The Ghosts That Follow Us

by yamarik

Summary

Fushimi has always attracted ghosts, but now there is one he needs to get rid of at all costs. Enter Homra: an agency that helps take care of problematic ghosts and apparently trains those with spiritual powers like Fushimi. They'll help Fushimi with his ghost, but in return, he has to temporarily join the crew.

OR: The one where Yata has a very good reason for being scared of ghosts.

Notes

I decided to try something new for me and post this as I'm writing it, rather than waiting until it is complete, so we’ll see how this goes.
Fushimi Has a Ghost Problem

A thread above the door tilted a set of windchimes when Fushimi entered, causing them to tinkle gently and announce his presence. He supposed it was supposed to sound more ethereal than the usual bell, but he just found it presumptuous and annoying. Yes this shop, if you could even call it that, belonged to an onmyouji. No, that did not mean that the owner had to set up all sorts of bullshit to seem fancy and mystical. He was probably just another fraud.

The room Fushimi entered was small, and it felt even smaller with the desk and cabinet that took up most of the space. There was an empty chair on the side of the desk closer to Fushimi, and another chair on the opposite side was occupied by a young man with white hair.

“Hello there, how may I he-” the young man began, only to cut off as he looked up at Fushimi. The young man’s jaw hung open, as if he couldn’t believe what he was seeing. Fushimi waited, wondering if the young man did this with all customers. When the young man didn’t recover after a count of ten, however, he clicked his tongue and spoke up himself.

“I need help getting rid of a ghost,” he said sourly.

“Only one of them?” the young man asked weakly, then seemed to realize something. “Er, sorry. It’s just…” the young man trailed off, not sure how to explain himself. It seemed he was the real deal then, and not just another fraud. “Well, I’m not sure how to tell you this, but-”

“But I have several of them following me?” Fushimi asked. “I know.”

“Oh, you do?” the young man replied, suddenly completely at ease. “Well that makes things much easier. Which one is bothering you, exactly?”

“None of these,” Fushimi grumbled back. “He comes and goes. Probably so I can’t get used to him and end up spending time nervously anticipating his return. It’s what he always did in life.”

“Hmm, that could be tricky,” the young man replied. “Not many ghosts have the power to move about so freely. Are you absolutely certain there’s no patterns to his behavior? Does he, perhaps, show up only near a certain location, or-”

“I’m not an idiot,” Fushimi snapped. “I’ve had ghosts following me all my life, I’ve noticed they tend to stick to the same spots. That man does not. It would be too convenient.” Fushimi’s voice took on a tone of bitterness at that last sentence, something the young man picked up on.

“I see,” the young man mused, then called out, “Kuro, Neko, what do you guys think?”

Suddenly there were two more people in the room, making it quite crowded. Not that it hadn’t been crowded since Fushimi had walked in, since he had no less than seven ghosts following him that day. The two newcomers were a guy and a girl, both of whom seemed to be about the same age as the young man behind the desk. The new guy had long black hair and wore a loose robe and a sword at his waist, while the girl had white hair, heterochromatic blue and yellow eyes, and wore a short kimono and had bells in her ears, tied around her neck, and threaded in her hair.

“These are my shiki,” the young man explained. “We’re the best of friends, though Kuro always yells at me.” The young man pouted, and the male shiki became flustered.

“That’s only because you act so childish all the time!” Kuro protested.
“Kurosuke got called mean,” the female shiki, Neko, giggled.

“Are you done?” Fushimi asked, not amused by their little friendship performance.

“So sorry,” the young man replied, while the female shiki hummed happily and the male shiki cleared his throat, apparently embarrassed. The two shiki honed in on Fushimi, and he suddenly regretted speaking up, because the feeling of the attention of those two was worse than being in front of an auditorium full of people. Their focus was intense, and Fushimi felt like he was going to melt under it.

“The ghosts present are all from nearby, and were simply drawn to him by his power,” the male shiki finally said. “But there is another ghost, one who is not present who uses him as its focal point. However, it has a much wider radius of activity than usual, so it will be hard to pin it down. But I can say that there is no doubt that the ghost that centered itself around him is malevolent.”

“I could have told you all that myself,” Fushimi sighed, rolling his eyes. “What I want to know is if you can get rid of him.”

“The meanie ghost is all hidey so it’s like when Neko uses her killer moves and everyone gets all 'waaaaaaaa!' and they don't know what to do,” Neko said, gesturing wildly as she spoke.

“In other words, you can’t help me, can you?” Fushimi asked.

“If he returned, it wouldn’t be a problem,” the young man replied. “But with his whereabouts unknown, it becomes impossible.”

“I see,” Fushimi said, and turned to go.

“But if you used your power you might be able to keep him from coming close at least,” the young man continued. Fushimi stopped in his tracks.

“What do you mean?” he asked, not turning around.

“Your power is like a magnet for ghosts,” the young man said.

“Yes, it draws them to me, I know,” Fushimi replied, irritated. “But how could attracting ghosts help me keep one away?”

“Magnets don’t just attract things,” the young man replied, and even before Fushimi turned around he could hear in his voice the smug expression he was wearing. “Two magnets with the same poles repel each other. With your power, you can do the same.”

“How?” Fushimi demanded.

“ Mostly practice,” the young man replied. “Although I do know some people who might be able to help you more, if you work with them. Are you by any chance looking for a job?”

There was a bell above the door to the bar Fushimi had been told to go to, an ordinary one. It dinged once, the sound resonating in the empty space, but at least it wasn’t some too-cool-for-school bullshit like the wind chime back at the onmyouji’s place.

There were five guys scattered around the bar, as well as a girl that Fushimi almost mistook for an eerily lifelike giant doll. Three of the guys were at the bar; a guy with bleached hair and sunglasses was behind the bar, looking as if he owned the place, while a guy with dark hair and glasses sat
sipping a drink and another bottle blonde was chatting amicably with the first two. The fourth guy was lying across a couch in the corner, while the fifth guy’s attention was fixated on a gaming console in his hands as he sat backwards in a chair that had been pulled up near the couch. The girl was seated by the window, and she stared unblinkingly at Fushimi. It was almost enough to make him shiver: almost, but not quite because after years of living with that man, he’d learned to hide his emotions.

“Oya,” said the dark-haired man at the bar. “A visitor. Your name is Fushimi Saruhiko, and you are here to learn how to utilize your abilities.”

Fushimi’s eyes narrowed as he took in the speaker, who smiled back at him calmly.

“Quit the parlor tricks, Reisi,” said the man behind the bar. He turned to Fushimi. “Shiro called ahead and told us he was sending you over to us. This guy just is very good at observing people and putting two and two together. Useful stuff, but he makes it pretty annoying at times.”

“I also see the future,” Reisi added.

“You see the results of decisions. It’s not the same thing,” the guy behind the bar snapped.

“But it is the future,” Reisi insisted.

“Now, now, you’re both right,” the other guy at the bar soothed. “He does see the future, but only in relation to decisions.”

“Fascinating, I’m sure,” Fushimi replied.

“Ah fuck, you stupid shit, just die!” the guy with the gaming console yelled, and were it not for living with that man, Fushimi would have jumped.

“He’s interesting,” the doll-girl said, startling Fushimi even more than the gamer’s shout had.

Over on the couch, the napping guy cracked open one eye. It took in Fushimi’s appearance, staring for a long moment, before the napper got up with a sigh and headed for the service hallway, picking up the gamer and slinging him over his shoulder as he went.

“Wah!” the gamer yelped. “Hey! Mikoto, I had almost-”

The gamer stopped talking as he caught sight of Fushimi, and his eyes turned to saucers as his face paled. That was all the reaction Fushimi saw though, because the napper unceremoniously tossed the gamer down the service hallway. There was a grunt and a clatter to indicate the gamer’s landing, but there were no further protests or complaints, and the gamer did not reappear.

“You better not have broken anything,” the guy behind the bar sighed. Fushimi thought this reaction was a bit underwhelming, given that he himself was wondering what the hell had just happened.

“He’s got ghosts,” the napper rumbled, leaning against the hallway’s door frame. His voice was so deep and raspy that it took Fushimi a moment to realize what he’d said. The girl didn’t react at all to the statement, but all three guys at the bar got looks of understanding on their faces and peered at Fushimi with renewed interest.

“Ah,” the three at the bar breathed.

“You said ghosts, do you mean multiple?” Reisi asked. He was leaning forward with interest, as
was the guy next to him. Not only that, but the guy next to him had produced a camcorder and was taking video.

“Is the camera necessary?” Fushimi asked, annoyed. He hated being caught on camera.

“Well of course,” the camera guy replied. “It’s my job to film any encounters with the supernatural.”

“You mean you made it your job,” the guy behind the bar replied drily, before turning back to Fushimi. “So, Fushimi-san, Shiro said he had an ability that needed a bit of training?”

“Something like that,” Fushimi replied. “I attract ghosts, but that onmyouji said I can learn to repel them too.”

“That could be useful,” Reisi mused. “Ghosts like to hide when new people show up, but if you can draw them out for us…”

“Quit talkin’ like yer the medium here,” the napper growled.

“Hm, but if you’re attracting them all the time it could be a bit of a problem,” the guy behind the bar said. “But for now, how about you stop standing in the doorway and come take a seat. I’ll make you anything you want, on the house. But don’t expect all your drinks to be free.”

Not knowing what else to do, Fushimi complied. He reluctantly took a seat next to Reisi, because while he didn’t particularly want to be close to the supposed foreteller, he wanted something to shield him from that camera. As the guy behind the counter produced a glass, Fushimi waved it away, and the guy put it away again, then leaned on the counter as he began talking.

“I suppose I should start with introductions,” the guy behind the bar said. “I’m Kusanagi Izumo. I run this place. I’ve got no spiritual powers whatsoever, but someone needs to manage finances and talk coherently to clients, and our mediums aren’t always the best at such things.

“‘Cuz they’re boring,” the napper said.

“But necessary,” Kusanagi countered. “Anyway, next to you is Munakata Reisi, our resident people-watcher, sorta-psychic, and encyclopedia on all things paranormal or supernatural or at all out-of-the-ordinary. Next to him is our self-appointed cameraman and peacekeeper, Totsuka Tatara. He’s a total airhead who always gets in the way and tends to be a liability, but we’ve got our reasons for keeping him around. Lots of them, though two of them really stand out.”

“That pun was so terrible it doesn’t deserve to be called as such. It is an insult to all puns,” Reisi said.

“I dunno, I liked it,” Totsuka replied.

“No, he’s right,” Kusanagi agreed. “It was terrible, and I’m ashamed to have uttered it. Anyway, moving on. You still with me, Fushimi-san?”

Fushimi nodded, trying not to roll his eyes. This was a waste of time.

“Good,” Kusanagi said. “Anyway, as you may have noticed, the other three are our mediums. Starting by the window, we have Anna-chan, who has the misfortune of being stuck with all of us even though she’s a perfect sweetheart and these guys are all idiots.”

“I beg to differ, my intelligence is quite higher than average,” Reisi countered cheerfully, stirring
his drink.

“You may be a smarty-pants, but that doesn’t mean you’re not an idiot,” Kusanagi countered. “It’s like you’re so smart that you’re stupid. You can do things far beyond the scope of a normal person, but you are completely clueless at being normal.”

“Can we get on with it?” Fushimi asked. “I have no interest in watching people banter. It’s boring.”

“Oh, right. Sorry about that,” Kusanagi said, focusing back on Fushimi. “Moving on, Mr. Tall, Dark, and Broody over there is Mikoto. He mostly sleeps and takes up space, and bitches about everyone else.”

Reisi’s mouth opened up, ready to make some smart commentary, but Kusanagi held up a finger to shush him, and Totsuka shook his head as well. Thankfully, Reisi compliantly closed his mouth, though his smirk remained, like he knew something everyone else didn’t.

“And finally, hiding back in the hall is Yata-chan. You probably won’t see much of him, since he’s got a bit of an aversion to ghosts and you said you attract them.”

“Wait, you mean he’s scared of ghosts?” Fushimi asked incredulously.

“That’s part of it, yes,” Totsuka said lightly, and Fushimi arched an eyebrow, wondering what meaning was hidden within that sentence.

“But isn’t the point that you guys deal with ghosts a lot?” Fushimi asked. In the hallway, Mikoto barked out a laugh.

“Why d’ya think he’s so scared of ‘em?” Mikoto asked.

“Yeah, his fear can be a pain in the ass at times,” Kusanagi admitted. “But he’s been useful enough times that we put up with it.”

“Plus his ability is most intriguing,” Reisi added, his eyes lit by some demented light within.

“You say that about all psychic abilities though,” Totsuka pointed out.

“Because it is true of all psychic abilities,” Reisi countered. “They’re fascinating, don’t you agree? And now, thanks to Fushimi-kun’s addition to our team, we’ll be able to witness firsthand the training of a psychic ability.” Reisi smiled at Fushimi like the cat who’s gotten the cream. Fushimi scowled back in annoyance. He wasn’t here to be someone’s entertainment.

“Alright, that’s enough of that,” Kusanagi scolded. “So, Fushimi-san, Shiro inform ya about the deal with this place?”

“He told me that I’d be expected to work alongside you guys,” Fushimi replied. “I presume this means you’ll call me whenever there are clients?”

“Not exactly,” Kusanagi replied. “As it happens, ghost hunting doesn’t pay well enough to feed six people- seven now that we’ve got you- so we also have the bar. We’ve also found that some customers don’t feel comfortable talking about their ghost problems until they’ve had a drink or two, and besides, coming to a bar is more comfortable than going to some seedy psychic shop. Point is, in order to keep this whole business afloat, we’ve all gotta pull double duty. Meaning you’ll work shifts here at the bar, and our clients will contact us here.”

So that’s what that onmyouji had meant when he’d asked if Fushimi was looking for a job. Fushimi
wasn’t thrilled about the prospect of working at some bar, but at least this way he wouldn’t have people calling him about ghosts all the time. And he supposed having a job wouldn’t be a bad thing. He’d been living off the monthly allowance from that woman, but it would be nice to sever his ties to her completely.

“And I suppose if I want to learn how to use this ability of mine, I don’t have a choice about working here?” Fushimi asked.

“Nope,” Kusanagi replied.

“Fine,” Fushimi grumbled.

“Great, so how are you at cooking?” Kusanagi asked.

Fushimi blinked. He’d never tried cooking before. Why would he, when he could just eat microwave meals and fast food? It was faster than cooking, and then he didn’t have to worry about cleaning up.

“I know how to use a microwave,” he replied finally, because how else could he answer?

“Well, I guess you’ll be waiting tables then,” Kusanagi replied. “Which means Yata-chan will have to be a chef full-time from now on, to avoid any problems. If you have any troubles, ask Reisi or Mikoto, since they’ve been around long enough to know everything but keep themselves idle most of the time, and Anna and Totsuka will be busy handling all the other tables. That okay with you?”

“I guess,” Fushimi mumbled.

“Great. Welcome to Homra, Fushimi-kun.”
Homra Has Its Mysteries

Fushimi’s first shift at Homra was spent learning the ropes. He shadowed Totsuka, watching as the man interacted with customers and took orders. Totsuka had a natural flair for putting people at ease, and was so easygoing and friendly that Fushimi, who had grown up with that man and thus learned that everyone was scum, had to wonder what dark intentions lay beyond that kindly facade.

Towards the end of the shift, Totsuka had Fushimi take over for a few tables, with less than stellar results; Fushimi’s dour expressions made a bad impression on the customers, and he almost always got at least one thing wrong with orders. Were it not for the bubble of sanguinity at his shoulder, Fushimi was sure he would have lost Homra some of their clientele that evening.

It didn’t help that, with only Totsuka and Anna waiting tables, it was chaotically busy on the floor. Through it all, Mikoto sat stationed by the bar, and Reisi at a corner table nursing a glass of water, both apparently idle. It irked Fushimi, but when he got a spare moment to comment on it to Totsuka, Totsuka brushed it off lightly.

“Oh, they’re both working,” he said airily.

“Coulda fooled me,” Fushimi grumbled.

“No really, they are,” Totsuka insisted. “Mikoto’s our bouncer. Just by sitting there looking grumpy, he keeps people in line, and on the few occasions someone does get out of hand he takes care of it. As for Reisi, he’s keeping an eye on the place. He helps make sure we’re giving everyone quality service, plus he keeps a lookout for anyone who might be one of our other clients, y’know? If he spots one like that, he sends Anna over to assess them, and then she decides whether or not to take the case.”

“Is she the leader then?” Fushimi asked. It seemed odd, since, of the three mediums, Anna had seemed like the youngest, and had the least presence of them all.

“Hmm, no, if anyone’s the leader, I think that’d be Izumo,” Totsuka said. “He’s the only one who does any real ‘leading’. Though I suppose we do all kinda gravitate towards Mikoto, so maybe him? But Anna has the sharpest senses and she tends to do most of the work on our cases. Mikoto and Yata-chan aren’t really needed except on special cases, though of course they always come along just in case.”

Fushimi didn’t get to ask any more than that, because table 6 needed drink refills and table 9 was ready to order, and then someone sent an olive flying and it was back to work. Still, what Totsuka had told him had been rather interesting.

By the end of the shift, Fushimi was exhausted. He almost missed it when Anna asked him if he’d be able to come in two hours before his shift the next day. He nodded, his eyes already drooping with exhaustion, and headed home, where he passed out as soon as his body touched his bed.

There were some habits that Fushimi had that even he had to admit were unhealthy. He knew his diet wasn’t great, for one. But who had time to worry about calorie counts and fat content and all that other nutrition stuff? And he only cleaned when the mess started to irritate him. But the one that caught up to him the next day was his sleep schedule.

Fushimi had gotten into a habit of staying up for days at a time and then crashing, letting himself sleep all day to catch up on rest. It kept the dreams away. He doubted there was anyone in the
world who could have lived with *that man* for any length of time without getting nightmares, and he was no exception to that. If he didn’t want to see his more traumatic childhood events anew while he slept, exhaustion was necessary. His first shift at Homra had finished a four-day wakefulness streak, and as such, he had primed for a good long slumber.

Unfortunately, when Fushimi was awoken by a full bladder, he remembered groggily that he wasn’t able to do this time, since he was due at Homra in thirteen minutes. Maybe he should call ahead and tell them he couldn’t make it.

Except Homra was his one shot at a normal life, free of ghosts, and most of all, free of *his* ghost. He couldn’t afford to be late. Fushimi changed into the first clean clothes he found, cleaned his glasses, grabbed a can of coffee from the fridge, then snatched his phone, wallet, and keys and headed out the door.

*That man* had left many things behind, including a few cars. Fushimi had sold the flashier ones, because he had no need for eight different vehicles, and resented the loud engines and bright colors of most of them, but there had been a sleek black sedan that he had kept for himself. It was fast and reacted well to the driver’s motions, making it a dream to steer; though Fushimi did wonder what nefarious reasoning *that man* might have had for keeping such a nondescript yet high-powered car.

It was this car which Fushimi drove to Homra, jerking into the smallest gaps in traffic with such abruptness that he nearly scratched the paint several times and had more than a few drivers honking and swearing at him. Whatever, he had someplace to be and only three more minutes to get there.

When Fushimi pulled into the small parking lot behind Homra, he found Anna, Kusanagi, and Mikoto all there, waiting by a large box van. The onmyouji from the previous day was also with them, chatting. As Fushimi got out of the car, he called out “Wow, nice ride! Hyu! Hyu!”

The male shiki from the previous day popped into existence next to him, scolding, “Shiro, how many times must I ask you not to use that fake-whistle sound effect? It’s undignified.”

“But Kurooo, if I whistle for real it causes problems. How else am I supposed to show my appreciation for things?” Shiro whined.

“I didn’t know you had a car,” Kusanagi said to Fushimi as a greeting. Fushimi didn’t respond, seeing no reason to deign to.

“So, what did I need to come in for?” Fushimi asked. Probably some employment paperwork or something like that. Still, that would hardly take two hours. Maybe remedial training since he clearly wasn’t ready to work on his own?

“You wanna learn to use your ability, doncha?” Mikoto mumbled.

“Of course,” Fushimi said, rolling his eyes. “I thought that much was obvious.”

“Good,” Anna said. “Because that’s why you’re here. So we can start teaching you.”

“Oh.” Fushimi didn’t often feel dumb, but right then he did.

“Hey, if Fushimi can drive, why don’t just the three of you go?” Kusanagi suddenly said. “Lord knows I’ve got things to be doing before opening, and it’s not like you need the van since Yata-chan’s not coming along today, so it should be fine, right?”

Anna nodded.
“If that’s okay with Saruhiko,” she replied. Fushimi tried not to cringe at the use of his first name by a girl who was practically a complete stranger to him. Sure, he only knew her first name, but that didn’t mean they had to be so familiar with each other.

“It’s fine,” he grumbled. “Where are we going, exactly?”

“The cemetery. There’s always ghosts there,” Anna said.

“Fine.” Fushimi turned around and got back in his car, and Anna and Mikoto followed him. Fushimi was surprised at first when Anna got in the front and Mikoto took the back, but then Mikoto sprawled across the back seat and closed his eyes like he was taking a nap.

When they got to the cemetery, Anna directed Fushimi to drive around it once before parking. She had him park across the street, and they approached on foot, with Anna leading the way to a spot along the fence. At first Fushimi thought there was a side gate he hadn’t noticed, but Anna stopped outside the fence, clearly not intending to go in.

“This should be good,” she said when Fushimi and Mikoto joined her.

“Mkay. Yell if you need anything,” Mikoto said, and then continued on to the nearest bench to, once again, sprawl out and nap.

“Why did he even come if he was just going to nap?” Fushimi grumbled, thinking aloud.

“We might need him,” Anna said. “There’s always ghosts at a cemetery, but some of them can be difficult. Mikoto can deal with any dangerous ones.”

“Do you expect to deal with any dangerous ones?” Fushimi asked, feeling the hairs raise on his arms. Anna shook her head.

“No, but part of that depends on you. If you’re stronger than I think you are, then the situation might get out of hand, but it’s easier for me to read what abilities a medium has, so that’s unlikely.”

“Right,” Fushimi said, but he remained dubious.

“Are you ready to begin?” Anna asked.

Fushimi nodded.

“Okay. Do you see that ghost over there by the magnolia tree? The one wearing the newspaper hat?”

Fushimi nodded again.

“Draw him to you.”

“What.” Fushimi said the word flatly, not like a question.

“Without moving from here, get him to come over,” Anna said simply. “Just him, if you can.”

“I came here to learn how to keep the ghosts away, not how to bring even more of them to me,” Fushimi protested angrily. “I get enough of them following me around, why would I want to draw the ones that haven’t noticed me?”

“You’ve been using your ability unconsciously until now,” Anna said calmly, seemingly unbothered by his anger. “To learn to use it consciously, you need to start by expanding on what is
already familiar. Work on fine-tuning what you can already do, and get a feel for how to use your ability, and from there we can work on repelling ghosts. Besides, while you’re still with us, it might be helpful if you can do more than draw ghosts out.”

“Such as?” Fushimi didn’t fail to notice that Anna seemed to have realized that his addition to their motley crew was only temporary.

“We might ask you to draw ghosts away from their ties, sometimes.”

“Their ties?”

“Most ghosts have something, or someplace, or someone, that is holding them in this world,” Anna explained. “Sometimes, drawing them away from that tie is enough to get them to let go and move on. And other times, particularly with object ties, they might become violent should someone get too close to their tie, and so it would be helpful if you could use your ability to keep them away from their tie.”

“I see.”

“Good.” Anna smiled kindly. “Now please try and draw that ghost.”

Fushimi turned back to the cemetery and leaned on the fence. Not knowing what else to do, he stared at the ghost, trying to will it to come to him.

Come here, he thought. The ghost didn’t move. Come here, dammit.

Amazingly enough, the ghost did come. However, so did a ghost in a yukata patterned with sailboats, as well as two children who came skipping along. Behind them, Fushimi saw an infant crawling doggedly after them all.

“Take a step back,” Anna said. “You’ll be outside their area of activity then and they should return to where they were.”

Fushimi obeyed, and the ghosts behaved as she’d said.

“Why’d they do that?” he asked.

“Which, come over here, or go away?” Anna asked.

“Go away.”

“Don’t ghosts usually go away once you go too far from their tie?”

“I don’t really look back to see,” Fushimi admitted. “I’m just glad that they’re gone.”

“Most ghosts prefer to stick as close to their tie as they can,” Anna told him. “They may drift away at times, particularly if they’re still caught up in certain routines, but they always go back to their tie. With you outside their area of activity, they are no longer drawn to you. Now, step back in and try again.”

They spent almost an hour like that, with Fushimi trying to call only the ghosts Anna specified. By the end of the hour, he’d gotten the hang of it, and Anna had gotten him to attract up to three given ghosts at a time without losing control. She seemed pleased with his progress, though Fushimi still felt irked to be focusing on doing more of what he already did naturally.

Back at Homra, there was indeed some employment paperwork for Fushimi to fill out, and just
enough time for him to fill it out in before the bar opened. His second shift was spent shadowing Anna, who, while lacking Totsuka’s disarming friendliness, still managed to have a pacific air that put customers at ease. The two of them both helped people relax, and it made Fushimi feel like he had no business being a waiter at Homra, since he was certain he could never have that sort of effect on people. Perhaps he ought to learn to cook and skulk in the kitchens instead.

About an hour into the shift, a couple came in. They weren’t all that different from any other people in the bar—a bit older than some, maybe, but it was still early enough in the night that seeing people who were out to eat rather than party wasn’t too peculiar. However, almost as soon as they were seated, Anna was asking Fushimi if he’d noticed anything about them.

“Do you want some sort of fashion critique?” Fushimi asked doubtfully. “I fail to see anything particularly noteworthy about them.”

“Keep looking, I’m sure you’ll see it,” Anna insisted.

“Should I stare outright, or do you want me to actually try and do my job?” If Anna noticed Fushimi’s blatant sarcasm, she ignored it.

“No, don’t stare, that might make it harder to see,” she replied. “Use your peripherals.”

Fushimi tried keeping the couple in the corner of his eye as they moved between the tables, but he kept getting distracted or having his view blocked, and anyways, he still wasn’t noticing anything special about that couple.

“Unless you’re trying to get me to notice that that man’s socks are mismatched and can be seen since his pants are highwaters, I really don’t know what you want me to see,” he told Anna finally.

Anna shook her head sadly.

“I suppose it is a bit much to expect you to see it,” she said finally. “Would you please ask Reisi what he thinks of them?”

Fushimi shrugged, but deep down he felt annoyed. Just what was he supposed to be seeing about that couple? He peeled off from Anna’s shadow and trudged over to Reisi’s table, toting a water pitcher with him.

“Need a refill?” he asked, the sarcasm in his voice practically becoming tangible with his annoyance.

“No thank you,” Reisi replied. “I take it Anna-san wishes my opinion on the couple at table 3?”

“Something like that.”

“There’s no need to sulk, Fushimi-kun,” Reisi said, smiling enigmatically. “I understand that seeing psychic residues on people takes much practice. Even Yata-kun tends to miss out on it, so it would be quite surprising if you noticed, untrained as you are. As for what you should tell Anna-san, they’ve been far more curious about their surroundings than normal customers are, and have glanced at the bar while whispering amongst themselves no less than three times. No, make that four, they’re doing it again. They’re also quite nervous, and judging by their eyes, I’d say they haven’t gotten a good night’s sleep in at least a month. Definitely clients.”

“I see,” Fushimi said. Only he wasn’t sure he did. It sounded like Reisi was saying they’d come here because of ghosts. But no ghosts had come in with that couple, Fushimi was sure of it. Still, he obediently returned to Anna and relayed what Reisi had said about the clients.
“Alright. Do you think you can take care of our tables while I talk to them?” Anna asked.

The answer to that question was “not really,” but Fushimi was pretty sure Anna wouldn’t listen whether he said yes or no. Grudgingly, he continued going around through the tables, resenting every single person who didn’t seem to understand the concept of personal space (which was just about every patron at the bar that night. It was like they all took up three times more space than they had any right to, and it annoyed him, badly). He resisted the impulse to dump drinks on every person who made a comment about his sour disposition, and actually managed not to mess up any orders. And he even managed a genuine smile once (when a man tried to complain that his rare steak was “charred” even though it was practically still bleeding, and Mikoto had showed up to offer to escort the man out. The way the man had paled and swallowed all his complaints as Mikoto demanded to know it the man was implying his brother couldn’t cook was just so satisfying). All in all, Fushimi thought he did fairly well, considering he barely knew Homra’s menu, couldn’t tell you the difference between any two cocktails, and also loathed people in general.

While Fushimi was handling all that, Anna had been talking to that special couple. They’d jumped at her materialization at their sides, but she’d smiled softly and soon they were speaking to her in a rushed undertone while she nodded, taking in whatever they were saying without judgment. After a while, Anna waved Kusanagi out from behind the bar. Fushimi was surprised to see that, in Kusanagi’s absence, Mikoto left his post and began fixing drinks for people, and he even managed a fairly blank and non-threatening expression while he listened to one woman complain about how hard it was to find a man who would do the cleaning in their relationship. For Fushimi, who had seen Mikoto managing to maintain his customarily grim expression even when napping, it was enough of a shock that he almost dropped a plate that he was picking up from the kitchen.

After a while, Kusanagi returned to the bar, and it was as if the couple had lost all significance. Anna and Mikoto had also returned to their duties, and life carried on as normal in the bar. The only difference was that the air around the couple seemed more relaxed, as if there had been tension surrounding them but it had been dispersed. They looked much happier too, as they finished up their meals and left.

One of Fushimi’s character traits, along with a patented scowl and endless sarcasm, was an impulse to know things. He’d always been smarter than his peers, and had quite liked that. When he didn’t know something, he often found himself going to extremes in the pursuit of finding out the answers; forgetting to eat as he perused old tomes in a library or staring at a computer screen until his eyes hurt and he got a headache from not blinking enough, or even talking to people. And his curiosity about that couple had him trying out that last one.

“Er, Anna,” he began, and suddenly he found it extremely awkward that he didn’t know her last name. He tended not to refer to people by their names, and when he had to, last names felt much more comfortable to him. There was a certain distance in using last names, and he liked to keep that distance.

He’d hesitated too long, because Anna looked at him with wide, searching eyes, and asked, “What is it Saruhiko?”

Now that was uncomfortable. People did not use his first name. Oh sure, it sometimes got mentioned during introductions and paperwork processes, but that was as a side note to his last name, and so hearing it used so casually for a second time by someone he’d met just yesterday made his skin crawl. He swallowed his irritation, however, because the question he wanted answered was not one that could be resolved through research.
“That couple that you talked to, did they have a ghost with them?”

“Not with them,” Anna replied, her gentle smile returning. It made him grit his teeth, that smile, because somehow it felt patronizing. “It is at their home. We’ll be heading out to take a look at it tomorrow, though we might not see anything since many ghosts become inactive during the day time. But hopefully you’ll be able to draw it out if that’s the case.”

“Then why did they seem so relieved after you talked to them?”

“Having a solution to their problem helps a lot of people,” Anna explained.

Fushimi supposed that was true. He had experienced it himself, when he’d been told that with some training, he might never have to see that man again. It was probably hope, but Fushimi would rather it had a different name. “Hope” sounded too optimistic, and Fushimi had long ago learned that optimism and naivety were one and the same.

“How did you know they had ghost problems if the ghost isn’t here?” Fushimi asked. “Reisi said something about ‘psychic residue’, does that have anything to do with it?”

“Yes,” Anna said. “With practice, you’ll learn to see it. It allows you to tell many things, like who has been afflicted by a ghost, and whether their dealings are past or present, but it also allows you to pinpoint other mediums and even identify their abilities.”

“Then can all mediums see psychic residue?” Fushimi asked. Anna shook her head.

“There are some with power who can’t see ghosts despite their abilities, so they wouldn’t see the residue,” Anna said. “And those with weaker Sight won’t see it either. Even with strong Sight, it can be difficult. Misaki rarely notices when people have been near ghosts, and he and Mikoto have the strongest Sight I’ve ever seen, aside from my own. Your Sight might also be as strong as theirs, though it’s hard to tell since you’ve had so many ghosts follow you that you’re pretty much swamped in residues.”

“So you have the best Sight out of everyone here then?”

“Yes,” Anna said, and her smile took on a rueful note. “My eyes work a little bit differently than normal. Sometimes it’s a little overwhelming.”

Fushimi wanted to ask what Anna meant by that, but somehow he sensed that she wouldn’t be forthcoming with any further information regarding her Sight. Perhaps one of the others might help him out. Still, there were other things he could ask about.

“You mentioned someone named Misaki, is that another medium?” he queried. If it was, he wondered why she didn’t also work at Homra.

“Yes, I thought Izumo told you that Mikoto-nii and Misaki-nii and I were the mediums here,” Anna replied, frowning slightly in puzzlement. Fushimi almost guffawed. So “Yata-san” was named Misaki, huh? No wonder he seemed to be the only one who was always referred to by his last name, with a girly name like that. Though if Anna had called him nii-san, did that mean the three mediums were siblings? That would at least solve the mystery of what Anna’s last name was.

There was so much information to process, but a busy bar was hardly the place to be thinking, at least not when he was supposed to be waiting tables. And yet even as he scurried about, fielding orders and processing checks, Fushimi found his mind drifting to other things: Sight and psychic residue and names and a Mikoto who didn’t look like he had a basilisk’s gaze, and the prospect of facing a ghost tomorrow. He could almost understand what had drawn Reisi to Homra, since
everything he’d learned just raised new questions, and Fushimi found himself wanting to unlock all the secrets of this bar and it’s personnel.
Once again, Fushimi had been asked to show up at Homra two hours before opening. He did better this time, though he still drove since it had seemed like his car had made things more convenient the previous day. And also he wasn’t a fan of public transportation. Sure, the trains were tolerable if it wasn’t rush hour, but tolerable was not the same as likable.

Although Fushimi arrived a good ten minutes before the arranged meeting time, he found everyone outside the bar in the parking lot, surrounding the van he’d noticed the previous day. As Fushimi pulled up, he noticed a certain beanie-clad head peering curiously at his car, but after a few words from Totsuka, the head hastily retreated. Fushimi parked and got out of his car, and Kusanagi waved him over to join the others. Upon Fushimi’s approach, everyone began languorously climbing into the van, and Fushimi assumed he was to follow suit. He debated taking his car for a moment, but decided against it. He didn’t mind not having to pay for gas. And, while he would have denied it with his dying breath and even after death, it felt right, somehow, to be climbing in with everyone else. Almost like he was actually a part of the group. Though it wasn’t like he wanted to be part of the group or anything.

The first thing Fushimi noticed about the interior of the van was that there were all sorts of fuda lining the walls, and charms hung from improbable places, jangling against each other as the movements of the passengers as they settled themselves caused the van to rock slightly. The seats were arranged in a 9-seat layout, with four rows of seats total. Reisi was seated in the front passenger seat, and the second row was occupied by Anna and Totsuka, the latter of whom was burdened by a sizable camera bag. One of the seats in the third row was occupied by the scaredy cat Yata, and Fushimi assumed he was to take the other as Mikoto was sprawled across the back row, lazy as always. When Fushimi seated himself, he noticed Yata scoot away from him slightly, and had to click his tongue.

“Oy, you’re sure the wards are good enough, right?” Yata asked, leaning forward as he addressed the front two rows of seats. “I don’t want any accidents ‘cuz of him.” He jerked his thumb at Fushimi, who clicked his tongue again.

“Does anyone else hear that clicking sound?” Totsuka asked, and Fushimi reflexively clicked his tongue again.

“It’s probably some of the charms, Totsuka,” Kusanagi replied as he fiddled with his keys. “And Shiro checked the wards yesterday,” he added to Yata. “He even had Kuro and Neko try and break in together, and they couldn’t manage it, so I doubt any ordinary ghost will have any luck either.”

“But what if-” Yata began again, but Anna’s quiet voice silenced him.

“There’s no need to worry, Misaki.”

“That’s right Yata-chan,” Totsuka agreed. “Everything will definitely turn out okay.”

Yata huffed, but he settled back in his seat and kept his peace as the van was started and pulled out. They drove through the congested streets of the city proper, slowly winding their way to the highway. From there they sped along, taking an exit towards a quiet neighborhood. A few streets later, they pulled up outside a cheerfully painted yellow house, and Kusanagi parked the van. Even before they’d begun to unfasten their seatbelts, the couple from the night before was approaching them, relieved looks on their faces.
As Fushimi climbed out of the van, he noticed that back in the row he’d abandoned, Yata had pulled out the same gaming console from two days prior and settled himself more comfortably in his seat, and in the back row, Mikoto hadn’t even twitched. He paused, wondering if he should rouse the two, point out the very obvious fact that they’d arrived.

“You coming, Saru-kun?” Totsuka asked, watching Fushimi expectantly. Fushimi felt his brows snap together at the nickname. Irritated, he stepped down from the van, figuring someone else could retrieve the two errant mediums from the back. And sure enough, no sooner was Fushimi out of the way then Totsuka was leaning into the van, hands braced on either side of the door frame as he peered toward the back.

“See you two later,” Totsuka said, and Fushimi’s scowl vanished as he turned and stared. Were those two just going to stay in the van? But then why had they even bothered to come along? Fushimi was so shocked, Totsuka had closed the van door before he could even react.

“Wait, those two-” he began, but words failed him. Words rarely failed Fushimi. He didn’t like that they were doing so now.

“Oh, Izumo will head back for them if we need either of them,” Totsuka replied. “But it’s really better this way. Ghosts sometimes react weirdly when those two are around, so it’s much easier to have Anna make an assessment first while things are relatively calm. Though of course we’ll make exceptions if it’s likely to be dangerous.”

Fushimi bit his tongue to keep from asking, “Ghosts react weirdly to them? You mean weirder than being drawn to them like a fucking magnet?” He was pretty sure he was the epitome of weird ghostly behavior, but somehow he didn’t feel like saying that. And also he had a feeling that sarcasm would be completely wasted on these people.

“Okay, nothing’s changed since last night,” Kusanagi said after a brief chat with the couple. “Still a mournful wailing sound at all hours. So, game plan: Fushimi, you and Anna will take the lead. Reisi, you’ll be next, and then Totsuka and I will bring up the rear. Any objections?” Even though Kusanagi asked about objections, his tone was such that it was clear he expected everyone to go along with his suggestion. Fushimi clicked his tongue, but the other three were nodded in satisfaction. “Alright good, it’s this one here,” Kusanagi said, gesturing towards the yellow house as if there was any doubt that might be their destination.

Totsuka pulled out a camcorder and began filming, and with that cue, they began walking up the driveway. There was a small side path connecting the driveway and the front walk, and when they reached it Anna brought their procession to a halt.

“Saruhiko, try and call the ghost,” she said. Fushimi clicked his tongue. What did these people have against using his last name? And once again, it was calling ghosts. Calling them, rather than repelling them.

Reluctantly, Fushimi began trying to replicate the experiments from the previous day. He found it difficult, not being able to see the ghost he was trying to call, and closed his eyes, wondering if that would help any.

“Good,” Anna’s voice said encouragingly from his side. “Try and sense the ghost. Connect with it. Call it to us.”

Sense the ghost? What nonsense. Ghosts just came to him, and he saw them; that’s all there was to Fushimi’s so-called “power”. But whatever, if it made this ridiculous crowd happy, then he’d try it, and when it failed then maybe they could get on with some real lessons, like getting rid of
Alright, I know you’re there, Fushimi thought, even though he knew no such thing. What had Kusanagi said again? Mournful wailing sounds? Could be any manner of ordinary things. Perhaps it was a faulty pipe somewhere, or maybe something was caught in an AC vent and was disturbed whenever the fan came on. They were probably wasting their time here. Come on, come out, come out, wherever you are.

All of a sudden, Fushimi had a flash of memory, of hearing those exact words sung out mockingly by that man. From the house, a high-pitched scream of a noise could be heard.

“Don’t give it your fear,” Anna chided.

“I’m not afraid,” Saruhiko grumbled.

“Would this be a good time to mention that Anna-san is an empath?” Reisi asked cheerfully from Fushimi’s shoulder. “She’s more attuned to the emotions of ghosts, but she is receptive to the emotions of the living as well.”

Serious? That was annoying. It was like Fushimi couldn’t keep any secrets from these people. They could tell his “powers” just by looking at him, they could see that man as well the next time he came around, and apparently they could read Fushimi’s emotions better than he himself could. Great. Just dandy.

Annoyed, Fushimi gave up trying to be nice.

Hey. Ghostie. Come here already! He snapped in his thoughts.

And then the ghost was there. Even before he opened his eyes again, Fushimi knew it, and damnit, did that mean Anna had been right about him sensing the ghost? It made his skin crawl just how much these people could tell about him.

“Izumo, could you please go get Mikoto,” Anna asked.

“Oh, is it here then?” Totsuka asked.

“Does it seem angry?” Reisi asked at the same time, and with far too much eagerness for such a question.

“Yes, it’s here,” Anna said, answering Totsuka first. “And no, it looks quite friendly indeed, but I’m not sure how well my persuasion can work on a dog who wants to play.”

While Kusanagi went and roused Mikoto from the van, Fushimi stared down at the dog ghost in front of him, looking plaintively up at him with soulful eyes, gently wagging its tail and raising a single paw as if begging for something. It looked to be a border collie, all black and white patches and long silky fur. Fushimi glared back, wanting to tell the damn mutt to get lost already. The dog merely danced in place in response to his glare, before resuming it’s vigil of pleading for whatever it was that ghost dogs wanted.

On their way to join the group, Kusanagi and Mikoto stopped to talk with the couple for a bit, and a moment later, the woman came towards the house, edging past the little group congregated around the ghost before slipping inside. Mikoto followed after her, but even as his eyes travelled to the front door, his feet stopped just besides Fushimi, and then he abruptly looked down at the dog, studying it. The dog finally looked away from Fushimi, and returned Mikoto’s gaze, until suddenly, Mikoto smiled. With a small laugh he crouched down in front of the dog, and reached
towards it, letting it sniff his hand.

After years of being plagued by ghosts, Fushimi thought he knew them pretty well. And one thing he knew for certain was that ghosts and people could not touch. Some ghosts could create forces that were strong enough to appear in the realm of the living as air movement, sometimes even creating chaotic whirlwinds, but aside from such poltergeist phenomena, the most a ghost could do was make a person feel cold as they passed through the same space. It was a rule that the two worlds could not meet up.

And yet after letting the dog get its sniff, Mikoto blatantly ignored that rule and scratched the dog’s ears as if it were a living, breathing creature. Fushimi almost began to doubt that the dog was a ghost at all, but no, it had that same fuzzy quality that all ghosts had, like when Fushimi took off his glasses and the world blurred. But his glasses were securely on, and the dog was definitely a ghost.

The dog had just lain down and presented Mikoto with it’s belly (also revealing itself to be male) when the woman returned from the house with a rope that was knotted at each end, the spaces beyond the knots having been allowed to fray. The rope was worn and discolored, and as soon as the dog noticed it, the dog was writhing back to its feet with a contortionist twist, and then it was flowing towards the woman and jumping around her, trying to reach the rope. One particularly enthusiastic jump took it straight through the woman. Behind the woman, the house began to scream again, and she flinched.

“Easy there boy,” Mikoto said, his voice surprisingly gentle. “Just a sec.” He strode over to the woman and accepted the rope with a mumble of thanks, and then dangled the rope out in front of it. The dog leaped, and caught the rope, and Mikoto’s arm suddenly sagged as if under a weight. The cords of muscle in his arms visibly strained as he lifted the arm back up, the dog hanging from the rope in his hand. From the house, a low rumbling sound, like an earthquake in a movie, could be heard, causing the windows to vibrate and enticing a few of the neighbors to peer curiously out as if searching for the source of the noise.

Mikoto slowly lowered the rope until the dog that was latched onto it could find the ground again. As soon as the dog was on its own feet again, it started yanking at the rope, throwing its head from side to side as it tried to dislodge Mikoto. Its tail was wagging so intently that Fushimi half-expected it to take flight, and the noise from the house intensified.

“Is that noise… the dog?” Fushimi asked.

“Of course,” Reisi said. “What did you think it was?”

Fushimi clicked his tongue.

As the game of tug-of-war between Mikoto and the ghost dog continued, it devolved into a wrestling match. Their game demanded attention, and Fushimi could scarcely take his eyes away, but when he did, he saw Totsuka filming the scene and Reisi watching just as avidly. Farther away, the woman had returned to her husband and Kusanagi, and the two clients watched Mikoto and the dog with eyes wide as if horrified. The man even reached up and crossed himself, and it was only then that Fushimi realized how bizarre this must look to someone who couldn’t see ghosts. To them, Mikoto was playing with an invisible dog.

“Does Mikoto specialize in animal ghosts then?” Fushimi asked Reisi.

“Not at all,” Reisi informed him. “He is simply the best person to handle this case since ghosts are physical to him, and he to them. He can also make objects he is touching physical to ghosts as well,
making him the perfect person to play with a ghost of the domesticated canine persuasion. Sadly, he does not seem to be able to make other living creatures able to come into contact with ghosts as he does, a fact that I frequently mourn.”

“So he just touches ghosts?” Fushimi asked.

“More like he fights them,” Totsuka replied. Fushimi was surprised that the cameraman would speak, since his voice would obviously be picked up loud and clear by the camcorder in his hand. “Even if it’s just play fighting like right now.”

“He… fights them?” Fushimi raised an eyebrow.

“When they’re uncooperative,” Reisi elaborated. “Or when they take an unhealthy interest in Yata-kun.”

“Does that happen often?”

“Not particularly. I’d say that Mikoto’s ability is only needed on about 3 out of 10 cases we take.”

“And what about Anna and Yata?” Fushimi asked, his curiosity getting the better of him. But perhaps he could learn what their talents were. Anna had said something about persuasion and had already told him that she had the strongest Sight, and Reisi had mentioned her being an empath, but the information Fushimi had was too vague. He wanted concrete details. And as for Yata, all he really knew about the guy was that he was scared of ghosts and Reisi was apparently fascinated by his ability.

“Anna-san participates in some way in almost all our cases,” Reisi said thoughtfully, “but if it’s cases that rely solely on her she’d be handling about 6 out of 10 cases. Yata-kun, meanwhile, is only needed on one 1 out of 10 cases, if not only 7 out of 100. I’m sure he’s most grateful for it, though I cannot fathom why. He is quite lucky to experience such an unusual phenomenon.”

“But it’s rather scary for Misaki,” Anna said, and Fushimi jumped, having forgotten she was still at his side. That was embarrassing. He hoped she wasn’t offended by the way he’d talked about her when she was right there. “And it can be dangerous at times, you know that.”

Reisi didn’t look the least bit chagrined at Anna’s scolding tone. In front of them, the dog had let go of the rope and was sidling up to Mikoto, licking at its nose and wagging its lower body along with its tail. Mikoto gently put a hand to the dogs head and looked it in the eye for a moment.

“Alright, you got your wish,” Mikoto said. “But you’re scaring your humans by sticking around. They’ll come to you when the time is right, but until then, you need to head off, okay?”

From the house, there was a toned down version of the screaming sound from earlier, and when it was diminished like it was now, it was recognizable as a whine.

“Yeah, I know,” Mikoto told the dog. “But everyone’s time comes sooner or later. There’s nothing we can do about that.”

The dog inclined its head, and somewhere between one second and the next, it vanished. Fushimi didn’t see when it happened, exactly, but he felt it. It was a sudden feeling of relief for a discomfort he hadn’t truly been aware of until it went away, like pulling on a jacket and realizing from its warmth that he had been cold until just now, or putting a refrigerated can against his forehead after spending hours at his computer and only then becoming aware of a mild headache plaguing him. Mikoto got to his feet, and Totsuka asked, “Is it gone then?” When Mikoto nodded, the camcorder was powered off and put back in Totsuka’s camera bag.
The group headed over to Kusanagi and the clients.

“Is it gone?” the man asked.

“Yes,” Anna said. “Your dog loved you very much, to want to stay with you like that. He wanted to play with you some more, but he accepted that it was time to go. You shouldn’t be hearing him anymore.”

“Then those sounds… those were Pochi?” the woman asked. Anna nodded.

“You didn’t… you didn’t have to hurt him, did you?” the man asked. Anna shook her head.

“Whenever possible, we take a peaceful approach to dealing with ghosts,” she said. “And your Pochi was quite gentle. He never wanted to scare you, only to get your attention so that you and he could play.”

The man and woman both had tears streaming down their faces by now, and nodded, apparently too choked up for words. The couple headed for the house, gesturing for Kusanagi to follow. Everyone else headed back to the van. As they approached, the back door slid open, and Yata could be seen looking out at them.

“So?” he asked as they started to climb in.

“A dog ghost,” Totsuka said. “It seemed to like Mikoto a lot.”

“A dog? Glad I wasn’t out there,” Yata muttered, settling back to allow Mikoto and Fushimi to get to their seats.

“I dunno, could be cute,” Mikoto replied.

“Like hell it would!” Yata shouted back, far too loud for the small space they were all in.

“Woof woof,” Mikoto deadpanned.

“You’re not funny,” Yata said sulkily.

“Sure I am,” Mikoto replied. “I could be a comedian if I weren’t stuck with you.”

“Now now you two,” Totsuka chided. “Don’t start any fights. You might mess up the wards or hurt Saru-kun. Not to mention you’ll invoke the wrath of Izumo.”

“What’s this about my wrath?” Kusanagi asked, getting into the van.

“Nothing, nothing,” Totsuka sang.

“Right…” Kusanagi didn’t sound at all convinced. He reached up and adjusted the rearview mirror, and for a second Fushimi caught a glimpse of a raised eyebrow.

“But I for one am ready to go home,” Totsuka said, changing the subject rather than trying to argue his lie. “You should make us all milkshakes when we get back to celebrate Saru-kun’s first case with us!”

“I don’t recall signing up to make milkshakes,” Kusanagi complained. “Don’t just volunteer other people for your own convenience.”

“Oh,” Anna said mournfully, making it clear that she had liked the idea.
“Hey, no worries!” Yata said, coming out of his sulk. “I can make you guys milkshakes! What flavor do you want?”

“Strawberry,” Anna replied.

“Can you do a banana one for me?” Totsuka asked.

“Uh, you’ll have to ask Kusanagi-san. I don’t know if we have the right ingredients,” Yata admitted.

“I’ll run to the store after we get back to get anything we don’t have,” Kusanagi sighed in resignation. “But you better make a chocolate one for me.”

“Green tea please,” Reisi said.

“Spicy,” Mikoto’s voice drifted up from the back seat.

Fushimi was just wondering what the hell kind of milkshake flavor “spicy” was, when he noticed that Totsuka was leaning around his seat to look back at him, and for that matter, Yata was looking his way too.

“Saru-kun?” Totsuka asked. “What kind of milkshake do you want?”

Fushimi blinked, startled. Wait, he was getting a milkshake too? He’d assumed the milkshakes were given by request only, and also he hadn’t expected one to be available for him if Yata was making them, given that the redhead seemed to be allergic to him.

“... Vanilla,” Fushimi replied.

“Vanilla? Who the hell drinks a vanilla milkshake?” Yata asked.

“I do,” Fushimi mumbled.

“Weirdo,” Yata replied.

When they got back to the bar, the milkshakes were made- Anna’s first because she had “little sister privilege”, then Mikoto because “he’s the coolest”, then Kusanagi because Yata wanted to stay on his good side, then Totsuka because the milkshakes had been his idea. Fushimi was surprised when his was made before Reisi’s. Unlike the others, Yata didn’t offer an explanation as to why Fushimi got the next one, which was baffling until Totsuka informed him that Yata just didn’t like Reisi very much.

Fushimi couldn’t help noticing that Yata made nothing for himself- as soon as Reisi’s milkshake was finished, the blender left it’s perch on the pick-up counter and was placed in the kitchen sink to be washed rather than rinsed for the next use. No one seemed surprised by this, and Fushimi assumed it was just another quirk of Yata’s personality.

Still, as he sipped the thick drink Yata had made, he had to admit that it was pretty good.
The day after the incident with the dog, Fushimi’s cemetery training was all about sensing ghosts. She would have him face away from the fence and try and feel where ghosts were, and then she’d ask him to describe the ghosts. It was surprisingly not that hard, except for the fact that whenever Fushimi sensed a ghost it seemed to draw them towards him. Even by the end of their “lesson”, he still hadn’t quite figured out how to avoid that side effect.

That evening, Kusanagi ended up making Fushimi stay after his shift was done to try and learn some of the different cocktails the bar offered, so that maybe Fushimi wouldn’t try and give a customer who ordered a white Russian a pina colada instead. It was a white drink, so why wouldn’t he assume that was the white Russian? And why did he have to know this anyway? He wasn’t the bartender. He wasn’t even planning on staying here. It was just a temporary job, until he learned how to get rid of that man. And it wasn’t like he enjoyed alcohol either, so there wasn’t any point in him learning this stuff. Not that he could convince Kusanagi of that.

The mediums left as Fushimi studied, as did Totsuka, leaving just Kusanagi, Fushimi, and Reisi. Kusanagi was busy back in the hall, presumably taking inventory or tallying up the night’s profits, but Reisi, bizarrely enough, seemed to be conducting a tea ceremony of a sort there at the bar. Fushimi tried to just ignore him, but it was hard when he could feel Reisi’s gaze on him despite the other man’s attentions to his tea. Finally, as Reisi began to sip the finished tea, Fushimi could stand it no more. He turned aside from the book Kusanagi had given him to study and glared back at Reisi.

“Can I help you with something?” he demanded in irritation.

“As a matter of fact, you can,” Reisi said, setting aside his tea. “I’ve been meaning to ask you about your background. Are either of your parents, by any chance, mediums?”

Fushimi stared. How dare this almost complete stranger suddenly start asking about his parents? Those people weren’t worth talking about.

Though he supposed it was a valid question. Were they? No, he didn’t think so. In the naivety of his early childhood, Fushimi had mentioned the ghosts he saw to both of those people. That woman had told him that he was too old for imaginary friends even when he was a mere three years old. As for that man, he had proceeded to mock his son, constantly asking him if there was a ghost around and then laughing hysterically when the answer was, inevitably, yes, like it was some great big joke. It was the same way he reacted when the younger Fushimi admitted to believing in extraterrestrial life, or asked if Atlantis was real.

“No,” Fushimi answered brusquely, hoping that would be enough to fend off further questions. It wasn’t.

“I see,” Reisi said, taking a moment to look reflectively at his tea. He took a sip, then turned back to Fushimi to ask, “And what about siblings?”

Fushimi stared. How dare this almost complete stranger suddenly start asking about his parents? Those people weren’t worth talking about.

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“I don’t have any,” Fushimi said.

“Hmm, in that case, any aunts, uncles, cousins, or grandparents who are mediums?” Reisi persisted.

“Not that I know of,” Fushimi said. “Why?”
“Curiosity,” Reisi answered. “I have long wondered what selects an individual for psychic abilities, whether there are environmental factors or genetic factors or if it is perhaps a matter of timing. Thus far, I have largely been unable to explore the possibility of genetics being a factor, due to everyone else’s unfortunate family circumstances. Of course, Shiro-san’s family could indicate a correlation between genetics and psychic abilities, but correlation is not the same as causation, and with only the one instance nothing can be confirmed. And now it seems that it was wise to ask you, as, from what you have said, it seems unlikely that genetics is a factor, after all. However, without examining DNA samples I cannot completely rule it out. After all, it could be that both your parents were carriers of a rare recessive gene, and, having inherited it from both your parents, you display the trait of being a medium.”

“Well isn’t the fact that the others are all siblings a good indicator that maybe there’s something to do with bloodlines?” Fushimi asked.

“Oh, were you under the impression that Anna-san, Mikoto, and Yata-kun share blood?” Reisi asked, his smile twitching in amusement. “I’m sorry to inform you that your assumption is incorrect. None of them share even a single parent.”

“But Anna called Mikoto and Yata her older brothers,” Fushimi said, frowning.

“Indeed,” Reisi said. “The three of them adopted each other as siblings. And, as it happens, Anna-san and Mikoto-san are legally siblings, as they were both adopted by their late mentor.”

“Are they orphans then?” Fushimi asked, because what Reisi had told him was just vague enough to be maddening.

“Their circumstances aren’t really any of your concern,” Kusanagi said, startling Fushimi. He hadn’t noticed the other man returning from the back hall. “Fushimi-san, it’d be best not to let this guy’s nosy twit tendencies rub off on you,” Kusanagi warned. “Certain subjects are a bit sensitive around here, and family is one of them. At least, for those three it is. Rather than digging into old stories that aren’t any of your business, it’d be best to just accept that those three have a family-type relationship, even without actually being related, and leave it at that.”

“It’s normal to be curious when you find out that people who refer to each other as siblings aren’t actually related,” Fushimi grumbled, but he decided to leave the matter alone. If he pried too much, they might kick him out without teaching him about his ability. Besides, if he looked at it logically, his interest was completely unfounded. They were just some people he knew for the time being, who he was going to learn about his psychic abilities from and then never talk to again. It wasn’t like it was important for him to know about their personal lives.

And yet even with his decision to let things lie, Fushimi still couldn’t help wondering about it. What had Reisi meant by “unfortunate family circumstances”? And why was family such a sensitive topic for them? Sure, Fushimi hated talking about his family, but he had some of the world’s shittiest parents. Almost everyone else he’d ever met would invariably mention their family at some point, often in some casual anecdote or mention of their obon plans. His loathing on the subject was unique, or so he’d thought. Maybe it was a medium thing, where having psychic abilities meant not getting along with one’s family. Maybe if he asked, Reisi could tell him.

The following day, Fushimi expected Anna to have him sensing ghosts some more since he hadn’t managed to do so without calling the ghosts, but it seemed he was wrong. When they arrived, Anna had him back to calling ghosts one at a time. It was so easy as to be boring.

The cynical part of Fushimi that was suspicious of human nature wondered if Anna was really planning on teaching him how to repel ghosts. After all, his ability to draw ghosts could be useful
for them, so it would make sense for them to keep him around as long as they could.

“There’s one just over that hill there,” Anna said, instructing him on the next ghost to call.

Annoying, Fushimi thought. He belatedly remembered that Anna could probably feel his irritation, but then he shoved that thought aside. So what if she knew how he was feeling? He had every right to be irritated with all this.

He found the ghost in question with that ever-growing sixth sense, and, even though that was enough to capture the ghost’s attention, he gave a little mental tug on it, encouraging it to come to him that much sooner. Maybe if he showed Anna he really had the hang of this, she might get it through her head that this exercise was pointless.

The ghost progressed towards them—towards him, really—cresting the hill and drifting their way. However, as it reached the bottom of the hill, the ghost’s attention wavered. Fushimi felt it, like a ripple in whatever it was that drew the ghost to him. And then the ghost had turned aside, headed in a completely different direction.

What the hell? For a brief and blissful second, Fushimi wondered if he’d somehow spontaneously repelled the ghost, and yet something inside him knew that this wasn’t the case. There was something there, on the edge of his senses, that was more interesting to the ghost than him. He closed his eyes, and sensed a burst of bright energy in the direction the ghost was headed. It wasn’t like anything else he’d ever sensed, and he wanted to try and learn more, but Anna’s voice was insistent next to him.

“You need to bring that ghost over here, Saruhiko,” she ordered gently. Saruhiko grit his teeth, but reluctantly obeyed.

Oy, you, get over here, he ordered the ghost, channeling all his irritation into the command to make it more forceful. The ghost twitched a little, scooting back towards Fushimi a little before continuing towards that ray of sunny spirit. And while Fushimi hated drawing the ghosts, he hated even more that this one dared to disobey him, dared to ignore his power. He repeated the pull, stronger, more insistent. He dragged on the connection to the ghost, trying to negate whatever attraction the sunburst had, and he actually succeeded in getting the ghost to turn away, but then, with a rebellious shove, the ghost turned back and lunged towards the other energy.

No! Fushimi thought angrily, trying to rein in the ghost again even as it was almost to the bright spirit, when his concentration was shattered by a scream.

As Fushimi watched, Yata reached the van, and he crawled inside quickly, never taking his eyes off the ghost locked with Mikoto. The moment the shorter man disappeared into the vehicle, the sunshiny presence faded, and the ghost lost all interest. Mikoto staggered forward as the ghost suddenly stopped resisting and let go, abandoning its sidetrack to turn back to Fushimi and rush over, succumbing to his insistent calls from earlier. Fushimi was stunned, and it was only when Anna tugged on his hand that he remembered to step back, out of the ghost’s area of activity. Once he was out of range, the ghost stopped all movement, hovering uncertainly for a bit before slowly drifting back towards the hill.
“What just happened?” Fushimi asked, blinking in confusion. This made no sense. Did this mean that, like him, Yata attracted ghosts? But then why did they need Fushimi? And why had Reisi said that Yata’s power was useful such a small percentage of the time?

“Ghosts with certain desires find Misaki’s ability appealing,” Anna said. “That’s why I asked him to come along today. Some ghosts have very strong attractions, usually to their ties, but sometimes to other things as well, and your ability needs to be stronger than any force that attracts them.”

“Certain desires?” Fushimi asked. He felt like a broken record these days, constantly having to ask these people what their carefully selected words and technical phrases really meant.

“It’s hard to explain,” Anna said. “It’s easy enough to tell you which ghosts here would be drawn to Misaki over you, but their reasons can be very different, and some with similar desires will easily ignore Misaki. The strength of the desire also has something to do with it too…”

“Haven’t you people ever heard of giving a straight answer?” Fushimi grumbled under his breath, tired of all these non-answers.

“Sure we have,” Anna replied calmly, without missing a beat. “We just can’t give you any because we’re all queer.”

Fushimi almost choked on his own spit. Of all the things he might have expected Anna to say, ever, that was not one of them. And when she said all of them were queer, what exactly did she mean? Did she mean that Fushimi wasn’t the only gay guy there?

Oh god, was he seriously looking for solidarity, or worse, a date, among these people?

Fushimi was all too glad when Anna had him step forward to summon the same ghost again, glad of the distraction. Even the droll prospect of calling ghosts to come forth was more appealing than the disturbing thoughts Anna’s last comment had somehow drawn up.

When Yata stepped back out of Kusanagi’s van, Fushimi knew it right away. He knew because his sixth sense was flooded with a rush of warmth, like when a cloud had been passing over the sun and the wind finally blew it away and he could feel the rays shining on his skin. And if that hadn’t been enough of a clue, the ghost immediately starting fighting against Fushimi’s control, eager to try the ghost equivalent of tanning, or whatever it was about Yata that so enticed the ghost. Maybe the ghost had a thing for short guys who were afraid of everything.

Fushimi struggled to keep the ghost on track towards him, imagining throwing several ropes around the ghost to help pull on it, but the ghost still broke free. Yata didn’t scream this time, instead scurrying back into the van long before the ghost even reached Mikoto. Again, the moment Yata was hidden by the many charms in the van, the ghost forgot about him and came straight to Fushimi, who stepped out of range and let it go back.

Anna had Fushimi try the exact same ghost a third time, and, when that failed almost immediately, had him switch to another ghost. The new ghost didn’t seem to notice Yata at all, nor did the next, but the one after that took an arching path to Fushimi, drawing close to Yata but not trying to reach him, more curious than anything else.

Anna had Fushimi try the exact same ghost a third time, and, when that failed almost immediately, had him switch to another ghost. The new ghost didn’t seem to notice Yata at all, nor did the next, but the one after that took an arching path to Fushimi, drawing close to Yata but not trying to reach him, more curious than anything else.

There were three more ghosts that expressed interest in Yata, and while Fushimi was able to keep one of them from deviating off course, the other two were more difficult. One of them he kept on track almost all the way, before it suddenly broke free of his control and made a beeline for Yata, eliciting another scream from the redhead as Mikoto had to all but tackle the ghost to stop its progress long enough for the shorter medium to escape. The third did obey Fushimi’s pull, but it
took a zigzag path veering between the simultaneous pulls of Fushimi’s magnetism and Yata’s apparent attractiveness to ghosts.

Afterwards, as Fushimi was driving Anna back to the bar, he asked for more details regarding the difference between the way ghosts flocked to him and the way some of them couldn’t seem to resist Yata.

“As you yourself have said, Saruhiko, you’re like a magnet to ghosts,” Anna explained. “To them, coming to you is like something you have to do, like going out to buy groceries. It has to get done, whether you like it or not, but sometimes, if you can give yourself a good excuse, you try to put it off. Misaki is more like something ghosts want, that some don’t really care about but others can’t resist. Like a fancy car, maybe. Some people would do anything for a sportscar, whereas other people just don’t care. And then there are those who admire the car but it’s not something they really need so they walk away.”

“So you’re saying my power is boring and ordinary like groceries, and his is something amazing?” Fushimi asked, not liking the comparison.

“No,” Anna said, shaking her head. “I’m saying they come to you because they are drawn to you even against their will. They go to Misaki because they see him as a means to get what they really want. After all, many people buy nice cars because they want to use it for other reasons: they want status, they want luxury, they want to impress people, they want comfort, speed, glamour. That’s the key: they want. Most ghosts come to you without knowing what they are doing or why, they just have to. But the ones that go to Misaki want what he can do for them.”

“And what exactly can he do for them?” Fushimi asked.

“That which ghosts cannot do,” Anna replied. Fushimi clicked his tongue. He should have known better than to hope for a real answer.

Unfortunately, that just got him thinking about Anna’s earlier statement again. He spent his shift that night trying to casually observe the others, wondering how exactly they were queer. He still hadn’t figured it out by the end of the night, but he supposed it didn’t matter. What did matter was that they had another case tomorrow.
Fushimi Messes Up

Fushimi’s second case with the team turned out to be about as interesting as dried paint. It was another house ghost, one that refused to let the temperature in the house get above 55 degrees, left the residents constantly feeling like they were being watched, and had a tendency to appear in the living room. It was an old lady in an outdated kimono, and all that needed to be done to deal with her was for Anna to go and talk to her for about 30 seconds. Apparently the woman hadn’t realized she was dead, and, once it was pointed out to her, she was more than happy to move on.

