| A Revolution in Technicolor  
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| by Seruspica  

**Summary**

AU. In an alternate 1950, a shocking leak leads to national scandal. Knowledge of espers—those with powers beyond explanation—has become public. The question of ‘integration or persecution’ hangs heavy over a government in troubled waters.

In the madness, stories entwine: of brothers separated and lost, of a gang boy in denial of his true, terrifying identity, of a child reduced to a bargaining chip in a decades-old game, of a former soldier with memories soaked in light, rain and blood… and of one unfortunate journalist caught in the crossfire.

**Notes**

This is a world in which some historical details have turned out differently. More on that later, but just to make it clear, the Nazis didn't win the war in this AU. (That trope's **overdone**.) The aritverse also has its own (based on canon, but slightly altered) psychic meta, which means some characters' abilities may be a little different.

General warnings are in the tags. Please heed them. (As of Dec. 2018, the fic is rated M for...
violence). Some chapters will contain additional warnings for one-off things.

Special thanks to Faith for support, and Iva, who did this very nice art.
Chapter 1

Prologue
An unnamed island in the Pacific Ocean, June 1942

The sky was tired of war. It wept for the dead, and left the men of the 99th Division broken and silent.

It had been raining for weeks. Every pair of boots on the island had been dragged through thick mud. Bodies had tumbled and stumbled over cold, lumbering feet, and uniforms had grown heavy with water. Filth stained once-clean bandages. Pauses in the downpour lasted bare minutes before new rumbles of thunder.

One dirty hand, in the midst of respite, ran through black tangles of hair.

The soldier sighed. If there was dirt on his face—and there was—then he didn’t care. It had stuck to the mess of his stubble and been swiped down his chin. Now, it was starting to cake, in spite of the damp. He felt it cling to his skin. He hated the feeling—but he would have time to take care of it later, he reminded himself. He would take his boots off and tend to himself in the evening. He had found no lesions the last time. He had been lucky.

His chest—broad but aching—heaved with fatigue. Dark, weary eyes swept leftwards, then right. The forest was thick, as thick as the sky was with clouds. Branches crisscrossed above. Like cold, bony hands, they reached down, leaves creeping too close to his neck.

They rustled. He closed his eyes, expecting something to leap. Nothing came out.

The sound ended as suddenly as it had begun. For a moment, it was as if he was no-one and nothing; as if he was unreal, not quite living or dead. Something ached at the back of his head, and he groaned, fighting to stay standing up.

One of his feet sank into the mud beneath. His heart beat louder with panic. Straining, he tried to drag himself out, and mud splashed up to his knee and seeped through the leg of his trousers. He winced, but shook his head, bearing it. He had faced worse.

He could taste blood on his tongue. He did not know when he had bitten down on it, but it was that iron taste that pulled him out of his mind. He stepped back with caution, his feet finally resting on firmer ground, and reminded himself: he was where he was, and nowhere else.

He was not alone in the forest. He was certain of it.

Breathe, the soldier thought to himself. Just breathe. The rain will come.
His eyes opened again, and he proceeded. Grass bristled against his boots. He had to focus, he reminded himself, looking down at the soil. He did not want to fall down again.

Something that was not quite grass or mud swept against his foot. The sight made him freeze. There was red on the grass mixed with grey; blood gleaming from a gap between grey fur, the remains of a fly-eaten eye and creeping, white bones. Insects circled the carcass, swarming, consuming.

Acid bolted into his mouth. He swallowed it down, forcing himself to step back through the sudden blur of his vision. From between his teeth came an inhuman sound.

“Lieutenant?”

The voice behind him almost made him leap out of his skin. His legs shook as he turned around. It was a voice that he recognised, but the face that met his own did not bring about thoughts of comfort or home.

His commander was not quite as tall, but his pace was strong, legs more certain, as he crossed through the mud. Not once did he slip. There was something chilling about his pristine green uniform, and the stark pale wash of his skin against hair dark as dried blood.

The soldier pushed back his shoulders, forced to look back at eyes sharp as glass. “Yes, sir?”

“Did you find him?”

Thunder rumbled. The soldier let out a shudder. Fear was a shameful thing, he knew, but the chill growing inside was too strong to suppress.

“I… I know he’s here,” he murmured. “Almost, I—I almost found him…”

“Almost?”

A bony hand took hold of his shoulder.

“He’s somewhere here. I know he is.”

“Then get him here. He betrayed us. He pays the price.”

The cold hand relaxed. It released its hold, and as soon as it did, the soldier felt his heart ease. His vision refocused, images no longer shaking. His stomach unknotted itself.

“…Yes. Yes, sir,” he rasped.

He felt himself sinking down, both into mud and the blue ice of hard eyes. Traitors were criminals, and criminals were to be punished. Commands were to be obeyed. He had learned those facts long before he had picked up a gun for the first time, before he had ever laid eyes on his uniform. He had learned to obey far before he had learned of his mission, or the names of those in his company, or the meaning of 99th.

Don’t think of blood. Don’t think of dying. Look forward, straight, at the heart. The rain will come, and the rain will wash it away, he had been told the last time.

Thunder resounded. The smell of new rain ran through the cold air. The soldier started to shiver again.

His eyes shut tight—and then, he tugged at the air.
The wind gave a howl. Trees screamed out, catching drops of rain in his palm as the clouds—at once with him, as if in cruel harmony—gave up their hold and erupted. Cold spray flashed through the artificial gust. He felt his hair stand on end. Cold stormed through the thin wires of his stubble and in and out of ragged black curls.

His hands were warm, as they always were when he called forth the feeling within. If he opened his eyes, he knew he would see light: a light that was his, burning into his palm, twisting teal-green and foam-white and seawater-blue.

He didn’t need to. He didn’t want to. He could feel it regardless, all of its colours and textures.

He could feel his superior standing behind him. He had not moved an inch. In the soldier’s mind was a fury of familiar colours: verdigris and rust-red, next to him, meshing with the green-and-blue shades that were his own. The two auras seemed to press down against him, a phantom heaviness, thick and warm in the air.

In the gust, he heard someone scream.

A branch snapped. Somewhere, a bird let out its cry, before falling prey to the wind. In his mind’s eye, for a split second, he imagined the small, tender corpse from before, and the bird falling to join it, both of them drowning in seasonal flood.

“That's enough. Keep steady. Don’t let go!”

It was hard to think straight in the eye of the storm. He was controlling it—or had to control it, he thought, trying to focus. It was his work. It had come from his hand: a hand that he could barely feel in the cold. He couldn’t feel anything else. All he had to keep him tied down was the ugly, sick taste of blood on his tongue.

The scream rang out again.

The soldier’s eyes snapped wide open. He saw it immediately. Caught on a cracked branch was a small man, clad in the same uniform, darkened by water. Once-shining buttons seemed dull compared to the wide, terrified whites of his eyes.

In his hands was an elegant gun, held as tightly as if it were treasure.

“Do you surrender?”

No sound came from the man. He was no more than a scarecrow, far from what he had been only hours ago, when he had been by the side of his comrades. He had been strong. Now, amongst the branches, he was no more than a broken, crooked old thing with his arm bent out of place, warped left and right by the storm.

The sight of it made the soldier feel sick.

He had to look straight. It was protocol. He had to look straight at the wind, and at the light that sparked from his hands, held straight out at the man, left suspended against the branches. One of them threatened to spear through his stomach.

The soldier thought of an execution from centuries past, long before he had lived. He gritted his teeth, and a twist of blue light knocked the branch out of the way.

“No?” The commander repeated.
He could not tell if it was rain or tears in his eyes.

“Put him down.”

His hand shook. The muscles were frozen within, but the light sparkled once and began to calm down, little by little. He was going to be sick. The ground below didn’t feel solid. He was sinking, or flying, or drowning in mud, and he could not tell which of the three it was.

Green-and-blue faded out. The man fell down from the tree with a thump. The gun slipped out of his grip, and hovered in mid-air for a moment, before slapping into an outreached, gloved hand. The smallest smile hung on the commander’s lips. One finger traced down the gun’s handle, admiring a tiny sakura flower engraving.

He looked up and eyed the remains under the tree. Uncaring about the mud below—and not slipping once—he walked over to close the gap between himself and the man, and prodded him with his boot. The body lay still for too long.

The commander sighed, and kicked the man’s side.

A groan broke from now-bloody lips. A heavy head rolled on the ground, side-to-side, the neck below it exposed.

“Still alive. I commend you, but you went against protocol. You defied orders, and you pay the price.” The commander turned back. His gloved hand reached out, beckoning for the gun in it to be taken. “Kill him.”

The soldier bit back a whimper: something he hoped had not been heard. He had no choice. Protocol had to be followed, no matter what rule had been breached. By his side, his hands were shaking.

No choice.

“Come on,” the commander pressed. “This one is yours.”

Frozen feet stood, turned to stone, on what felt like the last patch of firm soil in the forest. The soldier knew: he couldn’t run. Running was cowardice. Fear was a shameful thing.

Protocol. Law. The rain will wash it away.

“I… I’m sorry,” he choked out.

His hand brushed against the gun, nervous, before taking it out of the commander’s hands and into his own. Familiar tension returned at the touch. There was green and blue light in his vision again. He felt a pulse resonate in his head, his aura at one with whatever strange force lay deep in the weapon.

He heard a word. His mind made no sense of it.

The man below—former comrade, companion, one of a few—let out a cry. His eyes seemed to tremble, irises dark but illuminated by new light. It was a light that few could see: unnatural and colourful, in the hands of the one who would bring his life to an end. Their kind were few in the world, the soldier knew. He had never wanted to kill his own kind.

Protocol had to be followed. He had to look on. Teal light shifted to cobalt, illuminating skin to the veins.
There would be no glory in cowardice.

He had light in his hands, bright as the thread that marked out his division’s insignia. Embroidered on his sleeve was red ribbon and silver crossed spoons. The gun was jet-black.

“Hurry up.”

The muzzle came down to the traitor, ready to fire. Look straight. There is no glory in ending a life by your hand if you take that life looking away.

The soldier’s mud-crusted finger slid to the trigger.

Forgive me, forgive—

In the span of a heartbeat, his vision flashed twice. The first colour that came was swift blood, and then came the others: bright greens and watery blues coating his hands, so different from grass and mud and rain, rain—unending rain.

Chapter I
Seasoning City, Japan, May 1950

Reigen Arataka was, like any other citizen of his country, aware that extrasensory perception existed, and knew that he belonged to the lucky majority born without such a thing.

A part of him still refused to believe that it was real. He had not been alone. On the day of the leaks, on a grey morning in January, the office of Shiitake Evening had broken itself into two parts. They had split up and stood on either side of a table, staring and poking and pressing at the headline of a more national publication—Mainichi Shinbun, Reigen remembered—trying to make sense of what had been written.

He hadn’t believed it at all. The whole idea was ridiculous: a military unit, absolute secrecy, all letters signed by the government, eighty espers at most and sixty at least. He had laughed. The whole left side of the table had laughed with him, and gone out for ramen and beer.

That very evening, the radio had been on in his house. The Prime Minister had made a speech, before stepping down. The left side of the table had all been wrong. Shiitake Evening published its story, and word was out by next morning.

Reigen didn’t read the news until dinner. His mother sat across the table, her head in her hands.

The embarrassment ebbed away, and Reigen stayed on at the office and carried on writing: carried on filling up pages inside of the town paper, hoping for celebrity status and his name on the front page of something much greater, until his time came—

—and Reigen came to Seasoning City one Sunday afternoon early in May, stepped off the train and hauled his luggage through half of the city, after forgetting change for a cab.
His boss had put in a word with the magnates at Seasoning. The new job was a mystery, but it would
be something more high-profile—bigger, bolder, the boss had told him, gesturing and promenading
around the office. If the photograph of himself shaking hands with a younger Prime Minister was
anything to go by, then Reigen had reason to think he was right—but his last day at the office of
Shiitake Evening ended without a party, after learning the truth through a closed door.

In his place, starting Monday, would be a fresh-faced young lad. A talented boy, a charming one, so
the boss said. A nephew of mine...

His new apartment in Seasoning was no better. The room—up two flights of stairs, right above the
landlord and landlady’s own room, with a shared bathroom—was smaller than Reigen's old home.
The taps were stiff. Pipes groaned. The place came with furniture, which, in turn, came with a half-
ton of dust; too much dust to be dealt with in one night.

Reigen spent that night slumped on a stiffly-stuffed couch.

The first morning of work began with chaos. The alarm clock had failed, halving Reigen’s morning
routine, and so, he skipped breakfast. Afterwards came the push-and-shove of a crowded streetcar,
and polished off by a narrow miss from above, courtesy of a bird. Reigen breathed out a sigh as soon
as he realised that it had not hit him, but would not realise until he came home that, for most of the
day, his trouser leg had been sporting a coin-sized white splatter.

Seasoning was much larger than his old town had been, and so were the crowds. Big city, big lights:
just what you’re after, ain’t’cha? Psh, he thought, pushing aside the memory of his old boss’ voice.

“Big problems... just what’cha after, ” Reigen mocked, not realising he had said it out loud as he
walked. If anyone heard, then they paid him no heed. “Just what’cha after… what a load of horse
crap…”

The morning was certainly off to a good start, he thought, polishing up a fake smile. He carried on
with a sigh, gaze alternating between the streets, the foolish blue sky, and a crumpled map of
Seasoning in his hands.

The Seasoning Report office turned out to be tall and brown-bricked, not far from where he had
gotten off the streetcar. The street was thick with morning sound and as overcrowded as the rest of
the city. Repetitive offices stood surrounded by trash left out for the morning.

A peddling takoyaki cart caught Reigen’s eye. His stomach grumbled at the warm, comforting smell.
He peered at the prices, and for the first time that morning, something felt right. He had to work hard,
he told himself: not just for takoyaki to eat, but for all that he had hoped for. His name would become
the pride of the paper. He would find fame, and his mother would be proud, and he would be just as
happy as her.

Warm smells filled him with just enough happiness.

He went in with his back straight and chest out. He had practiced his smile long enough.

It was that last burst of optimism, and thoughts of takoyaki, that kept him alive for three hours as he
took to his new role at floor two, desk twenty-three, making sense of handwritten notes and typing
them up, one after the other.

The characters flashed in front of him, page by white-paper page. Nowhere in sight was there a
reporter’s notebook, or a recording device, not even a radio to break up the monotony of checking
line after line. He had grown used to workplace chatter, but all he could hear was typing and typing,
clicking and swiping. None of the other workers said so much as a word. He turned around a few times in his frustration, but it was futile. As soon as his eyes seemed to meet someone else’s, he found himself on his own again.

Voices were silent on floor two, and nobody cared for desk twenty-three, for the new man with no nameplate and no significance whatsoever.

His break couldn’t come quickly enough. It took restraint for him to not push his chair onto the ground. Reigen cursed under his breath, by then no longer caring. The stony face of his supervisor filled his thoughts, and he wished he could punch him. He cursed at his landlords for the apartment. He cursed the entire personal advertisement section of The Seasoning Report, for being so useless. He cursed everyone who had said nothing to him and turned back to their work, their own eyes weary, signs of souls crushed under piling-up papers.

“Just what’cha after, huh? Just what’cha after...” He huffed as he walked out of the building.

Leaning back on the building by its corner, Reigen lit up a cigarette. He tasted smoke and watched it trail up. For a moment, one of the puffs made him think of the tangle of his former boss’ moustache, and he swung at it with a scowl, watching the white break apart.

“I got my ass out here, and I’m stuck with all of this classifieds crap—“

“Hey, you all right? Sounding kinda angry there… you got fired or something?”

He turned around, only then realising how deeply entrenched he had been in the fantasy. Reigen couldn’t remember when he’d started talking out loud. A careless smile spread onto his features, smooth as silk. “No, it’s my first day, but… just nerves. You know, first days are like that? I’m good, just not that used to it. Having a great time here...”

The man behind him was short, a little shorter than he had expected, with smallish eyes and cigarette smoke around him, and—kind of strange, Reigen thought—a white, beaded necklace over the top of his shirt. It rested awkwardly over his tie, and he couldn’t help but raise an eyebrow at it.

The man tilted his head in confusion. “You sure? You did look a bit awkward.”

“Me? Oh, I don’t do awkward. I was just… practicing, you know,” he continued, his free hand flapping around in a desperate attempt to shrug as much off as possible. “Only just moved here, and y’know, I’m into theatre and all, wouldn’t mind joining a troupe...”

“Sorry, I don’t know of any troupes ‘round here,” the man shrugged, his necklace bobbing up and down. “But you’re right, I don’t think I’ve seen you before. Proofreading and typing, hm?”

“Um—yeah, temporarily,” Reigen said, trying to stay calm. “I’m there till they find a good enough story for me. I came down all the way here for a reason, you know, and they clearly haven’t found me my big-time scoop yet, but they’ll see—”

“Oh, then you might not get to know us down here that well. I’m just up in front in your section. Right-hand side. Next to that plant, you know the one. Shinra Banshoumaru. Pleasure to meet you.”

Shinra reached out a plump, ink-splattered hand. Reigen reached out and shook it.

Reigen couldn’t say he had noticed Shinra the same way Shinra had noticed him. The distinctive pot plant had been there, just as he had stated, but the faces and bodies of people didn’t come to mind. How Shinra had singled him out—and Shinra had been in front of him—he couldn’t begin to guess.
“Reigen Arataka,” he said, putting his smile back on. “Former Shiitake Evening front-page man, reporter of love, war, and death, and all-around scoop master.”

“Shiitake Evening? Can’t say I’ve heard of that one.”

“Only the greatest circular in all of Enoki prefecture.”

“Enoki? Well, you came far…” Shinra shook his head. “Not often we get folks from ‘round that side down here…”

Reigen looked down at his other hand, only half-listening to Shinra, and noticed the stub of his cigarette. He had let it burn out. He hadn’t expected company, least of all of the talkative kind; the kind that he knew would be keeping him on his toes whenever he so much as piped up, ready to pick holes in whatever he fabricated.

He had to be careful.

“So, you had a chance to get used to this place? It’s not too bad,” Shinra went on, almost ignoring Reigen as he turned around in search of somewhere to toss his cigarette butt. “I’m not from around here myself, but Seasoning’s taken me right in for half of my life. Pretty good takoyaki from there, by the—oh, should introduce you to someone, hold on—hey, Serizawa!”

Before Reigen could object, Shinra’s hand had already reached out and grabbed on to a sleeve.

Reigen looked up. In Shinra’s grasp was a taller, broader man, clad in a black suit with a brown overcoat draped over his shoulders, and a large, black umbrella held tight in his hands. His slouch left him almost eye-to-eye with Reigen. As odd as he looked, Reigen couldn’t help but look back, out of politeness.

Serizawa—if that was his name—avoided his gaze, his own dipping down to look at his hands and the umbrella clutched in them.

“Good to see you,” Shinra said, turning. “Might as well get you two acquainted. Serizawa, Reigen. Reigen, Serizawa. Same floor as us, though he’s round the back. Good man, a bit shaky at times. Don’t mind him.”

Reigen could tell the last fact even without Shinra’s introduction. Serizawa was sturdily built, but clearly unsteady. He could see his hands fidget as they clung to the curving handle of the umbrella.

“Nice to meet you,” Reigen said, reaching out for a handshake. He thought of offering a cigarette, too, but hearing Serizawa cough made him think otherwise.

 “…Sorry,” Serizawa mumbled back, wiping an awkward hand on his trousers, before quickly dipping into a bow too formal for the situation. “I didn’t mean to do that, I apologise!”

Reigen stood, a little taken aback for a moment.

“Eh, don’t worry about him. Serizawa’s a little anxious, don’t know what’s got into him… but he’s a good guy,” Shinra sighed. “And you don’t have to worry so much either, you know,” he continued, turning to Serizawa and nudging him with an elbow.

Serizawa lifted his head, somewhat startled. One hand was still gripping onto the umbrella, and Reigen couldn’t help but wonder if it would be raining today. The sky was a vivid May blue. He could feel the gentle end-of-spring sun starting to bake through the shoulders of his no-longer-crisp suit. Serizawa’s coat was strange to see on such a fair day. It was hard not to stare.
“Yeah, doesn’t matter,” Reigen shook his head, stare interrupted. “No-one’s going to judge.”

“Ah… well…” Serizawa trailed off for a moment, and Reigen began to wonder what had to be wrong with him. At last, his hands switched over, and the cleaner hand took the handshake, just barely, before gripping it with enough force to send sudden shockwaves through Reigen. “Serizawa Katsuya, pleasure to meet you!”

“Umm… yeah, that’s kinda grand,” Reigen said, Serizawa's grip a little too enthusiastic for his liking. “Reigen Arataka, from Shiitake and here to make waves.”

“Shiitake?” Serizawa’s eyes widened for a moment. “That’s not far from… from, I know, I know it, where is it…”

“Enoki prefecture. Couple hours up north of here, not too bad a place.”

“Ah,” Serizawa sighed. “I… I wasn’t thinking of there. Somewhere else…”

“Yeah, Enoki’s up north. Kinda small though, easy to forget. No offence to you, Reigen-san.” Shinra said. “Quite quiet up there, from what I heard about it. Not like it’s been down here, so close to Tokyo. So close to… so close to everything lately. A lot calmer up there.”

His eyes seemed to darken as Shinra sighed again, heavier this time. One thick-fingered hand gravitated towards his odd necklace. It was then that Reigen saw the small spirit tag, caught between two of the beads, and the care in his eyes as Shinra’s fingertip touched the symbol inked on it, almost in desperation.

“What’s that?”

The air seemed to turn colder. Shinra’s hands weren't entirely steady, but he kept his finger secure on the necklace. “Protection.”

“Against what?”

Reigen leaned in for a closer look, but Shinra jerked back. Reigen heard footsteps behind him, but only with the brush of Serizawa’s suit against his did he realise that the other man, too, had become curious. If the beads were some sort of regional custom, then Reigen hadn't heard of it before. Enoki had had its superstitions, but none quite like the beads around the shorter man’s neck. Serizawa’s own curiosity made him even less certain.


“Negi? The place?” Reigen questioned, unsure if it was right for him to lower his own voice. The chatter of other workers around them on their own breaks was filling his ears, barely enough for anything Shinra or Serizawa said to be heard. “Did something happen there? And hold on, what do you mean, them?”

“Didn’t you hear? I thought you’d heard in Enoki too.”

Shinra’s eyes seemed to take on a haunted look, glassing over with fear. What he had said had probably not been heard by anyone else, but Shinra's tone alone made Reigen freeze.

You-know-who, the voice in the back of his mind repeated. A part of him wanted to laugh, to tell Shinra there was no point in masking it: but something had happened in Negi, something that Reigen had missed in his frantic, rushed move from Enoki to Seasoning, something frightening. He could
see Serizawa, too, looking pale.

“Wait, by *them*, you mean—“


Reigen had heard all of the terms, but the words still felt unreal. “You’re kidding me,” he mumbled, trying not to fall prey to the goosebumps starting to trail up his arms. “They did something again?”

“You sound like you don’t believe me.”

“No—no, I do, keep on going…” Reigen waved a hand, dismissing.

“All right, but it wasn’t pretty,” Shinra shook his head. “There was an attack in Negi two days ago. Scared the crap out of me. Can’t believe you didn’t hear. You listened to the radio at all?”

“Not, not this weekend, I was moving down here.”

“You missed Suzuki’s speech. Forty confirmed dead.”

Reigen stood still, caught up in horror. *Forty people.*

His head filled with old memories. He thought back to war. His home, a little village three miles on a bike from the small town of Shiitake, had been in a world of its own—yet, even there, he had heard what had happened to Tokyo, and of the bomb in Hiroshima. His mother had cried. He had lain in his futon, radio blaring, his hand ghosting over the scars on his leg. Thousands were so much more than just forty, but the war was long over, and an esper was neither a bomb nor a plane.

An esper’s body was human, no different from any other man or woman or child, so word went.

“They weren’t kidding…”

“Looks like it. And that was in Negi. That’s only two hours away.”

Reigen said nothing back.

“Well, you did just move here. I don’t blame you for not being up to date on the news, even if news is your field. Speech was yesterday morning,” Shinra continued. “There’s a pretty good cinema too down Coriander Street, if you need to catch up. Guy out front gives us discounts, just say you’re from the paper and he gets you in for half price.”

“Coriander...?”

“Down the road, turn right, that’s the one,” Shinra pointed.

“Ah… damn, I still haven’t learned the ropes,” Reigen shook his head, still processing the news while trying to consign the directions to memory. “I’ll know the place like the back of my hand in no time. So what was that about Negi? Did they blow something up?”

“Apparently five of them. Shot the place up.”

“A shooting?”

“Suzuki didn’t say what it was. Higher-ups don’t want us to panic, do they? Still, there’s going to be panic. You hear enough to get the idea,” Shinra sighed. “Makes you wonder what kind of people they are, killing with bullets if they claim they’re not like average humans. If most of their kind are as
weak as they’re saying, they might as well be normal, just with a stick up their collective spoonbending ass.”

His hand came back to his necklace. Reigen still found it hard to believe that a simple necklace could serve as protection against any kind of attack, especially bullets. He could imagine it smashing to pieces, blood staining each and every one of the wooden beads.

“Then, wait, how are those going to do anything—“

“It’s protective. Blessed by three priests. Keeps away all negative forces. Espers can’t get anywhere near me.”

Reigen heard Serizawa sigh, but the other man said nothing else. Reigen could feel the same kind of fear deep within. Whatever was worrying Serizawa—the thought of *those with extrasensory perception and abilities*, or espers, or whatever they were—was beginning to spread through to him.

He had to ground himself somehow. He couldn't panic. His break would soon be over, he reminded himself, and then, he would have to get back to typing. Typing was normal.

“Couldn’t that have been some kind of yakuza thing?” He tried to think of it another way. ”I mean, it’s a shooting, right? What if that wasn’t espers at all, just some mad punks—“

“Doesn’t sound like it.”

“Wait,” Serizawa hesitated. “Did they… actually? You—I mean, did they find *one of those?* One of their spoons—you know, Claw—“

Reigen shivered. He had heard the name whispered in dread, even in Shiitake. It had come with mentions of *terror* and *killing* and *nobody knows who or where they are but they’re espers and they killed someone last week*—

“I’ve heard rumours. Nothing for sure, but it feels pretty certain to me,” Shinra went on. “Suzuki didn’t confirm anything.”

“What… what about the Prime Minister?”

“I swear he’s half-dead by this point and Suzuki’s running the place.”

“But—“

“It’s all a load of crap, isn’t it? If I were Suzuki, I’d screw the speeches and get those esper bastards under control already.”

Reigen thought of saying something, but no words came out. Serizawa’s unease, Shinra’s fear; everything had been founded. All of it had been written down in countless new and repetitive articles, some of which he had read, and others ignored in his little old town in Enoki, where the worst he had written about had not been war, but the mayor’s eye being blown out from a firework injury.

Enoki had heard, too, of course. There had been panic. No-one had ties to the 99th Division in the town of Shiitake, let alone Reigen’s small village, but the place had remembered. None had stayed deaf to the radio.

Nowhere was safe.
The sounds of the city around him went on, busy as ever, deaf to every word Shinra or he or Serizawa had said. If anybody had heard—if anyone had been listening—then nobody seemed to be doing a thing. The air around them was still, shifted only by cigarette smoke.

“I... I’m sorry,” Serizawa mumbled. “I-I killed the conversation, I should head back inside.“

“You didn’t—”

“I’m sorry!”

Whatever Shinra was trying to say, it was not enough to keep Serizawa there. Umbrella held tight in his hands, Serizawa turned around and disappeared back into the building, leaving Shinra and Reigen alone.

Reigen thought of changing the topic to the weather, but changed his mind and said nothing for a few moments, inhaling passive smoke.

His break was almost over, anyway. Even if he still had time, he didn’t care. He thanked Shinra for his company before heading inside. Serizawa’s brown coat was nowhere to be found. The man had already disappeared, off to his department. Where exactly it was, Reigen hadn't remembered.

Reigen didn't expect sitting down at his desk to bring him relief, but it did.

For the rest of the day, words sped by past his eyes, turning to paragraphs, and then into blurs, until his brain felt too numb to process anything else. His sole solace on that first day, as he had wished, became hot takoyaki, well-made. The happiness it had brought him had been unspeakable, enough to leave him more-or-less still alive for an afternoon’s worth of monotonous typing.

His fingers were starting to ache by the time work came to a close. He had fallen out of old habits, he thought as he dragged himself home. He had not ached so much at Shiitake Evening; but Shiitake had been far smaller, and Seasoning was his future. He would have worse to come. The typing work had to be preparation for something. Something great, one day, would happen. It had to be true. Reigen felt it, deeper than anything.

He hoped that the day would come tomorrow, when his supervisor would tell him he had made a mistake and that he belonged outside the office, with a notebook and camera, first-page-worthy, first to know, first to be listed under a headline, bold and crisp and proud to be out there. Reigen Arataka’s professional debut would come some day soon. It had to come. Reigen was itching for it. The world had to know.

He kept the thought in his mind as he took the streetcar back to his apartment, thinking of where the cheapest place to eat would be that night.

The new apartment was in a plain-looking building on a plain-looking street, much more new than his mother’s almost rickety house on the near side of the village. There had been a ramen place not far from his old school in Shiitake, and he had found himself gravitating towards it on both bad days and good, savouring broth thick with mushrooms. Even on stuffy-nosed winter days, when he had not been able to taste half of the flavours, the noodles had always been warm and cheap. Seldom had he come out unhappy.

From his exhaustion, and the frustration that came with endless proofreading, Reigen suspected he would be eating ramen for a while.

Somewhere between his old town and Seasoning, as his train had come to a station with too long a name to remember, Reigen had decided to take it easy for a few days. His mother was too far away.
She wouldn't be able to scold him. *New job stress is always rough,* she had said to him, anyway. *Rest up, but take care…*

His mind drifted to thoughts of his home and his mother again after dinner that night, after the local ramen had turned out overpriced, undercooked, and so awfully flavoured. Enoki’s mushroom bowls had been much, much better.

The sun was starting to set by that hour, and Reigen found himself gazing up at the sky. Summer was on the horizon, and with it would come rain, and perhaps then Serizawa—he recalled the shaky co-worker—wouldn't look so strange with his umbrella constantly in his hands, even if his coat was still odd.

Summer was coming. Reigen thought of being a child, out with his father, lighting campfires.

He tried not to long for the feeling of home. It was childish to think of the past. Seasoning was his new home, and his future. He was a grown man, ready to live alone. He didn't need his mother's ever-concerned, trembling voice clinging to his footsteps. He had come to the city in pursuit of a job, and he had been given it, at a place he would one day excel in, even if it meant a short while in at one of a hundred insignificant desks with a hundred sheets of paper to read.

It had to happen. One day, it would. He was sure. Some day he would make the report of his life, something as big as what had happened in Negi, even if the thought of an attack as deadly made his stomach churn.

Negi. *Only two hours away,* he recalled. Forty were dead: forty men, women and children, shot down not with powers, but with ordinary guns in the hands of those who called themselves espers. There was no telling if they were the real thing. A gun was a dangerous thing in any pair of hands. Powerful, powerless, it didn’t matter. Danger was everywhere.

Reigen was far from Shiitake, but he had never been safe. Nowhere was safe.

He couldn't escape the thought, not even as he dragged himself up the stairs to his apartment, or as he tried to shake it off, tossing and turned in bed. The efforts all came to nothing.

He didn't sleep well that night, or the night after.

Chapter End Notes

[optional notes]
Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

Alternate psychic meta is go.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It was Shigeo’s fourteenth birthday.

He had turned fourteen properly at some point in the afternoon, sometime between lunch and school finishing, though when exactly, he was not sure. His mother had never told him his time of birth to the minute. The most he knew was that he had been born on one leafy-green afternoon in the middle of May, and that his mother could not have been happier to hold him in her arms—or at least, that was what she had said to him when he’d asked.

As much as he loved his mother, it hadn’t surprised him to find out she had told his younger brother almost the same thing.

Shigeo’s parents were simple, acceptable people. His father, of course, was a war veteran too, like most of the other fathers he knew, older and more wrinkled than he had probably been ten years ago, but things like that came with age. Each little wrinkle of mine tells a story, you know, his father had said to him once, halfway through a drag of his cigarette.

Shigeo was not looking forward to wrinkles—but he was fourteen, and wrinkles were far in the future. What was waiting for him, in a much nearer future, was dinner with his parents and brother, and the sound of his father’s records playing through the evening, and warm yellow: the colour of happiness.

His mother had beckoned him out of the house. A good time for a run, isn’t it? Like on the weekdays with your club, she had said, and ushered him away from the kitchen. He did not understand why.

It had always taken him a little too long to realise things, he thought, as he finally put two and two together. By that time, he was already outside.

Unacceptable, a teacher had said to him once when he had been slow.

He had not been running for long; not at all. He had joined the club only three weeks ago, on a whim, tangled up in grey uncertainty and slightly blue shades of despair, looking down at lanky, worthless arms, and legs that had yet to lose all of their baby fat. He was still weak. Perhaps, he was hopeless—but good enough for us, the captain had said, wrapping an arm clad in muscle and a feeling of optimism around him.

(That feeling was yellow; bright like the sun.)

In his hold, Shigeo had felt both strangely secure, and awfully tiny. We’ll have you up and at ‘em, you just have to try...

Trying was probably the only tool in his small acceptable arsenal.

His legs were aching far too early. His chest already felt tight after only a couple of minutes, not too
far from home and not yet close enough to his goal. His vision flashed red. There was only so much he could do, even with the voice of the captain on repeat in his ears.

Shigeo hated it.

*You could just use your* —

He thought back to what his brother had said to him once, not long after his first attempts at a run had ended in failure.

He couldn’t do that.

It wasn’t right. He would run, and lift weights, and make himself stronger and faster, all by himself. If the other club members could do it, then he *would*, one day. He would run: run like everyone else.

People didn’t need to know the truth.

Shigeo had things that he could only say out loud to his family. He would say nothing sometimes, cocooned in a feeling of *sadness*, curled up in his futon with the radio on in the background. On those nights, with talk of another attack in his ears, he would lay there and think that he was something that should not have existed at all. He was a paradox, an unnatural thing, a mistake of nature.

It was what the voices on the radio said about his kind.

Running was normal. Sport was *acceptable*. Nobody talked about sport in a bad way on the radio.

His muscles—what little he had—could barely move to lift up a hand and wipe the sweat from his forehead by the time he got to the gates of his old kindergarten. His hair was plastered to sticky, wet skin. His sweater felt a little too warm, as did the shirt beneath it. The wind blew across his bangs, sending chills through him to the bone. He shivered.

He had made it.

The distance—the way home—was nothing impressive. His lungs were on fire, and his legs were screaming at him to stop and walk back and not run again for a long time. Still, he had made it.

Shigeo let himself smile.

He looked down at his hand, pressed to the gate, and felt something like *determination*: another orange-coloured emotion.

*One day*, he thought to himself. *One day I’m going to make it.*

Shigeo closed his eyes, feeling breaths escape and come back into his lungs. The evening air had never felt sweeter. The sky was starting to dim already, and as he looked around, he took in the colours of spring, the dulling blue sky and dusky pink petals littering the ground in swept heaps. There were few clouds. The wind felt *lilac* today.

The air that came with the wind smelled of suburban flowers—and something else, Shigeo realised.

He turned, eyes still fixed on the sky.

Behind him and up above in the sky was a dark twist of smoke.

It looked different from the smoke he had seen on his way home from school, streaming from the chimneys of far-away factories. The odd trails in the sky were thicker and blacker—and sudden, he
realised. The trails had not been there before he had left for his run. There had been no sound.

Something was burning. Nothing was supposed to be burning out in the suburbs.

His legs were still aching, and he could still feel the strain of running tight in his chest, but something about the sight behind him felt wrong.

He turned back and ran.

His father smoked, and his mother did too, as did the neighbour, a little stick-thin old woman called Michie-san with wrinkled masses for eyes. Shigeo had never taken to the smell of tobacco. He had never asked his younger brother about what he thought of the smell, but a part of him thought that he had not been fond of it either, seeing him turn away at the sight of their father striking a match in the kitchen.

The smell in the air was not cigarette smoke. It felt to Shigeo like campfire smoke, real smoke, something else burning, as huge as the cloud starting to spread and thicken out in the sky.

It was closer to home.

The nearer he knew he was getting, the more his lungs squeezed, and the more his legs seemed to ache. His heart beat like a drum in his chest. It was no longer just the fatigue. It was close—too close, too close, he realised. The smell assaulted his senses. He turned corners and traced the paths that he knew, the paths that led to his house, and he felt it growing, stronger and stronger.

Breathing hard, he stopped, leaning into a wall. His house was around the corner. There was going to be nothing special there, he tried to say to himself: it was a normal house, nothing out of the blue and completely acceptable—

The smell of smoke was telling him otherwise. The pavement was lit up orange and gold, and coupling with the growing smell of black smoke was a feeling of dread, as Shigeo peered out to see what was left of his house.

The place was in flames.

He couldn’t breathe. Panic took over, squeezing his chest and making him feel as if he was choking, but his throat was empty, and there were no words to push out.

It wasn’t possible, he thought, shaking his head in denial as the sound of crackling wood and splitting fibres said otherwise. The house was burning, from the ground to the tallest tip of the roof, the fire not even sparing the grass or the plants by the front steps.

His mother had always been careful. How a fire could spread so fast, in such desperation, was beyond anything he could imagine. It didn’t make sense. He hadn’t heard an explosion, either: there had been nothing, save for the smoke, but even that had only come to his attention once he had turned around—

Shigeo froze, hands clinging to the surface of the wall. Silhouettes were moving by the fire. Someone was wandering: his parents, his brother, he prayed. He was too scared to call out their names.

He couldn’t move an inch, but he made out two shapes, as he watched their figures emerge from the side of the house. Both looked to be men. One was stick-thin and tall, and the other was shorter, with his hands buried deep in his pockets, but Shigeo could make out little else. It was too far for him to take in any faces.
“Now that’s been dealt with… just got to find the kid…”

The shorter one spoke up first. Shigeo swallowed, trying to make sense of the message.

Had his brother escaped? Ritsu had always had the better luck of the two of them. It wasn’t right for him to be in the house—for him to be burning, he thought, feeling sickness rise up in his throat with the image. He had to have gone. He had to be safe. It wasn’t right: not at all.

Ritsu was fine. Ritsu had to be fine, he insisted.

The taller man sneered. “What’s he look like, then? Like the one we saw at the window?”

“I assume so.”

“Could go back in and check, but I think he’s burned to a crisp now. Knew it was a good idea to collapse those rafters…”

Shigeo fought the urge to scream.

The feeling was there, enough to make hairs stand on end, and if not for the pain in his legs he would have leapt at both men and torn their throats out, screaming don’t lie, you didn’t kill him, my brother’s alive—

Electricity surged through his being. His fists clenched, the tell-tale feeling of fire and coldness at once, blazing into life around both of his hands. Blue light sparked into life, shimmering cyan-to-purple.

It wasn’t acceptable, but—

“What’s going on here?”

The new voice startled him enough for the light to fade for a second. There was a third form by the house, coming out into view from the other side of the street. Move, said the voice in his head, almost screaming—but Shigeo found himself frozen, heart in his throat, only able to watch. Unlike the two men, it was a shape that he recognised.

No, no, please—

Wrapped tight in her dressing gown, and coming closer, was Michie-san from next door. Salt-and-pepper hair, jet against the orange-red of the blaze, clung to her curlers. Her trembling hand pointed out, and Shigeo saw the men turn in her direction.

“You,” he heard her voice shake as she called out. “You. You two, you did this…”

The taller of the two strangers gave a sigh. “Well, shit. Looks like we’re busted.”

He and his companion shared a quick glance. It lasted only a moment, but something about it made Shigeo deeply uncomfortable. The shorter man pointed a finger at Michie-san, and Shigeo found himself frozen, heart in his throat, only able to watch.

Wild scarlet light begun to dance around the man’s finger, twisting and lengthening into a cord. Its tip grew and sharpened, widening out into what looked like a blade. It was a kind of light that Shigeo recognised: a light that no-one else in his family could ever see.

Its controller pointed straight out. The cord, fast as a whip, lashed out at Michie-san’s neck. The dagger-tip slashed.
Blood spurted out. Shigeo winced.

It was only as the poor woman’s body fell to the floor, losing a slipper, her dressing gown coming down like great flapping wings, that he realised it was already over.

“Now that’s been dealt with…”

His hands pressed against the wall, the desperation making him sick. He could feel his aura flaring up now, the scorch deep within growing with each breath. He couldn’t take his gaze away from the body as it lay still on the ground, even as the two men around it moved, and the vivid red whip that had cut through Michie-san’s neck disappeared into the space between one man’s fingertips, as quickly as it had emerged.

He looked back down at his hands, still coated with a glow of his own.

He had to do something. Straight ahead, past the wall that was his last bastion, was a house up in flames, a dead body, and a pair of killers: two adults he could feel a terrible, smouldering kinship with, stemming from the pulsing light surrounding his hands, and buried deep in his head and his heart.

Smoke was filling the air, as was light; a lingering aura clinging to an esper’s flesh.

He couldn’t stay back any more.

He was growing dizzy with smoke, and delirious from the sight of Michie-san as the memory replayed in his head. He shut his eyes for a moment, and saw her fall to the ground again with an empty, dull thump, blood pooling and staining her dressing gown. It was too hard to see straight, too hard to focus, and for a moment, too hard to breathe, as he opened his eyes.

My family isn’t in there, and Michie-san is alive, and I can make it, I’ll make it—

It was an unacceptable lie.

He stood up and stepped out, step by step, feeling the blood rush through his ears as his aura spiked and crackled, worse than the flames.

“More company—sh*t, that’s him…”

The two figures looked back. He could only stare, paralysed. He needed to move. Eyes met for an instant, and Shigeo felt his chest squeeze with a feeling of white-hot surprise that was not quite his.

The taller of the two men looked even more of a horror close up. Long nails pointed out, and Shigeo fought the urge to step back, imagining one gnarly, thin finger scraping up through his flesh, carving and cutting.

“No, we haven’t got time.”

The other man spoke, a little more alarmed than his tone had sounded before. Shigeo felt his blood boil. The rising tide of his aura tugged at his core, as if screaming to use me, use me on them—

“We can’t let him—“

“Don’t fight him, just get the spray!”

A hand dived down, too fast for Shigeo to make out what it had reached for. There was no time. He had to go, and go fast. His family were inside the house.
He felt his hair stand on end as he broke into a run. Blue took over his vision, twisting into violet and then into watery green, tendrils of light wrapping around him in a shock of energy that he could no longer keep down. He let out a cry. He was exhausted still from his run, and it hurt—but he had no time to think straight.

Shigeo lunged. It wasn’t fast enough.

What came much quicker was a tough, bony hand, grasping at his chin, faster than his aura. He tried to pull back and failed. There was a quick sound—something he could barely discern through the haze of tears and pure rage—before drops of bitter fluid hit his face and dripped onto his tongue, searing through the skin of his eyelids and burning into his cheeks.

It hurt—and restrained, in a way he had never felt anything hold him back.

His aura flared once, before it died like a switched-off light.

His vision blurred. Flesh and bone met the ground far too quickly, and Shigeo winced, feeling skin scrape. He couldn’t move. It hurt to breathe, to think, to do anything, even to keep his eyes open. He could feel the fluid seeping into his skin, burning and burning. The fire crackled on, as if laughing.

“…Just leave him… run… that’s enough...”

Shigeo heard footsteps, two pairs of feet beating the ground in a run, and then silence. How long he spent on the ground, vision gone and senses blank, aura disabled, he never found out.

The house was still burning by the time he felt his limbs again. His senses came flooding back; sluggishly, but better than not coming back at all. Something in his head pounded. His vision blurred and refocused, still caught in a haze.

His thoughts came back together, bit by bit. The smell of the fire came next, and then the foul, clinging taste on his tongue that had to belong to the spray, before the world around him came back to almost full clarity.

The two men were gone. Behind him was fire.

Shigeo pushed himself up. He couldn’t stay calm. Gasps racked his whole body as all feeling came back completely. His legs shook, and he stumbled, falling back down. Pain shot through his legs. Blood trailed down his knees, and he winced as he forced himself to continue, half-walking, half-crawling, towards the closest thing before him: the still body of Michie-san on the ground.

His hands shook as he reached.

“…Michie-san? Michie-san?” He repeated, gently shaking the woman awake. Hands searched around of a pulse, only to tremble and jerk at the worst time, sinking into blood. Shigeo yelped, pulling back. One of the streetlights—now on, gazing down like a tall, suited man at a funeral—lit up pale skin and dark crimson liquid.

The blood was still warm—but the rest of Michie-san was as cold as it was still.

Shigeo felt tears burning his eyes. Half of what he was seeing didn’t feel real, but the feeling on the tips of his fingers was certain. He could feel no pulse of life from the body, nor from anywhere else, not even as his aura erupted around him, flashing blue fire and filling his lungs with emotions he could not name; that he could not understand.

“What’s going on?”
Shigeo turned around. His aura clung to his limbs. The voice was familiar.

Michie-san’s husband had emerged from the house next door. Something about the man had always made Shigeo’s stomach twist, and he could feel it starting again now, from seeing the heaviness in his walk to the mess of his hair in the glow of fast-growing fire.

Below, Michie-san’s body lay still.

“Oh, God…”

Shigeo pushed himself up again, properly this time. His heart leapt in his throat. He had no words he could say. He could only stare through the tears that were starting to drip, as he tried to keep breathing through the mess of smoke threatening to fog up his lungs. He saw the man drop to his knees by his wife’s side, then try to nudge her awake. The gasp that came out of his throat as his hands met flesh was inhuman.

Toxic eyes looked straight up at Shigeo. Teeth gritted with rage. “You did this to her.”

Shigeo stepped back, shaking his head. “No…”

“Don’t lie,” the man lashed out. “Don’t lie to me. That’s her blood. Her blood on your hands.”

“I—I didn’t do it to her…”

“Why do you have blood on your hands?”

“I—I…” Shigeo tried to speak out, but his voice would not stay. His hands were shaking. He could feel sweat coating his palms, creeping into the gaps of torn, scraped-off skin and stinging as it met blood. “It… it wasn’t me, sir, it was these others—“

“Others? So you had accomplices?” The man’s shock morphed into a snarl. Shigeo’s vision blurred for a moment, the sight before him resembling the face of a wild dog more than a human.

The air only thickened with blood-red: a colour Shigeo knew was the colour of anger.

“No—no, they came in and—“

“Don’t lie to me. I should have known.” The voice shut him down.

“What?”

“I should have known! I should have… I should have known you had it in you,” he spat. “Monster.”

Shigeo shook his head, trying to raise one scraped hand to deny. Red was everywhere, burning itself into black. “I didn’t—“

“You little spoonbending bitch.”

“I didn’t do it— “

“I’m going to kill you, you freak…”

There was no time to stand. He could see it already, moving too fast: a strangling hand coming close, with only one target. It was coming so quickly—too quickly—that it made Shigeo cry out, head dropping down into his hands.
Reflexes fired. Something deep within rushed.

The blow never hit, striking and stopping mid-air with a thump. Slowly, Shigeo opened one eye, seeing familiar light. Past the pale blue-and-fuchsia shine, he could hear the familiar hum of his barrier.

“**You little bitch. You killed my wife… you’re a monster, you’re not natural...**”

*Anger, anger—hate, anger—red, black, choking, red—*

Fists pounded again at the barrier. Shigeo winced, feeling it growing more and more fragile, hiding cracks that only grew each time he gasped and a hot tear burned through his skin and fell to the ground.

“**Monster—monster—you freak, you’re no child, I’ll kill you and all of you fucking—**”

He could hear the voice ringing now, as if the barrier around him was amplifying the sound. It clung to his eardrums, changing its shape, until it was no longer a shout, but a chant, and in his mindscape he could see pointed hands that came with it, and red, mocking eyes. Suddenly, he was a child again in his vision, and he could hear his mother screaming out as something crashed down, her voice yelling *run*, and the image changed into another: the sight of his brother before him, lying still on the ground, bleeding, *bleeding* —

Shigeo screamed. The barrier shattered.

The fist never came. There was only the howling of wind, and a cry.

His eyes screwed shut, with only a sliver of light left for the ugly trickle of tears he could feel flowing out. He felt the whip of his aura as it twisted and emanated, stretching out behind him like some monstrous, half-living tentacle, and as if it were his own extra limb, he felt it beating through fabric and skin.

There was a thump—one he barely heard through the screams in his ears—and a rustle of leaves. Gasping turned into groaning, followed by another thump. Something hit the ground, and his heart stopped for a second.

There was only silence.

The barrier was long gone. His joints strained as he tried to lift himself from the ground. His stomach hurt, and with it, so did his limbs and his chest, the pain of rough ground against the torn skin on his hands ebbing away as he gritted his teeth, trying to bear it. The electric rush of his aura receded, but clung still to his clothing and skin. The pain in his arms and legs slowly eased.

Michie-san’s husband lay by the tree, face-down and still.

Shigeo gasped.

Michie-san’s body lay by his house. Her husband had only seen his wife laying there, blood by her side, with Shigeo alone, and Shigeo knew what it had meant in his eyes. The two men he had seen silhouetted by fire had vanished. What he had heard them say frightened him. His parents were dead. His brother, too.

He had bloody hands and Michie-san’s husband was in bad shape: he would either wake up and remember, he realised, or never see daylight again and remain as a testament that he had used his powers on someone, and used them for terrible things.
No… please, I didn’t mean to…

Shigeo had never wanted to kill. He had never thought of looking down at a corpse. The sight of his father’s eyes glazing over at the mention of death and dead comrades had made him think of rot and murk and horror more than it had ever made him think of shining-sun flags, and fanfares played loudly, and decorated, great heroes.

He had blood on his hands. His powers had been his to control, and he had used them to harm another living being.

He could hear faint shouts and confusion coming from neighbouring houses, and piercing stares from windows and hallways and the ominous bark of a dog. He was not alone. He was surrounded, or would be if he stayed in one place, next to the corpse of Michie-san and the still-breathing but beaten, bruised body of her poor husband.

The body on the ground lifted an out-of-shape arm. A broken voice croaked.

“You… you killed her, esper scum, spoonbending bastard…”

The light in his hands continued to dance, flashing blue lightning and burning violet fire; but Shigeo could barely see it, his vision disoriented with tears.

He cursed everything as he felt the blaze in his core flicker out. Whatever words he had wanted to say were gone, torn out of his throat and replaced with terrible guilt, and horror, and images so saturated with fire that they burned: the red cord reaching out, a curler falling out of Michie-san’s hair, and the terrible smell of what he knew was death in the air.

There were more voices. More neighbours—he could feel them coming around, drawing closer, the air growing thick with horror and anger and something inexplicable that reminded him of a child crying.

It was unacceptable to harm, just as it was to feel emotions that were not his.

He had nothing of his own. Shigeo knew he was a paradox, and an abomination, but the words wouldn’t come out. Wild eyes watched from all angles, and he felt it emanate from all over: red, black, red, like blood and sinews, like a carcass hanging from a hook, red nails, red red red —

So Shigeo ran.

He didn’t know where his feet were taking him, or why exactly he was running away and not staying—but he could hear Michie-san’s husband screaming at him in his ears as he ran, louder than his own footsteps and gasps as his lungs struggled to process cold air. He had nothing, other than his clothing and the soft jangle of spare change in his pockets. He had nowhere to go, and nobody that he could call on in Seasoning, save for Michie-san, and Michie-san was gone.

His parents were gone. His brother was gone. The air stank of smoke. His family was not there any more, and neither was the rest of the neighbourhood, he thought as he ran, thinking of fire and rising voices and bodies found by the house and one missing esper with blood on his hands.

There was nothing left for him there.

He was a paradox: small, barely visible, not a good runner and nothing special at all, and at the same time, an esper, a monster, a freak, and all of the other things Michie-san’s husband’s voice kept on repeating aloud in his mind like some broken record.
Shigeo ran through the night, bleeding and alone, his fourteenth birthday a thing of the past.

Chapter End Notes

chapter notes
Chapter 3

The only thought on Reigen’s mind, two hours into another dull day of editing and proofreading, was whether it would be rude to submit his two weeks’ notice after six days of work.

His mornings had started to slow. He had long since unpacked and put the last of his belongings away, and yet, he would find himself tripping over nothing, half-asleep in the wake of bad night after bad night in a cold room in hot weather. His suits were either unironed or too crisp, and seldom comfortable. Even the noise of the streetcar, and all of the pushing and shoving were starting to barely affect him: the noise would turn to nothing but fog and slurred syllables to weary, half-functioning ears.

Sometimes, Shinra would nudge him during his breaks, and Reigen would smile. Putting on the mask was turning to a reflex, as much as waving his hands around and making jokes about the theatre society that Shinra had not yet forgotten about. Serizawa was quieter, and still terribly nervous. Reigen had tried to start conversations, and Serizawa had answered back for a while, but it did not feel like enough to wake either one up from what felt like a similar state of half-slumber.

The cold touch of the typewriter keys and the bone-like cool of his pen felt more and more hostile by the day. Almost two weeks in, Reigen was sure his ‘early days’ at the office were finished. Still, he did not feel quite welcome.

He had come on his sixth morning to a new assignment: something more important than proofreading advertisements and small-talk articles. It came in the form of a small stack of papers, written in large but barely-legible script and splashed with spots of black ink, unceremoniously handed to him by a stone-faced superior whose name Reigen had yet to learn.

“Check this. Check it all, type it up and have the copy on my desk by the end of the day, it’s getting published tonight and we’re having no mistakes in this,” was the order Reigen had sat down at his desk with. He had braced himself with a sigh. It was a stepping stone, he had said to himself, something every great writer would need to pass on his way up to greatness. An important article was already better than the pointless, dry columns and pieces of advertisements that he had been saddled with.

Two hours into deciphering the mess of kanji and ink, Reigen was full of regret and sleep-drunkenness. Above all, he knew he loathed both himself and his job.

He had come to two new conclusions in those two hours. The first of those, he thought with a yawn, was that he hated any aspect of proofreading at all.

The second was that Professor Shoudou Kirin, of Seasoning University’s school of philosophy—or was it political science? Reigen had lost track—could produce quality essays, but had the most terrible handwriting. To top it all off, he had been given an essay on espers; the one thing he had been trying to escape all thoughts of over the weekend.

The clock behind him told him he had been checking for almost two hours. He was only on the third page.

Reigen leaned back, trying to shake the spidery ink-splatters out of his vision.
He thought of his mother’s writing instead. Her script had always been neat: perfect loops and dashes and right-angle strokes, with a brush or the fancy fountain pen his father had given her for the last birthday he had spent with her. Reigen himself had suggested the pen, and his father had gifted it, just before the man had taken his first steps out of Enoki and into the rough jaws of war that had swallowed him whole.

His mother had seldom written with any other thing since.

A letter full of his mother’s good wishes had come to him two days ago. He had held the paper close to his chest, trying to preserve the smell of fresh mushroom soup and the fragrant dampness that clung to his village’s old wooden houses. He had cried at the sight of her writing. The letter had been so full of life and hope, just like her voice had been when they had parted. Her words, down on the paper, had been full of wonder, asking how his career had progressed, and who he had rubbed shoulders with at the office, and if there were any pretty girls in his sight.

Reigen had almost been able to feel her optimism through the loops of her full stops, but his reply had been stony. He had filled his own letter with lies. I’m happy, he’d said; all is fine.

The only truth in his reply had been that he was still single, and just about as interested in settling down as he had been in an article on dying traditions he had been checking the previous day.

(Let them die, he had concluded, fighting the urge to slam the typed-up pages down on his superior’s desk.)

The Shoudou essay was still there, no more finished than it had been before he had started to daydream. Sighing, he looked down at it again. Paragraphs had started to blur in his fatigue. It took effort for him to focus in on the characters, so that he was seeing more than simple, ugly grey blurs.

*The average individual possessing abilities of extrasensory perception—more commonly known as an ‘extrasensory’, or ‘esper’—physically appears no different from the average ordinary human being*

Reigen stifled a sigh into the palm of his hand. However many times he had heard the phrase thrown out here, there and everywhere, he had already lost count. His pen hovered above the sentence, ready to cross out, but changed his mind at the last minute.

It needed the introduction. He carried on reading.

*It is true that your colleague at work—*

—Reigen looked around shiftily, but saw nothing, and continued—

—or the average passer-by, or beggar, or even child out on the streets may, in fact, be one of these individuals. For the most part, there appears to be no physical difference between those possessing power, and those without. It is only a difference of ability, and morals, for those we have come to call ‘espers’ appear to lack the compassion found amongst the rest of humanity…

Reigen knew little about the professor, other than his name and the place his work was connected to. How many espers had the man met? Had he really brushed shoulders with someone no different than him, only to find that they were something so apart from the average human?

It was a struggle to think of his boss as anything but a cruel, bitter bastard—even if he had to be human. Whatever ambition Reigen had come to the city with had been sucked out and trapped between typewriter keys and ten thousand lines that he was sure would never be cared about.
Without compassion...

His leg was starting to itch. He could remember his father’s great smile, and the thick, earthy smell of freshly-cooked mushrooms, before the piercing sound of a gunshot. The smile twisted up, skin became silver, and then the silver clamped down all over again—

Reigen gasped. Ten pairs of eyes turned to target. His pen slipped to the ground.

No, he thought, trying to cast off the vision. One hand reached over to retrieve the fallen object, while the other rubbed at his shin through the grey fabric of his trousers. His leg was whole and intact. He was in Seasoning. Shiitake was miles away and in the middle of nowhere, and the rifle was far, and his father was buried in some unceremonious pit on some Philippine island.

“I’m all right,” he lied, shaking a hand to gesture.

No voices came back. There were only dull looks as heads turned back to their typewriters. Reigen’s head sank into his hands.

Stop it, stop this, stop thinking, stop all of it.

He had to press on. The voice of his superior still rang in his head. If he was going to quit, then he would do it of his own accord. There was no pride in being fired, and if anything, Reigen still felt like he had some pride left, no matter how fast it seemed to be dripping away.

It was hard not to let his mind wander as he read. Shoudou’s spidery writing left him squinting and swearing. He knew he was going too slowly, but no matter how hard he tried, he just couldn’t push on the way that he wanted.

The clock was ticking.

His break finally came, but he could barely let himself have it. In silence, he puffed at a cigarette, avoiding all eyes and hoping that Shinra wouldn’t think he was rude if he didn’t speak to him at all.

He was too tired to fake smiling today.

If their shoulders brushed against one another, then Reigen didn’t feel it. What ended his break and forced him to throw down the remains of his cigarette was the sound of umbrella fabric rubbing on calloused hands, even when there was no rain. Serizawa was far quieter than Shinra, but he couldn’t take any conversation that day, not even a quiet, awkward one.

His chair had barely cooled by the time he sat back down and went back to reading.

...With this, I come to the next point of my argument. Despite the threats presented to our society by certain groups claiming to represent the interests of the average ‘esper’, I see no reason why ‘espers’ should be feared. These groups—and I hesitate not to use the word “terrorist” in reference to them—have notably used none of the so-called “power” their members claim to possess, relying only on guns and incendiary weapons for all of their terrible deeds. Not a single bullet was fired that could not have been fired by any other human being...

The Negi prefecture incident had been more than a week ago. Reigen had picked up rather quickly on what he had missed. The radio repeated enough. Not much had developed from Shinra’s report, and then, the words from the newscasters had petered out. Interest faded. Suzuki made speeches about something else. Negi was replaced with the name of some other prefecture, and guns with knives, and espers with yakuza and student protesters. Spoons stuck into corpses had not come up again.
It was all in the past, he had reminded himself, above everything. It was all in the past, and none of it was in Seasoning. It didn’t need to affect him if he pushed it aside. Seasoning was large and busy—but it, too, could be safe.

The excuse had lasted him until Saturday. He had woken up to more news from the radio: the news of a fire, and word that the attack had involved at least one esper.

He had picked up a paper that evening, and thrown it back down again.

Even the Report had been patchy on what it was able to cover. It had published the voices of a policeman and an investigator, but little else, and of course, not one word from an esper: not even to confirm if one of their kind was could even start sudden fires. The sole witness, Reigen had read in another paper—over a shoulder—was babbling with hysteria in a hospital bed.

There was no verdict. All was pointing to arson. Corpses had been found in the house. All of the cutlery had most likely melted when the house had burned. There was no hope of finding a spoon, if there had ever been one planted there in the first place.

The powers the average ‘esper’ possesses are far weaker than these revolutionary groups wish us to think, perhaps enough to bend a spoon or some other small trick. More significant feats, of course, have been observed, but I wish to warn that these occur only once in the average ‘esper’ s lifetime, and should not be feared…

Reigen’s thoughts had been almost the same. He had heard all sorts about espers. Too often had he heard the word weak, to the point that it was losing its meaning. Professor Shoudou had used it eight times already, and more as he read on, then turned to the next page. Seeing the pile dwindle down brought some relief.

Those with truly great power are rare. The 99th Division numbered less than one hundred men. Far fewer than that would be still living today, assuming the war took its casualties…

The 99th.

Here we go again, the real danger that doesn’t exist, but is apparently real all the same. Reigen’s forehead tipped into his hands. He groaned, wondering if it would be acceptable to rephrase a professor.

A military unit of espers already sounded ridiculous, even with evidence. It had seemed ridiculous. It didn’t matter that the image of the documents, printed clearly on the paper, showed all the right signatures. It could have been forged—and it probably was, he had agreed with half of the office of Shiitake Evening. It was all a cruel prank. It could be laughed about over ramen.

When he had come home to the sight of his mother shaking, her eyes blank as they stared at the blaring radio, he could not put his disbelief into words.

The 99th Division had been real. What had been leaked was entirely real. The Mainichi Shinbun office had received the documents from an anonymous source: and in the same box came a severed human hand. The rest of the body was found in the days after, dumped in a river, with a strange, silver spoon jammed into the red flesh; where the hand had once been. The police had called it river debris.

The spoon had meant nothing back then. Word of the 99th Division had been chilling from the beginning.

Surviving men were out on the streets, in factories and offices, sitting on trains and in cars,
nestled into the most ordinary nooks of society. Each one of those soldiers had been a bearer of strange abilities; in shorthand, an esper, and each one looked no different from any other commuter or worker or begging wretch on their knees by the roadside.

The revelations had taken the trust of of sixty million and shattered it into pieces. In supposedly capable hands, and in the shaky voice of the Prime Minister as he had made the announcement, had been the safety of a nation, and of its people, but they could no longer be trusted. Those words had been on a thousand tongues, and on every page of every newspaper, *Shiitake Evening* amongst them.

The Prime Minister resigned immediately after the leak had come out. Reigen had joined his mother and listened to his voice on the radio, shaking through the twenty layers of formality that cushioned his speech.

It was shortly after his replacement had come into office that the first attack took three lives in some inconspicuous restaurant in downtown Tokyo: a building so full of silverware that spoons wedged deep into gunshot wounds and were taken as a sign of madness, and when a group claimed the attack for themselves, nobody had known what to think.

There hadn’t been a connection—not yet. It was only after two shootings, three knife attacks and the bloody aftermath of a pipe bomb that the spoons had taken on a more sinister meaning.

...though I will not deny that the survivors of that division, however many remain, may have the great power needed to truly pose a threat to the nation, we must remember how few of these espers exist. Eighty or so—or more realistically, perhaps fifty to sixty—former soldiers will never be enough to dominate any institutions holding national power. Japan is protected...

The radio had agreed. *We are safe* had been the message projected forth by the new Prime Minister through his quivering voice, and his interior minister—Suzuki, more confident, more aware of his words—who had gone on to make most of the speeches.

Safe was a joke.

Even the village folk Reigen knew had turned anxious, the city worse. It was difficult to escape the thick fog of worry that coated every crowd that Reigen had seen in Seasoning. There were always some whispers. There were always some looks. There was always some word of espers, some white-haired old woman reaching to hold the hand of her husband and asking if they would be all right as they huddled together on the streetcar.

Not even Reigen’s little nook of Seasoning was quiet—but the fuss had been of a different kind.

He had heard the occasional screaming and swearing, and cheering outside: the kind that came with gangs and fighting with bloody fists. The morning after, he had come out to smoke and found spots of blood by the trash. None of the locals seemed to pay any heed.

*Where were the police? Who was keeping things under control?*

He had found himself staring at the ceiling, doing nothing at all—just as he was doing now, staring and not typing the stupid essay.

Yesterday’s paper had criticised security. The day before, it had been angry over reform. Last week’s had been angry over broken American promises, saying the plan should have been stuck to: that seven years should have been seven, as stated, and not a ramshackle four. Maybe, then, the espers would have stayed shut up in their holes.

*Scum of the earth*, the man over whose shoulder he had been reading had mumbled to himself.
The Americans were long gone. By September of the year before, the sight of uniforms and caps with burning gold emblems was no longer so common. Enoki had always been quiet, but Reigen had seen American faces even in his small town, patrolling the streets and sampling the local ramen with hearty laughter and smiles on their faces.

He had interviewed them once for Shiitake Evening. Their names were long since forgotten, a hotchpotch of katakana.

Get back to the essay already. Get back to this and maybe takoyaki again, or some place with decent ramen this evening.

He did.

Teeth gritted and fingers aching, eyes begging to shut after hours of squinting and reading and re-reading and tossing pages aside, the draft was handed in with an extra smile on his face, a smile that he could not have been happier to discard as soon as he was out of the office. The silence of reading had eaten at him, and he never wanted to look at Shoudou Kirin’s handwriting again.

He needed a rest.

As he made his way home, he tried to drown out the conversations around him with thoughts of his own: thoughts of hot food once he got off the streetcar, and then coming home and collapsing. If he felt up to talking to the landlady, he needed to ask her on what day the rent was due. Somewhere in the midst of work and not sleeping enough, he had forgotten.

He would decide after dinner.

The other ramen shop he had found on the way home was a little further, and a little pricier too, but came with enough perks and thick enough udon for him not to complain. The inside was warm, in a way Shiitake’s ramen shop had been, though not quite as pleasant, and a little more full on that day. Still, Reigen admitted, digging through his wallet while searching for coins, it had felt good. There was relief in sitting in peace with a drink and the sound of noodles being slurped—and no talk about espers at all—filling his ears.

He came home quite happy. The blazer came off, and so did the tie. He let them fall like drunkards next to him on the couch. The landlady could be seen to, Reigen decided.

The steps down were stone-cold, even through the soles of his shoes. Reigen wondered if the landlady was still awake. Her door was just open—rarely was it shut when the apartment was occupied, the only exception being during sex so loud that the closed door did nothing to muffle the sounds.

He sighed with relief. He would have a chance of sleeping tonight.

The landlady’s voice was echoing through the corridor, midway through some kind of talk. Judging from the pauses, she had to be on the telephone: something she had told him he could use if he needed, before Reigen had declined and told her that there was nobody in the village who had a telephone of their own. Shiitake had some, but Reigen doubted his mother would take the three-mile bicycle ride there without warning.

He was about to knock at the door, when he heard the landlady’s words in more detail.

“…yes, she was down there, near Nutmeg, you know. Right by that horrible fire on Saturday night. Oh, praise the gods she didn’t get killed, you know what it’s like with… with you know, the devils on earth. I hate calling them… whatever it is that they call them these days, extrasensories, or…
Espers. Thoughts of his essay and spidery writing flooded his mind. Reigen felt as if he were swallowing ink. Not again.

It was between listening to more of her speech and risking punching her, or the wall, or her phone—or going back up again without the reminder about the rent.

Frustrated, he trudged back to his apartment.

He fell back down on the sofa. The rent was too much to think about, Reigen decided—too much, when the thought on everyone’s mind seemed to be espers. They were becoming excuses: espers were creeping like beasts in the shadows, haunting heavy shoulders like ghouls, and of course causing every little misfortune.

The article had said otherwise, something he had found easier to believe. Espers were no different from any other humans, save for a few feats. The difference was superficial. There was no danger stemming from weird, too-weak powers, but from guns and knives and red flags found torn in alleyways, next to bodies with missing limbs and spilling innards and spoons embedded into gaps in torn flesh.

Enoki had been quiet. Reigen had barely cared for politics and terror back then. He had come to a new job and a new place, and all had been changed: espers had shot forty dead in the next prefecture, and burned down a house in the south of the city.

Only at the start of that year had the thought of espers existing been nothing but a joke. The papers had lied, he had thought, at the beginning. He had been brimming with confidence as he took sides at the debate that ensued in the Shiitake Evening office; and a few days later, he had put on his false smile and laughed off his “little mistake”.

Laughing felt criminal now.

Forty bullets at least, and forty dead bodies... what Shinra said about the spoons, and Claw; Serizawa said they stuck them into the bodies... and that fire, the fire, a dead family...

His leg was itching again.

Reigen stared up at the ceiling, deaf to the clamour of the street coming in from outside. He was no longer so determined to punch the landlady.

Something about the words he had heard through the door, and what he had heard of the fire, made him think back to what Shinra had said on his first day. The department store incident—almost ten days in the past—had been real too, but it had been elsewhere. It had all happened a hundred miles away, in some town that Reigen was not yet able to identify on a map of central Japan: a town whose name he did not remember.

None of it meant a thing. None of it needed to matter to him. He couldn’t be like the rest. He couldn’t blame espers for everything. It shouldn’t have mattered, he knew—but like an itch stuck to his body, it did.

Nutmeg District was a few miles, or more, from the office, on the other side of town from his apartment. The smell of burning had not been close enough for him to feel. He had heard some bells, but their tolling had dwindled to nothing over the course of the evening. It had been close to him, but far, like a paradox: too distant for him to have seen the house burn and too near for him to carry on thinking that espers were not a danger to him.
Fuck it, he thought, pulling out his matchbox and from his other pocket, a cigarette. He lit it up. In and out, on repeat, he watched the smoke that he breathed fill the room like thick mist. Like that same smoke, his mind filled with thoughts of espers and spoons, of bullets in a town whose name he did not remember, and a simple house fire that signalled something more sinister under the surface, just south of his part of Seasoning.

With it came the thought of how it was possible for someone as human-looking as him to pull scorching-hot fire, or electricity, or strange forces, from the palms of their hands—and whether those people could really be human at all.
Kageyama Ritsu woke up to a cream-coloured ceiling.

It wasn’t a ceiling he recognised, and the walls didn’t feel familiar either. Lines of dark, antique-toned flowers lined the space between his bed and the wide window on the other side of the room. To one side was a mahogany desk and a chair, with what looked like folded-up clothing on its back. None of it looked to be his.

He tried to sit up. His blankets fell away, revealing freshly-bandaged arms, the skin beneath the coverings stinging. Ritsu winced as he ran one hand down the bandages. He could feel something similar on one of his legs, but not on the other. Where his clothing was, he could only guess, feeling only the familiarity of his underwear.

His arms and legs hurt, but he could feel a headache, too, and the headache was different: something that didn’t feel like it could be shrugged off.

How long have I been out for? Where am I?

The room was filled with daylight. Snowy-white net curtains swayed, the window open a notch. His lungs took in fresh air, gentle with the scent of blossoms, most likely those that clustered around the branches of the trees he could see outside. The sky was a gentle, pale blue. He couldn’t see the sun, nor were there any birds.

On the walls, as far as Ritsu could see, there was no clock, and he couldn’t hear one either. He kept on looking around, past the curtains. Outside was light, and inside did not feel so confining, as unfamiliar as it was. He took in more details as his head continued to turn, from the contours of the furniture to the reflections of light. The clothing he could see on the back of the chair was definitely not his, and it didn’t look like his brother’s, either.

It was then that he saw it, far to his right by the door: what looked like a large wooden mannequin. Sunlight glossed over smooth, well-carved limbs. Its shoulders were limp, and its legs were stretched straight out as it sat, slouched back by the wall, with its head down.

There was something unsettling about it, Ritsu thought.

The longer he stared at the mannequin, the tighter his chest seemed to feel. He couldn’t explain why. The feeling was strange, deeper than instinct and almost like common knowledge: the feeling that something was terribly wrong. He wasn’t alone in the room—that was the feeling.

The blue sky didn’t seem so blue anymore. The wallpaper felt darker and harsher.

There was some kind of presence there with him, in the room. It was the kind of vibe that he couldn’t explain, that he knew wasn’t normal, but that he could feel as definitely as a scream in his ears.

Carefully, he pushed his blanket away. His legs came up to his chest, aching still. Ritsu gritted his teeth, trying to gather what strength he had left. He had to be strong enough to stand up.

There was a click from one side of the room. His gaze flashed back to the mannequin. The click had come from the corner the figure was sat in.
He let out a gasp, seeing it move.

Its head was turning towards him, all by itself. One hand stretched out, as if reaching for him.

Ritsu screamed.

He was dreaming, or hallucinating; it couldn’t be real. The mannequin didn’t stop, falling to its side and slowly starting to push itself up, joints creaking and clicking. Its neck made cracking sounds as it forced its way up. The warped wood on its face made him think of crooked, badly-drawn eyes, and Ritsu couldn’t tell if he was asleep or awake as it stood up, and, keeping its hand out, carried on moving.

It lumbered on, drawing closer.

Wood clanked against wood. Ritsu could only sit there, paralysed, feet trying to push him back to the wall. He pulled his blanket over himself and shut his eyes, hearing it coming, louder and louder. The skin under his bandages tingled as he tried to move fast.

He could hear something else, he realised, through the floorboards. Someone was running. Fast feet were moving. The mannequin’s noises were only increasing in volume.

*Move, get up, do something, fight it!* He could hear the voice in his mind screaming at him to stand up and run, or try and fight back, but his body felt heavy, joints not quite listening as he receded into a makeshift cocoon.

One eye peered out from the blanket, a second too late: the door had already opened.

Ritsu didn’t see the door slamming, but he heard it, and instead saw what came into the room: a small, fire-haired girl in a cherry-red sweater.

“Don’t! Don’t come here—it’s, it’s, there’s a thing here—”

“I told you, don’t be so scary!”

The mannequin’s head turned immediately. Ritsu’s hands grasped the blanket. The girl had not been talking to him, he realised: her eyes were fixed on the mannequin.

He saw it dipping its head, and the girl stopped right before it. Shoulders back and head up, she wagged a finger and pointed. “I told you to tell me when he woke up, and you didn’t. You scared him!”

The mannequin gave no answer, but its shoulders drooped slowly enough for Ritsu to wonder if it was really alive. A *mannequin that’s alive. There’s a girl talking to it like it’s a doll or a human, but this is alive. I’m crazy. I’m... I’m crazy, aren’t I—and that’s what this is, I’m in a mental asylum...*

“Oh!”

The girl’s little shout made him shiver. She was looking at him now. Small and chubby-cheeked as she was, her gaze, vivid blue, was still piercing. “Hey, you’re awake now. Don’t be scared. She’s a friend. Mimi-chan didn’t mean to scare you, did she?”

Ritsu said nothing, dumbfounded.

Her small hand latched onto the mannequin’s wrist. “Mimi-chan, why did you scare him? You didn’t mean to, right?” It quaked a little as the girl shook it. She turned around, back to Ritsu, and the
mannequin’s head followed suit. “Sorry. Mimi-chan really didn’t mean to do that.”

“Wait, what? Mimi-chan?” Ritsu mumbled, confused. His words were falling to pieces. The shock had not left him. “Is that the… the…”

“Mimi-chan says she’s sorry. She won’t scare you again,” the girl said. “Right? Say sorry.”

The mannequin turned, a few more clicks breaking out through the air as it turned to face Ritsu. Warped wooden eyes seemed to stare back. Slowly, its head dipped into a bow. Wooden hands, fingerless, came together and to its knees.

Ritsu stared on, eyes wide and unbelieving. He didn’t know where he was, or who the girl was. His memories were fuzzy, his limbs were bandaged and stinging, his clothes nowhere to be found, and now, a wooden mannequin was bowing to him.

“See? Mimi-chan didn’t mean it.” The girl looked straight back at him, her eyes more pleading this time. It made Ritsu think of some well-dressed puppy-dog, begging to be showered with treats. He could think of nothing to say to her back—the sight of the mannequin bowing, now frozen in its pose, had chilled him down to the bone, and a part of him no longer felt sure that he was even awake.

He could hear footsteps again.

The girl shuffled back, and tugged at the mannequin’s wooden hand. It was a command to follow, Ritsu realised, seeing it raise itself from its bow and follow the girl closer to the chair, away from the door. They moved just in time, as it clicked open, and a new figure—a tall woman with her hair cut into a bob—came in.

“There—there, you see? Tsucchi, he woke up. Mimi-chan saw,” the girl chirped, her hand still clinging to the mannequin’s own.

“Mimi-chan’s got good eyes, then,” the woman, presumably Tsucchi, smiled, before turning to Ritsu. The turn of her head revealed the line of a centipede-like scar under one eye: something that made Ritsu shudder. “I’m sorry about the noise. Mukai got a little excited.”

“Mimi-chan started it! That’s why I came!” Mukai insisted. “I was just telling Mimi-chan to behave herself. I told her to stay and watch him, and she didn’t tell me he was up. I told Mimi-chan not to move, but she did, and she scared him. She said sorry, all right?”

The small animal eyes came out again, this time looking straight up at the only adult in the room. The strange woman crossed her arms, sighing. It was only then that Ritsu noticed how well-muscled they were, coupled with a look that he felt was wrong to oppose if he wanted to leave the room in one piece. It felt almost alien to hear a gentle tone coming from her, but the way she reached down to pat Mukai’s head made him recall the softer smile he had seen for a moment.

“I understand, but you could have been just a little bit quieter. You, not Mimi-chan,” she continued, kneeling down to look back at Mukai at eye-level. A large hand came down to the the girl’s shoulder. The mannequin followed, its own head dipping low to look down, hands following suit to support the small girl.

“I tried! And I said sorry too. I’m sorry again, onii-chan,” Mukai said, suddenly turning to Ritsu. He had not expected the address.

The sight was still a lot to take in, even if the mannequin did not seem to be such a threat. Something about her, the woman named Tsucchi, made Ritsu think of a tiger, strong-legged and ready to spring
at the slightest threat as she lifted her hand and stood up again.

“That… that’s all right,” Ritsu hesitated. “I’m not scared.” He didn’t need to confess that the sight of Mukai’s mannequin had almost given him a heart attack.

“I’m sorry, too. We didn’t mean to give you a rude awakening,” Tsuchi sighed, closing the gap between herself and the bed, where Ritsu was still curled up under the sheets. “How are you feeling?”

There were too many questions buzzing around Ritsu’s head. The room he had woken up in was a mystery. How long he had slept for, he couldn’t tell, and no matter how much the stinging under his bandages persisted, he was still struggling to remember what was beneath them, and what the cause of those stings even was.

His head was full of strange visions. There was brightness and flame and cries coming up through the floor, something cracking and falling, then light so piercing that it only compared to a scream. He tried to close his eyes to make sense of the memories, and was only met with a strange kind of thrum in the back of his head that grew as he attempted to focus.

It was starting to hurt. Ritsu hated headaches.

“I… I’m all right,” he winced, trying to fight it, and shrugging off some of his sheets to show the bandages instead. “Except for… these, I think I’m OK. Agh…”

The headache refused to settle back down.

“Mukai?” Tsuchi turned to face the small girl, who piped up at the call of her name. “Go and get Mitsuura-san. Tell him he’s woken up, and to get something for headaches. I don’t know if his burns need checking.”

Burns, Ritsu realised. It made sense—he could remember something like fire, and the more he thought about it, a smell of it too, smoke so thick it made him delirious.

“Just Mitsuura-san? Not Muraki-san?”

“Just him for now. Muraki-san’s busy. We’ll get anyone else if we need them, but get Mitsuura-san first.”

“All right!” Mukai exclaimed, suddenly puffing her chest up with pride. “Come on, Mimi-chan! We’ve got a job to do!”

She stormed out of the room almost as suddenly as she had come in. Her hand pulled at the mannequin’s, keeping hold of its wooden fingers, and as if it were another human, it followed. It stumbled a little, and dipped its head just below the doorframe, but hit it all the same with a small, comic bonk. Ritsu wondered if it felt pain.

Two sets of footsteps, one more hollow-sounding than the other, thundered away, until all was quiet, save for mumbling in the distance, and the wind blowing the curtains aside.

The woman left with him in the room walked over to click the window shut. “I… really am sorry. She’s a little excitable. It wasn’t the best time for that kind of thing, not after all that you’ve gone through. You’re Kageyama-kun, then?”

“Y-yes.”
“That’s good. If you were hurt last night, then it wasn’t enough to make you forget your own name, at least. I’m Tsuchiya.”

Tsuchiya—not Tsuchi, Ritsu mentally corrected himself, stifling a small smile at what had turned out to be a nickname. “It’s… nice to meet you,” he said, trying to be polite.

“Likewise, Kageyama-kun. Are you still tired? Did Mukai wake you up?”

“No. I… I woke up by myself.” Ritsu shook his head. It wasn’t a lie, even if the mannequin had scared off his remaining fatigue. “How long has it been?”

“Hold on. Let me check your bandages.”

Tsuchiya didn’t wait for him to reply. Brushing the edge of his blanket aside, Tsuchiya sat down on the edge of the bed, and beckoned for him to come closer. Ritsu froze, a little uncertain—do I lean in? Do I not?—about the strange woman, and who she was and where he was, even, but something about her didn’t quite feel so threatening. He pushed himself a little closer. Carefully, she took hold of one wrist, and began to undo the knot on the bandages.

“Are… are you a nurse?” Ritsu asked.

Tsuchiya lacked the gentle, flowery looks he had always imagined nurses to have, but after the encounter with Mukai and her mannequin, anything seemed to be possible.

“No, but I know my way around bandages.”

Ritsu leaned in a little, watching the knot fall apart. He raised his arm, letting Tsuchiya unwrap the long snake of bandage around one of his arms. Air met raw skin, and he tried not to wince.

What he saw beneath was mostly unbroken—definitely red, but not splattered with pus, and not bleeding either. The skin was bright, a little blistered in places but otherwise fine. Gently, he raised and lowered the arm. It ached a little, but it was most likely the bandages. Having them off so suddenly felt rather strange.

“That’s good… patching up well. Now the other one…”

Ritsu obeyed, switching sides to let her get to his other arm. He was still sat on the bed, the blankets pooling around him, aching a little but otherwise fine, and wondered if Tsuchiya was comfortable. She didn’t complain. Her hands worked in silence.

A knock at the door interrupted them both. Ritsu looked up, as did Tsuchiya. “Mitsuura-san. Come in.”

The door opened, first enough to let a curious face look in, and then to let in the whole of the visitor: a man with a thick mane of brown curls crowning his head, a small beard of the same colour and an intrigued look on his face that made Ritsu think of someone far younger than he seemed to be.

Ritsu didn’t see the look Tsuchiya gave him, but it didn’t seem to be threatening.

Following her cue, Mitsuura shut the door behind him. He came into the centre of the room and pulled the chair with the clothing draped on its back close to him, then took the clothes and moved them to the desk. Whose they were, Ritsu still wasn’t certain, but the thought that they had been left out for him suddenly didn’t feel so strange.

“At least I wasn’t interrupting. Mukai told me to come here,” he finally said with a sigh, as he
relaxed in the chair. He turned to Ritsu. “You’re all awake then?”

“Yes,” Ritsu said back, a little unsure what to expect from the stranger. He was a little wary still after the experience with the mannequin. Things had turned strange since he had woken up, but he couldn’t be dreaming. He was awake: awake for sure, even if the place he was in was in no way familiar.

“Good to see that. You’re Kageyama-kun, then?”

The mention of his name almost made him jump. He hadn’t expected anyone to know it; not in a house of some kind where he had never been, amongst total strangers, wrapped in sheets and bandages and being offered clothing that certainly had never been his.

“Yes. Kageyama Ritsu.”

 “…Ah. That confirms things.”

“What things? Who are you? Where am I?” Ritsu demanded, pulling away from Tsuchiya’s hold. His instincts were firing, emotions sliding from gratitude for the hospitality to something darker, a little more vicious. There were too many secrets in the room. He knew too little to be secure, and the faces that surrounded him were all unfamiliar. First a mannequin, and then a small girl, and then two adults he did not know—who had claimed to know his name, who had probably brought him to wherever he was, but where was his family? Where were his brother, and parents?

He couldn’t help but shiver as Tsuchiya turned back towards him, and he edged back to the wall, into a corner that felt too cold, but somehow that little bit safer.

“This is Akazukihara. There’s no need to fear anything. You’re safe here.”

“Akazukihara?” Ritsu repeated the name, slowly and carefully. He couldn’t recall it. “What is this place? How long have I been here?”

He looked around in desperation, hoping there wasn’t some detail that he had missed. Nothing about the name felt familiar—but maybe, there was some clue on the walls, or by the window, or there had been something familiar about the girl named Mukai and her mannequin.

No matter how hard he thought, it all came to nothing.

He looked back to Mitsuura, waiting for the man to say something. To his surprise, he caught on, and cleared his throat, calling for attention. “Well, let’s start things off, then,” he said. “I know this isn’t going to come across very well, but… what’s the last thing you remember?”

“Well…”

“Doesn’t matter if it’s not clear. Just try your best. It’ll help us explain if we know what needs explaining.”

Leaning back, Ritsu felt the cold touch of the wall—something was oddly comforting about that particular hardness and that specific brand of coolness—and tried his best to piece things together. His head was aching, not so bad that he couldn’t think or put things together at all, but it still wasn’t pleasant.

He couldn’t remember a single dream, but his mind wasn’t empty. There had been something before he had woken up in the bed in the strange room, in the place called Akazukihara. There were small snippets caught up in a blur in his brain: things he could barely make sense of. It was a challenge to
trawl through the mess.

“I… I don’t know. I remember,” he murmured, both hands coming up to his temples. Beneath, he could feel the growing pulse of his headache. “It was… I was in my room, I think. At my house. I remember that, and then… then I heard something loud, like an explosion. Then… then there was fire, like… everything was on fire. It was hot and… I couldn’t breathe.”

The house had been warm—too warm, some kind of smoky smell twisting and breaching. Fire, Ritsu realised, putting together the snippets. That had to be it. He could recall light and blaze and smoke, and the feel of wooden boards under his hands. He remembered wood and charcoal and paper, and other things, the rising smoke making him cough, so badly he thought he would be sick—

“…And then something else happened, like something really loud, and… and it hurt and I don’t know what happened…”

Ritsu’s eyes shut, bracing himself for a flash of light from the back of his head, and the feeling of dizziness that accompanied it.

“Can you tell us what hurt? Was it the burns?” Tsuchiya’s voice came out of the dark.

“No, I… I don’t remember, but… ow… like now, that’s what it felt like…”

“Now?” Mitsuura chimed in.

“My head hurts.”

His eyes screwed shut. It was getting hard to fight the discomfort, like something had come into his head and was starting to tug and squeeze at whatever was there inside of his skull. Colours flickered, on and off for seconds at a time. Unable to sit up straight, Ritsu forced himself down, his face sinking into a pillow as he fell to his side, then turned to his front, until the pillow was underneath him completely.

“I’ll ask the nurse to get something for that. Relax,” Mitsuura’s voice rang out clear, even through the mess in his head. “Tsuchiya-san, would you mind taking over a little?”

“No problem. If Mukai’s around, tell her to go and play with the others,” he heard Tsuchiya reply with the same kind of calm.

“Will do.”

He heard the door shutting behind him. If there were footsteps, then Ritsu didn’t hear them.

The fuzz was starting to clear up again, slowly but surely. Careful, trying not to aggravate whatever had triggered the strange, aching spell in his head, Ritsu pushed himself up. It was a little too much. He sank back down onto the pillow, feeling the pain ebbing and flowing, but struggled enough to stay on his side. Tsuchiya moved to the chair Mitsuura had vacated, and Ritsu allowed himself to spread out more on the bed, legs straight again rather than curled up by his chest like before.

“It’s all right,” she said. “Relax however you need to. The nurse will finish checking your bandages. Mitsuura-san sent for her, so I’ll finish explaining. She’ll have something for you once she gets here.”

“It hurts,” Ritsu repeated.

“I understand. It makes sense. You’ve slept for three days.”
He could only hope Tsuchiya was lying.

“What do you mean, three days? How does—it make sense? Where is this place, anyway? Akazu… ki…” He tried to remember the name, but in the midst of the headache flaring, it had slipped straight out of his memory.

“Akazukihara,” Tsuchiya recited. “Mitsuura-san’s family owns this house. This house is a refuge. Under this roof you are under the protection of all of us.”

“All of us?”

“All of us here, and elsewhere in the country. Akazukihara belongs to the Extrasensory Liberation Society.”

Ritsu had heard of the name.

He had glimpsed it on the edges of newspapers, the kind his father would bring home and read at the kitchen table after dinner, smoking a cigarette. Sometimes, his mother would come in and discuss it, too: and listening in through the walls, Ritsu had heard many names. He had heard of it on the radio, too, in the context of a conflict that frightened him so much he had struggled to sleep.

His brother would go upstairs at the mention of what had gone on in the news. Ritsu had asked him if he wanted to speak after his parents had sent him upstairs, too; but he had heard their voices, behind closed doors, and they had seemed almost terrible: speaking of espers and danger, and Shigeo, Shigeo, Shigeo.

There had been reasons for them to be scared. His brother was different from him—but the Society, from what he had heard, was for his brother’s kind, and not for someone like Ritsu at all.

Where is he?

“I’m not—I’m not an esper,” Ritsu said, spitting the words out like panic itself. “Why am I here?”

One hand gestured at him to calm down. Obeying Tsuchiya felt impossible, but the strain in his head was growing stronger again. He had no choice.

“We brought you here after… after the fire. You’ve been here since. The attack happened before our agents could get there.”

“Agents? Wait—you knew?”

“Our commander isn’t here at the moment, but on behalf of all of us, I’m sorry. We came too late. Your parents, they… they didn’t make it.”

Her eyes glazed over with the meaning of words she could not quite say. It came as a stab, straight through Ritsu’s throat. There was nothing he could say—nothing that he wanted to say, because he was too weak to fight back. It was too much to deny—too much to think, too much to speak, too much to try to make any more sense of what he was hearing.

A wave of dizziness washed over him, and for a moment, his head was too heavy for him to hold up.

“My… parents?” He tried to sound it out, feeling what little speech he had in him crumble and turn to ash on his tongue. Saying it felt like swallowing lead. “They’re dead?”

Tsuchiya nodded, shoulders drooping with a solemn sigh. “I’m sorry.”
Ritsu understood. His whole body felt empty, as if he was hollow. He couldn’t think. His hands were starting to shake, even as he sheltered them in the warmth under his blanket. The thought that he was alone—alone, fragile and alone—sank in and permeated. He didn’t want to think. He wanted to turn to his stomach again and sink his face into the pillow and tell Tsuchiya to leave. He wasn’t going to cry. It just wasn’t the right thing. He couldn’t cry, he repeated—he couldn’t cry, he couldn’t let himself cry…

Bracing himself, he almost bit his tongue as he fought back the prickling feeling of tears.

“What… what about my brother?”

“We found traces of psychic energy lingering by the house. We believe your brother is alive.”

Ritsu’s heart leapt. “Where is he? Where’s Shigeo?”

“We don’t know. I’m sorry.”

Her head shook again. The look on her face was stony, so full of sorrow that Ritsu found himself fighting the urge to jump up and to scream at her that all of it was a lie. His family was broken and gone, if she was telling the truth, and it was too much to bear—but his brother was out there, alive and waiting for him. If Tsuchiya had not lied, then the Society would help him. The Society would serve him far more than it could ever serve Ritsu. His brother was not like him, and had not been for as long as he could remember, and he knew why exactly.

He couldn’t stop himself.

“I have to go find him!”

His hands pushed off the sheets. Ritsu’s legs swung around, as he almost threw himself off the bed, the floor against the bare soles of his feet freezing him, but jolting him into action. It didn’t matter that he wasn’t dressed. He couldn’t be stopped. He had to go out there—

A sudden shock blasted through half of his head. Ritsu fell to his knees. His hands covered his eyes. Hot tears leaked through the gaps between fingers. The pain was back—and worse, he could feel, burning into his skull and pressing down at all angles.

“Hold on, you shouldn’t—”

He couldn’t be stopped, not like this.

“No, but… damn it! Damn it, damn all of it,” Ritsu spat, drops plummeting onto his thighs and seeping into the bandages that were remaining. His head felt heavier by the second. It hurt to even try to look up. “Please, I have to go find him! I have to get him! Just let me!”

“You can’t.”

“It’s not safe, it’s my brother, he’s strong, but they’ll kill him out there! Let me go!”

“You’re in no state to go out there. Settle down. Overexert yourself and you’ll pass out.”

“I don’t care, I have to go—ow…”

The pain wasn’t going away. If anything, it was only growing. He was crying, he knew, and he couldn’t let Tsuchiya see him hurting like this—but he was weak, too, and powerless, and prey to a pain he could neither identify nor quite place. He hated every ounce of his being.
“I’m telling you, settle down. You’ve got a lot of rest to catch up on before you’re even strong enough to go outside,” Tsuchiya insisted.

“It’s just a headache, I’ll handle it,” Ritsu spat, lying through his teeth.

“Kageyama-kun. Are you aware of what happened to you? Why you were out for so long?”

He stopped. The memories replayed again, still no more than a fuzz, mingling with the tears and the raw taste at the back of his throat.

He couldn’t move, not on his own: and as if she had been reading his mind, he felt Tsuchiya’s strong arms reaching around him. He had guessed at the strength hidden in her, past the muscles, and he had not been wrong, he realised, as he felt her arms move around him and lift. His eyes stayed shut.

The soft feeling of the now-familiar bed came up behind him. He thought of falling down, but fought the feeling. He had to keep himself sat up somehow.

“There,” he heard her say, breathing out without much effort. “You’re not stable just yet. Trust me, you’ll want to stay in bed for a while.”

“I got burned, right? That’s what’s happened, isn’t it, right?” Ritsu said, trying to lift his head up again as he nestled back under the blankets. His pillow was within reach, and what he could smear off his cheeks was brushed off immediately. It was embarrassing. Boys didn’t cry—not him, of all people. Ritsu couldn’t allow himself to. “Even if I did sleep for three days, it’s just—it’s just a burn, right?”

“Not exactly. Those aren’t the kind of burns you’d expect after that bad a fire. At most, you caused yourself to overheat. It’s a good thing your barrier went down when you lost consciousness. Any longer and you’d have cooked yourself in it.”

His eyes opened immediately.

“Barrier? Did my brother save me? I can’t do anything like that, it’s my brother—”

“You saved yourself. Or tried to, anyway.”

Ritsu was confused. “I can’t. I’m not like my brother.”

“Perhaps.” He saw Tsuchiya’s smile coming back. “But what I’m feeling around you tells me you might be something else. You might be feeling it, too.”

He couldn’t feel anything, save for the pain in his head, and the heat of sweat sticking still to his hair and skin. “Feeling what?”

“Think about it, and focus. You’ll see it. I saw something just now. Look down, if it helps.”

It felt like a joke. Ritsu looked down, waiting for her to laugh at the sight of how weak, how scared he had been. He hadn’t wanted to cry. It made him feel sick to look down.

The sight below made him gasp.

His hands didn’t look wet—and if they were, then he didn’t see the moisture on them. What was there was light: light of a strange, gleaming blue colour, the kind that made him think of sky and pale flowers.

There was light in his hands. The headache was making him hallucinate.
“What… what is this? I’m seeing things, aren’t I?”

Tsuchiya’s hand came down to his shoulder. Her voice reassured, but her words confused him, too, both at once. “Well, what you’re seeing is real, if that’s what you mean. If you aren’t lying, and you really don’t remember what happened, then what you’ve described back then was a typical first-feat experience.”

“First… feat?”

“It looks like you overdid it the first time. You’re not the only one to do that: it’s pretty common for newborns to end up exhausted for days.”

“Newborns? I—I’m not, I’m twelve…”

“Not in that sense. I mean that you’ve only just come to awaken.”

Awaken?

Like the crack of a whip, the thought snapped fast into Ritsu’s mind. It didn’t feel real: not at all, not as he looked down at his hands and saw flashes of teal starting to come into the blue, a blue that in itself was a singularity starting to split into colours he could barely tell from each other. Each shade was a texture, a feeling, that pressed into its palm, cold and hot and burning and chilling. The blue itself was more than a glow, washing though his fingertips like the seashore, and as he stared and stared down, mouth open and jaw shaking, he tried not to cry at the sight. The light seemed to flicker, and with it, so did the headache plaguing the back of his head, pressing down once before disappearing.

“What… what’s this?”

“An aura. The clearest sign that you’re one of us. That you’re an esper.”

Ritsu inhaled. One tear, one he could not contain, streaked down a burning hot cheek. He thought of crying into his hands, but the glow was too bright, and it scared him.

It didn’t make sense, but the proof was there, right in front of him, dancing in colours around the lines of his hands. He could feel a foul taste in his throat: the taste of sickness, coupling with the headache, and the thought that he was alone in a house full of strangers, and that he was without parents, and his brother’s trail had gone cold, and after all of the terror, he was an esper.

Silent, save for the crying, Ritsu stared down at his hands, and thought of how lucky he was to have come out alive.

Chapter End Notes

notes for this chapter
AU writing perks: just because a character is [REDACTED] in canon doesn't mean they are in this AU :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“Hey, what’cha staring at?”

Shigeo turned around, surprised at the feeling of a sudden weight on his shoulder. It came from an elbow, leaning on him like he was a friend to the boy who had popped up behind him.

He looked confident, if Shigeo had to settle for only one word. His shirt was a little too grey to be white, but a little too white to be grey against the slate shade of his trousers and braces. A neckerchief covered his collar. On his head was a proud-looking hat, navy blue, that reminded Shigeo of the sailors he had seen by the port, weeks ago.

The noise of North Market bustled around him, and he felt his heart skip a beat—not out of love, but absolute terror. Every Seasoning native knew North Market was full of pickpockets and thieves, even more so late in the afternoon, but Shigeo had come for the smells of hot food and the hope of begging for money. He had nothing to give, anyway.

“I… I’m not,” he replied.

The smirk on the boy’s face didn’t change. His free hand toyed with the almost jet-coloured locks spilling out from under his hat. Something about him was off, from the hat to the way he spoke—neither formally, nor in thick, heavy street-speak—and, somewhat unsettled by the look on his face, Shigeo tried not to look back.

“ Weird,” the boy said. “I saw you looking. Not from ‘round here or something?”

North Market bustled with life on every day of the week. It was louder than South Market, and to Shigeo, it felt like the kind of place where plums took on the faint smell of the fishmonger’s next to the fruit stall, and nobody noticed mitarashi dango stains on the covers of books or rolls of cheap yukata fabrics; where everything was saturated with both tobacco smoke and the voices of every single seller at once.

Shigeo didn’t like noise. His mother had always told him to head to South Market if ever they were in need of supplies. He had been thankful for South Market being much closer to home.

North was larger. It was the bigger of the two markets in Seasoning, louder and at the same time, shadier, emanating desire. Shigeo had no bag to keep his money in. Had there been one on him, he was sure that it would have already been snatched by some pickpocket no older than him: one of the children of the streets, ragged and dirty-faced, with cat-like eyes peering out of every visible corner.

North Market was not Shigeo’s part of town. As soon as he realised how close he was getting to it, he thought, more and more, that he should have stayed out.

“Not really,” Shigeo confessed. A part of him was screaming: lie about it or run, but don’t talk to
strangers, not in places like this, but he was too tired to listen to it. He was already exhausted, barely able to stand and needing to cling to the wall, too scared to come out into the chaos.

“I know all the street kids ’round here, and you don’t look like anyone special. So, what happened to you? Folks threw you out? Lost their jobs? Espers killed them or some shit?”

“No, nothing like that.”

He didn’t want to tell him more than he needed to. The boy was a stranger, and Shigeo wasn’t safe anywhere.

“Well, either way, I’m not here to listen to stories,” the boy said, shaking his head. His elbow finally came away from Shigeo’s shoulder, and he leaned back against the same wall instead. “What’s your name?”

“Shi—”

Shigeo stopped, realising what he was blurting out. He was probably being searched for. The blood on his hands had come away in a puddle of rainwater, but he was still in the same clothes. His hair and eyes couldn’t be changed. He had to think fast.

“—um, uh, Mob.”

It was the only thing on his mind.

“Mob? Psh. I’m Teru.”

Shigeo wished he could burrow himself into the ground. Teru was right. The name sounded silly, and it was some kid’s misreading from years ago, some silly thing that had stuck around in the back of his head, along with the mocking and laughter.

Mob sounded stupid, but it hadn’t been hard to invent for his classmates: it was only another name from the kanji that made up Shigeo.

Teru’s laugh breezed right through him. “But seriously, that’s a lousy name. Think of a better one, or you’re going to get creamed out here. No-one’s going to give you any respect with a name like… like Mob.”

He turned back to him, looking up and down, as if searching for something. “You don’t look like the kind who knows much, though. You really are new.”

“New?”

“To the streets. Look at you. You’re like a stray kitten,” Teru mocked, flicking at the mess of Shigeo’s hair. “Just don’t do the eyes at me, that’s not going to work. I’m not going to take pity on you.”

Teru was a little taller than him—not by a lot, but enough for the condescending look in his eyes to make Shigeo feel far smaller. He stepped back, but Teru’s arm was too fast, and came back to his shoulder, as if to keep him captured. The way it pressed down—not really friendly—made Shigeo jump. He tried to look back into Teru’s eyes, but could barely do so.

“Or… maybe I will.”

The sly smile slowly creeping onto his face made Shigeo think vivid green, of amusement and maybe
ambition, of a different kind that hung around some of the market sellers.

“What do you mean?” Shigeo asked.

“You’re hungry, aren’t you? It’s why you came here, right?”

“No, but—“

His stomach protested.

He could not remember the last time he had eaten, but he could remember what it had been. The taste still clung to his tongue. He had picked a small handful of spindle-stalked, shrivelled-up cherries from a low-hanging tree branch by Aniseed Park. It had only made sense afterwards, as he had curled up in a back-alley doorway with a terrible pain in his belly, why those cherries had been left on the tree. He hadn’t stayed long in that alleyway either: not after a boy with squinting, dangerous eyes had nudged him awake with a boot. The look on him had screamed at Shigeo to get away from our turf, or else you’ll pay for it.

He found another corner and slept there instead, his dreams full of that face and terrible colours.

Shigeo had lost count of the days. The cherries had been either three or four days ago, or even longer than that. The scent of hot food, of what was probably fish frying and some kind of stew cooking and mikan oranges baking in the May sun had been unavoidable.

It filled him with shame, thinking of how he had been pulled along by his nose. He had more important things to do. There was no-one left for him in Seasoning, and he was alone and running away—but he was hungry, terribly hungry.

“I’m…”

“Here. Let me show you the ropes. This is how we do things around here.”

Teru’s hand lifted from his shoulder—but Shigeo had no time to breathe, let alone try to run, before it tugged at the sleeve of his sweater instead. The other boy had no qualms about coming into the light of the market, and Shigeo found himself going along, heart speeding up in his chest as his hand scraped against the brick wall, trying to cling.

They stopped at the end of the wall, where sunlight was spilled out on the ground and marked the end of Shigeo’s security. Reluctant, he leaned over Teru’s shoulder. The boy looked left, and then right, the navy-blue visor of his hat moving with the mess of his hair. What exactly he was seeking out, Shigeo didn’t understand.

When Teru finally turned around, he didn’t expect his hand to lift from his sleeve, and to come to his lips instead in a hush. “You stay here. I’ll go get you something. Stay quiet.”

Shigeo nodded, and watched as Teru stepped out and was lost amongst people.

He had survived for a week in the shadows. North Market was still a dark place, but it was lighter, at the same time—a place full of danger, and if he had the worst luck, a place where somebody would recognise him. He had to stay quiet, just like Teru had said.

He wasn’t acceptable. He was an esper, and for all he knew, a wanted one — one that had been seen running away from a burning house and a pair of bodies. The police were probably on his trail. He had been lucky so far, but going out was too much. He would be seen. They would grab him and try to contain him, and if he wasn’t lucky at all, his powers would leak out again and grab someone’s
ankles or arms, or throw them, and then the bad words would come from all angles again, calling him *bastard, monster, spoonbender*—

His aura begged for release, and he longed for its feeling around him, for the warm emanation to cloak him like his mother’s softness once had.

Shigeo couldn’t let anything out. Enough had been enough. He had almost killed Michie-san’s husband, and the face had come back to haunt his dreams. It hurt—more than the emptiness of his stomach, and more than the scabs that covered his knees and hurt whenever he kneeled.

He had to wait. He had to be still.

One hand slid down into his pocket, feeling coins jangle. There wasn’t much, but it was worth trying. If he could pick up more fallen coins, it would come to something, eventually. Maybe, he would gather enough for some food, maybe even enough for a train to his grandmother’s house in the country, if he could remember the name of her little town.

He had to keep waiting—but it wasn’t long before he saw a white shirt flash amidst greys, that blue hat amongst darker heads, and Teru’s smirk was meeting his anxious eyes once again, swimming through crowds like a pair of scissors cutting through silk at one of the textile stalls.

“There, I’m back now,” he breathed out without effort. One hand was behind his back, Shigeo noticed, as the other lifted to straighten his hat. Its emblem—quasi-familiar—gleamed gold in a sliver of light, and Shigeo wondered where Teru had got it.

He fixed himself up rather quickly, before the hidden hand came out, brandishing a plump-looking peach. Shigeo’s mouth watered.

“It’s a good thing you ran into me,” Teru said, clearly contented. He puffed his chest out, as if to show off. “I know this place inside out. The ones with the voices that drown everything out. The ones that don’t look half the time. You’ve got to know them, and that’s a skill of its own. I’m just like that. It’s not easy being good at this craft.”

His hand was still out, the peach in it the brightest thing in the shade of the alley. Shigeo couldn’t tear his eyes from it. He knew he was starving, and he hadn’t eaten for so long that it was giving him pain, but something was wrong at the same time. There was *something* about everything — *something* in Teru’s shoulders, in his chest and the spark in his eyes, that made the fruit look wrong all of a sudden. The fuzz bristled against his fingers, sweet flesh calling out to be eaten—but it was wrong, all wrong, Shigeo realised, and as shady as the market from which it had come.

The feeling came fast. He pulled back his hand.

“I… I’m sorry,” he shook his head. “I—I can’t take it.”


“It’s not that,” Shigeo said. “I can’t take it. You stole it.”

“I took it, and that’s not something just anyone’s capable of.” He half-expected Teru to retract his hand, or to toss the fruit in the air like a pebble, but there it remained, still enticing.

“But you stole it.”

“So what?” Teru rolled his eyes. “Not like anybody’s going to notice. Not if you’re quiet, and… you’re the one who wanted this, right?”
“What?” Shigeo stepped back, startled. Teru sighed, the hand with the peach dropping to his side as he came closer. His shadow draped over Shigeo like a sheet.

There was no escape.

“Look at you. You’re a wreck,” the boy said, his other hand pushing him back, the force of his palm ringing through Shigeo’s chest. He stumbled, but caught his footing with a small gasp. “Like I said, a wreck. Without any dignity. Without a good name. I mean… *Mob*. What’s all *that* about, *really*?”

Teru didn’t wait for his answer: and it would never have come had he done so. “You don’t even know the rules of places like this.”

He came closer and closer, until Shigeo could feel hot, biting breaths on his cheek, but he could barely look up. His eyes met his shoes. Teru’s shoes were rather ordinary looking ones, but they were the last thing Shigeo wanted to feel in his side all the same. He tried to meet Teru’s gaze, avoiding the intimidation of dark, firm leather.

The intimidation in the boy’s eyes was even stronger; far worse.

“But… the rules are, don’t steal,” he mumbled, trying to stay calm but failing. His heart thrummed with oncoming panic.

For a moment, it was as if morality had come through to Teru. He backed off, giving Shigeo room to breathe—but the hand that was slammed on the wall didn’t budge. The heartbeat beneath, so close to what could turn to a fist any moment, was losing its rhythm.

“Well then, you’ve got a point,” Teru’s voice trailed off, turning quiet. “I’m not going to tolerate any stealing, if that’s your problem.”

“So you’ll give it back?”

“Course not.”

As if to prove his point, Teru took a bite from the peach. Shigeo tried to say something, but there was no use. There was no sympathy left on the face still smirking before him. Juice dripped onto Teru’s fingers, as if the fruit itself was trying to taunt him, and Shigeo felt his stomach twist with not only hunger, but the bitter feeling of simple regret.

“It’s mine now,” he said between bites. “Finders keepers, rule number one. You want to know rule number two?”

Shigeo didn’t, not really. “What is it?”

“It’s that you don’t take things from someone your senior. You respect people stronger and higher up in the world—like myself.” The peach had been reduced to nothing more than a stone, wet with juices and barely patched with small pieces of flesh. Teru tossed its remains over his shoulder without a care in the world, then wiped the juice on one trouser leg, seemingly unconcerned if it left a stain. “And that brings us to rule number three.”

“Number three?” Shigeo echoed.

“Rule number three is that here, we don’t do free favours. You’ve got to *pay* for them.”

“But you didn’t—“
Teru shook his head. “I’m not asking for much. I heard a little *jangle* in those pockets of yours, and I just did you a *very* big favour. You mind paying me for the trouble?”

Shigeo’s eyes widened. “For the—“

“For what I just did for you. You don’t want to starve, do you?”

He wasn’t about to comment on the lingering emptiness of his stomach, nor was the sad *jealousy* that had stirred up inside him over the peach strong enough to push him over the edge. Still, the feeling was far from pleasant, and Shigeo certainly didn’t want to go hungry. Teru was the predator of the two of them, and he was nothing more than mere prey, a rabbit caught in the eyes of a hawk: a hawk with sticky, thieving hands and a voice full of deception.

Rabbits were born to run: and as Shigeo felt the burn of his aura standing on end at his core, he fought to suppress it, and tried to look for a gap. He could see none. Teru wasn’t going to be thrown off so easily.

“I’ve got a fair few connections around here, you know,” he continued. “Pay up and you won’t have to worry again… or I’ll just slip in a few words with some friends. How about that? A little money for me, or a little blood on the ground?”

*Blood* —

Images flashed, of the night and the fire and the flap of a dressing gown, and blood, bright red blood pooling below.

“I—I don’t…”

“All right, maybe not a little. How does *all of it* sound?”

Shigeo felt himself starting to tremble. He was losing control by the second, with every small breath. He had to run, but he was weak and tired and aching, and could see no way out. “No. You can’t.”

“Oh, I *very much* can. And you’re looking a little impatient. How about I give you a taster?”

“What—”

A strong hand pushed out at his side, and Shigeo didn’t get to think of the rest. He stumbled and wobbled, but lost contact with the wall, and Teru clearly saw it. His hand reached out and clasped like a vice at Shigeo’s wrist, and the other hand swung at his cheek.

Shigeo cried out.

“How about *now? Now? Now, are you going to listen to me? Now?*” Teru’s voice resonated with the beat of his heart. The palm that had pushed him turned into a fist, and struck out on the other side, slamming up into his jaw. His cheek took another blow—and then another, before Shigeo’s back hit the wall, with much more force this time, leaving him gasping for breath.

He swayed, trying to stay calm but failing. His vision turned to a blur the moment Teru’s hand tugged at his hair. It thrust him back, and held on, and for a few confused, sickly moments, Shigeo thought he would force him right through the wall with inhuman strength.

A sudden punch jolted him out of his haze. The taste of blood filled his mouth.

“Now? Now you understand, huh?”
Shigeo spat between punches, gasping again at a hit to his side.

“I told you, didn’t I? This is what you get!”

It was too much—too much pain, too much agony, more than hunger twisting his stomach as Teru hit him, again and again. Shigeo only realised he was falling when the pain set in from him hitting the ground. The sky above was barely a flash in his eyes. Something eclipsed the light as quickly as it had appeared, and before Shigeo could refocus, Teru’s snarl was the closest thing to him again, and then the hands again, beating and tugging.

The street around him was turning to mist. His eyes were clouded over with tears. He was screaming in agony, enough to even deafen himself, but Teru wasn’t complaining. Teru was looking down from above, and laughing, laughing like a madman as he curled up on the ground, helpless and small, bleeding and screaming.

*Was nobody listening?*

The market was there, in the background: but the alleyways branched outwards and on, like blood vessels, and Teru was making him bleed at their heart. Nobody would hear him. Nobody would care, no matter how much he called. He was insignificant; completely so as he lay there, listening to laughter filling his ears.

His aura was stirring—more than stirring, he knew, *screaming* to roar into life. He had to save himself, or fight back, even if he was too weak and beaten to move. Flashes, small slivers, of colours Shigeo didn’t have names for, a spectrum of their own between sky and fuchsia and scorching, wild violet, danced through his vision.

He had to do something.

*Michie-san —*

He had to save himself.

*Michie-san’s husband —*

Shigeo gave up, and white flashed into his eyes.

It was primal. The call was a part of his flesh and his blood as much as it was one with his mind, and as part of him as anything else. The aura that enveloped him—that he could see, no matter how much his vision distorted—was his, and only his own. It scorched, hot as fire, as much as it filled him with energy.

He could see Teru before him, as he looked up, the tears in his eyes stinging still, but not so violently now, readying himself for what had to be another punch to the face. Not enough was clear to make everything out, but as Shigeo held on to the feeling that called out for him as much as he called out for it in his desperation, he saw enough to be certain that if his powers failed, he would be losing a tooth, if not multiple teeth.

Tears ran down his cheek. Pain resonated through him, one last time—and then, Teru’s fist struck.

The punch flew towards him, then stopped with a *thump*. Shigeo felt the hum of his aura.

The barrier was weak—and with Teru almost on top of him, he couldn’t complete it, but enough of it had formed to save him. Fists stopped in midair, once and twice and again after that. Teru continued beating at it, but it was useless. He was stopped, each time, by what to him was nothing but air, but
Shigeo saw his own welcoming colours.

Fists struck against the barrier, again and again, blue and violet flashing fast with each impact. The colours danced in Shigeo’s eyes, out of control. Teru, he knew, could not see them, but he had to know that something was up. None of his blows were hitting. Shigeo could see him gritting his teeth.

“Shit, what’s—“

He had realised. Teru was angry, if anything—but the boy wasn’t stupid. Past the hum of his aura and the sound of pummelling on the barrier’s surface, Shigeo made out pieces of voice, desperate with confusion as bare knuckles hit both something in the air, and nothing at all.

“You—you can’t, you shouldn’t... do this...“

There was only so much it could handle. Shigeo felt tears burning his eyes as he thought back to the last time. There had been pounding too, with his aura ablaze on his skin and running like wind through his hair, and colour—so much colour, comfort turning to pain screaming into his eyes, and voices calling and shouting: Michie-san’s husband’s terrible cries. He could recall every poisonous swear. Each word was a brand. Spoonbending bastard, monster, freak; all of them were calling for him and only for him, and each repeating shout was only growing louder and louder.

Teru’s voice had long since gone silent, and through the fog of screams in his ears, it took too long for Shigeo to realise that he had stopped trying to break through the barrier. Quivering in his position, helpless on the ground, he looked up. The boy was still there, but he had stood up, and stepped back. For a second, Shigeo’s heart leapt with relief.

“Oh. Oh, I see now.”

“See... what?” Shigeo breathed out.

“I see what you did. Aren’t you clever?” Teru said, his voice thick as honey.

Shigeo felt his chest starting to heave. He could barely see past the cracks in the barrier. He tried to push himself up, to fix up the breaks with a thought, like he once had been able to do.

Nothing came through. He could feel nothing from Teru—no power to speak of, and Shigeo was certain he had not stumbled upon another esper—but what he could feel was so thick it was choking. He could feel nothing but red: a red that was anger, and something flash-yellow, and a twisted, violet feeling that Shigeo knew had to be pride.

“I see what you’re doing. That makes it all the more fun. You’ll be the second esper I’ve beaten into the ground.”

Shigeo’s eyes widened in terror. “What?”

“And the first time was the most fun I’d had in a while!”

Shigeo’s barrier shattered.

He could feel something like despair, something he didn’t quite understand, squeezing him from the inside. More than hunger, the feeling was horror: horror that tore through his lungs in a scream as Teru’s shoe met his side, and he swore that he felt something crack as he rolled over, helpless.

He had failed, he realised as he tried to breathe in. His whole upper body was still, head swimming
in memories and voices and feelings he could not understand, and then came the physical agony. He couldn’t breathe—couldn’t speak, couldn’t even gasp out for breath as Teru’s shoe pushed down on his back, pressing and pressing as if he was no more than a human-sized hill that someone had conquered for territory.

“See? You’re weak, just like that other one!”

Another kick struck his side: muffled this time by a subconscious part-barrier. There was only so much his instincts could do to protect him. He could feel burning and stinging, and blood welling up on his tongue. He couldn’t hold it for long. He was going to die, there and then, at the hands of a boy his age that had stolen a peach and then beaten his life out of him over some money.

It wouldn’t be the worst way to die, but it was what he deserved. He was all that Michie-san’s husband had called him, and all that the toxic voices on the radio had said about him and the others.

He didn’t feel the next kick as it came, or the next. The barriers—or attempts at them—were weaker and weaker. He tried to concentrate, to strengthen them somehow, but his brain processed it all through a fog, as if nothing was real, and the walls above were nothing but dark, boxy blurs. The pavement below was all that remained. It was cold and rough and cut through his skin as it scraped.

“You’re weak, just like all of you are. The 99th? Fuck that, you can’t even fight! You’re all weak, you’re a joke: that’s what you are!”

Teru wasn’t lying. The thought of attacking—as possible as it was—only left flashes of blood and screams of accusation ringing through his head. He had to do the opposite: to save himself, and that was the only option. He had to run. He had to get his strength back. He had to get out of the alley, out of Teru’s range, out of sight, and leave it unbroken—

*One… more… chance…*

He was dying, most likely; but something was there, still surviving, still calling.

His eyes fluttered shut—and in the heat of the moment was one last rush, one last charge of energy that he had. It was between living or dying. Time felt slowed down; he could see Teru going in for the kill, or for almost a kill, ready to break bones and smash through his skull if he didn’t move.

*One more… try…*

There was no other option.

Shigeo released what he had.

His aura pushed out, colours clinging together into one last makeshift attempt to save himself. He closed his eyes, feeling the light almost blind him—and it was his own light, out of control and beyond understanding, as if it were acting by itself. He felt like screaming, but nothing came out. He could hear nothing at all for a few seconds, but what he could feel at the edge of his reach was a barrier, barely formed and barely stable, but just clinging on.

The hum that rang out with every use of his powers rang out, before it suddenly came to an end. Air slammed into his lungs, and sound returned to Shigeo’s ears. Teru’s voice came back, too, and as he opened his eyes, he saw him pushed to the ground, hands scraping against the concrete.

“What the hell was that? Ugh… oh mother fuck…”

He heard him gasp suddenly, shaking his head, and it was only then that Shigeo realised that he had
pushed him. The barrier had not been that simple—it had been a force, a sort of wild desperation—and he had hurt someone, hurt someone again. It had gone out of hand.

The feeling Shigeo could feel was indescribable. He knew the colour. He remembered the emotion, feeling it burning into his skin. Anger, anger—such anger he could feel it starting to choke him, and it was Teru’s anger. He was going to come closer. He was going to come back and finish him, he realised, and this time, he wouldn’t be able to protect himself. Any moment, any moment, he knew it, he knew it—

“…Fuck. Fuck it, just…”

The blow he had been waiting for never came, amidst a plethora of swears. He opened his eyes, feeling just enough strength starting to seep back into his muscles. His arms were aching, beaten and bruising underneath the dirty wool of his sweater, but he could move them.

He could breathe. He could see, and hear, and smell gutter water and trash in the alley. He could force himself up, even as his muscles strained far more than they ever had after any of his attempts to run. His legs followed suit—and he could see the bruises this time, mixed up with the blood flowing freely down both of his knees and into the stripes of his socks.

“…Just… get the hell out… get the hell out of here…”

He turned around, neck sore and back aching. Teru was still there, still standing, and far cleaner than he was, but he was exhausted, sweat making his shirt stick to him like a downpour of humid rain. There was no blood on him—Shigeo breathed out in relief—but the look in Teru’s eyes hadn’t changed.

“Go on. Run… Run the fuck out of here. You’re a coward all right… oh, fuck it, just run! I’m done with you…”

Shigeo couldn’t tell if he was serious. He pushed himself off the ground, stumbling over his own clumsy, blood-stained feet in damp socks. He could barely see straight. Whatever strength had miraculously come into him was barely enough to keep himself going.

“Get out already! Go… go finish yourself off!” Teru screamed out again, hands falling to his knees with a gasp from the lungs. “Go get one of your 99th… get them to shoot your guts out. I’m not... ugh…”

He spluttered loudly, and Shigeo felt himself shudder. Teru’s hand reached to his head, as if nursing a headache. “I’ve got… better things… fuck…”

“But—“

“Get out. Scram already!”

The look in his eyes screamed I’ll murder you if you don’t move.

Shigeo ran.

He ran, unable to look back: but with each pace, he could almost feel the ghost of the other boy pursuing him down the alley and past every turn. He couldn’t turn to check. His neck muscles constricted, and his legs were no better either. He was starting and stopping and stumbling as he tried to breathe in and breathe out, and struggling to see past a mess of sweat-sticky hair and teardrops and blood and whatever else had soaked into him.
He didn’t realise until he was far from the sounds of the market that he was missing one shoe, and that his side felt almost broken: and he could hear no voices calling for him. There had most likely been none, he thought as he ran, knowing he was half-hallucinating and bleeding and starving and so close to screaming. His mind had come to the edge.

Shigeo could feel his aura again, and the remains of the last feeling Teru had felt, mixing in with his own. It hung over him like a too-heavy cloak, making him trip and fall and worsen the bleeding. It twisted and turned, burning bright in his eyes, making him feel sick even with his stomach barren and empty. It consumed him as he ran for his life, blood and bruises and filth from the gutters painting his skin.

Its colour was white, and it was a feeling called fear: and fear itself told him that he was going to die.

Chapter End Notes

chapter notes, as usual
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

Content warning: very minor mention of drugs. (It's honestly brief, but might as well warn.) Ryuzaki is an OC; canon unfortunately didn't name enough gang boys.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“So you let him run, just like that?”

Teruki’s eyes stayed fixed on Edano as he took a drag between phrases. Smoke danced out of the darkness coating the alley. Cloudy-white, it stood out out against his jet hair and the red mark on his forehead; some scrape that Edano called a proud battle scar.

“There wasn’t much else for me to do,” he smirked in reply. “I mean, I didn’t want to waste myself on that brat. He ran like a chicken.”

Edano raised an eyebrow. “You got him that good?”

“Should have seen it. Good thing I let him go, actually. Won’t have the cops kicking our asses when they find his corpse out there.”

“Knew you’d do it. That’s our Teru-san for ya.”

Next to him, brown-haired Ryuzaki sighed. He breathed out, and the alley filled with his smoke.

Teruki leaned back, the muscles still tense in his shoulders. It was hard to avoid the smoke, but it had never felt unpleasant. What had always annoyed him a little more was Edano’s recklessness, but with a packet in his own hand and smoke surrounding him left and right, he found it harder and harder to care.

The smoke wasn’t good enough a distraction this time around. Something felt a little more irritating, about him, about everything, enough for the remnants of Edano’s voice to resound in his head and converge with what was already the start of a headache.

Hoping nobody would notice, he tipped his head back. Both Teruki’s hair and hat met the cold bricks of the wall. Something about it brought a feeling of comfort. He looked down at the cigarette in his hand, and realised he had lost interest in it five minutes ago.

The faint thrum in his head only felt stronger with each passing second. It had its own rhythm: the rhythm of stumbling footsteps and gasps that Teruki could remember still, far too clearly.

*When did I get so weak?*

He had seldom faced espers, and all of them had been easy to beat. One-trick-ponies, some voice had called them once on the radio. An esper had no reason to be proud of themselves, he had concluded, after his first experience with one: not when their pride came from something so flimsy that it barely made any difference.

The first one he had fought had been some rival gang kid. Green-sleeved arms waving around hadn’t
been enough to protect him. Teruki had laughed. He and Edano had watched the boy fall on top of spilled garbage, more red to him than there had ever been any green. It had been weeks ago, but he had not forgotten the fight.

He was strong, of course. Teruki could take on boys a head taller than him with few wounds to show for it. He hadn’t been fighting for long, but that didn’t matter: he had learned fast. Strength and technique were everything, more so than experience. He had taken on leadership like a weed breaking through cobbles, pushing apart weathered stone and settling in, standing out with hair like a black-petaled dandelion, as vivid as the sight of hot blood on his knuckles mid-bout.

Every fight was a thrill—better than cigarettes, stronger than black-market pills, wilder and bloodier, and each brought with it scars and wounds that marked him out as a survivor, a leader, a battler. He would come home with more notes in his pockets and memories of his foes weeping as he put his hat back on, while they lay, wailing and bruised, on the ground.

Espers were special on paper, but merely weak, merely human, as they bled on the concrete.

One esper had fallen by Teruki’s feet. The thought of fighting more had filled him with excitement. The rest would fall down, just as useless and helpless and utterly contradictory—and that was what he had been thinking for weeks, chest out and smirk on his face. Coming across a powerful esper would be ridiculous.

No need to fear, said the voice on the radio. It was unanimous, he thought, eyeing Edano and Ryuzaki next to him, the latter lazily kicking the wall with a cigarette butt between his teeth.

No need to fear, right?

He had watched the other boy stumble away like a crippled dog. He had let him escape, and screamed at him to run.

Teruki had long since stopped screaming. His chest hurt a little. He was too tired to even laugh at the memory: at how pathetic the boy had looked.

Why? Why did I let him…?

The ache at the back of his head was beginning to spread. It had spread to his chest, too, and gone from a faint pulse to what Teruki could only describe as something like scratching. He moved the back of his hand to rub at the spot through his shirt. The pain was somewhere too deep to be reached. Untouched, it continued.

He needed to go home and lie down, and most likely sleep. Outside was still light, and a part of Teruki nagged at him to stay with the group, to stay like he always did until after dark—but this time, he realised, would be too much.

He had to be coming down with something: some strange summer fever. The boy from before had to have been ill, and Teruki had caught it from him.

What else had been on him?

Teruki looked down at his hands, suddenly on edge with suspicion that the esper boy had been crawling with fleas, or ticks, or something far worse from the pits of the streets.

“Hey, what’s up with you? You’ve been staring at shit, going all quiet…”

He looked up. Ryuzaki was sneering at him, beady eyes poking straight at his skin. His free hand
was toying with a matchbox. The sound of the box’s contents rattling as it was turned over made Teruki wince. Even small sounds were making the pressure in the back of his head worse.

_Fuck him, fuck that esper boy, he gave me whatever the heck was on him, fleas or some shit—_

“I’m fine,” he spat, frustrated. “I’m fine, nothing’s wrong.”

“What, the esper kid got you?”

Teruki clenched his fists. The remainders of his cigarette fell from his fingers and onto the ground, lost in the gutters. “I’m fine. I told you, I beat him to shit, but he wasn’t weak, not like the others. He had an actual barrier.”

“Really?” Edano joined in. “You’re the one who kept saying how weak they all were.”

“…That one was different.”

“Ha, nice one.” Ryuzaki slapped Edano’s shoulder. “Special exception? What, was he one of those 99th ones? Nice, but that’s not gonna work.”

“He might have been,” Teruki mused.

“Not unless he was fighting that war in a diaper.”

Edano and Ryuzaki burst into laughter, and Teruki felt his face beginning to burn, unsure how much of it was down to the sickness growing within him.

The boy had definitely been more than the simple espers that other gangs had been beating up. There had been something about him, Teruki thought—something stranger, and freer, and as strange as it felt to confess, something more resonant, that just for a moment had rang out in harmony, like a soft bell in his ears.

A groan slipped through his teeth. His head was pounding.

“C’mon, he wasn’t one of the strong ones. He’s a kid. You could have done so much more with him,” Ryuzaki sighed, flexing an arm. “You gone soft?”

“I haven’t!” Teruki pressed. “I’m telling you, he ran like he was on fire, and I couldn’t catch him. There wasn’t much point beating any more sense into him, anyway—”

“So it’s him being _fast_ now? Hey, Ryuzaki, you heard that? The great Teru-san’s scared of an _esper!_”

“I wasn’t scared. He was the one that ran from me.”

“Yeah?” Edano sneered. “ _You sure?_”

Teruki gritted his teeth. Part of him wanted to reach out with a fist or two and give Edano _what for,_ and make him take back every word. His hands twitched by his sides, coming together into fists. He could feel the anger inside him rising up to a boil the more he heard Ryuzaki’s loud laughter, and the closer Edano came, close enough within punching distance—

“ _Shut up!_”

—and he swung, straight into Edano’s pasty-pale cheek.
Edano groaned and stumbled back, barely able to stay on his feet. He had never been good with taking blows.

“All right, you wanting to fight me?”

Sneering, Edano lunged. Breath hitching in his throat, Teruki dodged the first swing, then the second one, darting left and right but cutting too close. Edano’s knuckle grazed against his cheek. Teruki responded, aiming for Edano’s stomach.

His knuckle swept against fabric, but made it no further.

“Ha!”

If Edano had grown to be faster than him, then Teruki had not realised. The other boy threw back a few more punches, and he could feel his own muscles straining to dodge. Edano’s arms were quick flashes, and he could barely tell one from the other until they came close—and then, it was almost too late to fight back.

*When did he— no....*

It wasn’t Edano, Teruki realised. It was his own body that was starting to struggle. His muscles were aching already. It was too early. He tried to hit back at Edano once more, and failed. He could feel himself getting out of breath, far too fast. Something had changed; made him slow. His legs were already moving too sluggishly for his liking. Edano’s attacks were only coming closer and closer.

As he avoided a well-placed knee to the crotch, the fear that had come from beating up a small esper boy began to burn deep inside, hot past the strange ache in his body.

*What did he do? Did... did he really infect me? Am I sick? What was it?*

There was a gap, he realised.

Ryuzaki had stepped back, seeing the fight turning wilder. Where he had been, there was now a small space between bags of trash. Edano’s arms were out, both ready to strike, and the chance Teruki had sought was finally there.

He pushed, lunging out. Teruki smirked. He was an inch from hitting him now, and Edano wouldn’t move fast enough. He was the leader, and the role would stay his. It didn’t matter that he was ill—he was stronger than Edano, and always had been, and that fact was as clear as day, as clear as the red mark his fist would leave on Edano’s face.

His hat slipped off his head and landed amidst the trash in the gutter, but Teruki didn’t feel it. In his mind, Edano was already bleeding.

What he didn’t expect was Edano to just slip an inch out of reach, and for a thick-soled boot to knock the wind out of him, so hard that for a moment he thought it had shattered his ribcage.

Agony ripped through his side. His throat froze, and the alley in front of him blurred as he found himself losing the fight against gravity. Teruki knew he was falling. The world shifted gears and slowed down in his vision, and so did his arms, splayed out and useless as they tried to reach for Edano’s collar at least, and met nothing but air.

He hit the ground first, and then Edano’s boot came down hard on his back, and knocked the breath out of him completely.
His lungs gave out for an instant. Teruki choked, saliva dripping down his lips and onto his chin, the headache almost splitting his skull. A new mess of colours burst into his eyes. It hurt to look up. He couldn’t make it even halfway before he collapsed back down to the ground, grazing his cheek on coal-coloured concrete.

“Sorry, boss,” Edano smiled, wiping spit from the edge of his mouth. “Looks like you did soften up.”

“It—it wasn’t me…” Teruki lied, between gasps. His breath had come back, but even speaking still hurt. “It was that—that kid… oh holy fuck—"

He felt like retching and screaming out, both at once, even if it tore his lungs into pieces. The pain was suddenly rising, burning and stinging, something completely different from the ache of his back after being pushed onto the ground. His vision blurred for an instant. His throat felt like it had been punctured. His hands scrambled to push himself up.

The boot lifted up from his back. The pain stayed the same. He managed to get to his knees, but no further.

“Shit…” Edano’s curse felt distant, almost hazy. Teruki tried to look up again. In his eyes was a tall, blurry figure. He could see a hand reaching out. Both of his own were suddenly leaden, too heavy to lift. “Shit, I didn’t mean to do that…”

The noise in Teruki’s ears muffled the rest. His eyes squeezed shut, and he found himself fighting back pain, not from the boot or the ground, but from something else, from somewhere in the back of his head, far worse than before. He could feel it spiralling, burrowing: sinking and dipping down like icy water spilling past his collar and dripping through from his back to his chest, then turning to icicles and spearing right through him.

For a moment, it felt like freezing to death—and then it started to burn.

His hand clutched at his shirt. The skin beneath it was damp, but not as hot as the feeling below, deep inside. Something was there: something sharp, blunt, twisting, burning, cold, undefinable. There was a feeling he could not describe for a moment, and then it turned into squeezing, then a sharp pain in his chest again, and then the feeling of something scratching inside, like small claws, both at the head and the heart—

“Don’t… don’t come… get away, now…”

The words slipped out, broken and raw, his mouth dry but chin wet with saliva. The claws were coming harder now, more solid, almost tearing through flesh.

There was no blood on the ground. There was nothing but saliva, shining white on the concrete and sinking in, then darkening grey into black. White spit bubbles clung to the edges. Teruki’s heart raced.

Something was wrong.

Light flashed behind his eyes, and Teruki thought back to the esper boy: to wide, frightened-animal eyes and scraped, bleeding knees, to weak hands holding on to dirty, worn sleeves and then letting go, to something else he thought he had glimpsed for a second. It was burning bright in his mind; the feeling of whatever had hung in the air and stopped him kicking the boy straight point-blank in the face, a certain strange something that had screamed esper at him, completely invisible—

—or it had been invisible, and should have stayed unseen, like the last time, but for a moment, he
had seen it flash blue.

He remembered, and the light took over his vision.

Teruki screamed.

Something snapped. The pressure that had culminated in the back of his head turned to air, a sudden warm rush spreading out from his core and spilling lava into his veins. His eyes were shut, but he could see light: vivid, striking but not blinding, unnatural and completely wrong, where there had once been gentle darkness. His eyelids stayed shut, as if some force was pushing them down.

An odd sound began to ring through his ears. It was strange, almost indescribable, like a thin mechanical screech, but the screech was deep and resonant, in a way natural sound simply couldn’t be. There were layers, and under the screech, Teruki could make out the soft sounds of something that made him think of a voice, calling out to him and only to him: *this is the light and it is your light*, like a mother beckoning a small child out of the dark.

**Light?**

Teruki cracked open one eye, and saw nothing but fuzz. The pain was harsh, but not enough to force tears, and as he strained to focus, he felt it become clearer, but still oddly blurred and discordant. A hand was reaching out. Behind it was a grey sleeve, and even further behind a face and a thick mess of charcoal hair.

**Edano?**

“…shit… what’s…”

He couldn’t make out much more than a handful of scattered, watery words. His head was swimming. He was dangerous—probably ill, mad, hallucinating, not right, infected with some disease that was probably going to kill him, and if Edano hadn’t already caught it from him, he would probably catch it if he came any closer—

“Don’t…”

He tried to speak. It came out as a gasp, breaths hitching as his heart lost pace. The blur in front of him stopped moving—or so he hoped, trying to stay as still as he could through the ebb and flow of the pain. “Don’t… come…”

“Teru… shit, no…”

Edano was still coming closer. The pain in Teruki’s chest seemed to pulse, before he felt it stop and restart. It wasn’t ending, not how he wanted it to be over, once and for all. Whatever it was, it was out of control. It had to be sickness.

“Don’t…”

It had spread to his hands, and he could feel something there, pooling around his fingertips like sweat. Something like water—but not quite water—was stuck to his skin, permeating down to the bone, flowing and shifting.

“Don’t… don’t,” he murmured, barely able to make a legible sound. The strange feeling was everywhere, seeping into his skin and clothes, but going deeper still in a way he had never felt anything go, burrowing down into his core and coming back.
He couldn’t let anyone near him.

“Teru?”

He heard his name being called, but couldn’t tell who it was. The sound distorted before he could make sense of it. A hand reached out through the fogginess of his vision, but he wasn’t strong enough to push back.

_Get away, he thought, get away, I’m not—I’m not—_

He could feel something charging; something rooted to the feeling of fluid and electricity and blood rushing through his veins, all at once.

“Don’t come…”

“Teru—“

“Don’t come near me!”

He let out a cry, and the charge burst from his fingertips. The skin on them seared for a moment, before Teruki felt something jolt, and there was light again in his vision: light that didn’t feel like the sun, or a fire, or a lantern, or even a streetlight. For a moment, he could see nothing but yellow.

Edano screamed. A loud thump reverberated through the ground and the walls. Teruki swore he heard something crack, more akin to brick than bone.

The haze was still there in his eyes, but he could feel it dissipating, along with the pain. He could still hear the odd hum in the back of his head, even as the fog cleared and he began to make out familiar lines. The street was as he remembered, rough concrete and imposing walls, save for a knocked-over trash can and his hat on the ground. Ryuzaki was still there, too, but with a terrible look in his eyes.

Edano was pressed to the wall, a knee-length above the ground. Teruki wondered if he had been pinned, but he could see neither nails nor peeling glue, nor some great, impossible hand— but something was holding Edano there, something too bright to be normal.

Around his wrists and ankles were pale yellow shackles, bathed in a lemon-bright glow. The same light surrounded the rest of Edano’s body, faint but undoubtedly there.

“Ow… stop… please—“

Was Edano hallucinating too, just like him?

Teruki looked down, the pain still there but not so harsh anymore that he could not try to stand up. His gaze met his hand, and he stopped.

The same glow, connecting him with Edano, was painted over his hands. They shook, and so did the glow coating them, as if attached to the skin.