As they were driving back from that one, Kusanagi called back from the front seat, “Looks like you’re pretty lucky Fushimi-san. Your first two cases have been nice and peaceful. Let’s hope it lasts.”

“Speak for yourself,” Reisi countered. “I, for one, find it most unfortunate that Fushimi has not been able to observe anything more exciting. It’s far more invigorating when the ghosts are more active.”

“Not everyone is as crazy as you are,” Kusanagi told him.

“No, I agree!” Totsuka seconded. “It’s so boring to be a cameraman unless things get exciting. I mean, today’s video was just Anna-chan talking to the air!”

“Okay, but some people actually get a little nervous when ghosts start throwing sharp objects around the room!” Kusanagi protested. Fushimi, who had been tuning out the conversation since it seemed to no longer involve him, refocused on the topic in alarm.

“Hold on, what’s this about ghosts throwing sharp objects?” he asked nervously.

“Poltergeists can be a real bitch,” Yata muttered darkly from next to Fushimi.

“Yeah, I hate ‘em,” Mikoto agreed from the back seat.

“They’re just upset,” Anna argued quietly.

“Okay, and I’m very sympathetic to their plight, but that doesn’t mean they have to throw fucking gardening tools at me!” Kusanagi cried. “That hatchet nearly took off my nose!”

“It did not,” Totsuka replied. “I have the video to prove it.”

“I’d argue with you, but it’s no use trying to reason with a guy who had that as his first case and still stuck around,” Kusanagi sighed.

“Not that I actually expect any of you to bother, but would someone kindly explain what you all are talking about since not all of us were there?” Fushimi asked grumpily.

“Totsuka’s first case with us was a nasty poltergeist,” Yata replied, startling Fushimi with an actual answer. Did that mean Yata wasn’t included in Anna’s “everyone’s queer” schtick then? Pity.

Wait, what? Had Fushimi just thought that Yata being straight was a pity? Something was wrong with him. Also, his brain needed to shut up already, because Yata was still talking.

“There was this haunted shed we were asked to clean up, and the ghost inside got really upset when we entered because we were a bunch of strangers, and so it kinda went ballistic and tried to kill
“No one was hurt, but it was kinda close. All because some jerk wanted to pull a few weeds.”

“And that was Totsuka’s first case with you guys?” Fushimi asked. “Totsuka-san, did you work with other mediums before or something?”

“Nah, that guy just doesn’t know the meaning of fear,” Kusanagi called from the driver’s seat. “Him and Reisi both, and Mikoto’s not much better.”

“Pfft, are you kidding?” Yata laughed. “Mikoto’s terrified of-”

Yata was cut off as a hand shot up from the back seat and slapped over his mouth, silencing him.

“You shouldn’t make fun of Mikoto-nii, Misaki,” Anna chided.

Yata mumbled something at a yell which was silenced by Mikoto’s hand.

“Didn’t catch that, Yata-chan,” Totsuka said, leaning around his seat to look back at Yata. Yata tapped Mikoto’s hand, an apparent surrender.

“Finish what you were saying before and I will hide your skateboard where you’ll never find it,” Mikoto warned before releasing Yata and lying back down.

“I was trying to say that since he makes fun of me for my fears, then I should get to make fun of him too,” Yata muttered sulkily.

“I’m the oldest, I get to do the teasing around here,” Mikoto replied. “And Anna gets to tease you too cuz she’s the youngest. You don’t like it, you shouldn’t asked me to be your brother.”

“What the- that’s not fair!” Yata yelped.

“Ah, the woes of being the middle child,” Totsuka laughed. “This is why I don’t have siblings.”

“Amen to that,” Kusanagi agreed. “I used to wish I had a little brother or sister. Then I met you three and am glad to have been an only child.”

“Pfft, you couldn’t have a sibling,” Mikoto drawled. “You’d just end up being a third parent to them rather than a brother.”

“And still glad I’m an only child,” Kusanagi murmured, merging into another lane.

Fushimi actually had to stop himself from chuckling at that. What the hell was wrong with him? He’d known these people less than a week, they were secretive and cagey, and they were constantly bickering and bantering, two things he found annoying, so why would he laugh because of them? Especially from such a ridiculous conversation as to sibling rights and privileges among people who weren’t even siblings!

And besides, why would anyone sit around wanting a sibling? It was just someone you had to share with and who would be a constant pest and who would be just as miserable and unwanted as you were and would suffer because of those people as well and- Oh. Right. Fushimi had never bothered to consider the prospect of siblings since he was too busy wishing he had different parents, ones who didn’t ignore him or torment him. If he’d had a more normal life, one with normal parents who loved him, would he have wished for a sibling too?

And there was another reason to not be amused by the situation: once again, this group had gone
and left Fushimi with questions that he was unlikely to get an easy answer for. It was something they did constantly to him, piquing his curiosity and then leaving him hanging, driving him mad with the things he didn’t know. The last person who had been even half as confusing to him had been that man, and given how negative that relationship had been, there was no reason Fushimi should want to have anything to do with other people like that, let alone be amused by them.

By the time they reached the bar, Fushimi had stewed over such thoughts enough to be in a rather foul mood. If the others noticed his snit, they ignored it, instead heading inside and going about getting ready for the bar’s opening like normal. That was fine by him. If they tried to cheer him up he’d just be angrier.

All seemed well until about fifteen minutes before the bar was supposed to open. Fushimi, Totsuka, and Anna were moving about, putting the chairs back down from where they’d been left up the night before and making sure the napkin holders and salt and pepper shakers were all full, while Kusanagi and Mikoto replaced a bunch of glasses that had been cleaned since the previous night’s shift. Reisi, as usual, merely observed, though he wasn’t shy about pointing out any mistakes he noted. Back in the kitchen, Yata and the other chef were doing whatever chef things they did before the bar opened. And then, out of nowhere, Mikoto stiffened and his head whipped around, nostrils flaring. He stood up abruptly, and then, before Fushimi could even begin to wonder what was going on, he grabbed Fushimi by the collar and dragged him back the service hallway to the kitchen.

Fushimi had seen the kitchen, of course, through the opening of the pick-up window. But he’d never been inside it before, since he’d had no cause to, and also because if he and Yata were supposed to stay away from each other and the kitchen was Yata’s domain, then that meant Fushimi had to stay out, right? As such, the room had managed to become built up in Fushimi’s mind as some grand chamber. Yet as he was shoved inside by Mikoto and staggered forward to avoid faceplanting on the floor, Fushimi couldn’t help but think it was surprisingly mundane. It had lots of cold metal surfaces that were kept excessively clean, and there were all sorts of cabinets and drawers full of whatever kitchen stuff a place like this would have. In the corner was a mop, and Fushimi could see the entrance to a pantry and a refrigerator on the far wall. There were a couple ovens and some ranges, and that was about it. The only interesting thing was that, like the van, there were fuda hung around the room, on a string suspended near the ceiling.

“Wait, Mikoto, what the hell are you doing?” Yata protested.

“Smelled a bad one,” Mikoto replied. “Getting closer. Don’t want him drawing it in.”

“O-oh,” Yata replied, and Fushimi felt Mikoto’s presence vanish from the doorway behind him.

“Did he say ‘smelled’?” Fushimi asked. Though was that really the right question to start with?

“Huh?” Yata asked, having already turned back to whatever he’d been doing when Fushimi was forced inside. The other chef glanced over but didn’t say anything. “Oh,” Yata continued, “yeah, his ghost sense tends to manifest as smells. Like, Anna’s Sight is definitely the strongest, but Mikoto can smell a strong ghost from as far as three blocks away.” Yata sounded proud as he said it, but to Fushimi, it just sounded ridiculous. Who smelled ghosts, anyway?

“Is that so?” he asked sarcastically.

“Yeah,” Yata replied earnestly, and dangit, Fushimi had forgotten sarcasm didn’t work on this crowd. “Though for weaker ghosts they have to be a lot closer. Like, sometimes when they’re really weak he won’t smell them until he’s in the same room as them.”
“And do you smell ghosts too?” Fushimi asked. Maybe he could learn more about Yata’s mysterious abilities this way.

“Nah, Mikoto’s the only one who does that,” Yata replied, as if he was talking about math problems or sound science or anything else completely logical and not sniffing out ghosts. “I get more of a feel when they’re around, y’know? Like hairs standing up at the back of your neck or goosebumps. Sometimes cold sweats if they’re really nasty, like whatever Mikoto smelled. Basically like normal people except more accurate.” Yata shrugged. “My senses aren’t all that special, really. It’s nothing compared to Anna’s Sight and Mikoto’s sense of smell. Even Shiro’s got something cooler than me.”

“Sorry?” Fushimi asked, automatically seeking out an explanation even though why did he care about this?

“Oh, uh, Shiro-san sorta hears when there’s ghosts around,” Yata explained. “Like he said that it’s like when you get a ringing in your ears kinda? So you’re hearing something that isn’t really there, and it changes pitch for how strong a ghost is or something. According to Pops, it’s rarer than feeling like I do, but it’s still pretty common. Sight’s not that unusual either, though he said Anna was the first time he’d heard of Sight like hers.”

“I see,” Fushimi said. Though he didn’t, not completely.

“Hey Yata-san, would you mind getting some more garlic from the pantry real quick?” the other chef asked as he chopped something.

“Sure thing,” Yata replied, and left his station to go complete his new task.

Left alone, Fushimi began to wonder what was so bad about this ghost that Mikoto didn’t want him to draw. If he was going to be sequestered in this room until it was gone, then he ought to at least know why, right? He doubted anyone would tell him about it, but he was more than capable of finding out for himself by sensing the ghost. Yes he tended to draw the ghosts he sensed, but hadn’t he been placed in this room to keep his ability from catching the ghost’s attention? From here, he would surely be fine. He closed his eyes and let his sixth sense spread, observing the world around the bar without eyes or ears or any other organ that might disrupt his perception. There was the blaze of Mikoto, and a gentle light that reminded him of a candle in the dark that he assumed must be Anna. He didn’t sense Yata, but Yata was also contained within the wards, so that was to be expected. He let his senses broaden out, slowly taking in a larger area, seeking whatever had Mikoto on high alert. He didn’t have to go far. A little more than a block away from the bar, he found a roiling tempest, filled with malice and hunger. Just noticing it was enough to throw him off balance, making him feel dizzy.

And then whatever he’d been sensing sensed him back. He felt it’s attention snap onto him, and a vindictive glee that reminded him of that man flooded him. Overwhelmed, he was helpless as it reached for him, tugging and pulling at him in much the same way he’d been tugging and pulling at the ghosts Anna had asked him to call in his lessons. It hurt, like his very soul was being torn in two, and he screamed soundlessly. He tried to fight back, to claw at the ghost, but his attempts were ineffective. He thrashed, but whatever had him didn’t have substance. Despair welled up, and he felt himself succumbing. As he did, he was flooded with ideas: some were images, some were sounds, some were half-remembered feelings, all were vague and bombarded him too quickly for his receding consciousness to process.

His last clear thought was that when Mikoto had said this was a bad one, he wasn’t kidding.

Something cold and wet splashed Fushimi’s face, and he reeled back, blinking. In front of him, two
concerned figures loomed indistinctly, and voices were calling his name.

“Fushimi-san? Are you okay?”

“Oi, Fushimi, you there?”

Fushimi squinted, trying to make out the figures. One was short, and seemed to have black hair, with red tips. The other was taller, with shaggy blond hair. For a moment, Fushimi’s brain insisted they were strangers, but then he remembered the kitchen and the two chefs and realized where he was and who these two must be.

“What happened to my glasses?” he mumbled, his voice raspy. His throat was unexpectedly dry.

“They’re right here,” the taller chef said, holding them out. Fushimi took them and put them on. As his vision cleared, he realized for the first time that he was on his knees. When had that happened? He shifted, intending to get to his feet, but the slight movement almost sent him crashing to the floor instead. The only reason he didn’t collapse in a heap was because the chef who’d had his glasses caught him.

“Yeah, you probably won’t be able to get up for a while,” Yata said blandly. “Seriously, the hell were you thinking, opening yourself up like that?”

“I was trying to learn about the ghost,” Fushimi grumbled.

“Yeah? Well next time you decide to learn about a ghost, don’t forget to block yourself off, idiot,” Yata scolded angrily. “You coulda ended up losing yourself, or worse, bringing it here to do the same to us.”

“What?” Fushimi asked, frowning in confusion. Maybe it was the headache that was beginning to throb in his temples, but Yata’s words weren’t making any sense.

“Your shield, moron,” Yata sighed. “Y’know, so that the ghosts don’t get as much from you as you get from them? So that nasties like that don’t try and steal your energy or eat your soul or anything?”

“What are you talking about?” Fushimi asked, glaring back at Yata.

“You mean Anna didn’t teach you that yet?” Yata asked, suddenly looking stricken.

“I wouldn’t be asking questions like a fucking broken record if I had a clue what you were talking about,” Fushimi snapped.

“Well sorry, it’s just- she shoulda-” Yata cut off with a sigh. “I guess I can understand why she hasn’t taught you that yet,” he said heavily. “It’s not like it’s pleasant for her. But still, she shoul da at least warned you not to go sensing just any ghost. See, when you sense a ghost, you leave yourself wide open to connect with them. And with weaker ghosts, that’s no problem, but some ghosts… it gets pretty dangerous. Some will try and take from you- they want life and think it can be stolen, or because you’re a medium they think they can get stronger from you. That’s what the one out there is like. But there’s others, too. Sometimes if they’re really caught up in an emotion it’ll infect you, and even when the connection’s gone the emotion doesn’t go away. And just- there’s all sorts of bad things they can do, and you gotta shield yourself to avoid it. If you can do that, you can still learn about the ghost, but they don’t really notice you’re there.”

“So basically, that ghost wants to kill us?” Fushimi asked, finally feeling strong enough to push the chef supporting him away.
“Nah, she doesn’t care whether we’re alive or dead,” Yata replied. “She just wants to be alive again. She’d thought she had a great future, only then she got sick and was stuck in the hospital until she died, and all that was before anything could ever happen and she hates that everyone she knew is going on with their lives but she’s already dead. A medium looks like a ticket back to life for her, so if we hadn’t gotten you to come back she woulda latched onto ya and sucked ya dry. You’d still be alive, but depending on how much she took from you, you could end up bedridden or even in a coma.”

“Charming,” Fushimi replied. He thought for a moment, unsure what to ask next. “How’d you get me to ‘come back’ then?” he finally queried.

“Well, we tried slapping you, but that didn’t work,” Yata replied. At his words, Fushimi suddenly became aware of the fact that his cheek was stinging a little, though the sensation was largely faded.

“That’s why I had your glasses,” the other chef interjected. “I didn’t want Yata-san breaking them on accident.”

Fushimi was grateful to the taller chef for that. His glasses were replaceable, but he wasn’t supposed to drive without them, and life could be very difficult while he didn’t have them.

“Well, I wouldn’t have hit the glasses,” Yata protested. “I’m not stupid, Kamamoto. Anyway, when slapping you didn’t work, we splashed some water on you, which did work.”

Well that explained the wetness when he’d returned to himself.

“And how did you know so much about the ghost?” Fushimi asked. “You seemed to understand its motives rather well.”

“Her,” Yata insisted. “Not it, her. And like I said, if you shield yourself, there’s nothing to worry about. Plus I’m pretty good at that stuff. Things ghosts have felt and all.”

“So you’re an empath like Anna?”

“Nah, nothing like that,” Yata said, flapping a hand in front of his face in dismissal. “She just knows what they’re feeling. She can open herself up to it to feel it too, and to send her own emotions back, but it’s a choice. For me… it’s a bit different.” Yata shifted, his face taking on a rueful look. “I can connect with ghosts more easily than most. It’s ‘cuz of my ability, we think. And when you connect with a ghost, really connect with ‘em, you get to see things from their perspective a little.”

Fushimi found himself remembering the ideas that had hit him as he’d lost to the ghost, and he thought maybe this was what Yata was talking about. He wasn’t about to ask though. It had been too vague, and also his pride was stinging from asking so many questions at once. Questions stemmed from ignorance, and Fushimi hated being the ignorant one. He also burned with shame from the situation, from having to be rescued, so at this point, if he wanted to maintain the last tattered shreds of his dignity then it was time to be quiet.

“So uh, you think you’ll be able to get up soon?” Yata asked, looking uncomfortable. “Mikoto was already gonna cover for you until the ghost is gone and all, but it’s kinda gonna be a pain if you’re just sitting in the middle of the kitchen floor all night.”

Any gratitude Fushimi might have felt to Yata for helping him out and being so forthcoming with information vanished then and there. He clicked his tongue, half out of irritation and half because
if he was doing that then he couldn’t use his tongue to make scathing comments on the guy in front of him.

“Yata-san!” the other chef scolded. “Fushimi-san clearly needs to rest! And it’s not like we’re ever busy at the beginning of the shift, so he won’t really be in the way.”

Such arguments hardly improved Fushimi’s reinvigorated ill humor. Maybe the chef was defending him, but what he was hearing was that he was weak and a burden. He clicked his tongue again and began slowly pushing himself to his feet.

“Ah, whatever, quit your bitching Kamamoto, he’s fine,” Yata snapped. “He’s already getting up.”

“Will the both of you just shut up?” Fushimi ordered. “I can take care of myself. I’m not a child.”

He was met with skeptical looks from both chefs.

“Uh, yeaaah, not really believing you on that one,” Yata replied slowly. “I mean, you did almost lose your life force or soul or whatever to a ghost a little bit ago, and besides, we already heard that your cooking skills involve microwaves. So pardon us if we don’t exactly have much faith in your ability to take care of yourself.”

The worst part was, Fushimi couldn’t even argue with that.

“Well you could always teach him,” Kamamoto suggested. Fushimi blinked. Maybe Yata and Kamamoto weren’t exactly convinced he could take care of himself, but he didn’t have much confidence in Yata’s abilities in return. The guy’s reaction to ghosts seemed to be to scream and cower behind Mikoto or charms meant to mask his presence.

“Haaa?” Yata snarled, rounding on the taller man. “Why don’t you just teach him, you fatty!”

“I meant that stuff you were talking about earlier,” Kamamoto protested, arms up in surrender or defense. “The shields or whatever. You know I can’t do that ghost stuff.”

“Oh,” Yata replied, all his ire gone. “I thought you meant cooking. You should be more specific, idiot.” He punched Kamamoto’s arm before turning back to Fushimi. “But ya know,” he continued, rubbing the back of his neck, “it’s actually pretty simple? Like, it’s like in video games, or manga, where you just kinda imagine one being there? I dunno, I’m not good at explaining this stuff.”

Fushimi couldn’t contain the no shit Sherlock snort that rose in response to that last statement. While Yata at least gave him answers, Yata’s explanations were so roundabout and confusing at times that he’d almost rather he didn’t get the answers he sought after all. Yata’s eyes, which had been cast downward as he mumbled out his instructions- if such hemming and hawing could be considered “instruction”- snapped upward, narrowing as he scowled at Fushimi. Given that his eyes were already pretty narrow to begin with, it made him look nearsighted rather than intimidating.

“Che, I’m trying to help you out here,” Yata groused. “It’s really uncomfortable for Anna to teach this stuff, but you’ve gotta learn somehow.”

“In that case, aren’t you helping your dear little sister rather than me?” Fushimi drawled. “What a great brother you are, aren’t you, Mi~sa~ki~.”

Fushimi was pleased with the way, Yata’s eyes widened, and how the color drained from his face, but he only got a second to relish in his triumph before a fist hit the side of his face, knocking his glasses off and sending him crashing back to the floor he’d struggled so hard to get up off of. He instinctively brought a hand up to his jaw, trying to see if the right hook he’d been hit with had
broken anything. It was sore, and the gentle brush of his fingers made him flinch, but everything seemed alright. He located his glasses a few feet away and put them on, relieved that the lenses still seemed to be intact. When he looked up again, Kamamoto had placed himself in front of Fushimi like a shield, his back towards Fushimi as he kept an eye on the irate redhead in front of him. Yata, didn’t seem to be trying to get at Fushimi for another hit, but his eyes were locked onto the taller medium, and his gaze was pure murder.

“Get the fuck out of my kitchen,” Yata spat.

“But Yata-san, the ghost-” Kamamoto protested, but Yata interrupted.

“Is far enough away that it doesn’t sense him!” Yata snapped. “Or maybe you didn’t notice that his little stint earlier burned up some of the fudas, so this place isn’t truly safe! If the ghost were coming this way, it’d be here already, but it’s not, so he can get the fuck out before he fucks things up even more!”

“At least let me get him some ice for his jaw,” Kamamoto soothed.

“I’m fine,” Fushimi said through clenched teeth. And man that hurt his injured jaw. He got to his feet and stalked out, hoping Yata was right about the ghost from before. As he left the kitchen, he saw Mikoto entering the service hallway as well.

“I was jus’ comin’ ta tell ya that it’s safe to come out now,” Mikoto rumbled. “Guess Yata-chan beat me to the punch.”

“Yeah, literally,” Fushimi spat. Mikoto’s eyebrows rose.

“S’at so?” he asked. “I’ll get you some ice. You’ll need it.”

Fushimi wanted to argue, but decided against it. As it turned out, that was a wise decision. As soon as he entered the bar, Kusanagi asked about his jaw, which was apparently beginning to bruise already. He had to put up with questions from customers all night, and soon discovered that telling them “I got punched” only brought on more inquiries. The way they acted, interrogating him about his bruise just might have been the highlight of their evenings. Annoying. Worse still, he found out that admitting that he’d been punched by someone of a short and scrawny stature led to mocking.

As soon as he got home, Fushimi took two painkillers to try and ease the throbbing of his jaw, cursing Yata as he did so. Little bastard could pack a good punch.
When Fushimi showed up at the bar the next day, he half expected to find no one there, or for Anna to tell him to kindly fuck off since there was no way she was teaching him after he’d fought with her “brother”. This expectation only seemed to be confirmed when he found no one waiting for him in the parking lot, but when he went inside the bar to check, he found all three mediums and Reisi waiting for him inside.

“Good afternoon, Saruhiko,” Anna greeted amicably. “Misaki reminded me that you need to learn to protect yourself from ghosts, which is something we don’t need any ghosts for. Also, I understand that I owe you an apology for not broaching this subject sooner. I’m sorry for not warning you about the dangers of opening yourself up to ghosts, it was irresponsible of me, and put you at risk. My personal preferences should never outweigh your safety, and I’ll try not to make the same mistake again.”

Back in kindergarten, Fushimi’s teachers had always been insistent that one should respond to any expression of regret such as Anna had just shared with “I accept your apology.” But the fact of the matter was, Fushimi wasn’t ready to accept this apology. He could tell Anna was genuinely sorry, but that didn’t change that he’d almost gotten swallowed up by some ghost and had been yelled at for something he hadn’t even known about, all because she hadn’t said anything about this. He still felt he ought to acknowledge Anna’s sincerity even if he wasn’t ready to forgive her, but he wasn’t sure how, so he just changed the subject.

“Will this protection stop me from drawing ghosts?” he asked, glancing at the single ghost that was following him at the moment. “That guy said that it makes me seem normal to ghosts I sense.” He jerked a thumb at Yata.

“While what we’re going to teach you today does keep ghosts from noticing you are a medium, it will not cancel out your power,” Anna said. “It doesn’t mask your power, only you.

Of course it wouldn’t be that simple. His life never was.

“Fine,” Fushimi grumbled. “Though I hope you do a better job explaining it than he did.”

“Hey, I told you I’m bad at trying to talk about that stuff,” Yata shot back. “At least I tried, even though you’re a dick.”

“I’m not the one going around punching people, Mi~sa~ki~,” Fushimi retorted. He supposed he was playing with fire, using the shorter man’s given name when the last time he’d done that, he’d gotten punched, but he wasn’t about to be cowed by this midget. “Speaking of which, are you here to apologize for that?”

“Like hell I am!” Yata retorted venomously. “I’m here to help!”

“Help?” Fushimi drawled. “And how do you intend to do that? All you do is run and hide. There’s no way a wimp like you could ever be useful, Mi~sa~”

“Shut up,” Anna’s voice said, cutting Fushimi off. She was as soft spoken as ever, and yet something in her tone made Fushimi obey. No, it was more that he couldn’t disobey, as he was suddenly incapable of speech. He turned to the doll-like girl and found her glaring at him, eyes blazing. “Misaki is no wimp,” Anna continued, and her voice didn’t contain the authority that had frozen Fushimi’s vocal cords, but he was still unable to argue back. “He may be afraid, but that
isn’t a sign of cowardice. And he is useful, all the time. Saruhiko doesn’t understand it, but Misaki is an important part of our team. Do not say such things to him.” With the last sentence, Anna’s voice hardened again, becoming commanding. Fushimi tried to respond, to say anything, but all that would come out was a choked gasping sound.

“You didn’t have to do that, Anna,” Yata said.

“It was going to happen anyway,” Anna replied. “After all, it’s the easiest way to check whether or not Saruhiko’s shields are effective.”

Fushimi banged a fist on the nearest table, irate. They hadn’t even told him how to shield himself, so why were they already testing him? And more importantly, why had Anna’s words rendered him so literally speechless?

“Perhaps this would be a good time to mention that calling Anna-san’s ability ‘persuasion’ is a bit of a misnomer?” Reisi said, apparently reading Fushimi’s mind and reminding them all of his presence. “While it can be used in its lightest form to influence ghosts without being forceful, it can also be used to give orders to them that they cannot disobey. Not only that, but Anna-san’s powers also affect the living, not just the deceased.”

Had he been able to speak, Fushimi would have spat out “Are you freaking kidding me?” As it was, he just glared around angrily.

“Which is exactly the point of all this,” Mikoto said. “If you were shielding yourself, you wouldn’t be affected by it.”

“Nevermind that,” Yata said, prowling over to where Reisi was sitting, “how come you didn’t get affected at all?” Fushimi wished he could speak up, to ask if that meant Anna’s command had afflicted the whole room and only he had been unable to fend it off. If so, that was humiliating.

Reisi gave a Cheshire grin. “I may not be a medium, but I am still a psychic,” he said smugly. “Furthermore, I was well aware that, should Fushimi pick a fight with you, it was highly likely that Anna-san would utilize her abilities in your defense. After all, we really can’t have you punching him again, Yata-kun.”

Yata glared sulkily at Reisi, and with a muttered, “Che,” he moved away to sit at another table.

“Let’s get on with the lesson then,” Anna said.

“Yeah, only I still can’t—” Fushimi cut off, surprised at the return of his speech faculty. He clicked his tongue. “Nevermind,” he muttered sullenly.

“To start with, a mental shield works best when you have something to focus on,” Anna said. “It can be an image, a memory, anything that is easy to think about while not really thinking about it. If you are doing some kind of activity, something that comes easily to you and doesn’t necessarily require your full attention, that makes a good shield, but otherwise, visualization tends to be the best type of shield. For example, I picture in my mind a set of marbles I used to channel my abilities when I was younger. Mikoto runs through some kata exercises Kokujouji-jii-san taught him in his head, and Misaki imagines a wall around himself, and Shiro-san says he imagines that he is looking through a pair of binoculars or a telescope or periscope at the ghosts, so that he is actually far away as he looks at them. The idea is that you keep your shield at the back of your mind, and if a ghost starts to sense you back, you stop thinking about the ghost and start thinking about your shield instead.”
“That makes a lot more sense than video games and manga,” Fushimi said, looking pointedly at Yata. Yata made a rude gesture in return.

“Perhaps,” Anna conceded.

“But you can surely see where Yata-kun was coming from, can you not?” Reisi said. “After all, it is quite common for characters in works of fiction, including video games and manga, to learn magic through visualization. After all, if there is magic in this world, it lies in the human imagination.”

Fushimi gave Reisi a long, flat, unimpressed look.

“So, think you can do it?” Mikoto asked.

Fushimi hesitated a second, trying to think of something that he could think of easily. Perhaps a Rubik’s cube? It was something he could do without much thought, and which held memories, but it didn’t seem quite right. Maybe coding would work better. He sometimes planned out coding projects in his head, after all, so that should work, right? He nodded.

“Are you ready?” Anna asked. Fushimi, his mind still on Rubik’s cubes, began thinking of how to code an app that would shuffle the puzzle and allow a user to solve it. He nodded.

“Sit down,” Anna commanded. Fushimi heard the command in her voice, but as he concentrated on his code, he felt no need to obey the compulsion. Anna smiled, Mikoto gave him a solemn nod, and, most satisfactorily of all, he heard Yata mutter another, “Che.”

“Well done,” Reisi congratulated.

“Whatever,” Yata grumbled. “Don’t get cocky just ‘cuz you did it once. It’s a lot harder when you don’t get any warning y’know.”

“Perhaps, but I doubt it,” Fushimi replied. “As you said, it’s quite simple. Even a monkey could do it.” He couldn’t deny the thrill he felt at the way Yata glared back at him. Maybe it wasn’t exactly a return punch, but he was getting back at that jerk, in his own way.

“Again,” Mikoto said, and Fushimi didn’t even have time to react before Anna was speaking up again.

“Go wash your hands,” she commanded, and Fushimi desperately tried to remember the coding he’d been planning. It felt hazy, and he huffed in annoyance, forcing his brain to concentrate. There, he had it.

“See, I told ya!” Yata crowed, and Fushimi realized that he had moved towards the hallway and the bathrooms it led to, as if he was obeying the command. With a click of his tongue, he returned to the others, trying to ignore Yata’s smirk.

“He’s still doing better than you did,” Mikoto rumbled, and now Fushimi was the one smirking.

“Shut up! You know I was at a disadvantage to begin with!” Yata complained.

“Sure, blame it on your ability,” Mikoto snorted, crossing his arms and leaning against the wall.

“It’s not an ability, it’s a curse,” Yata mumbled sullenly. Mikoto’s expression became soft, and he straightened to go over to the shorter medium and lay a hand on his shoulder.
“That’s why you have us to look after you,” Mikoto said.

“If you dislike your ability so much, I would gladly take it off your hands if you ever found a way to transfer it,” Reisi said cheerfully.

“Reisi,” Anna said warningly, shaking her head.

“Again,” Mikoto said, and this time Fushimi was able to recall his code even as Anna gave an order to get a broom and sweep the bar. He didn’t falter in the slightest, and Anna smiled again, though she was beginning to look worn out. There was a slight sheen of sweat on her forehead, and her already pale skin was becoming ashen.

“Misaki…” Anna said, looking down at her feet as if ashamed. Her hands clutched at her dress.

“Go ahead,” Yata said, holding out a hand. Anna walked over and took it, closing her eyes. She breathed in deeply as she did so, and her skin regained its luster.

“Thank you,” Anna said, nodding as she released Yata’s hand.

“It’s what I’m here for,” Yata replied.

“What did you just do?” Fushimi asked. Was this perhaps Yata’s mysterious ability, or curse or whatever?

“Mediums can pass energy to each other,” Reisi explained. “It isn’t usually necessary, but Anna-san’s ability can be quite strenuous when she is giving orders. And while she can use her abilities on the living, it is a greater strain on her to do so. As such, it is good to have Mikoto and Yata-kun around, since the two of them both tend to use their abilities more passively, and thus are almost never hurting for psychic energy.”

“So it’s something any medium can do then?” Fushimi wasn’t sure why he was asking. It’s not like he was planning on sharing psychic energy or whatever with anyone.

“Not necessarily,” Reisi replied. “As I understand it, there is a certain amount of closeness required for it to work. For example, I doubt Anna-san could accept energy from you, given that you are still a relative stranger. It takes time to build up strong enough bonds for such sharing.”

“Plus if you don’t know the other medium well enough, s’not as efficient,” Mikoto added. “Like we can share with Shiro, but he doesn’t get as much from it as Anna can.”

“Yes, he once estimated that the efficiency of transfers from you two to him were only about 85% as efficient as transfers to Anna, did he not?” Reisi inquired.

“Yup,” Mikoto said. “Again.”

“Twenty push-ups,” Anna said, and Fushimi barely even had to think of his code to avoid the command.

“Aw crap,” Yata moaned. “I forgot I wanted to work on my arm strength.”

“Tricep dips,” Mikoto suggested.

“Can’t I just borrow your dumbbells when we get home?” Yata whined.

“Sleep,” Anna suddenly commanded, and Fushimi turned to glare at her. It was almost time for him to crash again, and he wondered if she was commenting on his sleeping habits with that order.
“Borrow my dumbbells? Can you even lift them?” Mikoto continued, completely ignoring Anna. “They weigh almost as much as you do, shrimp.”

“Shut up, I can totally lift them!” Yata argued. “I bet even Fushimi could lift them and he has fucking noodle arms.”

“How would you know?” Fushimi grumbled, reluctantly joining in their argument. Oh no, was he actually taking part in their banter now? What was wrong with him? “Unless you’ve been checking me out, you haven’t exactly had a lot of time to notice such things.”

Judging by the way Yata flushed brighter than the hair sticking out from under his beanie, he had indeed checked Fushimi out before. Fushimi couldn’t help but feel pleased by that. He had, unfortunately, taken after that man appearance-wise, but at least that man had been pretty much universally acknowledged as handsome; if Fushimi resembled his looker of a paternal DNA contributor, then that meant that he too was hot. Plus he did own a mirror.

“W-whatever,” Yata stammered, and dang was he flustered. It might even have been cute if it wasn’t giving Fushimi such a case of secondhand embarrassment. “If you eat microwave meals all the time then there’s no way you’d ever build up decent muscles. You need a proper diet to be strong.”

Oh great, dietary criticism again. Fushimi clicked his tongue.

“Hey guys, how’s it going?” a new voice said, and Fushimi started. He whirled to see Shiro the onmyouji standing in the service hallway, smiling and waving a greeting to everyone. Fushimi seemed to be the only one surprised by Shiro’s sudden entrance.

“Did you fix the fuda?” Yata asked, pouncing to his feet.

“I did,” Shiro nodded. “And Kuro has a whole big lecture planned out for you for making me do extra work.”

“It wasn’t my fault!” Yata protested. “The new guy almost brought a hungry one down on us!”

“I didn’t warn him,” Anna said mournfully. “Which is why we were teaching him about shields today.”

“Ooo, were you guys playing ‘Simon Says’?” Shiro asked, his eyes glowing with excitement. “Can I join?”

“No exactly,” Anna replied. “We were still making sure he had the basics down, but he’s done rather well.”

“What’s ‘Simon Says’?” Fushimi asked.

“You, know, like the game?” Yata said. “Only we play it a bit differently.”

“I’ve never heard of it,” Fushimi said flatly. “You may recall me pointing out that I don’t ask things I already know that answers to. It’s a waste of time.”

“Yeah, but Kusanagi-san said that you’re sarcastic a lot, so there,” Yata shot back. It was a valid argument, but he acted like it was a final blow when it really wasn’t.

“Well, if you don’t know it then we’ll just have to explain it,” Shiro said. “‘Simon Says’ is—”
“Better let Reisi tell it,” Mikoto interrupted. “You just confuse people.”

Shiro pouted, but fell silent.

“Very well, I shall take the torch,” Reisi said. “‘Simon Says’ is typically a children’s game, in which one person is given absolute authority over the others. This dictator has the power to give any order they please, and the other players must follow it. However, to limit the authoritarian power, the despot’s commands only hold power if the leader begins the command with the words ‘Simon says’. If they do not start off with those words, then the command is to be ignored instead of obeyed.”

“Sounds annoying,” Fushimi muttered.

“But the way we play it,” Shiro piped up again, “Anna-san is always in charge, and whenever she doesn’t say ‘Simon says’, she uses her ability to make it extra challenging, and so we have to maintain our shields well to keep from losing.”

“Shiro almost always wins, though, so it’s kinda boring with him here,” Yata complained.

“Well of course,” Shiro said, beaming. “I have to have better shields than the rest of you, since my shields apply to my shikigami as well. If I slack off at all, something could happen to Kuro or Neko and I would never forgive myself.” Shiro’s hugged himself as if distressed. “Not to mention Kuro would probably beat me up,” he added as an afterthought.

“Well I don’t think we can play today,” Mikoto said. “Anna’s getting tired already, and we gotta get ready to open soon.”

“Alas,” Shiro sighed. “Maybe next time, eh?”

“Maybe,” Anna conceded. “Also, Saruhiko?” Fushimi looked over at her, wondering what she wanted. “I’ll test you during shifts sometimes, so that you’ll be able to have your shields ready always,” she said. He sighed, a little annoyed, but unable to deny the wisdom of such tactics. He nodded his acceptance.

As he went to get ready for the upcoming shift, Fushimi couldn’t help but think that today had been useful. Sure, it wasn’t learning to repel ghosts yet, but at least he could now reduce their influence on him. It might be a good skill to have, should that man’s ghost show up again. Which he would, definitely. It would be when Fushimi least expected it. But that was okay, because today’s lesson had been all about being constantly ready. He wouldn’t let that man get to him, not anymore.
A Ghost Plays With Water

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Fushimi should have known their next case would be a pain, when, at the end of the shift, as everyone was cleaning up after closing, Reisi interrupted the process to announce, “I believe it would behoove us all to wear bathing suits to tomorrow’s destination.”

Earlier that night, they’d gotten another client, a museum curator who believed a vase in the new exhibit was haunted. The vase had mysteriously relocated itself around the exhibit no less than five times, and as such, it had been taken off display. Anna claimed there was a strong residue on the woman who commissioned them, but Fushimi still couldn’t sense it himself. She and Mikoto had agreed that there was probably a poltergeist tied to the vase, and as such, they had asked the curator to bring the vase and meet them at a nearby field.

And now, here they were trekking towards the field on foot, trying to ignore the growing storm clouds above them. And they only had two umbrellas for the lot of them, since the forecast had claimed it was supposed to be a sunny day.

“It’s been a while since we saw a ghost mess with the weather,” Totsuka commented as they walked, as if he’d read Fushimi’s mind. Fushimi frowned at that: if ghosts could affect the weather, it was news to him.

“Guess it’s a good thing you’ve got that waterproof camera, huh?” Kusanagi replied.

“Yeah, and that Reisi was kind enough to warn us about swimsuits,” Totsuka agreed. “Though I think umbrellas would also have been a good idea, Reicchan.”

“I only knew that if we took this case we would all return to the bar soaked, nothing more,” Reisi replied. “But I would assume that it means that umbrellas will somehow be futile.”

“Well what about raincoats?” Fushimi asked. “I would have at least worn mine if I’d known it would be like this, since I don’t have a swimsuit.”

Everyone stopped in their tracks and turned to look at Fushimi, and despite the rising winds he could have almost sworn he heard some crickets chirping.

“What?” he asked, uncomfortable under their intense gazes.

“You… don’t own a swimsuit?” Kusanagi asked.

“Why would I?” Fushimi replied irritably.

“Do you just not know how to have fun?” Yata asked, completely agog.

Fushimi clicked his tongue and turned to continue walking.

When they arrived at the field, their client and a companion were both waiting, along with a large, padded, tarp-swathed object that was presumably the vase in question. Also present was a ghost, a hollow-eyed man who looked almost as sleep deprived as Fushimi hovering protectively over the vase. Perhaps exhaustion had contributed to his death.
“Izumo, can you get them away from the vase please?” Anna requested as their group approached. “He doesn’t like that people are near it.”

“Gotcha,” Kusanagi replied, and he and Anna went up to the curator and her friend to talk to them while the rest of the group settled themselves about ten yards away from the vase. Totsuka set up his camera, Mikoto stayed as a shield between Yata and the ghost, and Reisi looked on with interest as always. As far as Fushimi could tell, there was no need for his magnetic powers, and he wondered why he was there. He’d picked up three ghosts on the walk over, and they all hovered around him like gnats in the summer heat, annoying him. This little adventure was nothing but an inconvenience, and if he didn’t have to be there, then he’d rather just leave.

Then again, why were any of them there? Reisi and Yata probably wouldn’t do anything, there wasn’t much point in Totsuka taking video of the event, and the other three were only present to render a service and oversee a transaction that were completely unnecessary. So what if the vase was haunted? Big deal. Just smash it and be done with it already.

Apparently whatever Kusanagi said worked, as the curator and companion headed back to the car they’d come in and took shelter inside. Fushimi wished that he could do the same. As Kusanagi came over to join their group, Anna cautiously approached the vase and the ghost, tentatively speaking to the latter. All Fushimi was able to hear was a polite, “Excuse me,” before the storm clouds above them broke loose, pelting them with rain. The umbrellas, which Kusanagi and Reisi had brought with them, were opened, and Fushimi and Totsuka quickly joined them under the limited shelter, but Mikoto and Yata stayed out in the open. At first, Fushimi wondered if there was some secret medium skill he had yet to learn that would keep the rain off, but the other mediums were getting drenched just as surely as anyone would. Clearly they were just insane. Further proof of their likely craziness could be found when, as puddles formed on the saturated ground, the two even began to splash in them like oversized children.

Given that there wasn’t much to see in Anna’s conversation with the vase ghost, Fushimi found his gaze drawn to the two redheads as they played in the rain, shoving each other and splashing and getting muddy. The rain limited the sound, but their joyful shouts and laughter could still be heard. They were clearly having fun, and Fushimi found himself envying them. To be so stupidly carefree as to recklessly play in the rain when they could easily get sick as a result, to not worry about what a pain it would be to dry their clothes out later or to wash out the mud… it was something he couldn’t understand, but for the first time, he found himself wanting to. Because in that moment, watching the two of them having fun together was one of the loneliest feelings he’d ever experienced. He’d always been the person on the outside, too nerdy and weird to be included by the other children and to disdainful of them to want to fit in, and it had never bothered him. Yet here, the isolation he’d always taken comfort in was almost painful.

“Would you like to join them?” Reisi asked, and Fushimi wished that Totsuka had been the one to end up sharing an umbrella with Reisi and not him. Then again, he wasn’t entirely sure Kusanagi might not have said the same thing. The man could be unnervingly sharp at times. They all could. But Reisi was still easily the worst of them.

“Tch. Don’t be ridiculous,” Fushimi replied. “I was just thinking how immature those two must be.”

“There is no shame in letting loose your inhibitions,” Reisi replied. “No one would judge you.”

“I don’t want to join in,” Fushimi insisted.

“Are you sure?” Reisi asked. “For all your social defenses, you seem to yearn for some kind of human connection. I think you’ll soon realize that you are not at Homra simply to learn, but
because you are seeking camaraderie. And you would not be alone in your endeavor. We all sought that place out for the same reason. That bar is a place that allows people to reach out to one another.”

“As if,” Fushimi spat. “Maybe that’s why you waste your time there, but I’m only waiting for the day I can use whatever ability I may have to push all the ghosts away so that I never have to see them again.”

Reisi was silent for a moment.

“Then you are in the wrong place,” he finally said. “And I think it only fair to warn you that saying such things in front of those three is liable to get you punched again. You seem to have forgotten the warning you received about the sensitivity of family. Do not forget the warning I am giving now: walking away from this life is not something that will be taken lightly.”

“If I can understand that all of you are ghost fanatics, then you can understand that I’m sick and tired of them,” Fushimi replied. “I want them gone.”

“No, only two of us are ghost fanatics,” Reisi corrected. “Kusanagi-kun is only here because he is a dear friend of those three. And those three are only here because this is the only way they can make a life for themselves. With their abilities, there is no avoiding ghosts. There is no freedom. They did not choose this life. They just didn’t have any other options. So do not expect such ambitions as yours to be well-received should you bring them up.”

Fushimi wasn’t sure he believed what Reisi had just told him. No other options? Yeah right. Seeing ghosts didn’t mean you couldn’t live a normal life. He’d managed well enough, after all.

But then again, when Fushimi considered how many ghosts he’d seen in his lifetime, he realized that it might be a bit inconvenient trying to get through each day when ghosts felt solid like they did to Mikoto. Sure, ghosts weren’t drawn to Mikoto like they were to Fushimi, but that wouldn’t stop them from showing up in the worst places at the worst times. What was Mikoto supposed to do if there was a ghost standing in the doorway of a bus, for example? And maybe it would get difficult, or even tiring to go through life as an empath like Anna. And Fushimi couldn’t help but remember how, just a few days before, Yata had called his ability a curse. Maybe the other mediums really did have limited options.

“Saruhiko.” Anna’s voice caused Fushimi to look up, surprised to find the girl standing just in front of him and Reisi. Her dress, frilly as she ever wore, was in sad shape, the ruffles flattened as it clung to her skin. She looked bedraggled, and it made Fushimi feel guilty for staying under the shelter of Reisi’s umbrella. “Would you mind trying to draw him away from the vase? I’ve tried to reason with him but he’s being stubborn. He spent a lot of time and effort making that vase, and does not wish to part with it, even if he is already dead. Please, I don’t want to have to get forceful with him,” Anna pleaded.

“Alright,” Fushimi sighed. He turned to the ghost and scowled at it, tying a mental rope to it and tugging. He felt immediate resistance, and so he increased his pull until he was hauling at the ghost, slowly bringing it away from the vase bit by bit. His feet slid along the wet grass of the field, and he almost fell, but he managed to shift his stance so that he had better balance and thus regained his footing. His gaze zeroed in on the ghost, blocking all else out, and he immediately began thinking of his code. How would he get it to rotate the cube and turn the rows? What sort of algorithms would randomize the shuffling process? What input could be used to go about solving the puzzle?

He was so focused that he didn’t notice anything else that was happening around him until
Mikoto’s voice snapped him out of it.

“Y’know,” Mikoto drawled in his low rumble, “it might be a good idea to take a break right about now.”

Fushimi turned to Mikoto, about to chew him out because if he took a break the ghost would just head right back to the vase, he could feel it, but his sarcasm was stopped in his throat as he saw that the raindrops were no longer falling to the ground, but were stopping midair and then gathering together in the few feet that were left between the ghost and Fushimi. Not only that, but some of the raindrops that had already fallen were reversing their course in order to join the suspended mass of water.

“A-Anna?” Fushimi said, not sure who else to turn to just then.

“The moment I try to use my power he’ll throw that water at us,” Anna said. “I can’t give any orders if I’m underwater.”

“Just hold him there,” Mikoto ordered quietly. “Keep him focused on you. Reisi said that if Yata and Izumo move that vase away, our friend here won’t notice until the last moment, or he won’t if you keep distracting him.”

“You have got to be kidding me,” Fushimi muttered, but he kept his hold on the ghost, no longer pulling but keeping the mental rope taut so the ghost wouldn’t get loose. Through the blob of water swaying in front of him, Fushimi could see the ghost, and beyond that he could just see two distorted figures sneaking over to the vase. They carefully picked it up, slowly walking together to get away from the ghost. Out of the corner of his eye, Fushimi saw movement from the car the curator and her colleague were sheltered in as the door was open and someone hesitantly got out, clearly not wanting to brave the weather and most likely nervous about the strange behavior of the water, but alarmed at the handling of the vase.

And then, out of nowhere, Fushimi felt a trembling in his connection to the ghost, and some part of him instinctively knew that it was because the proximity between the ghost and the vase was at its limit, and that any farther and the ghost would be outside its area of activity. The ghost’s eyes flew wide, and with a shriek that had Anna clapping her hands over her ears but which was silent to the rest of them, the water flew outward, enveloping their group and soaking all of them to the bone. A portion of the water broke off, flowing rapidly towards the vase and it’s carriers, who saw it and quickly took two more steps. Fushimi felt his control threatening to break and allow the ghost to return to its tie, but he clung on to it, and then the ghost and vase were out of range of each other. The rain stopped, and the floating water became subject to gravity again falling to the ground. Due to physics, the water that had been headed for the vase continued forward as it fell, splashing Yata and Kusanagi so that they too got doused. The ghost was still there, staring slack jawed into space, but it was fading, and within a few seconds it was gone entirely.

As the clouds cleared away, Yata and Kusanagi put the vase down. However, it seemed that not all the stormy weather was over, as the curator came stomping across the field towards them, presumably to chew them out for handling the vase. But, after a few minutes, the shouting was over and payment was exchanged, and then the waterlogged ghost hunters were heading back to Homra.

Once they got back to the bar, Anna took over the bar’s small bathroom to change, and Reisi laid verbal claim to the bathroom once she was done, while Kusanagi went to his tiny office to do the same. Totsuka, who lived upstairs, offered up the use of his shower to Yata and Mikoto since they were muddy, and generously promised to wash everyone’s wet clothes once they were all changed. He also promised to bring back a change of clothes for Fushimi, as he alone didn’t have extra
clothes lying around the bar. That just left Fushimi to stand around, trying not to drip too much, while he waited for Totsuka to get back.

“Here,” Reisi said, handing over a towel. “When I decided to bring a towel to dry off after our job, I sensed that one would not be enough and brought a spare. It would seem you were the reason why.”

Fushimi grunted, not sure whether to be grateful or to tell Reisi to stick his predictions in a haunted vase, but when he turned to accept the towel all thoughts of a response stopped in their tracks. Reisi had unbuttoned his shirt, revealing unexpectedly defined abs. Fushimi accepted the proffered towel and snatched his glasses off, burying his face in the towel and rubbing at his wet hair so as to hide the blush he could feel rising in his cheeks. It must have taken a lot of working out for Reisi to achieve such muscle tone, and Fushimi definitely could appreciate the effect.

“Reisi, if you wanna change in my office instead of waiting for Anna, you can,” Kusanagi’s voice said, drawing closer as he spoke. Apparently the bartender was back.

“I am grateful for your offer, and do believe I shall take you up on it,” Reisi replied. His footsteps receded, and Fushimi, feeling safe now that the dangerous lower torso was no longer in sight, moved the towel down, wrapping it around his shoulders.

“You okay there, Fushimi-san?” Kusanagi asked. “You look a little red. You’re not getting sick are you? I’ll get the water going for some tea in a sec, but if you’re already not feeling well…”

Fushimi clicked his tongue.

“It’s not that,” he muttered, his blush increasing. “Just…” Just Reisi was an attractive specimen who was apparently kinda buff. He couldn’t stop his eyes from cutting in the direction Reisi had gone, and Kusanagi noticed.

“Ah, sorry about him. He has no sense of shame, I swear,” Kusanagi said, shaking his head. “Mikoto at least beat the need to wear pants around Anna into him, but we still haven’t managed to get him to understand that some people find it a bit disconcerting when he suddenly goes shirtless.”

Wait, had the shirt come off entirely? And Fushimi had missed it…

“Yeah, disconcerting,” he agreed, nodding. “Especially with those abs.”

As Kusanagi’s eyebrows rose, Fushimi felt like slapping himself. He definitely hadn’t meant to say that last bit.

“Before you go barking up that tree,” Kusanagi said slowly, “I would have to advise you to reconsider.”

“I’m not interested!” Fushimi snapped. “He may be hot but he’s really eerie!”

“Well I’m sure his boyfriends would be glad to hear they don’t have any competition,” Kusanagi said. “Though I’m not sure how they’d feel about you calling him eerie. Then again, they might be amused by it. Hard to be sure with those guys.”

“Er, you do realize you said ‘boyfriends’, plural, don’t you?” Fushimi asked.

“Yup. He’s got two. It’s a poly,” Kusanagi replied. “But they’re all of them happy with it being just the three of them so I wouldn’t go nosing in if I were you.”
“I already said I’m not interested,” Fushimi said. He paused, then couldn’t restrain himself from asking, “He really has two boyfriends?”

“Yup. Mikoto and Totsuka,” Kusanagi said. “He asked them out right here. Just waltzed in one day and said he was attracted to both of them so could they all go on a date together and Totsuka said it seemed like it could be fun and Mikoto said it meant he didn’t mind since it meant he got two hotties, not one, and they’ve somehow made it work ever since.”

“That is both absolutely ludicrous and yet completely believable at the same time,” Fushimi murmured. “Though I’m a bit surprised Yata hasn’t nosed his way into the relationship if Mikoto’s involved. I mean, they are rather close, and if they’re not actually brothers then there isn’t any reason they couldn’t date.”

“Yeah, I get what you mean,” Kusanagi said, nodding. “I kinda thought the same thing when I first met them. I mean, they’re both about as gay as they come, and it’s pretty clear their relationship with each other is different from their relationship with Anna, so it isn’t that big a stretch of the imagination to think they might have romantic feelings for each other. But I said something once and they just kinda looked at each other and grimaced and told me to never say anything that revolting again.”

“So Yata’s also gay then?” Fushimi asked.

“Yup,” Kusanagi confirmed. “Why, you interested in him instead?”

“He’s abrasive and obnoxious, his fear of ghosts is annoying, and he punched me in the jaw, in case you forgot where this bruise came from,” Fushimi said, tapping the sore spot at the bottom of his face. “Why the hell would I be interested in that chibi?”

“I was just askin’,” Kusanagi said placatingly.

Thankfully, Totsuka came down right then, bringing with him a change of clothes for Fushimi. Reisi came out of Kusanagi’s office before Anna finished in the bathroom, so Fushimi also changed in the small space between the desk and the filing cabinets, trying to ignore the last ghost lingering around him. The pants Totsuka had lent him were highwaters, and the shirtsleeves were a bit short, but at least the clothes weren’t sopping wet, so, for now at least, Fushimi would put up with it.

When Fushimi finished changing and came out into the bar, Mikoto was also downstairs and Anna was out of the bathroom, though Yata was still up in Totsuka’s apartment, having taken the second shower. Fushimi felt a little bit glad the shorter man wasn’t there, since he wasn’t sure he could look at him without blushing thanks to what Kusanagi had said. Totsuka took everyone’s wet clothes up to wash them, and tea was passed around to help warm them up so they wouldn’t get sick.

When Yata did finally come back down, he didn’t have his beanie on, and Fushimi cursed Kusanagi for saying weird things because he thought Yata did have a certain appeal like that. Thankfully, Fushimi was able to snap out of it quickly, because Yata’s messy hair reminded him what a disaster his own must be right then. He headed to the bathroom and did what he could with his fingers to fix it, but it still looked weird. And a little too close to that man for Fushimi’s taste. Whatever. Like the clothes, it would simply have to do.

When Fushimi came back from the bathroom, he paused for a moment, watching everyone chatting together. Mikoto said something Fushimi couldn’t catch, and they all laughed, though from the way Yata was blushing it had presumably been a joke at the shorter medium’s expense. And just
like when the two mediums had been playing in the rain, that loneliness arose, and Fushimi found himself striding forward to take his spot among them. It didn’t mean Reisi was right about him. He didn’t need or want other people in his life. He was fine by himself. He’d just learn to chase off ghosts and go, and that would be it.

And yet even as Fushimi told himself that he could and would leave Homra behind without a second glance when the time came, it felt just a little bit like he was lying to himself.

Chapter End Notes

Reisi/Mikoto/Totsuka: aka what happens when I am too indecisive in my shipping. In other news, the next chapter is tentatively titled "Yata's ability is WHAT?" so you can look forward to that. However, said next chapter might be the last one for a while since I have had some recent writing struggles, so sorry in advance.
The next day, Fushimi once again arrived to find no one outside. He supposed that meant they’d be doing more shielding practice, maybe playing that weird game everyone had talked about. It honestly sounded like the kind of sick twisted thing that man would enjoy, and Fushimi definitely wasn’t looking forward to it, even if Anna seemed to use her ability in fairly innocent ways.

When he went inside, however, he found Anna and Kusanagi talking to a youth in an oversized jersey who was holding a basketball, while Yata was once again playing games on his handheld console. The redhead seemed to be struggling, and Fushimi considered going over and offering to help, but he wasn’t sure his advice would be welcome. Not to mention the various things that had been said the previous day were still weighing on Fushimi’s mind and messing with his thoughts. Instead he took a seat at one of the stools and focused on his code shield, finding solace in the structure of the computer language and using it as a convenient distraction from things he would rather not let run through his head.

He’d barely been seated when Anna came up to him.

“We seem to have another client, so we’ll have to put off today’s training,” she informed him regretfully. “I’m sorry. I was hoping we might start to work on repulsion today, but everything’s already arranged.”

“Is that kid our client then?” Fushimi asked. Anna nodded.

“Izumo’s calling Mikoto. He and Reisi are upstairs at Tatara’s to watch movies, so they’ll be here in a minute and then we can go,” Anna explained.

Once the three boyfriends joined them, everyone trundled out to the van. The client was given the shotgun seat for navigation purposes, and Totsuka was bumped to the back seat with Mikoto while Reisi took Totsuka’s usual spot. On the way, the kid explained what his paranormal problem was to everyone who hadn’t already heard.

“So, my friends and I play ball at the park near our school a lot,” he began at Kusanagi’s prompting. “Not so much in the winter, but once spring gets started we go pretty much every day. Well, ever since this season started up, we all had kinda an odd feeling. Like we would see someone on the court out of the corners of our eyes, and we’d pass it to him, only then there’d be no one there. And like, at first we thought maybe it was just like, we were too tired or something, but it kept happening. And then it started getting worse over the summer, like we’d choose teams and then there would be an extra person on the court as we got started. And sometimes you’d pass the ball and it would be intercepted by no one, and it would just dribble itself towards the hoop. It was really freaky. And then, the other day when we were playing, we finally saw him: Keiji. He used to play with us, but he was in an accident last winter. It was icy, and, well… he died. But we all saw him clearly. And just, I guess we’ve known for months now that our court is haunted, but like, we never thought it’d be him, y’know? He was our friend, so why would he start messing with us now? And like, I heard you guys can talk to ghosts- a guy I know hired you before and he said you took care of everything for him- so I thought maybe you could help us.”

“We can,” Anna said. “Don’t worry, I’ll find out why he’s still here, and then we’ll help him move on peacefully.”
The park they eventually arrived at was the kind of place that was clearly on the older side but was kept clean and the various features were in decent condition, albeit a little shabby. There was a playground, with streaks on the slide and bits of rust decorating the metal, and a sandbox that was more dirt than sand but still had plenty of buckets and shovels and rakes inside. The bathrooms looked clean, and the vending machines were stocked, though Fushimi was willing to bet you had to hit them to get any drinks you paid for to fall. Kusanagi drove past that, following the client’s directions to a spot over on the side, almost right up next to the basketball court.

The basketball court, like the rest of the park, wasn’t falling apart but had still seen better days. There were cracks spidering across the pavement, still small, and the backboards needed new paint. But what captured Fushimi’s attention right away was the sight of a boy, standing in the middle of the court, his head lolling as he stared blankly into space. That was their ghost.

Once Kusanagi had parked, he, the client, Fushimi, Reisi, Totsuka, and Anna all got out as per usual. However, Anna only took about one step away from the van before she pivoted, almost running into Totsuka as he climbed out, and leaned back inside.

“Misaki, what do you think?” she asked. Fushimi stumbled a bit, surprised, and could just see as, inside the van, Yata closed his eyes, his face screwed up in concentration. Then, with a sigh, the short medium unbuckled his seat belt and got out of his seat. He climbed out of the van, looking resigned, and stopped in front of Anna.

“Just- don’t let him do anything embarrassing, alright?” he asked, and Anna nodded. Fushimi could only stare as Yata led the way down to the court, heading straight for the ghost. The rest of their group trickled after him, and even Mikoto got out of the van to join them. Fushimi, still stunned to see the cowardly redhead taking the lead, followed in a daze as they settled on the benches near the court. Totsuka had his camera in hand, already rolling even as he got seated with the others. Up in the lead, Yata stepped onto the court, and suddenly the ghost looked up, honing in on him like a hound dog at point. The ghost didn’t move, and after a moment of hesitation, Yata continued forward.

“Go on,” he said quietly. “I can- I can help you.”

With that cue, the ghost surged forward, straight into Yata. Fushimi expected to see the ghost come out the other side, like any ghost did when it met the living, but as Yata stumbled, falling to one knee, the ghost did not reappear. Yata got shakily to his feet, and, as if the movements were unfamiliar to him, turned to face them.

Fushimi’s breath caught. There was a slight haze to Yata, and if Fushimi squinted, the haze defined itself into the features of the ghost. Was he-?

“Yo, Murata,” Yata said. “How about it, feel like a match?”

The client stared. Fushimi stared. Only Anna moved, going up to the client and encouragingly saying, “It’s alright. Right now, Keiji is in him. If you talk to him, it’s your friend who will reply.”

“K-Keiji?” the client asked, shaking like a leaf.

“Yup,” Yata replied.

While the client reunited with his “friend” on the court, Fushimi leaned over to the person next to him, not looking to see who it was as he asked lowly, “Er, is he okay?”

“Who, Yata-chan?” Totsuka asked. “Oh yeah, he’s fine. Does this all the time. Being possessed
“Oh,” Fushimi said. “Good,” he added, because he felt like the “oh” was insufficient but wasn’t sure what else he could say to that. Could being possessed even be considered an ability? Then again, he’d always attracted ghosts, and had never once been possessed, so if Yata really “did this all the time”, then maybe it was, in fact, a talent of sorts. He supposed that he could understand why Yata might not like to talk about such an ability, but he didn’t see why the others also felt the need to maintain such an air of secrecy about it. They certainly liked their secrets here at Homra.

“By the way,” Kusanagi said, leaning across Totsuka to talk to Fushimi, “you might find it wise not to talk to Yata-chan for a few days after this. If you really need something from him, it’ll be best to go through Mikoto or Anna rather than try and communicate with him directly, he gets a bit prickly whenever he has to get involved. He won’t punch you again- probably- but he’ll still…” Kusanagi trailed off, searching for words, and Fushimi decided to fill in the blank with what he’d gleaned from things that had been said so far and what he knew of Yata.

“Throw a hissy fit?” Fushimi said, not mincing words like he was willing to bet Kusanagi would have.

“I wouldn’t exactly put it that way, but you’re not wrong…” Kusanagi sighed.

“So in other words, every time he actually does something, the whole lot of you just let him throw a major temper tantrum, completely unchecked, is that right?” Fushimi asked, quirking an eyebrow. “Don’t you think you guys are a bit too indulgent? It’s hard to tell with his diminutive height, but I’m assuming he’s a grown man- he has a job and if his little sister is a grown girl then he must be an adult too. So if he’s a grown-ass man, then why do you all keep letting him act like a bratty two-year-old? Quit spoiling him and tell him to act his age already.” Fushimi expected an instant rebuttal, for the guys around him to jump to their comrade’s defense, but there was an almost eerie lack of protest to his seething.

“You’re probably right,” Totsuka said after a long moment. “But when it comes to those three, we all have a hard time not spoiling them. We let Mikoto be as lazy as he wants, and we tend to let Yata’s emotions run wild, and while Anna’s well-behaved and acts the sensible one all the time, in all honesty we’d let her get away with murder- not that she’d ever hurt a fly. Part of it’s the way they treat each other, but there’s also something else. We may not be mediums like you and they are, but we can still sense that those three have seen things they should never have seen. Their abilities all have severe drawbacks, and one is a certain amount of emotional turmoil. Maybe you’re right, Saru-kun, and we shouldn’t be humoring them. Maybe someone needs to say something to them, but I doubt it’ll be one of us, so maybe that’s why you’re here.”

“Wow, that’s the most serious I’ve seen you in just about ever, Totsuka,” Kusanagi said.

“Hey, I can be serious too,” Totsuka laughed. “I just don’t see much point in it since we’ve got you around. And with Saru-kun here as well, someone’s gotta keep things light, don’t you think?”

“Pardon me for not wasting time with tomfoolery,” Fushimi grumbled. He wasn’t sure what was annoying him right then: the implication that he should make up for these people’s shortcomings, or the sudden shift in mood. Why should he have to be the one to give Yata a reality check? He wasn’t even going to stick around! And it’s not like they weren’t capable of it- or it shouldn’t be, anyway. And would it kill them to refrain from joking around for more than five minutes at a time?

“I’m not blaming you,” Totsuka soothed. “If anything, I’m just using you as justification for my naturally effervescent personality. So keep being you, Saru-kun. It benefits the rest of us, whether
you mean it to or not.”

Fushimi clicked his tongue. He didn’t need anyone’s permission to live as he pleased, and he didn’t give a damn about whether or not it was helpful to others. If anything, he’d prefer it inconvenienced them, since maybe then it would keep idiots like these people away.

“And there’s that clicking sound again,” Totsuka mused. At this point, Fushimi wasn’t sure if Totsuka seriously couldn’t pinpoint the source, or if his commentary on Fushimi’s habit was a form of entertainment for the brunette.

Over on the court, the client had accepted the ghost’s challenge, and was squaring off against Yata. So far, Yata wasn’t doing so well, his movements awkward and uncontrolled. It was like watching a baby deer trying to get to its feet for the first time, or like a robot trying to learn to walk by itself. However, every now and then, there would be fluid movements, ones that took the client by surprise, and they were happening more and more frequently as the two played. The two players kept up a light banter, constantly ribbing each other, commenting on each other’s moves, and comparing each other to grandmothers and drunks. It made Fushimi kinda glad to be a loner, because friendship was weird.

As Yata/the ghost’s movements became more athletic, Fushimi found his eyes drawn to the shorter man. It was all because of that nonsense Kusanagi had said the previous day, he was sure of it. And okay, Yata admittedly had some nice muscle tone, but so did a lot of people. He was nothing special. Just a short, loud, rude guy who had punched Fushimi not so long ago.

The two players had been at it for a little while when a group of guys dressed for exercise showed up at the court. The new arrivals stopped at the edge, standing around and watching the two play. After Yata/Keiji made a run past the client and effortlessly shot a hoop, the two players paused, and one of the spectators whistled loudly and called out, “Dang, Murata, where’d you find this guy? He’s almost as good as Keiji was!”