There was something terribly unnatural about the glow that made Teruki’s heart race, panic setting in as he shook his hand to force it to leave. It remained. Edano was still pinned back, and he could hear the other boy gasping in terror, questions of what the hell happened and what the fuck, is it you, losing themselves amongst the resonant sound that still hummed in his ears.

There were two pairs of eyes fixed on him. For once, he wished they weren’t looking.

“I… I don’t…” He tried to say something, but the words refused to come. His throat was stiff, dried
up and stabbed through.

Ryuzaki stepped forward, even as he shook his head to tell him no, stay away, I can’t stop this and it came out of me and I don’t understand. “What the fuck? Fucking hell, what—what the fuck…”

Teruki tried to speak with his eyes alone. It didn’t seem to be working, and neither was any kind of control over the spectacle in front of him. The light refused to disappear, no matter how strongly he willed it. Carefully, he tried putting his hand down, and the light only followed, as it had before, completely surrounding.

“What the fuck… you’re one of them, no… no wonder you let that kid go…”

He shook his head, trying to meet Ryuzaki’s gaze—but letting Edano out of his sight filled him with guilt as he did it, even if just for a second. Whatever had happened didn’t make sense, but his hand was still lit up in the same colour as Edano, pinned to the wall, so the doing was his. He could think of no explanation, nothing to say, nothing at all.

“No… no,” he croaked. “I’m… I didn’t… didn’t mean to, ugh…”

There was that pain again, and a flash in the back of his eyes. Teruki fought the urge to cry out as it stabbed. Once, twice—it kept on happening, making his body spasm and his hands shake. The light around them flickered, like a flame about to die in the wind. The strange pressure he felt deep within—that had pushed out in the first place, before the headache had turned into something explosive and terrible—started pushing at him again, momentarily vanishing before it resurfaced.

Teruki’s vision distorted: black-white-black-white-yellow. Struggling to keep his head up, he found his eyes shutting and his head drooping low. There was the feeling again—the push and the scrape and burning, invisible fire—

He gasped out loud as something invisible tore. His throat constricted, just for a moment, and he found himself spluttering, as if someone had choked him. He tasted saliva as it dripped to the ground.

“Whoa, fucking—“

He winced, hearing a thump accompanying the scream.

The pain was starting to calm again. Teruki braced himself for a new wave to strike out and shock him, but it didn’t come. He could feel it ebbing instead—persisting like an itch, but losing its strength. Ryuzaki’s voice came past the strange hum, clearer and clearer as it came to a hush. He breathed out, finally.

One dirty hand pushed past the mess of hair in his face, and he saw that Edano had fallen. Ryuzaki had scrambled to his aid, and was in the midst of asking if he was injured. Edano was shaking his head.

“…no, I mean, it’s not that bad, I’ll deal…”

It was hurting again. The light had gone, but the feeling remained, heavy still on his chest, and Teruki felt it pulling him down. His body wasn’t obeying him. He wanted to stand, to call out, to reach for Edano and apologise and explain—but it wasn’t going to happen, he realised. The joints in his hands turned to rubber. He could barely move them, leaving them to twitch idly as he stayed, useless, on his knees.

He was going to fall down at this rate. The feeling had spread down to his hips and into his legs, telling him he was tired, and he felt almost like sleeping—
No, he realised: it wasn’t like sleep. It wasn’t right, it was sickening, heavy—

“Teru, what the fuck…”

It was Ryuzaki that called for him first. Teruki fought the pull dragging him to the ground and looked up. The look that met him was venomous—scared, certainly, but overwhelming, seething with anger, resentment—

“No, I…” He could only let out hoarse words. Whatever had happened to his energy from before was happening to everything that he had in him. All of it felt like it was being sucked out, and he knew he was helpless. He couldn’t resist it. “No, I—I didn’t mean to. I didn’t…”

“Didn’t what?” Edano spat. “Didn’t think we’d find out some day?”

“I… I didn’t know, not—not like…”

“Course we’d find out. Knew you let him go for a reason.”

“I swear, I don’t—“

“I knew it.” Ryuzaki finished, turning away from Edano, who followed him, having stood up when Teruki had been in his haze, fighting pain. “Knew you liked fighting espers a little too much. Got your sick thrills now, haven’t you? Bastard.”

His hand reached down to cup Teruki’s chin. Teruki shivered at the contact. “C’mon now. Do one of your tricks.”

Teruki let out a groan, trying to shake his head and tell him to get away somehow—but it all came to nothing, as his head slumped in Ryuzaki’s hand, like a ragdoll’s. It was too hard to move—too hard to say anything, or even to think. What he was seeing was starting to turn to a blur.

“C’mon now. C’mon, c’mon, just like a dog.”

“What, you think he’s helpless now?”

“Look at him, he’s a goner… liar, ‘course they’re all weak…”

A hand yanked at his hair, and he let out a barely-audible cry. He was losing what was left of his vision.

“Look at him, let’s get him… you hear that, spoonbender?”

“That’s for lying, you bastard—”

He knew he was weak—too weak, too weak for anything. Teruki couldn’t get the thought out of his mind. The pain was a prison, the strange heaviness shackling and chaining him down, out of control. There was no strength left in his muscles to fight with, and nothing in his throat that would let him make any sounds more distinctive than groans. He tried to protest, but his lips wouldn’t part.

“You gonna—“

“Push him down, give him what for—“

The words weren’t empty, Teruki half-realised, as he tasted concrete and felt cold, unwelcome hands raze through his scalp, pushing and mocking. He couldn’t breathe—but he was feeling less and less aware of it by the second, five-ton weights on his eyelids dragging them shut. The voices and sounds
of shuffling feet became nothing more than scrapes and shoves, and even the ground didn’t taste so unpleasant amidst another sensation: the taste of his own blood on cut lips.

“Drag—you gonna carry him? … scissors?”

“Carry… you know, beat him to shit…”

“…the fucking scissors…”

The voices were slurring and slipping around in his mind. Nothing stayed stable, but Teruki felt movement around him, and cold air and the scrape of concrete on both of his cheeks. He lost his grip on reality, and slipped out, tired and groggy and helpless. He ached. Nothing was left. Only pain lingered. It twisted, and made him regret ever laying a hand on the esper boy with the stupid name.

The pain was all that persisted, more than perception, as his consciousness slipped.

It was still there when he woke up. The process was slow, and it took a minute from his eyes opening to register where he had ended up. However long it had been, time had passed. He was no longer in one of the alleys, but at the bottom of a damp, trodden stairwell in a frigid, stone building, where he had once seen the homeless curled up with the desperate beggars.

The heat from before had completely vanished by then. Without his hat, Teruki’s head felt awfully cold.

As he forced himself up to his knees, he tasted blood and filth on his tongue, and felt cool air against the scraped, raw skin on his cheeks. His hands brushed against something soft and dark on the ground. Still in a daze, he couldn’t quite make sense of what it was. His thoughts and feelings didn’t connect. His voice was hoarse, and he couldn’t call out, but a feeling around him told him he was alone. He had been discarded.

Aching and beaten, he sat up, and it was then that his vision finally became stable. He made out dirt on his hands and drying blood on once-white sleeves, and a dark mess on the floor. His head felt strange. His hat was gone, but something felt even more wrong: something about the air coming into contact with skin where it should not have been felt.

It was a ghost-like feeling, something his body remembered when his mind had gone blank—something like hands, fingers, then metal, touching and hair being pulled and—

No, no, not this...

His hands moved up to the top of his head. They met almost nothing, the longest strands chopped to stubble, bristling and sharp against his palms.

Teruki wanted to scream, but he couldn’t.

He breathed: in and out, louder and louder. Deep within, he felt the familiar pressure again, small as a heartbeat, but clinging, still there, like a second pulse. He cursed it. It stayed, burning through his core like a glowing-hot brand. He cursed it again. Nothing changed.

Helplessly, hopelessly, he closed his eyes, and silently wept.

His mind’s eye put a colour to the feeling, something he wished he had not seen. It was warm, vivid, like the light of the sun, or a spotlight, bright and terribly beautiful when it was something Teruki knew that he hated— yellow, bright yellow.
It was light, and the light was mocking the dark, shameful mess of his own cut-off hair, strewn like trash on the ground.

Chapter End Notes

notes are here
Chapter 7

There were two things on Reigen’s mind that evening, and neither of the two was the article he had been given to proofread hours before. The article had bored him to death, and he had left work with a heavy mood and heavier eyelids, barely livened up by the conversation Shinra had tried to liven him up with over lunchtime. The conversation, like most of the article, were long since in the back of his mind by the time he got home.

The first thing on his agenda was a quick dash to the local bakery before it shut, and before it ran out of anpan: something he had become a little too partial to, he thought as he leaned on the counter, panting after a careless run. The contents of his wallet weren’t infinite. His mother wouldn’t approve, either, if she found out he wasn’t cooking both breakfast and his evening meal—but as he left the bakery, his wallet a few coins lighter, clutching two buns in a brown paper bag, he thought that maybe her thoughts weren’t so important.

He came home and abandoned his blazer, then picked up the cigarettes he had stupidly left on the table that morning. He would eat the anpan later that evening, or save some for a rushed breakfast.

Rushed breakfasts had become more-or-less normal in the days after coming to Seasoning. His mother would certainly shake her head if she knew, and Reigen thought of her as he trudged down the stairs again. He thought of how she was doing back in Enoki, where she was more-or-less safe, and not in a city thick with anxiety over shootings and spoons and arsonists.

He missed her, he knew. He missed his mother like he missed the softer night sky and the smell of campfires in the woods; of his father laughing as he pulled out a stolen matsutake the size of a large, sweaty hand from his jacket, and then, the sight of her, swishing her pen as she sat at the table, smiling as they came home. My boys, my sweet boys, she still said to him sometimes in his dreams.

Enoki was full of light and trees and small, wooden houses. Shiitake, the little town Reigen had lived near, seemed to breathe with life far more than Seasoning. Reigen missed his old life, and the peace, and the slumber-filled, quiet nights in his nondescript village.

Quiet…

Groaning, he recalled the second thing on his mind as he knocked on the now-familiar door, and stood back, waiting for the landlady—Yanaki? Yanagi? Yamanagi? He had forgotten.

Through the wood, he could hear the radio blaring. He hoped she had heard. The sudden shuffle of feet against a cold floor and the call of a grating, aged voice gave him his answer.

The brass handle turned with a click, and then the door creaked open. Yanagi—that was it—peered out with beady, dark eyes, ones Reigen thought had to be small by nature, but made even smaller by the growing web of wrinkles around them. A curler was stuck to her hair, almost comical, but he couldn’t tell if it was there on purpose, or if she had simply forgotten to take the thing out.

“Ah, Arataka-chan…”

Reigen bit back a sigh at the nickname. Like the curler, her forgettable name, and the loose threads on the sleeves of her hanten, every little thing seemed to be picking at him that evening, nagging and pressing and shifting, until he could fight it no more. There was just enough restraint left in him to
hold back, but it was becoming less of an itch and more of a bite.

“Is there something the matter?”

Even her voice was too sweet, too sticky like over-sweetened pink mochi. If she was trying to be kind, then Reigen didn’t have the sense to pick it up through the fatigue.

“Ah, no—nothing like that. I was going to ask about something.” He could put the smile on a little longer. He had been keeping one on around work for hours; a little more didn’t hurt. Slipping back into it felt like repeating an exercise. At worst, it made the muscles in the lower half of his face uncomfortable, but it felt best to grin and bear it.

“What is it?”

“Ah, well…” He thought about it for a moment, trying to piece together his thoughts in the most polite way. He hadn’t slept long enough—or maybe it was work pushing down on him, or just it being the evening. “About the noise. On the weekend.”

Yanagi raised an eyebrow, half-lost in her wrinkles and a loose, silly curl. “Is it the pipes?”

The pipes had been a pain to begin with, but Reigen had started to get used to the groaning. “No, I mean,” he gestured, “Outside. I heard shouting. Are there gangs around here?”

Shiitake had had its fair share of ruffians, even for a tiny town. Reigen’s village seemed to eternally sleep. He had last slept well weeks in the past.

Some part of him waited for the landlady to tell him to lean in and then whisper a secret, something about yakuza. He had stared down the alleyways in the morning and found nothing there, only rats—but the streets smelled like danger. They teemed with bad feelings. He had felt bad vibes amongst the bad smells. Reigen wasn’t scared, of course, not at all. Those were things that a reporter, a natural like himself, one that had yet to be recognised, would one day be known for braving and documenting.

There was nothing to be scared about, no matter how many knives or guns they had in their arsenal.

“The gangs? Ah, they’re nothing to worry about. They’re schoolboys. Silly things wanting to fight. No harm done, really.”

Reigen stood rigid, surprised.

The expression that met his own felt like something aimed at a child, one that was crying over spilled milk. Yanagi was tiny, far shorter than him—and yet, for that moment, it was he that felt smallest and dumbest of all.

“They’re only boys for the most part, nothing too harmful,” she carried on, nonchalant. “They won’t harm you if you don’t pay them heed. They don’t come out here very much, only sometimes. I’ve heard it’s worse in other parts. They’re not bad, not really.”

_Schoolboys_, Reigen thought, repeating. _She’s kidding me, schoolboys_,

The police should have been called. Yanagi had the only telephone in the building, but there was a police box two corners away—something he only remembered after eating ramen across the road, and spotting the policemen.

_Schoolboys._
He tried not to laugh at himself—or at Yanagi-san. Which of the two was the fool, he couldn’t tell. All of it sounded a little bit silly.

“And… you’re sure?”

“I’m sure. My Shoutarou gave them a shouting-at once. They settled right down. Like I said, schoolboys. They won’t do harm if you just keep your distance from them.”

Reigen had never been scared of schoolboys, whether quiet or noisy. He had been one himself, years ago, and had his fair share of fights—but he had stayed out of gangs, and Shiitake hadn’t had much to fight over anyway. Perhaps, Yanagi was right. The worst he’d heard was cursing and groaning, and then the crash of a falling trash can. There had been no guns.

Schoolboys with guns sounded silly, in hindsight.

“I will,” he said, determined. He had no business with schoolboys—and they had no business with him, either. It was the best possible outcome, he thought.

The thought of it being yakuza felt like a joke now.

Yanagi nodded back, crossing her arms and tucking wrinkled hands into oversized sleeves. “That’s good. Is everything else all right, then, Arataka-chan? Are you settling in well?”

The way she tipped her head made Reigen wonder if she really did have something up with her hearing, like he had wondered on the day she had welcomed him to his room. He hadn’t asked. Something about it felt rude. She had never asked him to speak up, though they had not spoken much.

“Yes. Everything’s fine,” he dismissed. One hand gestured to punctuate, less out of concern for Yanagi and more out of habit.

“How’s your new job?”

“Wonderful. Couldn’t have asked for a better one.”

“I’m glad, I’m glad,” she smiled. “Seasoning’s a lot better than out there in Umaki—“

“Enoki,” Reigen interrupted, head suddenly ringing with Arataka-chan and the saccharine flavour of Yanagi’s voice. One hand rested up on the doorframe, the cold touch stopping it from balling into an obvious fist.

“Ah, Enoki. I’m sorry. I was just thinking of my dear sister. She’s in Umaki, you know.”

Any moment now, and she would turn into an almost-disgusting mixture of his mother and aunt. Reigen prepared himself, and bit back a sigh. “Yes, that’s good to hear.”

“Lovely husband, three beautiful daughters.”

“Yes, that’s… very—“

“That reminds me, Arataka-chan. I was going to come up to tell you, so it’s good that you came down yourself.”

Reigen had lost track of the conversation, eyes wandering to the doorframe. “What is it?”

“My Shoutarou and I are off to Umaki tomorrow. That poor sister of mine got herself so shaken up
Reigen had heard of Umaki Prefecture, but had no idea of where it was. He thought of asking, but by then, she had already gone back to speaking.

“Our train will be in the afternoon. You’ll have to manage the place on your own for a bit, but we’ll be back in a week or two. We won’t be here, so you fix up any small things by yourself. We’ll slip all you need for emergencies under the door. There’s a good man down the road who’ll fix your pipes if they don’t work…”

“Ah—I… thank you.” Reigen said, trying to quiet her as calmly as possible. Her silence felt like a breath of fresh air. "I’ll look after the room, don’t you worry. Should I keep the rent for later, or leave it somewhere?"

“Pay it when we come back. We know you’re a good lad, Arataka-chan. We can trust you on that, can’t we?”

“Yes. Yes, of course. Of course you can!”

“Good to see that. We’ll put all the details through the door for you—unless you’re planning to go somewhere, too?”

“Ah, no, no. I’m here to stay. All is fine. All is fine...”

It wasn’t a lie. He couldn’t drag himself back up to Enoki. It was too much to think of his mother, growing grey, shaking her head as he hauled himself through her doorway, the very weight of failure pressing down on his back, beyond kneeling.

He couldn’t force himself to leave Yanagi hanging, either. He zoned out as she droned on. Maybe, he thought, the conversation would end quicker if he thought less. He was exhausted. His hands were starting to itch for a cigarette and fresh air. The air inside felt too musty, too saturated with the landlady’s breaths and needless conversation. When she finally said her goodbyes—called by her husband, to pack—Reigen felt like it had been hours.

His stomach grumbled. He remembered the anpan upstairs. He would eat it after a cigarette, he decided. He didn’t check his pockets as he went on, towards the door that led out. If he had left his keys upstairs, then it didn’t matter. He was alone. He didn’t have to keep the door shut, not if he was careful.

The door was pushed open. Fresh air tugged at his lips. Reigen welcomed it, wondering if this was what first kisses felt like.

The side door of the building brought him to a shaded alley, behind the little radio shop Yanagi-san’s husband owned. It was the one that he had heard so much noise coming from, but not the one the window in his room overlooked. Whatever had happened there on Saturday was gone. No signs of chaos were left. There was nothing there, nothing but silence and water in the gutters. It was a good place to smoke.

Sighing, Reigen reached into his pockets, and took out his matchbox, the cigarette he so needed already between his lips. He swiped. Flame danced and burned. With a quick puff and a barely-there tink of the match hitting the ground, the taste of tobacco numbed everything.

He leaned back, feeling the shivering touch of the cold wall through his suddenly too-thin white shirt, and watched the smoke swirl. Above, the sky was turning to dusk. Up ahead, somewhere past the buildings above, the sun was coming to set, painting the clouds with the colours of fire. The walls
kept away most of the light, and Reigen was left alone, untouched by any of it, save for a line cutting
down his arm as he let it fall to his side, smoke still trailing.

One more day, he thought. One more day again, and it’s over.

He would buy earplugs and sleep peacefully through the night. He would relax, and maybe check
out one of the markets if he had time, like his mother had told him to. Two weeks into life in
Seasoning, and he had yet to cook for himself; his mother would be disappointed, he knew. The
letter he had written a week ago, where all was apparently fine, had been only one small lie of many
in this new city. He didn’t feel bad, not really. Seasoning was too large, too grey to mean anything. It
wasn’t his little town, or the village he loved in Enoki. There was no feeling, no love. He could lie all
he wanted.

His mother was far. His father was gone. Reigen Arataka was not so much a man, but a meaningless
pair of typing hands and tired-out eyes that scanned ink-splattered pages, a smile that crumbled away
with each cigarette, and just another mindless consumer at a bakery he would one day no longer
afford.

The cigarette was almost burnt out. He needed another. Not needing to think, he tossed the old butt
aside, and reached for a new one—one that, almost mockingly, slipped from between his fingers and
did a ballerina twirl in the air, before falling to the ground. It rolled, but didn’t go far. Sighing,
Reigen dragged himself from the wall and turned to pick it up.

The pavement in the alley was far from kind to the touch, and looking close, he could see small wells
of liquid where the concrete had dipped, and remainders of papers. There was a smashed bottle by
one of the trash bags, most likely left without a care. Whatever had once been in it, Reigen couldn’t,
and didn’t want to tell—but the flies didn’t care as they buzzed. Past that was something else
inconsequential, maybe some discarded clothing—and something that Reigen found himself staring
at, a little confused.

Curiosity pulled. He found himself coming closer. The cigarette was forgotten.

Something was sticking out from behind one of the trash bags—something striped, white and dark
grey, something that Reigen recognised as the leg of a human, lying still on the ground. The sock
was filthy, stained with all sorts, black dirt covering all of the sole.

There was red, too, Reigen realised. Blood.

The landlady’s words filled his head. He thought of gangs, of the schoolboys she had brought up and
dismissed—but something about the sight before him felt more sinister than a spat between angry
boys. If the leg belonged to a victim, then they had done more than start a small fight.

His chest squeezed tighter with each step he took. The matches were slipped back into his pocket.

He made out more and more the closer he came, creeping in with soft, tiptoe-like steps, and Reigen
saw more than just the dirty, blood-crusted leg. Behind the trash was the rest of the figure: a boy with
bloody, red knees, in a brown sweater that hung like a sack on his chest. The lighter tones of his skin
looked sickly next to dark splotches marring the gaps of skin between his shorts and socks.

Black hair splayed around his head like a sweat-dampened halo. He didn’t seem to be moving.

Reigen’s heart leapt in his chest. Instincts told him to run, to get the hell away from the boy—from
the gang that would probably come in and threaten to beat him, too, any minute—but the rest of him
wasn’t listening. His knees were already bent, and beyond the control of his sanity, one hand was
reaching out to touch the boy’s wrist.

His skin felt eerily cold. Reigen bit his lip, searching for a pulse. He pressed down gently, and shut his eyes, feeling his own heart beat with terror.

Something moved beneath his fingertips, and he almost felt tears in his eyes.

He was alive.

Reigen couldn’t stop himself leaning over a little more, just to see any heave in the boy’s chest. It rose and fell steadily, even as the rest of him lay still, like some child’s discarded doll. Why had he been hurt? Who exactly had hurt him? Was he part of the gangs, or some bystander, like the kind his landlady had tried to stop him becoming? What had he done, to be left the way he was?

He looked like a schoolboy—but there was no gang. It was quiet, too—awfully quiet. He had heard nothing, and neither had Yanagi.

Reigen had too many questions.

“Hello?” He called out, tearing his gaze away from the boy to look around. “Anyone there? Which one of you did this? Which one of you? Own up already, that’s it!”

He regretted shouting as soon as the words left his mouth. Whoever had hurt the boy was probably capable of hurting him, too. Even if the attacker had been no more than a child themselves, they had done enough to make Reigen think that tying himself to the boy could put him in danger.

He could fight back a little, but not as much as he had boasted to anyone. Schoolboys, he told himself, schoolboys—even if it didn’t feel right.

Nobody answered. Only a slight echo called back.

Reigen sighed, waiting and waiting for footsteps to come, but nobody did. No heads peered around corners. No voices shouted out any warnings or names. There was only lingering silence, save for a few passers-by in the far light, on the main street, almost a world away from the filth in the gutters. Distant voices only half-reached, before being lost to the sound of water dripping and what had to be the rat from before, or a mouse, scratching itself. The alley felt like a world of its own, frozen and desolate. The streets all around were great currents, or dead, quiet rivers, none of them stopping for the sake of the boy—not nothing but a dull, bobbing pebble, washed up and helpless.

Reigen leaned down and reached for the boy’s side. Carefully, he gave him a shove. His ribs felt intact, at least, from what he could feel through the sweater, but he lay still, all the same.

He was warm beneath Reigen’s touch. The sensation filled him with life.

“Wake up,” Reigen murmured, glancing around. There was still no-one around. “Hey, wake up.”

There was no answer.

Was he homeless? Reigen hadn’t seen him before, and the alley had more-or-less become his regular smoking spot. The wear on his clothes didn’t fill his head with images of skin-and-bone tramps and protruding ribs, but with Reigen’s own memories of a warm, far-off home.

Would Yanagi-san know? Thinking of her made her voice resurface again, sickly-sweet; and Reigen changed his mind.
No, the police...

He stood up, trying to recall the local police box. Above, the orange glow in the sky was beginning to die. Darkness would be everywhere soon, and the boy couldn’t stay. It didn’t feel right to leave him. It would be dark soon. The police might not be there until morning—

—but it wasn’t his business.

Reigen had enough on his hands. He had work first thing tomorrow.

Groaning, he turned back in the direction he came. He could make it to the police box. It wouldn’t be far, and the boy could stay there. His parents would come and scold him and take him home, and he would go back to school and live life—

—but the state of him just wasn’t normal, and it had been too quiet.

Reigen turned back.

The boy was still there, abandoned. Reigen couldn’t stop his gaze clinging to him. Something stirred in the pit of his stomach. He couldn’t move. He shook his head, trying to deny the memory he could feel surfacing, but his head and his heart were no longer one.

Reigen’s leg almost collapsed under him.

The longer he looked, the worse the feeling seemed to become. He could almost see blood—blood that wasn’t there, blood he knew he was imagining—pooling by one of the boy’s legs, silver teeth sticking into the flesh. He could feel his throat being stabbed through by his own screaming, and the sound of a gun, and voices crying out, two men’s voices, over and over. His vision was swimming again, and his leg—not the boy’s any more—was broken, bleeding and bleeding—

He gasped, shaking his head. He had almost bitten his tongue.

It was only a memory. In front of him was reality. One hand stroked down his shin through his trousers. The bone beneath was straight and whole. There was no blood as his hand came away. It wasn’t real, he reminded himself yet again: he was in Seasoning now, aged twenty-seven, in an alley that reeked of trash and tobacco. There was no screaming. There was no gunfire. His father, and the man with the gun weren’t calling for him.

The boy was still there. It felt wrong to leave him.

He thought of carrying, or even dragging him, to the police, but something didn’t feel right. Seasoning was still new in his head. He was tired. He remembered things. He was crazy. He was weak and tired and didn’t care for the world.

The boy had to be tended to. The last thing Reigen wanted was to come back and find the boy as a corpse.

The alley was silent; the silence broken only by Reigen’s surrendering sighs as he trudged back to the boy’s side, and thought of how best to lift him. The doorway back in was unlocked. In his pockets—he checked—he had the keys to his room, along with his matches.

It was worth one small chance.

How he would pick up the boy so that he could drape him over his shoulders, he didn’t know. Reigen hadn’t carried anyone in his arms before. Trying to pick up a friend at the age of nine wasn’t
good prior experience—but it was worth trying.

As gently as he could, hoping he was doing the right thing, Reigen slid his hands underneath. One hand scraped against concrete as it reached around the boy’s shoulders. The other went to his knees. Once they felt a little more sure, Reigen squeezed his eyes shut and lifted.

The boy was a dead weight, but lighter than he looked. Reigen’s arms strained to keep him steady, but it was better than nothing. He would make it upstairs.

He left the outside door open—he had no hands, he would shut it later—and prayed Yanagi wouldn’t see. He could hear music coming through her doorway, some popular record playing. The boy didn’t stir, even as Reigen carried him past the door, where the sound of male vocals was loudest, and the voices of both Yanagi and her husband were caught deep in some kind of conversation before their trip to Umaki.

*Umaki, Enoki,* Reigen thought, frustrated, gritting his teeth as he made his way up the stairs, and past his and the Yanagis’ shared bathroom. Everything was tiring him out, pushing him to the limit. He wanted to flop down and sleep, to give up everything and tell his mother he was coming back to Enoki, to never set foot in an office again, and all of it was pressing down, hard, heavier than the weight of the boy in his arms. He could barely keep his eyes open. He was exhausted already. Work had almost killed him that day. He hated it—hated it, hated it, hated everything.

His door had been left slightly ajar. On any other day, he would have scolded himself—but right now, just for that moment, it was a blessing. His arms were aching already, and so were his legs. The dead weight of the boy in his hold pulled him down. He was going to crash if he didn’t stop soon. He went on, through the door and into his apartment, his bottom lip between his teeth as he kicked his shoes off. He had to be quiet. Yanagi didn’t seem to have felt anything strange, but the fear was still there. Reigen could still hear the vocals of whatever record was playing downstairs, mixed with barely-there conversation.

Finally—muscles weak, flimsy, screaming—he could put the boy down on his couch, easing him down before sliding out his aching arms. His knees gave way, and Reigen found himself collapsed by the couch. His chest heaved. He was out of shape and he knew it. He was crazy, too; never in his life had he imagined he would have to be in the state he was now, panting after bringing a battered, unconscious child, one who he knew nothing about, into his apartment.

He had to be crazy.

The boy was at eye level with him while he was on his knees. He was breathing, too—and as Reigen reached out to check that he was still warm, his side lifted and fell. The blood down his leg was mostly dry. Where his sock had slipped down, there was nothing but smears. The red scrapes on his knees were drying off and turning to scabs. His one shoe felt strange: completely unfitting. Reigen slid it off his foot.

Sighing, he forced himself up and shut the door he had left open, before locking it, and by it he left the boy’s single shoe. He could still hear Yanagi’s music, muffled through the floor.

*What was I going to— oh shit, the medical kit…*

He had complained about his mother making him take one, but suddenly, it felt as necessary as water. Water, too. He would brew some tea for himself later, he thought.

His medical kit wasn’t much, save for a small tin of bandages and fluids under the sink. Tired eyes skimmed over the labels. Everything was blurring together again. The tin shook in his hands as he
brought it over to the small table next to the couch, thinking he would pick something out when he got there, when he could have a closer look at the boy—no, when he was awake, he decided. It didn’t feel right to treat him when he was asleep.

He shook him one more time, to no avail.

Reigen put the tin down with a clunk, then sat on the floor, back against the table. One hand reached back for the anpan he had left. Both buns were still in their paper bag, and he pulled one out, only then remembering his hunger. The other one would be his breakfast.

He ate, not caring if crumbs fell to the floor. He could clean them up later, or tomorrow, or whenever. He was too tired to think straight. He didn’t want to get up, or to think about work, or set his alarm clock; nothing was important, not with the taste of sweet bean paste staining his chin and the sight of the boy, asleep, as he sat there, eating, waiting for him to awaken.

He fell asleep at some point, the remaining anpan—one half-eaten, the other perfectly whole and still in the bag—slipping out of his hands.

Chapter End Notes

I took some liberties with the apartment. Notes on that are here.
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The first sense that came back to Shigeo, after what felt like a lifetime of nothingness, was the feeling of touch. The ground below had become softer.

His hearing returned not long after, and he started to pick up sounds. He heard nothing but breathing at first: most likely someone else sleeping next to him on the streets, he thought, as light stabbed through his eyelids. There were two possibilities, or maybe three or ten or fifty; he couldn’t tell with the thoughts in his head swimming in mush, and one was simply the first thing he had thought of. The other, more realistic option, was that he was no longer alive.

Everything had gone black. All had withered and died, and even the pain had extinguished itself for a moment. He had barely felt himself hit the ground, and no other sounds had come into his ears between then—however long it had been—and now. He was probably dead. It made sense now: it made sense as to how and why all of his senses were back.

The light pried his eyes open. Below him was a surface less rough than street cobbles or concrete. He had to be dead. It was the only thing that made sense.

He was no longer outside. It was warm, but not so warm that it felt homely. Everything felt subdued, either blocked or washed out. He wasn’t outside. It didn’t feel like it at all. The air wasn’t fresh enough, but it was warm, and came with the feeling of being surrounded by walls.

He let out a groan, his throat hoarse and aching. His eyes opened properly, little by little. His arms shook as he pushed himself up. What was below wasn’t concrete, but it wasn’t home, either. His futon at home was soft, and yet, the floor was hard enough to be felt beneath it. This didn’t feel like either.

He was on some kind of couch, or a bed—but where that was, he had no idea. If he was alive, then he wasn’t anywhere that he knew, or worse still, hallucinating. Maybe, he thought, as his vision adjusted itself, it would have been better if he was dead. His hands scraped and clutched at the rough, reddish-brown fabric below—the fabric of a couch, for certain, with plain wooden floorboards beneath. Just ahead was a table, settled on top of an ugly-looking, brown rug.

There was an arm on the table, slung over. Shigeo stared, startled. Whatever state he was in, dead or alive or somewhere in between, he wasn’t alone. The arm belonged to a man: one that sat on the floor, slumped on the table as if it was some kind of partner holding him in a trust-fall, shirt and pants rumpled and collar open, tie missing. Something about him reminded Shigeo of of someone nameless and, in memory, faceless: a bony-handed old man he had seen by the station, clutching a bottle like a ward against some unseen evil.

Yet, there were no spilled drinks on the floor, and no lingering reek of alcohol. By the man’s side, just touching his hand, was a paper bag, and next to it, a half-eaten bread bun.

The sight of it brought back another feeling. Shigeo’s stomach felt emptier than ever. Out of instinct, his hand reached out, but didn’t get anywhere. Pain shot up his arm, and he pulled it back. Gently, he tugged at his sleeve, and saw the bruises he had forgotten about. Thoughts and images flooded back into his head, bringing shooting pain with them.
Groaning, he turned back to the bread. He thought of getting up and taking it, but with that came another thought: the thought that he couldn’t let himself steal, and that he had tried to scorn another boy for stealing, and it had put him in so much pain that he had thought he had died.

_Alive. I’m alive_, Shigeo realised, certain this time.

He was alive. He was still feeling pain, feeling all of it coming back, maybe even worse than before. He closed his eyes. The memories burned. He couldn’t stop thinking of fire and screaming and death and what had felt like something breaking within and terrified, angry eyes and pummelling fists and pain, _pain_, more of the pain, everything out of control, out of reach—

He had to get out.

His head made sense of the space surrounding him: he was in some kind of living space, most likely one that belonged to the man asleep by the table. The bread was his, too, and as much as Shigeo wanted to take it, he knew it was wrong. He had to leave, and leave fast. The man was a stranger, and Shigeo was on the run from all that he knew, hopeless and homeless and nothing and everything dangerous.

He couldn’t stay. He had to run, no matter how aching or hungry he was, and no matter how tempted he was by the dropped bun.

Shigeo bit his lip, and eased himself off the couch.

His one remaining shoe was gone. The sole it had been on was clean. His other foot was filthy and caked in blood and dark, dirty water from the streets he had run through. He put it down, and watched it leave no stain behind. He was safe. There wouldn’t be footprints. The man would wake up, and not find a trace of him: nobody to take to the police and nobody to shout at and nobody to brand _bastard, monster, spoonbender, inhuman…_

Ringing out, again and again in his mind, voices scratched at his conscience like claws. He had to go.

It hurt to stand. Shigeo winced, but fought the feeling. He had to fight. He forced himself to tread onward, bracing himself with each creak of the floorboards. The man leaning on the table breathed, in and out, groaning a little as he slept—but not enough for him to awaken, to Shigeo’s relief, as he tiptoed past him and towards the other end of the room, where a door had to be waiting. He couldn’t see one, but it was the only place left, and there had to be a door somewhere. There hadn’t been one on the side of the room he had woken up in.

Tempted again, he turned and looked back at the bread, hoping his stomach wouldn’t give him away. It was too much to resist. The man wouldn’t notice, Shigeo thought, if he was to creep back for a moment and take a little, and if he did, he could run—

A feeling deep within told him it wanted to be used. He could move it with his mind, envelop it in his aura and bring it into his hands.

_No_, Shigeo reminded himself. It would be stealing, and his powers were dangerous. He had caused enough pain. He had to get out, even if he was starving and the bread was almost calling out to be eaten, even if his powers were within reach and it was only a matter of taking some bread—

He never made the decision.

The floor slipped out from beneath him. Shigeo cried out, unable to move as he found himself plummeting to the ground. He landed on his knees. Pain shot through his legs, paralysing.
“Hey—hey, what’s—oh, kid, hey, you OK there?”

He was swimming in discarded fabric. Whatever had been on the floor—a jacket, a blazer, something—had flown out beneath him and landed under his knees. He tried to stand up, but in his panic, only to fall down again. The pain in his legs was unbearable. He felt tears welling up in his eyes. He didn’t want to look down, scared of finding blood staining the floor, or worse still, the item of clothing in ruins. It was most likely expensive.

“Whoa, seriously, settle down, OK? You don’t have to run!”

He had woken the man up. Shigeo’s heart pounded in desperation. It was over, all over—all the fault of his stupid, wandering eyes and his hands wanting, so badly, to take something that had never been his. He was in trouble now. He was sure of it.

“Honest, I’m not going to hurt you.”

He was helpless. Everything hurt. He was a mouse in the eyes of a predator. Swallowing, hoping the man wouldn’t scorn him for the state he was in, he turned to look over his shoulder again.

The man had lifted himself up from the floor, both the bread and the bag now clutched in one hand. Shigeo’s heart sank. He had been right, the bread had never been his—but the man’s face didn’t look angry. His brows weren’t knitted together, and the one empty hand reaching for him was more like the hand of a helper; not the savage, angry claw he had imagined. It was far from a fist. He was trying to reach, like Shigeo had tried to reach for the bread earlier.

His breaths had frozen, throat stiff, heart beating in preparation to run. It was hard to push back the feeling, even if he knew it was hopeless to try and move any more. He had been found out. His attempt to get out was over. All was finished.

The man shook his head. “You didn’t have to get up on your own like that. You could have woken me up first, you know. You’re in no state to be running.”

Shigeo said nothing. His knee stung with pain, and he looked down for a moment. To his relief, the scrapes hadn’t started to bleed. Bruises still splotched up and down his leg, darkening it like spoiled fruit, his dirty socks at the bottom. He had lost one shoe in the fight with Teru, he remembered: but where the other one was, he didn’t know.

The thought of Teru—of anger itself—made him uneasy. The ache in his legs only seemed to pulse with each memory, recalling every kick and punch, and every time Teru had grabbed him, hand still sticky with the remains of his peach.

Shigeo’s mouth was too dry to water, but he could remember. He was hungry, too—terribly hungry.

“Sheesh,” the man sighed. “Come on. I’ll help you up.”

Before Shigeo could say anything, the man was already by his side, the gap closed between them with two large steps, firmer than anything he could have managed. The bread and bag were left on the table. It hurt to even think about it. Shigeo’s stomach squeezed.

The man’s hands were free now, and one reached out in front as he bent down to his knees. His eyes met Shigeo’s own, and for a moment, Shigeo felt nothing but blue coming from it.

Something had to be wrong with his powers. He wasn’t sensing anything properly. Blue—pale, periwinkle, a colour that spoke of compassion—didn’t feel right. Where was the fear, the resentment, the disgust, because this was Shigeo he was looking at: a mess, an abomination, a
mistake of nature with bloody knees and stains on his clothes—

*He doesn’t know.* Shigeo realised.

The feeling of touch—of being touched—made him want to pull away and run, run as fast as he could by sheer instinct, but something urged him to stay put. The hand that brushed against his own was warm, a little long-fingered but not as thin as he had first thought it was. It was far firmer, far more reassured with the same blue that clung to the rest of the man, and Shigeo accepted it. His knees wobbled. Careful, already anticipating pain, he pulled himself up.

The pain didn’t come. What there was was bearable, milder than before. He stood up completely, his eyes barely coming to halfway up the man’s shirt.

A sudden wave of dizziness rushed in, and Shigeo almost fell. The hand held on, just long enough to keep him upright.

“You really aren’t all right. Does your head hurt? You might be running a fever.”

Shigeo wasn’t sure. “Am… am I—”

“Oh, you can talk, too. At least your throat seems all right.”

Shigeo’s eyes widened for a moment. He hadn’t realised that those had been his first words. He had barely felt them slip from his tongue.

“Well, that’s a relief. You tell me if you need anything and I’ll help,” the man said. His mouth relaxed into a smile, one Shigeo didn’t expect. “I was waiting for you to wake up, and then I fell asleep. Looks like we both got a nap, though.”

Whether losing consciousness counted as sleep or not, it didn’t matter. Shigeo was exhausted, all the same. His eyes wanted to close—maybe once more, and maybe forever, he couldn’t tell any more—and his stomach still hurt. All he had in his hands was warmth, and a colour in his head that felt like *compassion* again: an emotion like *kindness*, something similar in the pit of his stomach, even when it was shades apart. He had the man within reach, too. He could feel simple warmth coming from him.

Warmth came with being alive. Shigeo wasn’t dead.

His hands trembled, barely obedient. He was off-balance, too, barely awake and still half in pain. Carefully, he steadied himself, raising his arms. One wobbled, and fingers grasped fast.

The man let out a small yelp, clearly startled. “Whoa—oh, right. Yeah, best give you a hand. Don’t overdo it, you’ll want to lie down...”

Shigeo didn’t let go of his shirt, but shivered instead as he felt touch again. The man had large, but warm hands that felt almost caring as they brushed past his sweater, and wrapped, gently but tightly, supporting, around his shoulders.

“There,” he said, “you all right now? I’ll help you get back.”

Shigeo nodded. If he met his gaze, the man would say something. He didn’t want to talk. He had nothing to say, or wasn’t sure what to say: which of the two he felt more, he wasn’t certain. He didn’t even want to open his mouth. In the end, he said nothing. His eyes stayed fixed to the floor as he let the man guide him back to the couch. It reassured him more, knowing he didn’t have to say anything.
Looking down relieved him of the pressure, but the sight wasn’t wholly pleasant. The sight of dried blood on his socks made him feel queasy.

He didn’t want to think about the fight. The memories were as fresh as the blood had been when it had dripped down and made trails. It had crusted now, and turned brown; but at least, he wasn’t bleeding.

The couch wasn’t as soft as his futon back home, but it was still something. It was softer than the concrete he had been sleeping on for days on end, and the surface of when he had fallen when Teru had kicked him and beaten him senseless. He had ended up there afterwards, too, somewhere between life and death: crying, crying, until he lost consciousness and thought he had died.

The man didn’t sit down next to him, but he did let go. Shigeo watched him walk from his side of the room to the other. There was the clink of glass, followed by running water. When he came closer again, Shigeo saw that there was a small cup in his hands.

“Here,” the man said, pushing it out towards him. “You’re probably thirsty. Boiled this yesterday. Forgot to have tea in the morning. Have some.”

Looking up at the cup, Shigeo’s mouth felt drier than ever. His hands longed for the cold touch of the cup’s surface, as much as his tongue craved something quenching.

“Thank you,” he said, voice faint and throat dry. He took the cup as carefully as he could, praying that it wouldn’t smash in his trembling hands. Its surface was cool, pleasantly so, and only then did Shigeo realise how overheated he was. The man had been right; he was feeling feverish, as long as it had taken him to realise.

He took a sip.

The feeling of water—cold, yes, but perfect, perfectly pleasant—had never felt more miraculous. He drank it down far too quickly, feeling some of it spill down his chin and drip onto his sweater, and the cup was emptied out in what felt like the blink of an eye.

He wanted more, but the man had already offered enough.

“I’ll get you more if you want,” Shigeo heard him say, but it felt like too much to ask. Awkwardly—drops of water leaving damp spots on his clothes—he shook his head. “Well, if you need some, just ask. I’ll go get something to clean your knees up.”

Shigeo passed the cup back, almost missing the pleasant feeling of it in his hands as the man took it from him. He watched him go back to where he had been before, and heard the sound of water again—but when he came back into view, it wasn’t to stay by his side, or to pass him another drink. The man reached down, instead, close to where Shigeo had first seen him asleep. He picked up a tin from the table he had been leaning against, opened it up, and took something out. What that something was, Shigeo didn’t see clearly until the man came down onto his knees, right in front of him, a cottony mess of fluff in his hands.

“Just iodine,” the man said. “I mean, if you don’t mind, I’ll put some on. Is it just your knees?”

“I… no, yes,” Shigeo mumbled. He hadn’t expected medicine—least of all, for him to be offered some by a stranger. “It’s not that bad.”

He knew he was lying; at least, when it came to the pain. His back hurt, and so did his arms, most
likely splotched with bruises from joint to joint. He hadn’t been bleeding anywhere else—or so he hoped, looking around at his sleeves. There was a small smear of blood on one of the cuffs, but no large stains. He had been lucky, he thought with a sigh, that Teru hadn’t been armed, and that he had been saved by his barrier—

“Ow!”

The man almost leapt back in reaction. Shigeo winced, one hand out, as if to pull him back. His right knee was stinging, but not yet splotched with brown. The sheen on his skin was transparent.

“Sorry,” the man said. “I was trying to clean it. It’s water. I didn’t mean to hurt you.”

“It… it’s fine,” Shigeo said. “I’m fine.”

“Are you sure? Apart from the fever?”

“…Yes.”

“I’ll try not to make it sting this time.”

Saying it wasn’t much use. Shigeo braced himself, and it carried on stinging. The man’s hands were still gentle, far from how brutal and powerful Teru’s fists had been in the alleyway next to North Market, brushing the blood off and cleaning up whatever red had been smeared. His socks were beyond saving, Shigeo thought, eyeing small holes and tears down his left and right leg, but skin and flesh would soon heal.

The iodine stung far worse than water. Shigeo had to stifle a yelp as he felt it seep into where his skin had been scraped. The man was trying to be gentle, as much as the iodine was uncomfortable. He could tell, not only from the touch of his hands and the sweeps of the cotton wool on his skin, but from what he could feel coming from him in strange, nervous waves: an emotion coloured pale blue, that same compassion.

Feeling cool air on the dampened spot, Shigeo watched the man put the iodine bottle back on the table. “Is there anywhere else, then? Just making sure.”

“No.”

“Really sure, kid?”

The man tipped his head, seemingly unconvinced. Shigeo sat up. “No. I’m sure.”

“Well, that’s that, I guess. If you want anything else, I’ll get it sorted. Should get you a blanket, really. That fever won’t go down if you don’t rest up. God, I’m turning into my mother...”

The blue was still there, but the man gave a new look that Shigeo translated into warm yellow: a colour he wanted to believe in. He wanted to reach. Yellow was sunshine and American biscuits, and the colour of anpan; anpan like he could see on the table.

His stomach grumbled. Shigeo looked away, cringing in silence.

“Oh, damn, when’s the last time you ate?”

Shigeo didn’t want to think about it. He could remember the peach, so tempting and tender and out of his reach, the juice dripping down Teru’s chin as if to mock him. Before then, there had been the cherries, shrivelled and horrible. His stomach protested, remembering how far he had gone—and
how it had all ended up, wasted and burning, the taste of acid clinging to his tongue for what had felt like days, harsher than any fever.

“I… I don’t remember,” he said. He wasn’t sure if he was lying or not. The number of days had slipped past.

The man shook his head, and reached for the anpan. Imagining it being in his own hands, made Shigeo’s mouth water—but then, the man’s hand seemed to wander, picking up a small paper bag next to the tempting bread instead. “Here. You have this one.”

He tossed it, and it almost slipped from Shigeo’s hands, like some still-living fish he had seen at the market. His grip was clumsy, fingers not listening—and shaking, shaking so hard at the feeling of what had to be under the paper. It took restraint to not rip it apart and bite straight away. Instead, Shigeo unrolled the top, and tipped the bread into his hand, giving it a look-over.

His sense of smell wasn’t the strongest, but what he picked up was sweetness: definite anpan.

“What, it’s not poisoned…”

The chance was still real, he realised. He didn’t know the man, or why he had brought him in. His colours were pleasant, his voice and eyes not harsh like those he had seen on the night of the fire: but he was a stranger, and Shigeo wasn’t safe. Shigeo wasn’t acceptable. He wasn’t normal, and he was dangerous and probably wanted, even if he hadn’t meant to hurt anyone.

It didn’t matter, he thought, just for a second, as he bit down into the bread.

The paste was a little too sweet, the bread maybe not as soft as something fresh-baked, but it was something all the same. He clutched it tighter, trying to stop his hands trembling as he took another bite, a bigger one this time, savouring as much as he could. Crumbs trickled down between his fingers, and he thought of picking them up—but the first thing on his mind, there and then, was the bread, tasting of such relief and such happiness.

It disappeared far too quickly. “I’d give you this one, too,” the man said, prodding the half-eaten one. “But, I did start eating it. Sorry.”

Shigeo looked up, a little embarrassed, but nodded his thanks through a mouth full of crumbs and sweet paste. He probably looked silly, but it wasn’t the main thing on his mind. It didn’t matter that the anpan he was eating was from the day before. It tasted good, all the same.

“Slow down, kid, you’ll give yourself hiccups…”

The man let out a small laugh, barely there, hand resting on his hip. Shigeo looked up for a moment, and he looked back, still emanating his strange, pleasant colours.

“I’ll get you some tea. Good and warm. Should do you good.”

As much as his conscience pestered for him to get out, to go already and stop taking all that he was being given, Shigeo couldn’t stop himself. He gave a nod, unable to say much while eating.

“I’ll get on it. Sorry there’s not much around here, but I haven’t been out lately—oh, shit!”

Shigeo almost choked on the last of the anpan. The man sprang up with shock, bounding over towards his bed. His hand slammed down on top of the drawers that stood next to it, and picked up what looked like a small clock. As much as the man seemed to be trying to keep down his swearing, Shigeo heard it all the same.
“...shit, dammit... shouldn’t have fallen asleep, fucking hell—no, it’s not you, it’s me, it’s my fault—they’re gonna kill me...”

Shigeo swallowed. The bread felt dry all of a sudden. He heard the man sigh and put the clock back down with a sudden thunk, one so loud he thought he had broken it for a second. He came back, hand on his forehead, shaking his head to and fro, as if nursing a headache.

“Ah, sorry, kid. My fault. I should have been at work an hour ago... well, dammit. Screw that. I’ll tell them I got sick on Monday, don’t worry—hey, what’s that look for?” He tipped his head, as if trying to work Shigeo out. Instinctively, Shigeo shuffled back, sitting against the back of the couch.

“Are you all right? No, really, that was me. Not your fault, kid.”

“I... I’m fine. I’m fine.”

Shigeo really wasn’t sure if he was. The bruises splattering his arm were starting to hurt; but they would heal, he reminded himself. He couldn’t trouble the man any more. He had given him bread and treated his knees and let him sit and lay on his couch. It felt like too much.

The colours he felt coming from him had flashed into white as he had stared at his clock in denial, but now, the blues and yellows were back all around him, as natural as his breathing. It was a feeling Shigeo recognised, more and more the longer he envisaged his memories. They were colours he had felt before, in the arms of his parents, his mother holding him and calling him son, my Shigeo, they’ll never take you or Ritsu from me.

There was warmth in the air—but his mother was gone, and so was his father, and so had to be Ritsu. He had not seen those colours directed at him since the day of the fire. He had seen them on the streets in the daytime, but they had been mixed in a pool of so many others, with greens and violets and piercing whites and dark blacks and that burning, sickening anger; the kind he thought of whenever his bruises pulsed with new pain.

He had never been safe. All had been taken from him. He deserved to be dead, but he was alive, sitting on a couch with sticky hands and a filled stomach, with the warm eyes of a strange man looking down, a hand reaching for him but not touching.

It hung in the air, and Shigeo wasn’t sure if he expected it to come down.

“Well... well, if you say so. I’ll go brew that tea.”

The man sighed, as he paced towards the other side of the room. He stopped in front of a small table, placed in the corner, and reached to turn on the radio, which Shigeo had not noticed until a familiar voice came from it:

“—I speak on behalf of the nation in condemning the tragedies in Negi and Seasoning. We cannot rest until this conflict is settled, and yet, as things stand—”

The man let out a groan. “Not Suzuki again.”

Before Shigeo could say anything, the radio was already off. “Sorry, kid. I’m not in the mood for listening to the same old crap.”

Shigeo bit his lip, trying not to think of the voice. He had grown accustomed to it back at home; but his home was no more.

The silence felt odd, a blank canvas splattered with the colours that clung to the man’s clothes, hair and skin. Shigeo watched him cross the room, going back to the sink and filling his kettle with water.
The pipes gave a squeak as the tap was shut off, before the kettle came down onto what had to be a stove with a clunk, and the gas was turned on.

Shigeo couldn’t see much past the sink and part of the wall, but the reaching motion of the man’s arms let him fill in some of the gaps. Above had to be some kind of cupboard. The man shuffled its contents a little, before taking out a small tin of what might have been tea.

It was too far to smell for Shigeo to be certain. The colours didn’t feel like a lie.

“Why did you bring me here?” He asked. The bread had left him a little parched.

“I… well… I… I found you passed out. Couldn’t really leave you, I mean,” the man said, shutting the doors of the cupboard. It’s just for a little bit. You got parents, kid?”

Shigeo shuddered. His mind filled with images all over again. Deep within, his aura leapt too, leapt to tell him that it was still there. He could run and fight if he wanted. “No.”

“What do you mean, no?”

Shigeo didn’t know what to say. Whatever was pushing him down, either the fever or thoughts of smoke and fire and bodies, he couldn’t tell any more. He didn’t want to say anything. His lips moved on their own. “They… they…” The words stopped, and wouldn’t come any more. He wanted to run, and to cry, and to scream, and to do nothing at all, all at once. “They’re, they’re not—”

“It’s all right.” The man’s voice startled him for a moment. “I won’t ask. Who’s looking after you, then?”

“I don’t know.”

He was probably being looked for. He was dangerous. He hadn’t killed, but there had been blood on his hands, only washed off in puddles and smeared on grass wet with rainwater. He was a mess, on the run, and nowhere was safe—and yet, here he was, sat in a place that felt oddly safe, coloured in ways that made him want to stay, that told him there was real, warm tea coming.

He hoped the man wasn’t growing frustrated.

“Well, we’ll work something out. You know, things happen for reasons. That’s what my old boss used to say, before I got sent down here. Kind of a scumbag, but he probably had a point, or something like that. Work’s not gonna miss me if I’m out for a day, and I’m guessing there’s no point in you going to school either today.”

Shigeo said nothing. The man sighed, but it didn’t feel heavy: it didn’t feel like regret.

“We’ll work something out. You get better first, sweat out that fever. We’ll get you tended to, or call the police, or… whatever. We’ll burn that bridge when we get to it. I’ll get that tea first. Oh yeah, kid, never asked for your name. What is it?”

“Ka—uh, Mob. Mob.”

He could remember Teru mocking the name. It was all that he had.

“Mob, huh? Well, that’s an odd name—but damn, look who’s talking, it’s me you’re talking to here…” The man almost laughed, shaking his head in an odd mix of feelings that Shigeo didn’t have any words for. “Truth be told, kid, I get the name thing. My parents named me miraculous.”
“What?” Mob tipped his head, confused.

“Reigen Arataka,” the man said, still half-laughing in yellow shades, like the sun. “That’s my actual name. Don’t laugh.”

Mob wasn’t laughing—but in that moment, for a few bursts of warm, tender colour, he couldn’t stop himself looking at him. Reigen Arataka, he repeated in his head, making sense of each syllable. *Miraculous. Reigen.*

He was alive, in his room, waiting for tea. Maybe, he thought, he really was dead, and the afterlife, or some kind of heaven, looked like a room with a bed and a couch and a kettle growing hot, and a man standing over it, looking impatient.

*No,* he thought. The sting of iodine on his knees and the sweetness of anpan, a little too sweet and a little too tough, were probably real; just as the colour clinging to Teru had been real, and just like the blues and yellows emanating from Reigen, as white steam rose up from the kettle, so different from the pale and terrible colour of fear.

Shigeo had lived. Whether it was for the best, or not, he was alive.

He was sure of it.

Chapter End Notes

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Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The air outside was fresh, and Akazukihara’s back yard was noisy, full of laughter and chicken sounds. Ritsu took all of it in, relishing his first time outside in days. However long it had been since he had come to the house, the outside felt much better, much more alive than the room, and so different from his home city.

There were only trees and boundless hills surrounding the house: no smoke, none at all, no sticking-out chimneys and grey-brown walls. Outside, the grass was green, and trees grew as high as they wanted without anyone cutting them down or complaining. What exactly he liked about that freedom, Ritsu wasn’t sure. A part of him longed for it; a feeling that was only half-conscious.

So many feelings were new. He was still learning names and becoming used to everything. There was still pain—still headaches, still the odd stinging feeling on his skin, thankfully dulling—but he had been allowed to go outside, and that in itself was progress. He didn’t have to do anything to help yet, Mitsuura and the nurse had both said, but they had deemed him strong enough to go outside. It was far more interesting than being cooped up, Ritsu thought. He was a little sleepy still, even with the sun high up in the sky.

The sounds of the house’s other residents calling to one another on the other side of the yard roused him out of his state, and he watched, basking in the sun and spring breeze.

“Put it down!”

“Aw, come on, it’s just a bit of fun!”

“No, you’ll hurt it!”

“I won’t hurt—oh, stay, stay, why won’t you—argh, stay!”

A fat, white bundle of feathers and noise flapped in protest, forcing itself out of a clinging, clumsy pair of arms. The boy holding her screamed, face beaten with a wing. He let go, and suddenly, the chicken was down on the ground, running as fast as its short legs allowed it to go.

“Get that bird back here!” The only girl in the group—Rei, Ritsu recalled her name, that was it—complained. Bending down to her knees, she tried to console the animal, but it ignored her, running in the other direction instead. “Mitsuura-san said—"

“Oh, please, we’ll put it back when we’re done. Or we could roast it for dinner,” one of the other boys, clad in a blue sweater, replied. He crossed his arms, proud of himself. Ritsu didn’t understand the pride. Rei only huffed.

“She doesn’t like it! Look, she’s trying to get out,” she said, pointing to the now-escaping chicken. “She’ll get away if you’re not careful. Hoshino!”

The boy who had let it go turned to face her. “What, are you reading its mind?”

“I can’t!” Rei shouted, already striding towards the chicken. Carefully, she tried to scoop it up in her arms, but it wouldn’t obey, flapping and screeching as loudly as a bird with small lungs could muster. The boy in the blue sweater laughed. Hoshino joined in.
Ritsu stood up from the bench.

“H-hey!” Rei cried out. The chicken thrashed in her arms. “Y-you can calm down, can’t—ow! Silly, I’m not going to hurt you, Mitsuura-san said you’d like us—“

As if on cue, Ritsu heard the sound of footsteps behind him, and didn’t move any more. Mitsuura was already on the scene, waving frantically.

“Hey, what’s going on? Hey, you two, let go of her,” Mitsuura said, panting. He looked almost comical running. Something told Ritsu he was far more used to books and papers—and chickens, it seemed, as he scooped the bird out of Rei’s arms. “Nostra, Nostra, sweetheart, it’s fine, I’m not going to—oh, hey, no need to run—let me get that—someone help me? Rei?”

No, Ritsu thought, not so much chickens, trying to keep a straight face.

The chicken was flapping around in Mitsuura’s hold, its head pointing in the direction of the chicken sheds, where most of the other hens were wandering. Two of the other Akazukihara children were sat by one of the sheds, watching the birds. Ritsu had barely spoken to them, but knew they were twins, most likely his age, and the kind of people who kept their distance, but watched on with kind eyes.

“I told them to put her down!” Rei insisted, alerting him back to the scene unfolding between Mitsuura and the others. “I told her, and they were stressing her out.”

“Rei—it’s all right, as long as Nostra’s all right.”

“She is,” Hoshino sighed. “Don’t worry so much. I’ll go get her. You’ll see I didn’t harm her.”

“Hoshino—“

A part of Ritsu thought about joining in. There was something ridiculous about the way Hoshino looked, his black hair smothered with dust and white fluff—as if he was turning into a bird himself—but there was something sillier about the sight of Mitsuura cradling the runaway chicken, large fingers caressing its feathers as if it were a small child in his arms. He could have asked the others if they wanted help feeding the chickens, but seeing them playing, laughing, Rei protesting but going along anyway, made him think he was best off staying out.

“Ah, Nostra, Nostra…”

Ritsu stifled another laugh. He hoped nobody heard, even if the others agreed that it felt a little strange to call an egg-laying hen Nostradamus. Nostradamus lived in a coop with Merlina and Delphi, Salem and Pendle, and a plethora of other strangely-named birds, their names most likely courtesy of Mitsuura, though Ritsu didn’t feel daring enough to ask.

Sighing, he sat back down onto the bench—only to jump up in a panic, letting out a loud yelp. Something had brushed up against him, something that had not been there before.

Ritsu turned around. Behind him, he heard Mitsuura calling his name, before the man’s panic eased into a laugh. A cat had made itself at home in his former, most likely still warm place on the bench, and was sat there, grooming itself without a care in the world.

“Oh, Kageyama-kun, you never met Himawari, did you…?”

Ritsu raised an eyebrow. The eyes that stared back were bright gold. Looking down, he noticed a collar, buried under snowy-white fur, and then the silver flower-shaped tag dangling from it.
Awkwardly, but trying to smile, all the same, he turned back to the others. “Sorry, I didn’t notice. Himawari...”

“The cat,” Mitsuura said. He was still holding the chicken, and Ritsu couldn’t help but wonder what other animals lived at Akazukihara, and how many others Mitsuura considered his family. “That’s Himawari. Took her in, too. Doesn’t bother Nostra or anything, does it? Does it, my girl?”

He scratched the chicken’s neck, as if to punctuate the point. Nostradamus replied with an unamused peck to the hand. Hoshino sniggered. Mitsuura groaned, shaking his hurt hand, and Ritsu looked back at Himawari. The cat had leapt down from the bench, and was now trotting, as carelessly as it had sat around grooming itself, in the direction of the house.

Ritsu wasn’t sure if he liked cats or not. Shigeo had loved them. Sometimes, his brother would pocket small handfuls of food from dinner and feed strays, out of their parents’ sight. He would pet them, too, no matter how ragged or limping or ruined they were, and no cat seemed to ever hiss in his direction, only purring and leaning into his hands. Matted fur turned to silk as he stroked.

Ritsu had tried to join in once, and come away with scratched palms.

He couldn’t help but think of Shigeo, looking up to the sky. He wished he could sell his soul for telepathy, or some kind of prophetic vision. He had prayed for a message, or an omen. Nothing had come. He couldn’t reach—nobody could reach, Tsuchiya had told him during a visit, shaking her head with a sorrow so heavy that Ritsu had started to wonder how many people had tried.

The sky above was clear, the sounds and scents of nature pleasant. Akazukihara was safe, but Shigeo wasn’t there with him. It wasn’t right.

“Kageyama-kun!”

It couldn’t be right. He couldn’t leave, and Shigeo was out there, uncertain—

“Kageyama-kun!”

Something was burning, stabbing into the corners of both of his eyes.

“Kageyama-kun, are you all right?”

Ritsu jumped, turning back to the source of the voice: over by Akazukihara’s back doors, surrounded by ivy. Tsuchiya stood there, leaning to one side against the doorframe.

He knew he was supposed to stay in bed a while longer. He had been allowed out a little, but it was probably time to go in, he realised: to sleep again, sleep off the headaches, back in his room with only a view of the sky from the window.

“Yes,” he nodded, one hand dabbing at his eyes, covering up. “Just... just pollen.”

“Tsuchiya-san?” Mitsuura called out behind him. The chicken seemed to have hushed. “What’s going on? Did something happen?”

Tsuchiya straightened up, her expression suddenly firm. Ritsu wondered what news she had received. “Yui’s back.”

“Ah, Yui-san?” Mitsuura’s eyes widened. “Already? Well, she was away for a while. How was Tokyo? Can’t imagine it was any easier than the Osaka conference.”
“Ask her yourself. She’ll brief you sometime. She wants to see him first,” she said, turning to Ritsu.

Ritsu didn’t expect it at all. “Wait, me?”

“I expect it’s just to welcome you. I don’t think she’d want to brief any of us first thing, not after she’s just come back. I told her about you.”

“Yui-san?”

“Yes. She’s in her office. Do you know where it is?”

“No,” Ritsu shook his head.

“No issue,” Tsuchiya said. “I’ll show you. Mitsuura-san, everything all right out there?”

“Ah, yes, all is fine, all is fine…”

Nostradamus had other plans. Ritsu heard the others laugh as the man let go of the bird and watched it land on the ground with a plop. Tsuchiya sighed. “He’ll be fine. Come on, then. You might want to learn which room is her office.”

She went on, gesturing at Ritsu to follow. With one last glance at the chickens, Ritsu followed.

They took off their shoes at the porch, and went on past the dining room, where Ritsu had eaten breakfast that morning. It was empty, save for a housemaid wiping the tables. Mitsuura’s money, however much he had in his arsenal, was enough to provide for himself and all of Akazukihara’s residents. Ritsu had gone to bed full and satisfied each evening, and woken up to warm breakfast.

Mitsuura had no power but money, Hoshino had whispered to him at the dinner table. It was no secret. Hoshino could bend spoons through sheer concentration and effort, so much that it left him exhausted, but even that made him proud; makes me greater than him, he had said. Mitsuura had been out of earshot. Ritsu had thought it was rude, but said nothing. It felt wrong to insult someone who had been nothing but hospitable.

The corridors of Akazukihara were quiet at this time of day. Now was no exception. Most of the house’s residents were outside with the animals, or in tutoring. Akazukihara had no school of its own, but there were tutors, so he had heard, trusted and briefed and brought in by Mitsuura especially. Whether they were espers or not, Ritsu didn’t know. Neither arithmetic nor kanji required psychic abilities.

He had been a good student before. He could only hope that three days of lying in bed with psychic headaches had not changed too much. He had not met the tutors yet, though he had met Tsuchiya: his to-be tutor for the abilities he had awakened. He had met Muraki, one of the other esper adults, and the powerless Mitsuura. Yui was a new name. At best, it was something he had only heard through the walls, or mixed in with conversations he couldn’t decipher. Never had it stood out.

Names didn’t mean much to Ritsu without faces or roles. He had been reluctant to ask the other Akazukihara residents for their names for the third time in one day, blaming his headache.

“Tsuchiya-san?” He asked as they turned a corner, and a pair of large, wooden doors came into view.

“Yes?” She turned around. Ritsu, startled, almost stumbled over his own feet.

“I’m sorry,” he said, trying to straighten up and wipe the awkward look from his face. “You never
explained. Who is Yui-san?"

"Yui-san is an important member and commander within the Society."

"I have to meet someone that important?"

Tsuchiya nodded. "You would have met her earlier, if not for her being in Tokyo. There was an emergency meeting. Yui-san is very important in the Society, but also head of operations at Akazukihara."

"Head of… operations?"

"The most important one of us here. She does a lot of work for the Movement, but this is where she is most of the time."

Ritsu didn’t have time to react as Tsuchiya walked on, laying a hand on one of the elegant doors. Something about her expression called forth, and Ritsu obeyed. The doors looked even larger close up, and he felt even smaller, Tsuchiya’s tall frame and defined muscles making him feel as flimsy as paper. He looked up. The eyes that met his told him to go on.

Breathing in, Ritsu knocked, once then again.

"Yes?" A woman’s voice sounded out from behind the twin doors.

"It’s Kageyama," he said, trying to mirror Tsuchiya’s confidence.

"Come in."

Swallowing, Ritsu’s hand came down to the door handle. He looked back at Tsuchiya, expecting her to nod, or to take the lead again, but she only gestured at him to go on. He had no choice, and turned the handle. His stomach leapt at the sound. Ritsu fought to keep his face straight. He was old enough. He could be mature. He wasn’t a coward.

The opening door revealed a wide room, bookshelves thick with files and old tomes and protruding papers, and a neatly-curtained window at one side of the room. In front was a rug, and by it a desk. Papers were on it in small, neated stacks—and in the centre was a familiar, furry intruder.

Ritsu reached out, about to tell Himawari to get off—and it was then that he noticed the figure behind Himawari, dark clothes stark against the animal’s light, sun-lit fur. One hand was already scratching the top of the cat’s head.

Immediately, he straightened up, and pulled his hand to his side, ready to bow. "Ah—hello, Yui-san."

If Yui was the figure sat at the desk, then his imagined impression of the commander had been far from the truth. Thin hands clasped together, with long sleeves to the wrists had not been too far from what he had been guessing, but the face looking back was far less intimidating. Her hair was tied back in a messy, dark bun. Stray locks covered part of her forehead. The suit jacket on her might have been a little too big, but Ritsu couldn’t be sure. Underneath, he could see what looked like a grey dress.

"Kageyama-kun?" Her voice was surprisingly musical for someone so darkly dressed.

"Yes," Ritsu nodded, pushing aside all of the questions. His hands clapped against his sides, trying to hide any trembling, and dipped into a polite bow. He was face-to-face with a commander—someone
older, and so far above him that he had never imagined he would ever face someone of her rank. Even Yui-san felt somewhat incorrect, he realised. There had to be a more formal term. “Yes, Commander—“

“Commander is a little too much.”

Ritsu stopped. “I’m sorry.”

“No need. It’s we that should be apologising. We failed to protect your family, and… on behalf of the Society, I am sorry,” she said, her head drooping, not quite a bow. “I can only hope you have been given good hospitality at Akazukihara.”

“I… I have. It’s been a pleasure, Yui-san,” Ritsu said, trying to hold himself together. The mention of family filled his mouth with a bitter taste, but he swallowed it back, hoping she wouldn’t notice.

“That’s good to hear. Should anything happen, then myself or Mitsuura-san will be able to help.”

“Ah. Yes. Thank you.”

Yui turned to look down at the cat, her hand still running down its spine. It purred, clearly content. “I trust that you’ve been looked after?”

“Yes. I have.”

“And I hear that you’ve been allowed to leave your room now. Have your headaches cleared?”

“Yes. Almost entirely,” he nodded.

They were still there, he admitted, barely so: still pressing and sending odd bursts of colour into his vision if he stood up or moved his head a little too suddenly, but they were less common now. He could move almost freely. He could lift himself from his bed and stand up and get dressed, and no longer did he have to wait for food to be brought to his room if he wanted it.

“That’s good. They should clear completely soon, when you’ve stabilised. I’m sure you’ve been told what to expect once you have.”

“Yes. Tsuchiya-san said I’ll have to learn to use them. My… my powers.”

Once you’re a bit stronger, I’ll be teaching you how to control it, she had said on the first day, as he had stared down at the blue-turning-violet glow coating his hands. There are ways of using this to fight, and to defend yourself, and to help you live and grow and understand others around you.

A part of it still didn’t feel real, even three days after. That very morning, Ritsu had thought that he had only imagined seeing an aura yesterday and the day before, that all of it had been some wild, unbelievable fantasy. He had closed his eyes and breathed: and there it had been again, turning even more colourful by the day, blue turning to shades of sea-green and bright violet, all of its colours and the feel of it not an inch short of reality.

How something so… simple, yet complex, could alter so much of his life was still something he had to understand fully.

“Indeed. And I know Tsuchiya-san will be a good teacher to you. You’ll be tutored here at Akazukihara once you’ve fully recovered. You’ll be schooled as expected of someone your age, and Tsuchiya-san and Muraki-san will help with your abilities. Have you met the other children?”
“Yes.”

“What do you think of them?”

“I… I think they’re all right.”

He had met the others, save for Mukai, only that morning. His first encounter had been at the breakfast table, between mouthfuls of rice, when the taste of good food had drowned out his will to think about anything else for a while. Most of the conversation had taken place outside, afterwards. He had sat and watched Hoshino harass Mitsuura’s chickens. Rei, the only other girl apart from Mukai, had complained. Asahi—blue sweater, he tried to remember, putting something to the name and the face—had gone along with the chicken game. The twins had been quieter.

Akazukihara was, in some ways, no different from school. Save for Hoshino attempting to levitate a panicking bird, and Asahi offering to roast it for dinner with self-produced flames, nothing they had done had screamed esper.

It still felt a little strange to stomach: the thought that perhaps, Mitsuura and the staff were the only non-espers at Akazukihara, and that Ritsu was not an exception.

“Then, that’s good,” Yui nodded. “I’m glad you’ve settled in, or at least started to. In times like these, it’s best that we all group together. Especially you.”

“Me?”

“All of you young ones. It’s important that we teach you to co-operate, and to use your powers wisely. And that, of course, we keep you safe here.”

Ritsu thought of Seasoning: the city he had called home. Akazukihara felt like a world away, surrounded by trees and clear skies and fresh air. Birds seemed to sing louder. There was peace and quiet outside, interrupted only by someone manhandling one of the chickens, or as he recalled, feeling embarrassed, him almost sitting on top of a cat.

Everything was so different, and seemed so far away.

Himawari padded to the edge of the table, letting Yui scoop her up. The commander put the cat down on the floor, and quite merrily, it padded over to one corner of the room, where a large cushion had been left for it to lay down on. Ritsu turned back, and heard Yui sigh, her eyes still fixed on the cat with a look of contentment.

“I don’t know if you’ve heard, Kageyama-kun, but we take well to animals. Or maybe, they take well to us.”

“Really?”

“You might want to ask Mitsuura-san for his research on that. We believe animals can see and sense auras. If it’s really the truth, then it certainly explains a lot,” Yui continued. “Witches. Familiars. Family, in all kinds of ways. Himawari was taken in at Akazukihara as well, just like you and the others.”

“Like Mukai? And Hoshino, and Asahi?”

“That’s right. Mitsuura-san keeps his chickens, and we keep Himawari. The cat catches mice, and the chickens lay eggs, but neither one hurts the other. Just like things should be. Just like things should be everywhere…”
Yui sighed, shaking her head, and Ritsu thought of elsewhere. Elsewhere was outside. Elsewhere was a wide world, and a hostile one: one where he had lost everything in one night, where his brother had gone out for a run in the evening and he had not seen him since, where everything had been burning and then the pain had burst through at once—


“I’m afraid not.”

“Who’s looking for him?”

“We have agents and allies around the area. They’ll report back to us if they find anything. For now, you’re best off remaining here, and we’ll find your brother and bring him here, too.”

“No!” Ritsu raised his voice, realising what he had done far too late. “If you can’t find him, then maybe I can.”

“You can’t,” Yui replied, much too calmly for Ritsu to stop. Her tone reminded him of his mother, tired after a long day, telling his brother that bedtime was soon, and that no, he couldn’t go out running after dark, because he was different, except on that day—

“I can!”

“Kageyama-kun, now isn’t the time.”

“Then—then when is? I want to find him,” Ritsu pressed, his hands almost slamming down on the edge of the desk. “I have to find him! I know he’s alive. He has to be!”

“If you believe so, then I believe he is, too. We have intelligence to say that killing your brother wasn’t the aim of that mission.”

Ritsu froze. All thoughts that this was not right—that he was raising his voice against a commander, that he was much smaller and younger and knew nothing next to Yui or any of the other adults—were forgotten, discarded and meaningless. “…What?”

“From what we found out, the mission was to kill your family, but to leave Kageyama Shigeo alive. Ritsu-kun, is it?”

He had given his name at some point: how many times, and to whom exactly, he had forgotten. “Y-yes.”

“That intelligence may have come late, but the information was valid. We suspect your brother is alive.”

Ritsu’s fists clenched. Light came back to his eyes—to more than that, he knew. His feet wanted to take off. He couldn’t stay. His hands trembled, restless and ecstatic. “I… I knew it. My brother wouldn’t—“

He couldn’t stop himself turning around and racing towards the door.

“Where are you going?”

Yui’s voice pierced through his sudden drive. Ritsu stopped, his chest on fire with fast heartbeats. He had to go. He had to: staying felt like a sin. “I have to find him.”

“You’re in no state to be leaving here.”
“My brother’s out there, and he might be in danger. I’ve got powers now, I can go find him—“

“Powers mean *nothing.*"

A chill ran down his spine. The voice had felt like a shock, almost as if a cold wind had blown through Yui’s office, but left the papers and books all around him untouched. Her hair was perfectly still, and it took too long for Ritsu to realise that there had been no wind—only a feeling beyond definition, something like an unseen sort of flare. It reminded him of the feeling he had when his aura came into view and danced on his skin; and yet, he could see nothing, no strange light at all. On his hands was nothing but skin. Yui was just as she had been moments ago.

Shuddering, he tried to argue. “But—“

“Right now, it would be too dangerous,” Yui stated again. Her tone was as firm as hard metal. “You’ve yet to recover. And there’s no need for you to leave. Akazukihara is safe… and Claw would gladly take someone as young and ambitious as you into their hands.”

“C-Claw?”

Ritsu had heard of the name. He could think of no-one that hadn’t. His parents had whispered it in hushed tones, just like they had started to whisper his brother’s name, too, voices shaking in the private conversations Ritsu had heard when he should have been asleep.

“Your parents died by their hands. By much stronger hands. Hands you can’t challenge alone. The Society exists for this very purpose, and for your protection. Do you understand? I know how it feels. But you can’t go. You can’t.”

He didn’t care for the Society. They had been kind, but it wasn’t fair. He could only care for his brother—and yet, here he was, sat in comfort, in warmth, amongst others his age in a sanctuary, while his brother was somewhere uncertain, his situation unknown. It was wrong. All of it—all of it, Ritsu thought, hoping Yui could not read thoughts.

“I… I understand,” he nodded, reluctant. He had no choice.

“Then, it was a pleasure to meet you.”

He half-expected Yui to say something else afterwards, but she never did. Silence filled the room. It took a few moments for her to gesture towards the door. It was almost a taunt, Ritsu thought. He could leave the room, and head back to the garden, or up to his room, but beyond that was out of bounds.

It wasn’t fair, not at all.

He had no choice.

Heaving, he turned and made his way to the door. He could do nothing against a commander, her gender regardless, and perhaps, that didn’t matter so much. Some part of him cowered and shirked at the thought of challenging an adult esper, whatever her power.

Perhaps she was right, he thought: he had yet to recover. The bandages on his arms had come off that morning, and most of the skin beneath had never been damaged. His hands probably still smelled of ointment to treat what burns had been left. He was still a little sore, too: his body, disused for three days, had almost tried to rebel against him when he had woken up in the morning, but he had managed to stand.
The headaches were worse. He could feel one coming on, one that he hoped would not leave him as bedridden as the last few had been.

“Um, Yui-san, the headaches—“

He stopped for a moment, hand on the door. Yui was no longer sat up straight, reaching for a pen that had rolled away to the far side of her desk. As she looked up, Ritsu’s eye caught a strange, awkward detail.

“Yes, Kageyama-kun?“

In the midst of Yui’s black hair, on the right side, was a single blonde flash.

“The headaches. I think I’ve got one again."

Ritsu shook his head, shutting his eyes for a second. He opened them—and the blonde streak was no longer there.

He was delirious. It had probably come with the headaches. There had to be side effects to developing, or awakening abilities: things he had yet to understand, Ritsu thought, bracing himself to bear the growing thrum in his head. He could feel the unpleasant, aching feeling stirring again, approaching like a shadow out of a tunnel.

First shadow, then light: he fought to keep his head up. There was a burst behind his eyes. He needed to lie down.

“Ah. I’ll tell Tsuchiya-san to fetch the nurse, then. You go on and rest.”

“Y-yes. I understand. Thank you, Yui-san.”

Ritsu didn’t understand things at all. He was delirious—hallucinating, not quite sane, out of his mind. He had seen something, only for it to have disappeared, because what he had seen had never been there. He was tired, clearly tired. His head was starting to hurt.

His last few words, as he excused himself, came out as a mumble. The door clicked shut behind him, and only when the sound had completely gone, he let out a sigh.

He needed to sleep.

His hand met the cool comfort of the wall outside Yui’s office. Its touch reassured. It was stable. Ritsu himself was far from that. He groaned, feeling the rise of the pain. He needed to lie down. He would ask the nurse for something to help the pain later. It was coming back fast. He had yet to recover. How long it would take, he wasn’t sure, but he hoped it would be soon. Fresh air from the window wasn’t enough: he wanted to be outside, with the trees and the sky and maybe even the sound of laughter and chickens.

No, he thought, gritting his teeth as he forced himself up the stairs, clinging to the bannisters. His hand slipped over the wood. Laughter didn’t matter, or at least, no-one else’s. What mattered most was finding his brother: and once he was ready, once he had recovered, even earlier if it was possible, he had to go out there and find him. Shigeo was alive, he was certain. The feeling ran even deeper than the psychic energy he had felt developing within himself, like the bloom of a flower, and had always meant more than the commander’s words. Ritsu felt it more than anything else—more than the headaches, more than his own growing powers, more than textures and colours in the back of his mind. Shigeo was family.
Shigeo was different from him. Shigeo had been the one in most danger, and Shigeo had always been brave.

*Akazukihara is safe,* he recalled Yui’s voice. It wasn’t enough. Ritsu couldn’t rest. Every second—he clenched his hands into fists—was a constant reminder of the distance between him and Shigeo. They were not together. His brother was out there, somewhere, but he had no clue of *where.*

He was hopeless—hopeless, aching, useless, and terrible, he thought as he came back to his room.

Ritsu fell into bed and slept until evening.

Chapter End Notes

the usual batch of notes.
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

Content warning: vomiting happens.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The house was dark and empty, lit up only by voices—artificial voices, Teruki thought, listening to the same saccharine vocals for what felt like the fiftieth time. It didn’t matter what record it was. It was sound, all the same, both boring and oddly relieving. He sighed, and continued to stare at the ceiling, as he had been doing for the two prior days. One hand tugged at a blanket, the muscles in his fingers needing to flex. The music carried on playing.

He wasn’t happy, not quite. He was thankful for the record player functioning, that was true, and for having a space of his own. He had all the time in the world. It didn’t matter if he didn’t show up for school—and who would care, besides? No, he thought, nobody would care; nobody cared for people like him, not really, but people did care for rumours. There had to be rumours. Rumours would be enough to give his classmates all the information they needed about him: about what had happened, and about what exactly he had become.

Edano wasn’t the quiet type. Ryuzaki was worse.

He hated them both. It was a strong emotion, but it wasn’t anything new. Hating had turned into a habit, like needing to fight or to breathe. Hate came with him, and he came with all of his struggles, and they clung to him, too; his nightmares and the headaches that had been beating him senseless for days, days on end, since he had fought the esper boy and woken up on a cold, filthy floor.

The air was stale. The window hadn’t been opened in days, and he didn’t care for it. He was alone in the house. Nothing mattered. Nobody cared. His headache had begun to subside, at least, he thought with a sigh, feeling a stirring warmth deep within his chest. It spread to his shoulders as he breathed out. Teruki closed his eyes, feeling it pulse with the beat of his heart.

He had been able to stand without feeling dizzy that morning. He had made himself some semblance of breakfast and eaten without coughing it up. His arms and legs had cramped up a little from two days lying down, and he had stretched them out without seeing flashes behind his eyelids. If he really had caught some kind of illness, then it was starting to clear up.

Things were starting to change.

The pressure deep within him had turned to something more constant; something not as pressing, but a little more gentle, something Teruki could tolerate. It wasn’t choking or squeezing, nor was it burning, but just giving out enough heat for him to know that it was still there, always, buried deep in a part of him he couldn’t name or identify.

It had settled down. It didn’t feel like it was going to leave.

Feeling the warmth come to his fingers, he opened his eyes. Coating his hands was a now-familiar glow. It warmed the bones and skin there, but he could feel it elsewhere at the same time, all through his body, as if the feeling was coursing through his veins. It beckoned as much as it warmed.
He couldn’t take his eyes off it.

He could see more to it the longer he stared. His aura—his, mine, the thought struck, this is all really mine—had changed. It had grown into something stronger, more definite than the faint lemony will-o-wisp it had been three days ago in the alley. It was heavier, but steadier, its energy strangely gentle. It had long since stopped flickering. The faint sound in his ears had broken out of its screech, and smoothed into a hum, pleasantly pitched.

Colour had come into it, too. One finger dipped down to trace new marbled lines. Waves of rippling blue mingled with scorched terracotta amongst that homely, familiar yellow.

His aura was warm.

It was not so unpleasant now, no longer sticking to his skin like black oil to a drowning seabird. It was gentle. It emanated. Bright streams flowed into honey-thick pools. It was almost calling him forth, tempting his hands into reaching, so he could spread more of its cover. He could not quite touch it—not like he could touch water—but something about it made him think of thickness and sweetness, and incredible power sleeping within.

He sighed, transfixed, watching it spread and retract into his hand as he balled up and unrolled one of his fists. Yellow light followed his fingers, blue-green lines twisting and forming new ripples.

I have an aura. This is all mine, he thought with a sigh, the smallest of smiles easing its way onto his lips.

I’m… I’m an esper. An actual one.

Months ago, his mother had shaken her head at the first newspaper headline. Extrasensory abilities, she had said, groaning at the pages; what next, your father getting relieved of his job? It had felt like a joke, and to her, it probably had been nothing more than one, until the first of the attacks, when her face had turned more than sour, and the paper was screwed up and thrown into the trash.

Knew it, Teruki thought. That kid. That kid did this to me. I’m a monster, like him.

He clenched his fists. The scrapes on them weren’t stinging for the first time in days.

Slowly, his bruises were healing. The ache in his back, the feeling of being pulled and pushed down and punched and probably kicked: all of those feelings were fading, if not completely then at least a little, like his headaches. He was growing stronger again, enough to get up without wincing, enough to walk about without his arms and legs hurting.

His hand trailed up by instinct, needing to push hair out of his eyes. It met only skin and short, useless remains. Teruki felt sick, but the hand wouldn’t move from his head, running along it again and again, as if trying to drill the fact into his head that nothing was there. There had only been scraps of it left, and in desperation, his hands had worked, as if by themselves. He had grasped at his scissors, gasping, and cut cut cut, from the tips to the roots, until nothing was left.

He had let chopped-off strands poke at his eyelids until he couldn’t see any more. He hadn’t wanted to see.

His gaze dragged from the comfort of yellow to the cool of his walls, to one corner, where an empty frame stood, wrong in all of the ways. Days ago, it had been housing a mirror. His hands had reached out to touch its reflection, before he had pulled back, teeth gritted, and let out a wild scream, and then it had smashed. The glass was long gone from the floor. Like an old image, like a reflection, it was a thing of the past.
The scrapes marring Teruki’s hands and face would heal, too. If they didn’t, it wouldn’t matter. Nothing was left of his old life. He had no hair, and nobody to call a friend, and an aura that clung to him like a membrane, the feeling of its presence still there even when it faded out into invisibility, and clustered deep inside in a part of him he couldn’t describe. He was an alien in his own skin; a stranger in a world that no longer felt real.

He was alone. Maybe, he felt better that way.

There wasn’t much in the house, and his mother was out for the third day in a row, keeping secrets from Teruki’s father and trying to keep the same secrets from Teruki himself. Secrets were badly kept in the house, and every so often, he had come home and found himself drowning in excuses and the twirl of skirts he hadn’t seen before in his mother’s wardrobe, if she was there at all. The house was too quiet sometimes.

The record player took away some of the silence. Voices and tones filled the room with an ambiance Teruki could only dream of, something like instruments and vocals together: harmony, happiness, units as one.

There was no-one else in the house. There was only Teruki, bald and helpless and a monster in human guise, and the sound of repeating, familiar music—something he had been replaying for days. Why he had felt the compulsion to listen so badly, he had no idea. Teruki had known something once, but all of that was dead and gone, as detached from him as his own hair.

He was alive, all the same.

He was alone, and there was no shame in shutting his eyes, feeling the warmth of his aura lapping at his skin, and letting out a faint hum with the music. Some of it was reflexive, like the feeling he had had in his younger years, when his mother had applauded him for an out-of-tune, silly performance of something he had been taught in class. *Clever boy,* she had called him, playing with his hair, then charcoal-dark like her own. *Clever boy*…

He could hum, just as he had done back then, but nobody would hear it. Nobody needed to, he thought. If they heard, then he could do what he had done to Edano.

He could hurt. He could kill, if he wanted. The realisation was there.

Teruki opened his eyes. The song that was playing was starting to end. He had power, he thought: something unspeakable, unbelievable; something he had never imagined could exist within any human until a few months ago, and even then it had seemed somewhat strange. It wasn’t right for humans to possess such abilities. It wasn’t right to hear thoughts or make objects rise and fall in the air, or to set things on fire with a flick of the wrist. It wasn’t human. It wasn’t human at all.

Teruki wasn’t human, not any more. He had changed, and hurt Edano.

He could do it again.

Turning back to look at his hand, still bright, still decorated with that bright, yellow glow, he thought of *vengeance.* He had time, most likely. If he was to look at the clock—and he could barely see it in the curtained dark of his room—he would probably see some time in the afternoon. Even if it was later than that, he could make time. There was no-one to stop him. He didn’t have to listen to anyone.

He wasn’t human, and rules meant nothing to him. He was bald and ruined and broken, but he had thoughts and ideas, all of them pointing to vengeance.

The thought felt pleasant.
Grunting, he eased himself out of his futon. The blanket fell to one side, but he paid it no heed. He didn’t have to, he reminded himself. It didn’t matter if he was half-dressed and his overshirt was too large and creased in just about every direction. The floor beneath his bare feet was cold. It didn’t matter either. He wasn’t human. Teruki could bear it.

He came to the window, and bracing himself, pushed back the curtain. The light felt almost blinding. He had been right. It looked to be sometime in the afternoon, with the sun obscuring itself in the clouds. The world was still moving.

His hands were a little cold, and fiddling with the lock on the window felt like more of a hassle than ever, but it opened up, all the same, and Teruki felt almost blessed as he breathed in cool air.

Outside felt like another world after two days of silence.

He opened the window a little wider, enough to let himself lean out. The prospect of falling had scared him once: he had cowered in the corner at the thought that, one day, he would fall out and be left as a pile of bones and blood on the ground. His mother had been reassuring back then. His father had been there.

He had long since grown out of his fears, like he had grown out of childhood clothes.

He could see through the neighbour’s window a lot better now. He could make out the straight lines of tops of her drawers, and a cabinet, and a tall, pretty mirror that Teruki had secretly coveted, long before the mirror in his own room had been turned into shards. On top of the drawers was a jewellery box of some kind, or what looked to be one. Next to it was a hairbrush, and Teruki knew he was getting closer.

“Ah-ha.”

There was no-one at home, and nobody too close to the house. He could speak to himself if he wanted—even if he never usually spoke to himself. Something about it amused him in that moment, as he made out a few more brushes, and settled down on his target.

He hadn’t really pitied his neighbour: a woman who had to be the age of his mother, but with all of the baldness of a wrinkled, old man. Too often, he had found himself peering through the window and laughing.

For once, her abundance of wigs was something Teruki wasn’t finding so funny.

He had no chance of reaching her window, or getting into the house. He could steal fruit and even impressive items of clothing, but as he tried to reach, wobbling, Teruki realised that he had limits.

Limits meant nothing to someone inhuman.

He clambered back down, and looked around the room. There wasn’t much he could find that he could easily dispose of. Finally, he settled for a baseball. The bat in the corner of his room was a little too good to give up, but the ball was expendable.

Ball in hand, he came back to the window, and leaned out, just enough to put his hand outside. His remaining hand clutched at the window frame, as tight as he could. His window was only a floor up, but the sight below was still far from welcoming. He couldn’t look down. He could only look up ahead.

Teruki breathed in, thinking hard, almost calling. His hand clenched tighter around the ball. Relief flooded his veins as soon as the heat did: the heat he remembered, that he had spent days feeling both
around and inside of him. The yellow, rippling glow shimmered into life, and spread down his fingertips, flowing down to the baseball like a fast-moving flood.

Perfect.

Keeping focus on the ball, Teruki’s fingers shifted away, letting it go. The ball hung in the air, suspended, as if by strings. Yellow surrounded it.

One finger flicked up in a gesture. The ball rose—and fell, just as Teruki’s finger did, almost in tandem. He had practiced simple movements on his record player, learning to move the needle to go back to the beginning. It had felt strange at first, but like wall-slamming Edano, in hindsight, it didn’t feel terrible.

If anything, it filled him with some kind of meaning, and made him think less of the pain.

He could watch the ball dip and rise as long as he wanted, but there wasn’t much use. It was in his command now. The hum of his aura told him all was steady; one tone, like something played well on an instrument. His eyes fixed straight on the window. Teruki flicked out his finger, thinking forward, ahead, go on and break it.

Glass shattered.

By instinct, his eyes had closed faster than he had realised. He opened them, and started to grin. The neighbour’s window now had a ball-sized, circular hole in it, punctuated by creeping, expanding cracks.

He could do more than that.

Thinking of pulling, Teruki focused again, at one with the aura still on his hand. There was a crash, then a smack, and the ball was back in his hand, fast enough that it almost knocked him back, and made him wonder how lucky he was that it had broken no fingers. He tossed it aside. The ball rolled into one corner, and, no longer illuminated by yellow aura, blended into the room’s lingering shadows.

There were now two holes in the window. A little more, Teruki decided. His power felt almost hungry, wanting to flow and reach, to do a little more damage. It reminded him of the thrill of a fight: of the howls of the first esper he had fought, weak but satisfying to beat into the ground, and a little of the boy named Mob, helpless and puny—until he had fought back.

Teruki shivered, wobbling but regaining his hold. He had to focus—look straight, straight on. He had an idea. His power had yet to be tested to its limits.

He had heard of espers being weak, of being unable to surpass the first feat, like a drug losing potency after one use. His power felt different. It hadn’t settled at all, even after his aura had lost its flicker and become somewhat stable. It felt greater now. He was different. He could do more, he thought, gritting his teeth as he reached out, into the air, concentrating all that he had on the hole-ridden window.

If he had slammed Edano, then he could—

—smash!

He breathed out, as if he had run a mile, the energy within constricting and unfurling. Glass rained down onto the ground. The neighbour’s window had become an open-mouthed maw, jagged pieces of glass lingering at the bottom and top of the pane. He could reach now. He could grab and pull
what he wanted. He didn’t need to hold back, the feeling deep within told him, beating a rhythm into his ears along with his pulse. It was one with his blood. He was one with it. He couldn’t take it out or change it—because this was it, this was him, Hanazawa Teruki, fourteen years old, strong and unwavering, esper—

He let out a laugh as soon as the wig slapped into his hand.

It had been the first one he had spotted: one of the neighbour’s better-cared-for ones, probably expensive, and very much foreign. Teruki hadn’t seen many people with shocking blonde hair. The last time he had seen it was on the head of one American sailor, deep in awkward conversation with his Japanese counterpart.

The Japanese sailor went home that day without a hat. Teruki had come home with one. He missed the hat. He wondered if Edano had picked it up, and if he still had it.

He clambered down from the window, shutting it and drawing the curtains, leaving only a sliver of light so that he could see. The mirror in his room was completely broken, like the window the neighbour would notice when she came home—but his mother’s room was empty, and her mirror would work.

Teruki picked up the scissors he had left on the floor, small black remains still clinging to the surface. He brushed them off, and carried both the wig and scissors to the next room.

Putting it on was a hassle at first. Long locks bounced into his eyes, and the cap of the wig scratched against his scalp, uncomfortable against the almost-bald surface of his head. He didn’t want to get used to it, but there was no going back. He couldn’t wish his hair back. He would have to settle for the next best thing.

His neighbour didn’t matter. She could complain, but it was too late.

The scissors went in next, chopping and changing. He had tried to cut his own hair before, when it had grown too long and teachers had begun to complain. He didn’t mind his hair a little longer than most boys he knew, but the blonde wig was different: light-coloured waves leapt into his eyes and trailed down his back, making the skin underneath itch unpleasantly. The cuts might have been rough, or even lopsided, but it didn’t matter. It was something, in the end.

He left the scissors lying on the dresser, and cleaned up the mess on the floor. The boy that stared back from the mirror didn’t feel quite like himself. He was tired and barely dressed, and an esper: an esper with cut-off wig hair clinging to the palms of his hands and a stolen, chopped wig on his head. It was better than going out bald, even if he did miss his hat.

His clothes had been thrown into a pile in his room, to be washed later, but he hadn’t felt motivated. He still had fresh things in his drawers, enough to last a while, though he could wash clothes himself if he needed to. He was capable, even alone.

He could try his powers on anything if he wanted. It was fun, Teruki thought, making socks levitate, as he got dressed.

Downstairs, he practiced dropping eggs into his palms without making them crack. Only one did. It was promptly discarded. He cooked a couple for himself, and it didn’t matter that they might have been a little undercooked; Teruki had better things to think about.

He was out of the house quickly enough. The neighbour hadn’t returned home, judging from the lack of noise coming from the house next door. He gave the broken window one last glance, before
laughing. It didn’t matter. He couldn’t be proven guilty, and if he was, he would give whoever challenged him hell. He had the potential. He was powerful, different, unwavering. Nothing was stopping him, not any looks that people gave the bright blonde wig on his head, not any sounds from the street, nor anything going on around him. People meant nothing. The city meant nothing. He was unbreakable.

The streets were familiar enough, and so was the time. He had grown accustomed to finding Edano and Ryuzaki in the same alleys, around the same corners, sometimes even chewing on the same kind of dried fish that Ryuzaki liked so much, from the fishmonger the gang had learned to take advantage of.

Dried fish wasn’t bad, but Teruki preferred oysters.

Whatever money had been in his pockets—he made a habit to carry little, if any—on the day of the fight had been lost, or taken out when he had lost consciousness. He didn’t need it. He could steal whatever he wanted, just like he could beat up whoever he wanted. He could do as he pleased. If anyone came to stop him, he would give them a taste of the powers he had developed.

Maybe, he thought, as he drew closer to their usual place, he would demonstrate anyway.

Stopping a few metres away from a corner, he leaned back against the wall, and crept closer and closer, trying to listen for voices. He hadn’t been wrong. Edano and Ryuzaki were clearly hanging around the same street: the little alley they had declared theirs. None of the other gangs went near it, not without coming away bruised. Their voices rang out, and Teruki leaned in, peering over the edge once he was close enough.

Surely enough, there was Ryuzaki, leaning against the wall with one shoulder—and then Edano, more confident, prouder. Teruki fought the urge to run straight out and throw himself at him, seeing a familiar hat now adorning his head.

Seeing a handful of notes in Edano’s hand, Teruki put two and two together. Stolen, he realised. Whoever had been their last victim had certainly been both wealthy and foolish.

Teruki had no money to share—and he was no longer playing the fool. It was time.

“Well, good to see you again,” he called out, revealing himself as he came out from behind the corner. His hands slipped into his pockets.

Ryuzaki turned around, startled. “Teru-san?”

“Good to know you haven’t forgotten me.”

He smirked, brimming with confidence. He was on fire at that moment. He didn’t need to think straight. His hands were itching to fight, and messing with the insides of his pockets was only a temporary kind of relief.

“You’ve come back,” Edano said, shaking his head. “What’s with that thing on your head? Don’t like the haircut we gave you?”

“You think I liked that?”

The wig was a much better job, Teruki thought: because he had done it himself.

He didn’t stop, and for a moment, he thought he saw Edano step back, just a little. “Get the hell out of here. Did—didn’t we teach you a lesson already? You lied to us.”
Ryuzaki joined in, leaning closer to tease him. “Yeah. You don’t belong here.”

“Oh, I wasn’t lying.” Teruki sighed, shrugging. It felt right to be playful, seeing the look on his face and the swagger in his steps unnerve the other two boys, pushing them back without so much as a touch. Something about the whole situation felt almost funny. “I didn’t know myself. I hadn’t worked it out yet, but I know now. I shouldn’t exist, but I do.”

He could feel his aura stirring within as he lifted one hand. It felt good to be the way that he was. The feeling of wanting a fight wanted out.

Edano’s eyes widened. “Teru, what the fuck—“

“I don’t care.”

“Don’t—don’t come near us.”

“I’ll come near you as much as I want.”

“Back off. Now.”

“And I’ll have my hat back,” Teruki continued. His pace sped up, and for a second, he threw Edano off, catching him off-guard for the slightest of moments. It was just enough for him to swipe with his hand. The hat didn’t quite look right on Edano—but it felt so right in Teruki’s hands. Feeling it fall into them felt like coming home.

It felt even better back on his head, the wig just snug underneath. He wished, for a moment, to admire himself in some window.

“Back the hell off. You’re nothing. Do you want to get your ass served again?” Ryuzaki piped up. Edano stood frozen, torn between lashing out and stepping back further. Teruki fought the urge to burst into laughter.

“I don’t want anything. I don’t care for your rules.”

I want revenge.

“You… you bastard!”

“Call me all you like. I’m not human. Not any more.”

Focusing himself, Teruki thought, sending out the right message. His aura responded, and the yellow glow flared into life, encircling his outstretched hand.

“I’m one of them, not one of you. And that means your rules don’t affect me.”

He threw the first punch.

Teruki threw the second, too, and the third—but when Ryuzaki tried to attack his side and throw the fourth, it didn’t hit. The blow after that met nothing at all but the air, as yellow light twisted around arms and legs and pushed back and restrained. Edano tried to lunge in, but was met with something too fast. Teruki’s hands barely moved. His aura reached further, extending. He couldn’t paralyse—but he could force one of the two back, while the other tried to come in with a kick to the side, meeting a small barrier that Teruki had materialised.

If the boy named Mob could do it, then so could he, he thought, extending the barrier and hearing Edano curse as he tried to attack. It wasn’t so difficult. It felt right. He remembered how he had flung
Edano back once, and he could do it again. His aura was wild, but under control. It wanted to break, and to throw, and to push Ryuzaki so hard that it knocked the breath out of him, and he let it. His spine slammed into one of the trash cans. Edano went down like a comet, too, after a blow of his was blocked, and Teruki retaliated fast with a knee to the stomach.

*For good measure,* he thought, giving him one last kick to the spine.

Sighing, he readjusted his hat. In spite of the fighting, it had managed to stay on his head, the wig underneath secure enough, even if it had shifted around a little with all of the movement. Edano’s money lay dropped on the ground, and Teruki picked it up, curling the notes into his pocket. He would find some use for them: most likely buy something, or spend it on a bet on himself if he felt like fighting someone a little more daring one night.

He was stronger this time. He was inhuman; unbeaten. Beneath him were two battered bodies, two pairs of eyes looking up amidst a hotchpotch of red marks, gained when they had fallen onto the concrete.

“You’re not to say anything,” Teruki stated, his foot nudging Edano’s side. “You already did, didn’t you?”

There was no reply. Teruki sighed, looking down. By his side, Ryuzaki was still getting his breath back. Edano’s hands were coiled around his own midsection. Teruki thought of how big the bruises under his shirt would be, and if it was worth giving him another kick, just in case. “I knew it. You just had to go and soil my reputation. But you’ll clean it up. You better make sure this is nothing but a baseless rumour. You got that?”

Ryuzaki tried to sit up, heaving still. His voice came out as a series of croaks, hoarse and barely-there. The crash of a dustbin lid drowned out half of the sound. “Teru…“

“What is it? You scared? You should be.”

“What the… what the… fuck happened…?” Ryuzaki wheezed.

“Nothing. Nothing happened at all.”

He didn’t want anything more.

Teruki turned around, fixing his hat one more time for good measure, and left.

There was no use turning back. He already knew that the two would not get up again for a while. The aura around him quietened down, its glow disappearing as it retreated. The deed had been done. A part of Teruki, perhaps, felt better.

It wasn’t enough to head home, he thought as he left the alley behind, sneaking back into Seasoning’s network of backstreets. He had fought, both with aura and force: and he deserved a reward. For a while, he wandered the streets, eyeing his reflection in shop windows, and spent some of Edano’s notes on much-needed cigarettes.

It was nearing twilight by the time he was finally satisfied with himself. He walked away from North Market that evening with a small handful of oysters in his hands, and the remains of a smile. The old man behind the fish stall was one of the dozier stallholders: someone he and the others had learned to exploit months ago, not long after Teruki’s father had left for duty out on the ocean. It had been a challenge at first. The smell of seafood clung to everything that it touched, and that had included Teruki’s hands, but he was a master by now. If it could be taken, then he would take.
Oysters seldom tasted bad in the evening: yet, that evening felt like an exception. Teruki questioned if they had gone bad as he ate. They slipped on his tongue, making him wonder if that was how it felt to chew rubber; rubber soaked in saltwater, baked in the sun for too long.

His head was starting to hurt, too. Teruki tried not to think of it. He could hear the city around him settling down into evening, cars honking in the streets beyond the alleys and dogs barking at whatever it was that made the things bark. He had never liked animals.

Each sound he heard seemed to make him feel worse.

He kicked the ground as he walked, frustrated, tossing the last of the oyster shells behind him.

He could feel the pulse that had come with his aura, still there, still stirring, still unexplained. It had given him power. With it came questions. There was so much he didn’t understand—but he would work it out. He was sure of it. He had to find ways. He had found ways of using it, of holding it down when he didn’t need it and of using it as much as he felt like. Edano’s bruised face had been proof of that.

Maybe, he thought, he had been chosen. His powers might have been a gift from above; a sign that he had something to live for, other than the satisfaction of fighting and food stolen from market stalls. Teruki wasn’t certain, but as he finished off the oysters, trying not to think of the taste, he thought that it might have been so.

A newspaper rustled under his shoe, its headline trodden-upon and no longer legible. Teruki spat at it and went past. The papers were both right and wrong, he thought, feeling the warm weight in his chest, ever-beating. He had heard too much from both sides: that espers were dangerous, and that they weren’t, both at once from newspapers on either side.

He wondered if he was one of the dangerous ones.

The 99th Division had come about when he had been barely up to his father’s waist, and he was never to be one of them. The Division—its units, whatever their uses—were gone, and all that remained were the papers: the scandal, the memory, everything that had emerged on the day someone had leaked its existence.

Dangerous espers barely exist, the same paper had said, a week later, fighting the panic that it had created.

The papers could say all they wanted, he thought. It wouldn’t affect him. He had the power to hurt. His was the power to kill, if he wanted, and he had taken his vengeance. Edano had gotten off lightly. It had felt good to fight—of course, it had felt good. Fights always did.

He was probably tired.

He could taste saltwater on his teeth still, the taste suddenly stronger than ever, as if he had swallowed a cupful of salt. Teruki stopped for a moment, leaning down as he felt pain spread through his skull.

It was definitely getting worse.

Groaning, he reached for the wall lining the alleyway. He could see the last of the light up ahead, trailing a carpet for him to step on and follow, onto one of the main streets of Seasoning. The road would lead home.

He could barely look straight in its direction. He felt dizzy. Exhaustion, he thought, trying to calm
himself, and that’s all. He had fought and gained victory. He needed to sleep. He would have the most sound sleep ever now. He didn’t have to think about school if he didn’t want to: he was an esper now, dangerous, inhuman and careless—

His tongue tasted lingering brine. The wall barely felt real under his grip. He couldn’t hold on. He fell to his knees. Something squeezed—and then, the rest of his throat didn’t feel right either.

He wanted to scream. Something was strangling him; pushing up and down, both at once, squeezing his stomach. He could barely breathe past the smell of seafood. His hands lifted up to his mouth, trembling at the taste he felt in his throat. He could remember the texture of the oysters, as vividly as though they were still in his mouth: too smooth, too slippery, too much like rubber, too close to flesh.

His throat seized up.

Teruki retched onto the ground, unable to see past the blur of tears in his eyes as vomit dripped through the gaps between fingers.

Chapter End Notes

...and that's the end of Part 1. The story isn't formally divided into parts, but I like to do this for planning purposes. There’ll be 4-5 parts altogether.

The usual notes.

EDIT: This chapter got some fanart and I'm still not over that! Thank you to Lyno for it, it's beautiful and I love it so much.
He hadn’t cooked for a long time.

Reigen couldn’t remember how old he had been when his mother had brought him into the kitchen for the first time, telling him to help her serve rice and vegetables in the evening for dinner. His father would come home from work in those days, exhausted, back sore, Reigen remembered. He would smile as soon as a warm bowl of miso was placed in his hands, and the three of them would talk about whatever, huddled around the table. In the winter, his mother draped warm blankets over their shoulders. In summer, they all drank cold tea.

He had learned to cook only a little: leave it to your future wife, his mother had said. She said it too often, regardless of how much he furrowed his brows. Reigen was twenty-seven now, and there was no wife to speak of: but as he stirred his makeshift miso, simmering away on the stove, he wondered how his mother had felt, raising a child.

Behind him, Mob sat on the sofa, kicking his legs. The boy’s eyes were fixed on the wall. What was so interesting about it, Reigen had no idea, but he looked to be deep in thought. He was completely silent, and perhaps, Reigen found the silence a little unnerving; but as he turned back to the soup and lifted the ladle, he decided that it was just hunger and nerves.

He took a small sip, almost spluttering as heat scorched his tongue.

“Are—are you all right? Reigen-san?”

“It’s fine,” Reigen gasped. He breathed in and out, savouring the coldest air he could taste. Pain seared through his mouth. He had been a little too eager. “Just a little… toasty, that’s all.”

“Oh.”

Mob’s voice was quiet, as always. Reigen barely heard it past his exclamations. The boy wasn’t talkative. He had never complained when Reigen had asked to tend to his wounds. Not even the sting of iodine on his knees had gotten much out of him, save for the occasional, unsurprising wince. He was obedient, and that was a relief, Reigen thought, as he blew to try and cool down the remaining soup down in the ladle. Mob hadn’t complained at any of his food. He had said nothing about the couch being uncomfortable, or about Reigen himself, if he scared him at all.

Mob had been in the apartment three days. Reigen had learned little about him from speech, but a little more from the way he seemed to act and react.

The boy was certainly strange.

Not only had he come with an odd name—Reigen had pondered it, lying awake at night, wondering if it was his real one—but he had other strange habits, too, ones that Reigen couldn’t help but wonder if other children his age had. Reigen had been young once, too, but Enoki was a world away
from Seasoning, and his youth was years in the past. He wasn’t sure if it compared.

Mob hadn’t been in a good state when he had brought him in, all dirty socks and worn clothes, and so Reigen had run a bath on Friday evening. Mob, of course, had to go first, and he did so with a nod. Reigen had lent him his towel.

When he had heard nothing from Mob for almost two hours, he had started to wonder if the boy was even alive. To his relief, Mob answered the knock. Reigen had been too tired to scold him. By the time he went for his own bath, there was not a trace of warmth left—but as the water grew cooler, and his fingers wrinkled, Reigen didn’t think he cared so much.

The nights had been uneventful, for the most part. Mob stirred in his sleep, and Reigen was kept awake again by voices outside. They weren’t as bad as the previous week, but they unnerved him, still. He couldn’t help but wonder why Mob had been beaten so badly—and who had done it to him.

Mob had said nothing.

Reigen knew it was none of his business. He would have to take him home either tonight or in the morning, he thought as he stirred the soup. Perhaps, first thing before work, he would get to wherever the boy lived and have a quick talk with his parents, and ensure the boy was in safe hands. He would move on fast after that. He would go on to work, and read what he was given, and never involve himself with anything gang-related ever again.

Gently this time, he took another sip of the miso. It was far from his mother’s pleasant, home-cooked variety—but it was edible. He had finished some semblance of seasoned vegetables and cheap fish not long ago. The pan next to the soup was still lukewarm. Reigen thought of checking the vegetables, too, but decided he didn’t want a burned finger to go with his tongue.

If anything, having a house guest had given him some motivation to cook. “All right, I’m done,” he called over his shoulder. “Mob, you want soup?”

“Yes,” Mob replied. His voice was still a little emotionless, more on the quiet side—but that was probably his natural voice, Reigen decided. He had kept the boy fed since bringing him in, and treated his injuries. He had asked if Mob was in pain, multiple times, and Mob had only shaken his head. He hadn’t wanted to look him straight in the eyes.

Reigen sighed, not out of frustration, but of simple fatigue. “All right, I’ll set the table.”

He could cook simple things, but his mother had always done better. His father had joked that he was no chef either—but those jokes had come between mouthfuls of grilled matsutake out on the hills near Shiitake. Reigen had been small then. Matsutake, grilled out in the wild, tasted the best of any food he had eaten. It was something special, warmth and spice and his father’s scent mingling with herbs in the air; when Reigen was wrapped up in a jacket with huge sides and huger sleeves, his father’s broad hand ruffling his hair. He could remember him laughing, laughing so much that the smoke from their campfire bounced with his breaths.

There was no matsutake in Seasoning—and if he found it one day, then he would not have the money for it.

Carefully, Reigen poured a ladleful of soup into one bowl, then the other. He had only two bowls in the house, and one would soon be disused again. Mob would be going home to his parents. He would be alone again—but it would be for the best.

Mob was quiet, but a child nonetheless, he reminded himself. He was not Mob’s family. He had no
family in Seasoning, and no friends either, save for the colleagues he talked to sometimes; but even they brought with them memories of his hours at work, his desk and the walls, and the typewriter keys that seemed to clank more and more like the chains of a slave.

Listening to rants about politics and the esper crisis made him no happier in his breaks, either.

He carried the bowls over to the small table, and put both down, trying not to spill. A drop splashed onto the table. He wiped it with his finger. Mob didn’t seem to notice. “Soup’s on the table.”

“Yes. Thank you, Reigen-san.”

The boy eased himself off the couch, and came to his knees, where Reigen had left him a cushion. Reigen had never told him to sit at one side or the other—but the side by the couch was the one Mob seemed to prefer. He had never sat at the other. Reigen himself had never cared for positions—before bringing in Mob, he had sat at one side some days, and on other days, at the other. On most days, he didn’t sit anywhere.

It felt strange to have someone else across the table. As Reigen looked down, and then up from the soup, he almost expected to find himself in his old village, with his mother facing him, her eyes surrounded by new wrinkles with each week that passed. Seeing the face of a boy—his wounds healing up, the colour starting to come back to his face—was something he had yet to get used to.

No, Reigen reminded himself. He would take the boy home. There was nothing to get used to.

“There we go. Now, we can—“

“Um, Reigen-san?”

Reigen looked up. Mob was staring right back. “What is it?”

“Chopsticks.”

Feeling sheepish, Reigen looked back down. Mob was right. He had completely forgotten them—and the fish, and the vegetables, still turning cool by the stove. He hadn’t cooked any rice, either.

“Ah, seems like I’m just… that hungry today, huh? I’ll get them. You stay.”

Mob nodded. Reigen stood and went back to his kitchen space. Mob was right: he had left everything. He was tired, too tired, he thought, eyeing the curtains covering up his window. The light was fading outside. Soon, it would be dark, and the apartment would turn cold, like it always did. Mob hadn’t complained of the cold, but Reigen had given him his warm blanket anyway. He could sleep with a lighter one; he was an adult, he had insisted, and Mob was a guest, or something like one.

An injured boy—most likely from one of the schoolboy gangs he had heard of—was certainly not his idea of a guest, but nothing else seemed to fit.

Reigen picked up the plates he had prepared, and two pairs of chopsticks in one awkward fist. One of the plates balanced between his fingers. He thought of waiters in the glitzy restaurants he passed by as he left the office, speaking Western tongues to impress well-dressed guests, and almost laughed at the image. He was nothing like them.

The only French word he knew was the tactical ‘merde’.

Mob was looking up expectantly: the way he always did at the sight or smell of anything edible.
Reigen couldn’t help but wonder how much the boy had been eating before he had found him. Unlike the first time with the anpan, Mob had turned into a rather civilised eater. He was well-acquainted with chopsticks and table manners, so much that Reigen himself felt awkward when so much as a rice grain landed on the table.

The boy seemed to stop and stare sometimes, too, as if spacing out. As soon as Reigen turned to ask him if he was all right, he would shake his head and look down. He couldn’t always keep eye contact, but did so most of the time. He was quiet, but far from dead; far from what the state of him back in the alley had made him think, jumping to conclusions.

Mob could talk, too—in quite a well-taught way, for someone with no parents and ragged clothes that Reigen had realised were a product of life on the rough streets.

“You feeling any better?” He asked, halfway through his soup. He waited for Mob to finish his mouthful.

“Yeah.”

“That’s good. Got to get you back to where you belong soon.”

Mob stopped. The hand holding his chopsticks seemed to hang in the air, ever-so-slightly shaking. “I can’t keep you in here,” Reigen continued. “I just wanted to make sure you were safe. I know it’s rough out there, so I’ll get you back to where you can be safe.”

“Safe? With—with the police?” The way Mob’s voice shook made Reigen think of a small earthquake, casting ripples on crystal-clear water.

“If you need to. Though, if you’re with the gangs, that might not be the best option. Listen, you’ve got to promise not to get involved in those again.”

“Gangs?”

“You got beaten up by someone, didn’t you? Better to stay out of trouble, kid. You could have died. You know, gangs are bad news. Do your parents know you were out there? They’re probably worried sick, and I’ve kept you here for three days…”

Reigen sighed, and took a couple of vegetables. They didn’t taste as bad as he had thought they would turn out. Mob had taken some before, but now, his hands were clinging to his bowl.

Reigen wondered if he was cold—until he realised.

He had forgotten what Mob had said; how hesitant he had been. In a flurry, one hand flew to his mouth. The chopsticks wobbled around in the other hand. “Oh, shit. Sorry, that was my screw-up. I’m sorry…”

“It’s all right.” Mob’s tone came out surprisingly blunt. It startled Reigen a little. Looking back at the boy, he sighed. Something about him looked stony: peaceful yet cold, calm yet concealed.

Mob scared him a little. A fourteen year old, Reigen thought, cringing within. I’m scared of a kid, what the hell… On any other occasion, he would have smiled—but smiling didn’t feel right at that moment, not with the theme of dead-and-gone family in the air.

“No, I knew, and—oh, fuck,” Reigen shook his head, trying to sort out his thoughts. His hands flailed around, and almost knocked over his soup bowl. There was little left in it, but the worrying wobble had Reigen on edge. He almost slammed it down in an attempt to keep its contents from
spilling. “I mean… is anyone looking after you? Are you in a home, or have you got relatives?”

Mob stared back blankly. He didn’t look up for long—he never did, as if he was always too tired to lift up his head. His hands left the warmth of his own bowl, and came down into his lap. When he spoke, his voice came out as a murmur. “There’s my grandmother.”

“Where is she?”

“It’s a really small village,” Mob said.

“Where?”

“Negi.”

Reigen froze. The name was familiar.

It crashed into his mind like a tidal wave, forcing pieces of Mob-related debris together in his head as suddenly as an oncoming storm. Negi. He remembered Shinra’s voice with his hands on his necklace, and the strange fear in Serizawa’s eyes, and something about Suzuki, the Interior Minister, making a speech. He remembered the number forty—some kind of terrible figure—and then, delayed by a moment so painful it stabbed, he recalled what the number had meant.

Mob’s awkwardness at the mention of parents—and the state of him, hungry and desperate, in clothes that had seen far better days—made sense, in all of the ways Reigen wished they didn’t.

“Oh fucking hell…”

He didn’t want it to be true. Yet, it was the only thing that made sense.

“Reigen-san?” Mob’s voice lifted for a moment. Reigen turned back to face him, fighting the instincts pulling at his face. He had to be strong. Mob was strong. Mob was incredibly strong.

How Mob had come so far was beyond him.

“How did you get all the way over here?” Reigen asked, trying to keep his voice steady. The struggle was uphill.

“I… I ran,” Mob said.

_Two hours away, Shinra said it, two hours, is that by car or by train or did the kid run here, fuck, how, why, what on earth is he doing here —_

“This far?”

“I don’t know how far it is.”

Reigen breathed in, gathering what little strength he had left in his lungs. His arms were no stronger. It took effort to pretend that they were still; that they were not shaking. “I’m getting you to your grandmother.”

Mob looked uncertain. Reigen had expected him to smile, or to look shocked, even—but the boy was doing neither. He was still, as if the announcement had confounded him into freezing, and yet, he didn’t look scared at all.

“Reigen-san—“
“It’s all right,” Reigen continued. “You don’t have to worry. Do you remember the nearest town to her? Or the nearest train station?”

“…I think.”

“You think?”

“I don’t remember. I… I haven’t seen her for some time.”

Mob hesitated. A part of him was unreadable—unsettling, as much as Reigen wanted to know what was going through his mind.

He was hiding something. That much was clear. What it was, Reigen could not begin to guess. He could only think of his own family: of his mother left alone in Enoki, of his father’s unmarked and insignificant grave in the middle of nowhere, of random pieces of dead grandparents’ names. He could remember being as small as Mob, too—or maybe older, looking over the boy’s small, huddled frame—and being with his father, being free to run and cross fences and jump over gates.

He had never asked Mob for his age—but it didn’t matter, not really. There was no time for it to matter.

“Mob, listen,” he said, taking a breath in. He had to be the confident one; he always had been. “I’m going to pay for your ticket. Tomorrow, after work, I’m taking you to the station. I’ll take the train with you to Negi. You understand?”

In the sudden silence, Reigen thought he saw a glisten in Mob’s eyes—but they were already looking down at his hands before he could be sure. “You—you would—“

“Of course I will. You deserved none of that,” he continued. His gaze drifted back down to Mob’s knees, healing up fast, now splotched with iodine and no more fresh blood. “I’m getting you home, somewhere safe. Don’t worry about the money. You’re going home.”

“To my grandmother?”

“…To her. To anyone. Anywhere safe.”

Reigen leaned in a little. His hand pressed against Mob’s shoulder, pushing to reassure. It felt like the right thing to do. Mob had come far. He would be safest with family. He had to go back. Negi would be his home. Mob needed his family—and Reigen had to do the right thing.

The thought of bringing back a lost child to where he belonged, of doing something great, filled him up with more life than the past two weeks he had spent typing, shackled up in a spiritless office.

The warmth of the boy—breathing, alive, far from the wreck he had been three days prior—kept Reigen’s hand there. Mob, across the small table, didn’t pry it off.

Reigen broke the silence, starting to wonder if Mob was uncomfortable. “Hey, are you all right?”

Mob nodded back, painfully subtle. “Yes.”

“Is that all OK with you?”

“…Yes.”

“Then that’s what we’ll do. You’ve just got to stay here tomorrow while I go to work. I’ll make something you can eat, and when I get back, we’ll get that train.”
“When you—“

“I have work,” Reigen sighed. “Got to make sure they haven’t fired me after Friday…”

‘I’m sorry,” Mob murmured. His hands reached out for the soup again, and it was only then that Reigen remembered that they were in the midst of their meal.

“It’s all right, kid. Not your fault. Don’t think about that,” he said. His hand, at last, let go, and he watched Mob sit back up a little straighter. He had soup to finish too. “Think about your grandma, all right?”

Mob looked a little uneasy, but gave a small nod, all the same. “All right.”

“That’s all good.”

It probably wasn’t good for Reigen—namely his job, and his finances, too—but he didn’t want to complain to the kid.

Mob quietened as he went back to his dinner. Both finished eating in silence. Mob thanked him as soon as he was finished, but stayed at the table, as he had done for the past few meals, waiting for Reigen to pick up the bowls, as if waiting for Reigen’s approval to move away from the place.

Mob was definitely strange, Reigen concluded that evening.

Mob was the kind of child who barely removed his clothing to sleep, pulling his sweater off but leaving his shirt. He had taken the blood-covered socks off, at least, and let Reigen throw them out, not so much for the blood and filth as for the holes. Reigen had given him a pair of his own in replacement. They were grey, a little worn, but as clean as he had been able to get them: dull in comparison to the old, striped ones Mob had been wearing, looser on the legs, yet much more wearable than what had been ruined.

Mob had thanked him for those, too. Reigen didn’t care if he didn’t return them.

That night, Mob slept on the couch again, under Reigen’s only spare blanket, making small, barely-there sounds in his sleep. Reigen spent the night tossing and turning and sighing, deep in an ocean of thoughts.

He and Mob had a long way to go.

Morning came. Breakfast was brief, the alarm clock having been set just a little earlier for Reigen to make something for two people to eat, and for him to tell Mob that nothing was of value in the apartment, if his gang had taught him to steal. Locking him out felt somehow cruel. Inside was safer. Mob was frightfully quiet, and Reigen kept most of his money on him, and the rest under lock and key in a small box under his bed.

Reigen took what he had with him to work, concealed in his jacket, just in case. If Mob was to try and rob his apartment, he would find nothing there that day.

He promised to return—otherwise, it would be rude—and reminded him of the train.

Reigen himself needed reminding. Mob would leave soon. It was only right for him to help him leave, too. His gaze drifted to shop windows as he walked, wondering if Mob needed new clothes, too, to look presentable for his grandmother.

No, he thought. He was doing enough. Mob was a stranger.
His head was full of things that morning: all jumbled-up jigsaw pieces, that when put together, all centered on Mob. He was growing accustomed to city noise, but that morning was filled with more thoughts than necessary. The sounds of excuse me’s reverberating around him meant nothing. A part of him wanted to run back, to grab Mob and take the boy’s hand and head to the station; to find the next train to Negi immediately and give the boy all of his money for tickets, and then march off to work without a word. Another part told him to wait. A third voice said to stick to the plan and escort him to the end.

It felt cruel to leave him. How Mob had come so far, and how he had ended up broken and battered, Reigen was still struggling to imagine.

maybe I will get him some shoes, he thought for a moment, before realising how ridiculous it sounded. Why he had picked him up in the first place was an enigma. Reigen had never wanted to be cold, but out of the goodness of my heart seemed a little too kind, even for him.

Seasoning had done a number on him.

Maybe, he thought, with a scratch of his head, it was he that needed the train ticket more than Mob did—a train ticket up north, further than Negi, right into the heart of Enoki and past the little town of Shiitake. His mother was waiting.

Work, too, was waiting, he reminded himself. There was only one way ahead.

The voice of a newspaper boy—one about Mob’s age, judging by his looks—rang out through the street. The crowds had yet to build up. He had time, Reigen thought, and most likely change. One hand reached into his pocket to check and took out a few shining coins.

He paid the boy—he was a small, funny-looking one, puppy-faced—and skimmed over the headlines as he walked. The Seasoning Report, Monday morning edition, was no different from any other copy he had picked up before. He already knew it was lacking his name.

There was a little time for him to catch up on what he had missed for three days.

The first headline was nothing out of the ordinary. It was something painfully typical: something about dissent in the Diet over yet more esper-related matters. He made out the Prime Minister’s name, and Suzuki’s, and a few other scattered cabinet members, in pieces and flashes before eyes that only seemed to want to sleep in that instant:

…proposals to introduce control measures on individuals with extrasensory perception were once again rejected last week. Interior Minister Suzuki Touichirou has refused to comment on the issue after the fifth attempt at negotiations in the Diet ended in failure...

Reigen sighed. Shinra had been right at the start, and on all of the other occasions he had complained to him on his smoke break. Claw was out there, shooting and stabbing and planting bombs in stores and in the corners of streets, and day by day, no news of reform from above ever came. The bastards are bickering in their fancy building, while we wait to get pushed into the line of fire, Shinra had said the last time. He had started cursing Suzuki, too. The man could speak, he was right, but Shinra had little patience, and little by little, Reigen had picked up on more and more of the frustration that clung to his words.

Shinra had added a bracelet to his arsenal, and offered a second to Reigen. He had rejected it. Maybe, he thought as he read while trying not to bump into other commuters, he should have taken the bracelet—not for anti-esper protection, but simply to smash as an outlet for all the frustration.
He wasn’t in the mood to read about Suzuki and rejected proposals.

The paper was in no mood to please him, either, it seemed. Below, on the front page still, was yet another article: something more local, Reigen realised, spotting the words Seasoning and the name of one of its districts.

He glanced up at one of the buildings, where a large, grey clock was staring down from above. The office was close. He could carry on walking and reading, even if it made him that little bit slow. Everybody was tired, and nobody cared much for small flaws, including slow walking. It was the one thing he didn’t mind about mornings. Reigen let out a yawn as he read, one hand rubbing an eye. He had worried a little too much about the kid overnight.

Reigen tried not to think as he returned to the headline.

**ESPER ARSON SUSPECT NAMED**

_The sole survivor of an attack which left three dead in Nutmeg district over a week ago has given his testimony. The man, who cannot be named, is now in recovery..._

Reigen sighed. He was tired of espers, tired of Seasoning, tired of violence and noise and all of the rest of it. His hands scrunched the edges of the paper, but his eyes, as tired as they were, did not tear away.

_...two bodies, now identified as those of its residents, Kageyama Kenichi (45) and Chihiaru (40), were found in the house. A third was found outside with suspected stab wounds to the chest..._

He wasn’t interested, not one bit—but he was a journalist, after all. To not know the news was absurd, or outright ridiculous.

_...police are searching for a missing fourth resident of the house..._

Stupid, he thought: write about something other than espers.

The arson attack had been more than a week ago. He had heard, like any other Seasoning resident, and heard it again in his breaks, when Shinra had discussed it with Serizawa, and he had been roped into the conversation. He had heard rumours of esper involvement: first the fire, and then a violent attack at the scene—and of course, Shinra had been the one to bring in that speculation, his hand on his beads once again.

Still—now, as he read, this was different, and no rumour. It was far more official, marked with the words _police_ and _investigation_ and _criminal_, and other words that he recognised too well after months of news involving nothing but espers.

_...An arrest warrant has been put out for the suspect: Kageyama Shigeo (14), resident of the aforementioned address. Kageyama has been stated by the witness to be an individual bearing extrasensory perception, and should be approached with caution. The suspect is believed to be of the white extrasensory classification, possessing psychokinetic abilities..._

White classification, Reigen re-read. Possessing physical and combat-based psychic abilities, or so he had read months ago, when the government had declassified what was known about esper abilities. He shivered. There was a murderer out there, someone who could set houses on fire and stab and shoot without lifting their hand.

The name **Kageyama Shigeo** didn’t sound familiar—but the sight of the number _fourteen_ almost brought him to his knees. Kageyama Shigeo was young, not fully grown and yet already dangerous.
He was fourteen, and a murderer.

Those we have come to call ‘espers’ appear to lack the compassion found amongst the rest of humanity… He could remember Shoudou’s article, word for word. What he couldn’t do was look straight. He was half-skimming, half diving in deep, getting stuck on random kanji and fixating on that dreaded fourteen.

In the midst of the wall of text, imprisoned between columns, was a photograph. Reigen brought the newspaper closer to his face, trying to hide the sweat starting to bead on his brow.

The newspaper shook—it wasn’t his hands, not at all, he was fine—as Reigen looked at the image. Staring back was a grainy, small thing, most likely something from a class photo. For a moment, it made Reigen think of his own childhood, of boys standing in neat lines in matching uniforms. The photograph was cropped, leaving a close-up on one boy.

The boy looked no different from any other fourteen-year-old. He was a face in the crowd, singled out. There wasn’t much to him; only simple black hair in a bowl cut, and a matching black uniform. Staring out from the monochrome were the boy’s empty, wide eyes.

It didn’t make sense—but neither did Mob’s supposed story, the longer Reigen thought about it, about being from Negi and coming to Seasoning and going back to Negi again.

Reigen stood still in the street, eyes glued to the plain-looking boy in the photograph.

In the image, Kageyama Shigeo was avoiding the camera, in exactly the same way that Mob had tried not to meet Reigen’s gaze for too long.

Chapter End Notes

No special notes for this chapter.
Ritsu stood in absolute darkness.

The floor was solid beneath him, as was the slightly-too-tight feeling of the blindfold around his face. It pressed down onto his eyelids, and made his head a little uncomfortable, the ability to breathe through his nose cut off by fabric slipping under his nostrils. He could only breathe through his mouth, and tasted stuffy, unpleasant air as he did.

He could feel it: dense, empty but not open, the air around him almost resisting as his hands moved around, trying to feel.

“Don’t,” a voice called out. Ritsu couldn’t tell where it had come from exactly. “Don’t try to grope your way around.”

He didn’t want to put his hands down. He wanted to map the room out, at least through touch, if he couldn’t see. He thought of crouching, of putting his palms down onto the floor and tracing the curves of wood in the floorboards. He was blind, totally blind, and could smell nothing, either. None of his other senses made much difference.

“You might want to, but don’t. You’ve got to try other ways.”

Ritsu gritted his teeth. He wasn’t angry, not quite, but the darkness unsettled him. Only the voice—a voice that he recognised, to his relief—was there with him.

Muraki, a tall, bald esper, one of the adults, had taken him to the basement of Akazukihara after his morning tutoring session, and told him of an exercise, something to test his abilities. Ritsu hadn’t expected to be blindfolded, and then to be nudged in the direction of an open door, with the simple instruction to go in, and listen to what you need to do.

As soon as the door had slammed, Ritsu had tried to reach out.

“Tsuchiya-san?” He couldn’t tell where she was, but the voice had to have come from inside the room, somewhere, and bounced off the walls.

“Don’t try to call for me. I’ll move if you do. Find me, but find me another way.”

Ritsu didn’t understand. “How?”

There was no answer. If Tsuchiya really had moved, then she had been totally silent. She was probably capable of it, too, Ritsu thought. He had had his first lesson with her yesterday; where she had asked him to display his aura and try out whatever his inner feelings desired.

(His inner feelings had desired to bend the spoon Rei had been using to eat pudding—and then, to smash a flowerpot next to Hoshino, who had doubled over in laughter.)

What being blindfolded had to do with psychic destruction, Ritsu wasn’t quite sure. If he couldn’t see, and touching wasn’t allowed, then he was two senses down. He could hear, but his hearing had never been anything special, and Tsuchiya was both fast and quiet when she wanted to be.
Other senses, he thought, what others...

He wasn’t sure if his aura counted.

He could feel it, coiled up, waiting for him to give the command. He didn’t need eyes to see its colours. Within his mind’s eye, if he focused, he would find it within reach, all of it, blue and green and hints of bright violet coiled up in indigo. It felt colder than the stuffy room did: refreshing, like winter wind and summer breezes.

That had to be the answer, Ritsu realised, as he breathed in and out, and let the energy spread from his core. Water flooded his veins.

Water was what it felt like, chilling and full of life: and then, he furrowed his brows under the blindfold and felt the water solidify. Ice burst, cutting through skin—but there was no blood. He could feel nothing permeating his shirt. Glass shards danced and pricked gently, as if tickling, between the tiny hairs on his arms.

It didn’t hurt. If anything, his chest felt lighter, his muscles more at ease. He could feel it pressing more on one side; on his right, as if the cold was more prominent there, yet not freezing. Like a twig in the wind, he could feel something deep within trembling, but the feeling stayed in one place, a gentle wash of coldness, pricking his arm and shoulder and then, the right side of his chest.

Right?

Was that what Tsuchiya wanted from him? He wasn’t sure. He wasn’t sure if he understood his aura’s message, either, but it was so much stronger on one side than the other that it felt like a pull. If anything, it was telling him to move right.

Ritsu obeyed. With his hands out by instinct, he turned and stepped forward.

The feeling continued. The little glass shards on his skin seemed more clear-cut now, more definite than the small, almost random pricks he had felt. He carried on, letting instinct and feeling guide him, the coldness and slight sharpness telling him that maybe, he was going a little too far to the right, and emerging to counter it in the left side of his body.

That’s it, he thought, as the pricking in both sides subsided. Straight forward now.

He could only keep going. He was blind, and his aura was no substitute for eyes, but it was all that he had. He wasn’t even sure what he was following exactly, and only ascertained it as he drew closer. There was a second aura in the room, and it was much warmer than his. He could sense its colours even through his blind eyes.

Orange waves changed shape with each heartbeat.

Tsuchiya.

He had sensed her aura briefly, when she had first started his lessons. Learn it, she’d said—and he had tried to remember. It was definitely hotter than his, and maybe a little uncomfortable, sharp in a way that felt more like a javelin than the strange comfort of cool ice and glass.

It sounded strange, but he couldn’t think of any other description.

He had never wanted pain. His aura brought him no pain, either, save for the headaches, but those had since stopped. He wasn’t sure if there were words for some of the things he had started feeling—but Tsuchiya was close, and that was definite. His aura was colder than ever, the cold feeling more
definite, more beckoning, yet not succumbing to the warmth of the other aura close by.

“Whoa, steady. You got me there, kid.”

Ritsu pulled his hands back. He hadn’t touched anything, but the other aura was close: so close that his hands felt like they could grab hold of it without even reaching.

“That’s enough. You did well. That’s all we wanted. Take the blindfold off, if you want, but the lights are still off in this place. I’ll guide you out.”

He reached for it mid-sentence, and pushed it up, then tugged it off his head. The feeling of air coming back to his nose felt like such relief; like being washed over with cold water, water that he welcomed. He let his aura recede, the glow not even lighting up the floor even before it started to dim. It was strange. His aura had no reflection, and neither had any other aura he’d seen. They couldn’t even illuminate anything.

A part of him still thought he was hallucinating whenever he saw one.

Tsuchiya’s aura was nowhere to be seen. Ritsu tried to untie the knot in the scarf that had been his blindfold, but it was too tight, and his hands weren’t skilled enough. He couldn’t see anything in the dark, either.

A sudden hand came down to his shoulder, and Ritsu almost jumped up in surprise. His aura gave a twinge, next to Tsuchiya, still resonating with the lingering psychic energy in the room.

“Auras don’t just disappear,” she said, her voice coming from one side of him. “You can feel all of us espers if we’re close. It’s only a spark when you’ve not got your aura displayed, but it’s always there. Now come on. Follow me.”

Ritsu felt the brush of air against his clothes. That strange feeling tugged again, and he followed it.

She was right, he realised, as he walked on. There was no light at all in the room, but there was a definite feeling, something like the small guiding light of a firefly in the blackness surrounding him. He could feel it, a little less than he had felt with his aura displayed, but the pull was there, like some kind of magnetic force.

Tsuchiya’s aura—its feeling, warm and steady—wasn’t something he could forget.

There was a sudden click in front of him, and then came a sliver of light, carpeting down onto the floor. The door had been opened. Ritsu had completely forgotten that there was a door in the room, most likely the same one had had come through at the start. In the line of bright light, he could see Tsuchiya, for definite this time: the shape of her shoulders, and the jet-black, straight bob of her hair.

He followed her into the light, and saw that he was back in the same corridor where he had started. The house beyond the dark room was still lit by daylight. It took a moment for his eyes to adjust, and he rubbed them, the awkward blindfold still in one hand, before Tsuchiya held out a hand.

Understanding, he gave it back.

“Well, that was well done. I hope that wasn’t too sudden.”

Ritsu hadn’t been told anything before he had come into the room, or even before Muraki had blindfolded his eyes, and his nose. The latter, he realised, was most likely by accident.

“I… I didn’t know what to expect,” he confessed.
“You did well. There’s nothing to worry about. Now, do you want lunch?”

Ritsu wondered how much time had passed since breakfast. He looked around, but found no clocks in the corridor. His stomach did feel rather empty.

“Yes,” he said, nodding politely.

He followed Tsuchiya through the corridor and out of the kitchen, and watched her ask the cook for something—he didn’t hear what exactly. He was half in a daydream, half in reality, still trying to track and pinpoint the firefly light of her aura. For a moment, he closed his eyes, and focused, trying to sense if there were any more.

There were others; many more.