“Haaaaaa?” Yata/Keiji bristled, glaring the speaker down. “Whaddaya mean, almost as good, Yousei? I’m just as good as I’ve always been!”

The spectators all shuffled, a few of them exchanging puzzled glances.

“Oh hey guys,” the client greeted. “So um, you know how I was gonna talk to some mediums about how we kept seeing Keiji? Well, this guy’s one of them, and actually, right now, he kinda is Keiji. Or like, Keiji’s inside him or something.”

“Oh Murata, don’t tell me you fell victim to some scammers,” one guy sneered, shaking his head.

“If I tell everyone about that time with the toothpaste, will you believe it’s really me?” Yata/Keiji asked, and the doubter paled.

“Wait, what’s this about toothpaste?” another guy asked.

“Nothing!” the doubter screeched. “It was nothing!” He coughed, then added, “but I guess that really is Keiji then. Also, dude, you promised to keep that a secret.”

“I have,” Yata/Keiji replied. “Anyway, enough of that, how ‘bout a game for old times’ sake? I’m sick to god of you guys ignoring me all the time just ‘cuz I’m dead. Like, seriously, I’ve been right here this whole time.”

“Er, sorry man,” a guy in orange said, scratching his head. “We just didn’t think you were real.”
“Well I am,” Yata/Keiji said, folding his arms. “So, game?”

“I’m down,” a guy said, and there was a chorus of other assents.

“Okay, who’re captains?” someone said.

“Well shouldn’t…” a guy wearing a backwards baseball cap began, gesturing to Yata/Keiji and then hesitating. “Uh, what should we call you?”

“Keiji,” Yata/Keiji responded without missing a beat.

“Oh. Okay. God this is weird,” baseball cap muttered.

“You’re telling me,” Yata/Keiji replied. “I’m used to being taller than you guys, but now I’ve suddenly gotta look up at all of you. How’s that for weird?” That got a few laughs.

“Right,” baseball cap said. “Anyway, why don’t you be a captain since today’s kinda special and all, and then we’ll janken for the other team, how’s that?”

“Sounds good,” Yata/Keiji said.

About a minute later, they had their teams, and the game began. No score was kept, no timers were running, it was just purely for the enjoyment of the players, and as such, Fushimi was soon bored. He got out his phone and opened up a puzzle app, passing the time with some sudoku. It was too easy, and didn’t take the edge off his boredom nearly as much as he would have liked, but it was something to do other than have his eyes follow Yata too much for his liking. He’d hoped with more players, the medium would be easier to ignore, that he could just focus on the ball and not see the redhead, but Yata spent an alarming amount of time with the ball or near it. He was unavoidable, and Fushimi didn’t like it.

Finally, at least twenty minutes later, long past when Fushimi would have had to stop playing if he’d been on the court, the guys took a break. They took greedy gulps of water from a couple of fountains by the bathrooms, splashing each other in the process for fun. They were noisy, and Fushimi thought he might hate them.

And then one guy leaned over, clapping Yata/Keiji on the shoulder, asking, “What are you staring off into space for, Keiji?”

“Huh?” Yata/Keiji asked, then shook his head. “Oh, sorry. Uh, it seems that guy isn’t here anymore. He just wanted one last game, and now that it’s over, he’s already moved on.”

The guys went silent, and once again the sounds of cars passing by and birds in the trees and the rustling of leaves permeated the air.

“O-oh,” one of the guys said. “Then… we won’t see him anymore?”

Yata shook his head.

“But he didn’t say goodbye!” another guy protested.

“That game probably was his goodbye,” Yata replied. “He didn’t feel like he could ever say out loud just how much you guys mattered to him, so… that’s how he said it.”

“Yeah, that sounds like Keiji,” Murata said sadly. “He never was big on talking about serious stuff.” The other guys nodded in understanding. A few of them sniffled, and one even wiped away
“At least we got to hang out with him one last time,” a guy warbled.

“Though I gotta say, I knew our boy was amazing, but to think he could play so well using the body of a runt like this,” a guy with a shaved head said, gesturing at Yata. Yata’s eyes narrowed, and without a word, he snatched the ball, and practically flew down the court with it, leaping up and twisting as he did to slam the ball backwards into the hoop. It was a total show-off move, but it served its purpose, leaving all the guys gaping. After landing, Yata turned and glared at them, making direct eye contact with the shaved head guy before stomping off towards the van.

“Aaaaahnd that would be our cue to go settle things with them,” Kusanagi said. He and Anna both got up to talk to the basketball players, and Totsuka began packing up his camera equipment. Fushimi, figuring everything was finally over, got up to go back to the van. As he stood, he noticed that neither Reisi nor Mikoto had moved, and wondered if there was yet more to come. But there was nothing unusual that Fushimi could sense, and right then the van seemed more comfortable than the benches they’d been sitting on, so he shrugged and continued on his way.

“Ah, Fushimi-kun,” Reisi called, stopping Fushimi.

“Can I help you?” Fushimi asked irritably. Reisi opened his mouth, but then hesitated, closing his mouth again and pursing his lips for a moment before smiling like usual and saying, “No it’s nothing. Please forgive my interruption.”

Fushimi shrugged and continued on his way.

When he got to the van, the back door was open, and Fushimi could just see a shape huddled on the seat Yata always claimed. Right, of course that guy would retreat to the van once his part was over. Fushimi clicked his tongue but forged ahead regardless, climbing into the van and taking his own usual seat, even if that was next to Yata.

“Go away, I wanna be alone right now,” Yata’s muffled voice said as Fushimi dug his phone out of his pocket. Fushimi ignored him, fastening his seatbelt so he wouldn’t have to worry about it later.

“I said go away!” Yata snapped, raising his head to glare at Fushimi. Fushimi just opened up the app on his phone, not bothering to return the gaze.

“It’s not like I was planning on saying anything,” Fushimi replied, though he couldn’t help remembering what Totsuka had said and wondering if this would be a good time to go ahead and tell Yata to grow up already.

“Well I can still sense you,” Yata muttered, shifting in his seat so that his back was to Fushimi. “After all, you’re an actual medium, just like Anna and Mikoto.”

Fushimi almost dropped his phone. What the hell? Fushimi couldn’t even control his ability properly. And he was nothing like Anna or Mikoto!

“How, pray tell, does being a fucking ghost magnet make me an actual medium?” he demanded.
“Because you can actually do something with that power!” Yata yelled, whirling around to face Fushimi. His eyes were red, like he was trying not to cry. “You might not know how to use it now, but soon you’ll be able to push them away! Anna can make them leave, and Mikoto can fight back, but I can’t do jack shit if a ghost comes at me. If it’s a weaker ghost, I can push them back out, but most of the ghosts that come at me are strong, and so they make me sleep until they leave or they lock me in the back of my mind so I’m an observer in my own fucking body or they just kick me on out, and I can’t do anything to stop them! Hell, I can’t even be sure that the person talking to you is actually me! For all I know, I’m just some ghost that possessed this body ages ago and has always been here!”

As Yata spoke, tears began leaking from his eyes and slowly rolling down his face. Fushimi stared back at Yata, unable to look away. He hadn’t expected this, and had no clue how to deal with it. He supposed he should comfort Yata, but how exactly did one go about doing that sort of thing anyways? He had no idea.

“I’ve been training for fifteen fucking years,” Yata continued in a sullen mumble, turning back to the side and drawing his legs up, “and I still can barely do anything. All because I have this stupid body.”

“What exactly do you mean?” Fushimi asked, his mind desperately latching onto the first thing it could. Yata sighed.

“According to Anna, people have different barriers on ‘em that keep ‘em from interacting with ghosts. But mediums, we’re different: we’re missing some of those barriers. It’s like we’re a little bit ghost ourselves. That’s why we get special powers too. Ghosts can do things that the living can’t, and mediums can too. The barriers I’m missing, they allow ghosts to possess me without even trying. I practically invite them in; sometimes they end up inside me without even realizing it. And there’s no way of fixing this: once a barrier is gone, there’s no replacing it. I’m stuck like this.”

The information on these “barriers” was new to Fushimi, and he vowed to ask more about it sometime. But right now, he didn’t think it wise to keep pressing Yata, and besides, he wasn’t sure the redhead was capable of providing any more coherent information even if he wanted to. Instead he thought carefully, trying to come up with something more to say. He almost laughed when he realized that just a minute ago he’d claimed he didn’t plan on saying anything.

“Well if you’re a ghost, then why doesn’t my power work on you?” Fushimi said slowly.

“That’s…” Yata trailed off, his eyes widening as he twisted in his seat again. “You’re right, I’ve never been affected by you before. But maybe that’s because I’ve always been in my body. Let’s try for real and see if it makes a difference.”

“I beg your pardon?” Fushimi asked. Yata rolled his eyes, but was kind enough to elaborate.

“I mean,” he explained carefully, as if speaking to a small, unintelligent child, “we get out of the van, I leave my body, and then you try and make me come closer.”

That was actually a rather intelligent suggestion, and Fushimi clicked his tongue, reluctantly unbuckling his seat belt. He and Yata both tried to stand at once, knocking heads in the process, before Yata pushed past him and led the way out of the van. Yata walked over to a tree and sat down, while Fushimi stayed beside the van so that there was some slight distance between them.

“Ready?” Yata asked, and, after a hesitant glance confirming the others were still on the court talking to the clients, Fushimi nodded. Yata closed his eyes, and a moment later, a second, slightly
hazy Yata stood up, leaving the original sitting propped against the tree. The ghost-Yata nodded, and Fushimi mentally reached out, lassoing the ghost in front of him with one of the mental ropes he used to pull on ghosts. He tugged gently, not wanting to get bitched at later for being too rough or something, but the rope just slipped right through Yata without any resistance. Fushimi tried again, but again the rope went through Yata as if he weren’t even there. Fushimi made a third attempt for good measure, but it too failed, and he gave up.

“Looks like you’re not a ghost,” he said. “I can’t use my ability on you at all.”

The ghost-Yata vanished and the real Yata opened his eyes which were amber sparks filled with glee.

“Wait, really?” Yata asked, scrambling to his feet. “Like not at all?”

“I tried to draw you closer three different times,” Fushimi said. “And I couldn’t get ahold of you at all.”

“Huh, I didn’t even feel anything,” Yata said. “Still, this is super cool! Thanks Fushimi, you’re really awesome!”

Fushimi felt like his heart was about to stop. No one had ever looked at him the way Yata was looking at him now. It was overwhelming, and he wanted nothing more than to run away and hide, but those excited eyes were already seared into Fushimi’s memory.

Chapter End Notes

Yata being scared of ghosts because he’s easily possessed is 100% the reason this fic was born. Also, hopefully the next chapter will be soon-ish. I do have a lot of things planned, but certain developments need to take place first and that’s where I’m floundering right now.
No one had any verbal commentary about the sudden turnaround of Yata’s mood. They just raised their eyebrows and glanced at Anna, who nodded back peacefully, and that was that. And worst of all, Reisi made very pointed eye contact with Fushimi, as if to say he knew that the sudden improvement was Fushimi’s doing. He even had the nerve to have a satisfied look on his face, as if he’d been expecting this outcome and was pleased to see things had worked out the way he’d planned. How annoying.

They only just opened the bar in time for business hours. Fushimi asked what would have happened if the case had taken longer, and was informed that it wasn’t uncommon for the bar to open late or for it to have a random holiday. It sounded like a horrible business policy to Fushimi, but the bar still had a thriving clientele, so he supposed it couldn’t be hurting the bar too badly.

That evening’s shift was largely uneventful, with the main incident being some idiot spilling beer all over the place, including on Fushimi. Totsuka had instantly stepped in to clean things up and sent Fushimi to change into a spare uniform, which was probably a good thing because it prevented Fushimi from being there when the man’s check went out. Had he gotten the man’s credit card, he definitely would have taken note of the name on it and used that to exact his revenge. Was it petty? Maybe. Did he care if it was? Like hell he did.

After work, Fushimi spent a few hours surfing the web before deciding to take a brief nap as rest before tomorrow. Or rather, later that day, since it was already 3:30 in the morning. As he closed his eyes, he tried to ignore the image that flashed behind the lids of an excited face, and the illusory voice saying “You’re really awesome!” Still, he had to admit that thoughts of that idiot were preferable to those of a certain other person whose appearance was far too similar to his own, with a demented look in his eyes and a haunting sing-song, “Let’s play, my little monkey!”

But regardless of what he thought of as he fell asleep, in the end, the nightmares were still the same. When he awoke, he half-expected to open his eyes and find that man hovering above him, ready to continue the dream in reality. Asshole.

He needed that ghost to be gone.

Given his dreams and the anxieties they raised afresh, Fushimi wasted no time in getting to Homra that day. He was almost an hour earlier than usual, but it didn’t seem to make a difference since everyone was already there. He walked in to find the tables had been pushed aside, and everyone from the bar, as well as Shiro, had all clustered around a square of cardboard in the middle of the floor with looks of concentration on their faces. Only Reisi was separate, sitting comfortably at one of the tables and watching the others with his usual amused expression, and he greeted Fushimi with a wave.

At first, Fushimi thought they must be playing with a ouija board like a bunch of grade school brats, but as he got closer, he saw what appeared to be a floorplan on the cardboard. Curious.
“Alright, my turn,” Totsuka said. “I think it was Sergeant Sunflower, in the attic, with the shotgun.”

Fushimi stopped in his tracks, trying to process whatever the fuck he’d just heard.

“Ah! Totsuka-san!” Yata whined. “Why’d you have to pick on me! I was almost to the laundry room, and that’s definitely where it happened! Now Kusanagi-san’s totally gonna get the drop on me!”

“The laundry room, eh?” Interesting theory,” Kusanagi said. Fushimi approached to see they were playing a game of some sort.

“Tatara,” Anna said, and held out a card so the only Totsuka could see.

“Aha,” Totsuka said, and nodded before noting something down on a slip of paper. Reisi, who didn’t seem to be playing, gestured for Fushimi to come sit next to him.

“What is this?” Fushimi asked, glancing behind him towards the game as he seated himself across from Reisi.

“A most intriguing board game,” Reisi said. “The premise is that someone was murdered in a closed house, and the players must discover which character killed them, and where, and with what. There is a card for each character, each weapon, and each location, and at the beginning of the game, one of each is randomly selected and set aside as the “evidence”, while the remaining cards are dispersed to the players to-”

“Enough already, I get it,” Fushimi grumbled, trying to stem the flow of chatter. For some reason, he felt uneasy. Maybe it was because of that dream last night. He shivered, and looked down to see goosebumps on his arm- was it always this cold in Homra? Maybe it was because the bar was mostly empty; of course it would be colder without the heat of numerous bodies warming the place up. Still, something just didn’t seem right…

As suddenly as he’d noticed his unease, it vanished. Fushimi felt completely relaxed, a state that usually evaded him. In fact, it was so unusual that had the relaxation not been so complete, Fushimi would have felt suspicious. As it was, he remained totally calm as he threw up his shield.

“I’m sure you’ve already noticed,” he said, standing up and turning towards everyone else, “but it seems that we have a gho-” Fushimi stopped in his tracks at the sight in front of him.

On the opposite side of the circle around the board, Yata was slumped against Mikoto. And just in front of him, Yata was also sprawled on the ground, rubbing his head and looking sheepish.

“The hell do you think you’re-!” Fushimi began angrily, but Anna got to her feet and stepped in front of Fushimi pacifically.

“I’m sorry, Saruhiko, I asked him to,” she said. “To test your shields, we needed something that would catch you by surprise. You know my power, and so it would be hard to surprise you with it. However, Misaki’s power can catch you off guard even if you know about it, so I asked him to test you.”

“Are you fucking kidding me?” Fushimi seethed, but he sat back down, appeased for the moment. “What the hell was he even trying to do?”

“As well as being easily possessed, Misaki can possess others,” Anna explained. “He uses it on the rare occasions that ghosts manage to possess normal people, since he can help fight the ghost off.”
“I thought he couldn’t do that though,” Fushimi said. “Fight ghosts off I mean.”

“No, not in his body, he can’t,” Anna said, and for a second Fushimi could have sworn he’d heard the same words in Yata’s voice as if Yata had also said them. But Yata was still outside his body, so there was no way Fushimi would have heard him. “However, in the body of another, there is a low compatibility for extra presences. Sometimes just by entering as well, Misaki causes the person’s body to reject that which doesn’t belong.”

“I see,” Fushimi said.

“Hey Anna, can I go back to my body yet?” the Yata in front of Fushimi asked. Fushimi blinked, confused for a moment. There was no way he should be hearing someone who was a… whatever Yata was at the moment. But more than that, there was something weird about the words, and after a moment, Fushimi realized what it was. Sometimes, when dreaming, Fushimi knew what people had said without actually hearing anything. That was how it had been when Yata spoke just now—Fushimi’s ears hadn’t picked up anything, but his mind had still known what had been said.

“Can I hear him because he’s not a ghost?” Fushimi asked Anna.

“Oh, so you heard him then?” Shiro asked. “Not bad.”

“Wow Fushimi!” Yata exclaimed at the same time. “Most mediums only hear me when I’m talking to them specifically! You’re really amazing, pushing me out on the first try and being able to hear me. Even that fucker Reisi had to get possessed once before he could figure out when it was happening, but you got it right away!”

“The answer to both your questions is yes,” Anna said, addressing both Fushimi and Yata.

“Huh?” Yata asked, then remembered his question about returning to his body. “Oh,” he said, and then the spirit-Yata vanished while his body reopened his eyes.

“Spirits that aren’t ghosts do tend to have better abilities to interact with the world,” Shiro said, elaborating on what Anna had said. “Like shikigami, for instance. When I summon Kuro and Neko, they can be seen and heard by anyone. Though with shikigami, some of that does depend on who they work with. A weaker onmyouji might not have the energy to support all of a shikigami’s abilities, and some cruel summoners might go so far as to ban their shikigami from speaking.” Shiro’s eyes flashed angrily, indicating that he did not approve of such methods.

“‘S’nice and all, but I’d like to make an accusation,” Mikoto said. “Viscount Violet, in the foyer, with the baton.”

“Yata, you get to give evidence,” Kusanagi said.

“Huh? But I don’t have any of those!” Yata protested.

“Neither do I,” Shiro said. Anna shook her head, indicating the same.

“Nope,” Totsuka said. “Unless you’ve got something Izumo, it looks like King’s won,” he laughed.

“Not necessarily,” Reisi said. “He could still have one of those cards himself, and have made a most foolhardy ploy.”

“Yeah, but did he?” Kusanagi asked. “Because Mikoto’s not that big an idiot, and I’ve got nothing.”
“Indeed, he has won,” Reisi confirmed. “I was able to calculate as much after the third supposition.”

“Shouldn’t we still check the cards to be sure?” Yata said.

“Why should we?” Kusanagi asked, already beginning to clean up the game. “Or did you forget why we banned this guy from ever playing with us again?”

“No,” Yata muttered sullenly.

“I happen to excel at board games and card games of all types,” Reisi confided to Fushimi.

“Of course you do,” Fushimi grunted tiredly. “With your ability it must be easy.”

“Even without my ability, they tend to be quite simplistic,” Reisi replied. “It is merely a matter of out-strategizing your opponents, which is hardly a challenge.”

“Oi, you calling us dumb?” Mikoto asked.

“Not at all,” Reisii replied. “I am merely stating that my intellectual capabilities are superior.”

“Meaning we’re dumb,” Mikoto insisted.

“Oho, someone’s in the dog house,” Kusanagi said under his breath.

“Now now,” Totsuka soothed, “Reicchan would never call anyone dumb, Mikoto, you know that.”

“Yeah, because he’s gotta use big fancy words to say it instead,” Yata muttered.

“Hush,” Totsuka chided. “Mikoto, you know that Reisi doesn’t look down on people based on their intelligence, so he would never go so far as to insult them like that. So please stop arguing with him over something like this. It hurts us all.”

“Hmph,” Mikoto said, but he let the matter lie.

“Well, that guy might be smart and all that, but I think Fushimi’s better,” Yata said, and Fushimi felt a rush of blood in his face as his mind came up with several implications for that statement that he wished he could deny thinking of. “I mean, you saw how it went with his shield a minute ago, right? I was able to take full possession of Reisi the first time, but Fushimi was already resisting before I even connected with him!”

That statement struck a chord with Fushimi, resonating through him and chilling him with fear.

“Wait, you connected with me?” Fushimi asked, feeling anger rise up to override the fear. He couldn’t believe these people. They had some nerve, invading his very mind and calling it “testing his shield”.

“Er, no, not really,” Yata said, his sheepish look returning. He began tugging on his beanie as he continued. “I mean, I did, a little, before your shield went up, but it's not like I was planning on doing that much anyway. I always try to limit what I get from actual people. It’s one thing to connect with a ghost, but with a living person it’s… well it’s kinda invasive, isn’t it? Plus, I hate it when ghosts do that to me… Honestly I’d rather not connect at all but if I kinda have to, or it won’t work.”

Fushimi arched an eyebrow, not impressed with that explanation.
“Think of it as being somewhat akin to an organ transplant,” Reisi said. “When you transplant a new organ into a person, the recipient’s body may accept or reject the new organ depending on its compatibility. Similarly, when a soul takes possession of a body, the success of the possession depends on the body accepting the new soul; should the soul be too different, then it will be rejected. It’s one of the reasons why possession is so difficult for most ghosts: unless they are of a strength great enough to override the rejection, it is hard to find a suitable host. It’s one of the many things that makes Yata-kun’s ability so fascinating: even with Anna’s talk of barriers, that still doesn’t explain why it is that he is able to accept any ghost that wishes to use him.”

“Fascinating to you, maybe,” Yata muttered.

“So how much did you connect with me then?” Fushimi asked, glaring Yata down. The medium squirmed.

“Not much, really!” Yata whined. “Just that you’re really tired, and your emotions are mostly negative, but that’s all stuff that anyone can tell just by looking!”

“Nothing else?”

“Well, I think you’re tired ‘cuz of bad dreams…” Yata mused, frowning. “Y’know, if you have trouble with nightmares, I think Kamamoto knows a guy who can help with that.”

“I don’t think that’s any of your concern,” Fushimi said coldly.

“Oh, sorry,” Yata said, rubbing the back of his head. “Well, if you change your mind, let us know. You’d be amazed at all the different mediums and psychics and stuff everyone here knows. Anyway, I’d better get going. Anna said something about you guys starting here today, and even if Shiro sticks around I ain’t risking my neck if I don’t gotta.”

Yata walked off towards the kitchen, and Fushimi was about to go ask Anna what today’s training would involve when Reisi spoke up.

“I take it you don’t have any ghosts clinging to you today then?” he asked.

Fushimi paused, surprised. No, he didn’t have any ghosts with him today. And now that Reisi mentioned it, there had been a decrease in the amount around him.

But no, the decrease seemed to be mostly around the bar. The ghosts that came to him at the bar didn’t stick around long, indicating that they were most likely tied to something or someone who had gone out of range. When he left the bar, the amount of ghosts he saw was more typical.

“I don’t,” Fushimi admitted. “Is that their doing?”

“They do like to keep the area around the bar clear,” Reisi said. “They don’t want any trouble, after all.”

“I’ll bet,” Fushimi snorted. “So why are you interested in whether or not I’ve got any followers today?”

“It was mere curiosity that prompted me to ask,” Reisi said. “After all, Yata-kun didn’t seem concerned with being near you. Speaking of which, he seems to have taken a liking to you. Congratulations.”

“I beg your pardon,” Fushimi deadpanned. “The last I checked, I still had a bruise from him on my jaw. How does that equate to him ‘taking a liking to me’. Does he normally punch his friends?”
“I think you may find that, regardless of his original opinions of you, the events of yesterday afternoon have caused him to hold you in a higher esteem,” Reisi replied calmly. “But I believe Anna-san is ready to start your lesson, is that correct?”

Fushimi looked up to see Anna at his shoulder. The girl nodded, and Fushimi started to stand, but she looked at him and shook her head.

“You can stay there for now, Saruhiko,” she said. “We don’t need to go anywhere today.”

“But don’t you keep the area around the bar clear of ghosts?” Fushimi asked, utilized his newfound knowledge.

“Yes, but that makes this an even better location for today,” Anna said, “since it means you won’t draw an entire horde of ghosts.”

“What is it that you want me to do?” Fushimi asked, frowning.

“I want Saruhiko to draw all ghosts within a certain radius,” Anna declared. “All at once.”

“I thought you said yesterday that you were planning on having me learn to repel ghosts,” Fushimi said darkly.

“This is preparation for that,” Anna stated. “Thus far, you have used your ability in two ways: constrained to yourself and focused on specific ghosts. You can use it on a ghost of your choice, or it activates automatically whenever you enter a ghost’s area of activity. But you could also use it a different way. Instead of waiting for you to enter the ghost’s area of activity, you could create your own area of activity, where any ghost whose area of activity overlapped with your own could be drawn towards you if you are attracting, or would be pushed to the edge of their own area of activity if you were repelling.”

“So why am I learning this now and not some other time, after I’ve mastered repulsion?” Fushimi inquired.

“If you spread your influence, you will get a feel for your boundaries,” Anna said. “You will be able to expand them, but also to retract them. If you figure out how to retract your ability to draw ghosts enough, then you will reach a null state where you neither attract or repel ghosts. And from that state, it will be easier to switch modes for the first time.”

“It’s counterintuitive,” Fushimi complained.

“Being a medium often is,” Anna replied with a small wry smile.

It was probably the first time one of Anna’s half-answers required no further explanations for Fushimi. Reluctantly, Fushimi closed his eyes and called upon his ability, spreading it out around him like a puddle rather than extending it like a rope. It was easy to do, almost unnervingly so. He manipulated the limits a little, spreading them and receding them with such ease it was almost like he’d done this before.

Already, he could feel the attention of three different ghosts as his power entered their areas of activity and pulled on them. His ability was still in a passive state, and so it only brought them to the edge of their boundaries, but a simple tug would bring them running to him. The very idea of it made his skin crawl. Ghosts may not have the same effects on him as they did on the other mediums here, but that still didn’t mean he wanted them around. They were, at best, an annoying distraction, like when he’d taken his middle school entrance exams and there had been a rather gruesome ghost from a fire following him around. It was a good thing Fushimi was as smart as he
was, because somehow he doubted he would have passed that exam if he’d needed to concentrate.

Having succeeded in pushing his power outward, Fushimi reversed directions, slowly absorbing it back into himself and trying to find the neutral state Anna had talked about. He felt the ghosts that had locked onto him lose interest as his ability backed away, and relaxed a little. He’d never liked being the center of attention. Class presentations had always been the bane of his existence, and more often than not, he’d skipped them or simply recorded his entire presentation in advance.

It was a little bit tricky for Fushimi to nullify his ability, but after a couple of tries, he managed it. The moment he did, he felt an instant sense of relief, a bit like how his shoulders used to feel whenever he got home from school and shrugged off his backpack. He took a deep breath, feeling exhilarated.

“That’s good,” Anna’s voice said, reminding Fushimi that he wasn’t alone. “Now, try to sense within yourself for the other side of your power, and see if you can’t bring it out.”

Fushimi clicked his tongue. For a moment, he’d forgotten there was more to this exercise and to his ability. Just reaching that null state had felt like such an accomplishment. Still, she was right, being neutral wasn’t enough to keep that ghost away. He needed to go all the way.

Turning off his attraction had felt a bit like hitting a light switch that he couldn’t see. He mentally reached for that switch again, then felt around next to it, seeking the other switch that must be there. Instead, he found a box-shaped cover, held down by a lock.

“I can’t access it,” Fushimi said, opening his eyes. “It’s there, but it’s like it’s blocked by something.”

Anna frowned, and Reisi quirked an eyebrow.

“Blocked how, exactly?” Reisi asked.

“It’s like there’s a lock that I can’t get past,” Fushimi said.

“A lock, huh?” Reisi mused. “I wonder who put that there, and why…”

“It’s certainly unusual,” Anna said. She had produced a red marble, and was rolling it in her hand as if deep in thought. “I haven’t heard of anything like this before. Unless you know something, Yashiro?”

If Fushimi had almost forgotten that he wasn’t alone, he’d definitely forgotten that it wasn’t just him and Anna and Reisi there. He glanced up to see Totsuka’s camera pointed at him, though it quickly turned to Shiro as the onmyouji tilted his head in thought.

“I can’t think of anything myself, but maybe grandfather will know,” Shiro said. “I’ll call Uncle Miwa later and see if he’s got any openings for us.”

“I see,” Anna murmured. “For now, Saruhiko, will you please try and make a list of possible causes for this? Any incident involving your ability, or any other experience that might have affected you in this regard. It might help us figure out what’s going on here.”

“If that’s what it takes,” Fushimi replied. But he didn’t think there was any event that could have triggered this. Or if there was, it wasn’t like he would know, since he hadn’t even been aware of why ghosts always followed him.

One thing was certain though: whatever was blocking his ability, Fushimi didn’t like it.
Everyone Gets Teased

Three days later, and they still hadn’t heard back from Shiro. Not only that, but they hadn’t had a single case, and Fushimi was getting restless. At least when they were out vanquishing ghosts or whatever, he had a slight distraction. As it was, he just got to go to the cemetery with Anna to practice drawing ghosts some more. Under her guidance, he learned to spread his influence but choose which ghosts he brought closer, and to practice sensing ghosts some more. He was only able to get the barest details about ghosts though, like a vague idea of how they died, and whether or not a ghost was malicious. But things like who the ghost had been in life, what they wanted in death, or anything particularly useful for helping them evaded him.

And of course, in the three days since they’d discovered Fushimi’s handicap, there had been no headway into what might have caused it. Both Reisi and Kusanagi had been conducting research, but had found nothing, surprise, surprise. Fushimi hadn’t remembered anything that might have made a difference either. Again, big shocker.

Not that Fushimi cared at all, but the others seemed just as troubled by whatever was going on with his ability as he was. Anna’s face kept falling into a frown, sometimes even at work, and Mikoto had stopped to rest a hand on Fushimi’s shoulder no less than eleven times. The only one who seemed completely unconcerned was Totsuka, who merely stated that everything would be fine and he looked forward to when Fushimi “powered up”.

Maybe it was because everyone was preoccupied by Fushimi’s problem, but it was up to Reisi to notice their next client. Not one of them noticed anything unusual about the young man who came into the bar near the end of the shift; he appeared to be a college student, about the same age as Fushimi but with the slumped shoulders and dulled eyes of one who is dead inside from trying to keep up with a heavy course load. They saw plenty of kids like that each night; despite the shoestring budgets many students lived on, some of them always managed to scrounge up money to go drinking- though some preferred coffee as their poison rather than alcohol. And if the kid was a little skittish, well, college students were unfortunately known for getting a little experimental with medications to try and help them pull all-nighters.

They probably would have paid the kid no mind at all, and he might even have left without speaking up about his problem, had Reisi not left his own strategically located table and joined the kid. Fushimi, of course, didn’t find out about the problem until the end of the shift, a good 40 minutes later. As they began sweeping up, Reisi somehow managed to hold the center spotlight, sitting calmly at the table the client had long since vacated, hands folded as he hummed contentedly to himself. Fushimi wanted to demand to know what the case was, feeling short-tempered from his own problem, but that would imply he actually gave a damn about the case, and he didn’t. What did he care if other people got haunted? So what? He’d been haunted his whole damn life, so they could go cry to someone else, and so he was not going to ask Reisi what was going on because he was not burning with curiosity at all.

“So, you gonna tell us what’s goin’ on or aren’cha?” Mikoto asked, leaning heavily back against Reisi’s table.

“It’s a most peculiar case,” Reisi said, feigning disinterest by peering into his empty water glass. “Probably far beyond your capabilities. Yes, I think it must be too hard…”

“Cut the bullshit,” Mikoto said, knocking a fist against Reisi’s table, not hard, but not gently either. “Just tell us already.”
At this point, the room had gone still as everyone focused on the two bickering boyfriends.

“I know you like a little suspense, but it would be good if you’d just tell us already,” Kusanagi agreed.

“It seems our client has a little problem,” Reisi began, and Fushimi almost snorted. Wow, a client with a problem, who would have guessed? “And that problem,” Reisi continued, his voice slowing theatrically, “is this.”

Reisi held up a novel, and the room’s attention automatically shifted to Anna, who frowned at the book in much the same way she’d been frowning at Fushimi the last few days.

“There’s some residue, but it’s strange…” Anna said after a long and painful silence. “It’s almost like a ghost merely passed through it, but at the same time, it’s stronger than that.” She shook her head.

“So, what does the book do?” Totsuka asked, leaning eagerly on a mop.

“Apparently,” Reisi said, “our client, Kogawa-san, has acted out scenes from the book, all without his knowledge. Thus far, it has mostly been innocent enough, though he claims he ended up disrupting a lecture when he attempted to reenact the protagonist’s dance recital. According to Kogawa-san, this is the only book he has acted out any scenes from. Furthermore, a friend of his read the first few pages out of boredom, and ended up reciting lines from a conversation he read, and, like Kogawa-san, the friend was unaware he had done so.”

“So the book makes the reader into one of the characters?” Kusanagi asked. “That could be dangerous. What kind of book is it?”

“It’s supposed to be an erotic romance,” Reisi replied. “I read the summary.”

“Yikes,” Kusanagi mumbled. “Depending on who you’re with and what scene you end up acting, that could have some nasty consequences.”

“Better erotica than a thriller, I should think,” Fushimi mumbled. “At least no one should be dying.”

“Oh plenty of people die in romance novels,” Totsuka chirped merrily. “They can have all sorts of violence, particularly if there’s a jilted lover involved. Love can be quite turbulent.”

“Not to mention kissing a stranger doesn’t always go well,” Mikoto said. “Just ask Yata.”

“Does Yata go around kissing strangers then?” Fushimi asked, quirking an eyebrow. Somehow, he found that a little hard to believe.

“They’re not strangers to the ghosts that possess him,” Mikoto said. “However, he’s a stranger to them, and ghosts have a funny way of clearing out before he gets slapped for it.”

Fushimi wasn’t sure whether to laugh or sympathetically flinch.

“Though I think he was probably most traumatized by that girl who kissed him back,” Totsuka murmured. “It was certainly the only time I’ve ever seen him ask for a ghost to come back and possess him again.”

“Best not to mention that one, Tatara,” Kusanagi said. “Some things are best forgotten.”
“Going back to the book,” Reisi said, his voice ever-so-slightly impatient, “while I do believe we are capable of handling this case, it will be difficult. As well as reading the summary, I took the liberty of checking the book’s publishing information. It’s a fairly new release, having been out for just under six months. It seems unlikely for it to have picked up any kind of haunting in that time.”

“I’ll see what I can find out about that copy,” Kusanagi said. “In the meantime, it might be good to get ahold of another copy so we know what happens in the book, just in case. Reisi, I’ll leave that to you. Once you’re done reading, see if you find any news stories that match events in the book. Tatara, see if you can find information on similar hauntings. Anna, if you guys could take a closer look at the book, that would be great, but don’t read it. The genre aside, we don’t want any accidents.”

“The residue’s weak enough that I might not be able to read it anyway,” Anna said.

“When you say read, do you mean like, some sort of psychic reading?” Fushimi asked, unable to think of any other reason “residue” might have anything to do with reading the book. “Like psychometry?” He knew someone who had psychometry of a sort, and was curious as to whether Anna’s worked any different.

“No,” Anna said turning to face him. “I mean reading the book. Like the story in it. My eyes work a bit differently than normal, so I can’t read books unless there is some kind of psychic residue on them. I’m actually almost blind by normal means, but since I See energies really well, I can still see well enough. I miss a lot of details though, like I can’t see people’s faces unless they are a medium or have encountered enough residue. For instance, I’ve only recently become able to see Reisi’s face, since he’s the newest addition who isn’t a medium.”

“That’s…” Fushimi trailed off searching for a word.

“Unusual?” Anna offered, the corners of her mouth quirking up. “I know. It surprised even grandfather Daikaku. My guardian before that theorized that because my Sight is so strong, too strong even, that it impaired my vision. He hypothesized based on my eyes that people with Sight are actually seeing into another plane a little bit, and the more of that plane you see, the less you see of the one we live in. I cannot say whether he is correct or not, though.”

“Don’t talk about that bastard,” Mikoto spat. “He was scum and you know it.”

“Indeed,” Anna agreed, inclining her head. “I guess I’ve probably bored you saying so much extra stuff, Saruhiko. My apologies. The point is, though, that there aren’t many books that I can read, so I am always eager to pore over the ones that I can.”

Actually, it was nice to get a decent amount of information for once. Though of course, that bit about Anna’s guardian at the end was back to Homra’s characteristic vagueness.

“Yeah, well ya ain’t reading that one,” Mikoto said with a note of finality. Fushimi was willing to bet that his tone was one that was reserved for Anna and Yata, a sort of “big brother” voice demanding that, as the oldest of them, his word should be treated as law. How ridiculous.

“Wow, look at you being responsible for once;” Kusanagi murmured, wiping the countertop of the bar.

“Please, I’m always responsible,” Mikoto retorted. Fushimi snorted at that, though he almost didn’t hear himself doing so since everyone else in the room except for Mikoto did the same, even Anna.

“Hey, I’m responsible all the time!” Mikoto defended himself.
“Not really,” Totsuka drawled.

“Unfortunately, I must agree with Tatara,” Reisi said. “I’m sorry, Mikoto, but you do have a tendency to shirk.”

“Plus y’know, there have been enough times where you started to get frisky in front of Anna and Yata-chan that it’s sorta moot point for you to be concerned about Anna’s innocence,” Totsuka added.

“Not to mention you don’t always wear headphones when you watch adult videos,” Anna added quietly.

“Well,” Mikoto muttered, blushing just a little. “If you wanna read it, then you get to be the one to deal with Yata when he goes into meltdown from you reading something so indecent.”

“No thank you,” Anna said primly.

“That’s what I thought,” Mikoto said.

Fushimi couldn’t help but roll his eyes. It was maddening enough that these people were so secretive about all their abilities and whatnot, but the fact that they didn’t seem to understand the concept of TMI in regards to more private matters just made things worse. Though he supposed that given their closeness, there probably wasn’t much privacy amongst this crew.

“Hey we’re all cleaned up in the back,” Yata said coming into the front room. “So what’d I miss? Totsuka said we’ve got a new job?”

“Yup. We’ve gotta take a look at an erotic book,” Mikoto said, the hint of a smirk on his face. Yata promptly tripped over a table and staggered into the nearest booth to sit down, his face pale. Fushimi raised an eyebrow at the extreme reaction. How intriguing.

“Mikoto, that wasn’t nice,” Anna scolded. “He means we just need to examine the book, not read it, Misaki. In fact, we’re actually not allowed to read it, since it’s a little dangerous.”

“Oh, good,” Yata said tightly, his eyes wide in shock as he nodded. It was impossible to tell if he’d really heard what Anna had said or not. Fushimi almost felt sorry for him, but he was a bit too busy appreciating how Mikoto teased his “brother” like that. Not that he felt any solidarity to the older medium or anything, he just could see the appeal in ribbing someone who had such extreme reactions. That was all there was to it.

“Y’know, I’m really starting to wonder if we shouldn’t just call the client up and tell him we can’t help him in this instance,” Kusanagi sighed, producing a bottle of aspirin from under the counter of the bar.

“Izumo,” Anna gasped, appalled. “We can’t just leave people to suffer at the hands of ghosts!”

Fushimi was really tempted to speak up and ask “well why not?”, but he held himself in check. While their whole “do good” attitude was a nuisance, he supposed it was admirable in a way, to care about the problems of complete strangers like that. Foolish, but admirable. It just meant the people who worked at Homra were surely good people. Maybe if he stayed long enough, they’d rub off on him. He doubted it though. He was too twisted a person to care about others. He’d learned the hard way that he had to prioritize himself, and it was a lesson that had been repeated all throughout his childhood. It didn’t matter though. He didn’t need to be a good person. That wasn’t what he was here to be taught; he was here to learn to get rid of ghosts, and that was it. Once that was over, he wasn’t going to stick around and get lessons on humanity.
“I know that!” Izumo protested. “I’m not saying to just ditch him- we’d at least refer him to an appropriate contact- but this really doesn’t seem like a case our team is suited for.”

“We won’t know unless we try,” Anna argued petulantly. “Besides, Reisi said he thought we could do it, and he would know whether or not we can.”

“Indeed,” Reisi agreed, nodding. “Not to mention this matter isn’t any better suited to any of our contacts, skilled as they all are.”

“Alright, fine, you guys win,” Kusanagi sighed, putting his hands up in surrender. “If you’re so set on taking this case then we’ll do it.”

“Thank you, Izumo,” Anna said. “For agreeing, and for trying to look out for us.”

“It’s what I’m here for,” Kusanagi said ruefully. “I did promise the old man, after all.”

“I thought he made it the stakes for one of your guys’s hanafuda matches,” Mikoto mumbled. “Like if you won he’d bequeath you some money or something, and if he won, you had to be our slave for life.”

“Thanks for making that sound so illicit.” Kusanagi rolled his eyes, but there was a wry smile on his face. “It wasn’t like that, Mikoto. Besides, I never bet on our hanafuda matches, since he always won. That old man could sure play a mean game of cards.”

“You’re really making me regret not meeting him before he died,” Reisi said.

“Maybe if there’s time you can play him when we call him,” Totsuka suggested. “He can possess Yata-chan, and you two can-”

“The hell he can possess me!” Yata yelped. “I may look up to gramps and all, but I sure as hell ain’t letting him in my body! It’d be too weird! Would you want your grampa in your head, Totsuka-san?”

“I didn’t have one. Any family of my deadbeat dad probably severed ties with him long before he took me in,” Totsuka replied cheerfully. “So I really can’t say.”

“Wha- huh- but- really?” Yata sputtered, then shook his head. “Okay fine. Just take it from me, it’d be weird having someone who practically raised you rooting around in your head.”

“It’s only weird if you’ve been having dirty thoughts,” Mikoto teased.

“Shame on you, Misaki,” Anna said, going along with Mikoto this time. “And here I thought you were a good person.”

“Wha- whaddaya mean-?” Yata began, but the others were already joining in.

“To think our son turned out this way,” Kusanagi sighed, shaking his head.

“I’m so disappointed,” Totsuka sniffled. “Yata-chan, how could you?”

“How shameless,” Reisi said, not bothering to feign hurt the way the others were doing.

“Guys, I-”

“I looked up to you,” Anna said sadly.
“We had such high hopes for your future,” Kusanagi moaned.

“And you have the nerve to call me the perv,” Mikoto snorted.

“But-!”

“No wonder you took so long in the shower the other day,” Fushimi deadpanned. Everyone fell silent and gaped at him, then they abandoned their woeful expressions to burst into laughter, while Yata turned a shade of red three times more intense than his hair.

“I didn’t!” was all Yata could cry out in embarrassed protest.

As they finished cleaning up the bar for the night, everyone kept chuckling, throwing surreptitious glances at Yata that made the medium blush anew each time. Somehow, seeing his line achieve such success felt like a win to Fushimi.
They still hadn’t heard back from Shiro about contacting his grandfather when Fushimi showed up for training the next day, and there wasn’t much news regarding the mysterious book either. Kusanagi had talked to the client some more, and had discovered that Kogawa had bought the book almost two months previously at a bookstore. He’d started the book right away, and had gotten through the first two chapters without issue before a term paper took over his life as those things tend to do. It was only after the client turned in the paper and continued reading that he began to unwittingly act things out. Just in case, Kusanagi had already visited the book store where Kogawa had bought the book, but the staff had reported that they hadn’t noticed any unusual happenings in the store. All in all, his information indicated that the book had most likely become haunted at some point during the writing of the term paper.

“Maybe it’s not a literal ghost haunting the book,” Totsuka suggested after Kusanagi gave his report. “College students often talk about being dead inside, maybe that’s literally what happened. He died inside, and now whatever died in him is now haunting the book.”

“Nah, those kinds of ghosts don’t behave that way,” Mikoto said dismissively.

“What, you can really have ghosts created by someone dying inside?” Totsuka asked, his eyes wide in shock and excitement.

“Sorta,” Mikoto said. “More like traumatic experiences can leave a sorta imprint on this world. They’re like ghosts, but not.”

“How are they different?” Fushimi asked.

“Well, it’s like a ghost gif, kinda,” Mikoto said with a shrug. “They just sorta repeat themselves, usually a couple minutes at most. A lot of them can only be seen when you touch their tie, too, even for mediums like us. They also aren’t affected by our powers, but they disappear on their own before too long anyway, so it doesn’t really matter.”

“Fascinating,” Reisi said. “I’ll have to remember that.”

“Well, speaking of things your photographic memory remembers, what have you learned so far?” Kusanagi asked him.

“That the author of this book has no idea how a threesome actually works, for one,” Reisi reported with a note of disgust in his voice.

“Charming,” Fushimi drawled.

“No, not really,” Reisi replied. “It’s absolutely appalling. Honestly, I’m not sure how this novel got published at all, it’s such utter trash. Not only is it trashy, but there’s the obvious lack of research done, not to mention the plot is hard to follow, the characters are not the least bit likeable, the sex scenes are cringeworthy at best, and the more I read it the more I feel a desire to burn my eyes.”

“Please don’t,” Mikoto mumbled. “I don’t wanna hafta take care of your blind ass.”

“Admit it King, you’d just miss gazing into his eyes,” Totsuka laughed. “You’re such a sucker for the purple in them.”

“Shut up,” Mikoto said, cuffing Totsuka lightly.
“As for any news stories related to the events of the book,” Reisi continued, aiming a fond smile at his boyfriends, “I have been checking the tabloids and newspapers, but there isn’t anything that remotely resembles the sordid scandals of this book, for which I am very glad. My faith in humanity would drop significantly if I did find anything similar, haunted book or none.”

“So it looks like we’re at a loss on that front too,” Kusanagi sighed. “Anna? Did you and the boys notice anything special about the book?”

Anna shook her head.

“It’s as I said yesterday,” she said. “There’s a residue on the book, but it’s strange. It’s like it’s not actually there, but somewhere else. We can’t sense where it came from at all, or any of the ghost’s intent.”

“What if it’s not a ghost at all?” Fushimi asked. “Are you sure it is one?”

Anna pursed her lips.

“Not entirely,” she admitted. “Which reminds me, I did want to have you try something.”

“Tatara’s report first,” Kusanagi insisted. “Did you find anything similar to this?”

“Well I did find a report of a whispering tome back in the middle ages in Europe, and there was a guy who got possessed by the ghost of an actor so he kept performing numbers from Broadway musicals in random places, but that’s the closest I could find,” Totsuka informed them. “And I definitely didn’t find anything about hauntings that don’t have any ghosts involved. At least, none that weren’t just people pulling pranks or stray cats mating or things like that.”

“So in other words, we’ve got a big fat nothing,” Kusanagi sighed.

“I’m sure it’ll all work out,” Totsuka said airily. “If all else fails, it’s something else we can ask Shiro’s grandfather about, right?”

“Assuming we get a chance to talk to his grandfather, anyway,” Fushimi grumbled. He was beginning to lose faith in the promises of these mediums. Which was stupid, because it meant that at some point he’d actually started to believe in them. He knew better than to trust others, so why was he abandoning his principles now?

“Sometimes it takes a while for conditions to be right,” Anna said calmly.

“Not to mention Miwa-san has a very busy schedule,” Reisi added. “Many people wish to contact loved ones in the beyond.”

Fushimi clicked his tongue. How ridiculous. If the dead had moved on already, what was the point in dragging them back? They were less annoying if they moved on like they should. Besides, he couldn’t possibly imagine feeling so attached to someone as to be unable to function without them. The only person who was reasonably close to him who had died was someone he couldn’t wait to see the last of, after all.

“Whatever,” Fushimi grumbled. “So what was it you wanted me to try, Anna?”

“I was hoping you wouldn’t mind trying to draw out whatever it is that is haunting this book,” Anna said, and Fushimi almost clicked his tongue again. Of course he minded. He hated using his stupid ability. All the same, he curbed the impulse and listened as Anna continued. “It is possible that whatever is haunting the book is simply buried deep within, and we will be able to get a better
“Alright,” Fushimi agreed. Anna, who had been holding onto the book, handed it over, and he focused on it, barely even thinking about his latest coding project as he tried to sense whatever was in the book, seeking something to sic his power on.

There was something there, inside the book, that he could feel with a little effort. Like Anna had said, it was faint—like a shadow on a cloudy day. When he tried to grab at it, it was like fog, and while it didn’t evade his grasp exactly, he couldn’t take hold of it. Remembering his recent exercise on manipulating his area of influence, he changed tactics, enveloping the presence in the book rather than trying to grab it. Still nothing happened.

“Sorry, I’m not getting anything,” he said, opening his eyes. The first thing he noticed was that everyone was gazing at him, wide-eyed and unblinking. “What?” he asked, shifting in discomfort.

“Er, Fushimi, how many languages do you speak?” Kusanagi asked after a long moment of silence.

“My English is fairly decent,” Fushimi replied.

“Anythin’ else?” Mikoto rumbled.


“Right, okay then,” Kusanagi sighed. “So you wouldn’t happen to know any French then?”

“Just a few words that I learned here and there,” Fushimi said. “Wh-”

“What about Chinese?” Reisi input.

“Is this some kind of joke?” Fushimi asked, losing patience with all their irrelevant questions.

“Spanish?” Mikoto asked.

“No, I think that was Portuguese,” Reisi countered. “And there was also some German, I should think.”

“Look, I don’t speak any of those!” Fushimi snapped.

“A little bit ago you did,” Mikoto said.

“What?” Fushimi asked. “The hell are you talking about? When did I speak any language but Japanese?”

“When you were examining the book,” Anna informed him.

“I didn’t say anything though,” Fushimi said.

“You did,” Anna insisted.

“You actually said a lot of things,” Totsuka seconded.

“It is certainly the most eloquent I’ve ever heard you,” Kusanagi agreed.

“It was quite intriguing, though I do think adding hemlock as an ingredient to andagi would be inadvisable,” Reisi input.
“I’m sorry, what?” Fushimi asked, blinking.

“It was one of the things you said,” Totsuka explained. “You were reciting a recipe but switched topics halfway through. You did that a lot. As a matter of fact, I’m not sure you actually completed a single sentence despite all your chatter. It was very incoherent.”

“You’re being incoherent,” Fushimi grumbled. “All this blather about me speaking different languages and whatnot, but I really didn’t say anything. I just tried to pull out whatever was haunting the book, and got nothing.”

“On the contrary, I think it’s quite clear that you did get something,” Reisi replied. “Your behavior matches that which Kogawa-san described, saying things that you have no recollection of. Moreover, I am certain that none of what you said came from the pages of this book. So either this particular volume is grievously misprinted, or this case is even more peculiar than we originally thought. Perhaps it is an old ghost that moves from volume to volume, haunting each tome for a time before moving on. However, this implies the ghost can switch ties, which begs the question of how it does so and what prompts each transition. It would be wise to try and find out, lest it move to another book before we can deal with it.”

“That still doesn’t explain why it has such a weak residue,” Anna said doubtfully. “To switch ties, it would have to be pretty strong.”

“But if it’s started to deteriorate and lose its sense of self, could that affect the residue?” Totsuka asked.

“No, if anything, that might just make it stronger,” Anna replied, shaking her head.

“Then what if, instead of switching ties, it somehow has multiple ties?” Kusanagi suggested. “And so the residue you’re seeing here is only part of the ghost’s residue.”

“That might explain the weaker residue, but there would have to be some sort of connection between the different ties, and there isn’t any.” Anna said. Everyone sighed heavily, disappointed with the fruitlessness of their brainstorming.

“It’s alright, it’ll all work out,” Totsuka finally said. “At least now thanks to Saru-kun, we know we should start looking for more haunted books. Maybe if we bring them all together, something amazing will happen. Like *poof* we’ll summon a ghost that has read every book that ever was and ever will be, and they’ll share their wisdom with us!”

“Ghosts don’t get summoned,” Mikoto said. “That would be demons.”

“Demons had better not exist,” Kusanagi said firmly. “Ghosts are already more than I can handle, so don’t you tell me there’s demons and shit out there too.”

“Depends on what you call a demon,” Mikoto replied. “Some ghosts get pretty nasty, to the point where ya might as well call ’em that. Thought you still can’t summon them, Tatara.”

“Boo,” Totsuka pouted.

“There’s some living people who might meet that qualification as well,” Fushimi muttered, thinking of that man.

“I would like to submit that demons are not the only beings that can be summoned,” Reisi said. “For example, djinni and familiars are often summoned in lore, though that is more witchcraft than supernaturality.”
“Yeah, but do those exist either?” Kusanagi pressed. “And even if they do, I don’t think any of us are witches here.”

“I wouldn’t mind becoming a witch,” Totsuka said. “It’d be cool. Plus I think I’d look good in one of those pointy hats.”

“We’ve gotten off topic,” Anna said quietly. Fushimi thought maybe he was the only one who heard her, as the others continued their discussion of witches and summoning with gusto. He clicked his tongue.

“What are they ever on topic?” he asked.

“It can be hard to get everyone to focus,” Anna admitted with a smile that spoke of fond exasperation. “But they will be serious when it counts most. To be in this line of work takes a delicate balance of knowing when to get down to business and when to be lighthearted. It gets a little grim if you’re on task all the time.”

“I think I’d prefer that,” Fushimi couldn’t help but mutter.

“Yes, perhaps you would,” Anna said. “But you are only here for the time being. I think you would find that constant sobriety wears you down, were you to stick around.”

“What are you?” Fushimi quirked an eyebrow at Anna’s word choice.

“I’m not old enough to drink alcohol, Saruhiko,” Anna said sternly. “Also, you should be more careful. That could almost have been construed as humor, and we wouldn’t want you to hurt yourself.”

Fushimi scowled at Anna’s teasing concern, and clicked his tongue again. Thankfully, Totsuka was still too enraptured in the conversation that was now about what pantheon of gods would most likely win in a fight- which, what the fuck- to comment on Fushimi’s habit yet again.

“So did you have anything else planned for today?” he asked, changing the subject. “Y’know, other than getting me hijacked by an erotic novel so that I ended up speaking tongues or whatever?”

“Unfortunately, no,” Anna said. “You are always welcome to practice some more, but until we figure out how to unlock the rest of your ability that’s about all there is to do. Though regarding that matter, have you remembered anything?”

“No,” Fushimi said, rolling his eyes. “Nothing.”

“Don’t worry, we’ll figure it out,” Anna said kindly. “Perhaps a chance event will help you unlock it. That happened to both Misaki and myself. Though mine wasn’t really chance…”

“Were you two not always mediums?” Fushimi asked. As soon as the words were out of his mouth, he cringed, because it occurred to him that he sounded like Reisi and his eternal fascination with all things supernatural.

“We were,” Anna said. “But we couldn’t do certain things when we were younger. Reisi said before that calling my ability ‘persuasion’ is a misnomer, but originally, that’s all it was. As for Misaki, he only became able to leave his body after a particularly strong ghost pushed him out. It is possible that your ability is waiting for something to happen first before it will be used that way.”

“And just what might that be?” Fushimi asked bitterly.
“I don’t know,” Anna said. “Though I doubt that is really what is going on with your ability. Neither Misaki nor I was aware of our additional talents prior to awakening them. And then there’s your description of what is blocking you. Something about it seems wrong to me, though I don’t know why. Mikoto, Misaki, and Yashiro all thought so as well.”

“Great,” Fushimi said sarcastically. “Nice to know that even people who are like me still think that there’s something wrong with me.”

“The only thing wrong with you is your attitude and outlook on life,” Anna replied evenly. “You are certainly unusual, even for a medium, but that doesn’t make you unnatural or wrong or anything like that.”

“How is being a ghost magnet any less unusual than ordering ghosts about or wrestling with them or being possessed by them?” Fushimi demanded. Maybe his ability was odd, but theirs were too. Hypocrites.

“That’s not what’s unusual,” Anna said. “What’s unusual about Saruhiko is how much you can use your ability without repercussions. You saw before that my ability is rather draining. The others have to be careful not to overuse their abilities as well. When Mikoto fights a ghost, he gets bruises just like if he fought a living person, and he gets frostbite from prolonged touches. And being possessed for a long time is very hard on Misaki, both physically and mentally. Even Yashiro has a hard time moving when Kuroh and Neko are drawing energy from him to fight. But despite Saruhiko always drawing ghosts, you don’t seem to be particularly impacted by it. Even if you are using your ability at its most basic level, it should lower your functionality somehow, perhaps by causing you to sleep more than normal people or be more susceptible to colds or such. Yet you sleep less than average, and while you’re not exactly the epitome of good health, you’re not sickly, either. That’s what is unusual about you.”

Fushimi automatically had a sarcastic witticism at the tip of his tongue, ready to be deployed, and yet he held it in check as Anna’s words sank in. To think being a medium was such a burden… Well, obviously it was a burden, he knew that much between personal experience and his ability to put two and two together, but to realize that there were such side effects to having power as a medium was a bit disconcerting. He swallowed his retort.

“I think… there might be something though,” he said after a long moment. “A repercussion of sorts, I mean. The other day, when I stopped drawing them, became ‘neutral’, I felt… relief. Like when you’re sitting in an awkward position and shift so it feels better, or put down something heavy you’ve been carrying, something like that. It’s not that when I’m drawing them my body feels uncomfortable, but… it creates a sort of tension, maybe. I’m not sure how to describe it.” Fushimi clicked his tongue, annoyed at his inability to describe his experience well.

“I see,” Anna said. “Mild side effects like that could explain a lot. It makes sense.”

Before Fushimi could demand to know what the hell the girl meant by that, Kusanagi interrupted them, asking them to help him with a delivery that had just arrived. It turned out that Kusanagi had ordered some different glasses etched with the bar’s symbol that would be available for purchase, and so there were boxes to be lugged through the bar and then unloaded, and then the new wares had to be arranged- an act which took an appalling amount of time since there was much debate about what formation looked best. By the time they finished that task, it was already time to get ready for the bar’s opening.

Fushimi had no intention of ever saying as much, but it was peaceful, going through the routine of preparing the bar for customers. There was some of the constant banter that always seemed to be going on with these people, but it wasn’t bad since everyone had things to get done. There was a
rhythm to the motions of each person carrying out their assigned tasks, and the noises faded to a comfortable murmur. That wasn’t to say he liked it or anything, but he felt like he could maybe relax a bit.

As if in defiance of his lowered guard, about a minute after the sign in the window was flipped so the ‘open’ side faced out, their first customer arrived. He heard the bell jangle and looked up because everyone was required to greet arriving customers when it was this empty. Fushimi began the usual greeting, his voice bored and uninterested as always, but cut off halfway through—having caught sight of the new entrant. In the doorway, a young bespectacled woman with blonde hair in a messy bun was peering around the bar, squinting in the dimmer light.

“Welcome to Hom- ugh.” He grimaced and clicked his tongue, turning his head to the side. “What are you doing here?”
As he approached the end of his middle school years, Fushimi had been faced with a decision: did he continue with his education, or drop out and try and manage on his own? School held no appeal to Fushimi; he was smarter than most of his teachers and all of his peers, and all the social dramas were completely useless and annoying. However, not going to high school held even less appeal. He would be hard-put to find a worthwhile job with only a middle school education, and there was also the issue of living conditions to consider. He could afford to live on his own, since his rich mother gave him a large allowance as a substitute for maternal love, but there was no way either of those people would ever sign off as guarantors on a lease. Given the circumstances, he’d ended up choosing to go on to high school, because even if it was a waste of time it would be worth it to have that degree when he was applying to jobs, and it would help him bide time until he was old enough to sign a lease by himself.

Most of the people Fushimi had met in high school had been of no consequence. They were just a bunch of wastes of time and space, and weren’t worth associating with, let alone remembering. There had been only one exception to that.

“I’m just here because an associate of mine named Awashima recommended this bar to me,” that one exception, one Hirasaka Douhan, said. “I’m surprised to see you here though. You hate being around people, and I would have expected you to say having a job is a bother.”

Fushimi clicked his tongue.

“It really is a bother,” he admitted irritably.

Hirasaka hummed, but didn’t reply. She was sensible like that. It was one of the reasons Fushimi had tolerated spending time with her for three straight years.

“Friend of yours, Fushimi?” Kusanagi asked, curious.

“We’re not friends,” Fushimi and Hirasaka chorused in unison. They weren’t. Neither of them bothered with useless crap like that.

“Right, whatever. Point is, you two seem to know each other,” Kusanagi said. “Are you gonna introduce us?”

Fushimi clicked his tongue, but complied.

“This is Hirasaka Douhan, my classmate from high school,” Fushimi introduced. “Out of everyone there, we found each other the least repugnant.”

“So he was always this unfriendly?” Mikoto asked Hirasaka.

“I never found him particularly unfriendly though,” she replied calmly. “In fact, I found his attitude to be refreshingly sedate. Everyone else was so tiresome with their mundane and repetitive conversations and friendship games. At least with Fushimi, I knew I could count on him not to unnecessarily fill the air with chatter and that he would never bother feigning positive reactions to people or things he disliked.”
“Oh god, there’s two of them,” Kusanagi murmured.

“Are you sure you guys aren’t friends?” Totsuka asked.

“We’re sure,” Fushimi and Hirasaka chorused.

“Exes?” Mikoto suggested. Fushimi and Hirasaka both cringed.

“Never in a million years,” Hirasaka said flatly.

“Agreed. We just tolerate each other better than the annoying masses we went to school with,” Fushimi explained. “Not to mention we both have a lot in common.”

“Oh? Like what?” Reisi asked with a glint in his eyes that made Fushimi nervous.

“We were both considered freaks,” Hirasaka admitted bluntly. “We were the top students in the school despite never paying attention in class, were constantly criticized for poor attitudes, are extremely gay, and realized that despite our disinterest in socialization, we needed each other. Blackmailing idiots who try to elevate themselves through bullying is much easier with an accomplice.”

Fushimi couldn’t help but smirk as he recalled some of the finer moments of their high school alliance. The faces of their would-be bullies when their darkest secrets got exposed to the worst possible people were always priceless. Over by the door, Hirasaka had a twin smirk on her face.

“Huh, really are two of a kind,” Mikoto mumbled.

“We are plenty different,” Hirasaka said coldly. “For one, I don’t see ghosts.”

Thankfully, before the matter could be discussed any further, a trio of other customers came in, and everyone launched into the usual greeting. As Totsuka led the newcomers to a table, Hirasaka took a seat at the bar, and Kusanagi asked for her drink order. About a minute later she had a vividly colored cocktail with a bright pink umbrella sticking out of it, which she pushed around with a small smile before sipping her drink. That was one of the differences between her and Fushimi, right there: she was more in touch with her emotions. Not that she was a particularly emotional person, but she had more moods than just annoyed and more annoyed, which was pretty much all of Fushimi’s own emotional range.

Knowing that business would be slow for a while yet, Fushimi snuck back to the staff room where the book had been stowed for the time being and brought it out to the main room, heading up to plop himself onto the stool next to Hirasaka. Kusanagi gave him a stern look, but he ignored it, instead turning to face Hirasaka.

“How much would it cost me to get you to take a look at this?” he asked, brandishing the book.

“I never took you for one to read trash,” Hirasaka deadpanned back. “That looks like hetero stuff too. Not really up your alley, is it?”

“It’s for a case,” Fushimi replied. “I’m working here because… because I needed some help with my ability. There’s a ghost I need to be rid of, and these people can help me with that, but in return, they’re having me work at the bar and help them with ghost cases or whatever.”

“I’d assume you were joking but, well, this is you saying that.”

There was a very suspicious sound like a suppressed snort from Kusanagi’s direction, but when
Fushimi turned to scowl at the older man, he was casually wiping the counter with such innocence that it couldn’t have been any more obvious that he’d been eavesdropping. It didn’t seem like very professional behavior for a bartender.

“I’m serious,” Fushimi confirmed. “So how much would it cost?”

“As much as I hate to say it, I’ll trade you for a favor,” Hirasaka replied. Fushimi refrained from commenting, but in all honesty, he was stunned. Hirasaka was relentless in her pursuit of money, and would ask for compensation for even the smallest of actions. In high school, she’d refrained from making demands of him since they both needed their alliance equally, but since they’d graduated she hadn’t hesitated to try and extort money from him whenever she could. “I need to trace some emails for a client of mine, and I need your computer expertise to do it. If you show me how to do it myself for future reference, I’ll even owe you one.”

It would take an extreme idiot to turn down a chance at having Hirasaka Douhan owing him, and Fushimi was not an idiot.

“Done,” he agreed readily, sliding the book across the counter to her. Hirasaka picked up the book, turning it over in her hands as she closed her eyes and breathed in deeply. Fushimi waited, knowing it took time for her to use her ability.

“There’s not much here,” she said after a couple more deep breaths. She opened her eyes, handing the book back to Fushimi. “It’s mostly been sitting on shelves or in backpacks. It’s barely even been read. What exactly did you want me to look for?”

“The book causes anyone who reads it to start acting out scenes from it,” Fushimi explained. “It didn’t do that originally, so I was hoping you might see something that might have triggered the change.”

“Hm,” Hirasaka hummed thoughtfully. “I don’t know if it’s what you’re looking for, but there was something a bit odd. Since it hasn’t been read much, there’s very little emotion attached to it, but there was one spike in emotions. The weird thing is, it happened when no one was anywhere near the book. It had been set down near another book on a table, and then the owners of the books walked away to order their coffee, and that’s when it had the emotion spike. Also the pages of the other book ruffled a little, like there was a breeze, but since it was an outdoor table, it really may have been a breeze.”

“You wouldn’t happen to have caught the name of the owner of the other book, would you?” Fushimi asked, even though he was pretty sure Hirasaka would have. She was efficient like that.

“The owner of that one called his friend ‘Tecchan’,” Hirasaka said, pointed at the cursed novel in Fushimi’s hands.

“‘Tecchan’, huh?” Kusanagi mused, no longer bothering to hide his eavesdropping. “I’ll call Kogawa up and ask about that tomorrow.”

“The other book was titled ‘A Chimpanzee in Kalamazoo’, if it interests you,” Hirasaka added.

“Oh, I think I heard of that one,” Kusanagi replied. “It’s supposed to be the next great literary work or somethin’. From what I’ve heard though, it’s more the ‘or somethin’.’ Anyway, does that mean you’re a psychic too?”

Hirasaka nodded.

“Yes, that’s why Awashima-san suggested I come here sometime. We live together, and when she
found out about my psychometry she told me about her talent and mentioned that this bar is something of a gathering place for people like us. And if Fushimi’s here, I guess that’s true.”

“Sorta,” Kusanagi said, a wry smile on his face. “Aside from Fushimi we’ve got three mediums, plus there’s a guy who can read decisions. But we also get lots of regulars like Seri-chan, who have talents of their own and come to trade cases with us or because they like the drinks and the atmosphere.”

“What do you mean by ‘read decisions’?” Hirasaka asked.

“It’s best to just ask him yourself,” Kusanagi sighed. “He’ll want to know all about your psychometry anyway. It’s the guy sitting by himself with a glass of water and openly staring.”

“Unfortunately for him, I’m not that interested in his ability,” Hirasaka replied. “As for mine, you can tell him that when I touch objects or the boundaries of a place, the memories flow into me. I can sift through them at my own pace, but only so long as I maintain contact. Otherwise I just get a sense of the strongest emotions attached. But if there’s lots of strong emotions attached, the lesser memories can be hard to find. Fortunately, it’s usually the stronger emotions that people are looking for.”

“He’ll probably still come ask you about it sometime,” Kusanagi warned.

Hirasaka clicked her tongue.

“That’s annoying,” she said.

“You have no idea,” Fushimi agreed, not failing to notice the way Kusanagi’s eyebrows were slowly inching up his forehead in reaction to their interactions.

As more customers arrived, Fushimi had to get to work. Hirasaka finished her drink and left, though Fushimi knew she’d be back at the end of the night to make sure he cashed in on his end of their bargain. Not that he minded; since graduating high school, the two of them had made a point to meet up every now and then, if only because they needed another person around who understood just how annoying the rest of the world was and who would sympathize with them as they vented. It had been a while since they’d last met, and it seemed like they would have plenty to talk about. He knew he certainly had his fair share of complaints, courtesy of the idiots here at Homra.

Surprisingly, the shift was rather painless, without any real difficult customers. Maybe it was just the prospect of spending time with the one constant acquaintance in his life that had Fushimi feeling this way, or having someone who would finally understand just how ridiculous Homra was.

Hirasaka showed up a few minutes before closing, and was allowed to stick around as the bar was closed and cleaning began. She made no comment, instead watching with disinterest as they all went about their tasks. When she got bored of that, she pulled out her phone and fiddled around with some app on it, but Fushimi could still feel her eyes. Even if she wasn’t watching, Hirasaka was still paying attention.

Finally Fushimi was free to go, and he and Hirasaka drove back to her apartment together. She’d moved since he’d last visited her home: her new place was nicer, more luxurious. There was a small guest parking lot in front of the building and a garage on the side, and Hirasaka had to scan a fob to let them into the building.

The apartment itself was more spacious than Hirasaka’s old apartment, and very plush. There were
lots of cushions and pillows, as well as several stuffed animals, and the couch was covered by a fuzzy pink blanket. There was a cat bed in the corner, with a sleeping kitten curled up so tightly it was almost invisible inside the bed. All in all, it reeked of femininity.

“Hirasaka, good timing, I was thinking of doing laundry and wondered if you had anything you wanted washed as we- oh,” said a curvaceous blonde, entering the living room the front door opened onto from a doorway to the left. She cut off, wide-eyed, as she spotted Fushimi. “I didn’t realize you swung both ways.”

“Why does everyone keep assuming that we’re intimately involved tonight?” Fushimi asked flatly. “It’s not like either of us is remotely attracted to the other.”

“Fushimi is my acquaintance from high school,” Hirasaka explained. “I ran into him at the bar you mentioned, and we ended up trading favors, which is why he’s here.”

“Oh you also frequent Homra?” the blonde, presumably Awashima, asked.

“I work there,” Fushimi replied, then as an afterthought added, “for the time being.”

“I didn’t realize Iz- Kusanagi-san had hired someone new,” Awashima remarked.

“You said psychics tend to go there. Well, he’s one too,” Hirasaka said, jerking a thumb in Fushimi’s direction.

“I see,” Awashima said. “Please forgive my ill-manners, I should introduce myself. Awashima Seri. My psychic ability is seeing a person’s past lives.” She smiled warmly and held out a hand to shake.

“Fushimi Saruhiko,” he replied, taking the hand. “I attract ghosts, and with Homra’s help I’m trying to learn to repel them as well.”

“Attracting ghosts sounds like a difficult ability to have to cope with,” Awashima said, a pitying expression on her face. “I wish you the best of luck in your endeavors to change that. In the mean time, would you like any tea?”

“He’s a coffee addict,” Hirasaka said before Fushimi could respond himself. “No cream or sugar. It just detracts from his self-loathing.”

“Not that I need to worry about that if I’m spending time with you,” Fushimi retorted lowly.

“I’ll get right on that,” Awashima said. “Is instant alright, or should I turn the pot on?”

“Instant’s fine,” Fushimi said.

“Like I said, self-loathing,” Hirasaka smirked.

Ten minutes later found Fushimi situated in front of a laptop on a low table, a steaming mug of coffee on a coaster next to him as he went through the process of tracing the emails and explaining his movements for Hirasaka, who took notes even though she had a good information retention skills. It was a slow process, but it wasn’t quite midnight when they finished.

“Will that be all then?” Fushimi asked, glancing into his mug to see if there was any coffee left. There wasn’t. He’d finished it off a while ago, after all. Someday someone would get around to inventing self-refilling coffee mugs, but it seemed that it had yet to happen.
“For work, yes,” Hirasaka replied.

“Since when does a cosplay cafe require you to trace emails?” Fushimi asked, raising an eyebrow.

“It doesn’t,” Hirasaka said with a shrug. “That place went bankrupt a couple months ago and I had to strike out on my own. I set up office as a private investigator, and since then, business has been pretty good.”

“A PI, huh?” Fushimi mused, leaning back on his heels. “Why am I not surprised?”

“Because it’s a job that’s made easy by my talents and where I can charge as much as I want,” Hirasaka deadpanned. “You’d only be surprised if you were an idiot, and you’re not. But more importantly, tell me more about Homra.”

“What’s there to tell?” Fushimi grumbled.

“If you don’t want to tell me I can always look into it myself,” Hirasaka said lightly. Fushimi clicked his tongue, and Hirasaka grinned, knowing she’d won. “Don’t act so sullen about it, you’ve been looking like you wanted to talk about something since earlier.”

“It’s a really annoying place,” Fushimi began, but was interrupted.

“Ah, so you like it there,” Hirasaka said.

“Everyone is really annoying,” Fushimi argued.

“You like them too,” Hirasaka countered.

“They’re annoyingly perceptive!” Fushimi snapped.

“You say that about me, and yet I’m the closest thing you’ve ever had to a friend,” Hirasaka reminded him. Fushimi clicked his tongue.

“So tell me about them,” Hirasaka implored. “I want to know more about them, regardless of what you think. Aside from you and Awashima, I haven’t met other psychics before. Was that bartender one of them?”

“No, Kusanagi’s normal. And he pointed out Reisi, the sorta-psychic and full-time creep,” Fushimi began. “As a psychic I haven’t seen him do much, but he’s very nosy.”

“You must love that,” Hirasaka said, and it was only thanks to years of knowing her that Fushimi caught the sarcastic nuance to her voice. “Were the other three the mediums then?”

“Close,” Fushimi said. “Mikoto, the redhead, and Anna are mediums, but Totsuka’s not. He just kinda follows us around and films everything when we go on cases.”

“So who’s the other medium?”

“Yata. He works in the kitchens now, since he gets possessed easily, and with me attracting ghosts, it’s a bad combination. The kitchen’s sort of a safe zone. There’s a bunch of fuda in there to keep ghosts out.”

“And here I thought you had it bad with your ability,” Hirasaka said, shaking her head.

“He calls his ability a curse,” Fushimi agreed.
“Oh?” Hirasaka said, her eyebrows rising.

“Yeah,” Fushimi said. “It doesn’t help that he seems to be terrified of ghosts, though maybe that’s because of his ability being what it is. He also gets really moody whenever he has to use it. He also said…” Fushimi trailed off as he noticed a certain wavering to the lines of Hirasaka’s mouth, like she was trying not to laugh. “What?” he demanded.

“Nothing, nothing,” she said, her voice not nearly as toneless as it usually was. “But I bet if you’d continued you would have finished off by saying he’s the most annoying one of all or something, right?”

“Not necessarily,” Fushimi replied petulantly, even though he couldn’t say that she wasn’t right. Yata did annoy him. The guy was so chaotic, and… and… and nothing. He was chaotic. Fushimi had no patience for chaotic people.

“Well then how’s this, I’ll help out with Homra’s cases free of charge if you call me up the moment you finally realize you like him,” Hirasaka said.

“I beg your pardon,” Fushimi said flatly.

“You just gave more information about him than I asked for. You totally like him,” Hirasaka said. “But you being you, it’s going to take months before you realize it, and even longer before you accept it. If you even accept it. Knowing you, you might just reject the idea of having feelings so intensely that you’ll try and make him hate you or something stupid like that.”

“I wouldn’t do that,” Fushimi muttered. “And you’re wrong, I don’t like him. I don’t like people who punch me.”

“Is that why the side of your jaw is kinda brownish?” Hirasaka asked. “I thought maybe you were just trying to grow a beard and doing a horrible job of it.”

“Don’t try to be funny, it doesn’t suit you,” Fushimi snapped.

“But do we have a deal?” Hirasaka pressed.

“What if I prove you wrong instead?” Fushimi asked.

“You won’t,” Hirasaka said confidently. Fushimi wasn’t convinced, but whatever. It was her loss, in the end.

“Alright, deal,” he said.

Chapter End Notes

Their little bet worked out better in my head. Oh well. A while back I read a fic that had Fushimi and Douhan as close frenemies and it was great and I’ve been lamenting the lack of Douhan in my own fics ever since. She probably won't be showing up too much in this either, which is a shame because it was really fun writing these two sniping at each other.
So this chapter is kinda a mess, but I've already edited it enough times that I feel my sanity fraying just thinking about more editing. Someday I will find the balance between keeping characters relevant and keeping the scene flowing, or better yet, I will learn to not have too many characters in one scene. But until then I'll just have to ride the struggle bus like the flawed human I am. On a side note, recently I've been thinking of all sorts of ghost puns that would have been great alternate titles. I do like what I went with, so all is well, but it still feels like a missed opportunity...

Every seat in Kusanagi’s van was filled and Fushimi felt like murdering someone. When Kusanagi had called up Kogawa-the-client to ask for more information about “Tecchan” and his book, the client had taken that to mean the two of them should show up at the bar. Sure enough, the client’s friend had experienced similar things when reading his own book. However, it turned out the client’s friend had borrowed the book from his cousin, and had since returned it, so if they wanted to examine the second book they had to drive to the cousin’s house. And so the lot of them had piled into the van, accompanied by the client and his friend. To top things off, it was a hot day—hopefully one of the last ones of the year—and the AC in the van didn’t seem to be working right because it was sweltering inside. Fushimi felt like he was melting, and there was so much chatter from all nine occupants of the van, and it was hell.

The one consolation was that at least Fushimi had a seat to himself and wasn’t pressed up against anyone else like the three in the back were.

“Turn left here, it’s at the end of this road,” “Tecchan” instructed, and Kusanagi complied. Fushimi almost groaned with anticipation of getting out of this hellhole. He found himself being tempted by a sudden impulse to emulate a small child and incessantly ask if they were there yet. And to think they still had a return journey to look forward to...

After ten minutes of driving through lots and lots of grass without even getting a glimpse of their destination, Fushimi was beginning to regret his resolve to keep his peace. Seriously, how long could this fucking road be? He was just opening his mouth to make a complaint when the van slowed and Kusanagi was being directed to park “over on the side there, beside that SUV”. Finally. They’d arrived.

Given his eagerness to escape, it seemed to Fushimi that their client and Anna, who had taken up the second row of seats, were painfully slow in getting out of the van. He didn’t hesitate to jump to his feet and scurry out after them, though he was surprised when Yata followed after him before Reisi did.

As everyone stretched, loosening up from over an hour of sitting in the van, Fushimi looked around and finally saw where they’d arrived at. In front of them was a large villa, like something out of a Western period romance movie. Fushimi supposed it was a beautiful building, but frankly, it reminded him a bit too much of his childhood home for comfort. Not that it was all that similar to the mansion that woman owned, but opulent homes always left him with that impression.
“C’mon Mikoto, time to wake up,” Totsuka’s voice could barely be heard from the back seat of the van. “We’re here.” A few long moments later and Totsuka appeared, followed by a bleary-eyed Mikoto. Fushimi wasn’t sure whether to be impressed or annoyed at the older medium’s capability to sleep through such a miserable journey.

Mikoto blinked as he stooped in the doorway of the van, not quite outside the vehicle as he took in their surroundings. His eyes narrowed to slits, and it was hard to tell if he’d sensed something or if he was just dazed by the light after his nap.

“You cousin named Aizawa?” Mikoto suddenly asked, eyeing up the building with an expression Fushimi couldn’t read.

“That’s right,” Tecchan replied. “You know her?”

“Mm,” Mikoto said in response, and it was hard to tell what he meant by that. It seemed to be a confirmation of some sort, at least.

Tecchan shrugged off Mikoto’s response easily, and waltzed up to the front door, ringing the bell without a second thought. It was almost a full minute before the door was answered by a woman with wrinkles at the corners of her eyes and a few streaks of gray visible in her hair.

“Tetsuro!” she greeted warmly. “We weren’t expecting you. What brings you here?”

“Well, Aunt Yoshie, that’s um,” Tecchan began, but his voice trailed off. Clearly he hadn’t bothered to think up an explanation for his presence there, or, more importantly, Homra’s presence there. “That is, I, uh, book! I borrowed a book from Kyouko-san, and um, well…”

The woman frowned a bit as Tecchan began his stammered explanation. Her eyes travelled past him to survey their little group, then went wide. She pushed past Tecchan suddenly, arrowing towards where everyone from Homra was still grouped by Kusanagi’s van.

“Mikoto-kun, is that you?” she asked, grabbing Mikoto by the shoulders. Mikoto looked much less disgruntled by the action than Fushimi would have expected. “It is, isn’t it?” the woman continued. “There’s no way it could be anyone else, not with that hair and eye color.”

“Mm,” Mikoto grunted, and was subsequently pulled into a tight hug. When he was finally released he added, “’S been a long time, Yoshie-san.”

“Stop that,” the woman replied. “I told you to at least call me Auntie, didn’t I? You are family, even if you were only with us for a little while.”

“Wait, Aunt Yoshie, is he one of your former fosters?” Tecchan asked.

“Of course!” Yoshie beamed back.

There was a stunned silence as everyone stared at Mikoto and Yoshie. Mikoto looked back at the others and shrugged nonchalantly, like this was completely normal. But given that the only person from Homra whose jaw wasn’t hanging open was Reisi, Fushimi had a feeling that this was a pretty shocking turn of events. Yata and Anna in particular seemed anxious, trading glances and fidgeting like they wanted to reach for Mikoto but were stopping themselves.

“But you must come in!” Yoshie insisted, oblivious to how frozen everyone else was. “Your friends too! Fujitaka will be so excited to see you again too, and Kyouko-chan, of course. And I’m sure the other guests will want to meet you as well.”
“Mm,” Mikoto hummed, letting himself be dragged up the steps to the front door. Tecchan and Kogawa both followed, and after a moment, so too did everyone from Homra. As they headed up to the house, Fushimi made a point of bumping against Yata, getting the shorter’s attention.

“Not going to hide yourself away in the van this time?” he asked, smirking. He told himself he was asking out of curiosity, but there was a part of him that was looking forward to Yata’s reaction.

“Like hell I would!” Yata snapped back. “It’s too fucking hot in there for that! If I stayed in that seat any longer, I’d be stuck to it.” He paused, then continued in a quavering voice, “B-besides, it d-doesn’t seem all that dangerous, r-right? I-I mean, I haven’t sensed anything y-y-yet, have you?”

Fushimi made a mental note to give Hirasaka hell the next time he saw her, since it must be because she was saying weird things that he thought Yata stuttering nervously like that was cute. There was no way he would ever think such a thing on his own. He most certainly didn’t have any special feelings for Yata, whatever Hirasaka might think, and what little attraction he had could easily be ignored.

“Shouldn’t you be asking Anna that?” Fushimi grumbled back. “I’m no good at sensing things.”

“Nah, you’ll get the hang of it,” Yata said, smiling back at Fushimi with surprising warmth. It was almost as if the redhead meant to reassure him.

Once they were all inside and changing into house slippers, Yoshie went to retrieve her husband. She’d been gone for a minute when Anna spoke up.

“Mikoto, are you okay?” she asked.

“Hm? Yeah, I’m fine,” Mikoto responded.

“You sure?” Yata asked. “Only, you never talk about your foster families.”

“Well it’s not like it is for you two,” Mikoto replied with a heavy sigh. “It’s less that they’re hard to talk about and more that there’s no real point in talkin’ ‘bout ‘em.”

“But you did experience some bad things back then,” Anna stated.

“Mm, yeah,” Mikoto said, nodding. “But I’m over that already. Besides, the Aizawa’s were a good family. If Gramps hadn’t adopted me, I probably woulda been fine staying with them. They ended up finding out about me, but they didn’t mind or anything.”

Yata and Anna exchanged another glance at Mikoto’s response, but before they could say anything more, Yoshie returned, an excited-looking man with salt-and-pepper hair, large round glasses, and a thick mustache in tow.

“Mikoto-kun! How’s your epilepsy?” the man asked, then laughed like he’d just said something hilarious.

“Dear,” Yoshie said in a warning voice.


“And Tetsuro, nice to see you here, as always,” Fujitaka continued, apparently satisfied. “I guess you guys decided to have a reunion, huh?”
“Uh, actually Uncle Fujitaka, I never met him,” Tecchan said, gesturing towards Mikoto. “But Kogawa here hired him and his pals to help with a haunted book, and they think a book I borrowed from Kyouko-san might have something to do with it.”

“Oooo, spooooooky,” Fujitaka said, lowering his voice and tremulating it a bit like he was trying to match his tone to the word. Mikoto’s jaw set into a mildly pained expression, and behind him, Yata rolled his eyes. Fushimi was tempted to do the same. “Though now that you mention it, Kyouko seemed to think something was up in the library too. She even called in some friends to help out with whatever’s going on.”

“Well we just need that book I borrowed, so I was gonna take them to get that,” Tecchan said. “Is that alright?”

“Go ahead, by all means,” Fujitaka and Yoshie chorused. There were slight variations in what they said, but the same meaning was still there. “You’ll probably run into Kyouko and her guests there, since they already headed off to do their detective work or whatever,” Fujitaka added.

As they parted from the couple and set off through the house, Totsuka trotted alongside Mikoto.

“So, Miikoriiin, Totsuka sang, “Shouldn’t you have told us if you have epilepsy?”

“Nah,” Mikoto replied. “I don’t actually have it. It was a misdiagnosis.”

“How do you misdiagnose something like that?” Fushimi scoffed.

“Guess normal people find an epilepsy-induced seizure brought on by the flickering of a campfire a bit more believable than a kid getting rammed repeatedly by about five different ghosts ‘til passing out,” Mikoto said lightly over his shoulder.

“What assholes,” Yata commented. It was unclear whether he meant the ghosts or whoever had diagnosed Mikoto.

“Mm,” Mikoto hummed. “That family ended up telling my social worker that they didn’t think they could handle my ‘special needs’ and so I was shunted off here. A couple months later, Gramps picked me up.”

“Shouldn’t your former foster-father be more concerned about your ‘epilepsy’ then?” Reisi asked, though he sounded like he already knew the answer.

“Nah, they took me to a doctor and realized it was bogus right away,” Mikoto explained. “I didn’t tell ’em it was ghosts at first, but then Yoshie-san almost got scammed by a phony psychic and I had to come clean. Luckily she believed me, at least about me seeing ghosts. I think they were at least a little skeptical of me being able to touch ‘em.”

“Woah, so you guys can touch ghosts too?” Kogawa-the-client asked.

“No, just Mikoto,” Reisi replied. “The rest of us all have different talents.”

“Gotta love how you include yourself in there, Rei,” Mikoto teased.

“Huh, so are you like, the strongest then?” Tecchan asked.

“Mm, sounds about right,” Mikoto agreed. Almost everyone from Homra coughed or cleared their throat as one, and all of the coughs and cleared throats all sounded like they were trying to cover up snorts or snickers. Totsuka even doubled over in his attempts to contain his mirth.
“Well I am,” Mikoto said, glaring at them all. “I can out-lift any of you.”

“I’m not sure he meant physical strength, Mikoto,” Kusanagi replied wryly. Mikoto stuck his tongue out at Kusanagi before smiling.

As they continued down the hall, Yata and Anna hung back, still keeping an eye on Mikoto. Fushimi, who was also hanging back because there was no point in rushing, could just hear it when Anna whispered, “He’s still apprehensive about something.”

“Well yeah,” Yata replied, his voice carrying more easily. The corner of Fushimi’s mouth couldn’t help but twitch upwards at the way the idiot couldn’t help but be loud. “He never talks about his time in foster care. If these people were really so great, wouldn’t he have at least said that one of his families was okay instead of clamming up about everything?”

“Maybe he thought we’d try and ask for more than he really wanted to tell us,” Anna replied.

“Haaaa?” Yata’s voice rose, drawing a few startled glances from the others in their group. All except Mikoto, that was. Mikoto continued looking studiously ahead, as if he knew exactly what was being discussed back there and was trying to ignore it. After waving off the attention of the others, Yata continued speaking in a hiss. “Like hell we would! If he can respect our boundaries, then we can do the same for him! If he doesn’t seem like he wants to talk about it, of course we’d shut up!”

“Well it might not be that he thought we’d press him for details,” Anna replied simply. “As I said, he’s still apprehensive. So unless he’s sensed something that we haven’t then probably is something unpleasant that happened while he was here.”

The hallway they were in ended in two large, wooden doors with ornate handles. Leaning against the wall outside the doors was a young woman who looked to be in her mid-twenties, a couple of years older than anyone from Homra. She looked up at their approach, and waved.

“Yo, Tetsu,” she called. “And Kogawa-san, right? And…” her eyes narrowed as she looked over Homra, and honed in on Mikoto, just like everyone else they’d met that day. “You look familiar,” she said, squinting. “Did we foster you, maybe?”

“Mm,” Mikoto acknowledged.

“Let me see. It was… Sugou, wasn’t it? Yeah, Sugou Makoto!” the woman said, snapping her fingers and nodding in satisfaction.

“Suoh Mikoto, actually,” Totsuka said helpfully from the sidelines.

“No, it was definitely Sugou Makoto, I’m sure of it,” the woman retorted with a snort. Wordlessly, Mikoto reached into his pocket and pulled out his wallet, flipping it open to produce an ID card. The woman stared at it, then huffed and crossed her arms, leaning back against the wall.

“However, I was close enough,” she muttered. She glanced sidelong back at them, and a smirk slid onto her face. “Still though, you turned out better than I would have expected. I might even go so far as to say you’re hot.”

Someone made a choking sound, and Kusanagi put a hand to his forehead in resignation.

“Yeah, my boyfriends think so too,” Mikoto said, leaning on the wall opposite the woman.

“Boyfriends?” the woman asked arching an eyebrow.
“That would be us,” Totsuka said, stepping forward with Reisi on his heels. The two of them flanked Mikoto, and Totsuka even put a territorial hand on Mikoto’s shoulder. Mikoto looked extremely smug at the woman’s obvious shock over this development.

“I figured two is better than one, doncha think?” he asked lazily.

“Eh, that depends on what it’s two of,” the woman replied, flapping a hand.

“Well in this case, it’s two awesome boyfriends,” Mikoto said.

“Gross,” Fushimi muttered under his breath.

“For fucking real,” Yata agreed in an undertone from beside him. Fushimi glanced over, and a second later, Yata’s eyes met his as the shorter did the same. Fushimi clicked his tongue and looked away, not wanting to know what would happen if he held that gaze.

“If you’re all done being embarrassing, may we see the library please?” Anna asked, her voice as soft, calm, and dignified as ever. Fushimi had to hand it to the girl, nothing ever seemed to faze her.

“Why do you need to see our library?” the woman asked.

“Well, Kyouko-san, Kogawa here’s been—” Tecchan began, but the woman cut him off.

“Nevermind, it doesn’t matter,” she said dismissively. “You can’t go in there right now. Some strange things have happened recently and so I called in some curse specialists to take care of it. You can’t go interrupting them.”

“Strange things? Curse specialists? Do tell,” Reisi said, pushing up his glasses and stepping forward. Kusanagi and Yata both groaned.

“Now that you’ve said that he’s gonna have to go in,” Kusanagi moaned.

“Well of course,” Reisi replied. “Don’t you want to confirm for yourself whether or not they’re the real deal? Besides, I’ve never seen anyone working with curses before, so it’ll be exciting to see them in action. This could be a learning opportunity for us!”

“What kinds of strange things?” Anna asked Kyouko as Reisi gushed.

“Like books switching places, or the book isn’t the same book it says it is,” Kyouko said. “Or you can open a book and each chapter is from a different book, or it’ll just be the same chapter over and over again. Sometimes you feel a breeze even when there can’t possibly be a draft, and once everything turned upside down. Oh, and one time I was reading a mystery novel and I had just gotten to the part where the murder had happened and all of a sudden the next page was the part where everything was revealed and I got spoiled.”

“Has anyone started acting peculiarly after reading any books in your library?” Anna asked.

“Psht, my parents always act peculiarly,” Kyouko replied, “whether they’ve read any books or not.”

“Hm, it’s not exactly the same, but the shifting contents is a bit like when you did that experiment with Fushimi,” Kusanagi mused. “I guess that as much as anything is a good reason to check it out. Fine Reisi, you win. Into the cursed library we go. If I die because of this, I swear to god I will haunt your ass, even if I have to possess Yata to do it.”
“Hey!” Yata protested.

“Excuse you, but you can’t just-” Kyouko began, but she fell silent when Mikoto aimed a glare at her. Even Fushimi, who wasn’t the recipient of that dark look, felt himself flinching. For a moment, he could almost have sworn there were flames in Mikoto’s eyes.

Reisi wasted no time reaching for the nearest doorknob. As he pulled the door open, Yata squeaked and jumped, grabbing Fushimi’s arm and clinging to it. Fushimi scowled at him, and Yata released him with a nervous laugh. If it were two other people, it might have been endearing, but there was no way Fushimi would fall for such an action, especially not from an idiot like Yata.

“Uh, you don’t need us from here on out, do you?” Tecchan asked, suddenly nervous. It was hard to tell if Yata’s jumpiness was contagious, or if it had caused Tecchan to lose faith in them, or if maybe he’d just been afraid from the start and had gotten this far on bravado and bluster.

“Y-yeah, you just need to find a book right?” Kogawa agreed. “How hard can that be?”

“Unless Fujitaka-san changed the layout since I was here, really hard,” Mikoto replied as Reisi entered the library, Totsuka at his heels. “I got lost in there for about four hours when we played hide-and-seek once.” He waved cheerfully as he followed the other two in.

“I’m regretting every life decision that got me involved with you guys,” Kusanagi deadpanned, moving to follow as well. If it weren’t for the lingering threat of that man’s ghost showing up again, Fushimi would be in complete agreement with him about wishing he weren’t part of Homra.

“Ugh, fine, I can guide you guys,” Kyouko said, a disgusted look on her face. She pushed off the wall she’d been leaning on, sighing heavily and rolling her eyes. What a drama queen. “If I don’t, you’ll probably ruin the ritual or whatever those guys are doing. Oh, and if anyone wets themselves on the carpet, you guys better handle the cleaning bill.” She looked pointedly at Yata for the last statement. And yeah, Yata was a total scaredy-cat, but that was totally uncalled for. Fushimi kinda felt like punching her.

“At least our people don’t come along for the ride and then chicken out at the last moment,” Fushimi found himself muttering for everyone to hear. In his peripheral vision, he caught sight of Tecchan and Kogawa shrinking back, knowing Fushimi’s words were directed at them.

“Yeah, well, we’re not being paid for this!” Kogawa retorted.

“Of course not. You turn tail and run the moment you feel scared, unlike some people, who are scared but stick with it regardless,” Fushimi countered. He stalked into the library as well, just barely aware of Yata and Anna flanking him as he went through the doors. Kyouko brought up the rear, pushing the door closed behind her. The shutting of the door felt alarmingly final, as if there was no turning back now. And somewhere, in the distance, Fushimi could almost hear that man’s laughter.
Chapter Notes

Libraries really are dangerous. Bookworms go in and are never seen again. Another messy chapter here, sorry. Hopefully you don't have too much trouble keeping track of people.

It wasn’t hard to guess why Mikoto had once gotten lost in the library of the Aizawa household. It was a large room— that much was only apparent when one looked up and saw the large expanse of ceiling overhead— and there were shelves everywhere. They were crammed in close together, often with just barely enough space between them for their group to pass through single-file. Not only that, but there was little rhyme or reason to how the shelves were arranged; there were constant sudden turns and random zigzags that made Fushimi irritated in their disorganization. It was chaos.

But despite the horrendous layout, Fushimi thought he might like the room. Libraries in general were good places. So long as you knew which areas to avoid because they were popular for make-outs, they were fairly safe spaces. They were quiet and air-conditioned, most people there were seeking to read or research and weren’t interested in bugging the other patrons, and they had wifi. Story time could get a bit annoying, but otherwise, it was paradise.

Yet even as he felt a fondness stirring up for the room, Fushimi felt a growing unease. He automatically threw up his mental shield and turned to glare at Yata, certain this must be another test, but the shorter medium was still in his own body, glancing about nervously and muttering swear words under his breath. Yata had his arms crossed in front of him, his hands gripping the opposite elbows as if he was trying to rein in his tension, but it was obvious how on edge he was.

Fushimi’s next suspicion was that Anna might be the responsible party, being an empath. But even as he turned his glare on her, he could feel that she wasn’t responsible. He wasn’t sure why he was so certain of that, just that he was. He turned back to the front just in time to avoid walking into yet another absurdly positioned shelf and then closed his eyes, taking a deep breath to calm himself without the distraction of visual input.

Oh. So that was it. With his eyes closed, his sixth sense kicked in. He felt the presence of Anna and Yata behind him, and Mikoto up ahead, and a bright shining star of a presence that he assumed was Reisi. But all around them were several dim little flickers, like pieces of a shadow spread far and wide. It certainly didn’t feel like a ghost, but there was definitely something there.

After checking that he wasn’t about to run into anything— at least not for a few more steps, anyway— Fushimi turned to ask over his shoulder, “Have you guys ever seen anything like whatever’s in here before?” It wasn’t that the unknown presence made him nervous or anything, it just made him… yeah, okay, it made him nervous. He didn’t like being in the metaphorical dark. He was a thinker, a planner. He collected information and then he reacted in such a way that would ensure he achieved maximum gain and minimum loss, and there was no way he could do that if he didn’t know what the fuck he was dealing with.

“Oh, only from that book the client brought to us,” Yata snorted in reply. Behind him, Anna was gazing around with her eyes wide in wonder.
“Yes,” she agreed. “They’re all like that book. Every single one of them, all flickering the same way. It’s pretty.”

“I’m glad at least someone’s enjoying it,” Fushimi grumbled.

“I’m not enjoying it,” Anna countered. “It’s… unpleasant. They’re all identical, and it’s like being inside a ghost, or being surrounded by several of the same ghost, and it reminds me of something unnatural I saw long ago. This is different than back then, but it still makes me uneasy. However, to my eyes at least, it’s pretty.”

“Well, I don’t know about pretty or anything like that, but I keep getting the feeling that there’s something else too,” Yata said. “Only I don’t know what. Just… I keep getting chills, y’know?”

“Yes, there is something that’s near but just out of reach,” Anna agreed. “Something that I don’t want getting any closer, no matter what. It’s distracting. My senses keep getting drawn to it, even when I’m trying to figure out what is happening in this library.”

“Wait, so there could be ghosts in here and you just aren’t sensing them because of that thing?” Yata asked, alarm apparent in his voice. “Shit, and Mikoto’s way up ahead, too…” he added in a whisper.

“Clinging to the most muscular person around is hardly likely to protect you from ghosts,” Fushimi said, feeling irritated. It was just that he didn’t like Yata’s whining. And also the uneasiness caused by the library was getting to him. And maybe what they’d said had sounded just a little bit ominous. All perfectly legitimate reasons for him to be irritable, unlike if he were to be irritated by the fact that Yata instantly sought Mikoto out when scared.

“What, should I just cling to you instead?” Yata retorted acerbically. Fushimi was too shocked to even make a comeback, but a moment later he heard a stifled giggle from Anna, and then Yata was sputtering, “Wait, no! That came out wrong!”

“Sounds like you guys are having fun back there,” Kusanagi said idly from just ahead of them, and Fushimi clicked his tongue. He wasn’t here for something as idle as fun.

When they turned the next corner, the aisle they were in was a little bit wider than the rest. The increase in space allowed Fushimi to see past Kusanagi’s lanky frame and notice that there was a slight clearing up ahead, a widened out space with a few chairs and openings leading in between several more chaotic pathways of shelves. As Fushimi watched, Mikoto stopped in the middle of the space, despite the fact that Kyouko, their “guide”, was already disappearing into a recess between shelves ahead. Totsuka and Reisi also stopped, stepping to the side to allow the rear end of their conga line to join them in the clearing.

Fushimi was just about to ask what the hell they were dawdling around there for when he stepped into the clearing himself and felt it. There was definitely a ghost in the library with them, and it was angry. Was this what Anna had been talking about earlier? Fushimi desperately tried to think of something, anything that might function as a shield and block out the overload of emotion that was enveloping his mind. He staggered to one of the chairs, barely aware of Yata and Anna behind him until he distantly heard a yelp from Yata and a gasp from Anna.

“Dunno if that’s what’s behind all this, but I think we should check it out,” Mikoto mumbled, his voice strained.

“How the fuck did we not sense it sooner?” Yata hissed through gritted teeth, his hands tugging at his beanie as if he was trying to crawl into it and hide. Fushimi felt like commenting that although
Yata lacked height, even he wasn’t quite that small as to be able to hide in a beanie, but he choked on the words in the face of the emotion rolling towards him.

“Excuse me, but would you mind telling us what exactly is happening right now?” Totsuka said. “Not all of us are mediums, and it would also be good for the tape if you explained as well.”

“Until we reached this clearing, we weren’t sensing any ghosts,” Anna replied. “At least, not in this house. There are many fragmented presences, like in that book, but that was all we sensed in the house until just now, when we suddenly sensed a very angry ghost, not too far away.”

“Ooooh, how exciting!” Totsuka enthused. “A ghost that can-”

“Oh for fuck’s sake, why am I even guiding you guys if you’re not even gonna follow me!” Kyouko interrupted, reappearing from the labyrinthine corridors.

“These shelves are wrought iron, aren’t they?” Reisi asked, inspecting the nearest metal frame.

“How should I know?” Kyouko asked. “I’m not a metallurgist or whatever.”

“Iron would interfere with your perceptions, would it not?” Reisi continued, completely ignoring Kyouko. “And now that the iron isn’t quite so close and there is presumably less of it between you and the ghost, you are able to sense things more clearly.”

“No wonder this guy’s so angry,” Yata muttered. “If these shelves are iron, then it’s like someone made him sit on a thumbtack.”

“Eh, with this much, I’d say it’s more like they made him sit on a chair full of thumbtacks and then kept kicking the bottom of the chair,” Mikoto said.

“What the hell? That’s fucking twisted!” Yata said.

“Yeah, but it’s a more accurate comparison,” Mikoto replied.

“So where’s this ghost you guys are sensing then?” Kusanagi asked.

“That way,” Anna said, pointing with a finger that was trembling just a little. Fushimi wondered if she wasn’t crazy, to not run when she was clearly struggling to deal with the ghost’s maelstrom of emotion. He wondered if they weren’t all crazy, himself included. Because for some reason, he was planning on sticking with them. It was probably just because they were his ride back to civilization. Better to stick with them in this air-conditioned but dangerous environment than to suffer all alone in that overheated van.

“So?” Mikoto said, tilting his head to look at Kyouko. “How d’we get over there?”

“That depends on where over there you want to go,” Kyouko replied.

“Well we could always just knock over the shelves to make things easier,” Totsuka suggested.

“Indeed, that would be the most practical solution,” Reisi agreed, nodding.

“Are you kidding me!” Kyouko hissed. “Some of these books are really old and rare and delicate! How dare you suggest treating them that way!”

“Well then maybe Saru-kun should bring it over,” Totsuka suggested.

“No good,” Anna said. “Ghosts can’t go through iron. As soon as he encountered a shelf the ghost
would go not farther, and in the end, he’d only get angrier being forced closer to such a painful substance.”

“In that case, perhaps I can be of assistance,” Reisi said. With a benign smile, he contemplated the various pathways stemming from the clearing, before honing in on one of them. “This way,” he said, and took the lead. Totsuka followed him, and then the other mediums and Kusanagi, leaving only Fushimi and Kyouko. When Fushimi took his place behind Kusanagi again, he thought perhaps Kyouko would just leave, but she followed, muttering that they better not disturb the curse specialists.

“Why didn’t we just do this from the start?” Fushimi asked, leaning forward so only Kusanagi would hear.

“Because if you ask Reisi for a favor, he’ll wait until you’ve offered up everything you own plus your kidneys and your soul and your firstborn child before he actually bothers to help. It’s better to let him decide to help on his own. Plus, it’s not like Ms. Pleasantry back there was gonna let us in unsupervised.”

Somehow, it didn’t surprise Fushimi in the least that Reisi was the type to milk a favor for all it was worth and then some. In fact, now that he’d heard it spoken, he was sure that he would have expected no less of the raven-haired psychic.

The next clearing they reached was much larger, and appeared to be the center of the library. There was a large chandelier hanging overhead, illuminating the space, and there were tables and chairs that had been haphazardly pushed to the sides, leaving only a few plinths with glass cases protecting old and musty-looking tomes. As Fushimi joined the others from Homra on the edge of the space, he caught sight of four guys clustered around one of the plinths. They’d lit some candles around the plinth, and there was some chalk drawing on the carpet as well. One of the guys held a scepter, another had some bells, a third held an ohnusa, and the fourth had his hands in a mudra and was chanting out a mantra. All in all, to Fushimi it looked like a peculiar blend of Shinto, Buddhist, and Western beliefs with a bit of occultism thrown in. He was pretty sure it was a safe bet that these were the so-called curse specialists.

“You guys, you’re gonna disturb them!” Kyouko hissed when she caught sight of the four in the center.

“Isn’t the one raising a fuss more likely to disturb them than the people quietly observing?” Fushimi replied in an undertone.

“Well I wouldn’t be raising a fuss if it weren’t for you lot, so it’s your fault!” Kyouko replied, then added, “Dick.”

“Oh dear me, I feel sooooo insulted,” Fushimi drawled. Actually he did feel just a little bit offended, because it really annoyed him when people resorted to such basic insults. They could at least be a little bit creative in the names they called him.

Kyouko merely huffed in annoyance. Apparently she was at least smart enough to know when she’d already lost.

The guy chanting the mantra finished, and he nodded to the guy with the bells. The guy with the bells raised them and shook them three times, causing the bells to ring out once with each shake. As the sound of the bells faded out, a still hush fell over the room.

In the span of a moment, all the faded presences from the books scattered around the room
vanished. Fushimi was about to be impressed, when he noticed there was someone new among the four guys. It was a cowled figure, and judging by the tension he suddenly felt building around the figure, he was willing to bet it was the very ghost whose presence they had followed here. He was also willing to venture a guess that it was still just as angry as it had been, if not more so.

“Phew, well, guess that’s done,” one of the guys said, putting down the scepter and moving to start scuffling out the chalk.

“Not so fast, Akira, I think there’s still something here,” the guy with the ohnusa replied.

“What? But wasn’t that rite supposed to dissolve any curse, no matter what?” Akira asked.

“Not any curse, just most,” the bell guy said. “We didn’t bring that bone rattle, or offer a proper norito, after all.”

“Besides, you don’t really dissolve a curse,” the second guy said. “Typically you turn it back on the caster. The caster is still out there, and their ill will still remains.”

“Whatever, we did our part, didn’t we?” Akira whined.

The fourth guy ignored the other three, instead taking in the unexpected spectators. His eyes narrowed as he saw everyone from Homra, and his tone was bitter when he spoke up to ask, “Can we help you?” At his words, the other three guys turned and stared at the group from Homra like they’d just popped out of the ground.

“No, we’re just here for the ghost,” Mikoto said, a smirk growing on his face.

“Ghost, what ghost?” the four guys chorused.

“The one whose curse you just undid,” Mikoto replied, his grin growing wolfish. He began cracking his knuckles while staring down the ghost, and Fushimi was certain the guys thought he was trying to menace them.

“Mikoto, you should be more careful,” Anna chided. “Some ghosts feed on fear, you know that.”

“Well that doesn’t mean we shouldn’t tell them when there’s a ghost right next to them,” Mikoto grumbled, rolling his eyes.

“She means that your method of telling them was a little intimidating, Mikoto,” Kusanagi explained, stepping closer to his friend to lay a hand on his shoulder. “They don’t know that all your bloodlust is for the ghost and not them.”

The four curse specialists watched the interactions in front of them apprehensively, their eyes bouncing from speaker to speaker like a tennis ball being whacked around a court.

“Whatever,” Mikoto grumbled. “Point is, there’s a ghost right next to you guys, and it’s pissier than Yata when you make him get up early.”

It was a true testament to how nervous Yata must’ve been right then, since he didn’t even rise to the bait. Instead he remained huddled behind Mikoto, his eyes frequently darting to the nearest opening in the shelves as if planning out his retreat. And honestly, Fushimi kinda understood his fear in this instance. He was no longer overwhelmed by the ghost’s fury, but he could still feel it burning, waiting to explode.

“Y-you’re sure there’s a ghost here?” Akira said nervously. “W-we can deal with a ghost, right?”
he turned to look at the other guys with pleading eyes.

“Unfortunately, no. We’re only equipped to deal with curses,” ohnusa guy replied cheerfully.

“Uwaa, Gottie, you’re supposed to reassure me right now!” Akira whined.

“Don’t worry, everything will be fine,” Totsuka said, his bright smile in place. “We can take care of it. Or rather, some of us can, while the rest are here just cuz.”

“That was comforting… until it wasn’t,” Kusanagi said under his breath.

“Uh-oh,” Yata whimpered suddenly, and Fushimi was about to ask what he meant when the ghost began oozing shadows, slowly rising to loom above the curse specialists even as its darkness eased towards them. The entire library seemed to get darker, and above them, the chandelier swayed in circles.

“Oh, not good,” guy four said, looking up at the chandelier.

“Hey Akira, you can go ahead and panic now,” ‘Gottie’ said, swallowing nervously. Akira croaked and reached for bell guy, who clutched at him right back. They reminded him of Yata, only even less appealing. It was probably because they were taller than Yata, and tall people cowering was just awkward.

“Stop that,” Anna said, and everyone who wasn’t from Homra obeyed. Fushimi almost obeyed as well, only managing to throw up his shield at the last moment. Kyouko and the four curse specialists all stood still, their shoulders slumped and their jaws slack as they stared vacantly into space.

“Oops,” Totsuka said, panning the camera over the various victims. “Looks like you overdid it a bit Anna-chan.”

“Yes,” Anna agreed, her tone slightly petulant. “But it’s not really a bad thing, since they were panicking too much.”

“But can you really blame them?” Kusanagi asked. Fushimi felt a surge of annoyance at the fact that even the supposedly ordinary people in Homra managed to resist Anna’s power. He was supposed to be a medium, and yet he could barely avoid it. He clicked his tongue.

“Even the normal people aren’t affected by it?” he grumbled under his breath.

“Affected by… oh, you mean Anna’s power just now?” Kusanagi said. “Actually, she gave us some of her marbles a while back. They protect us from her power somehow.”

Fushimi clicked his tongue again, annoyed at having been overheard and at discovering the existence of such a convenient item. He also found it irritating how Anna seemed to be the solution to just about everything- wasn’t she too overpowered?

Speaking of Anna, the girl was approaching the ghost. Given the way the ghost had enlarged itself and Anna’s doll-like appearance, it somehow looked almost as if she were a little girl walking up to an adult. Fushimi half-expected her to take the ghost’s hand, even though that was impossible for anyone but Mikoto.

“You need to move on,” Anna said, her voice gentle but stern. “It’s past time for you to go.”

The shadows flared, and there was such a surge of rage from the ghost that Fushimi almost fell
“I can feel that you’re still angry,” Anna said, as if replying to another person’s complaint. “But can you even tell me why you are angry? It’s been so long for you that you can’t really remember anymore, can you?”

This time, the shadows shrank back, almost hesitant.

“That’s right,” Anna continued, her voice almost a coo now. “I know it seems scary, but it’ll be alright. You will finally be able to have peace once you move on. Don’t you want to rest?”

The ghost responded by shrieking and throwing shadows all over the room, and then disappearing. Anna, who had been right in front of the ghost, was hit by a strong breeze that messed up her hair.

“That was unnecessary,” Anna said sourly to the empty space left by the ghost. Already, everyone was relaxing.

“Ghosts. Such fucking drama queens,” Yata grumbled, releasing Mikoto’s arm and straightening up.

“Guess that’s somethin’ you got in common, huh?” Mikoto teased, flexing the arm Yata had been clinging to as if trying to restart blood circulation.

“Is it already gone then?” Totsuka asked, lowering his camera. “How disappointing. I was hoping that I’d be able to get some cool shots of Mikotan in action today.”

“Maybe next time,” Reisi said, giving Totsuka a consolatory pat on the shoulder.

“Well, guess that’s all done,” Kusanagi said, stretching.

“Hold up, what do you mean, all done!” guy number four said. Fushimi turned, only just noticing that Anna’s power no longer held the curse specialists and Kyouko. “There’s still-!” He cut off as the bell guy put a hand on his bicep.

“It’s okay, Daiki,” bell guy said. “Whatever was still here after we undid the curse is gone. They took care of it.” He stepped forward and bowed, saying “Thank you for helping us today.”

“No, I should be thanking you,” Anna said. “That ghost was entering every book it encountered and leaving bits of itself behind, and had entered every book inside this library as well as untold others. As such, we would have had to track down every volume it inhabited to be able to send it on, which would likely have been impossible. But by undoing the ‘curse’ on the books, you caused him to regroup, making him much easier to deal with. You really helped us out as well.”

“Incidentally, would you mind telling us who you are?” Kusanagi said, entering business mode. “We’ve never heard of you guys, and we know most psychics in the area, particularly when they use their ability for business.”

“Oh, we’re from Scepter 4,” Akira said. “I’m Hidaka Akira, and this is Fuse Daiki, Enomoto Tatsuya, and Gotou Ren.” He indicated guy number four, the bell guy, and the ohnusa guy in turn.


“The scepter part is because the scepter is a symbol of protection,” Gotou said, his eyes aglow with enthusiasm. “It’s multicultural, and they can be useful, so it was chosen to represent our firm. As for the 4 part of the name, that’s because there were originally only four members of the team.
We’re people they hired as they got more cases. Fuse’s got a bit of talent and Eno and I are both really knowledgeable about the occult, and Akira’s our fodder if things go wrong.”

“Hey!” Akira protested.

“Anyway, since we’re being all friendly, why don’t you tell us who you are?” Fuse said rudely.

“We’re Homra!” Yata said proudly, thumping his chest like some sort of hoodlum posturing to seem macho.

“We’re mediums,” Anna elaborated.

“We get rid of ghosts,” Kusanagi said, giving a real explanation since the other two hadn’t. “We also run a bar where we collect information about paranormal activities and psychic phenomena.”

“So all of you are mediums then?” Enomoto asked.

“Ah, not quite,” Kusanagi said. “I’m not, and our camera man’s not, and then that smug-looking glasses guy is a psychic rather than a medium, but the other four are.”

“That’s cool!” Enomoto gushed.

“Hmm,” Mikoto grunted, then added, “You should probably put out those candles.”

It was true, the candles were starting to drip wax. Kyouko shrieked at the sight, and Akira, Enomoto, and Fuse all rushed to remedy the problem. As for Homra, they stayed just long enough for Kusanagi to hand over a business card to Gotou, and then they left, Reisi guiding them out of the library without error.

Outside, Kogawa and Tecchan were waiting. Fushimi was a bit surprised to see them, having expected them to clear off long ago. Still, he supposed that, like him, those two idiots were stranded out here until Kusanagi drove them back.

The sun was sinking low as they drove back, and the air was a little cooler, so the temperature inside the van was a little less hellish and was more like a sauna instead. When they got back to the bar, the client and his friend followed them inside, and Anna retrieved the client’s book, the one which had gotten them involved in the whole mess to begin with. After she confirmed that the book was indeed clean- at least, clean of any ghostly influences or psychic residue- the book was returned to the client, and he and his friend left. Fushimi let out a deep sigh of satisfaction after they left. While Kogawa and Tecchan hadn’t been particularly annoying themselves, the case they’d brought had been rather bothersome all told. He would be glad if they never darkened Homra’s doorstep again- at least, not as long as he was stuck working at the bar.

The two outsiders were scarcely out the door before Shiro came bouncing into the bar. His exuberance was almost sickening to Fushimi.

“Oh good, you’re here!” Shiro exclaimed, not even giving them a moment to adjust to his abrupt entrance. “I was worried you wouldn’t be since you’re not open. But anyway, I’ve got great news! Uncle Ichigen says we can call on grandpa tomorrow!”
Kokujouji Sheds Some Light on the Situation

Chapter Notes

Hopefully it's not needed, but since some things haven't been outright stated and others haven't been mentioned in a while, here's a few reminders to try and minimize confusion on this chapter:

1: Shiro's grandfather is Kokujouji (the gold king), and he is dead. When they talk about calling him, they mean holding a seance.
2: The reason they are trying to get in contact with Kokujouji is so they can consult him about Fushimi's ability since Kokujouji was an expert medium.

When Fushimi first pulled up to Miwa Ichigen’s home, he thought that it was a temple. Perhaps it was the small gravel parking area it had. Or maybe it was because the entrance was a set of stone steps rising into the trees, guarded by a torii. Or maybe it was because he could smell the faint scent of incense even as he got out of his car. Whatever the case, it seemed almost theatrical to his cynical self.

At the top of the stone steps, Fushimi found a Japanese-style house. Many of the walls were screens that had been pushed aside to open up the rooms to the late summer breeze, and there was an external hallway running along the edges of the house. Anna was sitting at the edge of the external hallway, her legs dangling off the side. Instead of her usual frilly dress, she wore a simple, undyed, cotton kimono. Combined with her pale hair and skin, it made her look washed out and faded.

“Saruhiko,” she greeted warmly. “It seems you’re the first to arrive.”

“So you don’t count?” he asked sarcastically.

“No, since Shiro picked us up this morning,” Anna replied. Fushimi bit his tongue to keep from asking who all was included in that “us”. It wasn’t like he cared or anything. “Uncle Ichigen wanted our help preparing things.”

“Will you be helping during the seance itself then?” Fushimi asked. He didn’t know what to expect from the evening’s main event.

“Hopefully not,” Anna replied. “If things go wrong we could be needed, but Uncle Ichigen has been doing this for quite some time, and hasn’t had an accident in years.”

“I see,” Fushimi said.

“Anyway, since you’re here you should head to the baths,” Anna told him. “Part of the reason for Uncle Ichigen’s success is taking precautions, and having guests undergo purification before participating in a seance is one of the ways he does so. I’ll take you.”

Anna got to her feet and quietly padded along the outdoor hallway, and Fushimi followed from the ground. The difference in their footing left the girl a full head taller than Fushimi, which he didn’t like. While he wasn’t exactly a giant, he took pride in his height being a few inches above average. It was bad enough that three of the five guys at Homra were already taller than Fushimi; having
something else to make him feel short was downright irritating.

As they made their way around the house, they left behind the open screens of the front in favor of actual walls occasionally punctuated by screen doors. At the back corner of the house, there was a set of stairs connecting the ground and the hallway, with a mat at the base. There were a few pairs of shoes at the bottom, including a pair of dainty heels that had to be Anna’s, a pair of scuffed and battered sneakers that Fushimi was willing to bet were Yata’s, and a pair of black combat boots that seemed like the sort of thing Mikoto would go for. There was also a pair of loafers and some zori and even a pair of geta, but Fushimi ignored those once he’d identified the first three. It was… pleasant, maybe, that he knew them well enough to figure out which shoes were those of his colleagues, even if it was completely useless information. He liked being able to predict people.

As soon as Fushimi’s shoes had been added to the arrangement on the mat and he had joined Anna on the hallway, Anna knocked on the nearest door screen. A moment later it slid open, and Shiro’s head popped out.

“Oh hey,” he greeted. “Nice to see ya!”

“You’ll explain everything?” Anna asked.


Not seeing any other options, Fushimi obeyed, sliding the screen shut behind him. When he turned towards the room, Shiro was standing there in a kimono almost identical to Anna’s, beaming at Fushimi like he was seeing an old friend for the first time in a while.

“So, what’s this purification stuff?” Fushimi asked, disgruntled by Shiro’s friendliness. It was like Totsuka, only he’d had some time to get used to Totsuka and Shiro was still practically a stranger.

“It’s an important ritual to help Uncle maintain the purity of this place,” Shiro said. “When people walk around, they pick up all sorts of influences, physical, mental, and spiritual. They carry those influences around, and when they enter a place, those influences do too. Therefore, in order to keep this place pure, everyone who enters must be pure. If not, the seance could be hindered and the wrong ghost could show up, or a fallen god, or all sorts of nasty things.”

“Oh, right,” Fushimi said, losing his patience. Shiro laughed again, nervously this time, and reached up to rub the back of his neck.

“Well, there’s sorta some special rules and stuff,” Shiro said. “And technically it’s actually three baths. Though really the first one’s the only one that’s an actual bath and-”

“What. Do. I. Need. To. Do?” Fushimi interrupted, losing his patience. Shiro laughed again, nervously this time, and reached up to rub the back of his neck.

“Well, first is the real bath,” Shiro said. “You’ll need to clean yourself as best you can in there. To be honest, it doesn’t do much for the purification, but it’s still an important step because you need to be squeaky clean when you go to meditate, which is step two.” Shiro brandished two fingers to emphasize which step they were on. “You will spend ten minutes meditating. It’s pretty simple, just try and clear your mind. If ten minutes isn’t enough, you can always go for a second round later, but not right away because that water is really cold.”
Fushimi got a chilling sense of foreboding at that.

“Wait,” he said before Shiro could continue. “When you say meditate, you don’t mean like… under a waterfall, or something like that... do you?”

“That’s exactly what I mean,” Shiro said, nodding and smiling like he’d just won a medal. Weirdo. “There’s a spring here, and the water is about as untainted as you can find. Uncle was lucky to find it.”

“Oh dear god. Why?” Fushimi asked no one in particular.

“Because it helps you wash away all your darkness,” Shiro said as if it hadn’t been a rhetorical question. “Anyway, after that is step three, which is mostly to warm you up, but it also helps cleanse any spiritual influences. You get to soak as long as you want in a nice heated bath. It’s like an onsen with lavender water.” Shiro sighed dreamily.

“Right. So scrub up, meditate for ten minutes, and then warm up. Anything else?” Fushimi asked.

“Yeah, one more thing,” Shiro said. “Make sure you leave everything in the changing rooms. Any clothing or accessories or personal items can’t go any further. Your glasses are fine, but that’s it. There are kimonos at the end for you to wear.”

“Got it,” Fushimi said, and began to head towards the opening he could see that was labelled “men”.

“Oh, I almost forgot!” Shiro said, and Fushimi almost snorted in derision. “About step two: Yata-kun reminded me to tell everyone to just dive in right away rather than try to take it slowly. If you hesitate, it’s harder to keep going, so it’s best to get the shock over with all at once.”

Fushimi grunted and proceeded into the changing rooms.

Forty minutes later, Fushimi emerged from the baths in one of the plain cotton kimonos. He didn’t feel any purer than before, but he’d made an effort, so whatever, he’d tried. He could already hear a certain loud voice, and, following it, he found Yata and Mikoto playing kemari along with an unfamiliar man who wore a proper kimono paired with hakama as well as a hat and a gentle smile. As Fushimi approached, Mikoto kicked the ball, and it veered towards Fushimi.

“Ah,” Mikoto said, but Yata was already diving for the ball. Fushimi barely stepped out of the way in time as Yata just missed the ball and tumbled to the ground.

“Aw man,” Yata whined as he got to his feet. Noticing Fushimi for the first time, he started. “H-how long were you there?! he yelped.

“I think you know the answer to that given that you tried to tackle me in a hug the moment I arrived,” Fushimi said, because somehow it was hard to resist teasing the redhead. It didn’t help that his usual beanie was gone, revealing hair that stuck up in little tufts that was cute. As in, it reminded Fushimi of a small child. It wasn’t attractive or anything like that.

“Sh-shut u- I mean- hush,” Yata said, pouting. “I wasn’t trying to hug you, I was just trying to get the ball. A-anyway, you should join us. It’s fun.”

Fushimi had his doubts about that, but he joined in anyway. It would be a decent way to pass the time until whatever happened next.

As darkness fell, Kusanagi and Totsuka arrived, and then Reisi. As soon as they had all undergone
their own purifications—Fushimi had to admit he rather enjoyed the shrieking that came when Kusanagi and Totsuka began their meditation—the man who had been playing kemari introduced himself as Miwa Ichigen, Shiro’s uncle. Ichigen led them to a plain room with tatami floors and wooden walls. There were no windows, and the only lights were paper lanterns spread along the walls.

“Please find one of the circles of salt and seat yourself inside it,” Ichigen instructed. Fushimi hadn’t even noticed any circles of salt in the dim lighting of the room, and squinted, noticing for the first time that there was a curved line of salt just a few feet away from him. “Be careful not to disturb the salt, and make sure that no part of you or your attire sticks out.”

They all obeyed. The circles were a little hard to find, but they were spacious enough to sit comfortably in. Once everyone was inside a circle, it became apparent that the circles were evenly spaced around the edges of the room, leaving the center of the room open. As they settled into their circles, Ichigen brought two candles into the room and lit them. He then placed a large bowl of sand between them and stuck two lit sticks on incense inside it. The next items to join the display were an ink tray and brush and a piece of rice paper. Last was a sheathed sword.

Ichigen knelt in the center, next to the two candles, and began writing on the rice paper with the brush. Once he had finished, he held the rice paper up to the nearest candle, letting the flame take it, before placing it atop the bowl of sand to continue burning. As the paper was consumed, he got to his feet, picking up the sword, and as the last corner combusted, he unsheathed the sword and slashed it across the air above the items in one smooth motion.

The lanterns went out all at once, leaving on the flickering candles and the glow of something otherworldly to light the room. The glow came from a transparent person, a tall old man with an imposing aura. He didn’t feel like a ghost, exactly, but he definitely wasn’t living.

“It’s good to see you four doing so well,” he greeted. “I see you’ve still got that scalliwag hanging around, and you’ve even found some interesting new friends.”

“It’s good to see you too,” Anna replied.

“Long time no see,” Shiro said, waving.

“Gramps,” Mikoto grunted.

“Heya Pops,” Yata said.

“Oh, can we talk now?” Kusanagi asked. When Ichigen and the four “grandchildren” all nodded, he continued. “Cool. I resent the scalliwag label, by the way. You yourself asked me to look after these guys since you knew they needed someone responsible to look after ‘em.”

“That doesn’t change the fact that you are a shameless cheat at card games,” the old man replied.

“You think I’m bad, you should try playing Reisi over there,” Kusanagi retorted.

“A worthwhile opponent,” the old man said. “But being able to predict the outcomes of decisions isn’t infallible. However, I do not think you would have troubled Ichigen to call me here just to chat and introduce your new friends.”

“It’s about Saruhiko’s ability,” Anna said. “He says it’s locked.”

The ghost slowly turned, his gaze raking across Totsuka before landing on Fushimi and surveying him. It was unnerving, like his very soul was being bared. Even the scrutiny he’d received from
Kuro and Neko when he’d first gone to see Shiro hadn’t been so bad.

“A medium did this,” the old man said after a long moment that left Fushimi feeling breathless. “The only ways it can be undone are if the medium who locked your ability undoes it themself, or if they leave this world. Something like this… it reminds me of Mizuchi.”

“But Mizuchi-sensei wasn’t a medium,” Anna protested.

“No, but it seems like something that would appeal to him, don’t you think?” the old man replied, raising an eyebrow as he turned back toward the girl.

“Well I don’t know any Mizuchi, and those four are the first mediums I’ve ever met,” Fushimi replied, nodding to Anna, Mikoto, Yata, and Shiro. “An acquaintance of mine is a psychic, but I doubt she’d lock my ability.”

“The medium who did this wasn’t necessarily alive,” the old man said, once again swiveling to face Fushimi. “Many mediums find themselves having even more power once they are dead. My grandchildren may be the first living mediums you’ve met, but with your ability in that condition, it is likely you have come across some deceased mediums in the past.”

“But why would someone lock his ability like that?” Yata asked. “I mean, it’s not like it’ll do anything for ghosts, is it?”

“A prank perhaps,” the old man mused. “Or maybe for the sake of absorption. A ghost or even a living medium can harness the energy of other ghosts and consume it to get stronger, after all. Having a lure that will bring ghosts running would be very convenient for one who wished to grow in strength.” Everyone in the room shuddered at the thought. “It also could be someone who hoped to find a deceased loved one, and thought it easiest to draw them close, or perhaps someone who hoped to keep ghosts away from themselves by drawing the ghosts to someone else instead.”

“Is there any way to track the medium who did this?” Shiro asked. “A medium would leave residue, right?”

“Unfortunately, that residue wouldn’t linger long on someone like him,” the old man replied. “When you’ve encountered as many ghosts as he has, the residue begins to blend together. Picking one strand out would be even harder than finding a needle in a haystack.”

“Then I guess we’ll have to ask everyone to keep a lookout for anyone living who might have done this, and hope that if it’s someone dead they won’t stay quiet and we’ll meet them soon,” Kusanagi sighed.

“Indeed,” the old man said. “But I think that whoever did this likely wouldn’t stray too far. The only medium who’s afraid of ghosts is right here, after all.”

“Misaki’s too good-hearted to do such a thing,” Anna said.

“Not to mention he’s such a bad liar we’d figure out if it was him immediately,” Totsuka teased.

“That is certainly true,” the old man agreed with a fond smile. “I still remember the time he and Mikoto cut Yashiro’s hair for him…”

“Yes but at least it got Anna-chan to laugh so it was worth it to look like someone released a clan of gerbils into my hair until we could get it evened out,” Shiro laughed.

“We still got grounded though,” Yata complained.
“We wouldn’a got grounded if you hadn’t cracked under pressure and confessed everything,” Mikoto grunted. “Gramps took one look at Shiro and you started sobbing and spilled.”

“I’d already guessed it was you two,” the old man said. “Something about the fact that you both got Shiro’s hair on your clothes. Mikoto was even holding a pair of scissors still.”

“Woulda gotten away with it my-” Yata muttered, then cut himself off, finishing lamely with, “shorts.”

“As much as I’d like to spend more time with you, it is not good to spend too much time on this side,” the old man sighed. “Not to mention it is taxing on Ichigen if I do. Please forgive me if I say I hope I don’t see you four for the rest of your lives; I’d like for things to go smoothly for you all.”

“Of course,” Anna said.

“Same goes to you, Gramps,” Mikoto agreed.

“We’ll make sure to properly light incense for you and stuff,” Yata promised.

“I’ll take care of them like I promised, don’t worry,” Kusanagi cut in.

“See you next time, however many years it’ll be,” Shiro said gently.

A breeze passed through the room and in one moment, the old man vanished and the candles went out, plunging the room into darkness. A second later, the lanterns turned themselves back on, and Ichigen sheathed his sword, letting out a deep breath. It seemed the seance was over.

After some brief farewells, they were allowed to return to the changing rooms and put their clothes back on, and then they all headed back down to the parking area together. As soon as they’d passed through the torii, Yata burst out with, “Fuck yeah! I can swear again! No need to watch my language down here.”

“Has it ever occurred to you that the reason you’re so easily possessed is because you swear all the time?” Kusanagi suggested calmly.

“Pfft, you’re not foolin’ me with that, Kusanagi-san,” Yata replied. “I’ve been like this since I was a kid and I never cussed at all until I was a teenager already.”

“He used to be the one to enforce the swear jar,” Anna confirmed. “All the money in the jar was Mikoto’s.”

“No, I had to add money a few times,” Shiro said. “About three I think.”

“Well if we had a swear jar now, Yata would definitely be the main contributor,” Kusanagi said.

“Whatever,” Yata replied, sticking out his tongue. “Anyway, what’d you guys think? Pops is pretty cool right? Even if he couldn’t really give us any advice… But still, he was able to identify the problem right away.”

“I agree that Koukujouji-san would be a worthwhile opponent,” Reisi said, his glasses glinting even in the low light of nighttime.