He could feel his aura resounding inside of him. Small pulses, like drops of water falling into a puddle, resonated with each of the smaller signatures. There was Hoshino’s, out in the garden somewhere, light and fast-moving. Asahi’s was heavier. Rei, next to them, seemed to be totally still.

He opened his eyes and found himself moving towards the door to the garden. He peered out. Rei was sat down on the bench, chopsticks in hand and bento box on her lap. The others looked to have finished, their boxes empty and left behind on the bench. Hoshino was off to the other side of the yard, and Ritsu could only hope it was far from Mitsuura’s beloved chickens.

Hoshino’s aura-signature trailed behind, not quite visible, but the feeling of it was there, like a wisp on the wind. He could feel it move with the air.

“You want to go out? It’s a nice day for that.”

Ritsu turned around. In Tsuchiya’s hands were a pair of bento boxes, wrapped in matching blue-and-white cloth.

His stomach groaned, betraying his hunger. Tsuchiya let out a small laugh. “Come on, then.”

Ritsu put on his shoes—the second pair he had been given at Akazukihara—and went outside. There were few clouds in the sky, and Ritsu felt the pleasant coolness of a breeze through his shirt. He unbuttoned his sleeves and rolled back as much as he could.

Shigeo had never taken to any cold weather. His brother slept under the thickest blanket in the house, and seemed to smile less in the winter. Spring was his season, the time of his birthday and pink flowers and blue sky and lavender dusk-time; all of the colours Shigeo liked. Ritsu had never understood why those colours were so important to him. He couldn’t help but wonder if his brother was out there, under the same sky. He hoped he wasn’t cold.

Ritsu thought of sitting down on one of the benches, but waited for Tsuchiya to gesture to it instead. It felt more polite. He sat down only after she did, unwrapped the cloth around his bento once hers had been unfolded, and waited for her to pass him some chopsticks.

Their *itadakimasu* was joint.

Ritsu’s mind drifted to his mother’s rice as he ate. Akazukihara’s cook was a talented woman, he thought, torn between going at it in mouthfuls and slowing down to look more proper—but his mother’s cooking was something else altogether. The seasoning wasn’t the same. Maybe, Akazukihara’s food tasted better, but home had a taste, and an atmosphere, of its own.

The fresh air outside and the rustle of trees weren’t bad. He enjoyed the voices of other children
around him, and his tutors were kind. He had been given clothing and shoes and fed well. The nurse had given him medicine for his headaches. Akazukihara felt like a small piece of heaven, but heaven didn’t feel right on earth.

His brother was out there. Shigeo was out there, and wasn’t with him.

The thought made the rice taste that little bit off, but Ritsu chewed all the same. Tsuchiya seemed to be enjoying her lunch, and he didn’t feel like dampening the mood.

He put his chopsticks down, deep in thought. Tsuchiya noticed, turning to face him. Her own chopsticks, holding nothing now, remained in her hand. Ritsu picked his own pair up again, trying to not look ungrateful, but Tsuchiya paid his hands no heed.

“As I said earlier, well done on the task,” she said, smiling. It looked genuine, or so Ritsu hoped. “That was important for us, and for you. There’s some questions I need to ask, if that’s all right.”

Ritsu looked up. “Yes.”

“How did you find me in that room?”

He hesitated to answer. Was she tricking him? Had he even found her the right way? “I… I guess I felt your aura.”

To his surprise, Tsuchiya nodded. “That’s exactly what I wanted you to do. Now, what exactly were you sensing? Was it a sound, or a sensation?”

**Something cold,** Ritsu thought: broken glass, ice, but it was gentle. The cold felt pleasant, and it didn’t hurt him or mark him. Was it wrong? It didn’t make much sense.

“It… I don’t know how to describe it,” Ritsu lied, only slightly “But… when I use my powers, it’s like… my arms feel cold.”

“That’s exactly it. What else? How else does it feel?”

**Tell me,** her eyes seemed to say. Ritsu swallowed. Maybe it was worth a chance. Whatever Tsuchiya felt when she used her powers had to be different: her aura had been hot and striking and burning, more like what he had imagined using powers of his own would feel like.

His brother had told him his powers felt warm. Ritsu’s had been warm too, at the start. He remembered it, when he had sat up on his bed and first seen the blue-green glow flickering on his hands, its pattern barely just visible in its beginning. Something had changed, he was sure. Maybe, the heat of it should have developed, like its pattern and colours, but something had gone wrong and made it go cold.

“Like… like glass. Like something sharp and cold,” he confessed, swallowing. “It… it doesn’t feel bad, though. It’s like something’s pressing into me, and… and…”

He was waiting for it: waiting for Tsuchiya to grab him and look at him as if he was mad, or delirious, or wanting to die. She didn’t. Her expression didn’t change at all, still curious, still interested in whatever he had to say, even if Ritsu wasn’t sure if it was the right thing for him to be saying.

“That’s interesting,” she said, simply. “Carry on. This is all important.”

Ritsu thought for a moment, trying to get his words in order. Even if she seemed calm, he couldn’t
risk Tsuchiya—or Mitsuura, or anyone else—getting the wrong ideas.

“When I sensed you, it was like… like it got sharper. Like it was stronger on one side, but it wasn’t painful. I mean, it’s like it’s cold and sharp but it’s not bad, not… not really,“ he fretted. “I’m not crazy, am I?”

He expected, any moment, for her to nod and say yes. The opposite happened; Tsuchiya shook her head. “It’s all right. You’re not crazy at all. That’s just how it feels.”

Ritsu froze. He could feel his heart pounding, surprised at her lack of surprise. “…Really?”

“There’s no right or wrong answer. All auras feel different, and that’s how yours feels. This wasn’t a test, not like that. You don’t have to worry.”

“Oh.”

It was odd. His tutoring earlier on had been school-level math, nothing difficult. Yet, when Muraki had guided him to the room, his heart had been leaping, uncertain of what he needed to do to succeed. He wasn’t afraid of the dark, and hadn’t been since he was small, but the thought of failure was just unacceptable.

His brother sometimes came home with drooping shoulders, clutching a paper marked red. Ritsu had offered him help—but Shigeo declined, each time, and without much of a look on his face, retreated to their room, in a silence that made Ritsu want to curl up in his own futon and stare at the ceiling for hours.

“It’s certainly interesting. And how did my aura feel to you?”

“Warm,” Ritsu said, a little less hesitant now, but still somewhat uncertain. “It’s hotter than mine. And it’s not sharp. It’s… curving, sort of, or maybe sharp too. But it’s not soft. It’s more… solid. Like, it… it’s more pointed.”

It wasn’t the best expression, but it was the only thing he could think of.

“And which felt better to you?”

“Better?”

“More comfortable,” she clarified. “Don’t worry, say what you really feel. There’s nothing strange about it.”

The answer was obvious. Ritsu couldn’t deny that warmth was a pleasant feeling: but it was alien, too. Even if it wasn’t normal, he had felt at one with the cold.

“…Mine. Even if it’s cold and sharp and… not strong.”

It had felt more flexible than Tsuchiya’s aura. Hers had reminded him of waves that solidified and stood strong and resisted, while his had moved around more. It had felt like a cape on the wind, or the wind itself, light and free, cool as the breeze blowing outside.

“That’s completely normal. It doesn’t matter what your aura feels like, or anyone else’s is like. What matters is that it’s your aura, just yours. It’ll always feel the most comfortable to you.”

Ritsu blinked. “Really?”

“Really. And if you happen to navigate through sensations, then that’s just one perception type. Not
all espers navigate through touch, but a lot of us do.”

“Navigate through touch?”

“It’s your sixth sense at work. It just happens to be connected to your perception of touch,” Tsuchiya continued. Ritsu wanted to keep listening, suddenly fascinated. “You’re a haptic type, like me. Muraki-san’s a visual type. There are auditory types, too, but those are a little less common.”

Ritsu had heard snippets of conversation about types and auras: something Mitsuura had been mumbling about, scribbling things in a notebook. It hadn’t made much sense to him back then, and it felt a little embarrassing. Mitsuura was no esper himself, and yet seemed to know so much. Sometimes, he felt a little too curious. One evening, he had heard Mitsuura proposing some kind of theory, and tried to listen through a closed door, but found himself falling asleep in the corridor, only to be awakened by a confused Muraki, who had guided him back to his room.

He was wide awake now, outside. It felt much closer to freedom—even if, at the pit of his stomach, he knew that he wasn’t free in Akazukihara. He couldn’t be free without his brother. Still, the thought that he, too, was an esper of some kind, and that there was so much he had yet to know, kept him fixed in one place. He wanted to keep listening, and for Tsuchiya to tell him as much as she could.

“Auditory. Is that hearing?”

Tsuchiya pondered for a moment. “Yes, or something like that. You might want to ask the Shiratori brothers some time. They’re auditory. They might do a better job of describing it than I can.”

Ritsu made a mental note to do so.

“Visual types see, and auditory types hear. That’s why they have to be careful with telepathy. It can disrupt their perception if they’re not careful.”

“Really?”

“You don’t have to worry about that, though. You’re haptic. If anything, it’s binding you should be cautious of. That won’t feel good at all.”

“So I’m… haptic,” Ritsu repeated, trying to get used to the term.

“Yes. Haptic, white-classification.”

He remembered something. “I… I heard Mitsuura-san say something like that. About… black and white. What does that mean?”

“Well, from what you’ve displayed, and from what we know, you seem to be a standard psychokinetic.”

The thought was still strange. A week ago, Ritsu had been a normal human being. Two weeks before, he had been looking forward to his brother’s birthday—and yet, here he was, in the middle of nowhere, being told that he was psychokinetic. Standard psychokinetic sounded like a paradox, and if anything, Ritsu preferred things that made sense.

“Psychokinesis is mostly used for physical damage and offense. That makes you white-classification. If your powers were more… mental, or non-offensive, we’d say you were black-classification. Like the twins, or Rei-chan.”
Rei, the girl he had seen trying to comfort the chickens, was some kind of clairvoyant. He had asked her what she was capable of predicting at breakfast. *Not much,* she had said: *only cards.*

“So there’s black and white, but… what about grey?”

“*Grey?”*

“Mitsuura-san said there were grey types, too.”

“Ah…” She paused, looking up, as if searching for a definition. “Well, grey-classification is rare. We only use that for rare abilities that you can’t classify, and for all conjurers.”

“What’s a conjurer?”

“A type of esper that works with objects. They can bind objects to their will, give them new properties, and control them as they desire.”

“Any objects?”

“It depends on the conjurer.”

The idea of using magical—no, Ritsu reminded himself, not magical, but psychic objects—sounded bizarre. It didn’t feel right at all. He had been told that psychokinesis meant making objects move. Conjuration had to be different somehow. *Control,* Ritsu thought, could mean so many things, changing, manipulating, rebuilding—

*Controlling.*

Something seemed to click in his mind.

“Is… is that what Mukai is?”

The way Tsuchiya looked at him made him think he had alarmed her somehow. He bit his lip, but continued. “I… I mean, with those mannequins. Did she conjure those?”

Tsuchiya was silent. Her eyes felt like arrows, ready to fire, targeting Ritsu. His hands were suddenly clammy. He shuffled awkwardly on the bench, his bento almost tumbling from his lap: but Tsuchiya grabbed it, just in time, lightning-fast fighter’s reflexes kicking in before Ritsu could even make a sound.

She still didn’t say anything, even as she passed the box back. Ritsu couldn’t look away. He had said something he shouldn’t have.

Finally, she sighed, and spoke up. “How much do you know about her?”

“Not much,” Ritsu said. It was the truth. He had seen Mukai as much as he had seen the other residents of Akazukihara, but the girl seemed to spend most of her time on her own, with her mannequins as her company. She did look younger than him and the others, and it made sense if she was—but Mukai had never quite been part of the group. The mannequins seemed to be closer friends.

At the same time, Mukai was cheerful and bright, and he had heard her laugh when she had talked to Tsuchiya the day before. It seemed strange for her to be lonely.

Tsuchiya nodded, finally. “Yes. Mukai is a conjurer. Her power is linked to those mannequins.”
“Does she control them?”

“No exactly. Mukai’s conjuration is different. She can control them if she wishes, but it’s rare that she does. Mostly, they move by themselves."

Ritsu remembered the first time he had woken up in his room, when Mimi-chan—one of three mannequins, he had learned later—had looked at him, and stood all by itself. He remembered raw panic, confusion, pure fear: and then, the mannequin’s master had run into the room. Mukai’s scolding had made him think of the way small children played house, as if the mannequin had been a person.

The way its shoulders had drooped, and the tip of its head had made Ritsu think of something more human than wooden. It didn’t seem possible: but Ritsu was in a house full of espers. Standard psychokinetic was an everyday term in Akazukihara.

He didn’t want to believe it. It was probably true. “So they’re sentient?”

“Yes.”

For a second, Ritsu felt the ground beneath him disappear, before it lurched back into reality. His hands gripped the bento box as it teetered.

“I have never known of any other esper like that, and neither has Mitsuura-san,” Tsuchiya continued. “Mukai’s power is unique, and dangerous. It’s why she has to be protected. It’s why I’m here to protect her.”

She went back to her own bento, and Ritsu followed suit. The conversation was making him hungry. The thought, of Tsuchiya’s revelation, stewed over in his head. “I heard that Claw is recruiting conjurers into their ranks. The last thing I want them to do is to take an innocent child.”

Her voice came out lower, heavy with something Ritsu couldn’t quite describe.

He didn’t have anything to say back. Claw was something the adults of the house only talked about after dark. He knew it wasn’t right to sneak out of bed and listen—but his brother was out there, somewhere, and he needed all the clues he could get.

“Are they… after the rest of us, too?” He asked, trying to hide the shake in his voice.

“There’s no telling what they’re after. We only know what we’ve gained from the inside, and… even then, I know there’s things she won’t share with us.”

She —

There was only one other adult woman at Akazukihara, other than the housekeepers and staff. “Yui-san?”

There was silence again, as Tsuchiya looked around. Rei was still sat on one of the other benches, in sight, but probably just out of ear’s reach. The boys were at the other side of the yard, whispering about something while eyeing Rei from behind the chicken sheds. Himawari, padding around without a care in the world, had come to sunbathe by Rei’s side.

“Keep your wits about you, and don’t speak of this,” Tsuchiya whispered, leaning in, “but it’s best to be cautious around her.”

Ritsu couldn’t move.
He had seen Yui around Akazukihara, keeping to herself in the day, usually with some stack of papers in her arms. Sometimes, she would turn to say hello to Ritsu, but her eyes seldom looked straight at him. As if there was something with him, she would try to look past.

Maybe, Ritsu thought, stomach suddenly queasy, she had realised what he had seen.

“Her hair.”

Tsuchiya looked back, a little uncertain. “What about it?”

“I was talking to Hoshino and the others about it.” Ritsu swallowed, pushing the strange, sick feeling down. He hoped nobody could hear. Guilt was already filling him up. “I don’t know why, but sometimes I see her hair differently. Sometimes, I see these weird streaks, and they’re not always in the same place.”

“Streaks?”

“I don’t know if that’s what they are. They’re longer than the rest of her hair. Like string. But it’s hair. It’s not black like the rest of it. It’s blonde.”

The first time, he was sure he had been hallucinating. His headaches had been strong back then. Still, they had gone, and he was left seeing pale gold against black; blonde hair in the wrong places, too long and too light, so very wrong.

“Are those streaks always there? And does anyone else see them?”

“No. And they’re sometimes there, sometimes not. Sometimes they change places. I don’t understand.”

There was silence again. Ritsu heard the wind ruffle the leaves on the trees, and heard Rei shout something over at Hoshino, whose hand was pointed at her while he hid behind the shed. Asahi was laughing out loud. Himawari had leapt from the bench, and was off in another direction.

Whatever was going on felt insignificant compared to the confusion and contradictions stirring within his head.

Tsuchiya cursed softly, and hearing her, he turned back around. Her hands had balled into fists, as if punching the bench. “Tell no-one, but I’ve felt something off with her for a while.”

“Huh? With… with Yui-san?”

Tsuchiya nodded. “I haven’t seen those streaks myself, but Mukai has. She told me about them. I wasn’t sure, but now… it’s better that we keep this between us.”

“Is… is Yui-san—“

“She’s using something, for certain. And that’s why I don’t trust her. I should be feeling her aura every moment I’m in her presence, but I don’t feel anything from her. And I can feel all of Akazukihara.”

“All of it?”

Ritsu recalled the feeling of all of the auras; the tiny lights he had felt, their heat and their cold, their odd softness and hardness. He could feel all of them still, he realised.

He was feeling it, too.
“Yes. You’ll learn to feel it more clearly, and that’s important. Being white-classification doesn’t mean you can rush in to fight without a good head on your shoulders. I’ll be teaching you. I might not be exactly like you, but controlling your powers is universal.” Tsuchiya’s hand came to rest on his shoulder, sudden but reassuring, as warm as her aura.

Her smile came back to her lips. Ritsu wondered if her frustration had been forgotten. “And you know, kid, I’m a haptic type too. I’ll help you out with your sensing.”

“Thank you.”

“Maybe, one day, Yui’ll bring in your brother.”

“I want to go out there myself,” he insisted.

The hand on his shoulder turned a little more pressing; not painful, but somehow more serious.

“I don’t know about that.” She shook her head. “You’re still young in the esper sense. Claw’s out there. Yui is Yui, but sometimes you’ve got to leave things to the adults. We’ll find him. I’ll make sure someone gets on that, no matter what. I promise, all right?”

Ritsu could only hope. He wasn’t quite powerless, but Tsuchiya had a point. He could only nod, showing what gratitude he had. “Thank you.”

“All right. Now, you want to finish this off and head back for some practice?”

Her hand lifted, and Ritsu affirmed.

He went back to his bento, and tried to look more at whatever it was that Hoshino was doing to made Rei stand up and stomp over to him. He tried to watch her grab his shirt, and tried to listen to Asahi trying to pull Hoshino back, but his mind was on other things. His head was a mess. The headaches were over, but what Tsuchiya had shared had filled him with confusion: a far worse kind of pain.

It was hard to say nothing, as he finished the food, and went over to pet Himawari, who had bounded over in his direction. The cat was obedient—but nobody, nothing else was, he thought, hearing Tsuchiya mumble behind him, so softly he thought he should not have heard it at all.

“The hair… dammit, I knew…”

Chapter End Notes

No notes this time.
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

_The Magister_ was a name spoken only within certain circles of the government, not out of fear, but out of the very knowledge that a man like him even existed. He was an esper, for one, and to name specifics, a conjurer, one of the rare grey-classification types: a fine rarity, he called himself, one of a kind, like no other in all of Japan.

His name was Sakurai Yuusuke.

He was thirty-four years old, a man with proud shoulders and a stern pair of eyes, hidden behind thinly-framed glasses. Like most government espers, he, too, was marked from his time in the 99th Division with a tiny, brand-like tattoo, something small and easy to keep secret. Revealing its meaning would have him marked for death.

Sakurai had no desire to die as a traitor, or to die at all, and it was for that reason that he drove in to central Seasoning on that certain afternoon.

He had the afternoon off, and there was nothing on his agenda until evening. Monday evenings were reserved for a special commission, a regular thing, and as things stood, he would be doing it that evening, too. His job, and the client, were both special things. Both were kept hushed.

Hushing things wasn’t out of the ordinary.

Those thoughts, of just how much he kept quiet, had pestered him all through the morning, and pestered him still in the afternoon. There was too much on his mind. All the what if’s and why’s circled around him like bees. Being in the city could only relieve him so much, but he took in all that it could offer to him, all of its smoke and polluted air, as he stepped out of the car and left it in the secluded shade of an alley.

There were too many voices outside. None drowned out what he was thinking.

Priorities—like protocol, like guilt, like the thought of betrayal, even the word’s basic meaning—were not something he could discard. He couldn’t forget. He couldn’t leave things aside. He couldn’t, neither as the man Sakurai Yuusuke, nor as the esper, the government employee, the good agent, _the Magister_. He was loyal. The government kept an eye on all espers, and that meant on him.

As locked the car up and slipped the key into his pocket, he thought of how blind, how gouged-out that proverbial eye had become.

His glasses looked dirtier than ever, exposed to sunlight. He slipped them off to wipe them off with the edge of his blazer. One hand ran through his hair, pushing it back. Vision restored with the glasses back on, and phantom strands out of his eyes, Sakurai looked around.

He was a nobody in the city, even when devoid of crowds. The closest people to him were two women poking a newspaper, and next to them was a sweat-drenched construction worker, hard hat still on his head. No-one paid him any heed. To them, he was yet another passer-by, a mere human, seemingly one of the majority, nothing out of the ordinary at all.

The tattoos of the 99th were small and concealed for a reason.
It was barely two o’clock, so his watch said. There were hours to go before evening.

Today was the day.

He would go to perform his assignment—and from then on, nothing would be the same. He had one tiny chance. It was tonight or no night at all, and he did not want to face certain death, or the threat of it, be it with words or a knife to the neck or a gun to the brain. He was between life and death, between the thrall of spilled, leaked intelligence or the wrath of the men to whom he was loyal, between all of the lies he had woven and all of the truths about him, about his name.

He had been threatened. He had to respond.

His hand slipped into his pocket, stroking the folds of a small piece of paper: his orders. If he failed, it would be his death sentence.

Tonight was his only, and final, chance.

Suzuki Touichirou was at an emergency conference in Osaka, so said the radio. He had heard it this morning. The newspaper he had glimpsed on his way to work said the same.

*Tonight is the night.*

He knew the roads well enough, and paid them little heed as the odd city-dweller walked past. He tried his best to ignore what little he heard from their conversations, but picked up words about *sales* and *good fish* and you think they’ll shoot people again, like that time in Negi, and he thought that yes, they will shoot again, they always do and nobody can stop them. Claw shot whoever they wanted.

He was an esper. In a way that he wished he didn’t, he felt that he understood.

He had never wanted to fall into those polarised monochrome boxes, to be branded either black or white or as he was, a rare grey. *The Magister* belonged to whoever had need of his skills. He conjured. He afflicted and charmed items and entire rooms and whatever small trinkets were given to him to curse. What he was proud of, he would sign off with an engraving, his mark.

He marked things rarely these days.

Artists signed paintings, potters cut initials into the bottoms of pots: tying their works to their name. He had stopped marking most things. Marks were the proof of his guilt, signatures of their master, traitor’s trails, treachery.

He had already betrayed one side in secret. Tonight, he would betray everything.

His destination that afternoon was inconspicuous, but that was for the best. His kind knew how to keep themselves hidden. It was how they had come to survive, by hiding—or by sheer luck, or by ridding themselves of their enemies.

The one he was visiting, most likely, preferred doing the latter.

It wasn’t something he wanted to think of, but it was hard not to, what with the creepy, dull tone, the bony hands, and the choking smell of pollen that he remembered so clearly. *He* had to own something toxic, Sakurai thought, as he stopped in front of the familiar building. It wasn’t much: a small shop, sandwiched between a bookseller and a shabby-looking place that seemed to sell nothing but winter coats, out of season.

The florist’s sign was a little worn. Its owner probably didn’t care.
Sakurai straightened his tie and pushed open the door.

The small bell by the door gave a chime: something he normally found oddly pleasant. This time, the sound seemed to chip at his skull. A second ring sounded out, and the door shut behind him.

Flowers were everywhere, at all angles. Bright colours stabbed through the iris. At one side were asters in bloom, splashed with sunlit gold centres, and next to them, white chrysanthemum stood erect, stems tall and spindled as enoki mushrooms. A large waxy-leaf plant stood in one corner, most likely not for sale. It had been there every time Sakurai had been to the shop.

*Why here,* he thought, *why did you send me here of all places; did you know I was a regular...?*

The smell of pollen made his nose itch. A finger moved to rub away the uneasiness.

“Hello?” On any other occasion, it would have been rude not to be welcomed first. It was probably why the shop was quiet on such a pleasant day—for the borderline impossible variety of plants that it offered, some found nowhere else in the city, its owner was not the kindest of people.

“Welcome. Come in...”

The voice was so quiet that Sakurai barely heard it. He would have most likely ignored it, had he not known what to listen for. The florist himself wasn’t social. His realm was his jungle. His kin were the flowers and leaves, more than any people that wandered in, entranced by flowers, only to wander straight back out again.

Sakurai could barely walk through the shop without brushing against something leafy. Even the floor was barely visible: tubs and plastic vases and all kinds of containers were covering up most of the wood, leaving only the narrowest pathways for him to follow, until he made his way to the counter.

The florist was there, as he had anticipated, examining some kind of succulent in a pot. A slender, pale hand had lifted up one of the leaves, and at first, those hands were all that he could see, until the man peered out from behind them.

A pair of narrow eyes met his own. “Welcome,” the florist—his name tag marked with his name, Minegishi—said, enthusiasm nonexistent. “What brings you here, then?”

Sakurai almost felt relieved when his attention went back to the plant. No matter how many times he had come to the shop, and no matter how many times he spoke with Minegishi, the man was always unsettling. His voice was too deep, his tone eternally bored, and seldom did he sound any happier.

Sakurai turned around for a moment. The flowers were staring.

“It’s good to see you,” he replied, shoulders back and chest out as he fought the shake in his knees. “It… it’s a nice day out there.”

He cursed in his head as soon as he said it. He had never cared for the weather.

Minegishi sounded even less amused. “Always is. How can I help?”

Sakurai took a breath in. The flowers were definitely staring. He hoped they couldn’t read thoughts. “I’m in need of a bouquet,” he declared. “Flowers—”

—for the president’s wife—

No, he thought, stopping himself just in time. His mouth was left agape, and for a moment, he didn’t
realise how awkward he looked.

He was usually a good liar. He wasn’t proud of that.

Minegishi went back to staring, eyes like a snake in the grass. Sakurai shivered, feeling something tickle one leg. He looked down. It was only a leaf, but the leaf was moving, all on its own, like the hand of a child, brushing below the knee. He shivered. He heard Minegishi sigh, and looked up to see the florist shaking his head, as the leaf pulled away, its stem slithering back into its pot like a serpent.

Minegishi waved a hand, and the plant seemed to droop, like a man hanging his head in shame. Sakurai could still feel its ghost against his trouser leg.

“Seems they get a little excited around you,” Minegishi mumbled. “Leafy bastards. So what are the flowers for?”

Sakurai had never been fond of flowers. Minegishi’s were the worst kind. In all of the times he had been in the shop, something had always either budded or bloomed, wilted or shriveled, or vines started crawling over his feet. The air was thick with psychic energy. It seemed to cling to the plants, just like pollen.

…*For the president's wife*, he almost said out loud again. It was hard to break habits.

His hand delved into his pocket to remind himself of why he was there, feeling the chill touch of folded-up paper.

“For someone I know.”

“No… the usual?”

“No. Something different. A… *gift*.”

Minegishi tilted his head, as if trying to read Sakurai. It was hard not to step back. No flower nor vine could probe into thoughts, he reminded himself, reassuring—no matter how the atmosphere made him feel.

“Hm. A gift. That’s an odd one. For someone like you, anyway.” Sakurai didn’t know whether to be hurt or not. “Who’s the lucky one?”

He hesitated. No-one came to mind. “From the theatre,” he lied. “A dancer girl.”

“Nice taste.”

Minegishi’s voice was as dead as the wilted stems in the trash. He was a florist, but not a romantic. Even on the days he would drape himself in a fine embroidered haori, when he would sit and work on arrangements and not sell anything, there was little that changed on the inside—and if Sakurai was to only look at his eyes, then not much changed on the surface at all.

Minegishi had few customers, in spite of his floral variety. The longer Sakurai spent in his presence, the more he understood why. Relief flooded him when Minegishi reached back to the counter to take out a notepad and pencil, pushing back the length of his sleeves. Sakurai had been too caught up in colours to notice the notepad before.

A part of him wondered if Minegishi could identify each and every one, and if he navigated plants through *colours or feelings*. Hearing was fully possible too, he thought: though whether plants could
speak or not was something he had never wondered about.

Minegishi didn’t really seem like an auditory type.

The sound of him clearing his throat made Sakurai lose composure. Minegishi didn’t so much as raise an eyebrow—or the part of his face where most other men had eyebrows, where Minegishi had nothing at all. He was almost doll-like sometimes, in a way that left Sakurai on edge, wanting to get as far away as he could.

Minegishi was no hina doll. Hina dolls couldn’t kill anyone.

“So, what does this theatre girl of yours like?”

Sakurai hadn’t thought about it. He hadn’t learned the names of many flowers, other than what he needed to know. He looked around, left and right. The petals were blinding, stamens staring. The letter—yes, he remembered—had only mentioned one thing. It was a flower he knew, but he couldn’t say it, not yet.

One or two, the letter had said, and you choose the rest. Do not try to code it: we have sufficient material…

“Those... orange ones. She likes orange,” Sakurai said, pointing down at some apricot-coloured flowers, speckled with purple. The darker spots made him think of a child’s attempts at painting rain with their father’s expensive, fine ink.

He had no idea if the letter’s author liked orange at all.

“Alstroemerias?” Minegishi asked. “Pretty bright. Energetic. Guess she’s like that, hm?”

“Yes. She is.”

“Anything else?”

“Maybe… something yellow, or green…”

“You sound clueless.”

It was true. He could only hope that Minegishi couldn’t see the sweat on his hands. One was tucked away in his pocket, thankfully, keeping hold of the letter. The order written on it almost burned into his skin. He could remember most of it, word-for-word, from the formal, polite addressing of his name, to the frightening threat, to what would happen to him if he failed, and so he could not let himself fail—

“Sunflowers.”

It came out a little suddenly. Sakurai hadn’t spotted any sunflowers in the shop. Minegishi probably did have sunflowers somewhere, or he could grow some, he knew, but it was an odd request, all the same.

One or two sunflowers, and you choose the rest.

“Sunflowers?” Minegishi repeated.

“Yes,” Sakurai said. “She... she reminds me of them.”

It was ironic, how the letter’s contents had made him feel nothing but anger and fear and regret. He
couldn’t think of anything further from happy sunflowers.

“Must be pleasant. You got anything else you want me to add?”

*For the president’s wife,* he almost said—but no, not this time. He had nothing to say. *Tonight is the night,* he reminded himself, *and if I fail, I’ll be killed.*

“You know best. Add your touch if you like. Just… not too expensive.”

“I’ll keep it decent, then. When for?”

“Could you do… *tonight*?”

For the first time in minutes, Minegishi looked up from his notepad. “Short notice. That good a date, hm?”

“I know,” Sakurai said. “It’s… it’s the only time I can see her.”

It was the only time he had. He had only one opportunity, the only time he had left to act. Girls probably danced in the theatre most days, but Sakurai hadn’t checked. He didn’t care for costumes and songs.

In his pocket, the letter’s edge seemed to cut into his hands, but left neither blood nor marks. It left worse sensations. It left the feeling of guilt; the feeling of impending doom.

Minegishi sighed, crossing his arms. The look in his eyes still seemed unreadable, as if Sakurai was staring at a white wall. “Half extra.”

“That’s fine.”

*Money is not so important. You will be compensated…*

Whether that compensation would be in cash or blood, he didn’t know. Some part of him preferred not to think hard about it—but it was that same part of him, cowardly, stupid, that most intensely wanted to run. The shop was a jungle, not just of plants but of leafy-green aura, blood-red snake-tongues twisting amidst emerald tones. He’d been here before, many times, and Minegishi knew him well from *business on the side*.

*Business on the side* had not been a good thing. It had been wrong. Sakurai had been dealing in death.

He wanted to run.

Minegishi had sensed his aura—he was sure of it—springing already. It was a struggle to keep it down. Sakurai felt it within himself, pricking, burning, wanting to show itself and burst into sight and be free.

*The letter,* he thought to himself. The letter kept on reminding him.

He had a date of a different kind to go to that evening. Suzuki asked him to come every two weeks for a reason. He had his commission: Suzuki’s assignment, its details top secret.

Sakurai hated secrecy more than he hated Minegishi’s domain.

He couldn’t help but wonder what Minegishi knew, but he had no business in checking. He had no business asking Minegishi about his tattoo. There was no way of checking if he had one. It was too
forward. He didn’t dare ask. Minegishi’s eyes were as sharp as his critical tongue. Something was there, deep within, ready to pierce, sharp as thorns.

He had to get out.

He finalised the bouquet in his order, and left the shop with a business card, signed off with a time when he could come back. That evening, they had agreed. Minegishi was nothing if not punctual. The last time he had asked for flowers for the president’s wife and passed on his message, the bouquet had been done and passed on by the end of the day.

(Sprigs of lavender, he remembered: to say that all was going to plan. Asters, too: something that needed less psychic energy input was in the works, white ones to say he was far from finished, but it was on the way.)

Sakurai had never learned Claw’s secret code for sunflowers, if they even meant anything at all.

He spent the next few hours passing the time, strolling through Seasoning. He had left his bag and tools in the car, ready for the evening. The car was waiting for him not far from the florist. He went back just to check it again, testing every lock. All was safe.

He picked up the flowers five minutes before Minegishi closed up the shop, paid, and left with few words. His wallet was lighter, the pressure in his chest heavier.

He hated pollen. He hated those colours, whatever all of the flowers were called. He hated it all. The sunflowers felt somewhat odd in the bouquet, huge black centres staring at him like monstrous eyes. Whatever the letter’s sender had been thinking, he couldn’t tell. The last thing they made him feel was sunny.

A part of him wished the dancer girl at the theatre was real.

He had one more rendezvous before the commission that evening, and so went back towards the car, and then onward.

He wandered aimlessly for a while, eyeing shop windows, going back-and-forth, entering and leaving, then staring at a box of wagashi in one shop for so long that he could feel the shopkeeper’s stare burning his head. He left it with the box in one hand, and with it, an even lighter wallet.

He liked wagashi. If all else failed, he thought, it wouldn’t be bad for a last meal.

He sat down at a park bench, and watched the sun move. Dusk would come soon. He alternated between checking his watch and staring down at the flowers, then at the wagashi box, wondering if anyone would mind if he ate there and then. He was nowhere near home. He had no tea to drink, or anything other than the wagashi.

He wouldn’t be alone for too long, he hoped, and clutched the box tighter. He checked his watch. His companion—he hesitated, the term not quite pleasant—was late.

Always late, he’d overheard in the other department. Sakurai had his own experiences with him, but most of that had been years ago in the past, a fast-forgotten month of forehead creases and huge hands and elbows edging him whenever they wanted. His face had been no better a sight.

From what he’d heard, he hadn’t changed. Maybe, Sakurai thought, he’d made a mistake in trusting him.
Take a partner with you, if you wish, but no more than one…

His hand reached into his pocket, and took out the letter.

It had only become more and more creased, and dampened a little with sweat, over the course of the day—but the writing, typed out neatly, was perfectly legible. Everything, from his name to the words of the threat, was down on the paper, monochrome and perfectly strict. Each ink-black character was an alien eye. Sakurai was powerless in the stared of hundreds of them. They were tiny, like needles, pinning him down and preparing to stab if he disobeyed.

We have word on your less-than-legal activities, namely, your personal involvement with a certain organisation. We have intelligence to say that you have, in secret, provided weapons and intelligence to a faction that poses a danger to the the country you swore to serve as a man of the 99th, and even still to this day…

He couldn’t deny it. It wasn’t like lying about dancer girls. He had charged weapons and altered bullets. He had handed cursed spray bottles into darkly-gloved hands. He had dreamt of blood, and heard about death—so many deaths, so many of them tied like phantom threads to his hands. He was just as guilty as the ones firing the weapons.

The Magister was a liar, a traitor. Sakurai Yuusuke had signed his name to the revolution.

Should you wish to be redeemed, and for this intelligence to remain under wraps…

He was a liar, a murderer, a traitor to his country—

…then you are ordered to do as this letter dictates, and to destroy the attached plans immediately…

—and he would become a traitor again—

…you are to use your ties to Suzuki Touichirou to…

“Hey.”

Sakurai almost leapt from his seat. Heart beating louder, he looked up. His companion had appeared.

“ Took you long enough,” he said, gesturing to the other side of the bench.

Sakurai had to admit that he looked ridiculous. He had been sitting there, with his still-unopened box of wagashi and a garish bouquet of flowers—and now, he was being joined by the last person he would ever associate with one of those immodest American movie dates.

Koyama Megumu was not an attractive man by anyone’s standards. In the eyes of men, he was intimidating—huge, muscular, with eyes that seemed to beckon to everybody to fight him, or at least punch him in the face, with so much as a look.

Sakurai raised an eyebrow at the matted mess of what was left of his hair. Nine years ago, there had been more of it. It looked like he’d cut it with his own hands: in other words, badly.

“Sorry. Got held up by some punks giving me the evils,” Koyama grunted, cracking his knuckles. Sakurai winced. Koyama didn’t flinch, but the bench did as he sat down.

“Let me guess, you beat them up?” Sakurai shook his head, his hand coming up to his forehead.

“I didn’t. Don’t just assume that’s all I do.”
“It’s what you’re good at, supposedly.”

“Naturally. How’s it been?”

Terrible, Sakurai thought: worse, now that Koyama had lumbered into the picture. He regretted sending a message for help, but Koyama was unlike most of the government espers that he was aware of, and that he could trust. Koyama was strong, expendable—and in the same position as him.

Sakurai had seen his face where it should not have been, seen him shirk away when their stares met by chance across a corridor, and then realised.

It took a traitor to know a traitor.

“Fine,” Sakurai said, looking down at the wagashi box. It was better than looking at Koyama’s wreck of a face, all cheekbones and uneven jaw and like Minegishi, no eyebrows, but unlike the florist, he couldn’t imagine anyone finding Koyama handsome.

“Well, aren’t you quiet…” Koyama trailed off, chin falling into one too-large hand. He glanced around the park, then turned back to the bench. “What’s with the flowers? And the sweet stuff, I see that. For me, huh?”

“Shut it,” Sakurai hissed, pulling the flowers closer to himself. “Of course they’re not yours. They’re for tonight. And the sweets are for me.”

The sudden grin on Koyama’s face made Sakurai think of an obnoxious kid he had known at the orphanage. “Got a marriage arranged, huh? Well, finally. You need something to loosen you up, get that stick outta—"

“You know what I mean."

Sakurai felt his aura scorch and prick up, spiking white on his shoulders, before he exhaled, and forced it to settle. Now was no time to fight. Koyama was a numbskull, but even he’d get the message, sooner or later.

“Oh, right,” he finally said, after what felt like too long. “It’s… you’re off to Suzuki’s, aren’t you? I heard you do that.”

“Exactly, as usual.”

“What’s the flowers for, then?”

“Suzuki’s out tonight. Call it a present,” Sakurai said. “I’ve got to do this.”

“Oh, you said something before, some kind of letter…“

Sakurai took the wagashi box and put it aside, careful not to leave it too close to the bench’s edge. The letter was still in his pocket, safe and secure—and he took it out keeping it folded for as long as possible. Checking that nobody could see, he held it in front of Koyama and opened.

Koyama read. Sakurai re-read, much faster, trying to block out Koyama’s slow mumbling, as a thick fingertip slid down to trace the sender’s name.

“Toyotama. Hm. Like the princess? Might be pretty—ow!”

Sakurai slapped it away, before tucking the letter back into his pocket.
“What’s that for?”

“What, nothing. I just don’t like your hands.”

Koyama grunted. Sakurai didn’t care.

*Toyotama* was an enigma. He hated the name as much as the emptiness of his wallet after those overpriced flowers. He looked around, again and again. People passed by the park, walking on into the evening, going wherever. Nobody looked back at him and Koyama, or even came close. Sakurai felt like an abandoned, starved dog. Deep down, he knew he was no better than one.

*Dog of the government*, someone had said once. He couldn’t be one any more.

“But I just thought—“

“For all we know, it’s a man. What woman would send this, I don’t know, but... *Toyotama* knows too much about me. And you, too. And probably all of us,” Sakurai said. “I wouldn’t be surprised if they were a 99th too.”

Koyama stared back, a little more wide-eyed, still irritated from the slap. “You’re *fucking insane.*”

“I know.” Sakurai adjusted his glasses. “I never said I played by the rules.”

“And you’re wanting me to—“

“Shush.”

A park-keeper was nearing the two of them, broom in hand. Any moment now, he’d come an inch closer, and overhear everything. Even a word of the conversation was one word too many. Things were dangerous in the minds of civilians, or, Sakurai thought, the minds of possible spies. He couldn’t be certain.

“Let’s get out of here. We’ve got a long way to go, anyway.”

“I don’t drive.”

“That’s why I’ll be taking the wheel. Come on.”

Sakurai took one last look at the letter, then took it back, holding it tight in case of a stray gust of wind. All day, the air had been totally still, but evening was on the horizon. The world could change, anything might change, even he might change, or Koyama; nothing was certain. Tonight was the night.

He slung the wagashi box under his arm, then picked up the flowers, looking over his shoulder to make sure Koyama was still there. The wagashi didn’t matter; he’d have something to eat, at least, but the flowers were precious as gold, and shimmering like it, too, in the sunset. Seasoning was almost a pretty town in the spring. Summer heat and lashing rain made the place ugly.

He could envisage the coming of storms.

The colder seasons, cold and grey and white, like his own aura, were what he preferred, just from temperature alone. The cold would fog up his glasses, but nothing more, nothing worse.

It was hard not to stress as he walked.

He’d left the car hidden away in the shadows. Staring daggers at Koyama—*dent these, you’re*
dead—he passed him the flowers, before getting out his keys, and looking around again. Nobody else was around; no other auras, no espers, only the two of them. Sighing, he unlocked the car and tossed the wagashi box in the back, before taking his seat. “Get in.”

Grunting, Koyama settled. Broad shoulders, huge legs, arms like tree-trunks; he was clumsy, and Sakurai found himself staring, arms ready to reach any moment, at the bouquet. He couldn’t risk crushing them.

“I won’t,” Koyama groaned. “Stop worrying about the damn things.”

“Sit on them and you get it.”

“I’m not planning to.”

“You don’t plan anything. I do the planning.”

Koyama sighed. “Yeah, and I do the work…”

He was best off doing that, Sakurai thought. What Koyama lacked in brains, he made up for in muscle, and even that had its uses. Even if he frustrated him, he needed someone like that; it hurt to admit. Koyama was stronger in physical terms, even without psychic powers. He needed that kind of backup.

If needs be, he could take him out: not with bare hands, but by other means. He didn’t want to think about that, but as turned the ignition and started the car, he thought: yes, if needs be, he could cut through him.

He wasn’t scared of Koyama. Toyotama did scare him, however.

He wasn’t going to confess that to him.

The drive was long, and to his relief, blissfully silent. Sakurai focused his eyes on the road, waiting for lights to change, avoiding turning to look at Koyama. He couldn’t risk starting a conversation. His head felt like it was splitting already, even with the roads in a decent state.

The sky slowly darkened as they drove out of the city’s central district, and out into the country beyond.

The back of the car seat creaked, and in a brief pause, he turned to check on Koyama. Mistake, he realised, too late. The brute’s eyes met his. “You never said what the flowers were for.”

“Toyotama told me to leave them. I destroyed the letter with the full plan already. I know what’s in it,” Sakurai sighed in surrender, turning back to the road for his safety. “When we get there, I’m going straight in. You need to deal with the guards, then bring in the flowers. Wouldn’t mind if you helped me carry the kid.”

Koyama crossed his arms. The image of a small, moody child popped into Sakurai’s head. “Wow, so I’m just the babysitter?”

“Speak for yourself. Do you want to die?” Sakurai’s hands clenched tight around the steering wheel. He struggled to keep his grip steady, frustration apparent. “If what Toyotama knows about us gets out, then we’re dead. That’s why we’re doing this.”

“We?”
“I picked you because I know you’re in the same shit as me.”

“The same—”

“I saw you at that last meeting. I don’t forget faces like yours.”

“Shit, you—”

“Don’t talk about it.”

Neither of the two said anything else for the rest of the journey.

The sky darkened, the city faded and gave way to huge, leafy groves and small roads winding into the country, and still, after that, it didn’t feel right to say anything. Both were guilty. Both had turned out two-faced. Both were traitors to the government. Both were loyal to the wrong people.

It was the one thing Sakurai knew he and Koyama had in common, other than being espers formerly of the 99th: the one thing he hated most about himself, and about others.

He hated liars. He hated himself most of all.

Suzuki’s house was more-or-less modest for a man so high up the ranks of society, from old family money, probably. Suzuki could afford suits, and to travel, and certainly at least some luxury, if ever he got days off in his position; something Sakurai had complained to his seniors about when the price of a new coat had been too great a number a few months back.

In hindsight, pay didn’t mean much—at least in the great scale of things. It was better than nothing.

He had known nothing once. He had risen up, done his service, signed his life away and won some sort of reputation—and with it, a gag over his mouth, no choice but to work for the government, no future elsewhere, and to top it off, not the thing he hated most but something he disliked all the same: regular conjuration work for the Interior Minister himself.

At least, he was by now a regular. He had Suzuki’s men’s trust, or enough of it, he thought as the car approached the house. He made out the shadowy forms of guards by the door.

Suzuki was at a conference, out in Osaka. There were guards present at the estate even when Suzuki was in. Sometimes, the personnel changed. Sakurai had never remembered anyone’s name.

The ones up front, he could feel, were like him, but weaker, for certain, weaker than Koyama even. He wondered if they hated their line of work, too. He hated the government. He hated Japan. He hated the Americans, too, for coming, for breaking their promises, for leaving, for everything that they’d done. He hated the shackles that bound him.

He’d hated them enough to slip away, to slip into talking with Claw. Maybe, just maybe, he’d believed. He’d joined them. They’d given him guns to experiment with; for the revolution, they’d said, for the sake of our futures and pasts, so their leader had said from behind the gas mask he wore.

Sakurai remembered Ishiguro, too, before the gas mask, yet only briefly. There was no forgetting the past, no forgetting the 99th, no forgetting 99-7, even when he had been in that unit a month with Koyama. They’d transferred him after.

There was no shortage of talk of the 99th at Claw’s meetings, of the 99th, and of weapons. Sakurai hadn’t marked his experiments. He knew, all the same. He knew every bullet they’d shot. He had betrayed his employers. He had signed his life into Claw’s filthy hands.
He’d made the decision, and signed away his own life. So had so many others, he knew: so had something like half of the 99th Division.

*Toyotama, save me if you can.*

He could only beg for salvation.

“Stay. You know the plan.”

Koyama let out a grunt, sitting up to affirm. Sakurai sighed, begging: *don’t fuck this up.*

He got out of the car and opened its boot, taking out his satchel, and then, just in case, his customary tool. Sheathed in its scabbard, he couldn’t see the faithful sword’s blade gleaming at him, but he felt something stronger: within it, within the scabbard and deep past the surface of that cold metal, years’ worth of aura. In his grip, even through the protective material, something almost magnetic seemed to pull and enthrall.

He took a deep breath. Scabbard attached, bag in hand, he slammed the boot, and looked up ahead.

He could see twin guards, probably unrelated but not distinctive enough in the dark, in black clothes. Sakurai didn’t care for their names, but they knew his face. They knew he would be coming, and he approached them, giving them the usual look in the light one of them shone to get a look at his face.

“Here for—”

“The usual. As per orders.”

The guard holding the light nodded. His twin withdrew a key, and turned to the lock. Sakurai looked over his shoulder. Above was the moon in an indigo sky, and somewhere, sitting still in the car was Koyama, and with him was a bouquet of flowers.

*For the president’s wife,* he thought. *Fuck Claw, fuck their code, fuck everything and my life.*

He thanked the guards, then turned back quickly, as if to signal. His heart started to pound; he gritted his teeth, as if demanding the damn thing to hush.

Sakurai opened the door and took his shoes off. One of the guards followed suit, his pepper-hot aura barely a pulse. The house was dead otherwise. Shutting his eyes for a moment, Sakurai pushed out his aura, and felt its colours by touch, white-grey-lick-of-indigo. Its coolness refreshed, past the quickened beat of his heart.

He was going to die, either in the name of the revolution, or while fighting against it.

*Toyotama, whoever—*

There was a scream, and the sound of a thump: something hitting wood and metal, and grunts. The guard behind him turned and exclaimed. “What’s going—”

He didn’t have time to finish before the door slammed open, and a violet-clad fist thrust him into the wall.

Koyama hulked over his figure, his other huge palm pressing over the guard’s exposed throat. Sakurai dropped his bag, took out a prepared bottle, and ran.

He knew what was coming. His heart was screaming away, leaping in and out and up and down in his chest and into his throat, his hands growing slicker with sweat, so much that he almost slipped
and lost hold of the bannister. His feet pounded against the stairs. There was no time to think. He had
to run.

He could feel the barrier straight up ahead. It had weakened a little, like it did each week before he
reinforced it. The scabbard and sword beat against his hip, as if choosing deliberately to strike his
tattoo. In his other hand was the bottle, slipping around, liquid splashing inside. He didn’t have time
to check how tight the lid was.

The sounds from downstairs ceased. He couldn’t hear much past the heaviness of his breathing.

He found the door easily. It was familiar, and even beyond his vision, he had his aura, and the
feeling of his own barrier lining the walls. He stopped just outside it to breathe. He could barely see
straight in panic. Focusing, he took out a handkerchief from an inside pocket, and unscrewed the
spray-cap of his bottle.

His hands trembled as he pressed the handkerchief over the open bottle and tipped it, feeling cold
liquid through it. The handkerchief was barely thick enough to stop it flowing onto his fingers.

Once it was wet enough, he screwed the top back on, then put it down on the floor, just far enough
for it not to break if the door slammed.

He came closer, back to the door, and then knocked.

At first, there was silence, and then came the voice of its resident. Orange aura prodded at the walls,
searching for cracks in the thinning barrier. “Come in, old man…”

He had the key to the room. Suzuki had trusted him. His aura spiked and dug into his skin, sending
goosebumps through it under his clothes. He had to be ready.

Click went the lock.

His breath caught. They had to be fast. Sakurai dropped the key back into his pocket, then gripped
the door handle in one hand, the handkerchief in another. Nothing else would work the moment he
stepped into the room. Even his sword would only be as good as any other weapon.

He pushed the door handle down. Any moment, any moment now, he thought, and thrust against it.
Everything was the same, just as planned, and he was there too. Suzuki’s boy, exactly, according to
plan—

Sakurai pounced like a beast, one arm hooking firm.

His hand strayed too close to the boy’s face. Saliva and teeth—*fuck teeth*, he almost screamed—
made him flail for a moment, before his other hand swung around and pressed into his face.

The teeth began to relax, the fluid’s effect faster than chloroform. *One, two, three, four…*

On the tenth count, he fell limp in Sakurai’s arms. Carefully, Sakurai pulled his bitten hand away,
and wiped the saliva away on his sleeve. He hadn’t drawn blood.

Stone-still, save for the tightness in his chest loosening and finally letting him breathe, he stood there,
getting his breath back.

He didn’t know how long had passed when Koyama opened the door, but he was still out of breath.
The moonlight streaming in from the reinforced window lit up the bite on his palm. In his hold, the
boy lay still, as if sleeping. Only his breaths interrupted the silence, and then, Koyama did, too.
Sakurai turned around. The sweat on Koyama’s forehead was drying. His hair looked even worse than it had hours ago, as if some animal had run through it like grass. He hadn’t failed, at the very least. The auras of the twin guards were quiet. There were only three of them in the room, the boy was unconscious, and just as he had ordered, Koyama hadn’t forgotten the flowers. Somehow, just somehow, they hadn’t been damaged.

He couldn’t wait to get rid of them. The night was only beginning.

“Good,” Sakurai said, finally able to speak. “Now… second part. Let’s get the hell out of here.”

Chapter End Notes

If anyone's confused regarding a certain aura colour that was mentioned: I mentioned in earlier notes that I’d be deviating from the "generic red" texture used in the anime for certain characters, both because I like minor charas and want to expand on them, and also because meta demands they be different.

Notes!

In addition, I have now released some uncovered meta for the AU, accurate as of this chapter, for anyone wondering about how espers and powers and awakening work.
Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

Time for violence! Canon-ish, a little more blood though?

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The last of that day’s sunlight filtered through the yellow mess of Teruki’s wig hair.

People would probably stare, he thought, but it didn’t matter at all. A part of him wanted to be like the sun itself, to scream out and tell them, look at me already, look at me because I’m here and I’m alive, and none of the crap those two said about me is true. He wasn’t scared. To the world, he wasn’t an esper, the whole thing was a lie, and he had nothing to hide.

Edano and Ryuzaki hadn’t been at their usual spot that evening. He hadn’t checked if they had been at school. He hadn’t been going himself. He had spent another day lying awake, staring at the ceiling. Whatever had happened with the oysters had started happening with cigarettes, too. The smell had turned rotten. Even the taste of the paper, too close to his lips, had started setting off the reaction. The back of his throat still stung from trying to light one up that morning.

Breakfast has been rice, all on its own. It hadn’t triggered anything, but the blandness had made him think of eating glue, feeling it stick to the roof of his mouth. Still, it was more or less safe. He wasn’t sure about vegetables. Fish had been out of the question. The oyster incident was fresh in his mind, the smell of seawater and vomit, and the taste of rubbery flesh in his mouth.

The only thing left was money. Teruki couldn’t eat money—but he had things to do, a reputation to clear. Two birds with one stone, he thought; his hands itched for a fight all the same, for skin and bone to meet fast-moving knuckles. He thought of the last fight, the last proper one he’d been in other than with Edano and Ryuzaki, with the strange esper boy. Mob was probably dead, rotting in an alley somewhere. He was someone else’s responsibility now. Teruki didn’t have to do anything.

He had bigger things to clean up. Ryuzaki and Edano were both old news, but the rumour mill was hard to shut up.

He crossed the road—watching it grow emptier—as the last of the light gave way to the darkness. The district around North Market was well-known to him. Smokers in street corners turned heads and avoided each other, only the sparks of lit cigarettes giving away their location. A stray dog padded off into seemingly nowhere, scraps in its mouth, slipping into the darkness.

The evening was coming to life.

North Market’s sellers had all packed up. The square was dead. Only the frames of the stalls remained, unmanned, as if the wind that Teruki could feel picking up had blown everything away and swept up both prices and dust. He could see a few figures in the shadows, out of the reach of one lonely streetlight. They paid him no heed in the dark. Nobody could see a blonde wig without light, anyway.

Teruki had light hidden within him, bright yellow and burning hot. It wasn’t a light he could reveal tonight, or ever again, he thought, no matter how it had felt. It had been good, so good to unleash,
but had to keep it down now, not only for his surroundings but for himself.

His reactions, his headaches, his inability to sleep and eat properly—that had all started after the incident. It was connected. He was sure of it. He didn’t need that light, no matter how it had allured him.

Espers weren’t natural. They were wrong, freaks of nature. The sickness had to be proof of that.

He needed a fix, something to make him forget.

He could hear more and more voices as he cut through the alleys and groped his way around barely-visible walls. He had left his lighter at home. There were brighter, better-lit roads, but nobody took them; nobody but the unknowing and possibly stupid.

The traders of North Market stored goods in a cluster of warehouses not far from the market itself. They were quiet at night, and not far from Seasoning’s river port, where the most noise at night came from lingering conversations between half-asleep guards. It was the perfect place to gather most evenings, and where Teruki had become acquainted with Edano, sometime in the autumn of the year before, not long before his father had left for the ocean again.

The empty warehouse wasn’t warm, and was far from comfortable: too cold in winter and too hot in summer. Nobody brought food. Some brought handfuls of sweet-smelling things, and smoked in the corners, but all who came brought with them money. Teruki had plenty. He dipped into his trouser pocket to check. His lighter wasn’t there, but all the notes were, still crisp from when they’d been taken from Edano and Ryuzaki two days ago.

He stopped, letting one streetlight’s glow bathe the notes in light gold. They felt good in his hands as he counted. One, two, three—plenty more. Plenty was good.

He slipped the money back into his pocket, keeping his hand close, just in case, as he meshed into the growing, gathering hubbub of people clustered around the warehouse doors. Inside, the shabby electric lights flickered every so often, but nobody paid heed. Those that did—Teruki made out one smallish boy, looking around with unease—had to be new. The other boys were Teruki’s own age, or high schoolers, maybe older than that. Sometimes, it wasn’t easy to tell.

He passed by clusters of gangs, marked out by neckerchiefs or hats or matching pen marks on their hands. His head turned instinctively, spotting what he thought were Edano or Ryuzaki’s matching plasters; their gang’s little mark. The faces weren’t right. If the two were there, then he couldn’t see them at all.

The noise—oh, fuck, Teruki thought, the fucking noise...

Never had sound felt so irritating. It was as if someone had started hammering at his brain. Conversation was everywhere. He could pick up nothing useful: nothing but the odd come on, how much for that shit you got, and how’s the guy from last week, is he patched up now, and a small handful of curses and a bigger handful of boasts, and all of that was swimming in dense, heavy, nonsensical noise.

He was going to get another headache at this rate.

Silence had a certain feel to it; a feeling he had grown to like in his days alone at home, interrupted only by music, when he felt like listening. Here, the voices were uncontrollable. Each sound had its pitch, and each pitch came with resonance. The sounds were uncomfortable. There were too many of them. None worked with each other.
He groaned. It had to be tied to the headaches, and his sudden sensitivity to everything he had liked. Mob had destroyed everything.

Mob was dead, he reminded himself, and he was alive. He had to fight. He had to live.

In one of the corners, a couple of boys had set up a table, as they did every time. Where they had gotten it from, Teruki didn’t know. Neither did anyone else, it seemed, but the junkyard being nearby was the most likely clue. One of the boys—huge, towering enough for Teruki to question his age—had his hands down on the table, bulky arms straight as two pillars.

*Fuji.* That was his name, Teruki remembered as he looked up, and then back down at Fuji’s huge palms. Notes and coins of all kinds peeked out from under them.

Teruki’s pockets felt a little too heavy.

He walked past the gathering groups, ignoring stares and growing whispers, hands in his pockets. The notes were turning damp with sweat. Outside had been cool, and there was no heating in the warehouse itself, but the heat of other bodies, mixed with noise and the buzz of unneeded sound, was adding to the discomfort and warmth.

A couple of other boys were around the table, looking at the money already there. Teruki leaned over to see.

One pile was growing over the other. Next to Fuji, who held down the money, was Bandai, a smaller boy. The lower half of his face was covered up by a trademark black mask. It didn’t deter anyone as he shook hands on done deals. Coins scraped against the table surface as he slid them across, and then Fuji’s hands held them down.

Bets placed, the boys before Teruki left, and he found himself face-to-face with Bandai. They had spoken before. Teruki was no stranger to bets.

“Well, if it ain’t Teru,” His voice came out part-muffled through the mask. “Been a while. What’s with the hair?”

“I felt like a changeup,” Teruki said, flicking at blonde bangs. Shoulders back, chest out a little, he couldn’t let anything so much as touch him. He had to stay strong, even if he was far from his best.

“Heh. Weird. But not bad.”

*Liar.* Teruki sighed, shaking his head. “Don’t look at me like that. I know what’s on your mind, and I’m telling you, it’s not true.”

Rumours travelled far in some circles. He had disciplined Edano and Ryuzaki, but it had been too late to stop the rumour mill, or Ryuzaki’s blabbering mouth. The mess was clear; his wig even clearer, a vivid sign that something had gone on, even if people weren’t mentioning it to his face. He could do little but fight it: fight everything, burn it, destroy it head-on. He had to assert himself.

He leaned in, gaze sliding over to the money pressed down on the table, and then back to Bandai. “You can see for yourself, if you want.”

The money under Fuji’s left hand was for the reigning champion. Under the right were bets for the challengers; next to try their hands, or fists, at whoever had been left standing the last time. The challenger’s pile looked disappointing this time around.

“Oh, you here for...”
Teruki didn’t wait. His hand delved into his pocket, and pulled out all of the money he had been counting. The notes had crumpled, a little, but any fool could see their value.

Two sets of eyes widened, staring first at the money, and then at Teruki himself.

“All of that. That’s my bet. *On me. No-one else,*” he said, a dark smile on his lips.

Bandai reached over, and gave the notes a quick count, mumbling numbers under his breath. “Hey, that’s *something.*” He shared a look with Fuji, who nodded, and took the notes under his right hand, separated from the rest by one large finger between them.

Bandai turned back. “You really that confident?”

It was an obvious answer. “I don’t bet on losers.”

“We all have bad luck. But if *that thing,*” Fuji said, his voice rising uncharacteristically, “if *that thing* really is true, I swear you’re—”

“Like I said, see for yourself.” Teruki slammed his hand down on the table. “What you heard was *someone* trying to mess with me. With my reputation. There’s no need to believe lies like that.”

Bandai’s mask couldn’t hide the unease in his eyes. “*Someone?* Did you guys have a falling out?”

“Something like that,” Teruki said, already turning away to spare him the awkwardness. “Of course they’d do that. Trying to ruin me… *making things up*...”

He side-eyed Bandai over his shoulder, for good measure.

There was always some kind of gossip around, he thought as he walked away from the table. Sometimes, the rumours were esper-related. He’d caught wind of other teenagers being outed as espers, but nothing had ever been proven. Most times, the rumours faded to nothing. The next day, there would be something fresh, something about the police being more active on certain days in parts of the city. That took precedence.

The groups had all taken precaution, and moved fights to other parts of town on some evenings, to random streets and the backs of odd buildings.

Still, Teruki thought, braving the persistent buzzing of far too many voices, he had a name to clear. Edano knew the truth, and so did Ryuzaki. Both had tasted the concrete. He had to deal with the aftermath, and clean up the consequence.

The floor of the warehouse would need cleaning, too, if he didn’t hold back. He could feel the surge of his aura, like electricity, coiling and untwisting itself under his skin and in the marrow of bones. It wanted out, he knew. He could feel it, almost beckoning: *I could light up this place and blow out the windows and shatter the steel of these walls...*

*No.*

He couldn’t let it loose. It wasn’t right; his powers weren’t right, espers weren’t right.

He had to fight like before, like a human.

It was hard to lose himself in the crowd. A part of him regretted choosing such a blonde wig, even if it had been the first one he had seen in the window. He could feel stares burning into the back of his neck: eyes singling him out, then their voices: *what’s with the hair,* and *did you hear about him,* and
He tried not to think about it. No, he had to focus, and listen out for far more important things. He needed to know whose jaw he had the option of breaking.

“Heard the Demon’s…”

“…oh yeah, Tenga’s back, wonder who’s gonna fight him…”

“…you think Kenzaki’s recovered after that thrashing?”

“Didn’t Tenga knock two teeth of his out?”

*Tenga*, he thought to himself, scowling. He could remember the face, and the tired-looking eyes, and the done-up hair that he couldn’t wait to mess up. *Tenga seems good.*

“All right!”

A sudden yell burst through the room. The entire warehouse hushed. Teruki turned around, and saw that Bandai had leapt up onto the table, where the money had been. It was now gone. Behind him, another boy, whose name he couldn’t remember, was keeping it safe with Fuji.

Bandai pulled the mask down and let it flop around his neck. “We’re gonna get started! Got some high hopes tonight, so don’t waste ’em!”

Without the mask, his voice was loud, obnoxiously so.

The whole room seemed to move. Clusters of boys dispersed, making a circle. There were few rules when it came to the fights. Rings were made to push in the weak, and egg on the strong. Sometimes, one of the audience would get in a shove, and be met with either cheers or a punch to the face. Seldom could anyone guess which of the two was most likely.

There was plenty of room in the warehouse, even with a crowd the size of Teruki’s entire school. All of Seasoning’s gangs had come for the fun. It was all there was to do on some evenings. Teruki didn’t mind. It was better than being at home, in the dead, empty silence—a silence that, for a moment, some strange voice in the back of his head seemed to crave.

Bandai pushed into the circle, and strode into its centre. “All right, listen up, or you’re all gonna get it!”

All went silent. “We got ourselves the Demon, back in our midst. Nine-win streak in the ring, you wanna see him getting a ten? Do ya? C’mon!”

The crowd erupted into cheers. As if on cue, the opposite side of the ring parted to let in the Demon, Onigawara Tenga himself: Teruki’s age, tall for fourteen, but not wide, smirking wickedly like his namesake, and just as exhausted-looking as last week. Dark circles were smeared under his eyes, but he wasn’t beaten, not yet.

The audience beckoned. “Ten in a row!”

“C’mon, Oni!”

“Make it a ten!”

Bandai grasped Onigawara’s hand, and raised it, in a premature victory call. Teruki spat onto the ground. Onigawara had the record, and the reputation. Teruki had to smash it; get his pride back. His
reputation was at stake.

He’d smash it, all right.

“All right, then, who’s up for the challenge?” Bandai let go, and watched Onigawara make his round of the ring, taking and giving out handshakes from his supporters in the excited crowd. Teruki didn’t offer his hand. “We’ve got a good night coming here, good bets all round… who’s not chicken?”

Onigawara returned to the centre. All eyes were on him. Bandai cleared his throat. “Come on, who’s up for a fight with the Demon? Not gonna put a show on for us? You all cowards?”

The circle hushed, silence broken only by mumbles. “C’mon, up and at ‘em, got a whole load of cash in the pot, waiting for ya if you win…”

Teruki breathed in, and stepped forward. A few gazes were already on him, or maybe just on his hair, but it didn’t matter. “I’ll do it.”

This time, all eyes really did focus on him. The faint light above gave a flicker, lighting the wig’s hair into glowing, bright gold; as bright as his aura might have been if he released it.

“Whoa there, we’ve got one! Anyone else wanting to throw down?” Bandai looked left and right, feigning surprise. “Nah?” He spat, then stepped back, getting out of the way as the audience widened the ring to make space. “Well, we got one, you chickens…”

“Hey, you can’t let him fight!” A voice burst out from the ring.

Bandai crossed his arms. “And why’s that?”

“You not heard? You can’t let him fight, he’s a fucking spoonbender!”

Murmurs came from all sides. Teruki wanted to scream: no, it’s a rumour, it’s all a lie, of course I’m not any of that, but someone else did it for him. “Wasn’t that a rumour?”

The voice from before rang out, stubborn. “I don’t know if it is, but he’ll fuck you up either way.”

Maybe Edano had told him personally, Teruki thought. He could remember the incident as clearly as if it had happened moments ago, and wondered if Edano remembered the pain and shock of what he had done the same way. He couldn’t help but wonder what it felt like, to be slammed into a wall at full force by something invisible—something unreal.

Esper powers were wrong, he affirmed, gritting his teeth, wrong and unnatural—even if, on the using side, it had felt good…

A rough hand jostled his shoulder. He turned around. Bandai’s fingers clamped down. He leaned in. Teruki smelled fish on his breath, and wished he’d kept the mask on.

“Well then, spit it out. Are you?”

It was tempting to swing a fist at him, just for coming so close—

“Hold on!”

Both turned. Onigawara spat onto the ground, clearly unsatisfied. “Hold your horses. You’re just saying that ’cause you think I don’t want to fight him.”

He took a step closer, then closer again, and then Bandai was pushed out of Teruki’s personal space.
Onigawara took over it. There was no smell of fish on him, thankfully—but Onigawara’s voice was far worse. Something about it wasn’t in tune to Teruki’s ears, even if it wasn’t harsh like the earlier screech.

In tune was a strange description for it—but it was the only word that made sense at that moment.

“You know that’s—”

Onigawara shoved Bandai again. “Well, you can fuck your shitty rumour, ‘cause I’d fight him anyway.”

A few voices came from the alarmed crowd. “Shit, you’re crazy.”

“What the hell?”

There was no use waiting for silence. Teruki braced himself, pushing his hat down as far as he could. He couldn’t risk his wig slipping.

Onigawara stepped back, not in surrender but in preparation. “C’mon then. You gonna show me what you got? I’ve got no spoons for ya to bend, but I’ve got a fist that’d go well in that pretty-boy face.”

Teruki snapped. “I’m telling you, I’m not one of them!”

For once, it didn’t feel good to lie.

His hands were already balled up into fists. All he had to do was swing, just right, at the right time and into the right places. It was easy, like beating up Edano had been before it had all slipped out of his hands and the pain had consumed him and something had clawed its way out of him, glowing yellow.

He couldn’t let that yellow boil over.

Onigawara shrugged off his jacket and tossed it into the crowd. One of the taller boys caught it. “Go on then, prove it,” he said, chest rising and falling. Teruki felt the same thing: the heat and rush of an impending fight. “Beat me the normal way.”

“We got a showdown!”

If the bastard said one more thing, Teruki thought, he would punch him in the face, then strangle him with his mask.

Cheering filled his ears as Onigawara took the first move, and rushed in with a punch. Teruki leaned back. Onigawara’s knuckle merely swiped past his shoulder. His right hand grabbed the arm that had punched, and he pushed it back—not enough to throw Onigawara off guard, but enough to give him one moment to breathe.

He assumed a better stance, having a few seconds. It was just fast enough. Onigawara was swift to strike back, aiming for Teruki’s jaw. Teruki dodged, and Onigawara hit his shoulder instead.

Teruki hit back. His fist connected with Onigawara’s side. The feeling of skin, bone and flesh underneath the other boy’s shirt was what Teruki had come for: the raw thrill, the knowledge that he could beat some pain into somebody else. Hot blood on the floor, and hotter blood rushing through veins could bring so much relief.
He could miss Onigawara, or hit him straight-on; the uncertainty of that, and not money at all, was the real gamble. That was all that he needed. He had the chants from the crowd fuelling him, and that made it all better: the feeling of pride, of their reactions, of all eyes being on him and all ears, and then, when he won, they’d all be shouting his name.