“I’m just sad that I couldn’t take a camera in,” Totsuka sighed. “I could have gotten such wonderful footage.”

“Identifying the problem does absolutely nothing for me though,” Fushimi grumbled.
“Yeah, I suppose that’s true,” Kusanagi agreed ruefully.

“Are you going to stay?” Anna asked Fushimi, and a hush fell, as if everyone were holding their breath and waiting for Fushimi’s response.

The answer was no, obviously. Or it should be no. And yet…

“I’ll probably have better chances of finding whoever it is that did this being around you,” Fushimi grumbled. “If it’s a ghost, you’re just as likely to encounter it as I am, and if it’s someone living, you’ve got that information network right? Not to mention I doubt I’ll be able to handle whoever it is on my own, whether they’re dead or alive.”

“Guess we’ll see you tomorrow then, huh?” Yata said, and he seemed pleased somehow. It was probably Fushimi’s imagination though. It wasn’t like they were friends or anything. After all, Fushimi didn’t have friends. He wouldn’t have been sad at all to leave them behind.

But Fushimi couldn’t help but be glad that he was going to see them again. He was even smiling a little on the way home, though he didn’t realize it until he reached his apartment and opened the door to a sight that made his smile vanish as if it had never existed.

No.

Please no.

But he was there. Him. The ghost of the one who had been Fushimi’s paternal DNA contributor. Just as Fushimi’s own smile had vanished, that man’s smile appeared, delighted and malicious and just like Fushimi remembered. His mouth moved, and although Fushimi couldn’t hear the words, he could still imagine what that man might say, his taunts and laughter still far too vivid in Fushimi’s memory.

Desperately, Fushimi backpedaled, staggering until he hit the door and then fumbling his way out, only just remembering to lock the door behind him. He fled back to the garage, to his car, and burned rubber as he sought to escape.

Fushimi automatically set the car on a course for Homra, not even considering that the bar might not be occupied just then until he arrived in the empty parking lot to see the lights all out. Of course they weren’t there. The bar was closed, and they lived elsewhere. What was he supposed to do now? He could just see the passenger seat in his peripheral vision, and in it that man and his sneer.

Someone tapped on the car window and Fushimi jumped. He rolled down the window, glad he hadn’t cut the engine yet.

“Saru-kun? What’s wrong?” Totsuka asked.

Right. Totsuka lived here, in the apartment above the bar. Totsuka might not be a medium, but maybe he could still help. It meant asking for help, which Fushimi hated, but he couldn’t handle this alone. His hands trembled, and he took a deep steadying breath, mentally boxing up his pride for later when it wouldn’t get in the way.

“Totsuka-san,” he said, and it was shameful to hear the waver in his voice. He swallowed before continuing. “Can I ask you for a favor?”
Fushimi Makes a Discovery

Chapter Notes

Long chapter this time since certain things took a bit longer to write than I expected, and while I could have split things into two chapters, I decided it would be better to keep things rolling.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Fushimi’s car crawled forward, mirroring its driver’s uncertainty. He’d followed the directions Totsuka had given him (which had been surprisingly normal. He would have expected directions from Totsuka to include instructions such as “turn right after you pass a cloud shaped like a penguin”), but he had his doubts that this was really the house where Mikoto, Anna, and Yata all lived. Sure, Niki’s ghost had exited the car about a minute ago, but despite such an indicator that this was indeed the place, he couldn’t help being skeptical. Because it wasn’t a house, it was a freaking manor.

Not that the house he grew up in was any smaller; in fact, his childhood home was even bigger since it had multiple stories whereas this place had only a single level. But somehow he’d imagined the three mediums crammed together in a cozy little apartment, filled with clutter and oddities. This was nothing like what he’d pictured. Like Ichigen’s house, the architecture was Japanese, yet it was surrounded by a wrought-iron fence, and there was a channel around the house that had to be crossed via bridge. There was a garden filled with shrubs that looked a little overgrown but otherwise well-tended. Surely this couldn’t be the place where those three dwelled.

And yet as his car crept up to the house, he saw a familiar figure sitting outside the front door, waiting for him. It was the second time that day that Anna greeted him outside a house.

“Totsuka called,” she said as Fushimi got out of his car. “He said you seemed upset, but I think that was an understatement.” Her voice was grave, and he realized she must be feeling his emotional turmoil courtesy of that man. Before he could apologize though, he felt a wave of calm wash over him, and knew that Anna was trying to help him.

“He showed up,” Fushimi said, rather than thanking her. “That ghost. The one I need to be rid of.”

“Then you’ll stay here tonight,” Anna replied decisively, leading the way inside. “No ghost can get in here.”

“Why, because you’re here?” Fushimi asked as he kicked off his shoes.

“No, because we have almost everything ghosts hate. Running water, lavender, sage, iron, silver, salt, and of course, Shiro’s equipped this place with fuda. We also have some artifacts from other cultures. Most of them are useless or irrelevant, but it does give us some extra peace of mind. It’s the one place we can all relax.” There was a note of pride in Anna’s voice as she spoke of the house’s defenses. She led him into a sitting room, with two sofas on either side of a coffee table. Shiro and Mikoto were seated there, and they both waved in greeting.

“Isn’t that only a concern for one of you?” Fushimi asked, moving forward to take a place on one of the sofas.
“Nope,” Mikoto replied, having overheard the tail end of Anna’s exposition. “Ghosts used to be people right? So their actions are sometimes the same still. Just like some people like looking for a fight, so do some ghosts. We’ve got three mediums right here: what better place could there be to get into a fight? I’d rather not be woken up by some ghost doing something stupid, if it’s all the same.”

Fushimi didn’t have a reply to that, and things fell silent for a bit. Shiro seemed to be looking at some sort of book, though it looked a bit strange. The binding was hardcover, but the edges weren’t smoothed like most books, and it was thicker, almost like a binder. Fushimi, who had taken the seat next to Mikoto since Shiro was too friendly, began to regret his seating choice, since he couldn’t peek over Shiro’s shoulder from here.

All of a sudden Shiro brayed with laughter, and turned the book for them to see, gasping out “Oh man, remember this?”

The pages of the book were filled with photographs. It took a moment for Fushimi to make the connection in his brain that this must be a photo album, since he’d never seen one. His hands itched to reach out and take it, to examine it more carefully. It both hurt and irritated him, since the presence of the album meant that, despite their circumstances being less than optimal, the other mediums had still had a better childhood than him.

There were six pictures visible on the pages Shiro was displaying, showing younger versions of Mikoto, Yata, Anna, and even Shiro. There was one of Mikoto, Yata, and Anna all curled up together, fast asleep, and another showed the three of them dressed in formal kimonos. A third showed them all posing with skateboards, Yata grinning gap-toothed despite scraped knees, Anna wearing baggy clothes and a backwards baseball cap like some kind of wannabe thug, and Mikoto giving them both bunny ears and looking smug about it. Another photo showed a grinning mini-Yata pushing up the mouth corners of a blank-faced Anna, and there was a fifth picture showing Shiro and Mikoto with ribbons and bows in their hair. But the one Shiro was laughing at was Anna and Mikoto looking crestfallen and guilty as they stood in a ruined mess of a kitchen.

“Oh yeah, that was the time we decided to make a Christmas cake for everyone,” Mikoto said, his lips twitching up into a smile.

“It was still fun, even if it ended so badly,” Anna said. “I’m glad we tried it.”

“What even happened?” Fushimi asked, peering at the disaster zone in the photo.

“For my birthday, Misaki’s mom came and the two of them baked a cake for me together,” Anna said. “It was supposed to be a surprise, but I saw them while they were making it and it looked fun. I guess I was a bit jealous, because I convinced Mikoto to help me make one for Christmas, just the two of us. Only…”

“Oh man, remember this?” Fushimi asked, peering at the disaster zone in the photo.

“Only we almost burned down the kitchen,” Mikoto finished.

“Grandfather nearly fainted when he saw it,” Shiro said. “And Yata cried because he thought it was sad that you guys had tried to make a cake only for it to get ruined.”

“Heh, he was such a crybaby back then,” Mikoto snickered.

“Who ya callin’ a crybaby?” Yata said, whacking the back of Mikoto’s head with a cushion as his words announced his presence.

“You,” Mikoto said without a moment’s hesitation, and had to fend off another retaliatory pillow-
“Fuck you, you were way worse than me,” Yata said. “So shut up unless you don’t want any dinner.”

“You two were about the same,” Anna countered, and Shiro nodded in agreement.

“What, no we weren’t! He cried way more than me!” both Yata and Mikoto protested at the same time.

“Ugh!” Yata groaned. “Whatever, food’s ready, so come and eat already.”

Before Fushimi knew it, the photo album had been (regretfully) abandoned, and he was seated at a table with the rest of the mediums, a bowl of fried rice in front of him. There were chunks of pineapple in it, which he didn’t think was normal, but the rest of the group was digging in with gusto, so he supposed it must not be too weird.

“There’s enough for seconds right?” Anna asked when she paused to drink some water. Yata nodded, and, after swallowing, responded, “Of course! I always make a lot of fried rice, you know that. Any leftovers will be in tomorrow’s breakfast.”

“You’re having omurice for breakfast?” Shiro all but whined. “Can I have some?”

“Depends on how much of the rice gets eaten,” Yata replied. “But if we’ve got enough, sure.”

“Yay!” Shiro said, pumping a fist into the air.

“Will you be staying over too then?” Anna asked.

“Can I?” Shiro returned. Anna nodded, and Shiro cheered again.

As the others wolfed their food down, Fushimi picked at it. There were more vegetables than he liked, but more to the point, he wasn’t really hungry. He’d eaten before going to the seance, after all.

“Do you not like it?” Yata asked suddenly, and Fushimi looked up to find those two orbs of golden warmth trained on him, a distressed look in them that just about stopped his heart, it was that contagious.

“Uhhhh,” Fushimi replied unintelligibly. He blinked, trying to get ahold of himself, and then mumbled, “I ate already, so I’m fine.”

“Not everyone had to head up to Unc’s just after lunch, Yata,” Mikoto said, his bowl still at his mouth as he shoveled rice inside.

“If you ask me, Fushimi-san seems lost in thought,” Shiro said, putting down his own bowl to study Fushimi.

“If you ask me, Fushimi-san seems lost in thought,” Shiro said, putting down his own bowl to study Fushimi.

“Is it your ghost?” Anna asked before Fushimi had time to bristle with discomfort at Shiro’s alarming astuteness. “Are you still worried about him?”

“That’s not it,” Fushimi sighed, brushing off her concern. “It’s just…” It was a sign of how much they were throwing Fushimi off that he was struggling to think of something to say. Usually he had all sorts of deflections prepared for times like this. He opened his mouth, deciding to say he was just thinking about the seance still, but instead the truth came out as if he were some simpleton
who readily said whatever he was thinking. “I was surprised by that album. Both Kusanagi and Reisi implied that you all have unhappy familial situations, so I guess I didn’t really take you for album people.”

The moment he realized what had just come out of his mouth, Fushimi braced himself for backlash. They would be furious with him for prying. They would probably kick him out, and then that man would show up again and torment him to within an inch of his sanity, and it would all be his own damn fault because he couldn’t keep his stupid mouth shut. Great.

To his surprise, he heard laughter.

“My sister went through a photography phase when we were younger,” Shiro chuckled. “Whenever we were here in Japan she loved taking pictures of these three since she claimed that she could take pictures of me the rest of the time so as a photo subject I was boring. And since she wouldn’t let me in half the photos she took, I ended up getting her to teach me so I could take pictures too.”

“An’ den oo wen’ an’ hadda eesh mah’ boyfren’,” Mikoto said, his syllables becoming warped from his full mouth.

“Sorry, what was that?” Shiro asked. Mikoto moved to repeat himself, but was interrupted before he could speak.

“Don’t talk with you mouth full,” Yata scolded. Mikoto rolled his eyes, but obediently swallowed and then repeated, “I said, ‘and then you went and had ta teach my boyfriend’.”

“You say that like you don’t love it when Tatara takes pictures of you and Reisi,” Anna said.

“Yeah but it’s a pain when we go out and he has to stop to take pictures of every little thing that catches his attention or he spends ten minutes fussing over the lighting before he’ll take the shot,” Mikoto grumbled.

“You said, ‘whenever we were here in Japan’,” Fushimi mused. “Did you live abroad then?”

“Yup,” Shiro said. “My parents are professors at a university in Dresden. They even named my sister after one of their colleagues there: Klaudia. It was so cute watching these three try and learn to say her name. And I was almost an Adolf, believe it or not. But we always came back to visit grandfather whenever their university was on break, so we still got pretty close with these three. Like cousins, maybe.”

Fushimi’s experience with cousins was thoroughly unpleasant. He had a few he had met at family gatherings, and there wasn’t a single one whose relationship with him was even halfway cordial. But then again, Fushimi’s family was full of despicable people, so it was hardly surprising to discover that they were on much worse terms than was normal for relatives.

“What about you, Fushimi-san? Did your family have any album people?” Shiro asked.

Fushimi almost laughed. The only cameras in his family had been the ones in cell phones, computers, and the like. He’d only ever been photographed for school photos and the occasional family portrait for his mother to put on her desk at work so as to pretend to her employees that she understood their family values.

“No,” he answered as calmly as he could. He actually almost managed to keep the bitterness out of his voice, which was rather amazing. “They weren’t album people.”
“Well then what kind of people are they?” Shiro persisted, either oblivious to the fact that he was treading a mine field or simply not caring.

“To start with, calling them ‘family’ is a gross misuse of the word,” Fushimi replied blandly, the words spilling out before he could stop them. He didn’t want to talk about this, he didn’t want to share it with these people who were only in his life temporarily, and yet he couldn’t stem the flow of words. He’d kept them inside for years and years, ever since he’d entered kindergarten and realized for the first time what family was supposed to look like, but now they were leaving him as if they’d been waiting for him to give them voice. He could already see the horrified looks on the faces of the mediums, he could see them opening their mouths to tell him he didn’t have to talk about it if he didn’t want to, and yet he was already rushing into the next sentence before they could silence him. “What would normally be considered my parents is really just a couple who liked to have irresponsible sex, and that habit inevitably resulted in pregnancy. They only kept me because that woman likes to keep up appearances, and didn’t want to risk the scandal having an abortion or putting me up for adoption would have caused. As for that man, he always saw people as objects, and found it rather convenient having a toy that couldn’t escape him. I was happier the less I saw of them.”

As he spoke, Fushimi cast his eyes downward, not wanting to look at anyone. When he finished, he closed them, waiting. For a few breaths, there was silence. Fushimi was used to this. In the past, there had been occasions where he’d been forced to admit he had no love for his parents, and every time, it went the same way. First the silence. Then came the protests: “But they’re your parents!” “How can you say that about the people who gave birth to you?” “Don’t you think you’re being a little harsh?” It was the same every time. He wondered what arguments the mediums would use.

“Man, some people really shouldn’t be parents,” Yata said, breaking the silence, and Fushimi opened his eyes and looked up from his full bowl of rice to see the redhead’s eyes blazing with fury. Fushimi had just a second to stare before Yata was on his feet, snatching up his empty bowl and his chopsticks and disappearing into another room, muttering something about washing dishes.

“Sorry,” Shiro said, folding and unfolding a napkin in distress. “I didn’t mean to dredge up something unpleasant.”

“You don’t have to be sorry,” Fushimi replied, and to his surprise, he meant it. He felt relieved to have said all that.

“I wish we’d met you sooner, if it was like that,” Anna said sadly. “That sounds like a rather unhappy way to live. Maybe if we’d known you back then, you could have been part of our family.”

“Heh, I woulda paid to see that,” Mikoto snorted. “If the cuddle bug had one of his nightmares and tried to crawl in with this one, he’d gotten kicked outta bed.”

“Cuddle bug?” Fushimi asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Like in the photo earlier,” Shiro said. “Apparently whenever Yata had nightmares, he liked to cuddle so he’d feel safe, and he got these two into the habit as well. It was a bit of a shock for me, since when I first met Mikoto he acted rather distrustful towards me, but then a couple visits later and I woke up to him wrapped around me like a sloth hugging a tree. I think I even screamed.”

“You did,” Mikoto confirmed.

“I certainly wouldn’t have liked that,” Fushimi said, trying to stomp down the part of him that was thinking there were certainly worse ways to wake up than to a certain short medium being cute and
clinging with the reminder that he hated having his personal space invaded, especially if the invasion occurred without his permission.

“It was a bit alarming the first few times,” Anna agreed. “But you get used to it. And it does help. When I first arrived, my abilities ended up projecting the fear I felt during my nightmares and waking them up, and so they would seek me out so the three of us could face it together. When I finally got my ability under control enough that they didn’t wake up from my nightmares, the first time I woke up alone, I ended up crying so hard they woke up anyway.”

Fushimi thought about commenting that the three mediums sounded like they’d had a lot of nightmares as children, but he supposed it would be rather hypocritical of him. Besides, he still didn’t really know their circumstances. Maybe they too had lived nightmares during the day and had those experiences follow them into their sleep, as had been the case with him. Besides, didn’t all children have bad dreams sometimes?

Eventually, Anna went to help Yata with the dishes, and Mikoto disappeared to parts unknown. After a quick trip to the bathroom, Fushimi found himself wandering back to the sitting room they’d all been in earlier. He told himself it was because the sitting room was one of the few rooms he knew in this house, but somehow, the photo album mysteriously appeared in his hands mere seconds after he’d seated himself on one of the couches.

He was trying not to laugh at a picture of Anna proudly standing in a puddle all covered in mud when he felt someone sit down next to him on the couch. His sixth sense belatedly kicked in and felt a blazing inferno right next to him: Mikoto. He slowly lifted the covers of the book, easing it shut as carefully as possible, since he felt like he’d be in danger if he made any sudden movements. Before he could close the album, however, a hand reached out and snatched it from his lap.

“You’re allowed to look, y’know,” Mikoto rumbled. “It’s okay to be curious.”

“I wasn’t particularly curious though,” Fushimi muttered.

“No?” Mikoto asked. “Well, I guess I can’t blame you. They say people take pictures of things they love, so albums are basically full of love, aren’t they? It kinda hurts when you’re not used to it.”

“Are you trying to imply you’re not used to love?” Fushimi asked, finally looking at Mikoto to raise an eyebrow. “Because last I checked you had two ‘siblings’ and two boyfriends as well.”

“Yeah, but in case you missed the memo yesterday, it wasn’t always like this. Foster care wasn’t always the best place.” Mikoto raised an eyebrow right back at him, like a challenge.

“I thought you didn’t talk about that,” Fushimi said, remembering whispers between Anna and Yata the day before.

“Not much reason to,” Mikoto replied, tilting his head back against the couch. “When I first met everyone else, it was still pretty recent, and I still didn’t wanna trust ‘em right away ‘cuz that’s what I learned while I was in the system. You got to see the best and the worst of people, the kindness and the meanness, sometimes all rolled into one. And some of the people who were nice on the outside were mean on the inside and some who were mean on the outside were nice on the inside. I first learned to fight from one who seemed mean but was actually nice. Point is, it took me a while to believe they were really what they seemed to be, and even longer to open up. But the others have their baggage too, and it’s different for them. I’ve gotten to the point where I don’t mind people askin’, but for Yata and Anna, there’s still things they can’t talk about, and if I started talking ‘bout my past when I’ve always kept quiet about it, they’d feel pressured to talk about
things too, even if they’re not ready.”

“So you don’t talk about your past because they don’t talk about theirs?” Fushimi asked.

“Pretty much,” Mikoto confirmed. “For them, it still affects them, but for me it’s pretty much ancient history at this point. I’ve had plenty of time to get over it. It also helped meeting Tatara, since he’s got a pretty similar story to me, just that he got taken in right away. He doesn’t even care that his original parents might still be out there somewhere, and after seeing the way he is about it, it felt kinda stupid to resent two people who I don’t even remember. And what I went through in foster care doesn’t really matter either, since I’ve got a real family now. If I was rejected because of my ability before, if people looked at me like I was worthless, who cares? I’ve got people who accept me, and that’s lucky for me.”

“And you’ve got photo albums,” Fushimi said longingly, like he was some stupid idiot who said irrelevant things that made no sense. But like Mikoto had said before, photo albums could be full of a family’s love.

“Yeah, I do,” Mikoto said, and his voice was wistful in a way that said that somehow, he understood. “But they’ve got some great blackmail material filed away in them. All our embarrassing moments immortalized for posterity. Wanna see?”

Well when Mikoto put it like that…

Fushimi was extremely disoriented when he awoke. He wasn’t sure which affected him most though: his unfamiliar surroundings, the fact that he’d been in the middle of a dream of that man, the way he was being shaken awake, or the fact that he’d dozed off without realizing it- he still had his glasses on even. But if he was being honest, he suspected that while all those certainly contributed to his groggy confusion, what got to him most was the concerned eyes peering down at him: Yata. The redhead’s eyes seemed to glow as if lit from within, and seemed clear as day despite the fact that it was dark and had to be the wee hours of the morning.

“You okay?” Yata asked. “You looked like you were having a bad dream. A really bad one. Like, I haven’t seen anyone thrash that much since we watched that movie where hamsters took over the world. It was such a pain, too, since Mikoto was too scared to fall asleep by himself but if you slept with him you’d get beat up from his thrashing.”

“Wait, are you saying Mikoto’s afraid… of hamsters?” Fushimi asked incredulously, and man, those were words he’d never thought would come out of his mouth. Maybe this was another dream. Yata paled.

“Uhhhhhh,” he said, his eyes darting to the sides. “I didn’t say that.” His spoke a little too quickly, meaning the words could only be true.

“But you implied it,” Fushimi replied with a smirk.

“But I didn’t say it, so you didn’t hear about that from me,” Yata replied folding his arms stubbornly. “But seriously, are you okay or not?”

“Why, planning on curling up next to me if I’m not?” Fushimi drawled, raising an eyebrow. He couldn’t really tell for sure in the dark, but he was pretty certain Yata blushed at that.

“N-no!” Yata protested, his voice a little high and a little too loud for the late/early hour. “That
would be weird! I was gonna offer to make you some tea! Chamomile, with honey. It helps you relax and all.”

“Oh,” Fushimi replied, feeling a strange mix of emotions. He was surprised by the offer, and even a little bit grateful for it, but also… disappointed? It must be because Yata’s fun reactions had already stopped. “That would be fine, I guess.”

“Great, I’ll be back in a bit,” Yata said, grinning brightly and getting up from where he’d been kneeling by the couch Fushimi had fallen asleep on. He scampered off, leaving Fushimi alone with his thoughts. Not wanting to remember whatever he’d been dreaming, Fushimi found himself instead thinking about the photos from earlier, or rather, two in particular. One had been a picture taken at an aquarium, across the corner of a square tank. It was an awkward angle, but you could just see the three mediums and Shiro all pressed up against the glass, their eyes wide and alight with childhood wonder. Not surprisingly, Yata’s eyes had been brightest of all, despite the fact that he’d been farthest from the photographer. Just like how they’d been so bright when he woke Fushimi up a minute ago.

The second photo Fushimi thought of was one that had been tucked inside the back cover of the album, not really fitting in with the other pictures but still there nonetheless. Fushimi hadn’t recognized any of the four people in the photo, and had wondered why it felt like there was an empty space as if a person was missing. They looked like a happy family, two parents and a son and daughter, so there was no reason it should seem incomplete, and yet it did. But as he looked, he realized why. There was no mistaking the bright hair of the woman: he saw it every day on Yata. Mikoto had shut the album when he noticed Fushimi looking, but had confirmed it was Yata’s family.

Yata’s family… It really didn’t make sense to Fushimi. Anna talked about Yata’s mom as if she knew the woman, and there was a photo of his family in their album, and yet family was a taboo subject. Mikoto had said that Yata and Anna’s pasts still held sway on them, which could maybe mean that he’d only recently fallen out with his family, but at the same time, judging by the pictures, Yata had been living with Mikoto and Anna for a long time.

“There you go,” Yata said, putting a steaming mug down on the coffee table and bringing Fushimi back to Earth. He sat down next to Fushimi and took a sip from a second mug, wincing from the heat.

“Correct me if I’m wrong, but I thought warm milk was supposed to be what you drank when you couldn’t sleep,” Fushimi said.

There was a noise that sounded something like “geh”, and Yata flinched.

“Don’t like milk?” Fushimi guessed.

“Why would I? It’s gross,” Yata grumbled. “It tastes spoiled even when it’s fresh.”

“No wonder you’re short,” Fushimi replied, and was lightly shoved for his troubles.

“I bet you have things you don’t like too,” Yata muttered. “Everyone does.”

“Hmm,” Fushimi hummed rather than answering.

“You gonna drink your tea?” Yata asked.

“Some of us don’t like burning out tongues,” Fushimi said, but he picked up his mug and blew into it to try and cool the scalding liquid inside some, before taking a tentative sip.
“So?” Yata asked, leaning over to look into Fushimi’s face. “How is it?”

“It’s tea,” Fushimi replied.

“Yeah, but does it make you feel better?” Yata pressed.

“I guess,” Fushimi said, but it wasn’t like he was feeling unwell or anything.

“Thought so,” Yata said proudly, putting his own mug on the coffee table before sitting back again. “Pops used to do this for us. He’d also sing lullabies if we asked for them, but he wasn’t much of a singer, so we usually just waited until he went back to bed and then I’d sing ’em for us, since I was the only one that really knew any. Though I guess Anna and Mikoto learned the ones I sang ’em, but it just kinda became habit that I would sing. I even went and learned some German ones from Klaudia-san, though Shiro gets mad if I sing them because he says my pronunciation is terrible.”

“Well if it’s all the same, I’ll pass on any singing,” Fushimi said. While that man never actually sang to him, the way he talked was still close enough to singing that music didn’t really appeal to Fushimi. Male vocals in particular had a tendency to give him the chills in the worst possible way.

“I didn’t mean I would sing for you!” Yata sputtered quickly. “I was just saying what we used to do, y’know? When we were kids?” He laughed, and then continued in a more somber tone, “We all had pretty bad dreams back then. Mikoto had bad experiences from being in foster care, plus he’d met some nasty ghosts, and then he was a total scaredy-cat when it came to movies and stuff. Like, he always had to cover his eyes when the villains were on screen cuz he couldn’t handle it. And Anna… I don’t know what happened to her before, only that her dreams left her so scared she couldn’t even move. It felt like suffocating, and it made me want to vomit. And my own dreams could be pretty bad too. Until I met Pops, I didn’t even know I had psychic power, or that I sometimes got possessed, and finding out about it was… kinda terrifying. And there was some stuff, things I hadn’t really pieced together before then, but once I did I realized how dangerous I was. And when I started training my ability, and seeing Mikoto and later Anna training their abilities as well, it only got scarier. So yeah… we got pretty well versed in nightmares around here.”

“As fascinating as all that is, I don’t need anyone to take care of me whenever I have a bad dream,” Fushimi replied. Somehow, hearing Yata talk about his own nightmares was uncomfortable.

“Maybe not, but it does help you feel better,” Yata replied. “Trust me, I know. And it helps you get back to sleep faster, so that maybe you won’t be so tired all the time. Who knows, you might even get rid of the bags beneath your eyes.”

Yata laughed, and Fushimi almost felt like laughing with him, crazy as it was.

“I can take care of myself,” Fushimi grumbled.

“You said that before, remember?” Yata reminded him. “Back after you pretty much fainted in the kitchen? And I don’t believe it any more now than I did then.”

“It gets a bit hard to remember the details of a conversation that ends with you being punched,” Fushimi replied.

“Look, about that…” Yata said, reaching up to scratch his head.

“Before you go apologizing or anything, I suppose I should too,” Fushimi said, surprising himself. He didn’t tell people he was sorry. It just wasn’t in his character. If he truly regretted something, he might give someone a free favor, but never an actual verbal apology. “It was rather rude of me
to use your first name without permission like that, especially when it’s clear you don’t use it. And since I did so deliberately with the intention of mocking you, perhaps I deserved your retaliation, even if punching me was a bit extreme.”

Yata was silent for long enough that Fushimi looked over at him to find Yata openly staring at him, his jaw hanging slack and his hand frozen by his neck. Fushimi thought about waving a hand in front of Yata’s face to see if the medium would even blink, but decided against it. He only hoped that Anna was right about ghosts not getting into their house, and that Yata hadn’t just gotten possessed or anything.

“Dude, that’s just…” Yata said, blinking slowly and lowering his hand. He trailed off and heaved a sigh, his gaze dropping to his lap as he clasped his hands there. “Listen, I won’t say I wasn’t upset about the name, because you’re right, I hate it. It’s girly, and my dad’s the one who picked it out, and just, I don’t like people using it. But I was already gonna punch you before you used my name, y’know.”

“You were?” Fushimi asked, surprised.

“Yeah,” Yata said. “I thought you realized, and did it on purpose. I mean, it was a direct hit to one of my biggest sore points, and what with how much everybody gets in each other’s business and all, I thought you musta asked and someone told you.”

“I’m afraid I don’t follow,” Fushimi said, and those were words that rarely left his mouth.

“You said ‘what a great brother you are’,” Yata explained, looking Fushimi in the eye again, and his expression was so painful Fushimi almost wondered if he shouldn’t go wake one of the others up to give Yata a hug or comfort him or whatever it is people usually did when someone was so clearly hurting. “Only, you said it mockingly, almost like you meant the opposite. Even if you were being serious…”

Yata trailed off again, and Fushimi felt his breath catch as the earlier photo rose in his mind again.

“I’m not a great brother,” Yata continued miserably. “I’ve never even seen my little siblings face to face, and I probably never will because of this stupid- it’s bullshit. And Anna and Mikoto keep telling me I’m just being stubborn and that it’ll be fine but all it takes is one violent ghost and everything is fucked. They know I can’t control it, and yet they still keep saying I should go visit like it’s that simple. They make it sound so goddamn easy, and it pisses me off. If it were possible, I’d go, okay? But I can’t.” The redhead was shaking as he spoke, though whether it was from angst or rage was impossible to tell.

“Oh,” Fushimi said stupidly, and immediately kicked himself for not having something more intelligent to say. Yata jumped at that single syllable, almost as if he’d forgotten Fushimi was there.

“Heh, sorry about that,” Yata said, his voice sounding suspiciously wet. “I’m supposed to be helping you calm down, so you can forget about your dream. My bad.” He picked up his abandoned tea mug and took a long sip, sighing in satisfaction once he’d swallowed. “Good stuff,” he said.

Fushimi sipped from his own almost-forgotten mug and found the liquid had cooled considerably as they talked, and was at a good temperature. He took a couple of large gulps, then searched for a topic. Unfortunately, his brain was still stuck on the stupid photo album.

“What’s your favorite picture?” he blurted. When he got a confused look, he gestured towards the
book on the coffee table, and, since the gesture’s meaning might not be clear in the dark, added, “In
the album.”

“Hmm, it’s not really the pictures I like,” Yata mused. “It’s the memories attached to them. I
mean, that’s why we got it out today in the first place, is ‘cuz we were all feeling kinda nostalgic
after visiting Miwa-san and talking to Pops. And isn’t that why you take pictures, so you can
remember things?”

“Do you not usually have the album out?”

“It’s usually on a shelf in a different room,” Yata said. “It’s not really put away or anything, but it’s
not something we look at all that often. But… if I have a favorite memory that there’s a picture of,
it’s probably Pops’s birthday the one year. We all wanted to get him something, but we didn’t
know what he would want and besides, we were all saving up to try and buy a Game Station B. We
woulda still spent money on him, but then Shiro thought maybe instead of buying him something,
we could do something for him instead, and we decided to do a dance for him. Klaudia-san came
up with all the moves and taught us and we practiced for days. It was kinda embarrassing, but a lot
of fun. And Pops liked it, so that was nice too. But there’s a picture in there that’s all of us during
one of the practices, and we’d been messing up a bunch and were all kinda frustrated and I think all
of us cried at some point, but then during our last run, we actually got it, and it was during that run
that Klaudia-san took the picture. We look terrible in it, and it’s kinda blurry and also we’re in
kinda weird poses, so the picture itself is kinda bad, but I like that memory.”

“That’s…” Fushimi said, and trailed off, uncertain how to finish the sentence. Cute his brain
supplied, but no, that was not the word he was looking for. “Quite the story,” he said instead.

“Hey fuck you man,” Yata laughed, shoving Fushimi so that he almost spilled his tea. “It was
awesome, and if it weren’t for our problems then we totally coulda been an idol group.”

“Except idol groups have pretty people in them,” Fushimi replied, smiling in spite of himself.

“So you would have to join too,” Yata said confidently. “Then we’d have that base covered.”

There was an unexplainable heat in Fushimi’s cheeks at Yata calling him pretty. He ignored it, as
was his habit when he came across things that didn’t readily make sense.

“No one who hates people as much as I do should ever be an idol,” Fushimi said flatly.

“Except I bet it would just make you more popular,” Yata muttered darkly, and Fushimi couldn’t
suppress a laugh.

“Damn you’ve got a nice laugh,” Yata said, his voice awed.

“And you’ve got absolutely no filter whatsoever, do you?” Fushimi replied. Though he wasn’t sure
he minded. After all, honest idiots like Yata were usually pretty easy to deal with. As Yata smiled
at him sheepishly, he smiled back, glad to have had this little moment in the dark.

Chapter End Notes

1: Probably not what you were expecting, but hopefully you enjoyed the bonding and
fluff.
2: I think my new goal with this fic is to get my beta to comment about how gay things are at least once a chapter.
3: Milk really does taste gross.
Waking up to someone shouting in your ear is not a good way to start a day. That’s what Fushimi decided when he was jarred into wakefulness first thing in the morning. It took a moment for him to get his bearings, despite the fact that he’d left his glasses on. Correction: they were on still, because apparently he’d dozed off while talking to Yata and the shorter medium hadn’t been considerate enough to take the lenses off. And to add to his shortcomings, said idiotic redhead was now the one shouting right next to Fushimi without regard for the potential irreversible hearing damage he might cause. Asshole.

To be fair, Fushimi thought everyone was an asshole in the morning.

He had a crick in his neck and was sitting up but slightly slumped, leaning against something. His body ached with the slight discomfort of being in an awkward position for too long, and he really needed to stretch. Still, he’d fallen asleep in worse positions before, like the time he’d been lying backwards on an armchair with his legs resting on the back.

“-two looked so cute sleeping there,” Shiro’s voice was saying as Fushimi’s brain finally began to process words again.

“That doesn’t mean you had to take a freaking picture!” Yata howled in Fushimi’s ear, and Fushimi flinched.

“Look what you’ve done now,” Mikoto said. “You woke your new boyfriend up.”

“It’s not like that!” Yata screeched, and Fushimi scooted away from the “something” he was leaning against, since, judging by the noise, it wasn’t a something, but a someone. A loud someone who was currently digging his own grave. He opened his eyes and confirmed that, yup, it really was the idiot he’d actually thought wasn’t so bad during their talk last night. So much for that reevaluation of opinion. Shiro was standing in front of them, wedged between the couch and the coffee table, while Mikoto loomed behind them. “He was having a nightmare so I made him some tea and we talked and ended up falling asleep!” Yata explained, still at top volume. It was a good thing the mediums lived in a house like this, because in an apartment, their neighbors would hate them for the noise.

“Well, if you guys were dating, I’m pretty sure it would be over thanks to this,” Mikoto said. “Drooling on his shoulder is bad enough, but your gonna make him deaf if you keep it up.”

“Droo- I didn’t!” Yata protested.

“Who the fuck are you accusing me of dating?” Fushimi snarled. It was early, his eardrums were in danger of being ruptured, he hadn’t had any coffee… there was a long list of reasons why he was feeling murderous.

“Here,” Anna said, joining the little scene and handing Fushimi a mug. “It’s Irish breakfast.”
“Tea?” Fushimi asked. Anna nodded, and Fushimi clicked his tongue. “Fucking leaf juice. It’ll have to do.” He gulped it down, not caring if he burned his mouth. He barely even tasted it, but that was fine.

“And here I thought Tatara was a bitch in the mornings,” Mikoto said, amusement evident in his voice. The comment cemented Mikoto as a solid second on Fushimi’s mental hit list.

“Sorry, none of us drink coffee,” Anna said, ignoring her brother. “Reisi and Izumo like it, but they always bring their own with them if they stay overnight since they both claim we can’t make it properly.”

“Snobs,” Yata muttered.

“Anyway, we’re hungry,” Mikoto said, clamping a hand down on Yata’s head.

“No, but you did promise us omurice yesterday,” Shiro reminded. Yata sighed and got to his feet, trudging off to the kitchen.

“By the way, here’s the picture I took,” Shiro said, holding out his phone so Fushimi could see an image of himself and Yata leaning against each other, fast asleep. It was disconcerting to Fushimi, since he only ever saw himself in the mirror, when he had his usual patented scowl on in full force, and yet in the photo, sleep had eased his perpetual pout into something soft and vulnerable. And next to him, Yata looked just as vulnerable, if a little dorkier what with the way his jaw was slack. Either way, Fushimi had to curb an impulse to ask Shiro to send him the photo, instead forcing himself to say, “Delete that.”

Shiro just smiled and headed to the dining room they’d eaten in the previous night to await his share of breakfast.

While waiting for the omurice to be cooked, Fushimi went and washed his face, then fiddled with his phone until the food was ready. The omurice was good, although there sure was a lot more onion in the mix than Fushimi would like. He actually managed to eat a full plate (aside from the vegetables he picked out), which was rare with Fushimi’s picky eating habits. Not that he was about to mention any of that right now.

After breakfast, Fushimi went home to change and brush his teeth, hoping that he would be gone. Even if that man was still hanging about, Fushimi though he could still manage those simple tasks without too much trouble. He’d have to grab his phone charger while he was there, and maybe he should get his laptop as well. He wasn’t keen about bringing his computer to the bar, since he’d have to leave it unattended in the break room while he worked, but he would need something to do until the bar opened, and he didn’t fancy whatever nonsense the others would get up to today. Thankfully, he didn’t see that man in his apartment, and was able to escape to Homra without incident.

It felt pathetic, having to run and hide like this. It had been bad enough that he’d cowered in corners to avoid that man when he was alive, but now… It was foolish and naive, but Fushimi had to admit he’d optimistically hoped that death would finally sever the tie between him and the person who was technically his father. To his chagrin, it had cemented that link instead. That’s what he got for being optimistic.

While he was home, Fushimi made himself a proper cup of coffee, and once he felt human again (okay, human-ish), he grabbed his electronics and headed for the bar. He figured that if no one was
there, he could maybe intrude on Totsuka for a while, but when he arrived, Kusanagi’s van was already in the lot. Well, it was convenient for him if those losers had no lives and spent all their time at the bar, so he wasn’t about to complain.

Inside the bar, everyone seemed to be doing their own thing. Yata had out his usual game console, and Mikoto was napping on the couch. Totsuka, Reisi, and Anna were all playing a card game together where they had to try and figure out when the others were lying, and none of them seemed to be able to gain the upper hand. Kusanagi was reading a newspaper, and humming along to some jazz piece playing as background music. It was all so peaceful, and Fushimi felt almost comfortable as he slid into a booth and powered up his laptop. They each had their own little worlds, and he trusted them not to encroach upon his. If it was like this, then he might not even mind their camaraderie.

They whiled the hours until opening time away, biding time with boldfaced lies and suspicious truths, with light snores and button mashing, with keyboard taps and alcohol deliveries. Fushimi didn’t have to talk to any of them all morning, which made up for the bad start to the day. He was even beginning to forgive Yata despite the rude awakening.

And then, ten minutes before they were due to “clock in” and officially start prepping to open, Anna suddenly dropped her cards and grabbed at her arms, trembling.

“Someone very angry is coming this way,” she said.

The words had barely left her mouth before the door was thrown open and a man stormed in. He had sharp features that seemed sharper than they actually were due to the pure rage that contorted his face. His narrow eyes were thinned to slits from the force of his glare. He scanned the occupants of the bar as if wishing them all dead before he finally honed in on one in particular. He stomped over to his victim before anyone could stop him.

Yata’s eyes were wide as the man bore down on him; he didn’t seem terrified like when a ghost was around, but it was clear that he was still very much alarmed. He had just enough time to pause his game and put down the console before he was dragged from his seat, the man gripping his shirt as if trying to strangle it.

“You piece of shit, you think this is funny?!” the man yelled. Over on the couch, Mikoto abruptly opened his eyes and sat up, trying to glare a hole into the intruder.

“What the hell are you talking about?” Yata asked, baffled.

“You know exactly what I’m talking about!” the man shrieked. “Don’t act innocent! I know what you are, you monster, so stay the fuck away from my family!”

Anger flashed in Yata’s eyes, and he grabbed the man’s shirt back, his posture straightening as he glared back at his assailant. Up until that moment, the man had seemed to tower over the medium, and yet when Yata abandoned his usual slouch, it became apparent that, despite his lack of height, he was the taller of the two. Not only that, but with his own anger written on his face, he bore no small similarity to the man.

“What the hell? I didn’t even know you had a fucking family, and even if you did, so fucking what? I don’t want anything to do with you, you bastard!” Yata yelled back.

“Liar! I know it was you!” the man screeched, trying to shake Yata like a rag doll. He wasn’t very successful though. “It couldn’t have been anyone else! It had to be you, no one else would try and do this! It’s just like back then! It’s all your fault, you and that stupid bitch who protected you!”
Yata’s face went still, while his eyes went from angry to pure murder. He shoved the man away from him, causing the man to knock over some chairs that were stacked on top of a nearby table as he collided with the furniture.

“Get the fuck out of here, asshole,” Yata said coldly. “You wanna run your mouth about me? Fine. I don’t care. But no one talks about my mom that way. So you can get the hell out, and don’t you dare come back here again, got it?”

“I’ll call the police on you, I swear I will,” the man insisted.


The man opened his mouth to speak up again, but Kusanagi spoke first.

“I’m sorry, sir, but the bar’s not open yet,” he said sweetly. “You’ll need to leave now, before I call the police on you for trespassing and harassing one of my employees. If you need help finding the door, I’m sure our bouncer over by the couch would be happy to help you out.”

The man glanced at Mikoto, who chose that exact moment to flex and crack his knuckles. With a gulp, the man backed up a few steps, then spun and swept out the door.

“Phew, that was scary,” Totsuka said, not sounding scared at all.

“What the hell, Kusanagi-san!” Yata growled, prowling over to the bar. “I had it covered!”

“I know damn well you can handle yourself in a fight,” Kusanagi replied evenly. “But he’d already threatened to call the police on you and if I’d let things be then your temper would have gotten the better of you and then he would have had something legitimate to accuse you of. Plus you would have damaged my bar. This way, no one gets hurt.”

“Fuck your precious bar!” Yata snarled, then stormed into the service hallway.

“What the hell just happened?” Fushimi asked as soon as Yata was gone, because someone had to.

“No idea,” Mikoto grunted, already reassembling himself on the couch.

“It certainly was peculiar,” Anna agreed.

“Reisi, any ideas?” Totsuka asked. Reisi tilted his head, but made no comment, and so Totsuka shrugged his confusion as well.

“Trouble,” was Kusanagi’s only answer.

A tall blonde guy entered the room from the service hallway. Fushimi was immediately on guard, since the last stranger to enter the room had been hostile, but after a moment he recognized the newcomer as the second chef who worked in the kitchen with Yata.

“Um, I just thought you should know, Yata-san just went out the back door,” the tall chef mumbled. “He seemed kinda angry. Should someone go after him?”

“Did he have his skateboard?” Kusanagi asked, and the chef nodded. “Thanks,” Kusanagi said. “I’ll call Shiro and ask if he can send his shiki over to keep watch. In the mean time, we’d better start getting ready for the day. Kamamoto, do you think you can man the kitchen alone?”

“Sure thing,” the chef said. “It might get a bit hectic during the dinner peak, but I can manage if Yata-san’s not back by then.”
“He should be, but if not, then I guess we’ll just have to make sure to let anyone who orders food know that we’re short-staffed so it might be a little slow,” Kusanagi sighed.

“It can’t be helped,” Anna said. “Misaki was very upset by what happened.”

“No shit,” Fushimi snorted. “It wouldn’t take an empath to see that.”

“Indeed,” Anna said smiling ruefully. “Misaki has always been very open with his emotions. But that was a lot of anger and hurt, even for him.”

“Well let’s hope it’s not so much that he does something reckless,” Mikoto said.

“Actually, I’m more worried about you doing something reckless than him,” Kusanagi said. “I’m impressed that you managed to hold yourself back once, but if that man shows up again I’ll be counting on your boyfriends to keep you from doing anything rash.”

“What are you talking about, he’s way more hotheaded than me,” Mikoto argued.

“Generally speaking, yes,” Kusanagi agreed. “But you’re very protective, Mikoto, and you love a good tussle. You’ve been protecting him from ghosts for years, so defending Yata is second nature to you at this point.”

“Yata can fight for himself,” Mikoto grumbled.

“Are you telling me that, or yourself?” Kusanagi asked. “Because we both know it, but I’m not the one who nearly broke that customer’s arm last year for shoving him.”

“The guy was drunk, and it’s my job to kick out people like that,” Mikoto said loftily.

“Mikoto, Izumo’s right,” Anna said. “You threatened to castrate Sukuna-kun when he tried to scare Misaki before, remember?”

“Whatever,” Mikoto muttered, rolling over so his back was to the room and he was facing the couch he rested on. “I’m just tryin’ to look out for mine.”

“No one’s faulting you for that, King,” Totsuka said, kneeling at Mikoto’s back.

“Indeed, it’s one of your better traits,” Reisi agreed.

“Hmph,” Mikoto grunted, and Totsuka got to his feet with a shrug before heading off to change for the upcoming shift.

They got ready for the shift like normal, and before long it was time to open the bar. It wasn’t too busy a night, and things went smoothly enough that Fushimi almost forgot that they were missing a man. But every time he went to pick up an order, he still couldn’t help but notice that the kitchen was missing a certain idiot. The sterile surfaces of the kitchen seemed colder without Yata’s presence in the room, and there seemed to be more space as well.

By closing time, Yata still hadn’t returned, and there was a strange sense of unease growing in the pit of Fushimi’s stomach as he began his part of the cleanup. It felt fluttery and insubstantial, like it was only a partial feeling, and he hated it. If it were only something he could pin down, then it would be fine, but as it was…

The door opened, and Fushimi whirled toward it, about to give Yata a piece of his mind for being gone so long; his doting “family” was probably worried about him after all. But it wasn’t Yata who
entered the bar. It was Shiro. Fushimi clicked his tongue, annoyed that the white-haired onmyouji had to show up now of all times. Where the hell was Yata?!

“The hell are you doin’ here?” Mikoto asked, mirroring Fushimi’s sentiments pretty well.

“Yata-kun called me a little bit ago and asked me to come here,” Shiro said. “Is he still in the kitchen?”

“No, he’s still out,” Anna said.

“Probably brained himself on a skateboard ramp by now,” Kusanagi mumbled as an aside. “Unless he got possessed before your shiki found him, but I would assume you’d heard if that was the case.”

“Now now, I’m sure he’s fine,” Totsuka said. “You’ll see, it’ll be all alright.”

“He better be fine,” Mikoto said darkly. His very tone managed to imply that anyone living who hurt his brother would die, and anyone deceased who hurt his brother would get to experience a second death at the medium’s hands. Fushimi shivered, even as he felt himself beginning to sweat.

“Sorry,” Mikoto said, but he didn’t sound sorry.

The door opened again, and the chime of the bell strung above it was far too sweet a sound for the tension of that moment. Fushimi refrained from whirling towards the sound a second time— in part because he’d almost given himself whiplash when Shiro came in— instead looking up slowly in a manner that he hoped seemed casual and disinterested. Because of course it was casual and disinterested, what else would it be?

Yata looked surprisingly normal as he stepped through the door. It irked Fushimi, because after all the panic the medium had caused, he could at least have the decency to return looking like hell so that all their worry wouldn’t have been for nothing. But no, his beanie was still in place like normal, he lacked any bruises or scrapes or other signs of physical damage, his clothes weren’t hanging off of him any worse than usual, and his eyes weren’t even reddened from crying or anything. In fact, he looked much the same as he had before he’d stormed out, down to the irate scowl on his face. The room went silent as he stalked up to the counter and took a seat on one of the bar stools, glaring down at the bar like it had offended him.

“So, did you have fun?” Totsuka said casually, plopping down next to Yata like the medium had just gone out for a boys’ night or something. Yata didn’t answer.

“Did you have to miss the entire shift?” Kusanagi asked after the silence got too long.

“Sorry,” Yata said, sounding even less sorry than Mikoto had just a minute previously. “My mom took a while to call back.”

“Your mom?” everyone but Fushimi and Reisi chorused as one.

“Damn, did hell freeze over or somethin’?” Mikoto asked. “You never call home.”

“Yeah, well, it’s not like that piece of shit would ever tell me what’s going on,” Yata spat. “Not like he even could.”

“You’re not giving us enough information,” Anna said. Fushimi almost laughed, because since
when had anyone from Homra ever actually not given an information deficit unless pressed for
details?

Yata growled, then abruptly stood and faced the room.

“I have a case for us,” he announced. “All of us,” he added, looking specifically at Shiro.

“Come again?” Totsuka asked, blinking rapidly. Yata gave him a withering look.

“Can we get the details please?” Reisi asked, speaking up for the first time. Yata turned the
withering look on him for a second before sighing and sitting back on his stool, looking down at
the floor in front of him.

“The ghost’s name is Nakahara Yuuya,” Yata said, his voice matter-of-fact despite the anger that
was still present. “He died July 17th, about a week before his sixth birthday. His parents had a
major debt that they couldn’t pay, and decided to commit suicide as a family. He ended up
haunting his kindergarten, and now, 16 years later, he’s trying to get attention- writing on walls,
interrupting activities with his wailing, and… possessing students for short periods of time.”

“And, let me guess, you just so happened to go to that same kindergarten he was haunting?”

“And how many times did he possess you?” Anna asked gently.

“Every day,” Yata replied, his voice cracking just a little. His anger seemed to be fading, giving
way to the pain of a deep wound. “I think… I think the first time was sorta an accident, like he was
just curious about what I was. He didn’t really get that he was dead. Like, he knew something had
happened to him, something bad, but he didn’t understand death. And once he possessed me, he
just knew that he felt right again. Only then I left, and once I was gone I guess he started to realize
some things, because now, from what my mom found out, he’s looking for me. It’s the things he
writes, and what he says when he possesses kids: ‘Where is he?’ ‘Bring my body back.’ Things
like that. And she also said he’s used the kids he’s possessed to go to the house where we used to
live back then and ask for me.”

Fushimi paused in his sweeping that he’d been half-heartedly pretending to keep up, shocked that
Yata would be suggesting such a case. But no, surely he wasn’t intending to come along this time.
Except… the others had said that Yata always came on cases, no matter what. But if Yata came
along this time, wouldn’t it be kinda risky?

“You’re sitting this one out,” Mikoto stated, crossing his arms, and Fushimi almost wondered if
Mikoto had read his mind. Yata finally looked up from the floor, his eyes aflame with anger once
again.

“Don’t tell me what to do, Mikoto!” Yata snapped. “I have to go! This is my case, my ghost, my
hometown! And also, as much as I hate to admit it, that bastard was probably right! It is my fault!
Back then, Yuuya was… he was weak. Even without training I could tell that. The only reason he
could possess me so easily was because I was practically a perfect host for him, and with my
ability and complete lack of training, I might as well have had a sign up saying ‘make yourself at
home’! If it wasn’t for me, he probably woulda moved on before too long all on his own, but I
came along and messed it all up and so he stuck around and got stronger and now he’s fucking with
people, all because of me! So I’m going to fix this, and you’re not going to stop me!”

“Misaki, please calm down,” Anna pleaded, her voice strained.
“Don’t tell me to-!” Yata snarled, then realized who had spoken and stopped in his tracks with a subdued, “Oh.” He deflated, then added, “Sorry for hurting you Anna.”

“While I understand your reasons for wanting to go, are you sure it’s a good idea?” Shiro asked. “Even if I come along to help protect you, I’m not sure it’ll be enough. Getting possessed every day for the months you were in school would have certain effects on you, even if the possessions were just for a few minutes at a time.”

“I know that,” Yata replied. “I know better than anyone, trust me. But if he’s strong enough to be possessing random kids, then he’s probably strong enough to possess you guys if you aren’t careful. Plus he might try and attack you guys, but I think if I’m there he’ll be less likely to do that. It’d be a problem for him if I got hurt, right? And, um…”

It was almost laughable, watching Yata wrack his brain for more excuses. Laughable, and yet heartwrenching, that he was willing to go that far for, what, some ghost brat who had little to no regard for the lives of others? Why did Yata care so much about someone like that, to the point of putting himself at risk?

“I still don’t like it,” Mikoto said. “You’re too close to this one. That’s dangerous for anyone, but especially for you. The more sympathetic you are-”

“The easier it is for them to get in, I fucking know,” Yata interrupted. “But what if that’s exactly what we need this time? I don’t wanna get possessed, but if that’s what it takes to help Yuuya move on…”

“Quit calling him by his first name, he’s not your friend,” Mikoto ordered.

“Che.” Yata looked away, grimacing.

“Well, I’m in,” Shiro said. “Though given it’s a ghost you have prior experience with, I’m surprised Grandfather didn’t take care of it.”

“I think Pops was gonna, but he and my mom thought it was best if he didn’t show up right away, at least not until custody was all figured out,” Yata replied heavily. “They musta figured if Pops showed up to get rid of a ghost and my shitty dad heard about it, he might have realized it had something to do with me and mighta tried to pester Pops. And just, since Pops had other things to worry about, like training for me and Mikoto and then all that stuff with Anna, I think it slipped his mind.”

“Either way, as his successor in the family business, I need to correct such oversights,” Shiro insisted.

“I’m coming too,” Anna said. “I want to see Misaki’s home town.”

“Seriously? That’s why you’re going?” Fushimi asked, setting his broom aside because pretending to clean was just wasting effort. He’d have to do the actual cleaning once this conversation was done, so why bother?

“Well obviously I will help as necessary while I’m there,” Anna assured him, her face and voice both suspiciously earnest.

“Hmph,” Mikoto said. “I’m only going if I get to punch this ghost at least once. Someone needs to teach him that possessing people isn’t nice.”

“And I suppose that means Tatara and Reisi are in,” Kusanagi sighed.
“I’ll have you know I always intended to accompany them,” Reisi said, pushing up his glasses. “My advice may be needed before the end.”

“Yeah yeah, whatever,” Kusanagi said, flapping a hand. “Fushimi, will you be coming too? I need to know how many tickets I gotta buy.”

“I can buy my own ticket,” Fushimi said, before he realized that was basically a confirmation that he was going. Well, why not? It could be a learning experience, and maybe he’d somehow unlock the rest of his ability.

“It’ll be cheaper to buy them as a group,” Kusanagi replied. “Is that a yes then?” Fushimi nodded. “Great. Now if you loiterers would stop dawdling, this bar ain’t gonna clean itself, and I don’t wanna leave a mess if we’re gonna be gone the next few days.”
Homra Takes a Train

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

They were almost to Yata’s home town, and Fushimi still had yet to figure out why exactly he’d come along. As much as he hated to admit it, there was in fact a small part of him that was curious about the life Yata had lived before realizing he was a medium. But that was hardly reason to go through the discomfort of sitting on trains for a few hours. Sure if he had stayed behind, then he would have nowhere to retreat to should that man show up again, but surely he could have managed to put up with his ghost for however long the mediums were gone. And Yata messing with some ghost who had it out for him wasn’t any more of a reason for Fushimi to endure this. So why was he sitting here playing “Go Fish” with everyone to stave off boredom when he could finally have some time to himself to just relax and spend time with his computer?

“Hey Anna-chan, do you have any threes?” Totsuka asked as Fushimi contemplated what possible sins could have brought this upon him. Hadn’t Hirasaka’s roommate said she could see past lives? Maybe he should ask her.

“Go fish,” Anna replied. Though Fushimi supposed it could be some bad karma he’d picked up in this life, in which case Hirasaka’s roommate wouldn’t be of any help. Perhaps he should find some way to absolve his sins… Though was that mixing religions? Not being a religious person himself, Fushimi wouldn’t know, but he was pretty sure repentance and forgiveness were more Christian concepts, while karma was more Hindu and Buddhist. Whatever, they were all crock in his opinion. You lived, and then you died, and there were no divine entities to give a shit. Sometimes when you died you stuck around as a ghost, but ultimately, a time would come when your existence ceased completely, and that was that.

“Yata-chan, it’s your turn,” Totsuka prompted, since the redhead was staring off into space, his mind somewhere other than their card game.

“Check,” Yata rasped, his voice a bit hoarse, and for a second Fushimi thought Yata must’ve forgotten what card game they were playing. But the others exchanged an uneasy glance, and then Kusanagi asked, “Already? We’re still at least ten minutes out.”

“Not to mention the pendant I lent you should prevent any ghosts from noticing you that easily,” Shiro seconded. Yata’s free hand, the one that wasn’t holding his cards, strayed up to his neck, fiddling with a strange metal symbol dangling from a sturdy chain. Fushimi had noticed it when the group met up that morning, but it had slipped his mind until now.

“Well, uh, things kindaaaa, um… Things got a little blurred between us back then,” Yata mumbled, fidgeting with obvious discomfort.

“Are ya fucking kidding me?” Mikoto growled. “With a ghost like that, you’ll be just a much of a magnet as our friendly neighborhood ray of sarcasm here, if not even worse!” He jerked a thumb at Fushimi, who scowled at him.

“You do realize that it’s a ray of sunshine, right?” Fushimi asked coolly.

“Oh, I know,” Mikoto said, turning his glare from his brother to Fushimi. “But let’s just say you’re contagious, Chuckles.”
“Look, do you think I woulda asked everyone to come along if I didn’t know the risks?” Yata asked. “That’s why I wanted everyone here. I’ve gotta do this, Mikoto. I know it’s dangerous, and yes, I’m still doing it, so spare me the lecture ‘cuz I already heard it from my mom!”

“Stop fighting you two,” Totsuka ordered, reaching out to flick first Yata and then Mikoto on the forehead.

“He started it,” both mediums grumbled. Everyone in their group rolled their eyes.

“So, you gonna check me or not?” Yata asked. “If you’re that worried, then we gotta follow all Pops’s safety precautions. So hurry up and make sure I’m still all me, wouldya?”

“Fine,” Kusanagi said. “Name, age, birthday. Go.”

Yata sighed, then straightened in his seat.

“Yata Misaki, born July 20, and I’m 20 y- no, 21 years old,” Yata rattled off. He slouched back down and grumbled, “Danggit, it’s already been two months and yet I still forget that I’m already 21.”

“Um, what’s going on?” Fushimi asked.

“Sometimes it takes time for ghosts to possess Misaki,” Anna said. “He can fight off slow possessions if we catch them early on, but since it’s something he can’t notice on his own, we periodically ask him questions to see if he still is functioning as himself. If his answers are correct, then there’s nothing to worry about. But if his answers are incorrect, a ghost is starting to take over and is answering in his stead.”

“I see,” Fushimi said. “Well, I think we already have cause for concern then, because there’s no way this shrimp’s older than me.”

“Haaaaaah?” Yata snarled. “Who you callin’ a shri-” He cut off, his eyes going wide, and then asked, “Wait, I’m older than you?”

“No way, you musta misheard something,” Mikoto said. “He said he’s only 21, and you’re older than that, right?”

“No,” Fushimi said petulantly.

“What? But aren’t you older than Tatara?” Mikoto asked.

“Doesn’t seem to be that way, Mikocchi,” Totsuka said.

“Nope,” Kusanagi confirmed. “Fushimi’s the youngest after Anna. He won’t be 21 until November.”

“Wut.” Mikoto said flatly.

“Seriously?” Yata asked, excitement dawning on his face. “I’m older than him?”

“So it would seem,” Fushimi grumbled, not liking where this was going at all.

“Ha! That means I’m your senpai, so you gotta treat me with respect!” Yata crowed.

“Idiot, you were already my senpai,” Fushimi said, not bothering to point out that merely being more senior didn’t necessarily make someone worthy of respect. Respect was something that had
to be earned, and Fushimi wasn’t easily impressed.

“Oh yeah, I guess you’re right,” Yata laughed, his mood lighter than it had been all day. And Fushimi supposed he didn’t mind the inanity of this conversation quite so much if it had cheered Yata up to such an extent.

Yata asked for another identity check after they got off the train, this time being asked about his three favorite hobbies, which turned out to be skateboarding, cooking, and playing video games. Fushimi had to bite his tongue to keep from asking what video games Yata played, since, as a casual gamer himself, Fushimi wouldn’t have minded having someone to play with every now and then, but surely he could do better than Yata Misaki.

They had just exited the station when Yata froze, and for a moment Fushimi feared that things had already gone south and that Yata had just gotten possessed, but then Yata was tugging on the nearest shirtsleeve- Reisi’s (which just went to show that Yata was very shaken indeed if he’d willingly make contact with the psychic)- and asking “Is it too late to go get back on the train?” in a trembling voice.

“Why, what’s wrong?” Totsuka asked, but before Yata could answer, a woman came bounding up with a call of, “Misaki!”

Even if Fushimi hadn’t seen the photo at the back of the mediums’ album, he would have still recognized the woman as Yata’s mother. She had the same bright hair, the same vibrant emotions, the same expressiveness in her eyes despite the different shape and color to the orbs. She wrapped her son in a hug, causing him to squeak in surprise and then groan with exasperation.

“Mooo-oom,” Yata complained. Mrs. Yata let go of her son and grinned back at him, half happy to see her son and half challenging him to actually voice his protests. Yata rolled his eyes and then tugged on his beanie, pulling it down so that it almost covered his eyes. “The hell are you doing here?” he grumbled.

“Still a pottymouth, I see,” Mrs. Yata sighed, but she was still smiling fondly. “And just why wouldn’t I be here? You barely even remember this place, not to mention Morishima-san still lives here and I’m much better at handling him than you seeing as how I was married to him for six and a half years. And besides, you always say that if I come visit I’ll interrupt things at the bar but here you’re not at the bar so you can’t complain.”

“Okay, okay, but did you have to hug me like that?” Yata whined. “It’s embarrassing! I’m a fucking adult so can you stop treating me like a kid?”

“Still look like a kid,” Mikoto said, then wrapped his arms around both Yata and his mom and picked them both up in a bear hug.

“Fuck, my lungs,” Yata wheezed.

“Hello Mikoto,” Mrs. Yata said cheerfully. “Did you get taller?”

“Nah, don’t think so,” Mikoto replied as he put them down. Yata staggered away, gasping “Oh fuck I thought I was gonna die.”

“Well I suppose it has been a while,” Mrs. Yata said, then turned to her next victim. “And Anna, you’re getting more beautiful all the time!”

“You’re looking well yourself, Minami-san,” Anna replied.
“Oh dear, you’re starting to sound like Izumo-kun,” Mrs. Yata sighed. “All flattery.”

“It’s not flattery, it’s just that I see the positive aspects of a person’s appearance first,” Kusanagi replied as he joined the throng.

“We’re gonna be here all day, aren’t we?” Fushimi asked, sidling up to Yata.

“Probably,” Yata sighed. “Mom talks to everyone. She and Anna and Mikoto talk just about every week, and Shiro calls her a bunch too, and then she and Kusanagi-san are text friends, and I guess she added Totsuka-san and Reisi on social media. Or maybe they added her? Either way she’s in touch with them on a couple different sites. It’s annoying.”

“Poor you,” Fushimi said, only half sarcastic.

“Yeah well, I suppose I shouldn’t complain too much,” Yata admitted. “If they tell her everything, then I can get away with not calling that much.”

“Don’t want to talk to your mom?” Fushimi asked.

“Don’t know what to say,” Yata corrected. “Plus… she’s always trying to convince me to go home, right? And… it’s hard, saying no.”

Fushimi wasn’t sure how to respond to that. Maybe he could point out that at least Yata’s mom actually cared about him and wanted him around? But no, that seemed insensitive. Should he try to reassure Yata? But how? Maybe he could change the subject?

Yata’s mom answered Fushimi’s dilemma for him by coming over and pulling Fushimi into an unwelcome hug. Hadn’t the woman had enough hugs for one day? Yeesh.

“And you must be Fushimi-kun right?” Mrs. Yata asked. “I heard about you from everyone. Nice to meet you, I’m Yata Minami. Thanks for always looking after my idiot son.”

“It’s not like I’ve done anything to look after him,” Fushimi grumbled, feeling uncomfortable in the warmth of Mrs. Yata’s embrace.

“Nonsense, I’m sure you’ve been more help than you realize,” Mrs. Yata said self-assuredly.

“Uh, Mom, you can let him go now,” Yata said, and maybe he wasn’t such an idiot after all, being Fushimi’s savior just when one was needed. “I don’t think Fushimi really does hugs.”

“Oh sorry,” Mrs. Yata laughed, releasing Fushimi. Fushimi dazedly noticed that she had the same laugh as her son. “I just got really happy seeing everyone in person for once, and I forgot that some people have different personal boundaries. I should have known better, Totsuka-kun said you’re pretty introverted, so please pardon my over-enthusiasm.”

“It’s alright,” Fushimi muttered, because he didn’t know what else he could possibly say at a time like this. Something told him that if he made a fuss over the hug, he’d alienate everyone in Homra, and a two-train journey away from home did not seem like a good time to piss off everyone around him. But all the same, it had been rather unpleasant suddenly being hugged like that. He didn’t like people getting into his personal space, and that hug... It had been so... warm, and tender, and all sorts of emotions he just didn’t know how to handle. It was like being back in elementary school, and watching his classmates interact with their parents on parent day. They’d been so affectionate and caring, and it had left him acutely aware of the complete lack of love in his own home. He wasn’t lonely or anything- he actually preferred to be alone. It was just... it made him wonder, sometimes, how much worth he could possibly have as a person if even the woman who gave birth
to him didn’t give a damn about him?