He heard it all, every sound. The crowd was a mess of tones, nothing in harmony.

*What?*

The crowd had a sound, different from cheers or alarm—but something in his head, something else. Onigawara’s breaths, too, Teruki realised as he came close and struck his cheek. He could feel heat on his skin, inhalation and exhalation: and that, too, set off slight reactions in the back of his head. Every step, every movement, every beat of the heart—and then, the feeling itself of his arm being grabbed—had a sound.

Teruki couldn’t make sense of it.

Everything around him was sound and noise and discordant chaos. Nobody was making the sounds he could sense; sounds that, maybe, he wasn’t even quite hearing, but *sensing* somehow, in some other way. It didn’t make sense at all.

Stepping back set off one low tone. His name being called signalled something much higher. The air around him, tickling the back of his neck made him think of plucked strings. Onigawara’s knuckles grazing his skin were entire spread palms pressing on piano keys.

Everything—even everything, even his aura, pulsing somewhere in his half-conscious depths, had a sound.

He gritted his teeth, forcing it into the back of his head.

He didn’t know where the sensitivity had come from. He was imagining things. He had to be. He was tired, hallucinating, or something like that—something. Moving, thinking, leaning back to avoid a hit—all of those things made small, mundane noises, as did lungs expanding to take in warm air.

He almost didn’t feel Onigawara’s fist slam him hard him in the nose. It was only when he heard his name in the crowd, and looked down, tasting blood, that he realised.

He cursed under his breath. He had no time to dream.

It wasn’t right for him to get so fixated. If he was sick, he would lie down and sleep after. He had a fight to finish right now, and he would finish it, Teruki decided, as he looked back, straight into the eyes of the boy called the Demon.

Blood was dripping onto his shirt. Teruki’s hand reached, and slowly smeared the red from his nose and lip. He couldn’t stop. His knees were bent, but he wasn’t down. He couldn’t give up. He couldn’t fall.

The last time he’d fallen—

“What’s up, ya chicken? Got no spoons to bend?” Onigawara looked barely grazed in comparison.

Something pulled Teruki’s gaze down. His walk didn’t look right—no, he realised—didn’t *sound* right. He looked closer and made out a barely-there limp. He’d been hit, too, at least—or maybe, he’d not healed completely from the last time he’d fought.
He had to take advantage. He pushed his hat down; it had slipped a little.

Teruki forced himself up himself again, ignoring the coppery taste in his throat. It, too, had a sound; the sound of a badly-tuned *shamisen* string.

*No, this isn’t real, this is dumb...*

He wasn’t right in the head. He could *see* the limp, quite clearly. He hadn’t heard anything.

Teruki growled under his breath. He couldn’t think about meaningless things. He was bleeding. He couldn’t stop. He wouldn’t. His legs wanted to run—and they did, straight ahead, faster than Onigawara had expected, off-guard.

Being off-guard had a sound—

— *no, it doesn’t!*

It wasn’t on his mind now; not when Teruki’s fist connected with Onigawara’s jaw in a sudden swipe. He heard the snapping of teeth, and made out the pink tongue caught between them.

Onigawara spat. Blood scored a line down his lip. Teruki didn’t stop. He couldn’t. His blood burned in his veins, and more of it seeped into his skin, as he pushed Onigawara back. It wasn’t enough—but Teruki turned to his side fast enough, and his shoulder was stronger. The other boy teetered. The limp was a giveaway now.

On impulse, Teruki hooked his leg around his, and pushed down.

*The bigger they come—*

Onigawara tripped.

The sight almost made Teruki laugh.

The rising sounds of the crowd as Onigawara landed on the ground with a thump was all that Teruki heard. He heard a groan, too—and then more, and more, as he leaned down, on top of Onigawara, and punched him in the face in retribution.

It didn’t quite make him bleed. Teruki did it again. Blood dripped from Teruki’s nose, down onto Onigawara’s face, making him flinch in discomfort. Maybe, that was better. Onigawara couldn’t get a word in edgeways. The sound of pain was all Teruki wanted to hear, as he punched him in the jaw this time. He could try trapping his tongue again, or breaking his jaw, or—the temptation was real—he could reach down for his exposed neck, and just *squeeze*.

He could hear Onigawara recoiling from the last punch, trying to breathe. He could just move his hands down—

“All right, enough! That’s that!”

Bandai’s voice sounded again. Onigawara’s head flopped to one side. Teruki breathed, in and out, fighting back a wave of sudden dizziness, and quickly pressed his wrist against his nostrils.

Bandai came into the ring, and looked down. “Stand up.”

Sleeve against his face, Teruki obeyed. Before he could say anything, his other wrist was lifted uncomfortably. The crowd started cheering again.
He was the winner.

On the ground, Onigawara shifted, trying to roll onto his side. Teruki didn’t feel like helping him up.

He was bleeding, clothes stained, but he felt better. Edano and Ryuzaki hadn’t quite satisfied him: not like the cheering of so many around him, and the flickering light gilding the unnatural yellow-blonde of the wig as his bloodied hand moved up to fix it.

The nosebleed didn’t matter so much. He could hear the crowd’s shock, and their praise.

“He beat Tenga…”

“What the fuck…”

“Is he really—“

No, Teruki thought, looking around. Of course I’m not, now you see?

He basked in the glow, taking in everything. This was perfection. The only sounds he needed to hear were the voices of many, united in awe of him, and only him.

He could hear Onigawara was pushing himself up from the ground. Teruki looked back, and was met with a look of pure hate. It was dirtier than the look his mother had given the newspaper at the latest esper-related headline, or at the last speech they had heard on the radio over dinner together, back when he had still been able to stomach seafood.

The mere thought of it made him feel ill now.

Onigawara huffed as he pushed his way out, and a few straying boys from the crowd went on after him. He listened more carefully, and found himself making out more voices than ever, more disapproving. There were more whispers. He could only make sense of some of them, but whispering had its own sound in his head; something scratching and creeping.

“He’s got to… “

“He had to, he had to have done …”

It clawed at his insides, not so much the words he could hear, but just whispering. He couldn’t understand why his head was putting sounds to things that didn’t need them.

“Hey, he cheated!”

One boy piped up from the ring, somewhere to one side. Teruki wasn’t trying to listen, but as he stood, knees threatening to buckle beneath him, he carried on hearing.

“Did you see him cheat?”

“He had to have done something! You don’t just beat Tenga like that!” Someone else had joined the argument: a boy with a deep voice coming from a square chest.

“Yeah, but did he?”

“Of course he had to, the bastard’s an esper!”

“Who said?”
“What, you standing up for him now?”

He heard the sound of a punch, and a handful of gasps. He didn’t turn to look at the crowd. His face was fixed, straight ahead. Blood carried on spurting, dripping down his chin. His head started to ache, and desperate to stop any more bleeding, he put his sleeve back to cover his nose.

“He beat him fair and square!”

“You’re just saying that ‘cause you bet all your money on him!”

“I’m not, he really didn’t do—“

He didn’t want to hear any more. He couldn’t say anything. Teruki wrought his wrist free from Bandai’s hold, then turned around and walked away.

Some of the others called after him. There was no point going back. His sleeve stayed glued to his nose, and he felt it, hot and unpleasant, staining the fabric. Dripping blood made him think of loose stones wobbling on a path, clinking with each step.

Fuji, still looming over the table, pushed his winnings towards him in silence. He backed away as soon as Teruki touched them, the look on his face half-disgusted, half-scared.

Teruki slid the notes into his pockets. A few coins dropped from his fingers. They, too, came down, and made strange little sounds: the sounds dropped coins made, nothing more, nothing less. Even those were unpleasant.

He didn’t pick them up. He didn’t want to.

Outside, the air had turned cold. It didn’t feel like summer was on the horizon at all. The wind blew, covering Teruki’s skin in goosebumps.

His leg hurt, and so did his arm, and the rest of him. His nose didn’t matter too much. The blood would stop, sooner or later. It didn’t matter if he bled, he thought to himself. It probably didn’t matter to espers, not if they were inhuman—or maybe it did, because Mob had run away bleeding. Mob had probably died like that. Teruki had killed him.

Mob, somehow, had to have changed him. He had done something, whatever, and now, Teruki was like him. He’d infected him, somehow. None of the papers had called espers contagious, and the thought seemed insane, but there was no other answer.

He wanted to sleep. His head hurt from noise and the pain of being punched. He could hear all of the strange sounds again—more freely now, without voices, without interference. The night was much calmer. The night sky, Teruki thought, sounded like peace, and what clouds there were made him think of swelling, sweet harmonies. Each star was a plink-plonk; a pleasant, sweet bell, something that sounded like dreams.

The sounds didn’t feel real, but he listened, feeling the gentle hum of his aura deep within, in harmony with them all. No-one could see him, and no-one could touch him. Even if it felt good now, he reminded himself, it wasn’t right: he was strange, messed up and sick.

The night was sweet, the sound of wind pleasant—but somewhere was a frequency, a note pitched too high, the sound of breathing, a pulse—

Teruki froze, throat suddenly dry. His aura burned in his chest. Someone else was out there, on the street. He could feel it.
Someone was following him.

He turned around. “Who’s there?”

“...Knew it.”

From the shadows, a figure approached. The boy wasn’t familiar, not like Bandai or Fuji had been, but he’d been some other face in the crowd, maybe the same boy who’d called him out in the first place. “I knew it,” he said, pointing. “Edano was right. You freak.”

“So what?” Teruki spat back.

“You’ll get what’s coming to you. Cheater.”

“I didn’t cheat.”

“Well, you’re an esper, aren’t you?”

Any longer, Teruki thought, and he wouldn’t be able to resist. His hands twitched by his sides, fingers demanding to grab the bastard by the throat and squeeze, like he’d almost done to Onigawara in pure frustration. He could do it now. Nobody would stop him. He could break him until he couldn’t breathe, and any minute, his legs would act on their own and he’d run—

“Then so what if I am?”

Something else reacted first: primal instinct.

Heat spilled down his arm. His aura flooded his vision. Teruki could hear its music, in harmony, in sync, perfect, divine. It felt so different, so liberated, and he, for a moment, felt more alive than when he’d beaten Onigawara’s face. He could feel it, and then, he could feel other things—

—a fast change in pitch, a slam, a cracking of bricks, then a snap and a scream—

He made sense of it too late.

It was only after the sounds that the yellow light settled that it all became clear, only when the boy’s body tumbled down next to the cracked wall, when a brick toppled from it and hit him, and didn’t even elicit a scream.

Teruki’s chest squeezed.

He wasn’t dead. He couldn’t be.

His heartbeat sped up. His hands started to tremble. Teruki looked down, and there was that feeling, his aura, comfortable and perfect and the same as the glow surrounding the body limp on the ground, one leg splayed oddly...

No, he thought: no, no matter how good it felt, it was wrong, messed up, not at all right—

“Fuck… you...”

He heard the curse, and saw the movement of shoulders. The brick tumbled from the boy’s back. He was alive, but a part of him wished he’d killed him, because now, he could see him getting up, an accusatory hand raising, pointing, voice ready to scream—

Teruki turned and walked away, trying to block out the voice.
He didn’t want to look back. He didn’t want to think about anything, but he could hear that crack, over and over, and mixed with it was the excess of noise from before. Every footstep, every breath, and more than that, every movement of muscle, every swish of wig hair, even the hand pressed under his nose, a strange kind of feeling—

He had to stay in control. He couldn’t be scared. He had no fears.

If it hurt, it had to be part of it.

Fighting wasn’t what he needed, not now. He was different. He was better than all of the others, just like he’d thought before, before he’d ended up sick. He could break bones and shatter glass with his mind.

If it hurt, then it came with being an esper. It had to be that.

If it hurt, it was proof he was better.

Pressing himself against a wall, he breathed in and out, hands rubbing at his arms to try and get some warmth going. He had to bear the noise. He was strong enough, it was silly...

He forced his head up, fighting back sickness.

Deep within, he could feel it; his aura, that feeling of restrained heat, something powerful, wanting release, wanting harmony. He knew what it wanted. It wanted freedom. He wanted it, too, more than anything else, but he had to control it, even if it hurt to keep it cooped in.

He didn’t understand it at all. He wanted release, but wanted it gone, too.

People didn’t feel like he felt. Humans didn’t feel like he felt. He was an esper, and espers couldn’t be human, he thought, biting back pain.

He didn’t know which he was, or which of the two he wanted to be.

Chapter End Notes

this chapter's notes
Summer was coming, and yet, the usual rain was nowhere in sight. There was only one thing on Sakurai’s mind, other than the urgency of his situation: and that was how frustrated he was at the heat, and how his hands slid on the surface of the steering wheel.

He wasn’t looking forward to actual summer—if he lived to see the new season.

He had been on edge since the previous day. He knew he needed a break; the last one had been hours ago, and every minute felt like a minute too many. His forehead was starting to slick up with sweat, and not just because of the heat. His eyes wanted to shut, too. All of him ached.

He couldn’t let himself sleep at the wheel. The sound of a voice piping up from the back seats reminded him, through his pain, that he couldn’t let himself sleep at all.

“Let… let go of me, damn you… Undo this… bastards! Let me go!”

Sakurai glanced up at the rear-view mirror, groaning. The back of Sakurai’s head was being stared at by a pair of angry blue eyes, stark against fire-coloured hair.

The boy could barely move, lying across the back two seats with his knees forcibly bent. His hands were cuffed together. The chain clinked as he tried to thrash around. Below that, his arms and legs were bound up in rope. Sakurai regretted not gagging him. It was the sixth time the boy had woken up, and to make matters worse, each time he rose, he seemed to be more and more of a pain.

He glanced at his watch. They had been on the road since last night. The sky had been pitch-black then, and it was blue now, perfectly clear; cruel, unfitting. Their last stop had been on a narrow, dawn-lit road, halfway between insignificant villages, amongst shading trees and faintly rustling bushes. They hadn’t been spotted, but any stop was a gamble. There was no time to sleep. Sakurai hadn’t even finished his cigarette before deciding to move again.

Hours had passed since. How many exactly, he had forgotten. He could only remember the sky: when dawn had come, and then midday, and now, the sky was the same shade of blue as the eyes of the boy he’d kidnapped.

Kidnapped, he thought. It wasn’t his first crime, but this one was public. There was no going back now.

The sun outside shone merrily, as if mocking him. His clothes felt heavier with each hour. The inside of the car was thick with sweat and stress, and now, as the boy tried to insult him with all of the swears a twelve-year-old could know, the atmosphere was turning to poison.

Koyama was useless.

“Damn it. Little brat’s woken up again.” The rough voice came from behind, late and blatantly obvious and in no way necessary. If Koyama was trying to annoy him, then he was doing a wonderful job, Sakurai thought. Koyama’s tone was sluggish with his own lack of sleep. Something about it was pushing him to the edge, even more than the red-haired boy’s protests.

“Spray him, then.”
“Hell, no!” The boy raised his voice, and Sakurai felt his ears start to hurt. “Don’t do that again, I’ll —“

“You heard? Spray him already!”

If he wasn’t driving, Sakurai would have sprayed the boy himself, and punched Koyama in the face to boot.

Koyama let out a low grunt, and finally got to work. He was clearly tired: clearly sloppy, but all the same, Sakurai knew, he was strong. Strength was enough for what needed doing. Koyama didn’t need sense. All he needed to do was to hold the boy down and spray enough of the sleeping-curse spray into his face—and that, at least, was something Koyama could do.

In the rear-view mirror, the boy struggled under his grip. Yelling out again, he tried to bite down on Koyama’s arm. Sakurai fought the urge to wince. He’d learned first-hand: the boy was a biter.

Koyama pulled out the bottle.

As quickly as he could, he held down the switch, and thrust the bottle into the boy’s face. The boy’s spluttering made Sakurai flinch, but he clung on to the steering wheel, and tried to focus on what was ahead.

The narrow roads, far from the city, were empty. At least, hearing the tell-tale thump of the boy falling back down, Sakurai knew they would be unlikely to crash if either of the two in the back seats pissed him off one more time.

“Got him,” Koyama said. He reached down and picked up the blanket on the floor. The boy had thrown it off of himself in the struggle. Koyama tossed it over his body, now horizontal on the seats again, and the image Sakurai saw in the mirror grew dull. Where there had once been red hair and vivid blue eyes, there was now a nonspecific grey bundle.

It felt safer that way, too—but Sakurai couldn’t relax. The three of them had far to go. Safety seemed like a dream. For all he knew, Suzuki had found out, sent the police after him, or other government espers, and any moment, he would be shot at and killed. If not that, then he would die slowly, in horrible pain: the boy was noisy, the spray wasn’t strong enough, and Koyama made for a terrible partner.

Still, he had done what he could. Koyama was like him, a fellow traitor, a Claw renegade. He couldn’t have stayed. Sakurai couldn’t risk either one being found out. He’d had no choice, not if Toyotama’s threat had been the real thing—and it didn’t feel fake.

This was his chance: not only to save himself, but to break free, to change. Maybe, he could even atone.

The creak of the seats gave away Koyama’s slump. A part of Sakurai thought it would be better if he did fall asleep, so that he could have peace. He had thought of knocking him out with his spray, too, but it was too precious to waste.

Claw had taken a liking to the spray as much as Sakurai’s government superiors. The Magister was a conjurer of high reputation. He had impressed. His spray was potent enough to last five hours on most espers—unique, strong, his point of pride.

Three hours had been the boy’s record.

The Magister was no wizard, either. All he was was a liar, a guilty man and a hopeless excuse for an
esper; desperate and relying on others, reduced to kidnapping in the face of blackmail, and a victim of his own stupid, stupid mistakes.

This was atonement, or something like it. Guilt, mixed with sweat and saliva, lined his chapped lips.

Ahead was nothing and everything, the road winding on, his future as rocky as the mountains on either side.

For hours, Sakurai had been seeing nothing but trees and stone and the snaking, unending road’s surface; much of it unpaved. All was quiet, save for the roar of the engine, and the odd passers-by, the sight of whom made his stomach churn—and it was that feeling, combined with the noise the boy made, that were making him wish he could drive the car off one of the countless bridges he had driven past.

He was losing track of everything. His sanity had left him the moment he had opened the letter, and read the name Toyotama.

His watch was always there, ticking and ticking. He could feel each movement, resonating with his pulse, telling him time was not on his side. The letter had threatened him to act before the end of that week—but he had made the move now, and Toyotama was no longer the worst of his fears.

The worst was the growing fear that they were being pursued.

Sparse signs dotted the roadside here and there, but too often, Sakurai found himself leaning over to read the map held down by his bag in the seat next to his. The red line drawn there flickered in front of his eyes.

Behind him, Koyama groaned. “How long now?”

A part of Sakurai feared he wouldn’t be able to stop himself ending Koyama the moment they were out of the car.

“I’m not sure,” he said. He didn’t turn around. The road had all of his attention; coming up was a bend. “Not long now, maybe an hour. Less than that, probably. Letter said, come prepared, and don’t expect an escort. Sleep, if you want.”

The letter was tucked under his bag. It was getting a little warm in the car for his comfort, but he didn’t dare open the window. If he lost the letter, or the map that Toyotama had sent with it, he would be a dead man. With the map had come his directions, and the order: destroy the plan, and keep this private, on pain of death.

Koyama wasn’t concerned. “No escort? We have to walk, too?” Sakurai heard him complain. “Rough. What a bastard. Crocodile-bitch sure ain’t a mind-reader. They even one of us, actually?”

Crocodile-bitch had become Koyama’s nickname for Toyotama. At least, Sakurai thought, there was space enough in Koyama’s small brain for a little mythology.

“I presume. They know about the 99th.”

‘Everyone knows about the 99th. Everyone knows now, for fuck’s sake.”

“They don’t know everything, do they?” Sakurai hissed, his grip tightening. “They knew my name.”

“Everyone knows your name, Sakurai.”
“My real one. Not the Magister.” He was exhausted. He had been driving for hours. He needed to rest, but the road wasn’t yet hidden enough. They were probably too close to a village; a sign had flashed past only five minutes ago, and he wasn’t willing to take the risk. His head was pounding, and not just from the car’s sweltering heat. “Toyotama didn’t call me the Magister.”

Koyama let out a laugh. Even under his breath, it was far too audible. “Who even calls you that?”

“My department. You know my line of work is kept quiet.”

“Mine ain’t.”

“Of course it wouldn’t be, Helix. You’re just a bodyguard. There’s too many of you, anyway. They wouldn’t give a damn if one died.”


“You’re lucky I did. You might as well be expendable. I’m not like that.”

He didn’t care if it was arrogant of him. Koyama could complain as much as he wanted, but it was true. He had known no other conjurers employed by the government. Claw had a handful in their hands already—his stomach twisted as he remembered—some former soldiers, for certain, though he had known none of them by name. Only a couple had looked too baby-faced for a tattoo of the 99th.

*The Magister* was one of a kind. Claw had won Sakurai Yuusuke over, even if it had not been for long. He had lied and deceived and conjured up crates’ worth of weapons, infused bullets with energy, messed with explosives.

He couldn’t forgive himself.

The back seat creaked as Koyama shifted around on it. Sakurai jerked as a boot met the back of his seat. He clung to the steering wheel, and cursed through his teeth.

“Shit—don’t do that again. Don’t you fucking dare.”

“Say I’m expendable and I’ll give you a taste of these fists.”

Sakurai didn’t need to turn around. The sound of Koyama cracking his knuckles made him shudder, unpleasant, piercing to the bone. His gritted with fury.

“You say one more thing, and I’ll slice through your neck.”

He couldn’t close his eyes, but he could focus, just enough. His hands were still on the steering wheel, and had to stay there, but the sheath he’d placed against the other front seat was a possession, and inside it was another possession. Possessions were his. Whatever was his was his only, marked by his signature, and the silent, springing feel of his aura, penetrating layers of fabric and metal.

The hilt of the sword in the sheath began to rise. Maybe, Koyama would get the message at the sight of a levitating weapon: one he knew could swing once and end him. Quickly, he raised it a little more, sunlight catching the surface at Koyama’s eye level.

“Shit, put that down!”

If it were anyone other than him—whose aura he felt at that moment, bristling against the back of his neck—he wouldn’t have hesitated to swing. The temptation was real. The temptation was real to turn around, too, just to see Koyama cowering; but taking his eyes off the road was too dangerous.
“I’ll put it down if you say you won’t disturb me again.”

The sword remained still, floating, halfway out of the sheath, showing off its sharp edges. Koyama’s aura seemed to ebb away, retreating to its wielder. Sakurai’s own aura, icy and tense, stayed concentrated all through his weapon.

“Fine.”

The rough sigh that followed it made him wish he could stop the car. Slapping or punching Koyama felt more appealing by the minute. Still, the sword was his favourite weapon. He didn’t like staining it.

Slowly, the blade began to sink down, back into the sheath. Sakurai lowered it slowly, just to intimidate Koyama a little more if he could. It did the job. Sakurai saw him retreat in the mirror.

“You know your side of the deal,” he said. “Keep it shut, and I won’t kill you.”

“That’s not what I agreed to,” Koyama said, crossing his arms.

“That’s what you’ll agree to. That, or we both get caught and we die.”

“Fuck that, we were already dead.”

The sword rose up again with a shink.

“Fine, fine! Just… just lemme sleep a little, all right? Kid’s gonna wake up again, and I just want a nap. That too much to ask for?”

“I said you could sleep,” Sakurai sighed. Annoying Koyama had starting to satisfy him; and then, the brute had done the opposite to him, all over again. He couldn’t wait for the drive to be over.

Whoever Toyotama was, they had to be some kind of sadist.

He could think of no-one with a tactic like theirs. Blackmail was one thing, and kidnap another, but to put two together while keeping their own hands clean was so wrong it disgusted him. Kidnapping the son of a trusted client—the son of the Interior Minister, no less—was ridiculous, and to boot, too high-profile to be kept secret, and to twist the knife, Toyotama had targeted two men relying on secrecy.

Speaking of the 99th was said to be treason. Traitors faced death.

Whoever had leaked the 99th Division’s existence had to have been a non-esper—or a brave, crazy freak.

His gaze narrowed, squinting past a dagger of sunlight. The road had taken them past hills and plain fields, and out into the mountains, on the way up to what the map called some sort of mountain trail. There were more trees now. There was less light, and more silence—natural silence, save for the engine and petty birdsong. Maybe, Sakurai thought, he could stop somewhere nearby. He needed a cigarette. He needed to eat something, too.

The car slowed for a moment as he navigated a bend, and then turned to look at the map, checking. He had almost made it.

Koyama, too, had shut up, and fallen asleep. It almost felt disappointing, knowing he would have to wake him as soon as they arrived.
The mountain pass turned into a snake-like thing, twisting around, rising and falling on uneven soil. He tried not to think of death, of crumbling rocks, as the landscape progressed, back down from stone to more-or-less forest, gold and green, branches brown blurs past the windows. There wasn’t long left at all. Toyotama, no matter their aims, had at least not messed up their map.

The red line came to a stop partway through the forest; at a small path cut by a dead end, foliage thick on all directions. It looked almost too perfect for concealing a car. Carefully, Sakurai parked between two trees, and shut off the engine. It looked to be the right place.

He could have his break now.

Koyama let out a yawn. “Get out,” Sakurai said. “Leave the kid if he’s not awake. We’re almost there. It’s walking the rest of the way.”

Koyama groaned, stretching out his huge arms. Sakurai wanted to do the same, but decided to wait until he got out. He just had enough in him to reach for his bag and his sword, sheathed again, and then the map, as useless as it was now. He turned around to check the back seats. Koyama had already got out, and the boy was still under the blanket, just safe.

Sighing, Sakurai got out of the car, and shut the flimsy door with a slam. Mountain pollen tickled his nose. He suddenly sneezed, the map fluttering out of his hand. Koyama grabbed it before it could float away. “What’s this? Mind if I see?”

“Be careful,” Sakurai said, wiping his nose. “It’s my property.”

He hadn’t named it his possession, and there was no use marking it, but Koyama wouldn’t tell the difference. The way he held it, by the tips of his fingers, made him certain.

In the meantime, Sakurai reached for a cigarette and lit it.

Koyama pointed down at the start of the red line. One large finger left an unpleasant dent; one he didn’t seem to have noticed. “This place? We’re here?”

Sakurai looked over to see. Koyama was pointing at a vast patch of green. The smallest of roads trailed to it, before coming to an end, and past that seemed to be nothing but more and more green. The real thing felt no different. He could see nothing past the trees, and the road, just like on the map, went no further.

“Looks like it,” he said. “That’s where the letter says to stop, and I’m certain this is the place. We’re walking from here on out.”

“What?”

“What I said. We’re walking. Whoever Toyotama is, they really don’t want us to be spotted.”

“How far?”

Sakurai didn’t answer. His hand into his back trouser pocket, instead, and pulled out a creased, clearly sat-on piece of paper, still warm. He hated the touch, and hated the texture, but it was all that he had, and with his cigarette between his teeth, he opened it up. It was another map, much more green, to Koyama’s chagrin, with another red line looping and trailing past trees and trails. The red pen had to have been Toyotama’s, and the sight of it made him uncomfortable.

“This far,” he said, taking the cigarette out from his mouth to exhale. “Don’t ask how long it’ll take. I don’t know.”
Koyama looked at him as if he were some kind of abomination.

“So, you don’t know who sent you this letter, you don’t know if they’re one of us or not, you’re telling me we’ve got to walk into the fucking middle of nowhere?”

Sakurai said nothing. It was true, all of it: true and absolutely unspeakable, worse and worse the longer he left the thought stew in his head. He, the Magister, proud and unshakeable, unmistakably loyal, he, of all people—

“For hell’s sake. I can’t believe I let you pull me into this shit.”

Koyama shook his head, and for the first time, Sakurai looked at his muscles with caution, imagining stone and bark snapping in huge, calloused hands. He could only bite back. Fighting was feeble, and killing was not an option, no matter how easy it seemed; how easy it would be, he knew, to lift up his sword with his mind and aim and chop cleanly.

“Shut it,” he spat, and bit his lip as it turned into a half-sigh, against his intention. “You know we’re both in danger here. If I didn’t get you, you’d get fucked over. I know you’ve been doing the leaking.”

He looked up, hoping Koyama wouldn’t see the shake of his jaw. What met him was a confused pair of eyes that made him think of some stage comedian. “Leaking?”

“Don’t play dumb. You gave Claw the 99th Division documents, didn’t you? I know you’re with them. That’s why I got you in, of all people.” One last thought lingered, pressing down and making his heart thrum. He swallowed—and it was for the best, he decided. “I was with them, too. And I know I fucked up. So I’m saving myself, and you too.”

He didn’t know if it could be called saving, not when it involved kidnap and getting on the bad side of a powerful politician and the law itself, but it was better than what he had let himself do. He had thought of saving himself back then, too, when he had heard word of a meeting, and slipped himself into Claw’s ranks, and let himself be picked to prepare weapons for something to come.

He had glimpsed Koyama in a corridor once, and then crossed paths at work. He’d put two and two together. Both of them were in danger if Toyotama was right.

“Fuck.”

Koyama’s voice was so quiet it almost felt wrong. Sakurai looked around, convinced the sound had come from elsewhere. Realising, he turned back again. “So what did they promise you?”

“They didn’t promise me shit except for the revolution. And I didn’t leak them,” Koyama rebutted, head in one hand. Sakurai could see him trying to hide.

Claw had promised him the revolution, too.

Sakurai could remember the words, burning into his skull. He could remember his first meeting, too, and the first speech he had heard, underground in a small meeting room.

Ishiguro, leader of Claw, was peculiar. Sakurai had not seen his face, concealed by a haunting, dark gas mask. Still, no-one had been scared. Sakurai had come out believing, one with the revolution to come.

He didn’t know if he believed now.
“You were on their side. You lied to our employers. I know I did. There’s no need to hide it.”

If that was Koyama’s secret, then it was nothing worth hiding, nothing now that they were both on the run from Suzuki and the government and the rest of the law. All the same, it felt odd to have Koyama and secret in the same sentence.

After the leak had happened, anything had become plausible. Still, Sakurai admitted, maybe he wasn’t the right person at all. Koyama was all brute force and muscle and barrier-breaking: as trademark a white-classification esper as the sky was blue.

“I really didn’t leak anything,” Koyama insisted. “I swear, you could get those papers and check for my fingerprints and you won’t find a speck of me on there.”

“I wouldn’t want to find a speck of you anywhere,” Sakurai said, straightening his glasses. Koyama really was too simple for the revelation of the century. “And I see now, they’d never put you in that role.”

“Are you saying I’m dumb?”

“Maybe. But at least you’re not that expendable.”

Koyama crossed his arms and sighed, so loudly that Sakurai looked around in desperation. He hoped that nobody had heard. “First you say this, then that. I don’t get you. Maybe you made all that up about me being in the same shit as you. Did you just get me here so I can carry the damn kid for you?”

“No. I told you, I know we’re in the same shit here. But if you can carry him, that’s a use for you.”

“Don’t call me useless!”

“I’m saying that’s your use. He’s not just someone anybody could handle.” Sakurai leaned back, one hand pressing against the car’s cold surface. Above him, the sky was much more pleasant to look at than Koyama’s face. “Those handcuffs are keeping his powers in check. It’s the physical side of him that’s the nightmare.”

He looked down at his hand. The bitemark had faded, but the memory lingered.

“He bites, yeah. Typical kid.”

“Kid or not, he’s powerful. You know, Suzuki and I have had this arrangement for three years now.”

Longer, he wanted to say: longer—but Koyama was formerly of 99-7. He had been in 99-7, too, for a week: not quite enough for someone like Koyama to learn his face, before the order for him had come and he had been reassigned.

99-7 was part of the 99th Division, too: but the wrong part, and that meant Sakurai could say nothing else.

“Three years? Damn. He had that arranged with you?”

“Naturally. It was part of my line of work. He hired me. I’d have worked for him even if he wasn’t part of the government, as long as he paid me, and didn’t out me as an esper.”

“And then we all got outed.”

“By someone.”
“Not me, I told you. Fuck you,” Koyama grumbled. “And they can say what they want, but they didn’t leak all our names. They don’t know who we are, do they. They’re not stripping me, either. Do they even know about these?”

Sakurai shivered, seeing Koyama’s hand drift down to his hip. His own hand twitched, half-consciously moving down to his trouser pocket. Underneath it, no different to the touch from the rest of his skin, was his mark—a little different from Koyama’s, he knew already, but the same for the most part: the same small black 99, in the same sin-black ink.

“I don’t think they leaked that. But I know yours already,” Sakurai said. “99-7.”

“Is yours still that, too? You got transferred out—“

“Mine’s mine. I’m not taking my clothes off for you.”

“Not that I’d like that,” Koyama huffed.

“That’s good. Keep to yourself.”

The thought of a naked Koyama made his stomach uneasy.

Trying to think of anything else, his mind turned to food. The wagashi from before was barely touched. The boy, and Koyama, too, hadn’t eaten for hours, either—not since the evening of the kidnap, if even then.

He could only hope that Toyotama wouldn’t leave them to starve.

His stomach grumbled, almost mocking. Sakurai shook his head, and Koyama let out a small laugh.

“Yeah, me too...”

“Yes.”

“C’mon, loosen up,” Koyama elbowed him, and Sakurai thought of punching him in the face for real this time, before he realised the intent had been playful. With Koyama’s brute strength, it was hard to tell sometimes. “So what’s this deal with Suzuki, then?”

Sakurai sighed. There was no use hiding it now. Koyama was in the same danger as him; and there was nothing but silence and birds in the trees around them. Nobody was listening.

He had already kidnapped the Interior Minister’s son. It didn’t matter what other laws he broke.

“The kid’s one of us. You know that.”

“Well, duh.”

He couldn’t tell if Koyama had known, or was just trying not to sound stupid. Both options sounded plausible.

“He needed something to keep the kid quiet. That room was sealed, so he couldn’t use his powers in it.”

“And Suzuki wanted you to do that? Seal the room?”

“I did what he asked.”

He hadn’t protested, and simply gone with it. He had done things wrong. He knew he had. He had
to atone, to change—and yes, he decided, confess. He didn’t know if he hated Koyama, but he knew he hated himself.

“He wanted that kid of his kept quiet, and I was the only one who could do that. Even if I did ally myself with the wrong side.”

“Did you know it was wrong?”

“I don’t know. I kept my head down as low as I could. Like Suzuki kept his kid quiet. Like a lot of other things were kept quiet, too.”

He had said too much already. Sakurai tasted regret on his tongue. He had been trained to not speak of his division’s actions, or of his connections, or of anything at all after he had been signed off from the 99th.

Protocol was such. Protocol could burn in hell, he thought, spitting on the ground.

Koyama had noticed. “Wait, what else was kept quiet?”

“You’ll either find out, or you won’t.”

Koyama grunted, unamused, but said nothing else. Sakurai took off his glasses and polished them with the edge of his shirt. Koyama leaned back on the car, so much that Sakurai thought it would tip.

For a few silent moments, life continued, and Sakurai didn’t feel like a man on the run, or a man in danger at all. He finished the cigarette and watched the birds in the sky. Pollen tickled his nostrils, and he furrowed his brows, thinking back to Seasoning, and Minegishi’s creeping green vines in his shop full of flowers. He wondered what Suzuki had thought of the bouquet, and what the flowers had meant.

He cursed Toyotama again, for good measure, as he watched the last of the smoke, and by Koyama’s sweaty, good-for-nothing side, let himself rest, even if just for a few more quiet minutes.

Chapter End Notes

Notes, mostly Toyotama-related.
Chapter 16

Reigen went to work for four days, trying not to think of what he had seen in the paper.

The newspaper page lived in his pocket, out of bounds to the boy sharing his apartment, but close enough for him to have it on hand. He needed it as a reminder; as an ever-present, slight weight. He couldn’t forget. He couldn’t let his guard down, no matter how calm the situation he was in seemed to be.

He felt both safer with the reminder, and more at risk. The boy was still in the apartment—his apartment. It was only temporarily, he had to remind himself. He had to get him out, sooner or later, but he had to keep his promise too, and accompany him.

The boy had to leave. He was even more certain of it now.

The image was unforgettable—those eyes, the hair, everything about the boy branded esper and killer on the newspaper page had only made him more eager to be alone in the apartment again. It wasn’t safe. He wasn’t safe. For all he knew, nobody was.

Mob had been quiet. Reigen didn’t dare admit that it frightened him. Mob had done nothing but stare strangely, and take the longest bath Reigen had ever known anybody to take, and eaten some of his food with few words other than thank you. He was obedient, and didn’t speak much, or protest, even when Reigen had re-coated iodine on his healing knees. It had stung, but Mob hadn’t cried out. For a kid, he wasn’t hard to take care of, not really.

Mob wasn’t bad. Reigen didn’t know what to think of Kageyama Shigeo.

Kageyama Shigeo had killed his family and attacked a neighbour, almost to his death. A house had burned by his hands. He was an esper, able to move bricks and knives and slice throats open with barely a movement. He was also fourteen, with dark eyes and hair cut into something exactly like Mob’s messy bowl-cut, though in the photo, Reigen concluded, it must have been a lot neater.

He didn’t want to believe it.

It was best not to think.

Mob had done him no harm. He had not even robbed him. Reigen had started hiding his money in a hidden suit pocket since coming to Seasoning, and bought a small safe that he had yet to use. Still—the boy’s hands had never been dirty, and never in the wrong place.

He had left him alone in the apartment four times now, for work. He had come back three times, and then once again, only ten minutes ago, on that Thursday evening. Mob had been in the same place each time, where he always was in the mornings as Reigen left, sat on the couch. His eyes seldom expressed anything. He ate what Reigen left him for lunch, and even cleaned the plates afterwards. That day, as Reigen came home, all of the bowls—even from last night, which Reigen himself had forgotten about—were drying off by the sink.

He was a little unnerving, if anything. He didn’t seem evil.

A part of Reigen wondered if he really was Kageyama Shigeo. There were probably other boys out there like him, plenty at that. He passed through the streets every day, seeing boys in school uniforms that looked the same, and there were children on the streetcar and around market stalls, with parents or alone, buying groceries. Kageyama Shigeo could be anyone, he reminded himself whenever his
It is true that your colleague at work, or the average passer-by, or beggar, or even child...

Shoudou Kirin’s essay, published a week ago, was still lingering, as he sat and ate dinner with the strange boy for company. He tried not to think of it through mouthfuls of rice and cheaply-bought fish, but he couldn’t help but watch Mob do the same.

Mob was expressionless. It was still unnerving, even after five days in one apartment. The boy was a quiet eater, and never complained. He kept his space clean, and folded up the blanket Reigen had given him every morning. He was polite—maybe even a little too polite for a boy of his age, and that thought made no sense when Reigen thought of not only Kageyama Shigeo, but the gangs, or whoever else had left the boy for dead in the alley.

Nothing about him seemed to fit the profile of someone branded dangerous.

Other than showing gratitude, Mob didn’t react much to food. Reigen had tried to cook for the past few days. That evening, he had overcooked the rice, by sheer accident. Mob had yet to complain. Reigen himself only realised after the first mouthful.

He didn’t say anything until he was midway through his plate, when he put down his chopsticks. “Is it all right?”

Mob looked up. He seemed neither thrilled, nor bitter. “Yes. It’s good.”

His own bowl looked emptier when he peered over, and Reigen sighed. “Sure?”

“Yes. Thank you.”

“Sorry I couldn’t do anything special.”

“No. This is all right.”

Reigen wasn’t much of a cook. Rice was more-or-less simple, even if he overcooked it sometimes. Meat could be boiled. Fish could be bought dried, or raw, and cooked into soup. His sole pride was stew, Enoki-style, his mother’s specialty, but he had not found the right mushrooms in Seasoning. He hadn’t searched both markets yet, but he wasn’t optimistic. Thinking of how much he had spent on rice alone, Reigen couldn’t help but wonder how much commonplace food from his homeland cost in the choking crowds of the city.

Stick to South, even if North is closer, Shinra had said. Reigen wasn’t far from North Market. South Market would be quite the walk away, so said the shoddy map he had brought. Maybe, when the boy had been dealt with, he would take the time to go there.

He hadn’t asked what the problem was with North Market. The conversation had changed.

Reigen tried not to think too hard about Kageyama Shigeo as he went back to eating in silence.

He and Mob had spoken before during meals, usually about nothing in particular. Reigen hadn’t wanted to bring up the topic of family, and he didn’t want to probe too much into Mob’s life. He couldn’t risk saying too much. If Mob really was Kageyama Shigeo, then Reigen knew—he was bare steps, a table’s length away from a murderer, and an esper at that. He had tried to distract himself, or to not let his fears show on his face.

Fears, he had thought to himself while at work, how ridiculous. It didn’t feel right to be scared of a
As long as he didn’t provoke him—and for all he knew, Mob might not be an esper, let alone Kageyama Shigeo—he was safe.

He would get him out that weekend.

He cleaned up once he had finished, Mob politely nodding his thanks as Reigen took his bowl and placed it by the sink. The boy seldom left anything in his bowl, whether out of politeness or hunger—probably the former, Reigen thought as he washed. After the anpan from the first day, Mob had never asked for seconds, even when Reigen had offered them and said he didn’t want any more himself.

Leftovers became the next day’s food, for breakfast or lunch. It was cheaper than takoyaki. As good as it was to have something hot from the cart, his wallet was far from bottomless. Having an extra mouth to feed wasn’t making things any better.

He hadn’t really minded spending a little extra, he admitted, leaving the bowls out to dry. He refilled the kettle. “Mob,” he called, “you want more tea?”

Turning to face him, he saw that Mob had taken his usual place on the couch, as if Reigen had banished him there. “Yes, please.”

“Yes. I’ll put that on. Got something to show you, too, actually.”

Once the stove was on, Reigen wiped his water-damp hands on his trousers, and went over to the door, where he had left his work bag. His blazer had long since been shrugged off on the floor. His tie snaked on top. He hadn’t bothered to pick them up. The feeling of removing them had been a relief after yet another meaningless day at the typewriter.

The kanji had started to blur. Reigen had wondered if he would need glasses in the coming months and days of white paper and ink and clattering keys.

Office affairs didn’t matter, not now. He had taken himself to a shop during his lunch break, Mob’s single shoe tucked away in his bag. Everything else had been guesswork. He hoped he hadn’t messed up too badly. His mother might have complained at the price, even for second-hand clothing, but he had accepted it with a sigh. Enoki, he had learned the hard way, was cheaper in just about every way.

Looking after a child wasn’t cheap. At least, in Reigen’s case, it wasn’t permanent.

He took a paper bag out of his case, and gave it a squeeze. All was intact. He could tell from the hardness meshed with the soft.

Mob was still sat on the couch, seemingly staring at the opposite wall, and then at Reigen himself. Reigen’s stomach turned, thinking of Kageyama Shigeo again; of Mob maybe having the power to move, and destroy whatever he pleased in his sight. Three more days, he thought; three more times he would sleep, and then, it would be Saturday, Mob would be on the way to his grandmother, and he would forget Mob the moment the boy stepped into the house of his relative.

Reigen, of course, was no kin of his. He knew nothing about Mob’s grandmother—if she was even real, he realised, thinking of Mob’s story about Negi that seemed to make no sense—but Mob couldn’t know that he knew. He had to play along, and avoid questions, not knowing what the boy could be capable of, and not knowing anything else.
“Hey, Mob?”

The boy stared at the bag in his hands. Reigen tried to smile. No matter how little he knew of his family, or much about Mob at all, he couldn’t imagine it being acceptable to go to someone’s house in ragged clothing. “Here,” he said, walking over and passing the bag to him. “It’s not much, but I felt bad. You deserve something better.”

It wasn’t much, that was true—bought a little cheaply, the bag itself nothing much, but what was inside was in a decent enough state to be given. Reigen had been an only child, but his mother would come home with pre-owned clothes in his childhood days, kitting him out in whatever she could obtain from friends, or the markets, or the occasional gift from the nearest town whenever she could travel there.

He wasn’t sure what his mother would think of him now, but a part of him felt good, seeing the boy’s eyes widen as he pulled out a pair of grey trousers, a shirt, a neat green sweater, and a plain white vest to wear underneath.

He looked up, and suddenly, Reigen didn’t know how best to explain it.

“It’s for you, kid,” he tried to say. “You know… to meet your grandma. You can’t go out in that thing, it’s a mess.”

As if on cue, Mob turned around to look at his old sweater, hanging off the edge of the couch. Most of the stains had come out with a good scrub with soap, but Reigen had found himself scrutinising it late in the evening, picking out threads and signs of wear. Maybe, buying a new one had been impulsive—but seeing Mob’s hands running over it, feeling the fibres of something new to him, made him stop thinking of the money spent on the sweater.

Mob pulled out something else: something Reigen had found and spent a fair few minutes debating, thinking of the sight of blood on grey and white cotton, trailing down skinny legs. “New socks, too. You can take mine if you want, but I did get you some new ones.”

The new ones were plain, but Mob didn’t seem to object. He lifted them up, turning them around as if to make sure that they were real, or admiring something far more valuable than a simple pair of socks. Reigen thought back to the day he and his father had gifted his mother her pen. Mob treated the clothes with the same kind of care.

With the thought in his mind, he wondered when Mob’s birthday was. The article had said nothing about Kageyama Shigeo’s birthday.

He didn’t want to believe that article was true at all.

He watched, instead, as the boy put the clothes down on the couch, careful, brushing the sweater over again with his palm. There was no dirt, not that he had seen, but Reigen hoped it didn’t smell too strongly. If it did, then Mob didn’t seem to mind as he turned back to face him. There was a slight gleam in his eyes, and the nod he gave seemed like gratitude.

“Thank you.”

“Oh, no problem, no problem...”

If it was a problem, either to his wallet or conscience, then Reigen tried not to think of it. The thought of giving, instead, filled him with peace. It almost felt normal, like giving a gift to an ordinary boy, to someone that did not at all look like a murderer, who had no chance of being an esper, and whose existence was in no way a threat looming over Reigen, or the entire population of Seasoning.
Mob looked almost normal. Reigen didn’t know any more.

The bag crinkled some more. Mob’s eyes widened a little—and Reigen’s own almost did, seeing the boy react to something, as he pulled out a pair of slightly-worn, but decent, clean lace-up shoes.

“Oh, yeah, I… kinda used your old one to get the size right. Nothing else, though. The clothes might be too big.”

Mob put one shoe on his lap, and lifted the other, watching the light reflect on its surface. The shopkeeper hadn’t done a bad job, Reigen thought, of making them look that little bit fresher, tolerable enough to pass as some kind of gift.

He put the shoes back in the bag, and started to put away everything else. The gleam in his eyes hadn’t faded. “Thank you, Reigen-san.”

“Like I said, not a problem.”

It felt like the right thing to do, no matter how uneasy the boy had started to make him. He had to mask how he felt—and the burden on his wallet wasn’t the biggest issue. Espers were real. He was in the same room as one, if his fears were correct. He couldn’t stop thinking that maybe, they were.

Reigen hesitated, before putting a smile on again. He didn’t quite feel settled down. He needed space, and for a moment, thought of how he could get it. “You can… go try them on. Sorry if I messed them all up.”

The boy didn’t question his look—but then, Reigen thought, Mob never questioned anything.

“Did you lose the other shoe, by the way? You only had one.”

Mob nodded, quaintly. His hands clung to the bag as if it were treasure. “Yes. I’m sorry.”

“Nothing to be sorry about. It’s best this way.” Reigen said. “New pair, how does that sound?”

“Good.”

“Then go try it all on. The bathroom’s downstairs, you know by now.”

“The bathroom?”

“Yeah, kid. I… I just need one minute to clean up in here.”

Reigen shared the bathroom with the landlady and landlord downstairs. With them out seeing Yanagi’s sister, the place was all his. It was lucky, he thought, trying to hold himself together. How he would have hidden Mob, as quiet as he was, he couldn’t begin to imagine.

Mob would be gone this weekend. Yanagi would come back and find no trace of the visitor.

“All right,” Mob said, still clutching the bag. It was as if he feared that dropping it would taint it, or leave it splattered with imaginary mud on the floor. The floorboards were more-or-less clean, the apartment barely lived in.

Reigen had spent more time sleeping in bed than anywhere else. He’d cooked a little, but other than dealing with Mob, he’d had no energy for anything.

“Reigen-san?” The boy piped up, suddenly.
He turned around, startled. “Yeah?”

“Will… will I still be leaving on Saturday?”

Reigen remembered the promise. He had spent that day’s lunch break shopping for clothes, but on Monday, he had gone to the station to ask for tickets to Negi.

He hadn’t bought them. The thought of Mob and Kageyama Shigeo, newly discovered with the paper still fresh and untainted by sweat in his hands, was still new, still nerve-wracking and unclear. He’d been too scared.

“Yes,” he stated, trying to push aside any doubts. “Yes, of course. I keep forgetting to get those tickets. I’m sorry, I’ve just been busy at work, and I have no time at lunch…”

Mob seemed disappointed; an oddity. “Oh.”

“No worries, kid, no worries. I’ll get them.” Reigen gestured, as if to shoo away the concern. He wasn’t sure if it worked. “I’ll get them on the day, if I keep on forgetting. And like I said, I’m coming with you—that’s why it’s Saturday, all right?”

“All right.”

“You’ve got to stay safe out there,” he continued, walking up to Mob and pressing a hand to his shoulder. “I’ll walk you straight to your grandmother’s house, like I said. Do you remember how to get there from that station?”

“A little,” Mob nodded.

“Better than nothing. We’ll ask around. Chin up. I’ll get you there.”

“Thank you.”

“Now come on, you know where the bathroom is. Sorry there’s no mirror. Try it all on and tell me, and I’ll see if I can change anything tomorrow. Got to look good, right?”

Mob didn’t answer. For a moment, Reigen thought the boy had seen through him; seen his gaze wandering over to where he had tossed his jacket, or the thin, building layer of sweat on his hands. He didn’t look back much once he turned back to the door, where—barefoot, which looked odd now that he had a pair of shoes to wear—he opened the door, and silently walked out.

Reigen heard his footsteps through the wall, and then, as he tiptoed closer to the entrance to listen, the click of the bathroom door. He sighed. All was well.

He hoped he hadn’t seemed too condescending. His hands were still shaking. He couldn’t risk displeasing a possible esper whose powers, deep down, terrified him. He couldn’t stop his breath hitching, either, as he reached for the jacket he had dumped on the floor, and fished the article out of his pocket. He stood there, stone-still, and found himself scanning it, over and over.

The face in the photograph stared back. Kageyama Shigeo. Reigen mouthed the words, but didn’t dare say them. The more he stared, the more he leaned in and out again and held it up to the light, the more it seemed to take on Mob’s face, until he almost couldn’t dispute it.

It didn’t seem possible. Some part of him couldn’t forget the argument on that January morning in the office of Shiitake Evening, being on the left side of the table and arguing that espers didn’t exist. It didn’t feel real, even after the fire and the news of the shooting, after all of the speeches and
warnings. Kirin Shoudou’s article didn’t feel real. Suzuki Touchirou’s speeches—the words of the stern, yet concerned Interior Minister didn’t feel real. The photograph of the boy didn’t feel like the photograph of a cold-blooded killer.

Finding Mob in the alley hadn’t quite felt real, either.

Reigen thought of Enoki, and of how much calmer his life could have been, had he stayed in his hometown and never left.

The kettle suddenly whistled. Reigen leapt up in surprise, the article still in his hands. He didn’t think of it as he went to switch the stove off. Mob wasn’t back yet, and he left the kettle there to settle a little; he would brew tea once he returned.

He needed to hide the sheet of paper, too, maybe in a better place. He looked down at it one more time. It was best not to think of such things. He had to keep on pretending. He knew nothing, in Mob’s eyes. That had to remain, until the day Mob left on Saturday, disguised as Reigen’s nephew, or something like that, whatever he’d think of.

Why don’t I just hand him over?

He had thought of that, from the moment he had first seen the article and the photograph, and put two and two together. It would be the right thing to do, even if Mob wasn’t Kageyama Shigeo. The police would reunite him with his family, and Reigen would wash his hands clean of the affair.

At the same time, he had been beaten up. It felt wrong, when he had already promised the boy he would help. His stomach churned, thinking of the state he had found him in, too, and he couldn’t forget it.

Mob needed help. Reigen wasn’t sure if he needed help himself.

He was best off without help. He couldn’t risk anything. The police would tie him to Kageyama Shigeo and call him some sort of collaborator. Reigen knew nothing, but the thought of it chilled him right through. It was too much of a risk, too much of a gamble. He was in danger, whichever way he went, whoever he sided with, because Mob had come into his home—

“I’m back.”

Reigen jerked, suddenly startled. The sheet slipped from his hands. He tried to catch it—and failed.

The article, opening up, as if to mock him, fluttered down and slipped between his discarded shoes. Mob reached down for it, and Reigen felt his heart leap into his throat. “Don’t, it’s just trash—“

It was too late.

Mob, standing in the apartment entrance in his new clothes and shoes, had already picked it up. His eyes were on it, reading, making out kanji and making sense of the paper. Reigen couldn’t take it from him. He cursed himself for tearing out the article—if it had been the whole paper, it would have been less obvious, but there it was, and it was too late. He couldn’t tear it out of his hands.

He couldn’t reach for it. His arms were paralysed. A horrible taste began to rise in this throat.

“Mob?”

It was too late to change anything.

Mob’s eyes were fixed on the paper. In silence, slowly enough to make Reigen’s stomach turn, they
looked back up, shadowed with silence.

“You… you know.”

Reigen shook his head. The gesture didn’t convince himself. “Mob, I—I swear, I wasn’t—“

There was nothing he could say at that moment. He found himself without words, for the first time in a long time, as if his head had betrayed him completely. Mob’s eyes—Shigeo’s—were on his, in a way that disturbed him even more than the headline of the paper, black and white and bold, its message damning.

There was an esper in front of him.

“You know,” Mob mumbled. His lips barely moved.

Reigen’s mouth was dry. He couldn’t say anything, and he couldn’t move, either, as if some invisible trap-door had been opened beneath him, and more and more of him was falling into that void, helpless, unable to fly and ready to crash down.

His hand shook as it reached out. “Mob…”

“You’re going to hand me over to the police.”

“No, Mob, listen—“

“You kept me here because you wanted to hand me over.”

“Mob—“

“Not because you were waiting for Saturday to go with me.”

“Mob, did… did you really do it?”

He regretted saying it as soon as the words came. He couldn’t help but stare, even if it was dangerous to. He was eye-to-eye with an esper, the genuine article, one who had supposedly killed and destroyed and injured and hurt. Mob could break his head off if he did the wrong thing. He had the power—and that was who Reigen had been keeping in his apartment for days.

Reigen had kept a killer in his proximity, and been in denial of it. His stomach twisted. Mob said nothing at all.

Why he hadn’t handed Mob over, he didn’t know.

He had wanted to hand him over. He should have, he knew. It was the right thing to do, so his moral compass had said. Handing him over to the police was what he should have done: it was the only right thing to do to criminals, but there had been something more, he knew, and he hated himself for thinking of that something more. There had been the shock, and the sight of the boy in that state, laying there, washed-out skin on dark concrete, blood too—

Reigen’s vision flashed with the colour of blood. He remembered. The past was present all of a sudden, a pain in his leg. He could only wince, trying to push the thought aside, but his body stood stiffened and still, numb apart from the ache.

He tried to reach out, uselessly. His throat constricted, and relaxed far too late.

“Mob, wait!”
There was no use.

He could already hear the door clicking open, and then slamming backwards. Reigen could only stand there, struck down, with only the hairs on his skin strong enough to stay up at all. His arm finally moved. One hand pressed against the wall, desperate. The shock still rang through his chest.

His heart wouldn’t rest. There was a foul taste in his mouth: something that felt like guilt. It was the kind of thing that he hadn’t felt for a long time—the guilt that came with telling lies, lies that he had grown accustomed to, like bad-tasting medicine that could be sweetened with something like anpan and the comforting looks of his parents, and the security of four steady walls.

Mob was in danger outside. Reigen couldn’t stay calm. If the newspaper hadn’t lied—from Mob’s reaction, it had to be real—then Mob was dangerous, just as he had feared.

It didn’t feel right.

Mob was an esper, and one that had killed. He was also weak and spindle-limbed, his wounds not quite healed and face pale even in the light, even with his belly filled with something warm that Reigen had made. He was two things at once, each one contradictory. He was Kageyama Shigeo, a dangerous esper, a murderer. It was certain now—and yet, Mob was also a child. Kageyama Shigeo was only fourteen, and Mob was Kageyama Shigeo, and Mob had been lying there, bleeding and starving, helpless and weak. It didn’t make sense. Reigen’s head wouldn’t work.

His body snapped out of the freeze. Gut instinct took over.

He felt cold air brush against the hairs on his arms, exposed with his sleeves rolled up and sticky with sweat. His legs were acting alone, and so were his hands, pulling back the same door and slamming it back. His lungs breathed, in and out. Something cut into his throat—his own voice, from shouting too loud.

“Mob! *Mob!*”

Reigen didn’t know why he was calling his name—why that name, and not Kageyama Shigeo. Reigen didn’t know why he was running. In that moment, Reigen realised, he didn’t know anything at all. He didn’t know Mob. He didn’t know Kageyama Shigeo. He didn’t know anything about the boy running away, who he was now chasing.

As he ran, he realised, deep down—he didn’t know *himself* either.
Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

Content warning: sensory overload, deprivation and assorted mindfuckery.
Things do not go to plan.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Teruki hadn’t slept for two days.

He could hear the noise, still, as he forced himself out of the house. He felt it come from all corners:
from distant voices, from breaths, from the movements of eyes. It was impossible to blank it all out.
Footsteps had turned into hammers beating his skull. Leaves rustling in gentle wind felt like half a
world caught in turbulence.

He didn’t understand it at all. He just couldn’t think.

Nothing else felt right, either. The house had been too cold, then too hot as soon as he’d wrapped
himself up. He couldn’t remember what, if anything, he had eaten. It didn’t matter so much; none of
it had been kept down. The taste of vomit lingered still on his tongue, no matter how hard he had
tried to wash the tang out. The air felt stale wherever he went.

Out of sight in the shadows of dusk, Teruki pressed himself up against the nearest wall. The cold
surface stopped none of the pain, but for a second, something else seemed to settle, as if the pressure
threatening to break out of his body was ebbing away.

It was too good to be true. Before he had time to breathe out, the feeling lashed out in full force
again.

Teruki groaned.

One hand tugged at the collar of his shirt, trying to loosen the fabric around his neck and against his
chest. Having cold air there didn’t help, either. Nothing had helped at home, and—he cursed, trying
to get his breathing in order—nothing he could do outside was helping, either.

He had to bear it, even if he didn’t want to. It had to be part of the change. He couldn’t explain it any
other way, and it had to be that—it had to be, even if that a part of him thought it was wrong. It
wasn’t normal, that part of him said. Something else told him it was.

He didn’t know what he was now.

He needed some kind of distraction. His fists weren’t itching for a fight any more, but if he’d end up
in one that evening, he’d take it. He needed something to rid himself of the strain. He’d start a brawl
and make someone bleed, break their bones, kick their teeth, whip out a knife…

He couldn’t.

He couldn’t think straight, but—he was still human. He had to be; he had to cling to that part of
himself. He wasn’t insane, not like the terrorist espers he’d heard about, killing on sight and leaving
spoons in their wake. He wasn’t like that. He couldn’t be.
A small, yellow sliver twisted in the lines of his palms. He tried to concentrate, forcing it back, and felt its heat flicker out. The feeling wasn’t there on his hand any more, but it was still inside him, heavy and so hot it seemed to burn through his flesh; but when he’d looked there the last time, he’d found the skin perfectly smooth and intact. The sight of it made him sick.

It wasn’t right. He hated his powers—but god, he could feel something else in that familiar heat, something so real and, deep down, thick and homely and wonderful. The longer he closed his eyes and thought of its core, the more he felt at one with that feeling, it and him indivisible, and how he needed it, how he wanted to—

No.

He didn’t need anything.

Teruki tugged at his mess of matted wig-hair, and desperate, slammed his head at the wall.

It hurt. He bit the pain back, and did the same thing again. The pain worsened—but this pain was different. The pain that told him he was still in control. He was himself. It didn’t matter if that pain killed him. He would die by his own fate, and not from something that was taking him over, something the sensible part of him didn’t want.

He did it again, and again—anything, he begged as his skull shook, anything. Anything felt better than the headaches and the burning under the skin and all of the noise he was hearing.

Everything had a sound, he had learned over the last few days. Even seemingly silent things, silly movements or gestures, made sounds bloom in his mind. A hand moving up—his own, clinging to the wall, fingertips clinging to dips between bricks—made him think of notes rising in pitch. His head against the wall felt like something much lower.

He bit his tongue in desperation.

Slumping forward, tasting blood, he fought the urge to scream. Screaming would do him no good. The darkness of the street was a much-needed shelter. Nobody could see him. Nobody could hear him, because he wasn’t human, not now; he was dangerous even when he didn’t know what he was, what he wanted to be—

Something seemed to shift in the atmosphere. Teruki shuddered. Blood and saliva slithered its way down his lip, but his arms wouldn’t move to wipe it all off.

Deep in his chest, something gave a twinge. The feeling, the odd pressure he’d felt, eased for a moment, before tightening in one place and loosening in another. He couldn’t quite understand it—but he could feel something move, some kind of presence that he didn’t quite have the words to describe.

People meant nothing, their noise dumb and mundane and messy. This time was different.

Something was coming; something Teruki couldn’t make sense of.

He couldn’t understand what that strange feeling was, but it had a sound, and that sound, stirring, slow, felt like it was drawing nearer. Something twisted under his skin, then slithered and shocked, through the back of his head, then squeezed his stomach. He couldn’t bear the discomfort. Teruki leaned against the wall again, forehead pressed close, trying to get a hold of himself.
The noise was getting louder, closer and closer.

He had to get away, somehow. He strained, trying to push himself off the wall, but his limbs were shaking, and he could barely gather the strength to move. His head hurt, as did his shoulders and legs, the toll of the fight with Onigawara resurfacing. He’d long since cleaned up the blood that had poured from his nose, but he could remember how it had felt, cracking away. He could feel it still, even if he knew it wasn’t there any more.

Teruki forced himself up. His head was spinning, but he couldn’t let it stop him. He let go of the wall, and biting back all his dizziness, ran. Colours danced and stabbed through his eyes.

He was barely a street away before he found himself slumping against another wall, unable to breathe. His throat felt raw. His heart pounded, the tremor mixing with the burn past his ribcage; and had he eaten anything earlier, he knew, he would have been sick.

That strange something was still coming, sound growing louder, the strange feeling within growing more ominous. A deep, unwelcome hum rumbled through his ears.

He couldn’t escape.

A voice came from behind. “Hey, you weren’t half bad that day, ya know?”

Teruki remembered it. Instincts kicked in, and he inhaled, trying to gather what strength and pride he still had. He wasn’t in the mood for a rematch, not now—but if the worst came to worst, he would have to.

“Ya put up a good fight.”

He didn’t want to think about it—but the voice was unmistakable. “...Onigawara?”

The sound of footsteps made him cling to the wall, hoping he might ignore him. The pressure surrounding him didn’t change.

Slowly, he turned around.

It wasn’t Onigawara at all, even when the voice had sounded exactly like him. No, Teruki realised—he had to have hallucinated it, because the voice had come from a boy he didn’t recognise at all. He was probably around the same age, if not younger, though the firm look in his eyes made him think of someone like Edano, trying to play up the act.

There was a green jacket tied around the boy’s waist, sleeves stained brown with blood.

Teruki was sure he had had seen it before. He had fought a weak esper with a green jacket not long ago—and he’d made him bleed, too—but that boy had been different. He was sure of it. How this boy had obtained the same jacket, down to the stains on the sleeves, he couldn’t fathom.

“Got me good, even if you were half crazy...” Onigawara’s voice came from the boy’s mouth. It didn’t match his appearance.

“Who are you?”

The voice suddenly changed. “Psh, who am I kidding...”

What replaced Onigawara’s rough accent was something Teruki didn’t think he had heard before. He tried to make sense of it, pulling the sound out of the surrounding noise, but didn’t get anywhere.
He couldn’t concentrate. “That fight was a fluke. You’ve seen Onigawara fight before, and he doesn’t fight that bad.”

“...What are you saying?”

“I’m saying he hadn’t recovered from the last time. You got off easy.”


“You’re not as great as you think you are. You’re too much like those idiots. Maybe you’re still trying to act like them.”

“One of them? Who are you—who are you talking about?”

“More like, what are you talking about?” The boy rebutted, his arm suddenly reaching out and giving Teruki a shove. It wasn’t strong, but it was enough to push him back against the wall.

He could almost smell the blood staining the jacket’s sleeves. Teruki shuddered. The action brought with it more noise.

“You’re the one lying to them. Are you lying to yourself, too? Trust me, you can’t lie about that.”

“I’m not lying!” Teruki raised his voice. It hurt to do it, but he bore the pain. “If you heard something, then it’s not real, Edano made it up—“

“I can feel you now. You’re lying. I can feel everything, and I don’t want to be feeling it. You’re making me sick.”

Teruki felt sick, too. He thought back to the fight with Mob and the horrible feeling that had come after. He thought he had caught something from him, and maybe, he had. Mob had turned him into an esper, a monster, a mess. Any illness would have been better, he thought: something he could either die from, or find a cure for. It would have been escapable, either way. What he was stuck with was worse. He hated it—just like he hated the boy in front of him, so close that it was tempting to punch him.

The grip on his shoulder felt like it burned through his clothes and into the skin of his shoulder, branding, unpleasant. He needed it off, and away from him.

“What are you feeling? Get away from me.”

He tried to push him off, but the boy was having none of it, and grabbed his hand instead. It was slick with sweat, the sound it set off in Teruki’s head unpleasant as a rusted door. He tried to pry it off, but it stayed there, resisting.

“The rumour’s true, isn’t it? You’re an esper.”

“I told you, I’m not an—“

“Takes one to know one.”

He didn’t want to believe it.

He wanted to run, but he was blocked, an oversaturation of noise thrashing at his skull. Teruki looked up, past the bloodstained jacket, and took a good, proper look at the boy’s face for the first time. He really did look about the same age, hair parted midway. The eyes that stared down were hard, serious.
He tried to push him back one more time, and failed; the hand stayed on tight. Teruki tried again, trying to at least move his clasped palm, so he could dig his nails into the boy’s wrist. He didn’t make it that time, either.

Somehow, the boy was stronger than him, or he’d grown weak; which of the two, he wasn’t sure. It was hard to stay up, hard to maintain anything with the touch and the sounds of the stranger, standing far too close, pressing too hard against his trembling hand. Something else was there too, past all of the strength—something that felt like a heartbeat, but with such a strong resonance that it felt like much more.

He felt something echo within.

_Takes one to know one—_

“I’m Takenaka. I want to help you.”

Teruki felt the sounds around him growing in volume. He gritted his teeth, and tried to push back one more time.

His muscles gave up. “No,” he said, voice hoarse and throat dry. “I don’t need help.”

“I want to help you,” Takenaka repeated. His hold loosened, but the noise that came with every one of his movements continued. “I can feel it. Your aura. You’ve got an aura. You leave a signature, even when you’re not displaying. I can tell where you are.”

Teruki felt nauseous; even more so, as he felt that tell-tale heat burn, searing through organs and skin. It wanted release. He needed to use it. It wanted out, and he wanted _it_.

He didn’t understand, but he _wanted_—

“If I know, then they know, too. And I can feel that you’re suffering.”

“No, I’m not.”

“I just want to help.”

“I don’t need help!”

“Do you want to get yourself killed?” Takenaka snapped. His hand slipped from Teruki’s, before backing away, and raising both hands in a gesture of peace. “Just… just _listen to me_. You’ll put yourself in danger if you keep going like this.”

“How do you know what I’m doing?”

“Like I said, I can feel you. That’s what I am.”

Teruki didn’t reply. Takenaka’s stare felt dagger-tough, and the sight of blood on the jacket’s sleeves made him feel worse by the second. He couldn’t let himself be weak. He could take care of himself. He could fight, he knew, better than anything, even without his powers. No matter what Takenaka had said, he had beaten Onigawara fairly, and if he needed more, there was always the power within him, hot as the sun.

It was strong; so strong he could feel it urging within. Teruki imagined Takenaka being pushed back, like Edano had gone flying the first time. He could make him fly if he wanted. He could break walls to pieces, like he had broken the neighbour’s window to steal her wig. He could do anything. He
could push Takenaka into a fence, break glass and stab him with it, pull a brick out and have it batter
his skull until that jacket was more than just stained…

You can, you can, something within seemed to whisper.

“I can feel you right now. You’re unstable.” Takenaka said, the words damning. “You need to calm
the hell down. All your ‘I’m better’ bullshit isn’t going to save you. You’ll either go crazy, or Claw’ll
find you and you’ll get roped in with them.”

It was hard not to flinch at the name. His mother had cursed them, hands screwing up the newspaper:
and the radio called them killers and terrorists and madmen. Teruki wasn’t like them at all, but the
feeling was there, unavoidable, even thrilling deep in his gut: he knew he could kill but he couldn’t
but oh yes he could—

“I’m not unstable, And I won’t side with those bastards. I’m not with them. I won’t…”

“I can feel it. Your aura’s all over the place. You’re contradicting yourself. It’s messing you up.”

“Leave me alone!”

He’d had enough. Teruki charged at Takenaka, knocking him off balance as he kicked off the wall.
Teruki felt it, and took advantage. He could still push, even if he wasn’t as strong as he’d been a
week ago, and even if the strain made his vision blur and his headache intensify.

He had to fight back—

“What are you…?”

“Shut up,” Teruki hissed. Takenaka was fast enough to grab his hands again and force another
deadlock. “Shut up, or I’ll… I’ll hurt you.”

He couldn’t think of a better threat. Takenaka didn’t stop his resistance, the two of them pushing
back at one another with equal force and getting nowhere. Teruki knew he couldn’t hold on for long.
His arms were tiring. If Takenaka didn’t resist, he’d use his powers on him, no matter the
consequence. He had to. He had to...

“If you use yours, I’ll use mine,” Takenaka threatened. Teruki held his ground, only just. “And I
don’t want to.”

“Then don’t!”

“I’ll do it if I need to.”

“The hell?”

“I’m not letting you get killed by your own damn idiocy!”

Teruki had enough. If Takenaka was going to annoy him, then he’d give him a taste of his own
medicine, just like he could give anyone. He wasn’t weak. It didn’t matter if it hurt, or if he heard
things that weren’t there because of it, because nothing could stop him.

Bursts of heat and yellow light gathered fast in his palms, and he thrust out. Takenaka’s hands came
unstuck from his, and he pushed further back.

The most pleasant sound he’d heard for a while was the sound of silence—of distance. Teruki
opened his eyes and witnessed it for himself. It wasn’t much, but he’d managed to make a small gap
between them. Takenaka stood a few paces from him, eyes widened, chest heaving.

He had a chance now.

“So that’s what you’re like.”

He didn’t want to hear any more. Already, there was heat in his veins and light in his hands. Teruki focused on his aura’s hum, trying to fog out everything else that was now buzzing around his ears and inside his head; he shut his eyes as he envisioned yellow and thought of something so fast that Takenaka wouldn’t react to it, not until he was sent flying, and then he’d break—

*If you’re using yours, I’ll use mine.*

Blackness surged through the backs of his eyes, before light hit them again. Teruki gasped, feeling the sudden shock in his head.

The noise of his surroundings came back fast. “What…?”

Everything went quiet again.

*You didn’t listen before. Listen now.*

The noise resumed, then stopped for a third time.

*If you want to fight, then I’ll fight you. But I don’t want to. I don’t fight like you do.*

It restarted.

Teruki shook his head, trying to clear it. He’d heard something amidst the silence. Takenaka’s lips hadn’t moved, but there had been a voice, somewhere, just like his, and a feeling, like something probing against Teruki’s head, before the noise came back.

“...What?”

*I’m here to help you. So listen. Don’t try and fight.*

It happened again.

The noise around him disappeared, and all that remained was the voice. Teruki shivered, almost biting his tongue. It didn’t feel right. Concentrating as hard as he could, he tried to muster more of his aura—only for some connection to snap.

*Stop it. Calm the hell down. You’re pissing me off...*

He shook his head. His vision distorted once with the sudden absence of sound, and then again with its even-more-sudden return. “I’m…. I’m not...”

The voice was wrong, and the feeling was wrong, both the incessant noise from the last few days, and then, it disappearing. He squeezed his eyes shut, feeling a wave of nausea wash over him. He could barely stay up.

Takenaka was still there, a few paces away. His mouth wasn’t moving. The voice had been his.

“‘You’re not... speaking...’

*I know I’m not. That’s what I am.*
A probing feeling pressed at his skull. Teruki bit back, and realised. “Get out of my head.”

You have to accept what you are. You have to stop contradicting yourself. Deal with your powers, and then keep your head down, Takenaka’s voice said.

“Get out. ”

Takenaka took a step forward. Teruki shook his head.

You can’t hate yourself and desire your own power at once. You can’t be that dumb.

“Get out. ”

Another step. I won’t. Not until you stop thinking like this. I’m trying to save you. Don’t you understand?

“Get out, now...”

If this was being saved, then Teruki didn’t want it. He didn’t want the probing feeling inside his head, and he didn’t want the noise disappearing, only to come back in a shock. He wanted it gone. He wanted to stand and push Takenaka aside: to beat him to a pulp if needs be, to end all of the chaos stirring around in his head, to be what he had been a week ago, to be human—

“You’re not saving me,” he spat. “I don’t need—“

I’m telling you, shut it and calm the hell down!

Everything turned to nothing. There was no noise, only silence.

Teruki couldn’t hear himself speak; he only knew that his lips moved. “What…?”

I’m telling you, stay away from those guys at the warehouse. They hate you. They won’t bow down to you; they’ll have you dead. Don’t come back to your gang, either. Keep your head down...

The noise didn’t resume.

He couldn’t hear it. He couldn’t hear anything—as if something had stuffed up his ears and pushed into the space between his skull and brain, muffling everything. All that was there, past Takenaka’s unwanted voice, was blood and heartbeats, and he could feel something tightening in his chest, something striking down through his veins, faint movements of muscles, tiny changes in pressure.

“Ngh...“

He shook his head, hands clutching at his wig-hair. Any moment, he thought, his head would crack open, but there was nothing there: as if someone had reached for his brain and scattered it on the floor. There wasn’t anything in his head. Something was broken. He was broken: dismantled, shattered, blood and bone and nonsense. Something had once been there. There wasn’t anything now. Nothing remained. There was just Takenaka’s voice, and he couldn’t understand why it was there, how it existed—

You don’t want to kill either, not really. We’re not like that. We’re not mindless killers.

“I can’t..."

They’ll round us up and shoot us if we’re not careful. They just need an excuse. Don’t fall into the trap. Stop thinking about what anyone told you. You can’t hate yourself.
He could hear himself speak, feel his throat constricting, but he couldn’t feel the strange sounds that came with everything, that were everywhere, because they weren’t there. The noise was gone, finally, but what was left was all wrong, not right at all—

“What… are… no…”

He couldn’t form words. His hands were starting to spasm, palms wet with fever. They longed to squeeze, squeeze tight around Takenaka’s neck, shut him up; but he couldn’t do anything.

What the hell is it?

“What…” Teruki gasped. All he could manage was fragmented words. “Can’t hear… you, anything, not…”

What the hell, what’s with you?

He wanted to beat his head against the wall again, and he did, leaning forward then back, and it hurt, and it made a sound, but it was the wrong kind of sound; not what he needed to hear. Everything was too quiet, not right: his head wouldn’t work—

What are you… you’re crazy, what the fuck’s—

“Stop it, stop, fuck…”

What the hell?

“What… can’t see, can’t fucking think—“

Shit, don’t tell me—I didn’t—!

Something seemed to loosen. Teruki’s ear caught wind of something, finally—as Takenaka lost control over him, and light burst through the cracks.

He wasn’t sure if it was him, or some other force, but it didn’t matter. Takenaka’s presence was far too close. He pushed at it, and felt both the coldness of the evening air and the heat of his aura sweeping, spreading, escaping.

For the first time in what felt like forever, it didn’t hurt when he breathed in. He could feel everything again; the air against his skin, the sleeves of his shirt, his wig itching against his head and the uncomfortable crack of dried glue where he’d stuck it down, but even that brought him relief.

The noise hadn’t come back, but it was enough.

His eyes were slow to open. His feet felt it first; that the ground was uneven, that there were cracks underneath, but he felt something more, too. He could feel so much with his aura displayed: every movement of debris, every angle where his power had cracked the road, every dip and rise and jag of shattered stone ground, and it felt better than he’d felt for days.

Takenaka was there, too, knocked onto his knees, further back where Teruki had thrown him. He was catching his breath, green jacket brightened by yellow light. He tried to push himself up from the floor, but made it nowhere. The shock was still fresh.

Teruki looked down. He thought of coming at him again, this time doing more damage—

—and then, the noise burst through Teruki’s head again, sudden as lightning.
He had forgotten how loud it was. It assaulted his ears again, and he tried to cover them with his hands. It was no good. Moving his arms had been a mistake, because he heard noise when did that, and then he couldn’t block anything out—

He made out Takenaka’s swear in the background. “Shit…“

He didn’t have time to listen. Everything overwhelmed. He could hear Takenaka breathing, then himself breathing too, then stray rubble collapsing, stone against concrete. He couldn’t think. He could only react.

Teruki reached out a hand, gathering the yellow light of his aura, and slammed Takenaka’s body back against the opposing wall, so hard he thought he heard something break.

He wanted to do it again.

He heard Takenaka groan, his lips shaking. The jacket was dirtier now, coated with dirt and fresh dust, and then more fresh blood.

The sight was beautiful, fulfilling—so liberating, Teruki realised, feeling his aura’s warmth surrounding him. Maybe what Takenaka had said didn’t matter, and he could do as he wanted, and nobody would catch him. He was no match for Claw, no match for anyone that tried to come near him. He was an esper, and he was sure, a strong one at that.

“…God…” He heard Takenaka gasping for breath. “Shit, I… I didn’t…”

He tried to reach out, and the noise came again, unwanted, penetrating.

Teruki lost focus. Noise was blotting out the sound of his breaths, and his heart, and the pain was back once again. He moved his head, looking around, and felt something stab. It pressed down, through his skull, as if hard enough to crush through the bone. He tried to shake his head, then push down his hat, but—

fuck,
he cursed again—every movement had its own sound, and they were so much more audible now, his aura out in full force, the heat no longer just warm but blistering.

Noise, noise—

He couldn’t think. Everything hurt. He wanted it, but he didn’t.

Noise—

He couldn’t be human. He couldn’t pretend to be one and he didn’t know, maybe he still was—

Takenaka said something, but the noise drowned him out. Teruki gripped his arms, trying to settle himself. His fingers pressed down so hard that it hurt, until his aura faded from sight and settled back down deep inside of him. He needed control. He needed the pain. He needed something to remind him what was there, and what was real, and that he wasn’t mad.

He was mad, or wasn’t. He couldn’t tell which was which. He could only escape.

He had never wanted to change, but he couldn’t stop it all now. It was between hearing nothing and everything, too much noise or nothing at all. He couldn’t bear either. Neither was right.

He tried not to think as he ran.

He forced himself to run, even if he was barely able to see, his vision blurring, the murk broken only by occasional darkness and light. Takenaka’s familiar pressure didn’t trail after him, but Teruki
couldn’t forget it, or the blood on the jacket’s sleeves, or that empty, dead feeling of deprivation.

He could feel something else, suddenly—some other presence, not far from him. It wasn’t Takenaka, he knew straight away. The resonant feeling, one with his aura, deeply entrenched, was similar, but not quite the same.

He followed it.

He didn’t know what exactly that presence was, but something about it seemed to be pulling him. It was familiar. It was strong, too, sharp amongst the haze in his head. The urge to follow was primal.

A figure ran past, crossing two shaded alleys. Its lanky, stumbling legs beat the ground in a frenzy. Teruki ran.

He recognised it.

The figure’s head turned, and a scream rang out through the evening. He was just as Teruki remembered him: a weak, shabby excuse of a runner.

Teruki reached, grabbed the neck of his sweater, and pulled.

A gasp burst from boyish lungs. That sound, too, was familiar, and Teruki’s lips spread into a monstrous grin.

It was fate. “I found you… bastard!”

He tugged at him, before thrusting him into the nearby wall. The boy cried out. The sound hurt as much as it healed. Teruki felt it all: burning-hot skin, the pulse at the neck, the sound of terrified breaths pushing past everything, even his own pain.

The boy slumped to the floor.

It didn’t matter where he had been running to. He couldn’t run now. He tried to move, but Teruki’s hands pinned him down, and didn’t let go. The sight of that face was a thrill. He could swear fate had repeated itself: given them a destined second encounter, like storybook lovers or criminals, and it didn’t matter which of the two they were. It didn’t matter, except for one thing.

The boy should have been dead.

“You,” Teruki gasped out. The pain in his chest had started again, but he couldn’t let him take advantage. “You. I remember. Mob, isn’t it?”

Mob tried to curl up. Teruki leaned in, not letting him. “You lived, didn’t you? ‘Course you did...”

He had beaten him into the ground, and he thought he had died, but there he was, out of hell, there in front of him. He was real, and alive. Teruki felt noise coming from his shaking lungs and the tones that came with his heartbeat and every breath. Deeper, past that, but louder than anything, was a psychic aura, in harmony against his.

Esper—esper scum, bastard, you messed up everything—

Everything about Mob felt like mockery.

“…You... fucking lived...”

He felt like laughing. He didn’t know why. He could barely keep himself from collapsing. He’d
barely been able to run and catch up to him, living on borrowed time, on energy he’d pulled out of nowhere that he knew would soon run out.

Teruki let go of Mob’s arms and pushed himself off.

Shaking, he stood up and stepped back, trying to take in what cold air he could. Mob had been too warm, all panic-hot skin and resonant aura. He needed respite. He grit his teeth, feeling a little of his own aura seep out, warming his shoulders. It was giving him strength, the release small but *God how it felt*—

He felt almost stronger.

Mob groaned, trying to push himself up. “You’re… Teru?”

“God, I… I killed you, I thought you were dead, but you lived...”

Maybe, killing Mob wouldn’t have made him sick, like he was now, feeling the burn of his aura melting into his skin, where he had allowed it. It wanted more. He wanted to let it have more. He needed that comfort and chaos and maybe the sight of Mob’s blood on the walls, but the sounds were still beating his head, and he couldn’t think straight—

“Teru, are you…“

“I don’t care.”

He saw Mob flinch as he stepped back again. The boy was slow to get up. If he tried to escape, Teruki would spring: he felt like he could. He could reach for that neck, or for his hair, or for anywhere else and grab it and throw it, then break it, break all of him.

“I fucked up. You... should have died. You didn’t... that’s why...”

No. Yes...

There was noise in everything: every place, every voice, every inch of brief movement. It was everything or nothing at all. Takenaka’s voice had stabbed right through him and taken the noise away for those few desperate moments, and yet, he could remember it, how much worse it had been—

—*because it had cut off his power; cut off his eyes and ears, like cutting through veins.*

He was already one with it. It couldn’t be taken from him.

“Teru?” Mob’s little voice came from the dark.

“I don’t know.”

One sliver of aura wasn’t enough.

Something was pulling him down, as if trying to drown him, and at the same time, he couldn’t stop thinking of how he had lain in the sheets, watching yellow and blue mingle together. Back then, it had been good. It had been wonderful, perfect, and he’d wanted *it* and him to be inseparable, and he could feel that strange *something* still, even now.

“Teru?”

“I… I should have… but this, now, all this...”
He couldn’t bear it. He couldn’t think, couldn’t breathe without something hurting. He didn’t know what he wanted, or what his power was, or why it hurt—

—or why he longed for it, why he needed it, so badly he ached.

“It’s all your fault, isn’t it?”

Power rushed like a wave. Teruki gave in, and something deep inside snapped.

Heat surged into electrified veins. Light spread and flared, lighting fibres of wig-hair into a halo. He could feel everything. There was the noise, and all of the anger he’d kept in for Mob, and the ecstasy he’d felt when he and his power had been at peace, and the pride that had filled him when Edano had cowered before him, then the confusion and madness and chaos—

—and then it took over, and he didn’t have to think any more.

Chapter End Notes

notes for this update
Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

Something happened at the end of last chapter. Something... really did.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The pressure in the air seemed to change. Goosebumps spiked up all over Shigeo’s arms. Dread swept in like a hurricane.

Something began to press down, so heavy he felt he was drowning in honey: something slick but viscous, sticking to his hair and clothes, seeping into his skin. It wasn’t a fluid, not quite, but something different: terrifying, yet familiar enough for his aura to react deep within.

Shigeo’s knees buckled under the pressure. He couldn’t breathe.

His aura wrapped around him, clinging like a film in an attempt to protect him. It pushed upwards, trying to rise against the smothering heaviness. Somehow, it held. The sickness abated. He swallowed whatever had risen up in his mouth, and forced himself to look up, even if it meant staring into the sun.

Light was everywhere, piercing and bright and uncomfortable. He could feel where it was coming from. It hadn’t been there the last time. He didn’t want to believe it.

“Teru?”

“You did this.” Teru’s voice was low, half-growl, monstrous.

Shigeo shook his head, fighting nausea. “No, I don’t...“

“Don’t lie!” Teru screamed. “You died. You should have...”

“Teru?“

“You knew, didn’t you? Of course you did! You did it, all of it!”

He could try to raise himself, and step back again, but it was no use. Teru was already approaching, the gap between them shrinking with every moment; his face cruel, shoulders raised and stride bold, unaffected by the pressure of his own aura.

Shigeo tried to stand up. His head spun, heavy as lead. The streets, and the market square—so close yet suddenly so far away—were empty, but the feeling around him made him think of choking in crowds. He could barely keep just his head up. Shigeo felt heat in his veins. He knew; he had no choice. He had to let it out if he didn’t want to be smothered to death.

Wincing through the ache in his head, he commanded it to release.

Blue and violet light fired in all directions. Aura spread out from his skin, and spread, as fast as it could, forming a barrier. Gritting his teeth, Shigeo forced it upwards. He had to resist. He needed it to stay up; any more pressure, and he thought it would snap his bones. His stomach was twisting. He
couldn’t let himself be sick. He had to stay strong, because the last time, he had been weak, and now, Teru was back, and the yellow light surrounding him was an aura, something that hadn’t been there before, and it filled his head with colours he couldn’t conceive—

“I… Teru, I don’t…” He tried to say, fighting the pressure. “I didn’t—“

Something around him whipped back, retreating—and the pressure, fast as a breath of cold air, was gone.

Shigeo’s lungs savoured the coolness. Blue flooded his vision, familiar cobalt twisting to violet, protecting and encircling. The unwanted yellow retracted, fast as a bolt, back towards the one who had summoned it.

It surrounded him, still, outlining him. Shigeo gasped for breath. “Teru…”

“Shut up and die!”

Teru, unlike him, was still standing upright, his breaths heavy. The aura clung to him still, radiating from every inch, every fibre of clothing and the odd, almost-matching yellow of his changed hair. Shigeo couldn’t look away from it, and wondered what had happened to change it.

He had no time to think, and even less time to try and get up. In the blink of an eye, something whipped out.

Instincts fired. Shigeo shot back with a barrier. Teru’s aura—it didn’t feel right, but it was, it has to be his—pushed at it, before retreating back to its owner. Shigeo’s barrier disappeared. He could barely hold it, he thought; all other thoughts drowned out by the beat of his heart.

“Shut up,” Teru repeated, voice louder. “You weren’t even sorry. Not even... ”

The yellow aura spread out further. Shigeo shuddered. He made out orange and toxic sky-blue and lit seafoam-green in the yellow, drawn out into rippling lines and unnatural peacock-tail eyes, distorted in oil. His feet stepped back before he could think. His hands clutched at his sleeves, skin covered in goosebumps beneath the feeble warmth of his new sweater.

He had to flee. He had run away last time. He had gotten away...

He had no time to think, before a fast rush of pure force and wild, blinding light almost toppled him. The barrier he forced up, fragile but fast, barely held.

He only understood what had happened when the light pulled back.

Teru’s aura had formed a long cord, almost a tentacle, sprouting from his hand. He stretched his arm out, whip-fast, and another cord formed, both coming from the same finger. Shigeo didn’t have time to think, when both of them lashed. He could barely react fast enough. The barrier didn’t crack this time—but the resonance made Shigeo’s skull ring when something smashed against it, then again and again. Only as he struggled to look up, his head hurting to its limit, he noticed that there were three cords now, all tied to Teru.

A fourth whip hit his barrier, and he cried out, colours shooting through his vision. In the mess of it all, he stumbled back, and his heel struck a wall. He pressed against it, realising too late what he had done.

_Crack_ went another one of the whips, white concussion-light blazing in Shigeo’s vision. The wall
was firm and icy behind him.

He was trapped, like a rat in a cage.

He remembered Teru fighting him the first time, when his bare fists had broken through and left him completely beaten. He had run for his life, and almost lost it as he fell in some alleyway he couldn’t name, clinging on by the skin of his teeth. Reigen had found him and saved him back then, like a miracle.

No, he thought, gasping as another shockwave rang through his skull. Bursts of colour flooded through his head. He couldn’t run back to Reigen now. Reigen knew about him.

His only choice was to run—get away.

Another fast strike made him groan, unable to bear the onslaught of pain. A crack splintered the barrier. Shigeo knew was stronger this time—not starving, not close to death as he had been the first time, but all of that meant nothing. Teru had changed, almost into something else. He had an aura, and an esper’s abilities. He was unpredictable, terrifying; yet just as relentless.

Shigeo tried to lifted his head again. His head flooded with a mad mess of colour. *Anger … hate, freedom. Happiness? No, not that but…?*

He didn’t know the difference. It all felt like soup in his head.

The more he tried to focus, the thinner his barrier seemed to grow. Teru’s attacks didn’t stop, and Shigeo realised: there was no way to run. He couldn’t make sense of anything, but if he stayed to take the blows, then—

His barrier gave way, and a hot yellow cable clamped around his ankle.

Shigeo screamed, feeling it burning his skin. It didn’t feel like his own aura felt. It scorched, from the skin to the bone, melting the muscles below—or so it felt like in the midst of his panic, as he cried out, trying to will it away from himself. Like fluid, his own blues and violets tried to push at the yellow, thinning it in parts, but unable to break it.

*“Got you!”*

The ground blurred underneath him. Shigeo flew.

He didn’t feel half of the pain as he slammed into stone and wood and then concrete: his aura was already there, psychic membrane taking most of the blow, but what he *did* feel almost broke him. Shigeo felt the world turn to blackness, before his hands felt the ground underneath, cracked and uneven. His chest hurt, taking in desperate breaths. His eyes were slow to open, weird colours appearing and disappearing with every movement of his eyelids—but as they did, he saw scraped skin and splintered market-stall wood, and then shattered ground.

The shadow of a collapsing market stall loomed above. Shigeo saw, half-delirious, and scrambled to get out of the way.

He didn’t have time. The yellow cord whipped out and grabbed him again, and his face met the ground. His shoulder hit wooden debris. Splinters dug into his skin. Shigeo struggled and reached, barely able to, and tried to pull some of them out. The sharper tips pulled at and matted his sweater.

It was hard not to scream. For once, he had to be thankful for whatever force had made him an esper.
Had he not been one, he was sure he would already be dead.

He had to break the cord.

He could feel his own aura growing hotter, heating his skin as he tried to grab at the cord. It didn’t budge. Pleading, he tried to shake it off, hoping it would fray or fall off, but it stayed, as if locked on. Growing desperate, Shigeo forced all of the psychic energy he could muster into his hands, and felt his aura push tight, straining, straining—

“What?”

With one last, desperate cry, the cord snapped. Blood flowed back to his ankle. Shigeo’s own blue light pushed past where the cord had been and enveloped his foot, as if reclaiming, so relieving that Shigeo thought he would cry.

He eased himself up, head still in a haze as the pain subsided. Teru was still staring back. The yellow aura-light still surrounded him, even with the cord no longer there. He was tired—chest heaving, breaths loud and heavy—and Shigeo knew he was tired out, too, his heart still racing at breakneck speed.

Bathed in yellow light, Teru balled his hands into fists. “You did this. You gave it to me...”

Yellow aura fanned out around him, then shot straight down. There was a noise; a horrible crack. Shigeo jumped, gasping.

Light was seeping into the ground. Cracks crawled.

Jagged, crooked lines spread and cut: lines of gold, kintsugi on black, yellow glow seeping in, forming more and more of the cracks. Teru’s head dipped. His hair covered his face, and Shigeo understood nothing. The flickering chaos of colour he could feel in his mind made no sense.

He could make sense of only one thing: a stirring feeling in his gut that told him he needed to run. A lightning-shaped crack formed right below his feet, and he had no time to think, only to act. He ran, tripping over rubble, then forcing himself up again, scared his heart would, any moment now, leap from his throat.

The ground below erupted with dust.

Shigeo pushed his arms out, forming a new barrier. Blue-and-violet stretched to the ground. Teru’s yellow aura couldn’t go past it, and spread out elsewhere, left and right. The cracking grew louder, earthquake-like now, bright aura seeping into gaps like floodwater. Teru looked up then—and Shigeo shuddered, feeling some blood-red emotion.

Before he could name it, it was swallowed up in orange, violet and blue, and then Teru’s aura dominated his vision again. The ground below trembled and rose, countless fragments at once, coiled in sickly-bright light. Lumps of earth fell and landed below.

It didn’t feel real.

Shigeo felt his barrier waver, and he panicked, torn between reinforcing his barrier and running away as fast as he could.

Yellow light darted out.

Chunks of wood and concrete and stone rocketed at Shigeo, hitting the barrier like huge, heavy
bullets. Each one struck the barrier’s surface with an ear-splitting sound. Shigeo gritted his teeth, forcing all of his aura out in Teru’s direction. He could feel his barrier thickening where it was being pounded, over and over, but his breaths still caught with each strike.

Any moment, he begged—no, don’t break, hold on, I can make it!

“Just...”

Teru’s aura continued to rush, spider-webbing into the ground. Even as he aimed at Shigeo, stray rocks bounced off the structure poles of empty market stalls, and chipped bricks on walls. More and more structures broke in the cascade; and more and more debris flew as Shigeo tried hard to hold on.

Never had he been more thankful for his power. He could feel the whisper that came with his own aura, at one with his thoughts. It was a part of him, keeping him breathing, the homely blue standing firm in protection. Rubble cascaded. Shigeo held on, both hands out.

Around him, North Market was falling to pieces.

Wooden stall-fronts, empty and abandoned for the night, were cracking and splintering. Currents of yellow aura ran through boards like lightning bolts and tore straight through cloth. Metal poles wobbled as the ground below them erupted, and then, they, too, were caught in the current, floating upwards and out, out of control.

“You did all this, damn you!” Teru screamed, amongst the cascade. “Why the hell? Why the hell did you?”

“No!” Shigeo yelled. Teru didn’t hear it. The street was breaking apart, and Shigeo could barely see anything: not only through his barrier, but through the storm of debris striking him, as if caught in a hurricane. He needed to run. He could barely move.

There was nowhere to run. He tried to focus on Teru, but colour choked him and almost tore through his eyes: too much, too bright, too chaotic.

He had to stop him. He didn’t know how.

Something struck his barrier, and the noise reverberated: a metal pole that had once been part of a stall, he saw, as it clattered down. He was growing exhausted, and though his barrier and membrane had protected his bones, his skin was still scraped. The wounds from the week before had reopened. He could feel blood dripping down both his knees.

No, he thought, struggling. He was stronger than last time. He didn’t have anyone, not his parents or brother or Reigen, no matter how kind he had been, no matter how pleasant that gentle blue had been around him, or the golden colour of smiles, or anything, because there had been doubt and a lie, and —

A piece of metal hit the barrier. With a panicked burst of energy—Shigeo thought it had broken his barrier—it made a small sound, before flying right back.

There was a shout.

Shigeo stopped, his barrier shorting out in a panic. The barrage of rubble froze in mid-air, before clattering down to the ground.

He coughed, tasting dust as the debris fell and cracked even more. Past it all, Teru was still standing, but bent over, and something didn’t feel right, Shigeo thought as he stepped closer—
“Fuck!”

Shigeo pushed his bangs out of his eyes, and saw what had happened. Teru was clutching his sleeve, shaking with pain. The tear in it was obvious. Blood was seeping into the fabric.

Instinctively, Shigeo came forward. The urge to help was desperate. “You’re…”

“Shut up!” Teru yelled, and Shigeo froze, terrified. “You know… it shouldn’t hurt, fuck…”

“…Teru?”

“Don’t you… I don’t know why it hurts… aren’t you not human…?”

Shigeo stared, unable to move, watching the blood stain Teru’s sleeve. The hand let go of the wound, and came away dripping red. As if it was nothing more than the peach juice he had wiped away last time, Teru breathed out and let it flow, wiping his bloody hand on his trousers. It left a horrible smear.

“You’re hurt!” Shigeo called out again. He was scared, but couldn’t let him bleed out. Teru was like him: not just an esper, but a fellow human in pain, and it felt wrong to see him in that state.

The half-laugh in Teru’s voice made Shigeo feel worse. “You aren’t human, right…?”

“Wait!”

“I know,” he continued, his voice shiver-inducing. “I’m not human now. You… you fucked me up, you made me like this, and that’s it, it’s not human…”

Shigeo shook his head, trying to force back his memories of the fire, and of Michie-san’s husband’s words. He couldn’t cry. He looked up instead. The look on Teru’s face was insane, almost grossly inhuman in the glow of his aura. Something had to be there: some kind of hatred, or anger, or—

Weird colours burned through his eyes and the back of his head.

No, Shigeo realised, bracing himself through the mess. There was too much for him to read. Something felt broken, just like the ground: a radio tuned to white noise and static, then noise in colour, then noise without a pitch or a reason, and then a voice in the depths, desperate for someone to end it—

“I’ll do it this time!”

The rubble rose up again, brightly illuminated.

Shigeo braced himself. He could still see red past the yellow glow: Teru’s blood, hot on a white sleeve, so harsh that he could almost feel the same pain. He needed to stop him. How, he didn’t know. All he could see was the debris from before, rising again, all sharp edges and metal and stone, knife-like, turning to point straight at him.

In the midst of it all was the blood-curdling sight of Teru’s face, mouth open, eyes wide, colours a mess, in it madness itself, a kind of hysteria—

Everything hung in the air, and then, Shigeo was deafened by the sound of shattering glass from every window around him. Teru fell to his knees, and then completely to the ground, face-down. The glass and debris in the air followed suit. Everything crashed.

Shigeo looked away, momentarily deafened by all of the sound, before it withered away.
Silence took over.

Slowly, he turned back around, and lifted his head. All was quiet. He was safe, he realised: until he made out distant footsteps, and with them, voices. He looked up and around. The face of some woman peering out of her now-broken window looked back. He heard her call out. He had to run now.

Shigeo turned to escape, looking for a way out—then stopped.

He turned back, realising too late that he wouldn’t make it out in time if he didn’t get away.

He couldn’t stop himself. He didn’t know what was happening, only that he was running in a different direction, tripping over debris and almost destroying his knee on a mosaic of shards and splinters. He stopped himself falling down just in time. The glass only just caught on his skin, and he pulled the chip out as he carried on running.

Teru was lying amongst the debris. His hat had fallen off his head, the blonde flash of his hair even more vivid now, like an unwanted spotlight. His back rose and fell subtly. He was still breathing.

Shigeo looked down—it was hard to see in the dark—but made out blood on the ground, and then all that had soaked into Teru’s light sleeve. Next to him was a chunk of tell-tale metal, its edge bright red: the very thing Shigeo knew he had reflected.

It was his fault.

“Teru?”

Struggling, Teru pushed himself up. His shoulders shook, as did his hands and arms when he put weight on them. His left arm was even worse-looking up close. He barely got to his knees, before he slumped down and clapped his hand over the gash on his arm.

“I lost to you,” Teru said, so weakly Shigeo felt sick. “Just leave me.”

Shigeo shook his head. “No. You’re hurt.” He took a step closer, and tried to reach for Teru’s sleeve.

Teru only looked down, shaking his head. “I don’t know. Why did you…?”

The rest of the words were too quiet for Shigeo to hear. He could just see Teru’s jaw trembling, his chest heaving in desperation, as if getting his breath back. The energy from before had definitely receded. He couldn’t feel it pushing out like it had been before, and there was something still there, definitely, but it was far smaller now, like a tiny flicker-flame in the dark.

“Teru?”

“I don’t know. I’m not meant to be…” He looked up. His eyes were struggling to stay open, and the fury in them was gone. What colours were left around him were messy, but much clearer now; red anger, grey shame, yellow-green-mucus confusion. “I lost to you. It’s not worth it.”

“Please. We have to go.”

“You win. You run. There’s no place for losers out here. Maybe I’ll die.”

How much of Teru’s bitter-faced scowl was just pain, and how much was from that anger, or from those other emotions, Shigeo wasn’t sure. “Please,” he said. “You can’t. I don’t want you to be like this.”
His instincts told him to run. It wasn’t safe for him to stay. He could hear faint voices in buildings, and any moment, someone would come for him and Teru. Around them were ruins. Splintered wood and broken concrete littered the floor, amongst treacherous glass. Like teeth, shards gleamed faintly in the light of the moon.

The streetlights were out. Shigeo had time to run—but Teru was hurt, and it felt wrong to run alone.

“Why?”

He couldn’t let himself, even if Teru had hurt him. He had felt that unwanted pressure, heavier and unpleasant compared to his own, technicolor-yellow so bright it had made him feel sick—but he had felt something other than pain as it had shattered the ground. There was more to Teru than yellow, and more than the blues and greens and oranges that twisted and rippled and curled in his aura.

He could feel it now, still: pain and emotion, and pain was always deep red.

“Because you’re like me.”

Trembling, Shigeo reached out, his hand settling on Teru’s shoulder.

Teru tried to shrug it off. The action was weak, but Shigeo moved back the hand, all the same. Teru bit back a groan. “So that’s it, huh? You just… wanted a friend...”

“I… what?”

“That’s why you made me like this… right?”

Shigeo shook his head. “I… I don’t understand.”

The first time they had met, Shigeo had been weak, almost dead on his wobbling feet, sick to the core. Teru had broken his barrier, but he had felt nothing from him. If Teru had changed, then what had caused that change, he couldn’t begin to imagine.

“What’s going on here? Who’s there? Who are you?”

A voice rang out. Shigeo felt his hair stand on end.

“Run!” Teru pushed him, with all of the strength left in him. His hand, blood-stained, left a red print on Shigeo’s sleeve.

Shigeo grabbed on to Teru’s shirt. “I’m not going without you.”

“You’re insane...“

“Please!”

He didn’t want to hurt Teru any more. Teru was injured, limbs heavy, chest heaving with what Shigeo recognised as fatigue. His aura had faded out, but not died. He couldn’t see the glow, but he could feel it still, pulsing beneath the skin along with a heartbeat.

They could still run; and they had to escape.

Teru gritted his teeth as he pushed himself up again. Shigeo grabbed his arm, trying to help. His legs were beaten, his head hurting from being thrown into the wall—but he could still do his best, even if it was barely good enough.
He grasped at Teru’s sleeve and tugged desperately, urging him out of the rubble. He could barely run on his own, and Teru was barely able to move, but he had no choice. The market was devastated. Pieces of splintered wood stuck up from the cracked ground like graveyard headstones. All of the windows were cracked, if not totally broken. There were voices, voices everywhere, men and women and crying small children.

Trying to blank out what he could, Shigeo focused on one of the alleys ahead, and weaved his way in. He didn’t know where they were going. He could only make random decisions, picking one dark passage in lieu of another, but not knowing where he’d end up.

Going somewhere was better than nowhere, and that was the only option he had.

He couldn’t run well, not while holding on to Teru; and he grew tired too soon. His legs begged to stop, unable to bear any more.

Shigeo exhaled, and almost fell back against the wall of the building behind him. His hand slipped from Teru’s shirt. Shigeo heard him wince, and looked down at the gash. He couldn’t see much, and the alley was dark—but from what he could see, and smell, it didn’t look good.

He felt sick. It had been his fault.

“Why?”

He didn’t want to look at Teru, even when he heard his voice. He had hurt him. It had been his powers that had reflected the debris, somehow, without thinking, and it was his fault that Teru was hurt.

Teru had attacked him first—but Shigeo had messed up, and any moment now—he was sure—the police would find them.

“You didn’t have to...”

Shigeo didn’t reply. He felt tears welling up in his eyes.

The sound of footsteps rang out. He dropped into a crouch, curling up, helpless. They had been found. It was over.

Teru bent down to his knees, following; even if there was no use hiding now. He cursed softly, biting back anger. Whether it was because of the pain, or their imminent capture, Shigeo didn’t know. There was no use thinking about it.

“Hey! Who’s there?”

There was a voice, one that Shigeo barely made out through the haze of his own chill-coloured fear. He couldn’t say anything. He could barely think, because it was over.

“Hey, come on, I’m calling the police on you...“

Teru reached out a shaking hand, yellow aura condensing and forming; and Mob, instinctively, turned to see. Light began to creep between the bricks of the neighbouring building. Gasping, Shigeo pushed the hand down.

The light disappeared—but it was too late.

The footsteps were louder now, and with them, the sound of breathing: breathing that belonged to
neither Shigeo nor Teru. The police were here. “Come on, come on out already...”

No, Shigeo thought, that’s it, it’s over...

The shape approached, step by step—and then it came close enough for Shigeo to recognise.

No...

The man bent down. His features were barely visible in the dark, but Shigeo remembered him.

“Mob? Mob, what are you doing?”

Shigeo pressed against the wall, wishing he could melt into it. It was all over now. Reigen knew the truth. He had known it for days. He was going to hand him and Teru over—

“I saw what happened. Mob, are you...”

“You know him?” Teru said, startled. Shigeo half-wanted to tell him to shush and half-wanted to cry, or just to die on the spot. Reigen had found him, and now—

“Mob, it’s OK. I... I promise, I’m not going to hurt you.”

Silvery-blueness flooded into Shigeo’s vision. No, he thought, trying to deny it. Not blue, not that. He didn’t need to see honesty, not when it had to be a lie. Reigen knew the truth, but the colour didn’t make sense.

“You were going to hand me over to the police;” he choked out.

“No, I mean, I...” Reigen tried to speak, but faltered. Shigeo didn’t understand. The man’s hands trembled as he tried to gesture, then tried to say something again, but nothing came out. The words turned to stone on his tongue. “Mob, listen, I... I didn’t know when I found you. I didn’t know, and then, I still didn’t... I don’t understand, but... but I swear, I never...”

Shigeo’s heart wouldn’t stop racing. He could hear commotion gathering somewhere, a couple of streets away. He wanted to run, but he couldn’t, not with his feet refusing to move, and something telling him to stay and hear Reigen out.

His body was still, his aura whispering into his conscience: blue, violet, calmness, just listen.

“Please,” Shigeo blurted out. “Please, I... I hurt someone. But I didn’t—“

“Kageyama Shigeo. That’s your name, isn’t it?”

Reigen really had known. Reigen had lied. Still, there was blue filling Shigeo’s mind, and a murky green-grey he wasn’t certain about, something like guilt, but maybe there was more grey, like what he’d learned was sadness or shame. He couldn’t tell what the feeling was, or its name.

“I still don’t understand it all either,” Reigen said, his voice shaking, yet strangely warm-toned in the dark. “But I swear, I... I didn’t think...”

“I didn’t kill them.”

“I know. I know you didn’t.”

Shigeo froze.
“You can kill me right now,” Reigen continued, looking into his eyes. The odd colour—a mystery—still cloaked his speech. “You could have killed me before, but you didn’t.”

He had never wanted to harm anyone. Yet, he was an esper, a threat to society, no better than the frightening men who had fought and killed in the years of the war. He didn’t know any of them—had never met any of them—but they frightened him still. Shigeo feared the unknown, and what lay beyond, just like he feared Reigen above him and Teru beside him.

“I…”

“I trust you. I brought you in, and I… I don’t know. I… I still trust you now. I don’t know if it’s right, but I trust you.”

Reigen bent down to his knees and reached out towards him.

His hand hung in the air, shaking, barely visible in the night. Shigeo remembered those hands, those kind fingers treating his wounds, past the sting of iodine on his knees, and the smell of cooked food, and then the rustle of a rumpled bag, in it a set of fresh clothes.

Reigen had given him everything. Yet—yet Shigeo had kept secrets, and Reigen had known the truth, and he was dangerous, and Teru had tried to kill him, and he was tired and aching and didn’t know anything.

He just didn’t know.

Shigeo lifted his hand and reached back for Reigen’s. Shaking, their fingers met.

An image burst out and flooded Shigeo’s vision.

His hands tried to move, but his whole body was paralysed. Pain shocked his system; his whole being turning and twisting, before a heaviness filled it. A sharp light took over and shot through his eyes. He could feel wind and soft soil, and the smell of rain soaked through wet soil, and something like trees and mushrooms and earth.

Everything hurt.

Past the white shock was a burn, and the colour of blood in his eyes, a pain that wasn’t quite his, scarlet-red; something clamped around one leg, savage, piercing. Tears stung at the edges of his eyes—but the tears weren’t his, and neither was the sound of heavy, strong feet beating against the ground, and the rustle of grass, and a voice.

His chest felt uncomfortably tight. His vision shook, and then something blotted out the sun in the sky. Something—someone stood over him: a grey, balding head and a spotted neck, an old patched-up coat the colour of autumn bark, the diagonal sling of a rifle slung over one shoulder. White whiskers bounced over bruise-coloured lips.

A voice sounded out, the words a blur. A hand reached out. Shigeo—no, not Shigeo—reached back. The hand holding on didn’t let go.

Something flowed, burning hot, down one ember-hot cheek; before darkness took over.

Shigeo lost sight of who he was, and where he was, and what was going on—but suddenly, the grass on the ground (when had there been grass?) felt like concrete, and the sky (when had it been light?) shifted to night-time again, and Reigen’s face came back into view. His resting hand twitched, the ground cold below. The street was there again, where it had always been. He had hallucinated.
His raised hand had slipped out of Reigen’s, or he had pulled it back, or it had never touched Reigen at all. He didn’t know.

“I don’t understand any of this. I just… feel,” Reigen’s voice returned him to his senses, once and for all. Shigeo looked up again. In the faint moonlight—what little there was—he could see the man shaking.

“I know… I saw everything, but I… you’re just a kid.”

Something was familiar. There was something about himself, about Reigen, about the smell of blood in the air and the panicked run of a heartbeat.

“I won’t tell.”

The hand was still there. He wanted to take it.

It was Reigen: a stranger, a man who had called him by name, who had been holding an article with his identity exposed and word that he had killed his parents, who had seen him branded a criminal. Reigen, who had helped him, too, and taken him in, and fed him, and given him the clothes he was wearing.

He didn’t know anything—but there was that hand, and there was the colour of **compassion**, cornflower-blue again in the dark, dappled with **doubt** and white **fear**, speckled like death-caps on forest soil. He could feel fear, but there was that gentleness, too, beyond anything he had seen in his days on the run. That doubt has been there, and he had felt it, but first of all there had been that **compassion**, benevolent **kindness**, and then—

Green-grey, Shigeo thought. Maybe, that was **regret**.

He closed his eyes and thought of the hallucination. Some hand had reached. He had reached back in some other place—but no, the body hadn’t been his.

All that was real, right now, was his panic, Teru in pain, and Reigen’s eyes, deep with concern. Stronger than anything, past the fear and confusion and worry, was **earnesty**, and that hand reaching out.

Shigeo swallowed.

“What about…” He turned back to Teru, who was too focused on his sleeve to look back.

Reigen was quiet for a moment. “Didn’t he just beat you up?”

“Yes, but…” Shigeo shook his head. “He’s like me. And he’s hurt. He’s not well. He needs help.”

Something in the look Reigen gave him filled his head with oranges twisting with pinks: a kind of **confusion**. Teru wasn’t losing consciousness, not yet, but he didn’t look good. He could feel something else too, deep down: the same feeling that came with the yellow aura, now more subdued, almost withering.

Reigen, finally, gave a sigh. “Hey, kid. Promise you won’t mess my house up?”

Teru looked up, too exhausted to say anything.

“Well, you’ll bleed out if you carry on like that. Come on,” he said, turning back to Shigeo, his hand still outstretched. “The police will be here any minute. They might already be here… we’ll have to
be quiet.”

Biting his lip, Shigeo took Reigen’s hand and felt it pull him to his feet. Beneath the skin was sweet warmth, a different kind of heat than his aura, or blood: something much simpler. It filled him with thoughts of home.

Once he was up, Reigen bent down to check Teru’s arm. With a few words, and an almost-reluctant nod, he reached around the boy’s shoulders, and slowly pulled him up, letting him lean. Shigeo joined him on the other side, but Reigen shook his head.

“I’ll be fine,” he said, somewhat strained. “Just make sure he doesn’t drip blood anywhere.”

Shigeo nodded. In silence, save for their footsteps—his hesitant, Reigen’s a little bolder somehow, Teru’s sluggish and heavy—they walked on, into both the known and unknown, into the dark.

He could hear Teru making small sounds, Reigen’s hand pressing against his wound, blood against skin. Shigeo watched the movements of their shoulders as they crept along the city’s dark veins. The lights were out; all that remained was the moon. He could barely see what was ahead. Reigen’s fingers were trembling. By his side, Teru’s were bloody.

He could feel Teru breathe heavily as he lumbered along, Reigen’s body struggling to keep hold of him. For a second, Mob was sure he’d heard him mumble something like a weak, barely-there thank you.

He didn’t reply. They weren’t quite safe yet. He could only silently hope. A ghostly feeling remained in his arms, and Shigeo thought of the strange vision.

He couldn’t forget the taste of tears in his mouth, and the smells of gunfire, grass and fresh blood; and he could still feel the hand of a man taking the hand of a boy, and neither of them letting go.

Chapter End Notes

a primer on esper hysteria, aka what happened to Teru, for the curious
It was long past sunset now. How many hours they had been on the run, Sakurai wasn’t sure. His watch rubbed unpleasantly against his skin, and he thought of checking the time, but, too exhausted to think straight, changed his mind. It didn’t matter. It didn’t matter too much, not in the woods. The lack of light told him all he needed to know. Minutes and seconds were useless in the middle of nowhere, without company, save for the kid and Koyama, and other, much smaller, wild animals.

Even having his flashlight on felt risky, and Sakurai found it hard not to glance over his shoulder with each step he took. The forest was dense, thick leafy branches canopying the sky and stars above, and the rocky surface below. Even then, he couldn’t be certain of isolation.

His aura prickled his skin, spurring on goosebumps. He hated it; spat as he walked, cursed his paranoia, but forced himself to walk on, all the same. Stopping wasn’t an option.

Every now and then, Koyama would groan and complain, and the pain in Sakurai’s skull would intensify. At least, Sakurai thought, he was down to one nuisance. The kid had been gagged and sprayed as soon as he’d been fed, immediately after he’d woken up. He was quiet, asleep again, limply hung over Koyama’s shoulder.

Sakurai turned around to check, just in case, and shone his light onto him. The light glinted against the silver metal of handcuffs, and Sakurai’s trademark engravings shone back. Small engraved flowers decorated their surface, and he could feel them holding back psychic force, effective as always.

The boy’s eyes were closed, body still. Calm breaths made his back rise and fall in a slow, steady rhythm.

He sighed in relief.

As he swung the light back around, he struck Koyama’s eyes, making him wince. Sakurai ignored his obvious anger. He was too tired to care. At least, he thought, the handcuffs would hold the boy at bay, if Koyama’s clumsiness woke him up.

The handcuffs constantly functioned, unlike the spray. They couldn’t knock anyone out, but at least, Sakurai thought with a sigh, they didn’t need re-applying every few hours. His conjuration on them wouldn’t need topping up for a few more days. He could do that once the assignment had been completed. He hoped it would be soon.

The spray bottle had grown much, much lighter. They didn’t have much more time.

He had considered having the boy awake, but still cuffed, but his disobedience and protest had left Sakurai with no choice. A part of him felt sorry for the boy. Being gagged, tied up and blindfolded, then restrained with psychic-enhanced metal was far from his own idea of comfort. Koyama wasn’t happy about it either—that was clear, from the look on his face—but it was safer that way, for their objective in general, and for Koyama himself, who had narrowly avoided being kicked in the crotch by an angry, sore child in a moment of consciousness.
That had been hours ago. The boy was unconscious again. The last spraying had been some time ago. How long exactly, Sakurai wasn’t sure, but from the ache in his legs from the journey, it felt like too long. He was no athlete. The outdoors tired him. His nose itched, too, irritated by pollen from flowers and plants he couldn’t even name.

The prickling in his nose reminded him of a certain flower shop, full of creeping vines and disobedient blooms. Minegishi, he hoped, had been left far behind in Seasoning. Suzuki had probably found the flowers already. Sakurai was sure that in the city, they knew him as a criminal now. He had betrayed Suzuki: the Interior Minister, and his private employer. He’d betrayed the government as a whole the moment he fled.

*The Magister, a traitor.* He could imagine the accusations, the disgust, the pointing hands, and then the order of death on his papers, and the future threat of being killed. As soon as he was found, he would be executed. It was what protocol had declared.

He had dragged Koyama in with him, too, even if he had been mingling with Claw before. He could have evaded the authorities for some time, maybe, Sakurai reflected—but now, he was sure. He’d damned him, much quicker, much more directly. Koyama was doomed, too. Neither one of them was safe now. They weren’t safe at all: not in the dark of night, in the creeping, dense forest, and they wouldn’t be safe in the morning that would surely follow.

A gust of wind blew, and the the map in his hand gave a rustle. Gritting his teeth with a shudder, Sakurai looked at it again. His light danced and shuddered along the surface. The path that Toyotama had drawn for them stood out in red ink, twisting past rocky outcrops and hand-drawn circles that, Sakurai had learned, marked out huge trees. Some of the circles bore tiny black crosses, matching trees with ropes looped around trunks: a crude attempt at a landmark.

It was better than nothing. *All trees look the same,* Koyama had groaned, rubbing his nose. *They smell the same, too.*

“*We there yet?”* A voice resounded, half-yawning.

*Speak of the devil,* Sakurai thought. Koyama was worse than the boy sometimes—mostly because he could spray the boy and put him to sleep. He couldn’t spray the man carrying him. He didn’t want to be left to carry anyone by himself.

He already had too much on his plate: a map and a light and the weight of betrayal on his shoulders, and then his faithful sword in its scabbard, positioned at his hip, where it belonged, on the opposite side to his 99th tattoo.

“*Soon, I think,”* Sakurai sighed, unable to hide his fatigue. “*Soon.”*

There really wasn’t much to go, so the map said. Knowing him, Koyama would complain any moment and groan, mumbling something unpleasant about Sakurai under his breath.

Maybe, Sakurai thought, he had overused the word ‘soon’—but he had overused everything else, too, on their mad trip to nowhere. He was exhausted, running on adrenaline and the remnants of badly-packed food. To his disdain, it included the last of his *wagashi.*

If he didn’t get to Toyotama’s point soon, he wasn’t sure if he’d want to keep living.

The trees up ahead didn’t seem significant. Toyotama’s map was vague at times and messy at others, small pen-scrawl covering up paths and drawing lines seemingly over the edges of cliffs. Sakurai had almost fallen once, down into a crevasse that had stared up at him like a wide-open maw, but
regained his footing just in time. Koyama had grabbed him, too, somehow, though Sakurai was sure he could have lived without help.

_Damn it, Toyotama,_ he had thought, listening to his pulse race as it calmed.

It had become harder to navigate as the evening grew into night. He had become more reliant on his light, shining it everywhere he could before proceeding onward, checking for water or unsteady rocky paths below his feet. He hadn’t been careful at first, and now, his shoes were caked with mud. Their city-slick gloss was long gone.

His sanity was probably gone, too, he mused bitterly.

Noticing a tree with rope cascading from two of its branches, he stopped. Protective charms, like something from a shrine, were decorating it, swinging gently in the night breeze.

“Stay here,” he said to Koyama. He gestured with the hand holding the map, to make sure the message was clear.

The asterisk Toyotama had marked on the map was burned into his mind by now—and as he looked closer, at the bark of the tree, too, he saw something carved into it. The asterisk matched. He unfolded the map, and checked. It was the same sign.

It felt almost too obvious a sign for Toyotama, compared to the circles and crosses that he’d followed the rest of the way.

“That’s it. Somewhere around here.”

Sakurai pointed his light back at the map, and stared in more detail. Koyama came closer, peering over his shoulder to see. The asterisk was clear, blanketed in golden light. Creases left ugly white lines across fields and the road they had long since left behind, but the pen mark was still there, still clearly visible.

“You sure? Weird spot to stop, in the middle of a forest,” Koyama complained. “Think we can stop and eat something?”

Sakurai shook his head. “I’m just as hungry as you, and I’m not complaining.”

“How do you live with that stick up your ass?”

“He didn’t want to. His sword was tucked away neatly in its sheath, attached to his belt, as he liked it. He could feel its psychic resonance: the warm, magnetic pulse of embedded aura, etched in like the flowers he had spent hours engraving on its guard. Every inch of it was valued. He couldn’t risk damaging it—and Koyama, admittedly, wasn’t worth damaging either, not while he needed his aid.

If the boy wasn’t taking up space on his shoulder, Sakurai thought, Koyama would probably have tried to attack him by now. He knew could stop him, easily, too, but the thought of sullying his blade wasn’t pleasant.

It was, perhaps, the only perk of having the boy to put up with. The boy took up most of Koyama’s attention, and Sakurai could navigate on his own, mostly without being bothered.

“Slice away if you want,” Koyama said, turning away from him. “You brought me out here and I don’t see a reason why I have to be out here. If you say I’m fucked, then you know what, being
fucked might be better than being with you. You just wanted me to carry the kid around, didn’t you?”

It wasn’t a lie, not entirely. Having Koyama around had been useful, but Koyama had dipped his toes into Claw too, and that put him in danger, too. Sakurai had to save himself, and to save himself, he needed Koyama out, too. It was too much to risk. He had been lucky that Toyotama had allowed a companion.

Koyama was lucky, Sakurai thought, sneering. He could have killed Koyama if he had grown sick of him, if he hadn’t needed him.

The thought seemed more appealing by the second.

“I told you, I got you out of there because both of us are in danger—”

“Oi, Sakurai.” Koyama turned still all of a sudden, save for his heavy, overly sweaty palm prodding Sakurai’s arm. “Hey, that—”

Sakurai shuddered, prying it off. “I’ve had it with you, too—”

“No, Sakurai. Over there, that.”

Koyama pointed ahead. Sakurai felt a shudder run through him. Something had stirred and changed in the air. The pressure he sensed was different from his aura, or Koyama’s, or that of Suzuki’s boy.

An... aura, he realised, biting his lip.

It didn’t seem hostile. If anything, it made him think of a thin, tightly-pulled thread, taut and strict and well-disciplined, far from the commanding, loud display he associated with espers on the offensive. Someone was trying to keep their head down, yet they had to make themselves known, somehow—and they were showing their presence, Sakurai realised: only subtly, without the typical light show.

“Who’s there?” He hissed. His hand planted itself on the grip of his sword. The other hand clutched his flashlight. The pulse of imbued weapons permeated though skin and fabric. He could attack with a heartbeat’s notice.

“I come in peace,” an unfamiliar voice said. It came out of the darkness, from the same direction as the aura.

Carefully, Sakurai lifted his hand. His flashlight illuminated countless leaves and black bark. A figure emerged from the trees, and Sakurai looked over the human that came with the aura—or rather, the human that brought the aura with it. The glow was almost invisible at first, but the longer he stared, the more his mind’s eye made sense of the aura’s colour: a pale cream, threaded with gold, that barely showed as it clung to its owner.

Yellow torch-light highlighted neat hair and the face surrounded by it: the face of a woman. A large grey coat was draped over her shoulders. “And I see you did as I asked.”

Koyama raised his voice almost immediately. “Hey, lady, what are you—”

Sakurai stretched a hand out, and to his relief, Koyama shut up immediately. He didn’t pay him attention, and stared at the woman. “Was it you, then? Were you the one behind that letter?”

“Toyotama.” She nodded, bowing. Jet-black hair spilled past her forehead, hiding her eyes as she dipped down, then straightened back up. “Or Yui. The latter is best.”
“Yui? It’s a pleasure,” Sakurai said. He could only hope that Yui wasn’t an empath or telepath. Her aura retreated, the pressure in the air stilling, and he gave a sigh, relaxing. “I did as was asked, then. You wanted him brought here.”

“I did.”

“And what of the information you held on myself? And,” he continued, turning to Koyama, “on my companion?”

He hated the word, but had nothing better.

“It will not be compromised, as agreed on. We will keep all word of your connections a secret.”

“Former connections.”

“Certainly former ones. I apologise for the trouble this has caused you.”

Trouble was an understatement, Sakurai thought. For the past day, or more, he had been on the run with a child and an ugly-faced hulk of a thug, and in the process, he had broken the law, broken off all of his relationships, deceived a crucial Claw spy in the network, and made himself an enemy of the government he had sworn faithful to. He was certainly marked for death now. His lifespan had been cut short, if not by imminent death, then by stress. Koyama had driven him mad, and the chaos had disrupted his sleep—but that was nothing, nothing compared to the sheer danger he had thrown himself into, all for a letter containing a threat that, for all he knew until he met Toyotama, might have turned out to be nothing more than a joke.

Toyotama had been just another false name, but at least, the esper behind it was real.

“Who are you with?” Sakurai spat, tired of deceit. Yui flinched, and he couldn’t help but fight the urge to grab her and demand that she told him. “Whose faction? Why did you send me that letter?”

Before that thread-like aura could come back, he had already summoned his own, silver-white, to his hands. His faithful sword gleamed with its light: a lethal weapon in the possession of a master. He needed answers. Yui stepped back, and Koyama’s hand reached for Sakurai’s shoulder again, as if to stop him, but he had had enough of all that—

“I’m with the Society, Magister-san.”

Sakurai clenched his teeth at hearing his codename. The other cause for alarm was the Society: a name that he, and all espers in Japan, Claw or not, knew. “Them?”

Yui nodded, surprisingly calm, as if paying no attention to the spiking rise of his aura. “We offer you all our protection, and will be willing to aid you in your current situation.”

“I’m likely to be hunted and killed,” he sneered. “If I survive the night.”

By his side, Koyama had raised his fists, too, anticipating some kind of danger. Flickers of red and violet leapt around his knuckles. At any other moment, Sakurai knew he would be telling him to calm the hell down, but now, there was that sick feeling in the air, and the fear in his stomach that rose with his thoughts of that strange woman, of the entire plan, of the letter and even of the kid that Koyama still had slung over his shoulder.

“Then we are likely to stop that. That is what the Society represents. Protection for esperkind.”

Koyama let out a low growl. “So let’s get this straight, lady—you called us out here to join the
Society, and got us to kidnap the kid to make us the bad guys? You wanting to screw us over if we don’t agree, huh?”

The boy tossed a little, but for once, Koyama was fast to respond. Yui shook her head. “No. I had no motives like that.”

“You, or the Society?” Sakurai asked.

“It doesn’t matter. Right now, we should shelter. The Society’s base is close by. We had you come here for a reason. As of now, you are one of us.”

Her tone was decisive, yet still somehow calm, somehow soft in the depths past the harshness, past the cold wind and the surrounding dark.

Koyama grunted, seemingly unconvinced. “And the kid?”

“Likewise. That child is important. If anything, he might be our fighting chance.”

“Against Suzuki?” This time, it was Sakurai that raised his voice, curious.

He had been doing Suzuki’s private assignments for years, and he had learned the face of the boy. He had seen him scowl and complain at being cooped up, and his father’s tired, harsh stare as he forced him to bed, and then gave the order for Sakurai to reinforce the room; to seal it of any psychic energy. The boy had definitely been unhappy cooped up. Nobody enjoyed isolation and being enclosed without power.

“Against far more than that. Come on.”

Yui beckoned. Sakurai looked on, a strange feeling mistrust twisting his stomach. He sighed. His sword, trusty as ever, was by his side, in reach. Whatever Toyotama, or Yui, was planning, and whatever she wanted with the kid slumped on Koyama’s shoulder, he could put an end to her, all the same.

He didn’t want to.

He had no choice now. He was an enemy of the government now, and an enemy of Claw. Koyama was in the same boat. There wasn’t much else he could do, so he followed.

The walk dragged on. Sakurai stifled yawns as he followed and followed. His body was struggling. He thought of sleep. If he made it out of the forest alive, and if he could be sheltered somewhere, he would fall down any moment. Koyama was tiring, too, he felt—his steps had grown heavy, dragging, almost unwilling. The heaviness of his aura brushed against the fibres of Sakurai’s suit. The fabric had grown sweat-stained and rumpled. Sakurai had grown accustomed to his own dismal state, and wished that he hadn’t. He despised his own sweat-ridden smell more than the mud under his feet and on his shoes.

Nothing felt certain, and nothing felt right. Everything, like the unfamiliarity of the forest and the uselessness of his map, made his hairs stand on end. Yui was the only thing leading him forward, past bushes and tall, towering trees, down a small slope and a crumbling passage, where he had to turn around to check on Koyama every few steps. Being taller and broader, and with a sleeping child in tow, made the trek no easier.

It seemed like some kind of miracle that the boy didn’t wake up.

Yui suddenly stopped, and before Koyama could ask, she was already shushing him. Her hand
pointed at an almost-spiralling passage of greenery, surrounded by branches. Sakurai made out a wooden handrail of sorts, and grabbed on, testing. It stayed put.

“Down there?”

Yui gave a nod. “Yes. Just down here. Come on.”

They descended down the path, Koyama’s grip on the handrail making it creak unpleasantly. Sakurai hoped nobody heard. The dry soil and stones below seemed to shift whenever anyone—even Yui, the lightest-looking of the three of them—took a step forward. Loose earth cracked and tumbled below.

The branches at the bottom of the passage, tunnel-like, seemed to open up. Sakurai pushed some aside, and took in the view. In front of him, past the last of the shrouding leaves, was a vast field, and a large Western-styled country house in its centre. No lights shone in its windows.

“This?”

“Yes. This is it. This place is our base, or one of them.”

Sakurai couldn’t see much in the dark, even with his light. It was growing fainter by the moment. Beyond, the house loomed. Yui wasn’t lying, he could tell even through his fatigue. He could definitely feel faint psychic traces, the signatures that came with auras: if Yui was with the Movement then it made sense. If she wasn’t—then he could fight her, all the same. He was the Magister: no longer loyal to his employers, any of them, but his reputation had never been joked about.

They approached the house with few words. Yui took the lead, approaching the doors of the house first, then knocking carefully. Sakurai wondered if the knock was a password of sorts, but had no time to ponder it. The door opened up, and what looked like a maid peered out.

Yui did not converse with her for long. “Come in.”

Sakurai followed, approaching the door and finally switching off his flashlight. His hand ached from holding it for so long, and he wiped off the sweat as he took off his shoes by the entrance. There were other shoes on the step, being pushed aside by Koyama’s huge boots as he took them off: children’s shoes, women’s shoes, men’s shoes.

He could still feel the psychic resonance from before as he stepped into the hallway—even more so now, mixed with other signatures, most likely belonging to the other residents. A small light shone in the corridor.

Koyama yawned as he looked around. “Nice place…”

Yui didn’t reply. Sakurai took in the sight, and closed his eyes to feel more of the stirring auras. Yui began to speak, but for those moments, he was too tired to listen to her. Instead, he found his attention gravitating upwards, away from Yui and Koyama, and into the quiet.

There was another strange presence close by: not quite upstairs, closer than any of the others he could feel in the house, and much more prominent.

Yui noticed it, too. Excusing herself, she walked back past Koyama, and took a few steps up the stairs. “Come on out.”

A face peered out from behind the bannisters, caught red-handed. Within the child—it was a child,
all dark hair and awkward limbs—was that inexperienced, prominent flicker of aura. Clearly, the child had not been awakened for long, Sakurai thought. It was telltale, spread out a little too much for covert business, and thus amateurish.

“Ritsu,” Yui sighed, something about her almost on edge. Sakurai shuddered. The air seemed to have grown electric all of a sudden. The fine hairs on his skin bristled. “It’s late. Please, go back to bed.”

“But...” The boy—Ritsu—objected, his voice as shaky as the signature of his aura.

“This isn’t for you to handle. Come on.”

“Yui-san, I—“

It was then that Sakurai heard footsteps—and so did Yui, evidently. The woman let out a small gasp. Her teeth gritted as another figure made itself clearer behind Ritsu: one that was older, with a firmer aura accompanying it. It felt heavier, hotter, far more certain—and the figure’s brisk, unshakeable walk felt more confident too, coupled with the look in their eyes.

He couldn’t see as much of them as he wished, but something about the presence made him shudder. It was familiar, vaguely, somehow, as if it came with some kind of memory, but Sakurai couldn’t quite place it. It didn’t feel right. He’d prided himself on seldom forgetting any aura that had so much as brushed against him.

How long...?

“I know you’ve been hiding something.” A firm voice came from the figure, half-shaded in darkness. Ritsu looked almost bone-thin next to darkly-clad, muscular legs.

Koyama spoke up. “Tsuchiya?”

Sakurai recalled the name. He’d been right.

“I knew you weren’t being honest,” Tsuchiya stated. “What are they doing here?”

The memories were firing off now, almost out of control. He could remember the feeling of that particular aura, even if he had not had a long time to remember it. Even the number, the taste of that phrase, ninety-nine-seven, made him uneasy. Lightning flashed in his head. Sakurai’s hand darted straight to his sword, skin calling to metal. Visions of power and voices blasted through his stuttering mind: memories, faces, a man with black curls plastered in rain, screams in the dark, and the realisation of what they’d become and the visceral truth, that beyond the last unit, 99—

“You didn’t mention this.” Tsuchiya almost snarled. “You didn’t mention anyone new. And there’s no backup. What’s this?”

She looked straight down, and Sakurai was sure that she had noticed him, too. A part of him prayed that she had forgotten. He didn’t want to be remembered.

Koyama’s arms tensed, flexing, ready to fight, and almost pushed him off kilter. God damn you, Sakurai thought, even if now was no time to complain. The air was thick with electricity, static—something boiling, something else, another force, something about to spring. Sakurai’s own hands wouldn’t cooperate.

Yui raised her hand, as if calling for peace. “I’ll explain later. I brought them here to be sheltered.”
“Alone? Without warning?”

“They have to be protected.”

“Protected?” Tsuchiya spat, the boy at her feet almost leaping up, startled. “You’re going against your own orders. You’re doing as you please, aren’t you?”

“This is important. I couldn’t tell you.”

“Why couldn’t you?”

“It would put us in danger.”

“Danger? You don’t care about danger. You didn’t care for her, did you?”

Yui gasped. “What?”

The shock was immediate. Sakurai wondered if Koyama, or Ritsu, or anyone else felt it too: the sudden flare of energy in the air. It was coming from Yui. For a moment, the entire left side of her hair looked pale gold, and far longer, far messier—but in the blink of an eye, it was back to jet-black again.

Sakurai knew was tired—maybe too tired.

“Tsuchiya-san, please,” she breathed out. The hitch in her breath was clear. “Now isn’t the time.”

“You remember it. You say you want to protect all of us. But back then, you didn’t protect her,” Tsuchiya pressed. Her footsteps rang clear through the stairs, old wood creaking ominously. “Is that why? Is this another part of your game?”

“Tsuchiya-san.”

“You haven’t changed. I know you’ve lied all this time. You don’t care for everyone else. You only cared for your game, or—or for whatever it is that went on with you and—”

“Tsuchiya-san, we—“

“You let her die!”

The accusation was a shot through the chest.

Sakurai had no idea who she was, whoever had died—but something about the accusation felt sickening, as if the floor had fallen out from beneath him. They were trapped. That was the feeling that twisted his gut, worse than the sudden anxiety from the boy stirring from sleep on Koyama’s shoulder.

Beads of sweat formed on his forehead. It wasn’t something he could hide. He had been a fool, worse than Koyama, worse than them all.

Yui shook her head, as if trying to suppress something. “Tsuchiya. Stop. Not’s not the time. We have to—“

A scream rang out through the corridors.

Yui bolted immediately, then stopped, as if torn between fear and determination.
“Tsucchi!”

“Mukai!” Tsuchiya turned around, hurricane-fast, and shot back up the stairs. Ritsu cowered, pressing himself against the bannister. He was paralysed. Sakurai could feel it. The boy’s aura shuddered, the paranoid needle-coldness threatening to pierce through him, too, but Sakurai was the better-trained of the two. He could bear anything. He was strong—

“Oh God, no…” Yui gasped. Koyama leaned in, somewhat curious. He didn’t seem to have noticed the movements of the boy on his shoulder, who lifted his head and let out a yawn. “Where… where’s…“

There was another scream, from shrill lungs again, followed by thumping and the sound of furniture toppling over.

“Stay right there!” Yui leapt into action. The brute force in her pushed Koyama aside, enough to leave him as startled as the ginger-haired boy on his shoulder. Confused, he watched Yui run up the stairs after Tsuchiya.

“Saku—"

“Stay there, watch the kid!”

Sakurai didn’t have time to check if Koyama would listen. He raced up the stairs, after Yui. His hand rested on his scabbard, knowing he would need his sword soon.

He reached the top of the stairs, and looked around, left and right. One of the doors had flown open. Light streamed out, and with it noise, a small girl’s screams piercing his eardrums.

Sakurai couldn’t stop. He couldn’t let anything scare him, not now, and ran to the open door.