“If it’s alright then you should stop looking like you’re dying inside,” Yata retorted.

“I’m not dying inside,” Fushimi replied. “I’m already soulless so there’s nothing there to kill.”

“What, so you’re like some kind of zombie?” Yata asked.

“Until I’ve had my coffee, certainly,” Fushimi agreed, feeling the corners of his mouth twitch up.

He was pleased when he got a laugh from Yata.

“You two get along well,” Mrs. Yata commented, causing Fushimi to jump. Somehow, in the last five seconds or so, he’d forgotten she was there. Had forgotten any of them were there. That was rather remiss of him.

“N-not really!” Yata denied quickly. “I- I mean… our abilities are bad! Like, un-uncombatible, or something…”

“Incompatible,” Fushimi corrected. Yata stuck his tongue out in reply.

“Oh?” Mrs. Yata asked. “Well, that’s a shame. Anyway, I reserved a couple of rooms for us at one of the inns here which is owned by an old friend of mine. It’s a ryokan, so there’s two adjoining rooms for all you boys and then a smaller room for Anna and me.”

“Thanks for taking care of that,” Kusanagi said.

“No, thank you for letting me know how many people were coming,” Mrs. Yata replied.

“Traitor,” Yata muttered under his breath at Kusanagi.

“How so? I just asked for a little help finding a place for us to stay while we’re here,” Kusanagi replied. “Unless you’ve got a better idea?”

“Che, no,” Yata admitted sullenly.

“Right, then let’s head to that inn then,” Kusanagi said, having masterfully defeated all of Yata’s arguments in one fell stroke.

When they arrived at the inn, Mikoto, Reisi, and Totsuka claimed one of the rooms, and no one even bothered to argue. Fushimi just prayed that, if the three of them got up to anything, that they at least had the decency to keep it quiet. He did not relish the idea of spending his night listening to noises that were meant to be private. Once everyone had settled in, they all met in the largest room—the one Fushimi was staying in, as well as Yata, Shiro, and Kusanagi— and had a brief meeting to discuss “game plan”.

“Given the need for caution in this instance, we had better investigate first before we take any real actions,” Shiro said once they had all gathered. “The more we know, the less chance there is of anything going wrong, and the better Munakata-san can predict things. Splitting up will cover more ground, but it puts us more at risk too, so I would suggest moving in pairs or small groups.”

“Makes sense,” Kusanagi agreed. “We’ll probably want a medium in each pair, though I suppose Yata shouldn’t be counted as a medium this time around…”

“Hey!” Yata protested.

“Um, actually, I was gonna suggest we leave Yata-kun and Fushimi-san here with Kuro to look
after them,” Shiro said, coughing slightly. “The purpose of today is investigating, but both of them are liable to draw the ghost out right away and force an intervention. It could get messy, which is exactly what we’re trying to avoid.”

“Bu—” Yata sputtered, only to be interrupted.

“Yashiro’s right,” Anna agreed. “We won’t finish this without you Misaki, so it’s best if you stay here. Saruhiko too, this could be dangerous for the current you.”

Fushimi clicked his tongue, not sure which disgusted him most: that he was being discounted so easily, that he was going to have to spend who knew how long cooped up with this idiot, or that Anna was absolutely right. It was irksome to know that he was just a much a burden as he was a boon to Homra.

“My recommendation would be for Kusanagi-kun and Anna to form one pair, Mikoto, Munakata-san, and Totsuka-san to be a group, and then Minami-san and I will go out together,” Shiro said.

“Sounds good,” Kusanagi agreed. “Reisi, Mikoto, and Tatara will balance each other out, I can do the talking and Anna can do the sensing, and you have the spiritual ability while Minami-san has the knowledge of the area.”

“Plus Neko can protect mom from Yuuya,” Yata said. When everyone turned to look at him, he added, “If he’s been going to our old house- that’s what you said was happening, right Mom?- then that means he’s got my memories. He might recognize mom, and that could be bad, right? So Neko can try and keep that from happening, right?”

“Right,” Shiro said smoothly.

“Wait, you knew that your mom would be in danger too, and yet—” Mikoto began angrily, but Yata cut him off.

“Yeah I knew, which is exactly why I didn’t fucking ask her to come. I didn’t expect her to just show up! You can thank Kusanagi-san for that!”

“Misaki, stop shouting, it was my decision to come and help out,” Mrs. Yata said. “I certainly didn’t realize that I might be targeted by this ghost, but that doesn’t change anything. I’m not leaving you to deal with this alone. I’ve always wished I could do more to help out, and this time I can, so I’m going to. Now, I would suggest Anna and Izumo-kun start their search at the school- I’ll give you directions in just a second. Ask for Saotome-sensei or Itori-sensei when you get there. As for Mikoto, Reisi-kun, and Tatara-kun, head to the police station, ask for Watanabe Isshin, and say that I sent you, and work from there. Shiro and I will talk to some old friends of mine and see what we can learn from gossip. Does that sound good?”

“Awww, I wanna listen to gossip,” Totsuka whined half-heartedly, but everyone else nodded.

“We’ll be sure to take notes so that we can tell you all the juiciest bits later,” Mrs. Yata assured him with a twinkle in her eye. Totsuka grinned back, placated.

“Allright then, I guess we’ll reconvene back here for dinner,” Kusanagi said. “Until then, let’s hunt some ghost rumors.”

Chapter End Notes
So I've been trying to crank out a chapter a week, but it looks like the next one might possibly take longer than that due to some more writing snags. I don't think it'll be too much longer, but I'd like to apologize just in case because I know how much waiting indefinitely for updates can suck.
Chapter Notes

I'm back! ...with a shorter chapter. My bad. There was more, but I realized it would fit better later on so I edited it out. On the plus side, I should have regular posts again for a while, so... yay?

Fushimi really didn’t know his colleagues at Homra well- that was for certain. And yet, despite not knowing them well, he could tell that Yata was, at his core, a loud person. The medium had always been subdued whenever Fushimi was around, but it was still there in the way he couldn’t keep his voice down even in the middle of the night, in the way he was quick to shout when angry, and in the way his whisper carried. Generally speaking, loud people like that were some of Fushimi’s least favorite. So why was it that, when it was just the two of them alone in the hotel with Shiro’s stern-faced shikigami, Yata’s silence was what was giving Fushimi a headache?

It hadn’t even been half an hour since the others left, but Fushimi felt like he was going insane. Less people usually made things easier for him, but right now, he felt like he was suffocating slowly. He couldn’t focus at all. Why was the peaceful quiet that he loved suddenly so distracting? The only sound in the room was that of the buttons being tapped on Yata’s video game. He’d even muted the volume on the game, so there wasn’t any of the usual music and other game noises- which probably would’ve been battle sounds given Yata’s combative personality. It was creating such an oppressive atmosphere that Fushimi almost jumped when Yata’s voice finally cut through the air with a surprisingly calm, “Check”.

It took a moment for Fushimi to process what had been said and what it meant. He wracked his brain for a minute, trying to find an appropriate question. Maybe he should ask how they met? No, too generic. When was their first real conversation? Too vague. First impressions? But they only knew their own answers, so that was no good.

“How many people are in your family?” Fushimi asked, and shit, that was a taboo question wasn’t it? And was that sufficient information anyway?

“My actual family, or Homra?” Yata asked after a long moment in which Fushimi wished he could just crawl into a hole and never come out again.

Either,” Fushimi mumbled, trying to come up with a plausible excuse to escape immediately or sooner. There was a long pause, and Fushimi was seriously contemplating feigning illness so he could seclude himself in the bathroom for the next few hours when Yata finally answered.

“I guess my real family’s smaller,” Yata said softly, almost to himself. He hesitated, before continuing. “There’s four of them.”

Oh shit, he was possessed, wasn’t he? Four of them? Fushimi reached for his phone, ready to call the others and tell them they needed to get back pronto, but Yata was still talking.

“There’s my step-dad, Yata-san. Or... I guess I could call him by his first name, he tells me I can, but it feels weird, y’know? You don’t call your parents by their first names, right? And he does feel
like a parent to me, even if I don’t really know him that well. He’s always telling me I can come home any time I want, like I actually belong with them.” Yata laughed bitterly. “Ridiculous right?”

Fushimi didn’t answer, reeling with what he’d just heard. It sounded like he was talking about his actual family, not the ghost’s, but at the same time, that distance when he’d said “four of them”...

“I’ve got two little siblings too, y’know. Well, half-siblings anyway. They’re normal, or at least, not mediums, so that’s good, I guess. My sister, Megumi, she’s only 9 years old and I can’t keep up with her at all. Like, she’s got about 50 little friends, and every time I talk to her there’s a new one who’s her best friend and she’ll be fighting with some and I can’t keep it straight at all. And sometimes she’ll be into super girly stuff, but other times she’s a total tomboy. Like she always talks about what she wants to be when she grows up, and sometimes she’ll say sparkle fairy princess or makeup artist, and other times she wants to be a racecar driver or a laserbeam kungfu samurai pirate. I suppose she’s kinda amazing being like that…”

Yata shook his head, and Fushimi found himself following suit. Amazing was certainly one way of describing such a sister. Still, Fushimi could picture a miniature female Yata who acted like what he’d described, and who looked like the photograph he’d seen.

“And then there’s my brother, Minoru,” Yata continued. “He’s kinda weird, to be honest. I mean, he’s 13, so of course he’s kinda weird, but I mean, up until recently, he was always wearing black and talking about demons and shit. Occult stuff, I guess. But I s’pose he’s just trying to be close to me, in his own way, ’cuz the last time we talked he’d just gotten a skateboard and was telling me he was gonna be a skater. Like, this is a kid who almost never goes outside, and he wants to be a skater all of a sudden. What a weirdo.” This time, when Yata laughed, it was genuine. He had a bittersweet look on his face, happiness mixed with something lonely and sad.

“The last person in that family is my mom,” Yata said, and there was that strange wording again. “She’s…” Yata trailed off, and Fushimi waited, but nothing more was said. It was like Yata had forgotten he was talking to someone.

“She’s what?” Fushimi prompted.

“She’s kinda my hero, I guess?” Yata said, laughing. And he called his brother a weirdo. “I mean, she’s the one who sent me to live with Pops and everyone, and if she hadn’t done that… things would have been a lot worse for me. And she’s always been really supportive of me, even from a distance. And despite the distance and all, she’s still been there. She taught me to cook, and she helped me figure things out back when I started to realize that I wasn’t- that I’m not… I mean, that I’m attracted to guys instead of girls and that that’s okay. Like, at first I thought it was just something else wrong with me, but she helped me out with that. And just… My mom’s fucking awesome, okay?” Yata glared at Fushimi, as if daring him to challenge the statement.

“I never said anything to the contrary,” Fushimi said wryly.

“Oh. Yeah, I guess not,” Yata laughed. Fushimi wondered idly if Yata ever got whiplash from how quickly and completely his emotions could change. It was almost fascinating, to see someone who could feel things at such extremes, and to have such extreme emotions that could change with just a few words… Yata was really something.

“You seem like you really care about them,” Fushimi said after a moment, because he didn’t want that painfully awkward silence from earlier back.

“Well of course I do!” Yata replied. “They’re my family, even if I can’t actually be part of it.”
And there he went again, saying things about how he couldn’t see his family. The way he talked, it was like the moment he went to see his family he would get possessed. But he had Mikoto and Anna to protect him didn’t he? Even Shiro was willing to look out for him. So why was he so insistent on not seeing people he so clearly wanted to spend time with? It was completely-

“Incomprehensible.” He hadn’t meant to give voice to his thoughts, but the word hung in the air, spoken in Fushimi’s own voice, and there was no taking it back.

“What is?” Yata asked, oblivious.

“You,” Fushimi replied bluntly. There was no point in mincing words with this idiot after all, and since he’d already spoken up he might as well just say everything. “It’s obvious you want to see them, and yet you don’t, blaming it on your ability. It’s idiotic.”

“Haaaaaaa?” Yata snarled. “What the hell, man? You sound like Anna and Mikoto and Kusanagi-san. Don’t talk like you know anything! If I could go-”

“-then you would,” Fushimi interrupted. “You said that before. But why can’t you? Your ability is a problem, obviously, but it’s not like travel is impossible, since you’re here and so far everything’s been fine.”

Yata’s jaw hung open for a moment, and then he scowled, turning away and lifting his console as if to play some more. But Fushimi had no intention of letting him dodge this one. The others let him do that too much, and as Totsuka and Kusanagi had said before, Fushimi was the best one to make Yata face his problems. Fushimi sighed, then continued.

“Look, if you don’t want to see your family, I’m hardly one to judge you for it, since I actively avoid every single relative I’ve ever met. But you’re not doing anyone any favors by making up reasons as to why you can’t rather than admitting you simply don’t want to.”

“That’s not it!” Yata exclaimed, dropping his console. “It’s not like that at all!”

“Well then what is it like?” Fushimi demanded.

“It’s… I don’t fit,” Yata said, caving in surprisingly easy. “I’m only half-related to them, and I’m the only one who’s… different. Weird. I’m the only medium, and they all say they’re okay with it, but if something happens, won’t they end up hating me? They’ll think I’m a freak, and then they won’t want me around anymore. I mean, who would want someone around when you never know if it’s really them you’re talking to, right?”

Fushimi opened his mouth, ready to point out the idiocy of that, when that woman popped into his mind. Her disdain towards his “imaginary friends”, the look on her face on the rare occasions they actually crossed paths inside that house that he’d grown up in, the dismissal she’d had for anything parental at all. He knew all too well what it was like to be rejected by those who were supposed to be your family. At this point, it was an old ache for Fushimi, one that he didn’t even notice anymore because he was so used to it. But back when he’d been a child, it had been agonizing. To be the only kid who didn’t have anyone show up for parent events (that man wouldn’t come either, since he had to keep up appearances in public and that was boring to him), to be ignored by his parents, to be isolated at family gatherings… He could understand, maybe a little, why Yata was afraid of that.

“Isn’t that why you have Homra?” Fushimi asked. “It may not be the same, but it’s still people who will accept you, right? The people you talked about just now don’t sound so worthless as to be the types that will reject you over something like that, but if they are, you’ll still have people who will
support you, and a place to belong to. They’ll be your family, won’t they?”

“Y-yeah, I guess you’re right,” Yata said, but he didn’t sound convinced. Didn’t look it either. Fushimi could almost see his thoughts on his face, wondering if Homra wouldn’t reject him as well. As if that would happen: Homra was full of the kinds of idiots who believed in being nice and taking care of people and other such bullshit. They would probably say that no one gets left behind, or something equally ludicrous. But it’s not like there was anything Fushimi could say to so easily erase Yata’s insecurity.

“And if they ever fail you, you could always count on me, y’know,” Fushimi said, and then clicked his tongue at himself for saying something so… sappy. And where had that even come from, anyway? Perhaps Yata’s idiocy was contagious.

“It’d take some real shit for me to start depending on a gloomy guy like you,” Yata said, dead serious. Fushimi opened his mouth to tell Yata to fuck off and go to hell, he had just been trying to be nice, when Yata’s serious face crumbled and he started laughing. “Sorry, sorry, I couldn’t resist,” he chuckled.

“On second thought, forget it. You don’t deserve my good will,” Fushimi muttered half-heartedly.

“Ha, like you have any,” Yata retorted, still laughing. And maybe Fushimi smiled in return.

After that conversation, the silence was much more comfortable. Unfortunately, it only lasted for another twenty minutes before Kuroh suddenly stiffened, and after about a minute Anna and Kusanagi came staggering in, both deathly pale.

Yata was immediately on his feet, jumping to help support Kusanagi while Kuro helped Anna. Fushimi tried not to be too impressed at Yata’s ability to aid a guy who was more than half a foot taller than him, but he didn’t succeed. Given Kusanagi’s long limbs and greater weight, it must have been quite the challenge just getting him comfortably situated in a location that wasn’t just inside the door.

“Oi, what happened?” Yata asked.

“Your little friend is what happened,” Kusanagi panted. “He almost made Anna faint, and then while she was still reeling, he tried to possess me.”

“Shit, are you okay?” Yata asked.

“Yeah, thanks to Anna’s marble,” Kusanagi said, pulling a cracked red orb from his pocket. “It held him off long enough for her to recover and do something. Hurt like a bitch though.”

“Sorry,” Yata said.

“You don’t have to apologize,” Kusanagi replied. “You warned us this kind of thing could happen. Besides, this way I get a taste of what you have to go through, right?”

“I never said I wanted anyone else to have to go through that,” Yata muttered. It almost seemed like he’d rather ghosts possess him even when there were other options. What a self-sacrificing idiot.

“Maybe not,” Kusanagi agreed. “I just hope the others have better luck than we did,” Kusanagi said.

“Shiro and Minami-sama are fine,” Kuro said decisively. “I would know if anything happened to
Shiro, and he would sacrifice himself before letting anything bad happen to someone who was accompanying him. As for the others, I believe they are returning now."

"Wait, really?" Yata asked. He closed his eyes, and a second later, opened them back up. "So they are." Fushimi followed suit, and sure enough, the bright blaze of Mikoto’s presence and the brilliant glimmer of Reisi’s were approaching.

"Those senses are completely wasted on you, Yata-chan," Kusanagi sighed. "You’ve got good eyes and ears and a sixth sense to boot, and yet you never use any of them. It’s a wonder you don’t run into even more trouble, with how careless you are."

"Sh-shut up!" Yata protested.

"Don’t worry Misaki, I didn’t notice either," Anna said. "It’s a good thing we have Kuroh here to look out for us."

"Be mindful young cubs, for danger often finds you, seeking your own prey," Kuroh said, a smile on his face that was just the slightest bit smug.

"And there he goes with the fucking haikus again," Yata muttered.

Before Fushimi could ask what Yata meant by that, the predicted arrivals entered the room. Mikoto’s expression was even more grim than usual, to the point where Fushimi wondered if he was a basilisk and could turn people to stone if he glared a little harder. Reisi was slung over the senior medium’s shoulder, and Totsuka lagged behind, looking like his usual cheerful self despite the states of his companions.

"Back so soon?" Totsuka quipped upon seeing Anna and Kusanagi. As he spoke, Mikoto walked over to the nearest wall and put Reisi down, placing the psychic in a sitting position against the wall. Reisi made a small noise, possibly of thanks, then leaned his head back, his eyes barely open.

"Yeah, we thought we’d slack off, but it looks like you guys caught us. Darn," Kusanagi laughed in reply to Totsuka’s jest, but his voice was strained and he kept his eyes locked on Mikoto as the medium crouched beside his boyfriend.

"Er, so how’d it go?" Yata asked.

"Tell your little friend that if he tries to possess my boyfriend again, I’ll beat his punk bitch ass to a pulp," Mikoto growled, slowly turning to face his brother.

"He’s not my friend," Yata muttered sullenly.

"I don’t fucking give a shit whether you’re friends or not," Mikoto spat, glowering at Yata as if he were trying to tear the younger redhead to pieces with his gaze. "If he weren’t already dead, I’d fucking kill him."

"Now now, there’s no need for that," Totsuka soothed. Fushimi had to marvel at Totsuka’s guts, trying to talk down Mikoto when he was in such a murderous state.

"Tatara’s right," Reisi gritted out. "I have a proper grasp of the situation now, and can make sure no one else runs into trouble. Still, what a troublesome ghost we’ve come across this time. It’s good that we all came along after all."

"I’d be happier if it was just those of us who can actually handle this shit," Mikoto grumbled, taking a seat next to Reisi. He then grunted a belated, "Sorry," to Yata.
“But it’s more fun with everyone here, don’t you think?” Totsuka countered. “Besides, all of us together are what makes us Homra. We’re a team, and we can’t leave people behind just because they might get hurt, since anyone could get into trouble on any case, even you and Anna.”

“Mmph,” Mikoto grunted sullenly. Apparently Yata wasn’t the only overgrown child around these parts. Totsuka, merely smiled and pulled out his phone, snapping a picture.

“I got Mikochan’s pouty face,” Totsuka sang, earning himself a glare from the sullen medium. “Anyway, it doesn’t look like any of us are in any shape to get anything else done today, so how about we call it a night and order some pizza for dinner?”

“Sounds good,” Mikoto grunted. Fushimi disagreed- at least about the pizza part- since he had a feeling he’d end up picking off toppings, but he wasn’t about to say that.

“Alright! Make sure you get one with lots of veggies,” Yata requested, as if he had read Fushimi’s mind and had to prove him right.

“Can we get a side of wings as well?” Anna asked, her eyes big and pleading.

“Well I doubt any of us could say no to that face,” Totsuka said. Anna beamed back at that, and for the first time she actually seemed like the youngest in their group.

Fushimi was surprised at how easily the dark atmosphere of their disappointing first day dissipated. He supposed he didn’t mind; if their optimism was contagious, it might be nice to think positively for once.

And if he was also glad to see Yata in a more cheerful state than he had been during their talk, that was probably because Yata was even more annoying when he was being depressed.
Within half an hour of eating, every human aside from Fushimi ended up dozing off. Fushimi wondered if he should be taking a sample of the pizza to analyze for drugs or chemicals with a soporific effect, but decided against it. After all, Anna, Reisi, and Kusanagi had all seemed pretty beat after the events of the afternoon, Mikoto was always napping to begin with, and it was completely plausible to believe that Yata was stress-crashing. That just left Totsuka, who seemed like the type to easily be caught up in moods like that.

Fushimi didn’t really mind everyone snoring around him, except for two things: one was that they had three rooms for the lot of them but were currently all crammed in one- which was a waste and also left the room feeling a bit small- and the other was Kuroh. The shikigami was also awake, and was sitting in the corner in stony silence. Fushimi couldn’t ignore him, but also could tell that there was no use trying to talk to him. It may have been a good opportunity to ask about shikigami, but he was certain Kuroh wouldn’t give him the answers he wished for. Fushimi settled for fiddling with his cell phone, opening up a puzzle app to bide some time since he wasn’t tired.

When Kuroh jumped to his feet, Fushimi nearly jumped out of his skin. It wasn’t just the sudden action that startled him- the shikigami’s stoic face had melted into something softer, and there was even a hint of a smile on his lips. Kuroh stood still for a moment, before pacing over to the door and dropping to one knee in front of it just as the door was opened.

“Welcome back, Shiro,” Kuroh greeted, his tone warmer than Fushimi would have thought him capable of.

“Hi hi!!” Shiro replied.

“We’re back!” Neko said, her voice somehow sounding like a cat meowing.

“Oh my, did everyone fall asleep?” Mrs. Yata asked, surveying the room as Kuroh got to his feet.

“Shortly after eating,” Fushimi said to answer Mrs. Yata’s question.

“Without even washing or changing into pajamas?” Mrs. Yata asked incredulously, shaking her head. “Those kids, really. And no blankets either, they’re going to get sick.”

As Mrs. Yata fussed over everyone’s state, Kuroh gave Shiro a rundown of the events of the day, explaining the attempted possessions. Fushimi supposed he ought to be grateful to the shiki, since it meant that he wouldn’t have to explain things himself.

“Wow, sounds like everyone had a trying day,” Shiro said. “No wonder they’re all out already, they must be exhausted.”

“Exhausted or not, they need to sleep properly or they’ll suffer for it tomorrow,” Mrs. Yata said decisively. “We can at least get them to their futons. Would you two mind helping me?”

Fushimi did mind, very much, because if she was expecting him to carry a beanpole like Kusanagi or muscular Mikoto, she was out of her freaking mind. It was simple science: someone as scrawny as Fushimi wasn’t going to be carrying people that much larger than him. It just wasn’t happening. Still, he supposed he would have better luck of it than a middle-aged woman such as Mrs. Yata.

“Sure thing,” Shiro said, volunteering them both and making it clear he didn’t share Fushimi’s misgivings. “Kuro and Neko can help, too.”
“They can do that?” Mrs. Yata asked.

“They’re shiki, so they can interact with both the human world and the spiritual one, though their human interactions are a bit more limited, of course. And since almost everyone here has some sort of ability, that makes it even easier for Kuro and Neko to interact with them,” Shiro explained. “They should be able to manage carrying a single human each, no problem, so if they take Mikoto and Munakata-san to the other room, Fushimi and I can get Totsuka-san, and then we can work on getting Kusanagi-kun and Yata-kun to their futons and you can take care of Anna-chan.”

Fushimi clicked his tongue, but voiced no protest. The two shikigami hefted their human burdens, neither of whom stirred, while Fushimi and Shiro paced over to Totsuka. Together they lifted the sleeping cameraman, who smiled and murmured something unintelligible.

Getting Totsuka to the adjoining room was easy enough, but getting him into the futon proved to be tricky. In the end, Kuroh had to help them, while Neko watched in undisguised amusement. It was annoying to Fushimi to be someone’s entertainment, but neither Kuroh nor Shiro seemed to mind at all.

When they got back to the larger room, Mrs. Yata was back, and had hefted her son up so his arm was slung over her shoulders, his feet dragging as she hauled him over to the futon.

“We would have taken care of him, Minami-san,” Shiro said, rushing to her side to help.

“I know,” the woman replied. “But I don’t get many chances to mom this one, so I don’t like to let them slip by. Besides, he used to love it when we’d pick him up and carry him. Though I guess I can’t really do that properly anymore, since he’s all grown up.” She then lay Yata on his futon and smiled down at him, a hint of mischief crossing her face as she added, “Or as grown as he’ll get anyway.” She pulled up the covers over him, tucking them down carefully before leaning down, tugging off Yata’s beanie, and placing a quick kiss on his forehead.

“Alright,” she said, getting to her feet. “I promised the kids I’d call them every night, so I’d better go do that. They’ll be disappointed Misaki already fell asleep, but oh well. It can’t be helped, can it?”

“Tell them I said hi,” Shiro replied as she walked out. He was already crouching next to Kusanagi, but made no move to begin lifting the bartender even as Fushimi joined him at the taller man’s side.

“Something wrong?” Fushimi asked.

“Sh, not so loud!” Shiro hissed. “And no, nothing’s wrong, I’m just bracing myself for if we accidentally wake him up, since his fists wake up before he does.”

“Is that actually a thing?” Fushimi asked.

“It is with him,” Shiro said. “One of the few times I’ve ever seen Mikoto actually bruised was New Year’s two years ago. It was before Munakata-san and Totsuka-san came along, and it was kinda a crazy night over all, and those two ended up getting a little closer than either of them really expected, and to make a long story short, Kusanagi-kun fell asleep on Mikoto’s shoulder but then some fireworks went off and he almost broke Mikoto’s nose.”

“How was that short?” Fushimi asked, clicking his tongue.

“Trust me, the whole story would be much longer,” Shiro replied, a twinkle in his eye. “Now, let’s do this, before we wake him up just by talking. On three. One, two, three.”
The two of them hefted the sleeping bartender up, and dragged his lanky frame over to one of the empty futons. After laying him down and covering him up, they took a moment to catch their breaths before putting some distance between themselves and the two sleepers.

“With that story, there was something that surprised me,” Fushimi said.

“What, that Kusanagi-san is bi?” Shiro said. “Yeah, it does tend to surprise people.”

“Not that,” Fushimi replied, rolling his eyes. “Though I suppose I am a little surprised that he and Mikoto were a thing.”

“Oh they weren’t,” Shiro corrected. “Like I said, that was a crazy night. Things happened, and they temporarily crossed the line between friendship and something more, but in the morning they swore to pretend it never happened. They even deleted all the pictures I took. Not that I had many in the first place, because that was right around the time the kotatsu caught on fire and then we realized Anna-chan had somehow mistakenly been given some spiked cider…”

“Fascinating, I’m sure,” Fushimi said. Actually, he was beginning to be vaguely curious about the full story, but there was something else that he was more interested in first. “But the thing that surprised me was that you said you haven’t seen Mikoto bruised very often. I would think that he and Yata would have been getting into bouts of fisticuffs all the time as children.”

“Hmm, not really,” Shiro replied. “I mean, sure they did get into accidents together a lot, and they’d drag Anna-chan into trouble with them, but Grandfather and Uncle Ichigen started teaching them martial arts and were very strict about proper use and all. Honestly, the only time I can think of one of them deliberately trying to hurt the other was when they became family.”

“I beg your pardon?” Fushimi asked, puzzled. Because really, how did that even make sense?

“Well, it was more what led to them becoming family, I suppose,” Shiro amended. And was this guy incapable of telling a story linearly or something? Fushimi had thought Homra was bad with their vague details and half-explanations, but it seemed like if you asked Shiro why the sky was blue, he’d first have to explain the birth of the universe and gravity and how birds flew before he could give you the answer. “See, back when Yata-kun first came to stay with grandfather, there were some circumstances, I’m not really sure about the details, but it seems Minami-san couldn’t visit for a while. As a result, Yata-kun was pretty lonely a lot. Anyway, Yata-kun noticed that Mikoto didn’t get any visitors either, and so he asked about it. An understandable question for someone in his shoes surely, but to Mikoto, being asked why his mom never came and visited was a little…”

Shiro trailed off, and Fushimi understood the unspoken implication. Mikoto had taken offense to Yata’s question.

“So what happened then?” Fushimi asked.

“Well, Mikoto gave Yata-kun a black eye as an answer,” Shiro said. “And grandfather found out what had transpired and explained to Yata-kun that Mikoto didn’t have any sort of family, and then they became family.”

“What, just like that?” Fushimi raised an eyebrow, not believing that was all it took.

“Pretty much,” Shiro replied. “That’s what led up to it anyway. I’m sure you’ve already heard the rest of the story.”

“I haven’t,” Fushimi said.
“What, really?” Shiro asked. “Well, it’s not like there’s all that much more to it. After grandfather explained things, Yata-kun sought Mikoto out and said that he’d heard Mikoto didn’t have a family and so he would be Mikoto’s family from then on. Mikoto was against it at first, and almost punched him again, but Yata-kun won him over in the end. Or so the story goes. Personally I think Mikoto just liked being called onii-chan.”

Idiots. They were complete idiots. Fushimi had known it for a while already, but now he had confirmation. Who just up and decided to be someone’s family because they had none? And who just accepted it when someone else did that? It defied all logic.

And yet it made total sense, when he factored in the personalities and attitudes of everyone at Homra.

“And Anna?” he asked. “How did she become part of the family?”

“Well she didn’t end up in grandfather’s care until a while later,” Shiro said. “And she wasn’t in the best of places mentally, so those two made an effort to cheer her up. They told her she could be their little sister, and she told them her family was gone and she didn’t need another, but Yata-kun said if she stayed alone she would be sad and Mikoto said that most families sucked but theirs wasn’t so bad and she would still have her old family too. She still preferred being alone, but then they helped her with her nightmares and also Uncle Ichigen helped her talk to her parents and I think everyone’s warmth helped her move forward, and she just became part of the family without anyone noticing, not even her. Like falling in love, I guess.”

“What’s love got to do with it?” Fushimi asked, more sharply than he’d intended. But seriously, they were talking about family, so how had this turned into love talk? Though it didn’t matter, because either way it was something Fushimi couldn’t understand.

“Families love each other,” Shiro said. “At least, most do. I guess maybe yours didn’t. But ours does. Sometimes the bonds you forge with people you share no blood with end up being strongest. We’re proof of that. Homra is too. You could learn a thing or two from them, Fushimi-san, even while your ability is stuck as it is.”

There was a sudden lump in Fushimi’s throat, making it difficult to swallow and impossible to form words. Deep down, he wondered if Shiro might be right. Could Homra possibly be the place where he learned about those feelings that were so alien to him? What if, back when he’d first gone to Shiro about that man’s ghost, Shiro had done a divination without him noticing, and had predicted that the direction Homra was in from Shiro’s office would be prosperous or enlightening or some shit like that for Fushimi? It didn’t seem possible, but that was part of what an onmyouji did, right?

“Anyway, rather than standing around here all night, I’m gonna eat,” Shiro said, already heading towards the stack of pizza boxes on the floor. “I’m hungry.”

As Shiro took a seat, his shiki, who had been keeping a respectful distance, joined him, the girl transforming into a cat and leaping onto his head. Watching them, Fushimi felt an ache building within him, one that fit with the lump that was still choking him. They looked so comfortable together, fitting naturally with each other like three pieces of a whole. As a child, Fushimi had felt incomplete, like another thing broken by that man, but he’d learned to adapt to being a fragment, to ignore the part of him that insisted he needed to find the rest of him, because that sounded too much like romantic crap about “finding your other half”. He didn’t need another half, didn’t need to depend on another person to be happy. But watching Shiro and his shiki, Fushimi felt like he had before he’d adapted. Lonely, that was probably the word most people would use for it. So very, very alone.
“How far do your shikis’ protections go?” Fushimi asked abruptly, not sure what sort of etiquette went with talking about shikigami. Was it rude to talk about them as if they weren’t there? But could he address them directly? Then again, it wasn’t like being rude had ever bothered him.

“The entire building should be safe, as well as the garden courtyard out back,” Kuroh informed him, since Shiro’s mouth was full of pizza.

“Got it,” Fushimi said, and then fled. A garden courtyard, huh? It wasn’t exactly the sort of place he liked, but it seemed like as good a place to escape to as any. What else was he going to do, roam the halls? Go outside and get possessed and wind up doing who knew what? Yeah, garden courtyard it was.

The sun was setting as Fushimi left the inn and entered the courtyard. He supposed the setting was picturesque, what with the Japanese maples in the corners of the garden and a cherry tree in the center, and a sunset backdrop to complete the aesthetic, but it was lost on him. Trees were things that converted carbon dioxide to oxygen and provided shade. They were useful, not beautiful. And sunsets were just photons that were scattered to show different wavelengths than normal because of the sun’s angle on the atmosphere. Their gaudy colors didn’t make up for the dimmer lighting or the way the sun could get in your eyes if you weren’t careful.

And get in his eyes the sun did. He clicked his tongue, annoyed, as he raised a hand to block some of the light, and was caught completely unaware by the voice that greeted him.

“Oh, Fushimi-kun,” Mrs. Yata said. He clicked his tongue again, because really, he should have known. The woman couldn’t leave the inn any more than he could, and with Anna asleep in the room they were sharing, of course she would come out to the garden to make her call. “You’re not going to bed yet?”

“Why would I?” Fushimi responded, finally sighting the woman. She didn’t have a phone in hand, which made him wonder if she’d already finished her call or if she was delaying it. “I didn’t do anything today, and besides, I don’t sleep much.”

“That’s no good,” Mrs. Yata replied. “A young man such as yourself needs to be getting proper rest. You should take better care of yourself, Fushimi-kun.”

“It’s not like I could sleep, even if I wanted to,” Fushimi grumbled.

“That’s no good,” Mrs. Yata replied. “A young man such as yourself needs to be getting proper rest. You should take better care of yourself, Fushimi-kun.”

“Ah,” Mrs. Yata said knowingly. “Insomnia?” Fushimi shook his head. “No? Then perhaps you also have some ghosts-that-are-not-ghosts.”

“Ghosts that aren’t ghosts?” Fushimi repeated, puzzled.

“Yes. People talk about ghosts of the past or the past haunting you, right?” Mrs. Yata said. “Though I don’t think the past is the only cause of ghosts-that-are-not-ghosts. I think it’s more when your own mind preys on you. The past just gives it material to use against you. It’s unfortunate, but you children seem more prone to such ghosts, and it does seem to be a result of your powers.”

“My powers have always been inconvenient, but they didn’t really haunt me until recently,” Fushimi said dryly, though it was less his powers haunting him and more a certain ghost that he could be rid of if it weren’t for his difficulties with his ability…

“Well then I guess you’re lucky,” Mrs. Yata replied.

“Lucky?” Fushimi snorted. “I had an emotionally scarring childhood regardless of the lack of
ability-induced woe. How is that lucky?"

“Perhaps not,” Mrs. Yata conceded. “You’re right, I shouldn’t assume. But Misaki and Mikoto and Anna, all of them had a hard time of things, and it was because of their abilities, so it’s easy to think that you would be the same.”

“Well I’m not,” Fushimi retorted. “I’m just as unlucky, but for completely different reasons. My misfortunes stem from my shitty parents, not because I see and draw ghosts.”

“That’s not completely different,” Mrs. Yata countered. “If it’s shitty parents, then Misaki and Mikoto both had those.”

“You do realize that implies you’ve been a bad mom, right?” Fushimi pointed out.

“Haven’t I?” Mrs. Yata suddenly looked much older as she smiled ruefully. “Where have I been my son’s whole life? And yes, some of that’s his decision, but isn’t it my fault he doesn’t want to come home?”

“I don’t think—” Fushimi began, feeling obligated to correct this apparent misunderstanding, but he was cut off.

“Besides, if I were a better mother, I would have divorced my ex-husband as soon as I learned that Misaki’s… strangeness, shall we say, was because of ghosts.”

Rather than say anything, Fushimi just stared in bewilderment. How did those things connect?

“My ex-husband doesn’t believe in ghosts,” Mrs. Yata said wryly, noticing the expression on Fushimi’s face. “To be honest, neither did I at first, but with him it’s different. I always thought things like ‘even if ghosts exist…’ or whatever, so while I didn’t believe in ghosts, I didn’t really reject their existence or anything. But my ex-husband is so vehemently against their existence that he could die and become a ghost himself and still insist that ghosts aren’t real. I knew he was like that, and yet, when I met Kokujouji-san and found out about Misaki’s power, I still decided to keep Misaki with us, and that we would just try and keep it secret. Didn’t wanna ruin our family.” Mrs. Yata’s mouth twisted bitterly, and Fushimi couldn’t help but see the resemblance between her and her son. Their faces were different, but their expressions were very similar. “But of course, Morishima-san found out, and rather than change his way of thinking he decided that Misaki was insane and ought to be locked away where he couldn’t hurt anyone. Asshole.”

Fushimi felt himself growing angry at this man he had never met, who had turned on his son over such a small thing. Knowing how much Yata’s ability frightened him, it seemed so wrong that others mistreat him for it.

“Some people really shouldn’t be parents,” Fushimi murmured, turning the words Yata had said just two days before over in his mouth.

“True, but honestly if Misaki had been normal I think Morishima-san would have been a doting father,” Mrs. Yata sighed. “He absolutely adored Misaki up until his first words were a foreign language. Ainu, I think. And the more it became apparent that Misaki was special, the less he wanted anything to do with him. Plus there was an incident that really soured things… Anyway, he’s probably a good dad to the kids he has now. But I do wish Misaki could have had a better dad from the start, that’s for sure.”

“Still, not bowing out of your marriage the instant things looked bad doesn’t make you a bad mother,” Fushimi said, returning to the issue at hand. Because apparently some deity somewhere-
one that no doubt had a twisted sense of humor—had decided he ought to be the personal counselor to the Yata family. If he was going to be treated like some kind of therapist, then maybe he was going to have to start charging. That way people might realize how very unqualified for the job he actually was and leave him alone. “Your ex-husband didn’t get his way, and Yata’s still here and able to help people with his ability rather than being locked up in some mental hospital or insane asylum or whatever. You tried your best, and he looks up to you for that. He doesn’t hate you, and he does want to go home, but he’s scared is all.”

“He told you that?” Mrs. Yata asked, and Fushimi nodded. “Well, that’s a relief, I guess, though I’m not sure what he could be scared of.”

“Rejection,” Fushimi said simply.

“Ah,” Mrs. Yata replied, scowling. “Another thing to ‘thank’ his father for. Seriously, don’t tell me that shit while we’re back in this town. I might actually punch my ex in the face if I hear much more like that.”

Yup, definitely Yata’s mom. He could picture Yata being a lot like this woman in about twenty years, all nice friendly warmth until something caused his feistiness to break the leprechaun facade.

“I guess it’s a good thing you have friends with the local police then,” Fushimi replied blandly. And it turned out that making Mrs. Yata laugh felt almost as good as getting her son to do the same.
Everyone Goes to School

Perhaps there was some sort of God after all, because the hotel offered a complimentary breakfast. There were lots of options, including a nice tasteless cereal that Fushimi could soak in milk and then consume the soggy remnants. The best part (in Fushimi’s opinion) was the way Yata blanched at the sight of Fushimi enjoying his milk-sodden wheat bites.

Once they were all seated, Shiro called everyone to order to plan their next moves.

“I know yesterday wasn’t as fruitful as we hoped,” he began, “but we should still all report in to make sure we’re on the same page before we make any concrete plans for today, agreed?” Everyone nodded, and Shiro continued. “Alright, Anna-chan and Kusanagi-kun, did you guys find out anything new?”

“We didn’t get much, but we did learn a little bit from the teachers we talked to,” Kusanagi replied. “It seems Yuuya’s been acting up since summer. They’re not sure when exactly it started, since it was during their vacation, but it would have been late July.”

“So either my birthday or his, probably,” Yata sighed.

“That’s what it seemed like. He’d been writing. They said it was only ever one sentence at a time at first but, well, we got to see his latest sample firsthand. He covered an entire room. Walls, windows, ceiling, floor, the furniture, everything. They said he even wrote on a few students who were in the room at the time too. He really wants his message to get across, it seems.”

“And what about his emotions?” Shiro asked Anna.

“The usual,” the girl replied. “Anger. Fear. He’s frustrated that he isn’t getting what he wants. But also… He’s hopeful. He thinks that if he can find Misaki, that everything will turn out well. He wants to be alive again, without understanding that he isn’t alive. It will be tricky to deal with someone like him.”

“There there, it will be alright,” Totsuka said soothingly. “You guys always manage to take care of things, you can handle this one too.”

“Perhaps, but it may not be a good result,” Anna whispered, barely audible. Shiro and Yata both shot her alarmed looks.

“So that’s us, how about you three?” Kusanagi asked, turning to Mikoto, Reisi, and Totsuka. “What did you guys find out before things went south?”

“Well, Minami-san’s friend officer Watanabe gave us a list of names and addresses for each of the children that ended up at Yata-chan’s old house after being possessed,” Totsuka said. “He also said he’d been sent to pick up two of the victims after they ended up at that house, and that they were completely unaware of where they’d ended up or how they’d gotten there, just that they remembered being cold before they found themselves there. In other words, fairly standard for possession by a strong ghost. He takes quick and complete control.”

“Well, we kinda figured that much,” Shiro sighed. “Anything else?”

“N-” Totsuka began, but he was interrupted by Reisi.

“As a matter of fact, yes,” Reisi said, placing his utensils on the table and folding his napkin.
“Regarding that list, due to the unfortunate events of yesterday, I did not notice it right away, but there is a slight discrepancy in the testimony of Officer Watanabe and the list he gave us. He claimed there have been 12 victims, yet there are only 11 on the list he gave us.”

“I can explain that,” Mrs. Yata said. “I asked him to exclude my ex-husband’s son, since we won’t get any useful information out of that family.”

“I see,” Reisi said, pushing up his glasses. “Then that really was Yata-kun’s biological father the other day.”

It wasn’t often Fushimi felt like an idiot, but as Mrs. Yata nodded her confirmation, he found himself having one of those rare moments in which he questioned his intelligence. How had he missed it? He’d noticed the resemblance, he’d heard what the man had said and learnt of Yata’s father’s disbelief in ghosts and his alternate convictions, and yet he hadn’t figured it out. Worse still, Reisi apparently had, despite having less information. It was a major blow to Fushimi’s pride. His only consolation was that everyone else looked just as surprised as he was.

“That’s who that asshat was?” Mikoto asked.

“Yeah,” Yata muttered, clenching his fists. “Fucking piece of shit.”

“Well then, given that the discrepancy has been explained, that is all,” Reisi said, picking his utensils back up to resume eating.

“Which just leaves Yashiro and Minami-san,” Anna said. All eyes turned toward the onmyouji and Yata’s mother.

“Okay,” Shiro said, placing his hands flat on the tabletop. “Well. Aside from all the juicy little tidbits we heard, we did learn two crucial things. One: that most people seem to think it’s the house that’s haunted, and that’s why the possessed kids keep going there. The owners are even looking at trying to sell the place, though of course it’s hard to get a good value for a haunted property. And two: there seemed to be a lot of people who were inclined to believe that the house is haunted by none other than Yata-kun. A few of the rumor-mongers were bold enough to admit that they’d heard it was Minami-san, but the general consensus seemed to be that Yata-kun’s father murdered him and buried him in the yard and so Yata-kun is possessing the children to try and lead them to his body.”


“That would be quite the story, don’t you think?” Totsuka asked, looking interested. “It’s almost a shame that that isn’t the case.”

“The fuck?” Yata sputtered. “Totsuka-san, that kinda makes it sound like you wish I was dead!”

“I’m just saying it’s got a certain romance to it,” Totsuka replied.

“Don’t just kill me off for r-romance!”

“Not that kind of romance,” Mikoto said.

“I know that!” Yata protested, his voice cracking. His face was flushing an impressive shade of vermilion.

“Misaki, calm down,” Mrs. Yata sighed. “Anyway, we did hear a couple other things regarding some of the families of the victims that may or may not be relevant. Mostly the usual stuff about
divorces and affairs, though there were a couple of pregnancies as well.”

“Troubled family life might be something the ghost looks for in his general victims,” Reisi mused. “Still, what we know thus far is inconclusive.”

“I think the best thing to do at this point would be to try and look for any correlations among the victims,” Shiro said. “We can see if there’s any specific things this ghost looks for when it possesses people.”

“I just hope it’s something readily apparent, since a bunch of strangers asking about people’s kids is hella shady,” Kusanagi sighed. “Especially when it’s us.” He gestured weakly around the table, and Fushimi couldn’t help but glance around at the others. Yeah, somehow he had to agree that two thugs, a couple of airheads, a doll-girl, a sunglasses-wearing beanpole, and a grump like him were likely to raise a few red flags when asking detailed questions about small children.

“It’ll be fine,” Totsuka said. “If it’s something a ghost would pick up on, then I’m sure it’s something we can pick up on too. Everyone’s abilities work very similarly to ghosts’ powers after all.”

“Maybe the teachers we talked to can help us,” Anna said. “They both seemed to understand the nature of what’s going on.”

“Having such an active ghost around would likely do that,” Reisi said.

“It also helps that Saotome-sensei was Misaki’s teacher back then, so he’s seen something similar before,” Mrs. Yata chimed in.

“Then she was probably Yuuya’s teacher too,” Yata added.

“He,” Anna corrected. “Saotome-sensei is male.”

“It’s not like I remember,” Yata bristled. “It- it was a long time ago.” Fushimi rolled his eyes, not pointing out that Yata’s mom had literally just referred to the teacher as male right before Yata had misgendered him.

“Either way, you’re right, at least about him teaching your friend,” Kusanagi said. “He was just telling us about what that kid was like alive when the ghost version tried to possess me.”

“Are we all agreed that we should talk to the teachers as our next step then?” Shiro asked. Everyone nodded. “Good. Then we just need to try and prevent any more possessions, because, if yesterday is anything to go by, that ghost will be after us.”

“Well Reirirei, did say he had some ideas about that,” Totsuka pointed out. Fushimi was beginning to wonder how many ridiculous nicknames Totsuka had stowed away in his brain for his boyfriends. Wait, they were just for his boyfriends, right? Fushimi already disliked that Totsuka was calling him Saru-kun, but if Totsuka had worse awaiting him…

“Oh, really?” Shiro asked. “Well then I guess the floor is yours, Munakata-san.”

“Thank you,” Reisi said, pushing up his glasses again, causing light to flare off the lenses. “Now that I know first-hand what our ghostly menace can do, I have a better grasp of how he will factor into our decisions. I agree that he will prioritize us as targets over random children- my theory is that the ghost can sense our proximity to Yata-kun. As such, I have been considering our options, and it seems the best outcome will be if we all stick together today.”
"All? As in…?" Kusanagi asked, and Reisi nodded.

"Yes, even Yata-san and Fushimi-san should accompany us for best results," Reisi confirmed. "I think we will likely find out everything we need to know once we have completed a full interview of the teachers, but in case we need to split up, there will be three groups. Mikoto, Anna-san, and Tatara will have to be one group, and for the remaining two, I recommend that Shiro-san, Kuroh, and myself accompany either Minami-san or Kusanagi-kun, and Yata-san, Fushimi-san, and Neko go with the other. No one should get possessed if we proceed as such."

"Neko will be disappointed if that happens," Shiro said. "But I suppose it does make sense since she’s better at hiding things."

"Then let’s make sure we don’t need to split up," Mikoto said. "‘Cuz I don’t like it either. The runt shouldn’t be wandering around where I can’t see him."

"Oh come on," Yata protested. "I thought you’d stopped it with that runt crap since a while ago."

"Mikoto, you’re being unreasonable," Kusanagi chided. "If Reisi says that’s what we’ve gotta do, you know he’s right."

"Yeah well, I’d like to keep Reisi in sight too," Mikoto grumbled. "At least he’s sticking with someone who knows what they’re doing." Yata, Reisi, and Shiro all had their mouths open to argue, but Anna spoke up first, clearly trying to prevent an argument.

"Does anyone have anything else to add?" she asked. Everyone shook their heads.

"So off to school we go, huh?" Kusanagi mused.

"Yes, though not until this afternoon," Mrs. Yata said. "Despite the issues they’ve been having with the ghost, classes are still in session, since the principal is disinclined to think that it is anything more than a prank."

"Even if it were just a prank, it’s still something to be taken seriously," Shiro said. "It’s still dangerous, no matter what you think."

"Yeah, but for some people, their sense of danger doesn’t work right," Mikoto grunted, and Fushimi had to bite the inside of his lip to keep himself from asking if the medium was talking about himself or his boyfriends. "And some of ‘em don’t really care ‘bout danger ‘nless it affects them directly."

"Well either way, we still can’t go disrupting the school day so we have to wait to go talk to the teachers," Mrs. Yata pointed out.

"You have a point there," Totsuka said. "Now, about that gossip I was promised…"

As Shiro, Mrs. Yata, Totsuka, Reisi, and even Kusanagi all avidly discussed the juiciest rumors of the town, Fushimi finished his cereal, trying to tune out the insipid chatter lest it lower his IQ. Once finished, Fushimi couldn’t help but notice Yata making faces over each new tidbit. How childish. Still, those grimaces certainly suited the conversation, so when Yata rolled his eyes at something Shiro was sharing, Fushimi took the opportunity to make eye contact and pull a face of his own. Yata grinned at him, then crossed his eyes while sucking in his lower lip, and that was all it took before the two of them ended up turning it into a competition to see who could make the most impressive face. Fushimi was pretty sure Yata won, since Yata was definitely the more expressive of the two of them, and he had some pretty impressive facial contortions too. Not that Fushimi’s pride would ever allow him to admit defeat, or even admit that he had even partaken in a
competition of facial expressions to begin with. After all, sticking one’s tongue out at someone was just so undignified.

In the end, it was a glimpse of Mikoto’s raised eyebrows and smirk, caught in the corner of Fushimi’s eye, that stopped the little game. Fushimi quickly excused himself after that, heading back to their rooms. He should have just done that from the moment he finished eating, really, but he supposed Homra’s group mentality was contagious since leaving hadn’t occurred to him until the need to escape became too great.

Fushimi had been hoping for a nice quiet day spent with his computer, but Mrs. Yata had other plans. Less than half an hour after the rest of their party returned from breakfast, Fushimi found himself being corralled out the door along with the others so that the woman could show them around the town. Fushimi was pretty sure he was going to have to review the terms of his employment with Homra, because there was no way he would have ever signed up for this memory lane, tourism bullshit. Not to mention Mrs. Yata’s idea of what counted as noteworthy seemed rather bizarre. Fushimi couldn’t even begin to fathom why she felt the need to point out the location of a bygone shop where her high school drama club used to get hotpot, or the store where she’d bought Yata’s baby clothes and had almost gotten stuck in between two shelves because she’d been heavily pregnant at the time (which, wasn’t that oversharing a bit?). Meanwhile, they walked past far more interesting places such as an arcade, an entire shopping mall, and a statue garden where Fushimi could see several tourists taking selfies like idiots.

It was almost a relief when it finally became late enough that they could get to work. Not that Fushimi would be doing anything really, he was just here because he had nothing better to do and also needed to stick with these people to avoid a certain ghost.

Their walk to the school took them past a park where Yata had apparently played a lot as a child. It was the first place he seemed to actually recognize, and Kusanagi had to grab him by the collar to keep him from running off to the playground. Fushimi had to bite back a snicker when Yata protested and Kusanagi cited their pending business and the fact that Yata was “too big” for the playground as reasons why Yata couldn’t revisit his childhood; with as short as Yata was, people probably wouldn’t even notice he was an adult so long as they didn’t look too closely.

At the school, Mrs. Yata led the way unflatteringly to the staff room. She didn’t even hesitate before going in, as if she belonged there. The rest of their group waited outside as she talked to the teachers inside, and a minute later she came out with a young woman who was introduced as one of the teachers who were their contacts regarding the case, Itori-sensei.

“Thank you so much for coming,” Itori-sensei gushed. “We’re all just about at our wits’ end. I was so glad to hear you would help, but after yesterday, I was worried you wouldn’t come back.”

“Of course we came back,” Anna said, her eyes earnest. “We can’t just leave while you’re still being troubled by a ghost.” Fushimi was inclined to disagree with her, but he wasn’t about to say that. After all, he himself was relying on that helpful attitude.

“And we’ve got the whole crew here today to make sure there aren’t any more incidents like that,” Kusanagi added.

“That explains why there’s so many of you today,” Itori-sensei replied. “Anyway, Saotome-sensei is still in one of the classrooms. There was another incident earlier, during arts and crafts, and now there’s paint all over the place so he was going to clean it up.”

The teacher set off, and the group of mediums, psychics, and sidekicks followed. They passed a bulletin board covered in ugly drawings that Fushimi supposed a child and their parents would be
proud of, but which no sane person would ever admire. He remembered doing drawings like that himself, and as soon as they were allowed to take them home he would crumple them up and throw them out. He knew he didn’t have any talent for art, and if he took things home, that man would surely tear them to shreds or burn them anyway, so what difference did it make if he trashed them himself?

“Do you usually get so many incidents in a row?” Shiro asked cheerfully as the teacher led them through the halls.

“I don’t think we’ve ever had things happen two days in a row before, if that’s what you mean,” Itori-sensei replied, frowning and chewing on her lip a bit. “Since it started, we do get strange things two or three times a week, but there’s usually at least a day in-between, I think. Yes, actually, there’s definitely a day where nothing happens before the next incident, because I remember thinking after some of the kids was acting up before that at least nothing would happen for a day or two. I wonder why it’s different this time…”

“Ghosts tend to be more active when things they either like very much or dislike occur,” Shiro explained. Fushimi wondered which their group counted as: a thing the ghost liked or a thing it disliked.

“So- so you think it’s a ghost then?” Itori-sensei asked. “It’s not something worse? The granny next door to me said it could be an angry lesser god, or a yokai.”

“No, nothing like that,” Shiro said. “Just a ghost that’s been left alone for too long. We’ll take care of it.”

“Thank you,” Itori-sensei said sincerely, stopping in her tracks to turn and bow to them in gratitude. “This… ghost or whatever, it’s been driving us to insanity. Some students have stopped coming to school, and we even had a teacher quit, and to be honest, I was thinking of quitting too. I just, I don’t know if I can take it much longer. So thank you, we really need your help.”

“It’s what we do,” Shiro said as Itori-sensei resumed walking.

They turned a corner and then Itori-sensei was sliding back the door to a classroom and gesturing for them to enter.

“Oh my,” Mrs. Yata commented as they all filed in. It seemed a pretty accurate sentiment for the sight that awaited them.

The classroom the teacher had led them to was a fairly standard one, with neat rows of desks facing a chalkboard, and a line of cubbies underneath a bulletin board at the back. It would have been completely unremarkable if it weren’t for the purple paint dripping down from a splatter on the ceiling. There could be no doubt that this was the mess caused by the ghost which the other teacher had stayed to clean up. The man they were there to see was currently standing on a desk and futilely scrubbing at the marred ceiling with paper towels, grunting with effort and gritting his teeth in obvious frustration. At Mrs. Yata’s words, the man started, wobbling a bit before steadying himself and taking a look at their group.

“Oh, you came back,” he said tiredly, taking in the various members of Homra, Mrs. Yata, and the accompanying teacher hovering behind them. “Good, good.”

“I think you’ll have better luck putting something underneath to keep the floor clean and just letting it drip itself dry,” Kusanagi said, examining the splotch.
“Yeah, I suppose you’re right,” the male teacher said, looking ruefully up at the mess before hopping off the desk and approaching them. “Well, welcome back, I guess,” he said, nodding to Kusanagi and Anna. “And Morishima-san, it’s been a while.”

“It’s Yata now,” Mrs. Yata corrected. “I remarried. And you remember my son, Misaki, right Saotome-sensei?” Mrs. Yata reached an arm out behind Yata’s back and pushed, forcing her son to step forward.

“Misaki-kun?” the teacher asked, looking confused. “You don’t go by Yuuya anymore then?”

“Er, no,” Yata said, looking extremely uncomfortable. “Just Yata is fine. Or you can use my first name I guess, but I’d rather you didn’t. It’s kinda, y’know, girly.” Fushimi bit back a snort.

“You’re the only one who thinks that,” Mikoto said.

“Shut up!” Yata shot back, bristling. “You’re the one who said it sounded girly in the first place!”

“Boys,” Mrs. Yata said, a note of danger in her voice. Both mediums immediately quieted, and Yata pouted sullenly. Yet another reason he could pass for a kid: he was super childish.

“I… see,” Saotome-sensei replied, though it was clear he was just as confused, if not more so. “So what can I help you guys with?”

“We wanted to ask a few questions, if you don’t mind,” Reisi said, stepping forward to take the lead. “Namely, if you’ve noticed any commonalities amongst the students who have been possessed.”

“Well nearly all of my students have asked where Mori- I mean, where Mi- Yata-kun is at some point or another, if that’s what you mean by possessed,” Saotome-sensei said. “It’s kinda like a chain reaction sometimes, where one kid will ask and then five seconds later another one is speaking up, so you get a few kids acting up at a time. I think there’s also been some kids in other classes who were affected too.”

“Yeah, that’s Yuuya alright,” Yata muttered.

“We’re more interested in the students that sought out Yata-kun’s former home,” Reisi said. “The ghost is clearly strong enough to possess just about anyone, but he will still fare better with hosts that have a greater compatibility, which usually means there is some common factor.”

“I’m afraid I can’t help you there,” Saotome-sensei said, shaking his head. “I’ve heard that that’s been happening, of course, but they haven’t released the names of the children involved, and the parents have mostly been pretty hush about it. It’s not exactly the kind of thing parents like being known. Especially with the way some of them gossip.”

“Yes, they can be quite terrible,” Mrs. Yata agreed. Fushimi wondered what sorts of things the woman had had to listen to as the mother of a child like Yata. He too knew what mothers could be like, since they didn’t bother to lower their voices. As a child, he’d heard them saying things about this child or that, and how it reflected on their parents. They’d had plenty to say about Fushimi and his parents too. They were like vicious predators who would turn on one another at even the slightest hint of weakness. No wonder the parents of the victims had tried to keep things quiet.

“We were able to obtain a list of the victims,” Reisi informed Saotome-sensei. “I trust you will keep the names on it to yourself?” Saotome-sensei nodded, and Reisi produced a slip of paper. “Please consider birthdays, family circumstances, and personalities as potential factors. In particular, if you could try to look for things they might have in common with Yata-kun and also
Nakahara Yuuya-kun who died 16 years ago.”

“About that,” Saotome-sensei said, scratching his head. He looked over at Kusanagi and Anna.
“You guys were asking about Yuuya-kun yesterday too. And you were talking about being possessed earlier, so… am I correct in assuming that you think this is a ghost doing this, and that that ghost is Yuuya-kun?”

“Yes,” Anna confirmed.

“But that can’t be right,” Saotome-sensei protested. “The way those kids are acting, it’s nothing like Yuuya-kun. He was kinda quiet, but a nice kid, yet every time the kids start asking for Morishima Misaki, they seem almost hostile. And besides, why would Yuuya-kun haunt the school? He died at home.”

“He acts different now because of what happened to him,” Yata answered. “The people he trusted most killed him. Of course he changed after that. And it’s because he died at home that he came here. Home didn’t feel safe anymore, but here did, because even if you didn’t listen to him when he said he was scared to go home, you still aren’t one of the people who hurt him.”

Saotome-sensei stared at Yata, his breathing suddenly shallow. “How…?” he rasped, “how did you know…?”

“Because I’m the first person Yuuya possessed,” Yata said. “I didn’t go around calling myself another name just for fun. In fact, because of him, I don’t even remember this place. Or you.”

“Is that why he’s looking for you then?” Saotome-sensei asked. Yata nodded, his Adam’s apple bobbing as he swallowed thickly.

“I’m easy to possess,” Yata said. “The way he is now, he’s strong enough to possess just about anybody, but there’s limits. If it’s just some random kid, he can’t do it for very long, but if it’s me, he could probably stay in me until I die.”

“I-” Saotome-sensei began, apparently about to say more, but Yata interrupted him.

“Anyway, you should look at that list and answer that fu- answer Reisi’s questions.” Fushimi didn’t miss the way Yata’s eyes darted to his mom just before he changed his wording.

As Reisi handed over the list, Itori-sensei went over and joined Saotome-sensei. The two teachers began discussing possibilities, prompted by Reisi to consider different angles. Figuring he wasn’t needed, Fushimi left the classroom, intending to go get a drink of water since they’d been walking around all day. He remembered passing a water fountain on the way to the classroom, so he retraced his steps to find it.

He had just turned a corner and spotted it when he felt something odd, almost like someone had poked him. It was vaguely familiar, like the time in the bar when Yata had tried to possess him. He clicked his tongue; were those idiots seriously testing him now of all times? How annoying.

“Yata, stop that,” Fushimi hissed after a quick glance down the halls showed no one in sight.

That proved to be the wrong thing to say, because the next thing he knew, Fushimi was flooded with a feeling like ice being poured through his veins, and before he could even think of how to raise his shields, he was already falling unconscious.
Mrs. Yata has an Idea

Now now, we can’t have this, can we? Didn’t anyone ever teach you it’s rude to play with other people’s toys?

The words were echoing in Fushimi’s head, spoken in that voice that made his skin crawl. The words sounded wrong though, not like something that man would say to him. And also… they didn’t feel like memories. He shuddered, opening his eyes.

The world around him was blurry, but he could just make out a bed surrounded by curtains in front of him, meaning this was no doubt the school’s infirmary. He was sitting up, having apparently been positioned in the nurse’s chair. The curtains of the bed were open, and there was a figure with aggressively scarlet hair seated on the bed: Mikoto.

“Yo,” Mikoto greeted as Fushimi peered around, seeking his glasses. He located them on the nurse’s desk, and put them on. “So what happened?”

“Shouldn’t I be the one asking that?” Fushimi grumbled. “And why am I in the chair when there’s a perfectly decent bed right there?”

“Bed’s too short,” Mikoto snorted. “You’da ended up hanging halfway off. Which woulda been funny, but I didn’ want them all bitchin’ at me for not takin’ proper care of you.”

“You make such a great nurse,” Fushimi drawled sarcastically. Mikoto laughed.

“We’ve already got ‘nough nurses in Homra,” he stated. “They’re enough to drive you up the wall.”

“Then why aren’t any of them here?” Fushimi asked.

“Cuz Anna and Totsuka went to buy some drinks, Shiro just gets in the way, and the rest are all trying ta figure out that stuff with the ghost,” Mikoto said, crossing his arms. “And I’m the only one that can punch ghosts,” he added as an afterthought, a smirk blossoming on his face.

“I think I’d feel safer being guarded by one of Shiro’s shikigami if it’s all the same,” Fushimi replied drily.

“Kuro’s outside,” Mikoto said, jerking a thumb towards the door. “Said somethin’ ‘bout respectin’ your privacy. Personally, I figure it might be kinda weird to wake up in a strange place all alone. Plus it’s not like I’m needed anywhere else.”

“You were hoping to take a nap while you were here, weren’t you?” Fushimi said, suddenly figuring out why Mikoto had been on the bed and how he’d been so certain it was too short. Mikoto just shrugged.

“And aren’t you needed with Anna and Totsuka?” Fushimi pressed.

“Nah, Anna can take care of herself,” Mikoto said.

“What about Totsuka? He’s not a medium,” Fushimi argued. Was this a sign of favoritism in Mikoto’s relationship?

“ Nope,” Mikoto agreed. “But ghosts can’t touch him. He’s too positive. He’s like the opposite of
me and Yata, but without any powers.”

“Come again?”

“Man, you really don’t know a thing,” Mikoto said, and Fushimi bristled. It wasn’t his fault he was ignorant about this stuff. Unlike everyone else, he hadn’t been raised by others with abilities. Mikoto sighed. “You ever hear people say stuff like negative people are more likely to get haunted?” the medium asked. Fushimi shook his head. “Well, some people say that. It’s sorta true, but sorta false. Like, it’s not that negative thinking will bring ghosts around or make them more active or anything, it’s more that positive attitudes tend to be harder for ghosts to deal with. Someone like Totsuka, his attitude gives him a natural resistance to possession, so it takes too much energy for most ghosts to bother. Even Yata needs a little help taking over him. He’s also a little less affected by emotions and shit, but he’ll still be affected by powers like Anna’s and telekinetic attacks.”

“He’s that strong just because of his outlook on life?” Fushimi was skeptical.

“Yup,” Mikoto replied, meeting Fushimi’s skepticism with conviction. “It’s not an ability or anything, just he’s something ghosts naturally dislike. If he ever changed his attitude, became less optimistic, he’d lose what he’s got. But for now, he’s the safest of us all with this ghost. Now quit dodging the question: what happened?”

Oh. Right. Fushimi had almost forgotten Mikoto had asked that. Ugh. He really didn’t want to have to admit that he was the ghost’s latest victim. He clicked his tongue.

“I got possessed,” he mumbled. “Isn’t it obvious?”

“Nope,” Mikoto replied. “All we knew was that one minute everyone was trying to figure out what that ghost likes and next thing, Neko was saying you’d gotten too far away for her to protect, and a few seconds later something way nastier than that kid showed up. And when we went to try and deal with it, it disappeared, so all we found was you passed out in the hallway, not possessed.”

“Something… nasty?” Fushimi asked, suddenly nervous and not sure why.

“Anna said she thought it might be something she sensed before, back at the Aizawas’ place,” Mikoto added slowly. “But if it is…” he trailed off, and Fushimi felt the blood draining from his face.

“No way…” he whispered. “He… he was here?”

“Parently,” Mikoto replied. “S a nasty ghost you got following you. ‘S no wonder you wanna get rid of something like that.”

“You think he’s bad now, you shoulda met the bastard when he was alive,” Fushimi muttered.

“Pass,” Mikoto said. “I met enough of ‘em in foster care. Don’t need any more or any worse.”

“Tch.” For once, Fushimi clicked his tongue less out of annoyance and more out of a lack of other things to say. Was he supposed to apologize or something? “But it still makes no sense,” he muttered, half to himself. “Why did the ghost possess me and just leave? And why did that guy show up, even though you guys were all right there?”

“Fuck if I know,” Mikoto replied. So helpful. He should really get an award for that answer.

As far as the possession was concerned, maybe the ghost had just timed out or something. It could
only possess people for short periods of time, right? But more worrisome was that man. Of course, Fushimi knew that he was being followed by his ghost, but it still made him shudder to realize that the ghost had been there on their last case, and was not too far away even now. He didn’t like the thought that he could never be alone, never have any privacy, because that man was always watching, even if it was from a distance. It was nauseating.

Fushimi couldn’t be sure how long he sat stewing over things before he was jolted out of his thoughts by the door to the infirmary being slid open and Totsuka’s voice calling out, “Pardon the intrusion!” in a cheerful tone. As Fushimi blinked up at him, Totsuka added, “Oh, Saru-kun. You’re already awake!”

“It would seem that way,” Fushimi drawled in response.

“That’s great!” Totsuka enthused. “We brought some drinks for you. Well, for everyone, kinda, but you get first pick this time. We even got a can of coffee since Anna thought you’d like that.”

“I hope you like it,” Anna said, appearing from behind Totsuka and holding out said drink. “Izumo says canned coffee is terrible, so we were going to get you something at a cafe but we don’t know what kind of coffee you would like, and we thought something cool would be better right now.”

Fushimi accepted the can, popping the tab before he realized he really ought to say something in return. It was just one word, but it felt so awkward just thinking it, let alone letting it out to be heard.

“...Thanks,” he mumbled.

“No problem!” Totsuka said with gusto. He turned to Mikoto and tossed a box of strawberry milk, saying, “Mikopyon, catch.” Mikoto lazily reached up a single hand, effortlessly catching the drink, while Fushimi tried not to grimace at Totsuka’s latest nickname. It was bad enough that Totsuka felt the need to come up with such ridiculous monikers, but the fact that he came up with, and even used multiple… It was absolutely disgusting.

Mikoto was just putting the straw in his drink when Kusanagi’s lanky frame filled the doorway.

“I’ve got some bad news,” he informed them, fishing in his pocket for a box of cigarettes before quietly saying, “oh,” and replacing the carton without taking any. Fushimi could only guess that Kusanagi had realized a school might not be the best place to smoke. “Anyway, after tossing around a bunch of ideas, Reisi’s of the opinion that our ghost is possessing kids at random. In other words, anyone’s a target until he finds what he wants.”

“So what now?” Fushimi asked. “Because I presume you’re not just going to let him take over Yata and handle this the easy way?”

There was a sudden squishing sound, and when Fushimi glanced in the direction it had come from, he saw that Mikoto had all but crushed his drink in his fist and was glaring fiercely at him. Idiot. It wasn’t like Fushimi was actually suggesting they do that.

“Reisi wanted some time to mull things over,” Kusanagi replied. “We were gonna go buy some gyoza to have for dinner from a vendor Shiro noticed earlier and then head back to the hotel to eat and let Reisi do his thing in peace.”

“I guess the rest of the drinks will have to wait until we get back then…” Anna looking ruefully at the bag she was holding that was still filled with cans and boxes and pouches for consumption.

“Yeah,” Totsuka agreed. “Though Saru-kun and Mikochin already drank theirs so we’ll have to get
“I can—” Fushimi began, ready to say he could damn well buy his own drink, but then his brain chose to remind him of what had happened to him the last time he was alone. Being possessed like that was something he really didn’t feel like experiencing again. “-pay you back,” he finished lamely.

“Nah, don’t worry about it,” Totsuka said. Fushimi clicked his tongue, getting to his feet as they trickled out the door. The rest of their group was waiting out in the hallway. Once they were all together, they headed off as planned, buying their dinner and the extra drinks and then returning to the hotel without incident. Conversation was light until they were back in their rooms, though Fushimi couldn’t say whether it was because their group had the sense to avoid openly discussing ghosts while walking through streets that were growing crowded as people returned from work, or if it was just that they needed a slight reprieve from their investigation for a little while.

It was still a little early to eat, and so they all spread out to entertain themselves. Everyone got up to their usual activities, though Fushimi was startled to see Shiro produce a shougi board and start up a game with Kuro. As everyone tried to stave off boredom, Reisi sat and thought, calmly contemplating how to proceed with their case.

Finally, Reisi shifted positions and sighed, then announced, “I’m afraid that, regardless of what we attempt to do, the only outcome I see is to force the ghost to move on.”

As far as Fushimi was concerned, the statement did not merit the gravity that was apparent in Reisi’s voice. In fact, he didn’t really see how it was any different from what they usually did. But there was a collective intake of breath in response to Reisi’s words, and then Yata spoke up.

“No way, there’s got to be another way!” he protested.

“I’m afraid I cannot fathom what it might be, Yata-kun,” Reisi said, sounding sad.

“But we can’t just—” Yata sputtered. “I mean- Yuuya’s- c’mon guys, there’s gotta be something we can do, right?” He sounded almost desperate.

“Um, pardon me, but is there something bad about forcing a ghost to move on?” Mrs. Yata asked, and Fushimi was grateful he wasn’t the only one who was in the dark for once.

“It’s more like destroyin’ the ghost than movin’ it on,” Mikoto grunted. “S basically murder, an’ a pretty brutal one at that. Least to us it is.”

Oh. That did sound bad. Like the kind of thing that would be right up that man’s alley.

“Misaki, none of us want to do that,” Anna said. “But I already thought it might come to this.”

“But surely there’s gotta be another way!” Yata whined. “If we could just give him what he wants, then he’ll—”

“He wants to be alive, Misaki,” Anna chided, her voice unexpectedly harsh. “We can’t give him that, not even you. You’d just be sacrificing yourself to give him the semblance of life, and how long would it even last?”

“But…” Yata said, his voice trailing off, and Fushimi thought maybe the redhead had realized the futility of arguing until Yata suddenly pressed onward. “I don’t think that’s all he wants though.”

“Misaki-” Anna started, but was interrupted.
“I know you felt his emotions yesterday,” Yata said stubbornly. “But maybe you forgot the reason I’ve been doing identity checks since before we even got here. I know him. And yeah, sixteen years is a long time and people change, but it’s not that long for a ghost. And back then… it’s hard to say whether he wanted to be alive or not, since I didn’t really get that stuff back then either, but it felt more like he was… lonely, kinda. And confused. And just, well, Reisi and Kusanagi-san got possessed by him, so maybe they felt something while he was there. Even a forced possession still needs some kinda connection, right?”

“How he felt, huh…” Reisi mused.

“Well earlier when I encountered him, the only thing I noticed was the cold,” Fushimi said bluntly.

“Oh dear, you mean you were possessed too?” Mrs. Yata asked. Fushimi nodded.

“Ah, so that’s what happened,” Shiro said, staring intently at the shougi board before dramatically moving a piece.

“That was foolish,” Reisi said, commenting on Shiro’s move.

“Well, I dunno if it was our ghost or not, but I remember feeling unsafe when he tried to possess me,” Kusanagi said. “Like, not like I was in any immediate danger, but like, there wasn’t anywhere safe for me anymore…”

“That’s it!” Yata yelled, almost throwing his ever-present handheld console. “Like I said earlier, he got killed by his own parents, in his own home. So we just need to give him back those feelings of home and family, right?”

“And how exactly are we supposed to do that?” Fushimi asked. Yata’s mouth opened, ready to answer, but someone beat him to it.

“We let him possess me,” Mrs. Yata said calmly.

“Haaaaaaaa?” Yata questioned loudly.

“Minami-san, I don’t think that’s a good idea,” Anna cautioned.

“Actually, that just may work…” Reisi said.

“We’re gonna need a bit more certainty than may,” Mikoto growled.

“Then allow me to finish considering the possibilities,” Reisi replied calmly.

“Well, I’m not Mumutan, but I don’t think it’s such a bad idea,” Totsuka said. “I mean, I’m not sure it should be Minami-san doing it, but if we let the ghost possess one of us and help him, that might be a good idea. And then if things go wrong we have Anna-chan and Kuro-kun and Neko-chan, plus Yata-chan’s also good at chasing ghosts out of people other than himself, so we should be able to keep whoever it is that gets possessed safe.”

“Okay, but who’s getting possessed then?” Yata asked. “Because if it’s like that then it can’t be Anna or Shiro or me, it can’t be Totsuka either, and Mikoto’s also more trouble than he’s worth so…”

“Just a moment, Misaki,” Mrs. Yata interrupted. “It really should be me to do this. If what he wants is someone to make him feel safe, as a mother, I’m probably the best person to do that.”
“Mom, his mother fucking strangled us!” Yata argued. “I mean him!” he corrected angrily. “Damnit! This is really fucking mixed up…”

“But that’s exactly why it should be a mother who helps him,” Mrs. Yata said gently. “One who can prove to him that there are mothers out there who would do anything to protect their babies, no matter what it cost them. Even… even if sometimes they hesitate a bit more than they should.”

“But his death has been on his mind this whole time, probably,” Yata protested. “I don’t even know how many times I experienced it through his memory, but it was a lot. And that was just over a few months. It’s been sixteen years since then, and if he’s been thinking of it just as much as back then, he’s gonna be really fucking bitter. You might not get the chance to help him, once he realizes you’re a mom too.”

“But wouldn’t the memories go both ways?” Totsuka asked. “If so, wouldn’t he have seen in your memories that your mom was a good person?”

“His mom was a good person too,” Yata sighed. “Right up until she wasn’t. Same for his dad. Maybe my memories will be enough that he hesitates. But if not… Mom, I don’t want you getting hurt. I mean, you’ve still gotta take care of Minoru and Megumi, right?”

“I trust you,” Mrs. Yata replied. And judging by the look on Yata’s face, those were the right words to say.

“Minami-san is right,” Reisi agreed. “If we’re going to reach a peaceful resolution, it seems that letting her get possessed is the only way.”

“There,” Mrs. Yata said, in an I-told-you-so kind of way. “Although… doing this, will it have any side effects? Will I get sick afterwards like Misaki sometimes does?”

“Depends on how things go,” Mikoto said.

“As far as I can tell, you will most likely faint, but once you awaken you should be at full vitality,” Reisi informed her.

“Y’know, you could just say she’ll be fine rather than spewing an entire fucking dictionary,” Yata grumbled.

“Just ‘cuz it uses up your vocabulary doesn’t mean it’s the whole dictionary,” Mikoto teased, earning a scowl for his troubles.

“That’s a relief,” Mrs. Yata said, casting a warning glance at the two redheads. “I’d hate to inconvenience you all by falling ill. As for getting possessed, what should I expect, Misaki?”

Yata shifted uncomfortably.

“I’m not really the one you should be asking, mom,” he mumbled awkwardly. “It’s different for me. Like, for most people, being possessed is unnatural, but for me, it’s just… It’s like- it’s like water, y’know?”

Fushimi felt his eyebrows involuntarily rising up his forehead. He thought he understood what Yata might be getting at, but water? Really? Was that the best explanation Yata had?

“Water?” Mrs. Yata asked, frowning in confusion.

“Yeah,” Yata said. “Like, when you pour water through a tiny hole, it’s really hard for the water to
get through, right? That’s like you guys. But with me, the water’s not going through anything, it just flows however it wants. So a ghost trying to possess me won’t having any problems, but if a ghost tries to possess you, it’s gotta go through that tiny hole and so it works different. So you’ll probably be better off askin’ Kusanagi-san or Fushimi. Or Reisi.” Once again, Yata made his distaste for Reisi clear by adding the psychic only as an afterthought. Fushimi found himself having to bite back a smile at how obvious Yata was.

“What Fushimi said earlier sums it up pretty well, I think,” Kusanagi said. “It’s really cold. Also you kinda get a headache sort of feeling- I’d say it’s like when you’ve got a bad cold and your sinuses are all clogged up, because it feels like there’s too much in your head.”

“Very apt,” Reisi agreed. “I also heard whispering, but inside my skull. Also, there is, of course, the ghost’s emotions, but they seem to override your own so you might not realize they’re not yours.”

“Oh right, that too,” Kusanagi said. “Fushimi, you got anything to add?”

“Not particularly,” Fushimi said. “I seem to have passed out almost immediately after it began, so there’s not much I can add.”

“He must have caught you off guard then,” Anna said, much to Fushimi’s chagrin. Yes, he’d been caught off guard, but it wasn’t like he’d expected anything to happen when the others were just down the hall.

“I thought I was close enough to still be safe,” he muttered. He didn’t feel like adding that he’d also assumed it was Yata, and that once he’d announced that he’d noticed the possession attempt, the other would back off.

“When Neko is hiding everyone that way then they have to stay close or else it goes fwaaaaa,” Neko said, and that was even more incomprehensible than Yata talking about water.

“Ahem,” Kuroh coughed. “What Neko means to say is that, when we are moving about, we must shield each individual from ghosts rather than the area they are in. However, the more shields we are maintaining, the smaller our range becomes. Were we shielding the school itself, you would have been fine, but as it was, we assumed that with everyone moving together, there was no need to switch how we were shielding you. Had we noticed that you were breaking off from the group, I would have accompanied you, and there would have been no problems, but I’m afraid I was inattentive. It seems I am still lacking as a shikigami.”

“Yeesh, Kuro,” Yata complained. “You’re almost as irritating as th- as Reisi.”

“Given that the people you find obnoxious are usually the most sensible ones, I will take that as a compliment,” Kuroh replied.

“Personally I find the very fact that someone feels the need to insult me a compliment in and of itself,” Reisi added, smiling beatifically. Yata rolled his eyes at both of them.

“Getting back on topic,” Shiro said, interrupting the ego-fest or whatever it was that was going on, “I’d rather wait until tomorrow to act, unless that’ll be a problem.”

“It is actually advisable,” Reisi informed him.

“Good,” Shiro said. “I think we’d all like to get some rest first. We did do a lot of walking earlier, after all.”
“Plus Saru-kun got possessed less than an hour ago,” Totsuka chimed in. Rather unnecessarily in Fushimi’s opinion.

“Not to mention our dinner’s going to get cold if we put it off much longer,” Mrs. Yata agreed. “And tomorrow’s the weekend, so that will also be good.”

From the way Yata kept glancing at his mom throughout their meal, it was obvious he still felt apprehensive about her participating in their plan to help the ghost. Fushimi supposed it made sense, but wasn’t it the logical step? Still, it wasn’t like he could understand. After all, he probably would have been better off if one of his parents had gotten possessed by a ghost, since no ghost could possibly be any worse than those people had been.
The Plan is Enacted

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

After some debate, it was decided that the school was the best place to try and close the case. It was where the ghost was most active, and also, it was a place they could access. They had considered going to the house the ghost had lived in, but given that someone else probably lived there now, it seemed unwise to attempt it.

When they arrived at the school the next morning, the doors had already been unlocked for them by Saotome-sensei, who Mrs. Yata had called the previous evening. The teacher met them inside, though he was there less because they actually needed him and more because they were a bunch of random adults wandering around a kindergarten and wanted someone who belonged there to be with them so they didn’t seem quite so creepy. Once inside, they proceeded to the same classroom they’d been in yesterday, which was recognizable by the paint still on the ceiling. At least it was no longer dripping.

“I don’t suppose you happen to remember where Yuuya-kun sat?” Shiro asked Saotome-sensei once they were all inside. “The stronger his attachment to the spot, the better it will be for us.”

“I don’t remember that, but he did spend a lot of time in the back corner,” Saotome-sensei replied. “Whenever we had free time in the classroom he’d go there and play by himself. And, uh, Yatakun, was it? He used to do the same thing, too.”

“Right,” Shiro said, then turned to Mrs. Yata. “Are you ready, Minami-san?”

“As ready as I’ll ever be,” Mrs. Yata replied, visibly steeling herself with a deep breath. She strode towards the corner as the teacher gaped. Next to Fushimi, Yata shifted, gripping one arm with the opposite hand and squeezing.

“Alright, Neko,” Shiro said, and the shiki reached up to jingle the bell hanging around her neck. The hairs on Fushimi’s arms stood up and there was a feeling like something had shifted. If he were to describe it, he would say it was almost like a breeze blew across his sixth sense.

Fushimi tried to tell himself not to expect anything to happen right away, but he couldn’t help the flutter of anticipation he felt. But it wasn’t like Mrs. Yata had Fushimi’s ability and the ghost would be instantly drawn to her, so who knew when it would become aware of her and show up to take control?

As it happened, the ghost showed up very quickly, only a few seconds after Neko released her protection. The ghost brat’s arrival drew out a “Hm, that was quick,” from Shiro and a gasp from Yata, though Anna and Mikoto both remained silent.

The ghost looked like an ordinary kid. It had the same round cheeks and big eyes of any healthy child, as well as short limbs and chubby hands. It had a pouty face, one that Fushimi didn’t get a good look at before it entered Mrs. Yata’s body. As it did, the woman’s eyes rolled back, and she slumped a little, almost falling before catching herself. Her head swivelled from side to side, taking in her surroundings anew, and as she looked around, Fushimi could see that her eyes, while still the same shape and color, no longer shared that fiery liveliness that Mrs. Yata shared with her son. She had been possessed.
“Yuuya-kun, is it?” Shiro said, stepping forward. He spoke casually, as if he were meeting an acquaintance or a friend of a friend for lunch. “Nice to meet you. You can call me Shiro.”

“Shiiiiiro?” the ghost in Mrs. Yata’s body replied, drawing out the syllables slowly as if unused to speaking. It spoke in a higher pitch than the woman herself used, sounding almost birdlike. “Don’t knnnnow annyyy Shiirrrrrro. Go away. You’re not what I nnnneeed.”

“You’re right, I’m not,” Shiro agreed amicably. “Out of curiosity, what is it that you think you need?”


“Well what’s wrong with the body you’re in?” Shiro asked. There was a small noise of protest from Yata, and in contrast to the dulled eyes of his possessed mother, the medium’s eyes blazed. There was a small dent in his cheek as he bit the inside to hold himself in check.

“Not mine,” the ghost inside Mrs. Yata replied. “This body feels wrong.”

“Right again,” Shiro replied. “But I wonder, whose body is that then?”

“Whose-?” the ghost asked, frowning. “It’s… it doesn’t matter.”

“Oh, but I think it does,” Shiro replied. “Tell me Yuuya-kun, whose body are you in?”

“I’m in… mother’s,” the ghost said hesitantly. “No, Misaki-kun’s mother,” it corrected. And then came a flood of words, spoken almost on top of each other. “ButMisakiismeandIamMisakiandMisakiismeand- mymotherbutmotherhurtmeno, nomotherbutthenwhois doesn’t matter.”

“Yuuya, whose body are you in?” Anna’s voice contained just a hint of power in it as she repeated Shiro’s question, and Mrs. Yata’s body shuddered.


“Good,” Shiro said brightly, smiling and nodding. “And do you know why she’s here?”

“Mom is here to…” the ghost trailed off.

Shiro opened his mouth to prompt the ghost again, when the ghost continued in a scream. “TO HURT ME IT HURTS IT HURTS MOM STOP PLEASE WHY ARE YOU HURTING ME!”

As the ghost screamed, it began to reach up, clutching at Mrs. Yata’s neck as if trying to grasp something that wasn’t there. There were tears on the woman’s face, and her breathing was ragged. Next to Fushimi, there was a flurry of movement as Yata started to lunge forward and Mikoto reached out to snag the smaller medium and keep him from interfering. And even though Fushimi knew that right now, Yata needed to be held back, that his interference now would—according to Reisi’s predictions—ruin everything, he still felt it was a cruel thing to do. He wanted to speak up, maybe suggest that they have Yata leave, but no, Yata might yet be needed so he had to stay, even if it was obviously painful for him.

“That’s not right, Yuuya,” Shiro said, his smile a little strained as he continued. It seemed Yata wasn’t the only one who had qualms about continuing. The onmyouji’s eyes darted to glance at Reisi, who inclined his head in just the slightest of nods, his eyes somber as he indicated that they needed to keep going. The corner of Shiro’s mouth twitched ruefully before he proceeded with his next statements. “She came her for you. For her son. Not to hurt you, but to help you.”
It was a cleverly worded set of sentences, in Fushimi’s opinion. It managed to both lie and tell the truth at the same time, implying that Mrs. Yata truly was the ghost’s mother while simultaneously admitting she wasn’t. It was exactly the sort of dishonest honesty which that man would have loved, and it made Fushimi’s mouth twist in a grimace.

“Help… me?” the ghost asked. “Why?”

“Because some moms will do anything to help their children,” Anna said. “You can tell, can’t you? That Minami-san would?”

The ghost hesitantly nodded, then cocked its head and asked, “Are we going to find me?”

“No,” Shiro said, shaking his head. “Finding Morishima Misaki will not help you, Yuuya-kun. He can’t keep you safe.”

“Well why not?” the ghost asked petulantly, crossing Mrs. Yata’s arms.

“Right now, does anyone hurt you?” Shiro asked. The ghost shook Mrs. Yata’s head. “That’s right,” Shiro agreed. “But if you go back to that body, you can be hurt again. Do you want that?”

“No,” the ghost said, chewing at its/Mrs. Yata’s lip. “But I don’t wanna be alone no more. No one looks at me. They all act like I’m not here unless I take their bodies.”

“But there’s someplace you can go where people will see you again,” Shiro explained. “Where you won’t have to take other people’s bodies, and no one will hurt you. Would you like to go there?”

“Where is it?” the ghost asked.

“Only you know the answer to that,” Shiro said. “There should be a door.”

“And if I go through that door, people can see and hear me again?” the ghost pressed. Shiro and Anna both nodded.

“Pinky swear?” The ghost held out a pinky. Shiro hesitated, and then did the same, locking pinkies with the possessed woman and solemnly stating “May I swallow a thousand needles if I lie.”

Mrs. Yata’s eyes closed, and a moment later the ghost boy appeared beside her again, having exited her body. As Mrs. Yata began to collapse, Kuroh and Kusanagi both rushed to her side to catch her. The ghost watched the woman for a few seconds, then slowly turned, reaching out and upwards as if trying to reach a doorknob.

“Wait!” The word echoed inside Fushimi’s head even as he saw the movement out of the corner of his eye as Yata lunged forward in spirit form, his body suddenly limp in Mikoto’s arms. The ghost stopped and turned back, shrinking in on itself as if expecting to be hurt. “Just- just a minute, okay?” spirit-Yata added gently.

The ghost stared at Yata for a long minute, then tentatively stepped closer to him, its mouth moving in a question that only Anna could hear.

“Yes, it’s him,” Anna answered. The ghost’s eyes bugged out in shock, then it said something else, and Anna snickered before explaining, “He says you got big.”

“Yeah, well, that’s what happens when you grow up,” Yata muttered, crossing his arms. “But before you go, I- I wanted to show you something. Here.” He reached out, and his hand went into the ghost’s shoulder, the two spiritual appendages occupying the same space for a moment. Or not
occupying, as the case may be, since could ghosts or spirits really occupy space?

The ghost’s eyes closed as Yata touched it, and when, after Yata pulled his hand back a few seconds later, the ghost reopened its eyes, they seemed less like the eyes of a child and more like the eyes of someone older.

“Remember that stuff, okay?” spirit-Yata whispered hoarsely. The ghost nodded gravely, and then once again turned and reached up, and a second later it vanished.

There was a moment of hushed silence as they all tried to process that the ghost was gone. Fushimi could feel that it had left them and moved on, and yet there was still a sort of tension like it might be back at any moment. He was sure the others felt the same way, judging by the way they remained alert and wary.

“Um, is everything alright?” Saotome-sensei asked.

“Yes,” Anna answered. “Yuuya has left. He won’t be troubling you anymore.”

“Oh. Okay,” the teacher said. “And… Yata-san and Yata-kun? Are they…?”

“They’re fine,” Kusanagi said. “Yata-chan should be back up in a second, and as for Minami-san, she’s not feverish, and her pulse is steady, so she just needs some rest.”

“That’s a relief,” Saotome-sensei replied. “Would you like to take them to the infirmary? There’s only one bed, but…”

Yata chose that moment to return to his body, and Saotome-sensei trailed off, gaping as the medium’s limp body suddenly regained the tension of the living, and a couple of tears fell from Yata’s eyes. Yata sniffled a bit, and Mikoto held him even closer, his restraint becoming an attempt at comfort.

“Thanks, but that won’t be necessary,” Shiro said. “We’ll take Minami-san back to our hotel to recover.”

“Yeah,” Totsuka agreed. “Mikomiko’s gotta earn his keep somehow right?”

Mikoto huffed but obligingly released Yata to head over to where Kusanagi and Shiro were supporting Mrs. Yata so the woman could be lifted onto Mikoto’s back. Once Mrs. Yata had been settled, Saotome-sensei led them out. It still felt odd, just leaving like that, but it wasn’t like there was anything else to do. They bid the teacher goodbye at the front of the school and began the walk back to their hotel.

“So what did you show Yuuya-kun back there, anyway?” Shiro asked once they were outside.

“Just some stuff,” Yata replied. His voice was raw, and his eyes were red with the effort of not crying. “Y’know, letting him know what actually getting to live is like, and showing him that while shitty things do happen, some good stuff happens too.”

“You’re too soft on ‘em,” Mikoto growled. “That’s why they always take advantage of you.”

“Hey, if I had your ability I’d beat the shit out of most ghosts and you know it!” Yata protested. “But ones like Yuuya… He was just a kid. And people hurt him, and… And it’s pretty damn hard not to care about someone whose thoughts and feelings you’ve shared, okay!”

“That’s the danger of it though,” Mikoto muttered darkly. He shifted, shrugging Mrs. Yata a little
higher on his back as he walked. The woman mumbled incoherently, and Yata’s expression went from one of anger to one of concern.

“Hey, she’s really okay, right?” Yata asked. “We don’t need to get a doctor or anything?”

“It’s like Munakata-san said,” Shiro assured him. “She just fainted. No other side effects.”

“You can trust what Reisi says, Misaki,” Anna added. Yata grumbled inarticulately, but didn’t openly argue.

“Why do you hate Reisi so much anyway?” Fushimi asked Yata in an undertone.

“Because he’s creepy as hell and nosy as fuck and he thinks it’s great that I get possessed all the time,” Yata hissed back without missing a beat. “You try putting up with someone asking you about deaths you’ve experienced second-hand all the time and begging you to get possessed more often and see if it doesn’t piss you off too.”

“Our Reicchan can be a little insensitive once he fixates on an idea,” was Totsuka’s input, as if he weren’t butting into a private conversation. “We’ve been working on it.”

“I think you need to work on it some more,” Fushimi replied, thinking of various conversations he’d had with Reisi and some he’d overheard. He was rewarded with a wet snort from Yata.

Once they got back to the hotel, it wasn’t long before Mrs. Yata woke up. After a brief discussion, it was decided they would all return home on the evening train. Kusanagi went to get their train tickets and hotel fees sorted out, and Mrs. Yata went to call her family to let them know she’d be returning. Yata went with her, which seemed to please Anna and Mikoto in particular. But Fushimi couldn’t help but worry that talking to his family might make Yata act gloomy again. Well, no matter. If he did, Fushimi would just point out that their team only had room for one moody person, and there was no way Yata could outsulk Fushimi so he’d just have to stick to being the loud idiot of the bunch.

Before long, they had checked out of the hotel and were at the train station and bidding Mrs. Yata goodbye. As she went through, giving hugs to everyone, she started to reach for Fushimi, and then hesitated, clearly remembering that he’d been uncomfortable when she’d greeted him that way. And it was still uncomfortable, but if she was going to look so uncertain, then maybe it was better to just put up with it for once. With a click of his tongue, he stepped into the woman’s still-open arms and accepted the embrace with a grimace. Thankfully, Mrs. Yata kept it short, holding on for only about a second before moving on to her final victim, her son. Yata wasn’t so lucky, and had to endure a full minute of squeezing before his mom would let go. Mrs. Yata had a tear on her face, which Yata gently wiped off with a halfhearted smile and a rasped, “See ya, mom.” Unfortunately, this just caused the woman’s tears to flow more freely, but she smiled through them and waved goodbye as they boarded their train, then headed off to wait for her own.

Their train had hardly left the station when Yata shifted, almost elbowing Totsuka in the process, then, while looking at the luggage rack above them like it was the most fascinating thing in the world, said, “So I told mom she could come visit, and bring the kids and… dad… too. If it’s alright with you, Anna, Mikoto. Since it’d be easiest if they stayed with us ‘n all.”

“Ah, y’mean I’ll finally get a chance to share all your embarrassing stories?” Mikoto asked lazily. “Finally. I thought I’d have to wait for you to get a boyfriend, and at the rate you’re going, that ain’t gonna happen for a while.”

“Hey fuck you,” Yata grumbled halfheartedly, folding his arms and slouching lower in his seat.
“That sounds lovely, Misaki,” Anna said, smiling. “When will they be coming?”

“P-probably not for a while,” Yata replied. “The kids have school, and then when they’re off for the winter holidays they usually go and visit their grandparents, so there isn’t really a good time until spring. But mom was saying maybe they could just come next summer. Y’know, for my birthday and all.”

“Sounds like we’re gonna have to hold a really big party then,” Totsuka said cheerfully.

“I’ll see if nee-san can spare some time to come visit then too,” Shiro put in. “The more the merrier, right?”

Fushimi couldn’t hold back a “tsk” at that. As far as he was concerned, the saying ought to be “the more the misery”, because fuck large groups of people. They were noisy and exhausting and could be downright terrifying under the right circumstances.

“It feels like it’s been a while since I heard that clicking noise, but it’s back,” Totsuka mused. Once again Fushimi wondered if Totsuka was serious or just had a twisted sense of humor.

“You will be sure to include me in planning this theoretical party, won’t you?” Reisi asked. “I do find event planning to be most stimulating after all.”

“I can stimulate you a different way,” Mikoto mumbled under his breath. However, his voice was almost lost as Kusanagi cut in with, “Woah there, Reisi. While we’re grateful for the offer, I think it’s best if you leave the planning to the rest of us. No offense, but you can get a little…” Kusanagi trailed off with a grimace, before finishing his sentence. “…extreme.” Given the word choice, Kusanagi’s pause, and what he knew about Reisi, Fushimi got an ominous feeling in the cavity of his stomach that caused him to vow to himself to never let Reisi organize anything he would be involved in.

“It seems everyone is in agreement then,” Anna said, nodding. “We would be happy to have your family visit. Though it is a shame they can’t come any sooner.”

“About that,” Yata said, rubbing the back of his head. “I- I also told mom that I’d talk to you guys about… going to visit them. Sometime. Maybe. Like, we’d probably hafta stay in a hotel, since they don’t have lots of extra space like we do, and I know it’d be an inconvenience for everybody, but…”

“I’m sure we can convince Reisi to help wait tables for a few days while you three head out,” Kusanagi said gently. “We might lose a few customers from his… Reisi-ness, but we’ll manage.”

“It’s merely weeding out the weak,” Reisi said, smiling smugly.

“I think most people call it ‘being a pain in the ass’,,” Yata muttered.

“I would say more, ‘testing the limits of people’s tolerance’, personally,” Shiro chimed in.

“Are ya really one to talk?” Mikoto asked. “You can get on people’s nerves too, with that distracted way of yours.”

“Yes, yes, everyone here has their annoying personality quirks, we get it,” Kusanagi sighed.

“Izumo, do you really mean that?” Anna asked, her eyes wide and hurt.

“Nah, he doesn’t mean you, Anna,” Yata assured her. “Right? I mean, it’s Anna, so there’s no way
she’s annoying.”

Fushimi begged to differ. Her empath abilities made him uncomfortable, and she was no more forthcoming with answers than the rest of them, so he thought Yata was being overly charitable. But he wasn’t about to say as much. He had a feeling it wouldn’t end well for him if he did. Something about Anna having two “older brothers” who were quick to the punch and who doted on her shamelessly. He was willing to bet that Anna’s dating life must be pretty rough with those two around. If she even had one.

“I just mean that no one’s perfect,” Kusanagi defended. “Besides, isn’t friendship seeing someone’s obnoxious side and still accepting them anyway?”

“Well said,” Shiro agreed, applauding a little. Could he be any lamer? “Though of course, not everyone finds the same things irritating. What may annoy one person might not annoy another.”

“True. Some of us certainly seem to find specific traits more bothersome than others,” Totsuka said. And then, as if his mission in life was to make Fushimi hate him, he looked over and added, “Right, Saru-kun?” Fushimi glowered at the view outside the window; he had been perfectly fine not participating in the conversation at all, so why did Totsuka have to go and ruin a good thing like that?

“Ah! You never said if it was okay with you!” Yata exclaimed, jumping in his seat and pointing at Fushimi.

“And just what is ‘it’?” Fushimi asked slowly, turning to face the auburn-haired medium.

“Y’know,” Yata said, and Fushimi was tempted to point out that he wouldn’t have asked if he did know. Then again, that was a lie. Feigning ignorance could be extremely satisfying at times as one watched the victim get increasingly flustered and angry. But this wasn’t one of those times. But Yata’s pause lasted for all of a second before he finished the thought, so Fushimi stayed silent. “My family coming to visit. Everyone else said they’re okay with it, but what about you?”

Fushimi blinked, astonished. Why did Yata care what he thought? And why did Yata caring make him feel so peculiar? How exactly was it making him feel? And what did he think about it anyway? It wasn’t like it was really any of his business, right? How should he answer?

Before Fushimi could get his thoughts in order, Kusanagi broke the silence that was growing while Yata waited for Fushimi’s answer. He was waiting for an answer, right?

“Yata-chan, isn’t Fushimi gonna be gone by then?” Kusanagi prodded.

Right. That. Fushimi being at Homra was only temporary. How many times was he going to forget that? And why did he keep forgetting? Probably because he was at Homra until he could be rid of that man’s ghost, and that man had always seemed like something eternal and inescapable. Deep down, he must not have really believed he could ever get rid of the ghost, and that was why he expected to be stuck at Homra forever.

“Huh?” Yata asked.

“If we haven’t unlocked his ability in ten months when you’re family comes, then we might as well give up the business,” Shiro said. “We don’t deserve to call ourselves mediums if we can’t handle the unusual. Sure we had a setback, but that doesn’t mean we won’t figure this out in the end.”

“Oh, right,” Yata said, looking strangely crestfallen. He reached up to rub his neck “I forgot. It’s
just, y’know, Fushimi just feels like he fits here. Kinda. Like, he’s… I dunno. A good guy or something. But yeah, of course he’ll leave once he’s able to. I mean, that’s what anyone would do, right?” Yata laughed, but it sounded hollow. Was he that jealous that Fushimi’s ability was one that could allow him to live a normal life?

“I wouldn’t,” Totsuka said.

“Indeed. Nor would I,” Reisi agreed.

“Yeah, but you guys are weird and also you like Mikoto’s ass,” Yata retorted.

“It is indeed a nice ass,” Totsuka said appreciatively. Fushimi thought he was going to be sick.

“While his posterior is certainly picturesque, Mikoto’s physique in general is quite impressive,” Reisi added. Yup, Fushimi was definitely going to be sick.

“Aren’t I supposed to be too young to be hearing this?” Anna asked.

“Yup,” Kusanagi confirmed. “You heard her, guys. And even if she weren’t too young, none of us wanna hear it.”

“It’d be a bit more convincing if you hadn’t wolf-whistled the first time we met,” Mikoto rumbled, grinning.

“For the last time, I was just surprised to see someone with hair like yours,” Kusanagi said with exaggerated patience.

“Sure you were,” Mikoto smirked.

Yeah, Fushimi definitely intended to be gone once he could leave. No way did he want to put up with these people and their undersharing about worthwhile information and oversharing about private matters, not any more than he had to.

Still, if they didn’t have random segues into discussing the anatomy of Mikoto that his boyfriends arbitrarily considered attractive, they weren’t too bad. And he thought that maybe, just a little, he hoped that Yata’s family’s visit in ten months went well.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry if that was a dissatisfying end to this little arc, I'm not entirely happy with it myself but then again I often think my writing isn't as good as I want it to be so shrug. I am reflecting on how to make things better as this continues, so hopefully there will be improvements.
The day after returning from Yata’s home town, Fushimi awoke to a text from Hirasaka asking to meet for lunch. It would mean he probably wouldn’t get to Homra as early as usual, but then, without his “training” or whatever it ought to be called, there wasn’t really any need for him to get there so much ahead of his shift. He typed back a quick confirmation and headed into the shower.

That ghost thankfully remained absent all morning, and Fushimi was able to spend some time relaxing and playing some video games. He ended up playing an FPS game for a while, feeling certain that Yata, and probably Mikoto and maybe the others at Homra as well, would enjoy it. Maybe he’d ask them if they were familiar with it sometime, and if not he could lend it to them. Or not. That’s what nice, friendly, people who weren’t Fushimi did.

Hirasaka, thankfully, had the good sense to invite Fushimi to a barbecue place for lunch. It meant a meal which could be blissfully free of fish, veggies, fruits, or any of the other things Fushimi hated eating. Once they were seated and ordered their dishes—almost entirely meat—Hirasaka opened up conversation with a rather suspicious, “So, how have you been?”

On the surface, it might seem like a perfectly ordinary, polite conversation started. But Fushimi knew better. Hirasaka did not ask people about their wellbeing; she just wasn’t interested. She only cared about how a person was doing if they seemed to be doing poorly and might not be able to pay her back for something they owed her for. Not to mention, she’d seen him the previous week, which counted as recent contact for the two of them. If she was asking him how he was doing, clearly she was fishing for information, or was up to something.

“What do you want?” Fushimi asked irritably. Hirasaka’s favors weren’t always too bothersome, but, generally speaking, they were more trouble than they were worth.

“Who says I want something?” Hirasaka responded, playing coy.

“Don’t treat me like an idiot when you know full well just how intelligent I am,” Fushimi drawled back.

“I’m not treating you like an idiot, I want to know how you’ve been. Give me a status report on where you stand with the people at that bar you’re working at.”

Ah. There it was.

“If this is about that bet, you’re still completely off base,” Fushimi informed her flatly. “I still don’t like them. The three boyfriends are way too open about things, plus the one keeps using ridiculous nicknames, the girl never fully tells you what you need to know, the bartender nags all the time… They’re really annoying.”

“And your crush?”

“Not my crush, and still an idiot.” Fushimi rolled his eyes, thinking about the way Yata had knocked out during on the second train during their journey home, and had spent most of the ride snoring lightly against Shiro’s shoulder. “He’s an insecure mess, he turns small problems into giant issues, and he acts like he has to take on everything by himself even though he can’t do anything alone.”

“Hm, I see,” Hirasaka said, her tone amused. “Well, I suppose it was a bit soon to be expecting any progress, but in the meantime, I have something for you.” She pulled out a plain manila folder and
handed it over.

“What’s this?” Fushimi asked, gingerly accepting the folder. As he took it, a waiter came by and deposited the bowls with their ingredients on the table.

“Preliminary background checks,” Hirasaka replied, beginning to pile things on the grill. “Awashima was kind enough to tell me their names, so I was able to get started.”

“What the fuck, Hirasaka?” Fushimi’s voice almost cracked, something that hadn’t happened since high school. But seriously, why would she be giving him this?

“You’re one of two people I don’t mind being around for extended periods of time,” Hirasaka replied blandly. “As such, since you’ve gotten involved with those people I feel obligated to make sure none of them are axe murderers who will decapitate you the first chance they get. Just because you won’t give them that chance doesn’t mean it isn’t worthy of concern. And since you’re the one involved with them, you ought to have the information too.” She paused to flip some of the meat on the grill, then added, “I don’t usually give that kind of stuff away for free, you know. So just say thank you and if you don’t want it then dispose of it yourself. I’ve done my part.”

“You better not be demanding any return favors for this,” Fushimi grumbled.

“I won’t. Also, I think Awashima was planning on stopping by your bar tomorrow. I might come with her. She seems to have a crush on that one glasses guy, and it’s rather cute.”

“Glasses guy” would mean either Reisi or Fushimi himself, and Fushimi was pretty sure he could rule out the latter since Hirasaka wouldn’t be so oblique if she were referring to him.

“He’s more trouble than he’s worth, trust me,” Fushimi warned. Not that he cared if Hirasaka’s roommate was wasting her time pining after someone like Reisi.

“Well it’s still cute, even if you say it’s hopeless,” Hirasaka countered. “But don’t worry, you and your crush are still my number one ship.”

“It’s not a crush, I’m not at all happy to hear that, and why are you so intent on setting me up with someone you’ve never even met? In fact, why do you even give a damn about my romantic life at all?” Fushimi demanded.

“What romantic life?” Hirasaka quipped back. “You yourself said it’s not a crush, which means there’s no romance. But if it were a crush, then my interest would be in trying to help you be happy because you ought to have more people you find tolerable too. While I don’t mind listening to your bitching, it might do you some good having other people to vent to. Plus, if I’m right, I get to lord it over you forever, which is pretty much a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. And I am right, you just don’t know it yet.”

“Keep telling yourself that,” Fushimi drawled. “Now hurry up and give me some of that meat. It should be ready by now.”

The rest of their lunch passed enjoyably enough. Hirasaka told him about some of the more ridiculous clients she’d had thus far, and Fushimi even smiled a few times from the amusement her anecdotes brought forth. But the whole time, the folder she’d given him was never quite forgotten, frequently catching the corner of his eye from where it lay on the edge of the table. After they’d paid their bill and left, he sat in his car and contemplated the folded manila, pondering what to do with it. He certainly didn’t think that the people at Homra were anything remotely dangerous like
Hirasaka had suggested, but...

No but. He didn’t care what was in their past. They wouldn’t be in his future, so what was the point in finding out more about them?

But maybe even after he stopped working at Homra, he could still stop by for drinks sometimes…

No, bad idea. If he did that, doubtlessly he would somehow get roped into helping them with more cases, and it would be extremely bothersome, and who wanted such a life? Not Fushimi Saruhiko, that was for sure.

He put the folder in the glove box, out of sight, out of mind, and finally made his way to the bar to get ready for work.

When he arrived at the bar, Fushimi was caught off guard when, merely seconds after he entered through the back door, he was nearly tackled by none other than Yata. Yata, who, despite noticing Fushimi’s discomfort regarding hugs just a few days ago, was very quick to wrap Fushimi in his arms today.

“Fushimi!” Yata cried excitedly. He let go almost immediately, thankfully, and beamed up at Fushimi as if he’d just won the lottery. “Guess what! Guess what!” Yata asked gleefully.

“I don’t make guesses,” Fushimi said flatly. His response to exuberance was always to be as unenthusiastic as possible in contrast. “I draw conclusions and make inferences based on observations of facts. Guesses are just a waste of time.”

For a second, Yata seemed to deflate. “Che, you would say something grumpy like that,” he muttered, but then his buoyancy was back full force, and he was gushing, “Nevermind that! Kamamoto’s finally back to normal mode!”

It took Fushimi a few long seconds before he could place the name Kamamoto. Right, the other chef. The one that looked like he walked out of a modeling ad. Okay, now that he’d remember who Kamamoto was, what the heck was “normal mode” supposed to mean?

“Yata-san, I really don’t see why you’re so excited,” a vaguely familiar voice said from the kitchen. But the person who stepped out was anything but familiar. It was a portly man, tall and rotund, with short blond spikes and a thin beard. Fushimi blinked, wondering who this newcomer was.

“Because all summer, I had tables full of girls to wait on ‘cuz they all wanted to catch a glimpse of you,” Yata griped. “Do you know how many fucking times I had to tell them that no, I couldn’t give you their number for them ‘cuz you’ve already got a girlfriend and she gets hella jealous? Too fucking many!”

Fushimi didn’t stick around to hear more. He carefully eased himself past Yata and fled down the hallway and into the main room of the bar. As he scurried in, Kusanagi looked up from where he was polishing the already pristine glasses at the bar and raised an eyebrow. Thankfully, the boyfriends were absent, though Anna also looked up at him quizzically.

“You okay there, Fushimi?” Kusanagi asked.

“What the hell is ‘normal mode’ and who the fuck is that guy Yata’s arguing with about girls?” Fushimi asked.

“Oh, right,” Kusanagi mused, putting down the glass he’d been busying himself with. “You
wouldn’t know. Short answer, that guy you saw would be Kamamoto, and the way he looks now is his normal mode.”

“Impossible,” Fushimi deadpanned.

“As far as anyone can figure, yeah, it is,” Kusanagi agreed. “It’s the one true mystery of this place, something that even Reisi can’t figure out how to explain.”

“Then why did he look so different before?” Fushimi asked.

“Well, every summer, Kamamoto transforms,” Kusanagi explained. “He suddenly loses his appetite, and loses a bunch of weight almost overnight. His hair also grows a bunch, though his beard vanishes for reasons that baffle even him. Then, at the end of the summer, his appetite suddenly returns, he regains his weight just as suddenly, his beard grows back in, and he trims his hair back to normal. He stays that way for the rest of the year. Normally he would’ve been back by the time you first came here, but I guess what with how hot it’s been, he didn’t change back.”

“We’ve already checked him for residue, but he’s not being haunted,” Anna said. “He doesn’t have any power, and no one else is using power on him. That’s just how Rikio is.”

“I’m not sure I believe you,” Fushimi said.

“Yeah, we’re not sure we believe it either,” Kusanagi agreed. “But until we can figure out another explanation that actually makes sense, we just accept it. After all, we deal with paranormal shit all the time, so why can’t a guy have impossibly fluctuating weight?”

He had a point, but Fushimi didn’t feel like saying so, so he clicked his tongue instead.

The rest of the day was uneventful. Fushimi only got a few comments on his lack of customer service skills during the shift, Mikoto and Reisi both did absolutely nothing all night, and every time Fushimi went to the kitchen to put in an order or pick one up, Yata was still in his jovial mood. They had a radio on in the kitchen, and more than once, Fushimi overheard the short medium singing or rapping along to whatever song was playing (his singing wasn’t too bad, but he definitely did not have a career as a rapper anywhere in his future, given that he seemed to have far more enthusiasm than rhythm).

The following day began with another tame, relaxing morning. The calm lasted until about halfway through their shift, when a customer walked in trailing three ghosts wearing old-fashioned armor. The ghosts were fixated on the patron they were following, but as the man took a seat, one of the ghosts turned to Fushimi and started his way. Alarmed, Fushimi paused halfway through introducing himself to some new arrivals at one of his tables, hurriedly trying to pull his power inside himself to enter his “neutral” mode. The worrisome part of it was that he would have sworn he’d been maintaining a neutral state since he’d first discovered how to enter it, but apparently he was wrong. Even now, as he turned his attention back to the customers, he could feel his ability fighting him, trying to revert back to drawing ghosts. It made no sense, because it should be natural for him to be in a state of neither attracting or repelling ghosts, and yet he had to struggle to do so. He’d have to mention it to Anna later, though he suspected that it was probably the same as the lock on his ability: the work of an unknown medium that couldn’t be undone without confronting the cause directly.

While Fushimi struggled, Anna was already making contact with the client to talk to him about his ghosts. There were more customers coming in for drinks than food at that point, but there was still plenty of work to do, especially with Anna handling the client, and so Fushimi wasn’t able to eavesdrop and find out what was going on. Whatever, with the ghosts right there, Anna could
probably just persuade them on to the afterlife or something. Plain, simple, boring. Not his problem, that was for sure.

Or at least, it wasn’t his problem until there was a tap on Fushimi’s shoulder and he turned to find Mikoto looming behind him, looking like a lion that had just woken from a nap and was ready for a nice stretch.

“Anna said she needs ya,” Mikoto said, jerking a thumb over towards where the girl was still sitting with the client. “I’m taking over.”

As Fushimi gladly abandoned his post, he spared a vague thought towards the customers and what they must think of the change in waitstaff. On the one hand, they must be happy to be free of such a dour waiter. But on the other hand, when his replacement was the bouncer, was that really any better?

More importantly though, Fushimi had to wonder why Anna needed help from him of all the mediums at the bar. He was probably about to find out though, since it wasn’t like he could help unless Anna told him what she needed.

“Saruhiko, would you mind attracting these ghosts to you for a bit?” Anna requested when he arrived besides the table. Fushimi narrowed his eyes, but heard her out. “I need Misaki to check something, but if any of the ghosts take interest in him, he won’t be able to do it.”

Ah, so it wasn’t really Fushimi’s help that Anna needed. Why was he not surprised?

“Got it,” he said blandly, and stopped resisting his ability’s tendency towards drawing ghosts. It was a peculiar feeling, since he felt the tension of using his ability return, but at the same time, he was no longer fighting against whatever was locking his ability. It was like simultaneously engaging all his muscles to fight against a strong wind yet relaxing into the flow of a swift current. The ghosts immediately came to his side, but, eerily enough, they remained fixated on the client. It felt predatory in a way, and Fushimi did not predict anything good happening to the client if the situation was left as it was.

Fushimi held the ghosts in place, and a minute later, Yata arrived. Only one of the ghosts paid the medium any mind, swiveling its attention back and forth between its victim and the medium. Creepy. Even creepier was the way none of the ghosts was blinking at all. And sure, as far as Fushimi knew, ghosts didn’t exactly need to worry about such inconveniences as keeping their eyes properly moisturized, but most of the ghosts he’d seen (and he’d seen several) did their best to mimic human behavior. They blinked, they walked through doorways instead of walls, their chests moved up and down in an imitation of breathing, some would even sigh, and they were very lifelike in general. Sure they had their tells: no sound, a tendency to hover a bit above the ground, a slight haze or transparency, sometimes their appearance was the same as when they died, they could be seen clearly in the dark… But overall they tried to act like they were alive. Whether it was an attempt at denial, or if it was just old habits dying with more difficulty than the ghosts themselves had, it didn’t really matter; it was just how it was. So ghosts like this, that deviated from that copycat behavior, were alarming.

“So whatcha need?” Yata asked, taking a seat at the table instead of hovering beside it like Fushimi was.

“I need you to check something for me,” Anna said. “These ghosts claim that this person killed them.”

“Wait a minute, I’ve never-” the client protested, but Anna held up a hand.
“I want to believe you,” she told the man. “It certainly does seem unlikely, but I need to be sure.” She turned to Yata and nodded, and with a sigh, he left his body, his spirit-self reaching out and placing a hand on the man’s shoulder. He stood there for a long minute, while the man shifted uncomfortably in his seat. Finally, the spirit-Yata vanished and the real Yata opened his eyes and shook his head.

“Nothing,” Yata reported. “He’s got nothing to do with those ghosts, and he sure as hell didn’t kill them.”

“See?” the client interjected eagerly. “I told you!”

“All I can tell you is that they started following him when he was on a trip,” Yata continued. “Passed through an area with a lot of ghosts, probably a battlefield since they all looked like these guys.” Yata nodded towards the ghosts.

“Perhaps you merely resemble the person who killed them,” Anna mused. “I’ll see if I can convince them they’ve got the wrong person, but—”

“I think you’ll find that Awashima-kun will be of some help,” Reisi said, and Fushimi looked up to see he’d joined them, along with Awashima and Hirasaka. Reisi indicated that Hirasaka should sit at the next table over, and she complied, though of course she leaned over so that she could shamelessly eavesdrop. While Hirasaka could be one of the most discreet people Fushimi had ever met, she had no qualms about being openly nosy either. She noticed Fushimi’s gaze on her, and raised her eyebrows at him, causing him to roll his eyes in response.

Once Hirasaka was seated, Reisi returned to his own table, his eerie smile on his face. Fushimi glanced over to see if Awashima reacted to his absence at all, given her supposed crush on the man, but she was busy peering at the client with half-open eyes.

“Seri, do you see anything?” Anna asked curiously, turning to Awashima, who nodded.

“One moment please,” she said, and Fushimi felt psychic energy gathering around her, concentrating around her hand until she reached out and tapped the client on the head. In front of their eyes, the client’s face seemed to shift, retaining the same features and yet somehow becoming completely different, as if someone else was using the face. An icy chill swept across the room, emanating from the ghosts, and Fushimi shivered. “Your name is Minaguchi Suitomo,” Awashima intoned. “You died in 1578, or Tensho 6, when you had your army attack the neighboring lord’s lands.”

“Impossible,” the client replied, his voice suddenly strangely accented and more pompous. “Prithee cease speaketh such nonsense, for thou art grievously mistaken. As thou might beholdeth, thy humble personage is most intact.”

“That’s because you were reborn,” Awashima said bluntly. “Take a look around. I’m sure that this looks nothing like you’re used to.”

The client’s head obediently swiveled, his eyes growing wider the more he took in.

“Such scandalous attire! Have yon peasants no decency?” he gasped.

“Some of your soldiers are here,” Anna interrupted, before the client could launch into a tirade. “They say you killed them, and wish for revenge.”

“Ha! Slander not mine name, oh lady fair! There be not blood on these hands!” The client brandished his hands as if to prove a point.
“That depends on how you look at things,” Awashima said coldly. “You certainly didn’t manage to kill a single person, even among your enemies, but your complete lack of tactics led to the demise of almost half your soldiers. The only reason any of them survived at all was because you took an arrow to the heart and one of your generals assumed command.”

“That thou darest speak such lies?” the client said angrily. Awashima met his gaze impassively.

“If you need help remembering, I’d be happy to assist,” she said, and Fushimi felt himself shuddering anew from something her tone implied. He didn’t know what she meant, but he was certain it was not pleasant.

“If thou art telling the truth, then…” the client whispered, then swallowed hard. “How might mine soldiers take revenge on one who art already deceased?”

“They will not take revenge,” Anna stated. “You will sincerely apologize, and they will accept your apology.” There was a note of command in her voice, and around Fushimi, the ghosts stiffened, while the client made a choked sounding noise, as if he were trying to protest but couldn’t. “Do it,” she ordered, and with a sigh, the client obeyed.

“I bid thee convey unto thine soldiers my sincerest of regrets,” the client said. “That mine actions would cause such grievance, I find difficult to believe, but should such accusations be true, then thou hast been unjustly dispatched ere thine time hath arrived, and severed cruelly from thine loved ones and thy life. Shouldest thou forgiveth such atrocious misdeeds, it would be an undeserved boon unto mine heart.”

There was a sort of sigh that went through the ghosts, and the room warmed a little.

“They say they wish you had listened to the advice of your generals, but they will forgive you, because it was their duty to follow their lord, and death would have come for them sooner or later,” Anna said. And like wisps of smoke, the ghosts were gone, and the room suddenly felt almost hot with how abruptly the temperature returned to normal.

“Thank you,” Anna said, nodding to Yata, Awashima, and Fushimi. Awashima and Yata both nodded back, and Awashima headed to the table where Hirasaka was waiting while Yata got up and headed back to the kitchen. Fushimi blinked, stunned to realize that business had continued normally around them somehow, before obediently finding Mikoto and resuming waiting tables.

Within a few minutes, the client had paid up and left. Awashima and Hirasaka ordered some light snacks- appetizers, really- and after finishing their food they moved to the bar and spent the rest of the night nursing drinks and chatting with Kusanagi.

Then, as the evening was winding down and the bar had emptied out so that there were only a few patrons, and Fushimi was spending most of his time hanging around the bar since it wasn’t like they needed three waiters anymore, Shiro came in.

“It’s rather late for you to be here,” Kusanagi greeted.

“Yeah, sorry about that,” Shiro said, coming over to the bar and sitting down heavily.

“Something wrong?” Kusanagi asked, even though it was obvious something was. Even Fushimi could tell, and he was terrible at figuring out people’s emotions. Mostly because he didn’t care.

“You could say that,” Shiro said slowly, stretching his hands out to the bar even as he leaned back slightly on his stool. “I have a bit of a… problematic case,” he admitted.
“Oh?” Kusanagi asked.

“Yeah,” Shiro sighed. “Someone called while we were away. Her colleague passed away recently, and it seems he was involved in some sort of occult research. She said that so far, nothing’s really happened, but she and the others who went to clear out his office got a really bad feeling. All of them did. And I went in today, and… The whole place feels weird. There’s definitely something there, but it feels passive. I don’t think it’s particularly dangerous, but… with one wrong move, it could be. I trust Kuro and Neko, but…”

“But you want some back-up, right?” Kusanagi said.

“Ideally yes,” Shiro said. “But I’m not sure where I can get some back-up, aside from asking you guys.”

Kusanagi frowned.

“Why wouldn’t you just ask us?” he asked. “We do kinda owe ya after that last one.”

“Yes, but this is one I don’t think I can ask for your help with,” Shiro said mournfully. “You see, the office in question is at a hospital.”
As soon as Shiro said that his troublesome case was at a hospital, a kind of horrified understanding dawned on Kusanagi’s face.

“Ah, that would be a problem,” Kusanagi agreed. “Have you tried the Ashinaka shrine yet?”

“No, because it’s not good,” Shiro replied miserably. “I’m expecting a fair amount of investigation will be needed, and the only mikos that can handle a case like this are still students. They should be going to school, not skulking around hospitals.”

Kusanagi hummed thoughtfully.

“If it were only investigation, then there’s plenty of people I can think of,” he mused, “but having the possible need for action does make it a bit trickier. Aside from us and the mikos at Ashinaka, most people are either good at investigating or good at exorcisms and such, not both, and it sounds like you need both.”

“I do,” Shiro confirmed.

“Alright, I’ll talk to the others and see what they say,” Kusanagi decided. “Maybe if not everybody goes, that’ll work. It just sucks that Anna is our powerhouse, and she’s the one we need to worry about with something like this.”

“Er, what exactly is the problem with a hospital anyway?” Fushimi asked nervously. “I mean, yes a lot of people die in them, but the few times I’ve been to hospitals, they seem relatively calm?”

“Yes, and that’s actually fairly normal,” Shiro said. “Most people who die in hospitals and become ghosts have ties elsewhere, so they don’t linger there. As for the rest, the presence of so much continuous death in one place makes hospitals into a sort of portal to the afterlife. Most ghosts that tie themselves to someone or something in a hospital end up moving on fairly quickly, without any intervention.”

“Trouble is, Anna hates hospitals,” Kusanagi informed Fushimi. “Ever since she was little. Doctors’ offices too. Any time she needs a doctor, they have to find one who makes house calls.”

“That’s a little strange,” Hirasaka said, wrinkling her nose slightly. Fushimi was inclined to agree.

“From what grandfather said, she has her reasons,” Shiro replied. “We’ve always just accepted it. Anyway, even without her, it would be a great help to have some help, so if you could talk to the others, I’d-”

“Talk to the others about what?” Mikoto asked, joining their group and leaning his elbows against the bar.

“Shiro’s got a toughie,” Kusanagi informed him. “At a hospital.”

“Yeah fuck that,” Mikoto said, tossing his head lightly.

“There’s no one else who can help him,” Kusanagi pointed out.

“What ‘bout that qigong chick that Tatara’s friends with?” Mikoto asked.

“I thought he hadn’t heard from her recently though,” Kusanagi replied. “Which means she’s
probably off training somewhere.”

“Oh yeah.” Mikoto nodded vaguely, and turned so he was facing away from the bar instead, albeit still leaning on it.

“Kusanagi-kun was thinking perhaps you could help me out without Anna,” Shiro said. “Please? I really have a bad feeling about this. At the very least, can we ask Munakata-san what he thinks?”

“He’ll prob’ly say we should go, even without thinkin’ it through,” Mikoto huffed. “Plus, even if ya tell people Anna don’t do hospitals, ‘s one thing to hear it ‘n another thing to see for yourself.”

“Or feel it,” Kusanagi agreed. “I don’t think I’ve ever felt as nauseated as when you guys brought her along to visit the old man after he was put in hospice care. And that place was even designed to seem more homey.”

“Yeah.” Mikoto nodded again, then sighed and pushed himself off the bar. “Alright, no use waiting around forever. I’ll go let Anna and Reisi know what’s up and see what they have to say.”

As Mikoto walked away, Fushimi’s eyes followed him. He noticed that the others present-Kusanagi, Shiro, Hirasaka, and Awashima- also kept their gazes on the medium. Mikoto went to Reisi first, and after a quick exchange of words, they walked to Anna together. Fushimi could feel the moment the girl was briefed on the situation; there was a sudden wave of nausea and unease and a deep-seated terror like nothing he’d ever felt, but just as suddenly it was gone. There was a crashing sound from the kitchen, and within seconds, Yata had left the kitchen for the second time that night and was making a beeline for Anna, his eyes aflame with protectiveness. He hugged Anna to him, and she placed her hands on his shoulder, taking comfort from his presence, before pushing him away with a pained smile and walking over to the bar.

“When and where should we meet you, Yashiro?” she asked.

“Anna-chan, you don’t have to-” Shiro began, but Anna wasn’t having any of it.

“I can do this,” she insisted. “If Misaki could face Yuuya-kun, then I can manage a case at a hospital.”

“Yeah, ‘cept I didn’t really face him in the end,” Yata mumbled, coming up behind her. “Mom did.”

“Fine,” Anna said stiffly. “If Misaki can offer to let his family visit us and talk about visiting them as well, I can manage a case at a hospital.” She glared at Yata poutily, and he squirmed in place.

“You don’t need to push yourself just because someone else did the same,” Awashima said, speaking up for the first time in a while. “Everyone has their own pace.”

“Seri-chan’s right,” Kusanagi said. “None of us will hold it against you if you sit this one out. Hospitals are unpleasant for you, and we get that. Maybe someday it’ll be easier for you to go to them, and there’s no shame in waiting until then. We’ll take care of things in the meantime.”

“I appreciate the concern, but going to hospitals is never going to get any easier,” Anna said. “It’s time for me to face this, even if I don’t feel ready. If I don’t… I may never deal with this fear. What will I do if one of us gets into an accident? If I get into an accident? If I’m bleeding out, I doubt the paramedics are going to stop and ask if I am mentally prepared to wake up in a hospital.”

“Wow, she kinda sounded like you for a second there,” Hirasaka whispered, lightly elbowing Fushimi.
“If there are no other objections,” Anna continued, “I would like to take this case. I’m not going to turn my back on my family when they need me.”

“Okay then,” Shiro said. “Do you think you guys could meet me there? It’s the Golden Age Research Hospital. Do you know it?”

“I can look it up,” Kusanagi said.

“Okay,” Shiro nodded. “The south entrance is closest to the wing we’re investigating, so let’s meet there at 9:30 tomorrow morning.”

Fushimi clicked his tongue. Why did it have to be so early?

“See you there, then,” Kusanagi said.

“Thanks,” Shiro replied gratefully, getting to his feet. “I’ll see you then.” He waved and left the bar. Once he was gone, Anna and Yata returned to their regular duties, and Mikoto lumbered over to Reisi’s table to steal the psychic’s water glass.

“Would you mind if I joined you guys tomorrow?” Hirasaka asked suddenly. Fushimi’s head snapped around to look at his acquaintance so fast that his neck twinged a little in protest. He narrowed his eyes, suspicious of her casual tone, the request, and most of all, the way her attention was suddenly devoted to spinning the umbrella from her cocktail in her fingers. Yes, Hirasaka liked cocktail umbrellas, but for that precise reason, she tended to handle them delicately. “It sounds interesting, and after earlier I’m curious to learn more about how you guys work.”

“Sure, why not?” Kusanagi said. Fushimi could think of plenty of reasons why not. She was obviously up to something, she’d apparently been running background checks on everyone, she might try to embarrass Fushimi (not that she could, but that was neither here nor there), she might get in the way, the last time there’d been extra people in Kusanagi’s van it had been hell… those were all some pretty solid reasons, at least in Fushimi’s mind. But no one was asking him, and he didn’t think he could speak up and say it was a bad idea. And from the triumphant look Hirasaka shot at Fushimi side eye, she knew what was going through his head and was silently relishing her little victory. He silently vowed to make her pay.

“Wonderful,” Hirasaka said. “I’ll see you then.”

“In that case, I suppose I should use one of my sick days tomorrow and accompany you as well…” Awashima said, proving herself to have wisdom that was superior to Kusanagi’s. Or at the very least, she was intelligent enough to learn a thing or two after rooming with Hirasaka and notice when the other woman was acting suspiciously.

“You might give your coworkers a heart attack if you do that, Seri-chan,” Kusanagi teased. “I thought you didn’t take sick days.”

“One can always make exceptions for emergencies,” Awashima replied loftily, but there was a slight flush to her cheeks. Was she really that embarrassed to be teased about apparently being healthy?

“It’s hardly an emergency,” Kusanagi told her, “but we appreciate you helping out.”