The room inside was a mess. A chest of drawers lay tipped on its side. Bedsheets were splayed on the floor, and amongst them, pieces of what looked like polished wood, scattered and splintered. Yui was still by the entrance. Her hand was pressed to the wardrobe, as if trying to hold herself steady by its cold surface.

Tsuchiya stood in the room’s centre. In the far corner, Sakurai made out the shape of a small, shivering girl, curled up in a cocoon of whatever sheets remained on the bed. Her face was red, wet with panic and tears. Small, desperate hands clung to a pillow.

Between Tsuchiya and the bed was a man, tall and dark-haired, with his eyes strangely shut.

“Don’t move,” Sakurai heard Yui hiss. “We’re armed.”

The strange man only shrugged, letting out a soft laugh. “Well, you caught me,” he said. “But that’s the thrill of the chase, isn’t it? See if you can kill me before I get what I came for.”

Something about the sound of his voice sent Sakurai’s skin into an outburst of shivers. He had been a fool, to think he was safe, to think he hadn’t been followed, because this didn’t feel right at all, to trust Toyotama—Yui, whatever her name truly was, whatever she hadn’t been truthful about.

“Who the hell are you?” Tsuchiya demanded.

The man shrugged again. “I don’t know who you are, if that makes it any better. We’re on even ground. Though I think we might both have ties to a certain division.”
“You bastard!”

This time, Sakurai couldn’t hold his tongue either. His hand moved up the scabbard, and his sword slipped out, its grip pressing into his hand. He clenched it, ready to strike. He could feel aura-heat scorching his skin, burning into the blade, and its call: how it wanted to strike out, to sing in the air, how it wanted to slice and spear through flesh and bright veins—

“That’s rude. But I didn’t serve with you, either. No, I’m here to see someone else.”

The stranger’s head turned away from Tsuchiya, eyes still lidded. Sakurai gritted his teeth as he stopped, facing Yui exactly. The shock came again: the sharp rise of her aura, electric.

“That’s a nice greeting,” the stranger smiled, clearly feeling the same thing as Sakurai. “Couldn’t hold back your anger for me, could you? That’s just what he told me about you. And he was right. You haven’t changed a bit. 99-2 could have been yesterday.”

“Codename: Black Void. Assassin.” Yui’s voice was low, growling, unwelcome. “Shimazaki Ryou. Renegade of the 99th.”

The man let out a small laugh, hand resting on the wall. Something about him didn’t quite feel carefree. Everything was wrong, from the pressure around him to the shiver-inducing closed eyes.

“You’re not wrong. I defected. But you remember my codename, and what I did… and I remember you too, Toyotama. Crocodile-queen. A good name for an illusionist… and a very good one for a liar.”

Sakurai clutched at his sword. The last word was all that he needed. He’d been deceived.

In the barely-there light, Shimazaki opened his eyes—and there was nothing there, only darkness. Freakish white lights glowed at the centres of empty sockets. A sly smile spread, and then a nauseating jet aura, pitch-black.

“I guess you really lived up to that name. And you live up to your true one, too. Clever, cunning. Just like that husband of yours. Don’t you, Suzuki Hana-san?”

Chapter End Notes

(welcome to hell)

This fic has over 100,000 words now! That’s something, I think. On that note, I’m sorry for the slow updates. Next update might take some time because I basically have to completely rewrite ch. 20, but I’ll get on it ASAP.

I did put up some new meta recently, on the state of hysteria (aka what Teru went through in ch. 17-18) - it’s here, if you missed it.

Other than that, all the best! Thank you for your support, comments, and assorted forms of love.
Chapter 20

Ritsu didn’t know what to think.

The thought that he shouldn’t have been listening, let alone awake, the fact that he knew nothing about the people Yui had brought in, the screaming from Mukai’s room and the sight of a stranger there: all of them plagued him. Yet, nothing—not nothing—mattered as much as the name.

Suzuki. Suzuki Hana…?

He didn’t know what it meant—but its presence was a cause for alarm. Tsuchiya had been right. Everything about Yui, from her strange, flickering hair, to her name, her lack of surname, and then, what Tsuchiya had said: I don’t trust her. Everything Ritsu knew seemed to hang in the balance. Yui herself was a lie.

The air in the room, and all around him, turned frigid.

Tsuchiya looked ready to spring, more so than Shimazaki: the assassin, thought Ritsu. The sight of him, at the corner of his eye, made him shudder, but Tsuchiya’s expression, unlike Shimazaki’s confident smile, was unforgiving. Filled with unspeakable rage, her gaze was fixed on Yui, and Yui alone.

The sound of a sword being unsheathed sent shivers down Ritsu’s spine. He clung to the bannister, eyes glued to the man with the scabbard.

“Suzuki?” The man said, his voice bitter. Ritsu’s aura spiked into his skin with each word; each syllable, each prickle of movement made by the sword-wielding man’s aura, rising from his shoulders. “You… you had us—”

“Don’t you dare!”

Yui’s shout felt like a stab. Ritsu found himself grabbing on tighter. “Don’t you dare say that name like a curse. My name is mine.” Inhaling, she turned back to Shimazaki in the middle of the room. “And I’m telling you, get the hell out of here!”

Shimazaki let out a ‘tch’, shrugging his shoulders. He stuck both hands in his pockets, as if he was wandering through the streets, and not stood in the middle of a house he had somehow broken into. “Easier said than done, hm? I’m not going until I have what I came for.”

He turned around, back to Mukai. She had crept into the very corner of her bed, and wrapped herself
in her bedsheets. She was shaking, making small sounds as she did. Slowly, her little hand pushed a layer of blanket away, and a pair of frightened blue eyes slowly peeked out. Her face was red with tears.

A slender, dark-sleeved hand reached, faster than Ritsu’s eye could make out.

“Tsucchi!”

“Don’t fucking touch her!”

A loud crash rang out. Instinctively, Ritsu shut his eyes. As his panic settled, he opened them again, and took in the sight.

Yui had flown backwards, her back striking one of the walls, and seemingly at once, Sakurai had been knocked off-balance. Taking advantage, Shimazaki turned back to Mukai.

Ritsu felt the urge to scream. Before he could, a blur thrust Shimazaki onto the ground.

Splintered wood—the remains of Mukai’s puppets—clattered on either side as his body tumbled down, and he hissed in pain as he landed. A loud, mad scream rang through the walls. Ritsu’s chest racked with shock.

Tsuchiya had knocked Shimazaki to the floor, pinning him down. She seemed huge above him: almost a lion on top of lithe, bony prey. “Don’t even think about it,” she snarled, hands gripping tighter. “Don’t you—“

“Easy, tiger… you want to hurt me?”

The calmness in Shimazaki’s voice threw her off kilter.

Everything happened too quickly again—Tsuchiya fell to the ground, coughing and hacking. Ritsu couldn’t believe his eyes. A fast foot came at her head and kicked her in the back of the skull. She let out a half-scream. The sound made him wince.

Ritsu traced the foot to a leg. It was Shimazaki’s.

How he had suddenly gone from being on the floor, under Tsuchiya, to behind her, and up on his feet, Ritsu couldn’t comprehend. Tsuchiya tried to jump up, but fell back down as soon as Shimazaki kicked her head again—from the front, then from the back again. His body was flashing, moving too fast, and how on earth he was changing from one place to the other, back and forth, Ritsu couldn’t tell—

“It’s like a game,” he heard him say, as Sakurai pushed himself up with a groan, and unsheathed his sword. He swung, and Ritsu watched it connect with Shimazaki’s neck—but it didn’t connect at all, because suddenly, Shimazaki was standing behind Sakurai. “If you can’t catch me, then you can’t win.”

“Shit!”

Sakurai hissed as Shimazaki whipped around, kicking his side. His sword teetered in his grip, but he grabbed it just in time, and swung again. It struck the frame of Mukai’s bed. The edge tore through the side of the mattress when he swung it out again. Shimazaki dodged, only narrowly.

Frustrated, Sakurai pulled the blade out, and tatters of mattress fell to the floor. Whimpering, Mukai curled up in the corner—so tiny, so helpless.
Ritsu tried to trace a mental path through the room, full of adults and violence. He could grab Mukai, if he tried, with his powers. He could save her, if he tried hard enough.

He lost track before he could act.

Sakurai’s blade whistled before him, flashing silver. The room was too small, and as it cut through the air, it struck the wall. A crack ran up it, and sent a light layer of white powder raining down.

“Fuck! Come out, fight fairly if you want a fight!” Sakurai called out, whipping the blade in front of himself. Shimazaki only grinned, before vanishing again.

Sakurai reacted, swinging backwards, all honed instincts and skill—just as Shimazaki reappeared, in the right position.

The tip of the blade sank into his shirt.

Sakurai yanked, and a spurt of blood rushed out in a perfect red line. It seeped into Shimazaki’s clothing, and dripped through his pale, slender fingers, as he clutched at his chest.

“Flesh wound,” he hissed. “Nothing important.”

Sakurai turned around to Tsuchiya, as if to indicate: this is my fight. She gritted her teeth, but stayed back, while he braced himself for another attack in the small, enclosed room. “One more move, and I’ll give you more than that.”

“Think so? You won’t get me again,” Shimazaki sneered, removing his hand from the injury. His shirt had taken the brunt of the stain. It was too dark to see how much blood there was. Only Shimazaki’s smeared fingers indicated anything.

Ritsu could see the rip in his shirt it, and knew, then, that he had a chance. He had to act, too. His aura flared into life.

He had to fight, even if he didn’t know how.

Before he could push himself up all the way, Shimazaki had vanished again. The little voice in Ritsu’s head, in sync with the cold of his aura, seemed to be screaming: run now.

He wasn’t fast enough. Before he’d moved even an inch, Shimazaki reappeared, next to him in the corridor.

“But I can get someone else, if you like.”

Shimazaki’s voice flowed, sickly sweet. Ritsu gritted his teeth, energy gathering at his balled fists. The man’s stare, empty but for the lights in his empty eye sockets, shot him through with uncontrollable shivers.

He had to do something. He couldn’t. If Shimazaki moved so much as an inch, Ritsu swore his heart would stop beating in fear.

“Don’t touch him!” A voice screeched out from Mukai’s room.

“Says who?” Shimazaki hissed, smiling wickedly.

“And me, you bastard!”

And in a flame-coloured flash, Shimazaki was knocked to the floor, body landing on the corridor’s
wooden boards with a thump. Ritsu exhaled, recognising Tsuchiya’s strong arms, holding him down again—until Shimazaki vanished, reappearing behind her, and Tsuchiya turned around, fast as a whip, tugging his legs out from underneath him.

He didn’t land. He was gone in a blink—and then, Ritsu heard Sakurai shouting again, blade at the ready, the assassin’s inhuman eyes reflected on its surface.

“Ritsu,” Tsuchiya breathed out, turning around to face him. “Ritsu, are you all right?”

Ritsu wasn’t sure if he was. His pulse, the roar of blood in his ears, the uncontrollable shudders he’d felt in his bones the moment the assassin had locked gazes with him: all of those things threatened to throw him over the edge, make him vomit or scream or do something, something that scared him.

He couldn’t be scared. He was an adult now, he had to be one, and an esper at that—

“I’m fine,” he forced out. “He… didn’t get me.”

“Go hide,” Tsuchiya ordered.

“I… I can’t.”

“This is dangerous.”

“I know, but…”

An ear-splitting crash, and Mukai’s frightened scream, muted out whatever thoughts he’d had in his head.

“Ritsu, listen to me,” Tsuchiya said, trying to be firm yet faltering. It was impossible not to, what with the sounds of battle behind them, and then, something that made Tsuchiya wince clearly: Mukai calling her name. “I know things are hard. I don’t know what’s best, either. But you need to run.”

“I can’t,” Ritsu protested. “I have to fight. If I don’t…”

“If you fight, you’ll end up killed. You’re barely old enough.”

“I am!”

“You’re still young. I’m sorry I ever said things to you. I should have kept it to myself.”

“But I saw, I thought you’d want—”

“It doesn’t matter anymore. Just run!”

The shock in her voice coincided with the thump of someone’s body hitting a corner, and Ritsu darted from his spot, on his hands and knees, and scrambled towards the stairs.

He didn’t know where he was going. He wanted to run—even if logic told him he had to stay and help in the battle. He couldn’t stop the guilt as he watched Tsuchiya stand up, then brace herself to punch Shimazaki, as soon as he materialised in front of her. Before she could hit him, he vanished again.

It wasn’t fair, Ritsu thought: but it frightened him, too, undeniably so, as much as it aggravated. He had no chance. He had to flee.

He only made it three hurried steps down before he heard something hit. Ritsu turned around,
curiosity insatiable. It was Tsuchiya: now a hurt, groaning mess, stumbling backwards.

She pressed her palm to her head, and it came away wet with blood. A huge, splintered piece of mannequin rolled away from her, clearly well-targeted.

_Tsuchiya-san—did he just…?_

She fell to the ground, unmoving. Ritsu’s heart raced. Under the skin, he could still feel the boil of her aura, stifled by unconsciousness.

A crash followed. Sakurai was visible through the door frame, now at the back of the room. From his angle on the staircase, Ritsu could see a fallen curtain rail, and with it, Mukai’s curtains. Shimazaki had ducked just in time.

Move, his inner voice said—but Ritsu stayed still.

Shimazaki stopped to breathe. His hand disappeared inside his jacket, before withdrawing a small, silver knife. It glided through the air, just as Sakurai swung. The swordsman parried. Shimazaki retaliated. How his tiny knife could hold its own against the sword—and not break—Ritsu couldn’t tell, but he found himself frozen, watching marks appear on the wall and nicks cut themselves into Shimazaki’s jacket.

A gash sliced through one of Sakurai’s suit lapels, as the man stopped to adjust his glasses. He held his stare on his opponent, gritting his teeth.

“Brave, aren’t you?” Shimazaki sneered. Before Sakurai could retaliate, he had vanished. “But I’ve got a little message for you.”

“What—?”

Before he could say anything else, Shimazaki re-appeared right in front of his face, and elbowed him in the nose. A nasty crack sounded. Sakurai spluttered, blood trailing onto his lips. He clung to his sword, more desperately than ever, but when Shimazaki disappeared and reappeared, this time behind him, the sword slipped from his hands and clattered down to the ground.

Shimazaki strode forward, and trapped the blade under his foot.

Sakurai lay on his front, winded from the sudden attack. Panting, he tried to reach for his sword, but Shimazaki had it secure, and even with the aura glowing around it, the sword only quivered under his shoe. It couldn’t come back. Sakurai tried again, but the effort amounted to nothing.

“Not surprising that you’ve got that weakness. So much for the great and mighty Magister, hm?”

Sakurai tried to breathe, in and out. It seemed to hurt, judging from the sounds that were coming from him. Ritsu, in panic, wondered where Akazukihara’s resident nurse was, and why she wasn’t there, right now, where they needed her most.

There was no time to cry for help.

“So, what was it you told Minegishi?”

Ritsu’s feet wouldn’t move. In the corner of his eye, Tsuchiya shuddered, slowly regaining consciousness, but all he could stare at was Sakurai. He tried to call for his sword again, but the weapon wouldn’t budge.
In desperation, he tried to leap up: the speed an attempt to throw off Shimazaki. It wasn’t enough. Shimazaki reappeared right in front of him, and kicked him down. His back hit the floor first, and before Ritsu could scream, Shimazaki was on top of him, his shin holding down Sakurai’s blade flat on the ground.

The silver knife was still in his hands. For a moment time seemed to slow, and Ritsu read the spine-chilling motions of his lips.

“Flowers for the president’s wife?”

He turned away just a second too late, and saw one quick slash, before the stab.

Sakurai screamed in pain. Vomit filled Ritsu’s mouth. Instinct took over: the thing he regretted the most, as he turned back, and saw the floor, and Sakurai’s once-white shirt, now stained with blood. The man, clearly agonised, convulsed and rolled to the side. His trembling palm ignored the new gash on his jaw, and instead, clapped over something far worse, as his glasses, one lens broken, fell to the ground—

—where Ritsu saw red, coming from what was left of his eye.

He was going to be sick, any moment. He wanted to scream. He couldn’t let it. He had to stand up and fight, even if it meant having Shimazaki slice him, or rip out half his face.

His legs wouldn’t move. His body refused to listen to him.

“You… fucking!”

Gasping, now with both her hands covered in blood, Tsuchiya finally pushed herself up. Shimazaki turned around, smiling, as if ignoring his now-dirtied knife.

He vanished, then reappeared next to her; and then, the next thing Ritsu knew was that Tsuchiya was trying to fight him head-on, and that her hands were close to his neck, but they didn’t reach before he knocked her off-balance, and—

Stop, stop, please—

“Ritsu, what are you doing?” He heard her gasp out, halfway between attempts to attack. “I told you to run!”

“Scared for the kid, are you?”

“Shut up!”

With a beastly scream, Shimazaki was pushed back, and stumbled over a piece of mannequin on the floor. He fell. The thump reverberated.

Tsuchiya flashed Ritsu a look: panic, concern, everything. The breath came back into Ritsu’s lungs.

“Ritsu!” She called out again.

Shimazaki disappeared, appearing behind her, but she whipped around just in time, grabbing his arm. In a flash, he wasn’t there any more—but she had already responded to the figure that had appeared at the other side of her.

She was fast—spine-chillingly so, even when wounded.
“Ritsu! Run now!”

Frantic, he looked around. Tsuchiya was fighting off Shimazaki. Hana, or Yui, or whoever she was, lay in the corner, slumped and unconscious, her black, neat bob giving way to blonde tangles. Sakurai, breathing heavily, was on the floor, hand over his eye.

Mukai was curled up in bed. He couldn’t save her.

He turned around, and ran down the stairs. In the background, he heard her scream once again, but didn’t let himself turn around.

He didn’t know where he was going. Escaping was all that mattered: all that had to matter, if he was to make it out alive. He wanted to help, so badly he could feel his aura screaming out to be used, to stick something sharp into Shimazaki, or the other force that he felt downstairs, unfamiliar—

—wait!

A shudder bolted through him, and Ritsu stopped three steps from the bottom of the staircase. He had sensed something, for sure. It didn’t feel right. He stood still, and realised he was sensing it still: something slow and slithering, threatening to coil if he came too close.

Swallowing, he crept down the rest of the steps, and then—his heart thumping and thumping—down the corridor.

The lights had gone out. Ritsu’s feet pushed aside shattered glass. The doors around him were closed, except the pair that led to the sitting-room. He’d learned which doors they were off by heart: where the room had always been bright, where’d see Mukai lecturing her mannequins about not scaring anyone, or Rei shuffling cards to ease the fear in her eyes. Neither girl’s aura was there.

What Ritsu sensed was a pair of auras: one strong and firm, like the pulse of a heart mixed with the strength of hard stone, and one that sent shivers down his spine, cold and textured like ropes.

He had to run, to get out—but he couldn’t stop himself.

Aura pricking at his wrists, he peered in between the doors.

The room was in shambles. Wooden frames and overturned furniture lay collapsed on the floor. The rug that had once been at the centre of the room had been thrust into the corner. Where it had been, was a smallish, pale man, with hair like snow and tendrils of vivid green aura snaking between his fingers.

What surrounded him looked like ropes, too—or not, Ritsu realised: they were too thick and green. They were vines.

The man had one arm outstretched, his grey haori sleeve bright amongst the vines as they stretched out in the direction of his hand. They grew at his command, shooting out like striking, venomous snakes, and Ritsu turned to see the direction in which they were travelling. He wasn’t alone in the room. A second man, this one more muscular, was down on one knee in the corner, panting in desperation.

Ritsu had seen him, with Sakurai, but couldn’t remember his name. He didn’t have time to. The man let out a low grunt as the vines attempted to wrap around his arm, until a violet burst blew them off, remnants of green wilting on the ground by the second.

More vines came at him, and with that same purple aura, bursting like sparks from his fists, they tore
apart upon contact.

The man gave a wide, crooked smile. *Koyama, that’s it.* Ritsu remembered his name.

“You think you can grab me?” Koyama smirked, flexing an arm. He stomped on the remnants of vines on the floor, as if to mock his attacker.

The man in the haori raised a palm, and the next wave of vines closing in on Koyama stopped growing. Helpless, they fell to the ground, halfway between the two of them.

*A plant-controlling esper...*

Ritsu knew: he had to back off. He’d never been told about controlling plants, and he’d never seen anyone do it at Akazukihara. His brother had never done it, either. Sometimes, drooping flowers would raise their heads as he walked past, or wilt after a bad day at school, but those times had been trivial. This was a class of its own. He hadn’t imagined such a power existed.

There was so much he didn’t know. He hated not knowing, not being enough, and not strong enough, either.

“If I can’t hurt you,” the pale man said, “then, perhaps I should take a different approach.” Slowly, his head turned to the gap between the open doors.

His gaze, arrow-sharp, almost pierced Ritsu’s. “I see we’ve got an intruder.”

“Shit!”

Koyama swore, and turned to face Ritsu—but he wasn’t fast enough, and neither was Ritsu himself. He knew he needed to run, but felt sick, and his legs wouldn’t move.

He tried to slam the door back, but he didn’t get time to. Green and black shot out in his direction, before something grabbed his ankle, and he was thrust first at the edge of the door, and then up into the air.

Ritsu couldn’t see straight, but he could smell his own blood.

The pale man thrust out his hand, and then the world blurred—until Ritsu’s back hit one of several chairs, broken and battered at the side of the room, and he cried out in agony.

“Kid!” Koyama’s voice barely came through, drowned out by Ritsu’s pulse, and the pain. “Fucking hell… bastard, I’m gonna kill you for that!”

Ritsu didn’t hear the rest. Blood filled his nostrils and dripped down his cheek, grazed by splinters. He could *feel* his legs and arms, but his body felt shattered, no matter if it was still back together. His head slumped down, as if glued to the floor. He couldn’t lift himself up. He couldn’t move. His head hurt so badly that he feared moving an inch: even a small movement felt like it would smash through his skull and crack straight down his spine, if it hadn’t been cracked already.

The cool buzz of his barrier seeped into his skin. It had protected him. It hadn’t stopped the pain, but he knew: he wasn’t dead yet. He could still twitch his fingers.

It wasn’t enough.

The sounds of fighting, of breaking furniture, and faint cries from upstairs turned to fuzz in his head. Maybe, this was it, he thought. He should have listened, and run away, like Tsuchiya had said. He
was going to die now. It was his fault, for being so curious.

Maybe, for one silly moment, he’d thought he’d be able to help, or that he’d come one step closer to finding his brother.

*I’ll see him in... the next world, maybe...?*

He didn’t want to believe it, but as his eyes squeezed shut, welling with tears, he sighed and forced himself to accept it. Blood covered his lips. It tasted like metal: like the last thing tying him down to reality, before he died.

He could already feel the shinigami’s warm breath on his skin, and the slender hands prying him out of his skin.

He’d never really thought much about death. Now, he was being prodded by it.

“Psst. Get up already.”

Ritsu groaned. He had always imagined gods of death as deep-voiced; not like this.

“Come on,” the voice sounded again. “Get up.”

His hands felt the cold floor beneath, and Ritsu thought back to reality. He was still in the room. The hand he could feel on his side didn’t feel like the hand of death, or what he’d imagined it to be like. The voice didn’t feel like death, either. Whoever was talking to him was clearly trying to be quiet, but the force was cutting through all the secrecy.

Ritsu groaned weakly. Opening his eyes was a struggle.

“Come on, he’s distracted!” The hand moved up to his shoulder, then shook it with more force: any stronger, Ritsu thought, and it could have been dislocated. He didn’t need any more injuries.

He forced out a mumble. “Can’t...”

“What do you mean, can’t? You don’t look broken to me...”

Ritsu felt like snapping at whoever was talking, telling them to look at his state—and realised he didn’t know who he was talking to. The hands he felt were small, not like Koyama’s, and for a moment, in his delusions, Ritsu thought of his brother, even if the voice didn’t match.

The voice was either a girl’s, or unbroken.

Slowly, he turned his head, and as his vision refocused and the sound of fighting in the background jerked him out of his fuzzy state, he made out the form and face of a boy, maybe his age, with the brightest ginger hair he’d seen in his life.

He definitely, definitely wasn’t a shinigami.

“Ssh,” the boy hissed. “We need to get out of here, quick.”

He shook Ritsu again, before another crash and a yelp from Koyama distracted him, and he turned around, then back again. “They’ll see us!”

“Ngh...” Ritsu groaned. “Can’t...”

“Come on! You’re like me, right? Use your power or something!”
Like me. Ritsu understood.

The hand shaking him felt hot, too hot to be normal. It reminded him of Tsuchiya’s aura, fiery and strong and resistant, yet different, too. There was heat there, more than anything else, sharp and striking like a red-hot poker, yet somehow, rolling too, like bubbles against his skin on some invisible watery surface.

The boy was an esper, but he’d not seen him before at Akazukihara—and then, he remembered red hair peeking out from the folds of a blanket, something he’d seen through the bannisters when he should have been asleep. Koyama, in front of him, was locked in battle, violet rage tearing through an onslaught of vines, increasing by the second. The boy had been there with him, with Sakurai too, and—

He didn’t want to think about Sakurai. Under the skin, from the depths of his bones, Ritsu felt his psychic energy rise.

He had to get up.

It was as if something phantasmal was spurring him on, red-hot energy and crackling flame and rushing water, flushing out the pain in his back and limbs, until he could lift up his arm and smear the blood on his face onto his sleeve.

“See?” The boy said, giving his other sleeve a gentle tug. “Yeah, just get up, and…”

“Can’t.” He could keep his arm under his nose, but not much else. Ritsu’s joints felt like paper.

“What’re you saying? Come on, I can’t carry you.”

The boy was right. Groaning, Ritsu concentrated, mustering as much aura as he could, and felt it blanket his skin and hair and all of his senses. Sharpness and fresh cold blew through his chest, as if bringing him back from the dead. From his palms, it spread to his fingers, and from his legs into his toes. In his veins, he could feel it sparking with energy, like a flame demanding to spread.

Under the boy’s strange touch, even his back didn’t seem to hurt as much—or it still hurt, but Ritsu felt, in that miraculous moment, that he could stand up and bear it.

The boy crept closer, and stretched his arm under Ritsu’s shoulder, then over his back. Slowly, Ritsu leaned on him, and once he was sure, pushed himself up. He didn’t feel healed, and he could still feel blood seeping into his sleeve, but somehow, he felt alive again: as if the red-haired boy had given his life back to him.

He didn’t have time to question it. As soon as he stood up onto his feet, the pain in his skull erupted again, and he let out a pained cry.

“Sh—”

Before the boy had clasped his hand over Ritsu’s mouth, the pale man in the haori was looking back in their direction.

“Not dead yet?” He said, voice bland, as if more bored than frustrated.

“Damn it.” The red-haired boy hissed. “You can’t kill us.”

“Kid?” Koyama turned around, huge arms swinging as he did. “Kid, you fine? Shit, you woke up, too…”
“Doesn’t matter!”

“Of course it doesn’t.” The pale man replied. “It doesn’t matter who dies, so long as the war is won. Good thing we already won it.”

Koyama stepped back, taken afoot. “What?”

“What I said,” he continued. “There’s no use. Not when the revolution has started. Not when the world has already changed.”

“Doesn’t mean you’ve won it!” Koyama roared. “What kind of bastard says they’ve won a war when you can’t even give me a poison ivy rash?”

“Don’t insult me.”

As if on cue, the floor underneath began to rise slightly—until the floorboards gave way and cracked apart, green stems rising up and pale, creeping roots flashing from beneath. Bright aura wove between the plants as they rose, wrecking more of the floorboards as they grew, to the man’s waist within seconds.

“Now, how poisonous would you like it?”

The green aura felt venomous: as if the sight of it alone was toxic. Ritsu felt it prod his own aura, like bony fingers reaching to poke. He shuddered, falling onto the red-headed boy’s shoulder.

He felt sick at the presence. Psychic energy gathered at his fists.

“What are you doing?” The boy leaned in, so close Ritsu could feel his breaths. Ritsu didn’t answer. He could feel the power gathering, welling up in his veins. He couldn’t think, not through the sick feeling, not through the aura in conflict with his own; not through the pain in his bones and muscles, and deeper within.

It was hurting. The energy pricked past his skull, almost piercing. He could feel it gathering like water in a pool, rising. His hands gave a shudder. It was too much. The water turned into shards, perfect ice, and then the shards stuck in, spreading ice through his skin.

He tried to look up, seeing the plants standing erect like spears, about to strike. Koyama was bracing himself.

The pain from before was too much. Ritsu looked straight at the pale, plant-wielding man, and his gut filled with hate. Ice-like energy burst from his arms—before surging down, into the ground, and bolting like lightning up into the ceiling.

A violent noise rocked the room, and Ritsu found himself shielding his face from cascading glass.

For a moment, he wobbled on his own feet, as if the ground below had fallen prey to an earthquake, before a sturdier arm grabbed onto him, and kept him from toppling. Panting, Ritsu looked up, and saw glass and crystals littering the ground. Amongst the plants—or maybe, the plants were amongst the glass, he couldn’t tell—were ruined floorboards, the remains of the chandelier that had once hung from the ceiling, and an outstretched, pale hand.

It twitched, and Ritsu knew: the man was still alive.

He looked up at the ceiling, then down at the floor, then at Koyama, mouth open, in front of him.
“Fucking…” he exhaled. “You just…”

“He did,” the red-headed boy spoke up, before Ritsu could say anything himself. “He’s got potential.”

Ritsu breathed in. His throat was sore; he couldn’t tell whether from panic or exhaustion. “I don’t know… what just…”

“You brought that down, kid.” Koyama pointed at the cracks webbing the ceiling, as a piece of plaster fell on top of the pile of plants and glass. “And you—”

“He’s not dead.” The redhead interrupted.

“Good,” Koyama sighed. “I can take care of him. You two get out of here.”

As if on cue, the hand under the chandelier flexed and tensed, before pushing up. Glass fell either side, as the pale man forced himself to his knees. His hair was covered in plant remains and small, barely-visible crystal dust, and cuts marred his knuckles and fingers, but as he rose, Ritsu knew: he hadn’t done as much as he’d wished.

He hadn’t even wished to attack. His body had acted on instinct.

“I can… help,” he choked out, wishing for more strength. He had it in him. He was sure of it.

“Yeah, you can,” the redhead said, tugging at his sleeve with such force that it threw Ritsu off-balance. Fiery aura pricked at his skin, the sensation more pleasant than the bright green aura had been. “But we’re getting out of here.”

“But—”

“He says he can handle it. We don’t have time.”

By now, the pale man was standing up, and Koyama’s psychic energy was back to coating his fists, as he prepared himself to attack. He let out a loud, insulting taunt, and more roots erupted from the floor in response—ones that the red-headed boy barely avoided, and had to pull at Ritsu’s sleeve to save him from their reach.

“Like I said,” he hissed. “Let’s get out of here!”

“But Koyama-san…”

Before he could react, the boy had grabbed his wrist, and started to tug. “No time.”

“What?”

“I’m Shou. That’s about it. Now, we’re not going to stay here!”

Shou pulled at his sleeve one more time, and Ritsu lost balance, only for Shou’s hand to grab onto his.

A shock of something flooded the veins in his arm. Where his and Shou’s hands met, he could see a flicker of flame-coloured aura, hot enough to prickle at his skin—before Shou’s hand disappeared before his eyes, and then, his own hand was no longer there, or his arm, or…

He could feel Shou’s grip, even if he couldn’t see anything. “What the heck?”
“We’ll get out this way.” Shou’s voice, disembodied, called out. Shou had disappeared, and for a moment, Ritsu thought he’d hallucinated the voice, until a tug at his hand alerted him where he was.

“Wait, what just…”

“They can’t see us like this.”

Ritsu had never seen invisibility in action. “I can’t see you—“

“That’s the point. Come on!”

Shou tugged at Ritsu’s invisible wrist, and Ritsu had no choice but to follow. He could feel the pull, even if he couldn’t see it. Shou’s faint scorch of aura heated up the muscles in his fingers, and he could feel it resonating through the rest of himself. Even with the screaming and shoving he could hear around the house, the thumping of feet on the floor, the hurling of insults, he couldn’t help but feel strangely secure with that warmth; like Shou was his kin, like they were connected and couldn’t, not at that moment at least, be broken apart.

There was another slight tug, and a rushed-out “Come on!” before Ritsu’s feet acted for him.

They leapt over rubble and glass, rushing like wind past almost a blast of green, bursting leaves and stems shattering through the floor, breaking wood and clashing against purple-clad fists. Psychic energy buzzed through the air, so much of it that Ritsu lost track of where he was and where Shou was taking him, until he managed to focus again and realised they had fled the room, and were back in the corridor, running past countless doors.

“That way.” Shou led the way, urging him forward. “It’ll be safe.”

“Why?” Ritsu wasn’t sure how he knew; or even if Shou knew Akazukihara at all.

“Less presence. No-one’s out here.”

Shou stopped in front of one of the last doors, one that Ritsu knew well. The handle turned easily, and before he could protest or question it, Shou had dragged him into the dining area, and then onwards, towards the back door into the garden.

It was unlocked. As soon as the door opened, Ritsu felt almost claimed by the cool outside air.

The sky was starting to lighten. He hadn’t known how long he’d spent unable to sleep in his room, or what time it had been when he’d snuck out. It wasn’t light yet, but it soon would be. His body felt more tired than ever; as if to signal to him that he needed to sleep, that he should have tried to sleep harder. He shouldn’t have stayed awake.

He didn’t know if staying awake had saved him or doomed him.

“Are we safe… now?” He panted, trying to find his hand in the darkness. It was still invisible, seamlessly pressed against Shou’s, and for some reason, he didn’t want to let go. It was probably the invisibility, he thought, feeling a cord of energy connecting their hands, binding them under the skin.

“I don’t know… ugh…”

Shou wobbled, and for a second, Ritsu’s knuckles came back into sight.

“Shou?” Ritsu couldn’t see enough of him: not even as his body began to flicker. It reminded him of Yui-san’s hair—Suzuki Hana’s hair, the liar’s hair—but in his grip, Shou’s hand didn’t feel so firm
any more. The longer he stared, the more he could see: the outline of Shou’s sleeve, then his shoulder, his hair, and then the lines of his face, or as much of it as he could see in the slowly dissipating dark.

“Damn it…” Shou mumbled. His voice sounded weak, too. “They… had me out for that long… “

“Shou?”

“God, I can’t… can’t…”

Shou’s head slumped down, and then, the rest of his body gave way, and fell onto Ritsu, becoming completely visible as he did.

The weight caught him off-guard, and Ritsu teetered, before catching the other boy in his arms. His body was warm, but completely limp, eyes shut. Ritsu felt his heart race.

Shou’s chest moved up and down, and Ritsu exhaled with relief, realising he could still feel his pulse, and the hot, flowing flame of his aura, burning deep within him. He was unconscious—just unconscious, he reminded himself.

Carefully, he tried to lift Shou’s body, and moved it, as gently as he could in his state, towards the bench closest to them. He wasn’t heavy, but Ritsu found him hard to move nonetheless: he knew he was tired, and aching, and barely alive himself, the pain from before coming back no matter how hard he tried to push back against it.

Propping Shou up against the bench, Ritsu looked around. The garden was empty. Shou had been right: he could only feel auras in the house, through the walls and collapsing floors and crumbling ceilings. He didn’t know what do now. Koyama was still fighting against the plant-controller, and upstairs, he could hear the shouts still—louder than what he’d thought he would.

Mukai’s window was open, he realised. The curtains had been pulled off, but what else was there, he couldn’t see. It was too far away, and too dark for him to see anything. All he could do was feel for the auras, feel his own pricking his skin, and what he could feel resonating with it: Tsuchiya, and Mukai, and Sakurai’s, weak and faltering, fading. Next to it was Yui-san’s aura, so faint he was sure she was unconscious.

He could only hope she wasn’t dead. He could only smell blood, though his nosebleed had stopped. Carefully, he wiped away the flaking blood from his face.

He had to do something. He could rescue Mukai, he realised.

A new scream rang through his ears, through the open window. Instinctively, Ritsu stepped forward—only to almost trip.

Himawari stood by his feet, and Ritsu wished he could will her away. Where she had come from, he couldn’t guess. Now isn’t a good time, he thought, wishing he could relay his thoughts to her somehow. She didn’t move. He tried to focus on her, willing his aura, begging it to push her away—but it wouldn’t coalesce around the cat.

“Shoo,” Ritsu whispered, almost biting his tongue in desperation. “Hima—“

He didn’t have time. Another shout from Mukai’s window caught his attention, and it was then that he saw. Mukai had clambered up to the window, somehow. The latch was unlocked. Behind her, Ritsu could hear the ongoing sounds of the battle.
With a small grunt, she pushed the window open further.

What…?

He was too late to understand. She looked over her shoulder, then back again, her hands not sure
where to go as her knees lifted, and moved up towards the open window. Wobbling, she got to her
feet, and leaned on the glass.

“Mukai, no!” Ritsu screamed, unable to think.

Something dark flashed behind her, and a loud crash followed; the crashing of furniture, and then a
loud, angered cry that sounded like Tsuchiya.

Mukai looked over her shoulder again, and screamed, much louder than Ritsu. Ritsu looked back
and forth, between Mukai at the window and then the back door. He still had time. He could run
inside, save her and fight—

—but his feet were glued to the ground. His lungs refused to work, and for a moment, Ritsu thought
he would choke. He wasn’t scared. He had no right to be, but his body just wouldn’t move.

He could see Mukai, her chest rising and falling like the beat of running footsteps on the ground, her
little hands clinging to the window frame. She gasped as she looked back again, then, too quickly,
stepped out onto the sill, and the form of a reaching hand flashed into sight behind her.

“Mukai!”

The world went into slow motion.

Ritsu saw her falter and wobble, losing her grip on the frame. Her arms waved about, uselessly—and
then, Mukai fell.

Ritsu tried to gather his aura, to concentrate, but Himawari’s small furry body bounded across the
garden at full pelt, brushing against his legs, and made him lose control.

The sound of a body hitting the ground rang through his ears.

For a sickening moment, there was nothing but silence. The fight in the room with the open window
ceased.

If he had moved, if Ritsu had been braver and stronger or more capable, then, as he opened his eyes,
he wouldn’t have wanted his aura to stab him right through.

If he had—but—

“Mukai!”

He wanted to run, to see Mukai and to tell himself that she was all right, but he couldn’t move. He
felt ill.

“Mukai!”

Mukai wasn’t moving at all.

The window shattered. The sound of feet hitting the ground, and Tsuchiya’s maddened voice,
screaming, again and again, louder and louder, wasn’t enough to rouse him. He couldn’t move at all.
He could only watch, useless, as she kneeled, and picked the limp body up in her arms. He watched
her shake it, heard her call Mukai’s name again and again, stared in paralysis as she moved her fingers to search for a pulse, then her head to feel breath.

Ritsu couldn’t say anything. It was cold: too cold, suddenly, far too cold. It was his fault, all his. Mukai had jumped and fallen and—

—Tsuchiya fell back, and the body was swiped out of her grasp.

She rolled backwards, staining her clothes with grass and dirt.

Where she had been was now a tall, dark-clad shadow, shoulders lit up by the coming dawn. White eye-lights glittered like morning stars.

“Thanks for that.”

A smashing sound erupted from one of the lower-floor windows, before a silver-grey flash leapt out, bloodstained but whole. Great vines pushed out at the rest of the window, and sent the last of its glass tumbling down.

Ritsu recognised the man Koyama had fought, whom he’d accidentally attacked. Behind him, plants seemed to shrivel up and sink to the ground.

He seemed to say something, before latching on to his sleeve. Shimazaki nodded to him.

Tsuchiya forced herself up, breaths ragged, full of rage. “Don’t you dare—“

“Too late!”

The last Ritsu saw of Shimazaki was his careless grin, and the plant-controller holding on to him, and then both were gone. Mukai’s limp body vanished with them.

All was quiet. There were no words, as the first beams of sun lit up blood on the grass. Birds were starting to chirp. Ritsu’s feet stayed glued to the ground. His chest was still tight. The garden was still. Tsuchiya breathed in and out, clearly in pain, her hands slumping down to the ground.

The plants at the window were withering. Koyama’s ugly face, with its huge old scar, peered out. Ritsu heard other footsteps, too, ringing out through Akazukihara’s wood floors, and more voices coming from all of the windows; Mitsuura calling out, Sakurai’s name being called, someone’s scream, then a fast call for bandages. Behind him, Shou’s aura pulsed. He was only asleep, still alive.

Ritsu stood there, idle. Mukai was gone, and he hadn’t helped. He didn’t know what to say, how to speak. He could only stand there, his eyes fixed on where Tsuchiya was. Her aura’s hot pulse beating along with the blood in his ears.

There were no words for what had to be going through her head, but he could see it; in her mad shudder as she looked up at the still-open window, in her hands as they buried themselves in the ground and pulled at the grass-blades below, and in her voice as it erupted into a desolate howl.

He understood it, he thought—and he thought it was sheer, unstoppable rage.
Shigeo was tired.

He opened his eyes, slowly at first, then with more confidence, realising he couldn’t close them again. He was tired—maybe more tired than he’d ever been in his life, more beaten than any run had ever left him, down to the aching legs and uncomfortable sensation against his knees that told him they were horribly grazed.

His head hurt when he lifted it up, like it had turned to stone overnight. The floor was cold against his palms. The blanket Reigen had thrown over him had fallen off to one side. It hadn’t been comfortable, sleeping on the floor without a futon, but it was better than it had been on the streets, when he’d forced himself to deal with the smell of the gutters and rouse himself at the faintest sound of approaching feet.

Reigen’s couch hadn’t really been comfortable, but it was better than the floor, or the street. Looking in its direction, Shigeo saw Teru’s arm hanging from its edge. His fingertips brushed the floor, just avoiding the blood-riddled rag that had once been his shirt, thrown onto the floor.

Teru lay face down, breathing but unmoving.

Shigeo wasn’t sure what to feel. He didn’t know anything, no matter how long he spent staring at Teru’s back, watching it rise and fall with his breaths. Teru was alive—but whether he’d done the right thing, he wasn’t certain.

Sickly colours patched through his vision. If last night had been real—and it had—then there was no reason why Teru couldn’t push himself up, and stare him in the face with eyes full of burning-mad rage, and already, Shigeo could envisage his bones, snapping like fragile wood. He could feel the cling of aura still with each of his movements. Faint, small ripples of yellow seemed to shift in sync with Teru’s back, rising and falling with each of his breaths.

Shigeo couldn’t see anything, but he could feel it, like he could feel his own shielding blue. Teru let out a small, weary groan in his sleep, and Shigeo felt the colour move.

The yellow presence and Teru were one, just like Shigeo was with his aura. It felt strange, just like seeing him in the same room, asleep, as if the previous night had been a dream. Shigeo didn’t know what to think of the blonde hair, either. That was probably strangest of all, last night’s chaos aside.

Behind him, a creak from a worn bed rattled the silence. Shigeo turned around, as Reigen’s loud yawns pulled him from the remains of his slumber. The man lumbered out of bed, still in yesterday’s clothing—also strange, also unsettling somehow, after seeing Reigen waking up with fresh-looking shirts every day. His hair stuck out in all directions, making Shigeo think of a hedgehog.

“Mob… good morning…”

Reigen’s voice reminded him of his father after a family gathering, but without the smell of sake. His joints cracked unpleasantly as he stretched out, and that, too, made Shigeo think of his parents. He wondered how old Reigen even was—not as old as his father, probably, but an adult for sure. He’d never been good with telling ages.
Glancing over at Teru, slumped on the couch, he remembered: he didn’t know Teru’s age, either.

The apartment, other than the mess and the presence of Teru, was no different from yesterday. It was still small. The floor, as Shigeo had found from sleeping on it, was still cold. The traitorous rug on which he had tripped on his first morning there was on the other side of the room, pushed over to make space. The small table was as before, too, save for a familiar tin full of bottles, and what had once been a roll of bandages that was now a long, winding mess, spilled onto the floor.

Shigeo could remember rolling over during the night, half-asleep. His side still felt sore.

He had probably bumped against the table.

Reigen’s bare feet made noises as he walked over towards the couch. Unsure of what he wanted, Mob edged away from him, hitting the very table he’d just thought about. It wasn’t painful, but he still didn’t like it. His body was still sore from the previous night, and all that had unfolded.

He watched in silence, as Reigen leaned over Teru, and gave him a faint shove. “Hey, kid. Time to wake up.”

Part of Shigeo wanted to grab at Reigen and pull him back. There was no telling what could happen, not when he could still sense that resonance. The bright yellow aura and Teru were inseparable, and if bothering one would mean triggering the other, the sight from last night, for all Shigeo knew, could repeat itself in Reigen’s apartment. He didn’t think he could handle another fight, not with his legs still aching and the skin on his knees scraped again.

He froze when he saw Teru move. Small, tired groans came from his throat as he buried his head in the back of the couch.

“You still tired?” Reigen asked. “Well, no worries. Sleep it off for a while.”

“I’m… fine…”

A limp arm swung a little, side to side, draped over the edge of the couch. Teru tried to lift himself up with his other arm, and it was just as Shigeo spotted the off-white bandage around it that—

“Ow!”

Teru yelled, biting his tongue in an attempt to silence himself. He didn’t stay up. He’d barely been able to hold his weight on his injured arm, and then, it had given way.

Shigeo’s blood ran cold. He wondered if he’d broken something. All he’d seen was flying debris and skin being sliced open, but for all of that night, Teru’s aura had been stained with the colour of the blood dripping down from hot flesh.

“Shit…” Reigen cursed, then reached down. His arm wrapped around Teru’s shoulder. “Here. Lean on me.”

“I’ll deal…”

“Lean on me, I said.”

Reigen didn’t accept interference. Teru didn’t look up, his eyes still half-shut, but he leaned in regardless, biting back pain as he pushed himself up and Reigen’s support helped to pull him, until he was sat up, legs touching the floor. His trousers were still on: odd, compared to the bloody mess of a shirt that lay by his feet. The bandages on his injured arm were just as horribly stained.
Shigeo couldn’t even remember when Reigen had bandaged it. When the three of them had lumbered into Reigen’s apartment at night, the events between then and falling asleep on the floor had been a blur.

He could remember small things, like Reigen asking him to take the floor. He remembered nodding, and not saying a word.

Once Teru was sat up, albeit with his head down, Reigen sat down next to him. He looked at the bandage, then ran his hand down it, onto the bloodstain. His hand came away dry. “Stopped bleeding. But that’s pretty nasty…”

Teru didn’t react.

“Put it down here,” Reigen patted his lap. “Let’s take a look…”

Teru, eyes still half-shut, slung his hurt arm over it. Reigen sighed, and looked down, giving off a little flame-like alarm, then dull green discomfort. The sight of bandages and blood made Shigeo uncomfortable, and he turned away, back towards the table.

“Mob, could you get the tin? And a clean cloth?”

Reigen had noticed. As much as he knew that he had to, Shigeo didn’t really want to get up. He was tired, and a little hungry—and thinking back at Teru’s arm, not quite at ease.

It didn’t matter. He had to do something more important than hide away.

He’d learned where Reigen kept some cloths for cleaning: next to the sink. He wasn’t sure if Reigen meant those, but they were better than nothing. Shigeo forced himself up and padded over, barefoot, to the other side of the room. His socks had peeled off with his shoes when he had come in, and he saw them next to the apartment door, scrunched up and no longer new. An unfamiliar pair lay next to his. Reigen’s, the largest of the three, were on the other side of the step.

He wondered if Reigen would complain, considering how new his socks and shoes had been.

Turning away, he went back to the sink, and checked the shelves above it. Reigen kept a small tin of tea there, and a handful of other things. He spied a small saucepan and a few simple bowls, and then, there was a cloth. It looked clean, or at least, as clean as anything could get in the stuffy, messy apartment.

He took the cloth back, then picked up the tin from the table, and passed both to Reigen, who took it from him with a nod. The smell of iodine permeated the air, and Shigeo looked towards the window, wondering if he could open it.

A little light peered past the curtains, and he thought of the night before for some reason: of how Reigen had reached down and offer his hand, and then, how something had engulfed his vision and thrown him into that strange field, and filled his ears with hot blood and the ghost of gunfire. He couldn’t remember much else, save for an old man, an unfamiliar face, and then the old man’s outreached hand, so much like Reigen’s had been. Shigeo had reached back for it—or not, he thought. It hadn’t quite felt the same, almost as if he hadn’t been in his own body at all—

“Mob?”

He almost jumped. “Yes?”

“Are you all right?”
He had stiffened up, he realised. “Yes.”

Reigen raised an eyebrow. “Sure? You looked kind of sick. Sorry, it might smell a bit in here…”

Being reminded of it made him uneasier than before. “It does.”

“Sorry. I’ll try and open a window once this is done.”

“Are you a doctor, Reigen-san?” He didn’t know why the question came to mind all of a sudden: maybe because of all the bandaging Reigen had done, or the familiar smell of an open bottle of iodine.

Reigen didn’t look back, and focused on Teru. “...Top of my class, Mob. Don’t worry. I know my way around first aid.”

Somehow, it didn’t feel like he’d answered Shigeo’s question, but he had sounded confident. Before he could say anything else, Reigen’s attention was already devoted to Teru again.

“One second… hold still…”

Reigen tore off the bandages, and Teru hissed in discomfort. Apart from the arm, he didn’t look too badly hurt, but the yelp of pain set Shigeo on edge: as if, like before, Teru could look up at him with the same enraged, maddened look in his eyes, and the next thing he knew, he’d be thrown through the walls of the apartment and his bones would be broken for real.

A part of him wanted to run. The door was in sight. Reigen was busy. As he unwrapped Teru’s arm, Mob picked up the roll of bandages from the floor, and tried to roll it back up. It had shrunk in size so much over the last week that Shigeo wished he had money to repay it all. It had been his fault, for being hurt, and then for asking to bring in Teru. He’d have to pay it back. It wasn’t right for Reigen to be dealing with him.

Maybe, it would be better to leave, and to stop relying on him altogether. Reigen knew the truth, after all. Something felt too kind about it all.

Still, Shigeo thought, the situation seemed calm, or at least, calmer than before. Teru was half-asleep, drooping forward with Reigen gently nudging him awake every so often, and other than his arm, not much else seemed to have been injured. He looked almost ordinary, like any other boy who hadn’t slept well on a school day—maybe, a little like Shigeo, who had never liked getting up in the morning.

In his household, with his family, it had always been Ritsu, his younger brother, who had been early to wake.

Please be alive, Shigeo thought, storm-blue dread pooling in his belly.

“Actually… hey, what’s your name again?” Reigen’s voice distracted him from his thoughts, until he realised he hadn’t been speaking to him after all, but to Teru instead. “Did I even ask for your name? Can’t just call you ‘kid’ anyway, not when there’s two of you.”

Teru didn’t reply, seemingly too tired. Reigen gave him a nudge. “Hm?”

“…Hanazawa,” Teru mumbled.

“Hanazawa what?”
“Just… Hanazawa.”

Hanazawa, Shigeo repeated to himself, trying to commit it to memory. It felt strange and maybe even a little wrong. Teru was Teru, but Teru didn’t look like the boy he’d been. His hair was different, and more than that, the look on his face and the tired murk of colour Shigeo saw around him was nothing like the confident brightness that had been there before.

Hanazawa was almost a different person: as if Teru and he were two different people. Shigeo wondered which name was the real one, or if both were real.

“All right… Hanazawa-kun, maybe you could do with a wash before I bandage you up…”

“What?”

“There’s a bathroom in the building.” Reigen explained. “Downstairs. I’ll show you. Should be some soap down there as well—wait, can you wash yourself?”

“Hm?”

“The arm.”

“I’ll be fine,” Hanazawa replied, sighing.

Shigeo couldn’t tell if it was boredom, fatigue, or something else he couldn’t name. He’d never been good at naming feelings. Half of them he only knew because of the colours, and even then, he’d had to ask Ritsu or his mother. His mother would shake his head and give him odd looks. He hadn’t understood what he’d done wrong, but supposed it came with his abilities.

Reigen had let Shigeo take a bath after he had been brought in, but not so suddenly. At the same time, he hadn’t been bleeding as badly. He hoped nothing had gotten into Teru’s wound, even if Reigen knew how to clean it.

The older man helped up Hanazawa, slowly, then looked over his shoulder. “Mob, can you stay here a minute?”

Shigeo nodded. “Yes, Reigen-san.”

“Good. Keep the place clean.”

He couldn’t tell how much of his words were a threat, or an order, or even encouragement. It didn’t really sound harsh, but with his own fatigue, he couldn’t trust himself to think straight. He could barely keep his gaze fixed on Reigen and Hanazawa, breaking it off with a yawn as Reigen tried to support the boy leaning on him.

A pair of tired eyes looked over a bare, blood-smeared shoulder. What was in them, Shigeo had no idea, and he didn’t have time to make sense of them, either.

The door didn’t shut completely after Reigen. Mob stood up and walked over to it, then peered out. Reigen had gone down the stairs, and from what conversation he could pick up, he was showing Teru the bath, then asking him how hot he wanted the water, and if he could wash his hurt arm.

Shigeo sighed, put the roll of bandages down, and went back to his spot on the floor. He didn’t really want to sit on the couch.

It wasn’t the first time he’d been alone in the apartment, but the atmosphere felt brand new all over
again: as if Reigen hadn’t been leaving him there while he worked, as if he had never slept in the room, as if he hadn’t been there at all. Without Reigen, or Hanazawa, the place seemed cold for late spring. It made Shigeo recall the winter, only a few months ago, when he and his brother had bundled together in an attempt to keep warm, and when the whole family would push their futons side-by-side, when they’d felt like bugs in cocoons, like some childhood game.

It didn’t feel like that any more. His family wasn’t there. He didn’t know if they’d lived or died. He hadn’t wanted to believe what he’d glimpsed in the newspapers he’d found during his time on the streets. He still didn’t want to believe it now.

If his parents were gone, then—no, he reminded himself. There was still Ritsu. He hadn’t heard anything about him.

He pushed himself to his knees, and scooted towards the small table, where he had seen the anpan on the first morning he had found himself in the apartment. A familiar cutting lay there, creased, but still legible. He read what he could bring himself to, then turned away.

His parents were gone. Not Ritsu, he pleaded; not Ritsu. There was no mention of him.

Ritsu had always been the stronger of the two of them, despite Shigeo being older. He’d always been stronger and faster, and popular amongst his classmates, and then there had been Shigeo, dawdling behind, out of sight, as if whatever force or God was out there had granted him psychic abilities and taken away everything else.

Maybe, sometime in the past, he’d thought of his powers as a blessing, but now, with the memory of the fire, and the smell of blood fresh in his mind, he couldn’t help but think that he’d been cursed.

The door creaked open, startling him. Reigen came in, took his shoes off and, leaving the door ajar, came back over to the couch with a sigh. Shigeo moved away by instinct, hitting the small table. The newspaper article fluttered down to the floor.

“Ah, shit,” Reigen turned around, then picked up the article. “Sorry. I still had that lying around. I didn’t mean to leave it.”

“It’s all right,” Shigeo said. “You kept it for a while.”

“I didn’t mean to alarm you, kid.”

“No. It’s all right.”

“I didn’t know. It was hard.”

Shigeo watched as Reigen brushed the surface of the couch with his hands, as if to get rid of dust. He seemed to fixate on a spot, and Shigeo wondered if Teru had stained it. He didn’t get to find out. Reigen sat down where it had been, and patted the other side of the couch.

“You don’t have to sit on the floor,” he said. “I mean, sit here if you want.”

Shigeo didn’t know if it was right to. “Yes,” he blurted out.

Careful, so as not to even brush against Reigen, Shigeo stood up and sat down on the other end of the couch, and stared at the wall. Past the little table, there wasn’t much else in the room, other than the rug that had tripped him up on his first morning there. Reigen’s medicine tin rested on the floor by the man’s feet, and with it, Teru’s old, unpleasant bandages.
“I left Hanazawa,” Reigen said. “He can wash himself on his own. Just got to hope he doesn’t fall asleep like that.”

Shigeo half-expected him to add, *and I hope he doesn’t destroy the place,* but it never came, and he didn’t want to admit his fear either.

“I think he’ll be fine, anyway. Do you want me to check your knees?”

“No,” Shigeo shook his head. It felt bad to ask for anything more.

“If you say. Oh, one more thing. Do you still want me to call you Mob?”

Shigeo tensed. The article was in Reigen’s hands, and it was clear that he’d read it before, what with its age, now two weeks old. He hadn’t been sure how much time had passed, until he’d seen the date in the corner.

“Oh is Kageyama-kun better?”

Nobody had called Shigeo by his name since the day he had run, since before the fire and the strangers and Michie-san and her husband. Teru had been right. Mob was a strange name. It wasn’t a real name at all. He had lost his real name in the fire, and lost it again in the depths of Michie-san’s blood and in the screams of her husband, and then, the remains of it had been trashed and left in the alleys and under the bridges where he had slept.

He was Mob now: Mob the nobody, Mob the boy who had nothing, Mob with the bad excuse for a name. Teru being Hanazawa was strange—but he could only be Mob.

“I don’t mind,” he said, simply. “Mob is all right.”

“Then Mob it is,” Reigen said, giving some semblance of a smile. It didn’t really look right on his face, for some reason, but Shigeo decided not to question it. He didn’t want to; not when he’d been so uncertain about Reigen, not after the strange and confusing events of the previous night.


Reigen looked back down at the article in his hands. The headline, Shigeo’s black-and-white portrait, names and numbers and things Shigeo wasn’t certain about: all of the, were still there. Seeing it there made his chest feel tight. His heart raced at the sight of it.

The article was trembling in Reigen’s grip.

Reigen sighed, one sweaty palm raising itself to his forehead. “I didn't know at the start. I just... I just saw you. I felt bad. And I did say I’d get you to your grandma.”

“I didn't lie about her.”

“I assume,” he sighed. “I just didn't know. Maybe I got things mixed up. I thought you lived with her. That... you know, Negi. That you ran all the way here from there.”

“No. I'm sorry.”

“It's all right. You didn't lie to me, not if she's real, anyway. I messed it up. I don't know. Kid, do you want to go back to her?”

“I don't know.”
"I don't know either. I just don't know," Reigen surrendered, reaching over and picking up the newspaper article at long last. "I saw this on the day I went to work. I didn't know what to think. I don't even know if it's true. They said all these things, and... I don't know, do you just think people are lying? I just... I didn't want to believe, Mob. I didn't. And then, last night, I didn't know at all, I just wanted you to be safe. I didn't think you were bad. For God's sake. You're fourteen."

A clearer blue started tailing his words; blue as the sky, blue as the pictures of the ocean Shigeo had seen on posters. "You're fourteen, and I didn't think. I mean, all of this. All of this stuff about espers, it just happened so suddenly, and I didn't want to think it was true. You never harmed me, not even when I left you alone in the apartment. You could have robbed me, you could have killed me, you could have destroyed something, and you didn't, because that's not what you are, and then, last night... I saw..."

The air around him turned feverish-pink; not quite burning. Shigeo didn’t understand. Reigen stopped speaking, and it felt wrong: as if the words had got stuck in his throat, or that whatever he was thinking was confusing him, or making him feel sick. “I don’t know. I don’t know why I’m even doing this…”

“Reigen-san…”

“I don’t know. I just don’t know.”

Shigeo didn’t know either. He didn’t know Teru, or Hanazawa, or whatever his name was, not well enough to know what had happened the previous night, not well enough to know what had happened to his now-golden hair. He didn’t know Reigen either.

Reigen had been kind. That was all that he knew. Reigen had brought him in in the first place. Reigen had helped him and given him food and new clothes, bought with his own money, and never asked for anything back. Shigeo had lied. He had run, and then pulled Teru out of the carnage, and tried to stop the drip of his blood. Reigen had seen it that time, for certain: blood on his hands.

Still—Reigen had reached. He hadn’t let go. He couldn’t forget.

He could ask. Reigen wasn’t looking at him, and he wondered if it was right—before his instincts kicked in, and Shigeo acted before he thought.

“Reigen-san. Back then,” he said, hoping for some kind of answer, if only he could get right the words.

Reigen lifted his head. “Huh? When?”

“Yesterday. When you found us, I saw something. Someone. In the grass.”

“Grass? Mob, what are you saying?”

It was already hard to explain. He couldn’t make sense of it, whether he had had some kind of vision or been transported somewhere. Maybe, it had been an illusion. The more he thought about it, the more the presence in the grass felt familiar, almost, like an aura, but not quite. It hadn’t been strong enough.

“Last night, when you held out your hand. I saw something. Like a dream,” Shigeo tried to explain, stumbling over his own words. “Lying down in the grass. Something bad. Pain. Something cold in my—someone’s leg. And someone came, someone reached out a hand.”

“What?” Something was off about Reigen’s voice. What it meant, Shigeo didn't know.
“I don’t know why I saw it. I’ve never seen anything like that.”

“Mob…”

“I don’t know what happened. Or where it was. But… I don’t think I was me. I was somebody else.”

Silence and stillness was all he got in response. Reigen stared back, devoid of all words. Shigeo tasted something in his mouth, like the feeling he got when his mother rolled his eyes and told him, you shouldn’t have said that. He’d never been good at reading the atmosphere. He’d never been good at much, not even understanding himself, and now, for some reason, something inside was telling him he should have said nothing at all.

Reigen wasn’t looking at him any more.

“I’m sorry,” Shigeo said. “It was just strange.”

“It’s OK,” Reigen replied, turning his head. Something about his smile didn’t look right. It shook at the corners, but Shigeo couldn’t tell what that meant, either. There was a colour in his head, but one that was too murky to name. People made less sense when their colours weren’t clear. “Maybe… maybe that was a dream.”

“Reigen-san.”

“I don’t know.” He made an awkward gesture with his hand. For whatever reason he had, Reigen wasn’t looking him in the eye. “I don’t know… your powers.”

“They’re strange,” Shigeo confessed. “Sometimes, they frighten me.”

He wasn’t going to mention the horror he’d been in last night. Psychic powers were terrifying. Even when he hadn’t been the one threatening to destroy half of the city, he’d still been scared; scared of the fire bringing his blood to a boil, scared of the colours, scared of what he could do if he didn’t keep his powers contained. So often they’d threatened to overflow, to spill into chaos, to wreak havoc like he’d done to Michie-san’s poor, desperate husband.

“What are they like?” Reigen asked. “Other than… you know. The stuff you were doing last night.”

“Psychokinesis. I think… I think it’s called that.”

Common psychokineti was the term he’d heard used on the radio. The phrase contradicted itself. He didn’t like that. It felt strange to say it, when he hadn’t met any other psychokinetics, or any other espers at all.

His mother had shaken her head and told him: call it nothing at all, because it’s dangerous for you to call it anything. He hadn’t understood what she meant at first. On the streets, people talked about espers, and shivered with the pale, sickly colours of fear.

He hadn’t told anyone, nonetheless. He’d tried to think about running and lifting weights with his arms, not his powers, instead.

Reigen nodded. “You can move things.”

“Yes,” Shigeo nodded.

“What… what else?”

“Like what?”
“Like, can you read minds or something?”

Shigeo paused, before shaking his head. “No. But sometimes, I see colours.”

“Colours?”

“Colours. Like... feelings.”

It was hard to explain; not even he knew. The colours were there—they just were, tied to his powers somehow, but not in a way he could read. What the feelings meant, beyond their colours, beyond their names, he didn’t know.

“Oh,” Reigen exclaimed, momentarily. Bright yellow burst through clouded pastel.

“I don’t understand,” Shigeo continued. “I just feel things. That’s all.”

“No mind stuff or anything?”

“No. Why do you ask?”

Reigen paused, looking up at the ceiling, then at his hands in his lap, and then, nowhere at all. “Just curious, I guess,” he said with a smile. “I’ve… wondered about espers and all. I’ve never met one.”

“You met me.”

“Before you.”

It felt strange to think about not knowing any espers, when Shigeo had grown up with his colours in the back of his mind and his aura warming his bones at night. It had been strange to his family, and his mother and father had always told him to keep it quiet, quieter than any secret, yet even then, he’d show it to Ritsu, make water float, make candle flames dance.

Had everyone else really been like Reigen, before they’d found out espers existed?

Shigeo hadn’t met other espers before Hanazawa. Part of him had thought he might have been the only one of his kind, before he and the rest of the country had found out about the 99th. Now, he knew: he wasn’t alone, but that he was in danger, no matter what he did, or where he ran.

He didn’t want Reigen to be in danger. Maybe, he thought, it was better to leave, no matter how much he wanted to curl up and stay, somewhere, in some semblance of a calm, quiet home, but his home was gone, and there was nowhere to run. Reigen, in the end, was still a stranger.

Reigen had picked him up twice now.

Reigen was strange.

Maybe, Reigen was kind.

The couch creaked beneath him, and Shigeo looked up. Reigen had stood up, and before he could say anything, Reigen spoke first. “Just figured I’d check on Hanazawa. Do you mind staying here?” The corners of his mouth quirked up in a wobbling smile. “You taking a long time in the bath was something, I don’t know how he is. And, well, you’re a good kid.”


“I know. It was something,” Reigen replied. “But tell me yourself, did you do all the newspaper
said? And I’m not asking you if you’re an esper or not. Just if you killed those people and burned down that house.”

Shigeo thought. He hadn’t started the fire—but he had hurt people, first Michie-san’s husband and then Hanazawa, when he’d tried to protect himself, and then Reigen, too, by dragging him into the mess. He was to blame.

Yet—

He tried to recall the figures he had seen in front of the fire, but could only remember black blurs and the voices of men, before the bitter taste of strange fluid burned through his memories.

Reigen’s question was simple. “No,” Shigeo said.

“Then I’ll trust you not to burn down this place. Criminals always get brought to justice, you know,” Reigen replied. “If you want it to be fine, then you’ll make it fine.”

Shigeo didn’t say anything back. He could feel a wobbly blueness amidst the faint gold that came with small smiles.

“Well, I’ll go and check. You just stay here, I’ll be back in a minute…”

In silence, Shigeo watched Reigen leave, before leaning down to prop his chin in his hands. He wished he had something to drown it all out, and wondered if Reigen had books anywhere. Reigen brought home newspapers, but he’d always throw out the Seasoning Reports before Shigeo had had the chance to ask if he could read them.

The article Reigen had left on the couch was the only exception, and Shigeo didn’t know if he wanted to read it again. The paper was creased and wrinkled, and smelled like sweat.

He wasn’t sure what to think. It was hard to keep his mind fixed on the paper, not when it brought back so many memories: the fire, his own heavy breaths, running, and then, all that had happened the previous night, and how it had ended—with Reigen’s hand reaching, and whatever he’d seen before he took hold of the hand and didn’t let go.

He knew he’d seen something else. Maybe, he’d become someone else, somehow: a different person, in a different place, his nostrils clogged with the smell of pollen and grass, and the face of an old man he thought seemed familiar, when Shigeo had never met anybody like him. He didn’t remember a forest like that, either, and he’d never heard a real gun being fired.

What had happened to him?

He thought and thought, staring at the ceiling, then shutting his eyes, trying to make sense of the mess. He didn’t even know what he’d seen, or felt, or where he’d been, if anywhere. He didn’t know if it was tied to the way he saw colours. He didn’t know what those colours were.

He didn’t know where Ritsu was, or even if he was alive. He didn’t know if he had any hope. All he had was Reigen, and—

A half-scream came from the door, followed by a slam, and something striking a wall. Shigeo jumped in surprise, and, heart in his throat, ran to the door. Uncertain, he opened it, and left it ajar, like Reigen had.

The corridor was empty, dull with no light. Shigeo looked downstairs, and saw Reigen below.
“Shit!” Reigen cursed, loud enough for Shigeo to hear. Shigeo couldn’t help but recall his parents complaining about the youths down the street and their foul language, and wondered if Reigen was like them, too, no matter how kind.

Reigen’s hand pressed against the side of his head, while the other leaned on the wall, trying to keep himself steady. Groaning, he dragged himself up the stairs, and Shigeo wondered if he should go to meet him—but Reigen got there first, wincing.

The top half of Reigen’s shirt was damp: not with blood, but what looked like plain water. “What happened, Reigen-san?”

Reigen looked at him, and sighed, before looking down at the floor. “...Maybe I shouldn’t have taken in that Hanazawa kid.”

“Did he...”

“I didn’t know that blonde mop was a wig.” He rubbed the area he had been clutching.

“Is that why he did it?”

Reigen gestured with his free hand, making a whistle-like noise. “With the damn brush.”

A faint scream of yellow twisted around his head, and Reigen continued to rub it, as if he’d been stung. The tendril of aura grew faint, but Shigeo carried on staring as Reigen changed his clothing, hoping that, for now at least, the three of them could somehow live.

A nagging feeling pestered the back of his head, sickly; something he guessed might have been called anxiety.

Chapter End Notes

I could not verify the existence of bath brushes in ’50s Japan, but giving Reigen a whack took priority. For that, I’m only a little bit sorry.

That aside, thank you for all the kind comments and such.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!