The last few customers trickled out, and so Fushimi got up to flip the open/closed sign, even though it was still a few minutes to closing. But seriously? Only a complete asshat would walk in and expect service with the brief time left. No one scolded him for it, so he assumed they were all in agreement with his action.
In the middle of cleaning up, Hirasaka somehow managed to corner Fushimi, a grin on her face.

“So was that him earlier?” she asked. It took a moment for Fushimi’s brain to make the connection, and he almost responded with a moronic, “who?”

“Yes, that was the third medium,” he replied.

“I’d say he’s cute, but you’d know I don’t really mean it, since I just don’t see guys that way,” Hirasaka commented. “He seems nice.”

“Yes, because punching people in the face for making you feel insecure is so nice,” Fushimi drawled sarcastically.

“Considering he only seems to have punched you the one time, I’d say he’s pretty nice,’ Hirasaka said. “You have a way of offending people with very little effort.”

“Maybe you should stick around here more yourself then,” Fushimi grumbled. “Because you’re just as bad, and I bet you’d look great with a black eye.”

“I would look great,” Hirasaka said confidently, “because I am a master of makeup and am up to the challenge.”

Fushimi snorted.

“Have you forgotten how I was recruited by all the classes that did plays for the cultural festival to do their makeup for them?” Hirasaka reminded, raising an eyebrow.

“Hardly,” Fushimi replied. “The point was less about how it’d affect your appearance and more that you would get punched yourself, sooner rather than later.”

“Please, I bet I could be bff’s with your boyfriend in just a couple days.”

“Yeah right,” Fushimi snorted. “You’d get along like a house on fire. Also, he’s not my boyfriend. I’m perpetually single due to my fussy personality and resting bitch face, remember?” he said, quoting something Hirasaka had told him before, shortly after their high school graduation.

“You forgot about your propensity to insult anything that moves,” Hirasaka reminded him. “No one likes a guy who finds fault in them before even getting to know them.”

“There’s no point in getting to know them,” Fushimi grumbled back. “People are all basically worthless anyway. You know that as well as I do. They’ll act all nice as long as they want something from you, and then turn their backs the moment things change. I have no desire to waste my time building bonds that will collapse with less than a moment’s notice.”

Hirasaka didn’t argue, and Fushimi thought that was it, but as he moved to start stacking chairs on a table, he heard her say lowly, “Y’know, someday you’re going to have to start being honest with yourself.” He turned back to her, but she was already heading towards Awashima, and before Fushimi could stop her the two of them were bidding everyone a good night and stepping out the door, leaving him bewildered. Why would he be lying to himself, as Hirasaka had implied? After a childhood full of that man, he’d had more than enough of fibs and half-truths, dishonesty and lies. It was one of the reasons he chose to be so blunt with people; even if it was rude, it was the unadulterated truth.

Though speaking of truth, he should probably mention what he’d noticed earlier about his ability to the others. He finished stacking the chairs, and then made his way over to Anna.
“Do you have a moment?” he asked.

“If you’re going to tell me I don’t have to help out with Yashiro’s case or that I shouldn’t or that it’s okay to be scared especially when I have trauma, then no,” she snapped.

“I don’t see how it’s any of my business what cases you do and don’t take,” Fushimi replied drily. In all honesty, he thought they were crazy for taking cases at all. Why seek out trouble when it already found you more than it should?

“Sorry, Saruhiko,” Anna sighed. “I’m a little on edge, I suppose. I know everyone means well, but I want to help Yashiro and I want to face my past. And I know it’s silly, but having this case come up just after Misaki’s, it feels a bit like fate or something. Like we’re supposed to accept the things we’ve been through together. Besides, everyone will be there, so it’s not like I’ll be doing this alone. Anyway, what did you want to talk about?”

“Earlier, with that client,” Fushimi began.

“Well, that too, I guess,” Fushimi admitted.

“Seri sees the past lives of people who have been reincarnated,” Anna explained. He’d already heard that from Awashima herself, but all the same, Fushimi suddenly understood everyone else’s concern; if Anna was explaining things so readily, she must be very upset indeed, and therefore not thinking straight. “She can also temporarily awaken their past life. It’s kinda like possession, but not really, since technically she’s just helping them remember who they were before they became who they are, so it’s not really a different person. It’s not something that she has to do very often, but it has it’s uses, as you saw.”

“That makes sense,” Anna nodded. “If it weren’t like that, then you probably would have naturally reverted to the neutral state long ago. I’m afraid that we won’t be able to do anything about it until we fix the lock on your ability.”

“I didn’t really expect you to,” Fushimi admitted heavily. “Although,” he added, a thought occurring to him, “couldn’t you do the same thing as that other medium? Lock my ability in a neutral state?”

Anna looked revolted at the very suggestion.

“Saruhiko, what that medium did to you is very wrong,” Anna said seriously. “It would go against everything we stand for here at Homra to do the same thing to you again. Not only that, but there’s a risk of it backfiring, and locking us instead. If that happened, everything I say might be an order, or Mikoto’s body might become the same as a ghost’s, or Misaki might lose his body. And if we messed up, it could also simply increase the pull you have towards ghosts, and with the greater usage of your ability would come more serious side effects. It’s too dangerous, not to mention just wrong. Please don’t ask for such a thing again.”

“Sorry,” Fushimi mumbled, and he meant it. “I didn’t realize it was such a bad thing to ask.”

“I know,” Anna said, smiling reassuringly. “You’re not the kind of person who would ask for
something so dire unless you either didn’t know how terrible it was or desperately needed it despite
the consequences.”

“I’m not that nice a person,” he told her. “If I thought it would benefit me, then I’d still insist on
it.”

“But doesn’t it benefit you if we were to succeed in locking you into a neutral state?” Anna asked.

“I’d still see ghosts, and that one would still be around and I’d still be helpless against him, so the
risks outweigh the benefits,” Fushimi replied sourly. “But if you could reverse the current state of
things so that I was stuck repelling ghosts instead of drawing them, then it would be a different
story.”

“Would it though?” Anna asked. She didn’t seem to believe him. But why wouldn’t she? It was the
truth.

“Of course it would,” Fushimi said snippily. Anna shook her head, smiling ruefully.

“Saruhiko’s not very honest,” she said, more to herself than to him. It grated on him. First Hirasaka
had implied he was dishonest, and now Anna was doing the same. He was not a liar. He wasn’t
anything like that man, except in appearance.

“Thank you for letting me know about this development with your ability,” Anna added. “Even if
it doesn’t change anything, it is good to know. At least we can be certain that the medium who did
this to you was someone very cruel.”

Fushimi felt a flash of panic. “Someone very cruel”. He knew someone who fit that description
perfectly; it was the same person who had tormented him his entire life, and who even after dying
continued to haunt him. That person would find it hilarious seeing Fushimi being constantly
harassed by ghosts. But no, it couldn’t be. After all, he had always looked straight through the
ghosts that had always been around Fushimi, had mocked Fushimi for believing in ghosts and
taunted him by asking if any ghosts were around at any given moment. It had to be someone else.

And if it actually was that man who had locked Fushimi’s ability, what was he supposed to do?
Niki had never been someone a person could bargain with or appeal to, and he’d laugh off any
threats as well. Fushimi had never once managed to win against that man, and just because Niki
had died didn’t mean that status quo was about to change. Besides, with the way Niki came and
went as he pleased, there might never be a chance to fight back against him.

But Fushimi was certain that it was impossible for that man to have been a medium. It wouldn’t be
long now before they’d somehow stumble upon someone who Fushimi had met once and had
somehow pissed off with his “attitude” and so they’d done this to him as revenge, and with a little
talking to, said medium would agree that enough was enough and they’d undo their lock and
Fushimi would learn to repel ghosts and then he could leave Homra and live happily ever after
without seeing another ghost ever again.

Given all his thoughts, Fushimi merely grunted in response to Anna’s thanks, and figured it was
about time for him to leave, before anyone else implied he was a liar or gave him uncomfortable
thoughts. Before he could make his escape however, Kusanagi stopped him to ask if he would need
a ride the next day or if he would drive himself. That was something that hadn’t occurred to
Fushimi when he was contemplating reasons why having Hirasaka along was a bad idea- in this
instance, they didn’t all have to carpool in one vehicle. He gladly announced that he would drive
himself, and then went to change and go home.
Unfortunately, as soon as he got into his car, his brain chose to remind him about Hirasaka’s “gift” laying in the glove box. Whatever, it wasn’t like he wanted to know more about these people. He would just do his best to forget about that too, just like everything else that was on his mind.
The Hospital is Ominous

The next morning, Fushimi arrived at the hospital in question fifteen minutes early so that he had time to visit a coffee shop about a block away. He’d looked it up in the wee hours of the morning when he hadn’t been sleeping because sleep was for the weak. Or for the normal people with healthy lifestyles who weren’t him. Either way, he’d known he would need his coffee fix, and had done his research accordingly.

The barista at the coffee shop was young and apparently new judging by the difficulties he seemed to be having in doing his job. Fushimi was glad when, as he finished placing his order, Awashima and Hirasaka walked in, apparently having had the same idea as him. It wasn’t so much that he was glad to see them- he still had his qualms about Hirasaka joining them- but that he could really use a distraction to keep him from watching the barista mess up his order. He was willing to venture a bet that the kid was the type of person who needed exorbitant amounts of cream and sugar and syrups to stomach coffee, and therefore had no business being a barista.

Awashima was proving to be very likeable, at least for someone who loathed people and mornings as much as Fushimi did. She gave a polite greeting, showing that she was awake and alert and not opposed to chatter, but was perfectly happy to let silence fall when Fushimi didn’t strike up a conversation right away. That, and her coffee had a reasonable amount of cream and sugar in it. Both were some major plus points in Fushimi’s opinion. He could see why Hirasaka tolerated the woman.

After picking up their drinks, Fushimi and the two interlopers headed to the hospital together, and arrived at the south entrance at the same time as the rest of the crew from Homra. Totsuka was draped on Mikoto’s back, sound asleep, Kusanagi was also carrying a to-go cup of coffee, Yata was bleary-eyed and groggy, and Anna was barely blinking in the way of one who is trying not to let their eyelids close lest they stay closed. Only Reisi looked fully awake with his disgustingly cheerful smile and raucous greeting (okay, it wasn’t really that bad, but it was called out from a distance and clearly enunciated at a time when any sane person wouldn’t be able to manage more than a mumble or grunt). Shiro was nowhere to be seen, which Fushimi felt was quite rude given that this was his case and he’d been the one to request this early meeting time.

After standing around for five minutes in silence, everyone was getting antsy. It was like back in Yata’s hometown, when Fushimi had been stuck in the room with the redhead and Kuroh: the silence felt uncomfortable. They were all shifting, and a few times people opened their mouths as if to say something, then stopped themselves. It was like they were playing the quiet game or something. If it was the quiet game, then Reisi lost, since he was the one who finally spoke up.

“Pardon my curiosity, but have any of you felt anything yet?” Reisi asked, addressing the three “siblings” and Fushimi. “It is possible that Shiro missed something, and that one of you will pick up on it. Furthermore, when walking into an unknown situation like this, it is best to be alert, since I cannot advise you.”

Mikoto tilted his head, chewing on his lip in though, before shrugging one shoulder. Anna stared blankly into space before starting and saying, “Huh? Oh. Right, um… not really?”

Fushimi closed his eyes, trying to sense if there was anything odd about this hospital. It seemed perfectly normal to him. He opened his eyes, planning to say as much, but the words died in his throat when something caught his eye.

Niki was across the street.
It was only for a second, there one moment and gone the next, vanished in the moment it took for a person to walk through Fushimi’s line of sight, but it was enough. He’d definitely seen Niki, and Niki had definitely been laughing.

“You alright there, Fushimi?” Hirasaka asked, and Fushimi clicked his tongue, grateful for the distraction.

“Nothing in the hospital,” he answered Reisi. “Although I just got a glimpse of that ghost. He was laughing,” Fushimi shuddered, then added quickly, “He probably wanted to mess with me again.”

Niki was just messing with him, right? There was no way he’d know something about this case, was there?

“Bastard’s gettin’ bold,” Mikoto rumbled.

“Indeed,” Reisi agreed, though the psychic had the gall to look excited by the prospect. Fushimi clicked his tongue again, glad Totsuka was asleep and therefore unable to comment.

“Well I think I may have something,” Yata said. He held out an arm, shoving up his sleeve and displaying bare skin so that everyone could observe the way the hairs all stood on end and the skin had countless little bumps. “Something’s really scared, and it’s not Anna,” Yata told them. “I know what her being scared feels like, and this ain’t it.”

“If ghosts are scared, it’s probably stuff from their final moments,” Mikoto said heavily. “Try not to connect too much.”

“I… don’t think it is though,” Yata said, frowning. “I dunno, maybe Anna will be able to tell more when we get inside.”

“Don’t be silly, what could a ghost be afraid of?” Mikoto asked. Almost everyone in their group turned to raise an eyebrow or two at him. “I mean besides me,” Mikoto amended with an eye roll. “Or a shikigami, I guess. But there’s not much for a ghost to hafta worry ‘bout out there.”

“Maybe they’re afraid of Shiro’s bad feeling,” Anna said softly. Her words sounded ominous.

Just then, Shiro finally arrived, announcing his presence with a call of “Oyyyyyyyy!” He came running up to them, Kuroh and Neko following in his wake as he wove through the morning pedestrian traffic. Upon reaching their group, Shiro stumbled to a stop and put his hands on his knees as he tried to catch his breath. Kuroh and Neko took their places at his side, not even pretending to be winded.

“Wow, only ten minutes late, that might be a new record,” Kusanagi mused. Fushimi clicked his tongue yet again. Shiro was habitually late? Just great.

“I left,” Shiro panted, raising one arm above himself and brandishing a single finger as if to make a point, “an hour early.” He lifted his head and grinned weakly.

“We ran into Watanabe-san as she was delivering some fruits to a neighbor,” Kuroh explained. “We helped her carry things, and afterwards she wanted to chat.”

“She offered us mochi!” Neko added. “But Kuroh said we couldn’t ‘cuz he stinks, but it’s okay because Watanabe-baa-san said she’d bring some tomorrow!”

“If we’d stopped for mochi, we would have been at least half an hour later than we already were!” Kuroh argued.
“Either way, we’re here now, so why don’t we go inside?” Shiro suggested hurriedly. Probably because Neko was hissing at Kuroh, and her hair was standing on end like someone had just rubbed a balloon against it. Fushimi figured it was probably a good idea for Shiro to prevent a fight with a distraction, but at the same time, he did feel vaguely curious about what would happen if Neko and Kuroh did get into it with each other.

Totsuka groaned at Shiro’s suggestion, apparently more awake than Fushimi had realized, and clambered off of Mikoto’s back. He produced his camera, scowling petulantly the whole time. Once it was out, Reisi turned to Shiro and said, “We’re ready.”

Inside, they stopped at a reception desk, and after Shiro had a word with the receptionist, they were buzzed through a set of doors to the left of the desk. Shiro led the way through the halls humming to himself as he walked. Neko skipped along behind him, while Kuroh took the rear of their procession.

They had gone about ten steps down the hall when Anna suddenly stopped, a hand at her forehead. “Izumo, I think I’m going to need to borrow your sunglasses,” she said.

“Is there a lot of residue?” Kusanagi asked, reluctantly surrendering his shades.

“Oh yeah,” Mikoto grunted.

“Even I can see it pretty clearly,” Yata seconded.

Fushimi didn’t see anything, but he wasn’t about to say so. With his ability locked, he already felt like a failure of a medium, and now he apparently had the weakest Sight of them all. Maybe he could blame his vision; after all, he was the only one who wore glasses.

But as they progressed down the hall and took a right at an intersection, Fushimi began to notice flashes of color in his peripherals. They were distracting, especially since, every time he turned to look at them, they disappeared.

“Don’t look at it directly,” Yata said after Fushimi twisted to look at a particularly vivid purple hue that he’d seen and almost walked into a cleaning cart that had been left out. “You’ll just drive yourself crazy.”

It was good advice, but Fushimi felt a little bitter about receiving it. First of all, now that it was brought up he realized he’d heard that same suggestion before, back when he’d first started working with Homra, and Anna was trying to teach him how to see residue. Secondly, Yata had figured out what he was seeing before he had, without him even saying anything about it. The shorter medium was now smiling to himself, looking very pleased; he probably was gloating about making Fushimi look like an idiot.

As the rainbows at the edge of his vision increased, Fushimi caught himself looking at the other mediums to check how they were dealing with the onslaught of psychic residue. Anna’s eyes were slits behind Kusanagi’s sunglasses, and her face was a picture of misery- however that could just as easily be her supposed terror of hospitals. Mikoto was walking around with his eyes closed, still navigating fairly well on his own, though Totsuka and Reisi were both sticking even closer to his sides than usual, as if to guide him. Yata had his hands on either side of his eyes to block out the optical assault. And up ahead, Shiro walked on, seemingly unaffected.

Shiro finally led them into an office suite fronted by large glass doors with golden lettering that said “Special Research”. The doors were wide open and inviting, and the lettering looked very
official, and the whole thing felt like it was trying too hard to look legitimate and cover up some shady dealings. Fushimi instinctively didn’t trust it.

“So,” Shiro said, stopping just in front of the doors, “this is the suite we’re investigating, but before we go any farther, I should warn you that inside is a bit…” He trailed off, looking nervous.

“You mean all that residue we’ve been seeing isn’t even related to what we’re investigating?” Mikoto asked. Fushimi didn’t feel like pointing out that Mikoto wasn’t exactly “seeing” it if his eyes were closed the whole time.

“No, it is,” Anna insisted. “All of it leads to this place.”

“Right you are,” Shiro said, pointing and nodding to Anna. “Once we get inside, though, that’s when the ‘bad feeling’ kicks in. Kuro, Neko, and I took a look around last time, but I couldn’t really pinpoint any origin. Still, maybe we missed something.”

“I doubt we’ll notice anything you three missed,” Mikoto said.

“Yes, but it would certainly make things simpler if you did,” Shiro sighed. “Because frankly, I’m not sure what to think. With this much residue, I would expect multiple active hauntings, and yet we found nothing. If it was just a little bit of residue, I’d say maybe it was a more passive ghost and we just happened to show up during its inactive period, but there’s definitely been multiple ghosts through here, so that wouldn’t work.”

“I have read of cases where multiple ghosts merged, fusing into one greater entity,” Reisi said. “Could that be what’s happening here?”

“I’ve never seen or heard of a ghost like that being passive though,” Shiro replied.

“Well, there’s no use standing around out here chatting,” Awashima said. “If we’re going to unravel this case, then we’ll need to go inside at some point.”

“Ladies first,” Kusanagi said with a wink. Awashima rolled her eyes, but strode forward past Shiro and Neko. As soon as she passed through the doors, her face turned white, but she soldiered on so that she was out of the doorway.

“Ooo, interesting,” Totsuka cooed. “Shiro, I forgive you for making me get up early now. C’mon guys, let’s check this out!”

One by one, they followed Awashima through the doors. The three mediums went through together, Yata and Mikoto staying protectively to either side of Anna as they went in. It seemed that they were concerned what the effects of the added strain of the “bad feeling” on top of her preexisting unease might be. Fushimi was one of the last ones to go in, and when he went through, it almost felt like a flashback to his childhood in the worst possible way. He felt that anxious thrill of wondering whether or not that man would show up, of wondering what he might do, wondering whether or not his hiding place would be discovered. He shuddered, but reminded himself that all that was in the past. It wasn’t much of a comfort though, since at least if it had been that man, he’d have known what it was he was afraid of. Right now, his fears were completely unfounded, and while they were illogical, he couldn’t chase them away, and that just made him more afraid.

Instead of continuing on through the office suite, they ended up clustered just inside the doorway. Fushimi found himself shivering a little, and noticed he wasn’t alone in that aspect.

“You okay, Anna-chan?” Shiro asked, because while more than a couple were shivering, Anna’s body was being wracked by tremors.
“I don’t like this place,” Anna said, her voice bordering on a whimper. “It reminds me too much of back then.”

“Yeah, well, unlike back then, you’ve got us, right?” Yata said with false cheer. “We’ll take care of anyone who tries to hurt you!”

Anna smiled weakly at that.

“Thank you,” she replied. “I’m sorry I can’t use my power to help everyone feel better right now.”

“Pfft, like we can’t face a little bit of negativity every now and then,” Totsuka said. “Ghosts cause people to feel scared all the time, right?” That was easy for him to say. He was the one who was resistant to ghosts due to being so positive.

“Often enough,” Mikoto agreed.

“Yes, but again, it’s usually a more active ghost,” Shiro pointed out. He took a deep breath, then strode forward towards a hallway that seemed to run the length of the suite, and the rest of them trailed after him, looking around warily. They instinctively clumped together, staying close to one another. Normally, Fushimi would have grumbled or protested or taken steps to stay away from the others, but for once, the cluster of people around him felt comforting. It helped that he was at the edge of the group, and could step away at any time, and also that Hirasaka was the person in front of him.

As Shiro had said, there didn’t seem to be any one place in the office suite where the bad feeling was any worse. It felt like some kind of premonition for an event more terrifying than any of them could imagine. Kusanagi had taken charge of Anna, the two of them shuffling along as well as they could with Anna clinging desperately to the bartender like her very life depended on it.

The one thing they did notice- or at least the mediums did- was that there were certain objects that positively glowed with residue, some so bright even Fushimi could see it while looking directly at the objects. The other mediums (Mikoto and Yata at first, but Shiro soon took over) narrated their observations for those without Sight, pointing out the objects so that Totsuka could train his camera on them. The objects seemed to be random: a pen, a paperweight, a bracelet, a stethoscope, and more. The main thing they had in common was that they were small; the largest object was a coffee thermos. While the objects were scattered about, most of them seemed to be in a large office at the end of the hall that ran through the suite, containing a large oak desk, a fancy ergonomic office chair, and mahogany shelving along the walls.

“You run any tests on this stuff?” Mikoto asked Shiro, gesturing towards the desktop, where several glowing objects lay.

“Not yet,” Shiro admitted. “They’re actually one of the reasons I wanted you guys here, just in case they’re ties and touching them will produce a violent and angry ghost or something.”

“Makes sense,” Mikoto said, and took a fighting stance. “Alright, let’s do this.”

“For the sake of the camera, what exactly is is that you are you doing?” Totsuka asked.

“Also about half of us have no clue what’s going on other than we kinda feel like wetting ourselves for no real reason,” Kusanagi added.

“We’re gonna run some tests to see if there’s ghosts involved with any of this stuff and if there is I’mma beat the shit outta ‘em for good measure,” Mikoto grinned.
“Violent as always,” Kuroh sighed, shaking his head. But he too took a defensive stance and wrapped a hand around the hilt of his sword.

“Is everyone ready?” Shiro asked.

“Fuck yeah,” Mikoto said emphatically.

“Nooo,” Yata moaned lowly at the same time.

“Do it, Yashiro,” Anna said quietly when Shiro hesitated at the mixed answers.

“Well okay then, here goes,” Shiro said, and reached out and jabbed at a glowing pad of sticky notes before jerking his hand back like the notepad might bite. Nothing happened.

“First test, no reaction,” Shiro said. “I’ll try adjusting the location now.”

Once again, Shiro reached out, this time placing his fingers gently on top of the sticky notes and sliding the pad a few inches across the desk. Again, nothing happened.

“Second test, still nothing,” Shiro said.

“Try picking it up,” Totsuka suggested. Fushimi rolled his eyes at the cameraman making suggestions like he knew what was going on. Then again, Totsuka had probably seen tests like this before, and he apparently knew a lot about psychic investigations and phenomena, so maybe his suggestion was valid.

Shiro complied, taking the sticky notes in hand and lifting them. When there was still no reaction, he tossed the notepad a couple of times, then held it out to Kuroh.

“I’m getting nothing. What do you sense?” Shiro asked.

Kuroh took the pad of sticky notes and held it in his palm, frowning.

“There’s a ghost in here, but it’s dormant,” Kuroh finally said. “More so than I’ve ever seen. In fact, it’s comparable to when the living fall into comas.”

Totsuka whistled.

“How extraordinary,” Reisi said. “One does have to wonder how such a thing could have occurred.”

“Not naturally, I can tell you that,” Kuroh said darkly. “It is unclear what kind of research was done in this place before, but based on this I am certain that it was unethical. I can feel the ghost’s energy being sapped away. It seems that the energy is meant to be redirected into whoever holds this artifact, but I am not receiving any energy. If anything, the artifact is trying to leech my energy as well.” With that, Kuroh hastily placed the notepad back on the desk, then produced a handkerchief to wipe his hand on as he looked towards the notepad with a look of disgust. As he did so, Mikoto finally lowered his fists and resumed his usual slouch.

“Interesting,” Reisi mused. “Perhaps we should seek out some sort of research records, so that we might try and discover the purpose of that object.”

“Do ya think the others are all like that too?” Yata asked, ignoring Reisi.

“We’d have to test them to be sure,” Shiro said.
“In that case, perhaps Douhan-chan’s ability might be useful?” Kusanagi suggested. Fushimi
turned to stare at the man, because when had he and Hirasaka gotten so familiar that he referred to
her by name? Stranger still, Hirasaka didn’t seem the least bit perturbed by it.

“I’m afraid not,” she informed him. “My ability is a strictly four-use a day thing. If I try to use it a
fifth time, it won’t work. And given that there’s more than four objects to investigate, that’s a few
days’ worth of my ability. If you ask me, it’d be faster to just look for records like Mr. Prim-ness
over there suggested.” She nodded over towards Reisi. “I’d start with that computer.”

“We can’t just touch someone’s computer without permission,” Kusanagi protested.

“Well, technically Dr. Narita who hired us did say we could do whatever we needed to do to take
care of things here…” Shiro said slowly, a glint in his eye.

“That settles it,” Hirasaka said decisively. “Fushimi, you’re up.”

Fushimi rolled his eyes, but obediently took a seat behind the desk and booted up the computer.
But if he was being honest, he was pleased it had come to this. This was his area of expertise, after
all, and this way, he’d be doing something that actually felt useful. Thus far, all he’d done was tug
on ghosts a bit here and there. The only case where his ability had really contributed to getting rid
of a ghost was when they’d dealt with that vase ghost, and he’d almost been overpowered then. But
this right here, obtaining the secrets stored on a computer? That was something he could do better
than anyone else.

It didn’t take long to get past the password on the computer. It took even less time to find the files
they needed, since they seemed to be the only thing saved on the hard drive. The files were
encrypted as well, but it was nothing Fushimi couldn’t handle. It would just take a little while, that
was all.

As Fushimi worked, the other mediums began testing some of the other objects, working in pairs,
while Awashima, Reisi, and Kusanagi stayed close to take notes (using pens and notepads that had
been confirmed to be residue-free). Anna, Neko, and Kusanagi took Totsuka with them to examine
some of the objects near the front of the suite, while Shiro, Kuroh, and Reisi went to search around
the offices some more, leaving behind Yata, Mikoto, and Awashima to look around the office
where Fushimi was working while Hirasaka sat on the desk near Fushimi and observed his
progress, despite her tagging along so she could watch Homra at work.

Fushimi had tuned out the sounds of the mediums as they began testing some of the objects on the
shelves along the wall, but they abruptly forced their way back into his awareness when he heard a
shout from Mikoto and a clank followed by a weakly tinkling melody. He looked over, intending to
make a complaint, but all words stopped in his throat as he saw Yata tilting backwards. The
redhead’s eyes were wide open with shock and almost seemed to glow a sickly shade of yellow
under the fluorescent lighting of the room, and his loose shirt billowed around him. He seemed to
be moving in slow motion, but he couldn’t have been, because even as Mikoto made a grab for him
with a look somewhat akin to fear on his face, Yata was already falling flat on his back on the
floor, his eyes fluttering shut as he fainted.
Fushimi wasn’t quite sure how he got from the computer desk to Yata’s side, or how the scattered members of their group also ended up there. But there they were, all of Homra plus Shiro, his shikigami, Awashima, and Hirasaka, listening to Mikoto explain what had happened.

“I don’t know what happened,” Mikoto repeated for about the third time, since every time someone else arrived the first thing that came out of their mouth was, “What happened?” Fushimi was even vaguely aware of that same question having left his mouth at some point. “He was running the tests while I was keeping watch for any trouble, when he picked up that music box and then his eyes rolled back and he was falling.”

“You didn’t see anything?” Reisi asked worriedly. Apparently Yata’s loathing for Reisi was one-sided. Mikoto just glared at his boyfriend as an answer.

“Misaki’s possessed,” Anna proclaimed. “But… it’s more than one ghost.”

“I’d say I wouldn’t have thought that was possible, but today seems to be all sorts of impossible at this point, doesn’t it?” Shiro sighed. “Anna-chan, can you talk them out of him?”

Anna shook her head.

“It’s not just more than one,” she said. “It’s many. I can’t control that many.”

“What if we gave you energy?” Shiro suggested. Anna just shook her head sadly.

“Could they be drawn out?” Mikoto asked. All eyes turned on Fushimi. Could he draw them out? In the past, it seemed like ghosts were more affected by the appeal of Yata’s ability than by the pull Fushimi exerted on them, but he had held off the ghosts following that customer who was the reincarnation of that feudal lord.

“I’ll try,” he said. He took a deep breath, but before he could let his ability do its thing, Yata sat up abruptly with a cry of, “Don’t!”, narrowly missing a collision of heads with Awashima, who had been trying to take his pulse.

“Don’t hurt them, please,” Yata begged. Or rather, the ghosts within him-

“Misaki?” Anna said questioningly, and Yata nodded. Oh, it really was Yata speaking.

“They… they don’t really want to possess me, they’re just scared,” Yata said, his voice cracking.

“What are they scared of?” Anna asked gently, slipping into her calm and reasonable self that she seemed to adapt when dealing with ghosts. Not that it was all that different from the calm, reasonable self she was all day every day, but there did seem to be a slight difference, at least to Fushimi.

“That place,” Yata said, and shook his head. “I can’t tell you any more than that, they’re a bit hard to understand. There’s just so many of ‘em…”

“A kodoku,” Hirasaka said, and everyone’s eyes turned to her now as she closed the music box, which had already stopped playing its melody and had been emitting a low whirring sound. “Or at least, an attempted one, though it seems to have failed. Probably because this isn’t some manga or anime where people create those kinds of things.”
“So someone crammed a bunch of spirits into that music box to try and create a curse?” Totsuka asked.

“I think the intent was more just to create an extra-strong spirit,” Hirasaka replied. “Either way, it seems the ghosts didn’t consume each other, and so it just became like an overstuffed closet, waiting to burst.”

“And so the ghosts opted to move into the first thing they could so they’d have more space,” Shiro said grimly. “How cruel.”

“So what are we supposed to do then, if you won’t let us get the ghosts out of you?” Kusanagi asked Yata.

“I think they’ll move on on their own,” Yata said slowly. “A few of them already have, or at least, I think some of them have, it’s kinda like a beehive in here.” He knocked lightly on his head. “I think most of ‘em don’t have ties, or maybe they do, but they can’t remember what they were so they might as well not, and they just want to be free, except they’re scared to be free. And… I think there’s something else they’re scared of, or some things… It’s all so vague.”

“And how long do you think it’ll take for them to get over their fear?” Mikoto asked, crossing his arms. “Because I doubt being possessed by multiple ghosts can be good for you.”

“That’s…” Yata mumbled, then desperately changed the subject. “But don’t we have more testing to do? A-and we need to look at those records, right, and…”

“At this point, I think it would be more prudent to hold off further testing until we have examined any records regarding the objects here,” Reisi said. “I can pinpoint which objects are most likely to have adverse effects on us, but I cannot know what those effects might be, and it is best to go into a fight prepared.”

“Then while we wait for Fushimi to get us those records, why don’t you try and find the worse things here?” Kusanagi suggested, taking charge. “Or better yet, figure out which things are harmless so that they can be examined, and that way we can keep getting things done.”

“Alright,” Reisi conceded. Fushimi merely grunted, hastily getting back to his feet and heading back to the computer. He didn’t have to look to see Hirasaka watching him, probably smirking at the way he’d been so quick to get to Yata’s side. But it wasn’t like it meant anything, right? That was completely normal. When someone fainted, you went to check on them.

But when someone fainted and your mind completely blanked out… Okay, maybe he did care. A little. After all, Yata was… well, he had his annoying points, but many of them stemmed from a caring nature and from insecurities that he really couldn’t be blamed for. So it was only natural that Fushimi didn’t hate him, and was beginning to find him tolerable enough to worry about. But it wasn’t like he had feelings for Yata, contrary to what Hirasaka might think.

Back at the computer, Fushimi got back to work, forcibly opening documents that had suspicious amounts of protection for being research data. At this point, Fushimi didn’t need the austere atmosphere of this office to make him dislike the place; clearly there was something very wrong here. After about ten minutes, he got all the files open.

“I’ve got it,” he said, and almost everyone who wasn’t trailing after Reisi swarmed around him—Yata stayed seated on the floor, and Anna, who had opted to stay with him, remained at his side, though she did lean slightly in Fushimi’s direction as if to listen in. He tried to ignore the way he now had people hovering over him and instead began reading things off. “Let’s see, there’s
experiment records, subject data, a few documents that, based on the titles, are probably dissertations on theories derived from his work…"

“Let’s start with experiment records,” Kusanagi said. “After what happened with Yata, I think we should try and find out what this guy was attempting and how much success he had with it.”

“Given the size of the files here, it’ll take a while to go through everything,” Awashima said. “Do you have any way to copy things?”

Fushimi snorted, and heard a twin sound from Hirasaka. The answer was very much yes. He pulled out a thumb drive he carried for emergencies and began the process of copying the files. While that was ongoing, he opened up the experiment records folder for perusal. Thankfully, everything was carefully labelled in a mostly coherent way; for example, one of the titles was “Kodoku- Failed”. However some of the titles were less clear, such as “Sight Glasses- Partial Success” and “Sight Pocketwatch- Success Dependent on User”. But overall…

“Ah shit,” Yata said suddenly. Fushimi looked away from the computer screen, blinking to see the medium staring vacantly into space, his mouth twisted into a grimace.

“What is it, Misaki?” Anna asked.

“Well, uh, one of the ghosts in me actually worked here at one point, and he- I think he’s a he, anyway- he told me the name of his boss,” Yata reached up and dragged a hand down his face, before added in a rush, “And that boss’s name is Mizuchi.”

Fushimi blinked, not sure what to make of Yata’s statement, although the name did ring a bell. Above him, Kusanagi sucked in a sharp breath, and Fushimi finally recalled overhearing harsh words against a Mizuchi during the seance for Shiro’s grandfather.

“I was beginning to think that might be the case,” Anna said sadly, looking away towards the bookshelves. “The feel of this place… It’s familiar to me. Like back then, but more… dead. It seems that when Grandfather Daikaku managed to block him from experimenting mediums, he found a way to use ghosts as his test subjects instead.”

“Should- should we leave then?” Kusanagi asked tentatively.

“No,” Anna said. “I already said I want to face the past. And now, knowing that this was sensei’s office, I feel obligated to do something. As the sole survivor of his early experiments, I owe it to the ghosts here to help them, just like Misaki owed it to Yuuya-kun to help.”

“Sole survivor?” Awashima asked, then paled. “Sorry, I didn’t mean- that is… you don’t need to answer that, I was just a little shocked is all, I know it’s none of my business.”

“It’s alright,” Anna said, although she was trembling again, and there were tears leaking out from under the sunglasses. “There were about a dozen of us in sensei’s lab. Mediums, all children. All… all orphans, and most of us lost our parents recently. He was always testing our powers- trying to find out what we were capable of and if we could become stronger. Originally, my empathy was my strongest power. I could link to the other mediums, and, depending on their abilities, I could synchronise with them and use the same power for a limited time. But with sensei’s experiments, I discovered my persuasion, and he made me use it over and over until I could control the ghosts rather than just coax them. And from there it was controlling multiple ghosts, and controlling humans as well… He was also trying to find a way to use my empathy to give non-mediums power. Even temporarily would have been fine, but he wanted it to be permanent. He said he and his team needed to be mediums so that they could unlock the secrets of death.
“But the experiments he did were hard on us,” Anna continued. In contrast to her tears and her shaking, her voice was numb and matter-of-fact, as if she were stating facts that were significant only to someone far away, like the fertility rate of penguins in Antarctica. She huddled a little closer to Yata, whose gaze focused on her for a moment before going vague again. It didn’t stop him from hugging her back. “He thought since our abilities worked on the dead, that maybe they would be stronger with near-death experiences. And in a couple cases, near-death became actual death. He also took us to places where the ghosts were strong to use our abilities, and sometimes they were too strong. Some of the others were actually killed by ghosts, some of them simply overextended their abilities and were killed by the backlash. And one… he had me try and transfer her power to another person. It failed, but then he had me try and put it in a bottle. It worked, but… she died. I don’t know if it was the shock of losing her ability or if our abilities are somehow necessary to survive, but either way it was like her essence was split in two and she died and in the end it didn’t even work because once she was gone, her power left too. I think the only reason I survived that place was because sensei saw me as the key to his goals, and needed me alive. And then Grandfather Kokujouji came and put a stop to sensei’s experiments and took me to live with him.”

Having said her piece, Anna shifted, lying down right there on the floor so her head was in Yata’s lap. He absently place a hand on her head and began stroking, comforting his “sister” as if by muscle memory. No one said a word, probably because there was very little that could be said to that. “That sucks” would certainly not do her experiences justice, and it wasn’t like any of them had relatable tales of their own to regale her with to show their solidarity.

“Well based on the titles of these records, it seems he kept at it with his attempts to gain abilities,” Kusanagi said. “Aside from the kodoku, most of these seem to have something to do with abilities. Sight and Hearing seem to be the main goals, though it looks like there were plenty of attempts at other things too. It looks like very few of them were true successes, so that’s something good at least.”

“Yes, but the fact that any were successes at all is worrisome,” Awashima said. “More importantly though, I suggest we take a look at the ones marked ‘Dangerous Failure’. They seem like the most likely things to pose a threat. And who knows, perhaps one of those items is what Yata-san’s ghosts were so afraid of.”

“Yes,” Fushimi agreed, because given the other labels, it was a logical conclusion. If there was anything to be feared from one of the Sight experiments, as a medium who possessed some amount of Sight, he would likely already see it. As for the ones simply labelled as “Failure”, he would assume that they ended with no result, or possibly harmless results. While that still left a few things that had some amount of success, a quick scan showed they were all fairly simple things. Besides, the fact that the “Dangerous Failures” had the word “dangerous” in their labels seemed a pretty good indicator of something to be concerned about. He moved the cursor to the nearest file, marked “Atmosphere Control- Dangerous Failure” and clicked on it.

Once the document had loaded, Fushimi’s eyes travelled along the page, skimming for details. He felt the others doing the same, and hoped they wouldn’t get huffy with him when he started scrolling since he didn’t see anything worth shouting about in the early sections. Not surprising, really, since the record was written like a lab report, with each step of the scientific method painstakingly written out as if this wasn’t complete pseudoscience. As such, it wasn’t all that odd that they wouldn’t find out what made this experiment “dangerous” simply from the hypothesis, materials, and procedures.

When he finally reached the description of the results, Fushimi stopped scrolling, having found what they were looking for. The experiment seemed to have placed a ghost that created an icy chill
and strong negative feelings in a picture frame with the intention of creating an object that could affect room temperature at the will of whoever held it. However, the frame had become completely untouchable, causing severe frostbite to anyone who handled it without special gloves, and had emitted such negativity that a research assistant who had gotten too close had attempted suicide on the spot. That would explain the “bad feeling” in the office suite. But Fushimi hadn’t noticed any picture frames…

“Alright, let’s look at the next one,” Kusanagi said. Neither Awashima nor Hirasaka made any protest, so it seemed they’d both read to their satisfaction as well.

The next experiment was labelled “Clairvoyance- Dangerous Failure”, and described how a mirror that the doctor had attempted to infuse with a clairvoyant ghost had shattered during its first use, the shards levitating and attacking the unfortunate assistant who had been using the mirror. After that, “ Conjuring/Vanishing- Dangerous Failure” caused a Matryoshka Doll to start enveloping other residue-rich artifacts, absorbing them and growing larger. “Curses- Dangerous Failure” had been meant to create a yo-yo that would allow the user to cast curses, but instead cursed the user, and “Healing-Dangerous Failure” made it so that a certain thermometer made whoever touched it fall violently ill, vomiting up dark green sludge.

Lastly, there was one that was labelled a little differently; “Telekinesis- Dangerous Success”. The records described how a mug had been successfully imbued with telekinetic ability that would be available to anyone who held the mug. However, the telekinesis was completely outside the user’s control. Fushimi really hoped that the other mediums had a means of dealing with all this mess.

They’d just began scanning through the other records in case there was anything noteworthy in them when the rest of their crew returned.

“Nothing we looked at struck me as particularly alarming, however, there is a closet that I felt it would be unwise to-” Reisi began, then trailed off with a frown as he took in the sight of Anna still lying across Yata’s lap. “Is something wrong?” He asked.

“We’re not leaving,” Anna said firmly, then continued on to inform them of facts that had recently been brought to light. “But it seems this was Mizuchi-sensei’s office.”

“If you knew that and brought us here anyway, I’ll fucking kill you,” Mikoto said to Shiro, scowling murderously at the onmyouji from the corners of his eyes. Shiro just laughed nervously, which wasn’t exactly encouraging. Fushimi began to wonder whether or not he should call the police, and if doing so would merely add him to the victims list.

“Don’t be absurd,” Kuroh said. “If we’d known that man was involved, we’d have asked Ichigen-sama to come out of his semi-retirement and handle this one.”

“Gentlemen, please,” Awashima said, an eye roll evident in her voice. “We have work to be doing. While you were off reconnoitering, we found records of some highly unpleasant, not to mention dangerous, artifacts that we can assume are somewhere in this office suite that we believe need urgently to be dealt with.”

“Finally,” Mikoto groused. “Something that sounds like fun.”

“I wouldn’t be too sure,” Kusanagi cautioned. “Most of this stuff sounds like it shouldn’t be touched even by you.”

“Regale us,” Reisi said. Kusanagi complied, with input from Awashima and Hirasaka here and there where he missed a detail. As the explanation went on, frowns appeared on the faces of Shiro,
Kuroh, Mikoto, and Reisi, while even Neko abandoned her customary feline smile for a more nervous expression. The frowns only got deeper with each new tidbit of information. Only Totsuka was unaffected, edging around so that he could capture everyone’s reactions on camera.

“That mirror could be problematic,” Shiro said once they’d heard everything. “Depending on how it works, it might attack everyone within its vicinity.”

“The Matryoshka too,” Reisi added. “Is it not possible that something like that might take on characteristics and abilities of that which it absorbs?”

“Yeah, that one’s not so different from a kodoku itself,” Mikoto agreed. “Gettin’ stronger with everything that it eats…”

“Mm, it is a little different though,” Shiro pointed out.

“Yeah, but not by much,” Mikoto argued back. “Point is, Reisi’s right, that one’s gonna be a bitch.”

“Yeah, that’s true,” Shiro agreed, and lapsed into a thoughtful silence. The same silence seemed to have enveloped everyone. The only noise was from Neko, who apparently added sound effects when she was thinking in the form of extended “hm” sounds that were somewhere between a hum and a moan.

“Well what if you separated the ghosts from the objects they’re encased in?” Totsuka finally suggested. “Won’t they be easier for you guys to deal with that way? No flying shards of glass and all?”

“Normally I would say yes,” Shiro said slowly, “but given how dangerous these ghosts are even trapped in an object against their will, I’m not so sure…” He sighed, then turned to Reisi. “Munakata-san?”

Reisi continued thinking for a moment before answering.

“For the doll, that definitely will not work,” he agreed. “And there are some that I am not sure about. However, it would indeed be advisable for the mirror and the yo-yo, at least. It is hard to be certain, due to my own lack of Sight, but I believe that releasing the ghost that is contained in the yo-yo will be enough to completely solve that problem, while there will still be work to do with the mirror ghost. I apologize for not being able to be more specific.”

“Well, if you want specific, I might have an idea for how to help with that,” Awashima said, smiling. “Did you, by any chance, see a pocketwatch lying around anywhere?”

“Yes, we saw three,” Totsuka chirped.

“Just a moment then,” Awashima said. “Fushimi-san, if I may?” Even without receiving an answer, she was already leaning into Fushimi’s personal space, and when he leaned away, she took over the mouse and navigated out of the document they were looking at and to another. She scrolled for a bit before finding what she wanted.

“There should be one with gold filigree on the lid in the design of a tree. It’s believed to be Portuguese in origin, probably 18th century, though you probably don’t need to know that.”

“If they don’t need to know, then why mention it?” Fushimi found himself asking. But really, it was a valid question.
“I just like my history,” Awashima said, smiling down at him. He scowled back; he’d thought she knew how to keep the friendliness to a minimum, but here she was acting all cheerful. “Probably because my ability makes it relevant to me. It was even one of my majors, though of course I needed something more practical as well since there aren’t many jobs for history majors.”

“I do recall seeing a pocket watch matching that description,” Reisi mused.

“Good. Go get it,” Awashima said, straightening. “I think it might help you.”

With her attention away, Fushimi scrolled up and realized the file she’d opened was one of the ones he’d noticed earlier, “Sight Pocketwatch- Success Dependent on User”.

Reisi went to get the pocketwatch, Mikoto at his side just in case and Totsuka following them, either because he didn’t want to be left out or because he thought that it would be most beneficial for the camera. They returned a minute later, and Reisi’s Cheshire grin was back.

“Helpful indeed,” he said. “Thank you, Awashima-kun. With this I can see the results of this case much more accurately. Now then, shall we start planning?”
Closets Contain Mayhem

They’d determined that the “dangerous” artifacts were most likely all locked away in the closet Reisi had mentioned upon returning from the office exploration mission he and the others had taken while Fushimi had found the records. If the objects weren’t in the closet, then they weren’t in the office suite anymore, which probably meant trouble for some unfortunate oblivious soul somewhere. Fushimi both did and didn’t want the artifacts to be in the closet. He didn’t want that to be the case, because then it wouldn’t be his problem and that would be that, but he did want it to be the case because if it wasn’t then Homra would no doubt be intent on tracking the objects down, thus making it his problem after all. Oh joy.

It had been decided that non-essential personnel would remain in the main office where Fushimi had hacked into the records. Of course, non-essential personnel had a variable meaning, since Totsuka was still filming away in the thick of things despite his complete lack of ability. Reisi was also present despite not having any powers to fight ghosts with, but he could at least tell them how to avoid disaster. Plus, with the aid of the pocketwatch, he now had Sight. Awashima’s theory was that the pocketwatch only granted Sight to those who had some psychic or spiritual ability but lacked Sight, and so far, the theory held water since she, Hirasaka, and Reisi could all See while holding the pocketwatch, but it had no effect for Kusanagi or Totsuka.

But at least they’d left the other non-combatants in the office. Awashima and Hirasaka and Kusanagi, and the incapacitated Yata who seemed to be having a harder and harder time focusing on things were all there. Fushimi couldn’t help but be worried about Yata’s condition, and wondered if they shouldn’t be getting him out of there and back to the safety of the bar or the mediums’ home. Or better yet, exorcising the ghosts from him instead of caving to his idiotic soft-heartedness. Also remaining behind was Anna, which made Fushimi uneasy. She’d said she needed to stay and no one had bothered to argue. In fact, Reisi had even supported her decision by agreeing that the “atmosphere control” ghost in the picture frame would likely be overwhelming for her in her current state of emotional disarray.

Fushimi would have loved to stay in the office with everyone else, but, unfortunately, it wasn’t meant to be. Thus he found himself standing clustered together with the three boyfriends and Shiro, with Kuroh stood in front of them, his sword unsheathed and held ready, while Neko stood at his side, hands on her hips. The seven of them were all facing the door to the closet of calamity (as Fushimi was privately calling it), trying to brace themselves for what was about to happen. Fushimi was pretty sure that no amount of mental preparation could possibly be sufficient, but no one was asking him.

“Alright,” Shiro said all too soon. “Easy one first. Neko?”

Fushimi almost had to laugh. “Easy one” first? That was rich, coming from someone who wouldn’t even be doing anything with the artifact they’d all agreed to handle first. It didn’t seem so easy to Fushimi. Not that the others seemed any better.

With Shiro’s words, Neko hissed, then darted forward, yanking on the handle to the closet door. For all the violence she exhibited on the knob, she only opened the door a few inches, blinking a few times as she tried to see inside before darting a hand in and grabbing something, then backing away and abruptly shutting the door. There was a collective release of a breath that no one knew they’d been holding.

“Caught ’em off guard,” Mikoto rumbled. “Next time won’t be so smooth, I bet.”
“Indeed,” Reisi agreed grimly. It wasn’t a comforting thought.

“It’s alright, it’ll all work out,” Totsuka crooned. Fushimi resisted the urge to punch him.

Wait, Fushimi was considering punching people now? Yikes. When had Yata started to rub off on him?

Shaking his head to try and dislodge the alarming of thought of resembling Yata in any way, Fushimi stepped forward. His turn.

“Hurry up grumpy glasses!” Neko yowled. “This feels weird!”

Fushimi clicked his tongue—whether it was at the shiki’s impatience or at her nickname for him, he couldn’t say. He reached out his ability, wrapping it around the object hidden in the cup of Neko’s hands, and yanked. The ghost seemed eager to heed his pull, but just before the last bit of it left the object, the ghost suddenly snapped back inside.

“Oh right,” Reisi said. “I forgot that these objects have seals on them to keep the ghosts inside, which we will have to break to remove the ghosts. How silly of me.”

“You really couldn’t have mentioned that a bit sooner?” Fushimi groused. “Do your job properly, why don’t you.”

“I do apologize, Fushimi-kun,” Reisi replied, his tone not the least bit apologetic. “I have just been so taken with the effects of holding this pocketwatch, I’m afraid I was a little distracted.” So he said, but Fushimi was willing to bet that Reisi had wanted to see as much as he could with his newfound Sight, and had deliberately forgotten.

“Oh, found it!” Neko cried, and Fushimi started. He looked back at the shikigami to see that she had opened her hands to examine the object that had been contained within: the yo-yo. She held it up triumphantly, showing some miniscule characters etched into one of the plastic halves of the toy. As she hummed happily and danced in place a little, Kuroh’s sword flashed, just missing Neko’s fingers as it sliced at the yo-yo. Neko wasn’t the least bit startled by the action, and instead said, “Thanks, Kurosuke! Grumpy glasses, you should be able to do it now.”

This time, the ghost practically lunged out of its containment, exultant in its newfound freedom. There was just time to catch a grinning face before the ghost had left them.

“We’ll still want to take care of this afterwards,” Kuroh said, plucking the now-empty toy from Neko’s grasp. “The residue could still curse people on occasion, not to mention there’s the slight possibility, albeit improbable, that another ghost might get trapped inside.”

“Right,” Shiro nodded. “Now, next one?”

Fushimi took a deep breath as he nodded along with everyone else. If only all the artifacts could be handled so easily.

Once again, Neko approached the closet, more cautiously this time. She darted in and came out with an empty picture frame. The cork background wasn’t completely blank, however, as it was embellished with a lonely looking snowflake design done in gray.

As soon as the seal was located and broken, the temperature dropped and frost began to edge along the walls, floor, and ceiling. An icy wind blasted down the hallway, causing doors to bang open or shut and making everyone shiver violently and hunch over, huddling together for warmth. It was so cold, and Fushimi just knew that this was the end. This cold would be the death of them, there was
no point in even trying to live because death was inevitable so why even bother…

“I could really use a cup of hot cocoa right now,” Totsuka said. His voice wasn’t nearly as bright as usual, but there was still a certain liveliness to it that Fushimi couldn’t comprehend. How could anyone have life at a time like this, when they were all doomed? He turned his head sluggishly, barely even managing to summon up the energy to do that much. It took a great deal of effort to shift his gaze, but once he did he could see his companions’ eyes. They all looked dull and listless, just like how Fushimi felt, with only Totsuka’s eyes containing a slight spark. It was faint, but it was there. It hurt to look at it, and yet it fascinated Fushimi, and he stared, unable to look away.

“Yeah, hot cocoa is the perfect thing for cold weather like this,” Totsuka continued, and the spark brightened. For a moment, Fushimi could almost taste the rich creamy chocolate drink, and suddenly he wanted a mug of his own. And in that moment, he realized something: in the time since the wind had begun to blow, he’d forgotten how to want.

During his childhood, Fushimi had had many things taken away from him, and had taught himself not to develop attachments or to allow himself to want things. But he’d still known how to want. In fact, he’d spent many days wanting to be able to want things. If anything, it had made him feel want even more. So to have forgotten that…

With that realization, it was like a fog was cleared from his mind. They were doomed? Hardly. They had a plan, and they could handle this ghost. Feeling suddenly angry at being manipulated by a ghost, Fushimi turned and threw his power at the picture frame, yanking the ghost out in one swift tug.

When the ghost left the picture frame, the wind stopped, but the floor and walls instantly became solid ice. Their breaths condensed in front of them as they stood stock still aside from their shivering, staring down the ghost in front of them. The ghost returned their stares with a gaze that could only be described as icy, which seemed like a poor joke to Fushimi.

And then the tense silence was broken by the tinkling of bells. The ghost started, a look of outrage crossing its face before…

A sleigh drove right past them, the horse’s bells jingling merrily. Fushimi looked around, baffled, because the closet in the hallway in the office suite in the hospital was gone, and they were standing on a snowy hilltop, with flakes drifting gently down around them. From their vantage point, they could see children building a little snow hut, and there was a small family of snowpeople. On the hillside, a snowball fight was in progress, and some children were trudging up the hill with a sled in tow, clearly planning on taking advantage of the slope. It was like a paradise of snow-based activities, where one could play in the snow the way Fushimi never had as a child.

And in front of them, the ghost was looking around in wonderment, eyes almost teary. It looked like it was being overcome with nostalgia. The ghost flitted back and forth, reaching towards the snow hut, then veering towards the sledding, before taking a step towards the snowpeople, and then finally stooping as if to scoop up some snow, only to instead flop down back-first into the snow and begin dragging its arms up and down and its legs side to side, making a snow angel. The ghost then got to its feet and surveyed its work, smiling happily.

The bells jingled again even though the sleigh was long gone, and suddenly there was a cottage there, sitting as if it had always been on the hilltop. A woman came out, holding something steaming, and approached the front gate with a warm smile for the ghost. The ghost’s jaw dropped and it stood for a moment before rushing forward, snow flying behind the ghost as it was kicked up by the frantic footsteps. The ghost reached the gate and wrenched it open, a joyous expression on its face.
And suddenly the ghost was gone, as was the cottage, and the snowy hilltop. They were back in the dimly lit hallway with its flickering florescent lights, the closet in front of them as the ice and frost and the bad feeling that had permeated the suite all melted away, leaving nothing behind.

“Good job Neko,” Kuroh said, recovering first. Neko folded her arms proudly and hummed happily, bobbing a bit in celebration.

“Dare I even ask?” Fushimi muttered to the air, wondering what the hell just happened.

“Neko specializes in manipulating perception,” Shiro said, stepping forward to rub the top of Neko’s head fondly. The shikigami all but melted into the touch. “It’s like illusions, except illusions can’t effect how you interpret space, whereas what she does can. Also an illusion wouldn’t be able to hide one’s presence like she can.”

“It’s most impressive, isn’t it?” Reisi enthused. “Though I did note a few flaws in this instance. For starters, snow should be wet, and yet despite ‘standing’ in about three inches of ‘snow’, my shoes and feet remained dry, and the falling flakes left no dampness on my clothes.”

“Yeah, but who else is gonna notice that?” Mikoto asked wryly.

“It is the little details that can spoil the deception,” Reisi replied primly.

“You’re just a perfectionist,” Mikoto retorted.

“Though it is a bit of a bummer that we didn’t get a chance to join in on the fun,” Totsuka sighed. “I thought the little family of snowpeople could use a snow dog and a couple of snow cats, and maybe a snow rabbit. Or something more exotic, like a snow iguana.”

“Gentlemen, we still have four more artifacts to deal with,” Kuroh reproached, presumably trying to interrupt before they went into a discussion of what pets were the coolest or some such nonsense. Fushimi felt like applauding. Well done, Kuroh.

“Indeed,” Reisi agreed, easily transitioning from whimsical to business-like. “The mirror should be next, I think. Shiro, are you ready?”

“I’m not just here for my good looks,” Shiro replied. He was met with a disbelieving snort from Mikoto, but studiously ignored it. “Let’s go.”

For a third time, Neko stepped forward, and opened up the closet. However, the door had hardly cracked open when shards of glass came flying out, and Neko leapt back with a cry that vaguely resembled a meow. Fushimi flinched and raised an arm protectively- the natural thing to do when shards of vicious crystalline death are flying at one’s face- but with a blur of movement, Kuroh bathed the shards aside with the flat of his sword, even knocking a few back with enough force that they embedded themselves into the walls beside the closet door.

As the shards reconvened in a cloud like a stringless mobile of murder, the unattended closet door continued its journey outwards, swinging wide open. Neko sprang forward again, moving to grab the mirror and close the door, but before she could, the mug came flying out, the Matryoshka following close behind it. The Matryoshka was larger than Fushimi would have expected, being about the size of an ostrich egg, and the doll’s expression was a menacing snarl. As the mug veered down the hallway, the doll gave chase, clearly targeting the other artifact with the intent to absorb it. Before Kuroh could move to stop the escaped objects, the shards were on the move again, and he was forced to attend to the mirror rather than give chase to the escaped objects.

“Shiro, the doors!” Kuroh yelled.
“On it!” Shiro yelled back, and raced for the nearest door in the hallway, slamming it shut before fishing in his clothes to pull out a sheaf of fuda. His fingers flickered over them before selecting one and slapping it on the door with a muttered incantation.

“Someone get the mug and the Matryoshka!” Shiro called as he dashed towards the next door. “Don’t let them escape!”

There was the cracking of knuckles, and Mikoto strode forward, taking long, unhurried steps as he menaced his way towards the demented doll. Even though he was coming up behind it, it turned to face him, forgetting the other artifact it had been chasing. The two halves clacked against each other in a low drumroll, and then it lunged, trying to dodge past Mikoto, who calmly lifted a foot so that the raised sole of his boot blocked the doll’s path.

Free of its pursuer, the mug swooped through the hallway, not particularly trying to escape, but still a menace, as it seemed to be following the lead of the mirror shards and tried to dive bomb where Fushimi, Reisi, and Totsuka still stood in front of the closet, protected from the shards by Kuroh. As the mug approached, Fushimi’s feet were rooted to the spot, and he only just managed to duck. Totsuka followed, still filming, while Reisi sort of swayed so that the mug missed him before snatching the object out of the air. Immediately, he rose into the air and began to tilt sideways, rotating so that he would eventually end up upside down. Fushimi gaped, Totsuka “oo”-ed, while Reisi himself adopted a relaxed posture and calmly said “Oya, it seems we have lost control of the situation.”

If “we have lost control of the situation” was code for “my plan has gone to absolute shit,” then yeah, Fushimi agreed with that statement. He rose from his crouch shakily, looking around desperately for something to do. Not that he expected there to be anything he could do at this point. After all, what could he do- draw a ghost from elsewhere to the scene and make things even worse? Somehow, he didn’t think anyone would thank him for that.

“Grumpy glasses!” Neko cried, and Fushimi looked up just in time to see her dodge around Kuroh, using something in her hands to fend off the shards that tried to attack her. Without waiting for Fushimi to respond, she shoved something into his hands, and he stared down at it to see a cracked wooden mirror frame: the frame for the shards that the other shiki was currently fending off. As the mirror entered Fushimi’s grasp, the shards froze in mid-air and shivered, and then spread out so that, instead of clustering together and attacking by spraying outwards to hit as many targets as possible, they formed a cloud intent on attacking a single target. And it just so happened that that target was Fushimi.

Before Fushimi could demand to know why the hell this damn woman was trying to get him killed, Neko was shaking her wrists to jingle the bells there and yowling at him, “Do that pull-y thing and get him out so that Shiro can exorcise him!” Oh right. He was supposed to draw the ghosts out of the items they were inhabiting. He turned the mirror over in his hands, looking for the seal keeping the ghost inside, only to see it already broken by two gouges in the wood. Apparently Neko had thought to break the seal while using the mirror frame to protect herself from the shards. Clever.

A shard got past Kuroh, but stopped short, hovering mere inches from Fushimi’s face before withdrawing in a jerky motion like it was being pulled from something. Fushimi took a shaky breath, closing his eyes and trying to ignore the slapping sound of Shiro placing a fuda on another door and the grunting of Mikoto squaring off against the doll. He was definitely making an effort not to think about how that almost musical sound was being made by Kuroh deflecting the glass shards.

The ghost in the mirror was reluctant to leave, much like someone whose attention is rapt. It was
like when ghosts honed in on Yata, or the one time back in high school where he and Hirasaka had passed someone doing a demonstration of kunai throwing on their school trip. He’d very nearly left Hirasaka behind, because it had started to look like the only alternative was carrying her, and he wasn’t about that life. He’d persisted only because the last thing anyone on this Earth needed was for Hirasaka to learn to throw kunai. Like he had done with her back then, he imagined wrapping his arms around the ghost and hauling it backwards, away from whatever it was so intent on.

Fushimi felt his muscles strain as he pulled on the ghost, and he grit his teeth, before making a last hurrah and all but throwing the ghost away from the boundary he could somehow sense. With a feeling like a pop, the ghost came loose, and Fushimi opened his eyes just in time to see the shards all falling to the floor. A few fell pretty much right at his feet, and made him very glad he’d closed his eyes. He could function under pressure— a necessary survival skill during his upbringing— however that didn’t mean he enjoyed doing so. Besides, it was a lot easier to think about what he was doing when he didn’t have the thought of ‘Well this will be a shitty way to die’ running through his brain.

Less than a foot away from Fushimi, a ghost appeared. It surveyed the scene slowly, before turning and fixing its gaze on Fushimi, who felt his heart skip a beat in alarm. The ghost’s eyes were like something out of a comic; all glowy and bright electric blue. Its expression twisted in annoyance at the sight of him, and Fushimi got the feeling the ghost resented being pulled from the mirror. He very carefully stepped away from the glass shards on the hallway floor, edging closer to Totsuka and praying that nothing happened because he wasn’t sure which would be a worse way to go: stabbed to death by shards, or getting murdered by Mikoto and possibly Reisi as well for using their boyfriend as a human shield to avoid the aforementioned death by shards.

“Shiro, over here!” Neko suddenly yowled, and Shiro slapped out one last fuda before turning in their direction.

“Oh, ready for exorcism?” he asked, as if mediums fighting dolls and psychics floating upside-down and irate ghosts trying to make the term “death glare” literal were all everyday occurrences for him. Then again, maybe they were. It wasn’t like Fushimi knew what an onmyouji’s lifestyle was like. “Be right there,” Shiro called, before muttering his incantation to the door he was sealing. “Neko, think you can hide the ones I haven’t sealed yet?” he requested as he danced around Mikoto’s fight with the Matryoshka.

“They won’t get past my killer moves,” Neko promised, grasping a bicep with the opposite hand and flexing. Fushimi wasn’t sure if she was trying to show off somehow or if it was supposed to be a preparatory motion.

“Thanks,” Shiro said, smiling. “Now,” he continued, his smile fading into a look of determination, “let’s take care of some ghosts.”
Mikoto gets to Fight

Chapter Notes

Sorry this chapter took a little longer than usual. It turns out that going on fic-reading binges for other fandoms is NOT conducive to writing. Strange that.

The ghost that had been inside the shattered mirror did not look impressed as Shiro approached. Then again, as far as Fushimi could tell, there wasn’t much reason to be impressed by Shiro, at least not at first glance. He was the kind of skinny that made it seem like his athleticism would be limited to running; or rather, running away. Even in Fushimi’s sixth sense, Shiro wasn’t all that noticeable a presence, at least not with the blaze of Mikoto and the dark clouds of Kuroh and the ball of yarn that was Neko. Even Reisi shone brighter, if not stronger, than Shiro.

And yet Fushimi had to admit that there was a sort of quiet strength to Shiro’s aura, like a soft breeze that could build up to a gale if the right conditions were met. Fushimi wondered if the ghost in front of him would meet that condition or not.

“Hi there,” Shiro greeted the ghost. The ghost’s expression twitched in a way that made Fushimi sure it had rolled its eyes, even though the eyes were just a couple of glowing orbs so there was no way to see the eye roll.

“I’m going to exorcise you now, hope that’s not a problem,” Shiro continued, rolling up his sleeves. “Please cooperate, because I’d rather not use any more aggressive techniques.”

The ghost turned around, apparently deciding Shiro wasn’t worth its time. Down the hall, Kuroh had joined Mikoto in the fight against the Matryoshka, and Neko was trying in vain to turn Reisi upright again. Next to Fushimi, Totsuka was doing his best to film everything despite the fact that there were three different ghosts causing problems at the moment.

As the ghost turned its back, Shiro took a balanced stance and began to chant. The ghost froze in place, turning back to glare at Shiro, who serenely continued rattling off syllables that made no sense to Fushimi. As the chant finished, Shiro made a gesture at the ghost, and it jerked sideways before catching itself.

“Was that supposed to happen?” Fushimi couldn’t help drawling as the ghost turned and glared at them.

“No,” Shiro admitted. “But that was a fairly low-level exorcism, and it rarely works for me. I guess that’s what I get for letting grandfather handle all the exorcisms while he was still alive.” Shiro laughed in a self-deprecating way. “I guess I’ll try something a bit stronger.”

Once again, Shiro began chanting, and as the chant continued, the ghost began to be dragged backwards, flickering dimly as it went. This time, when Shiro finished his chant and gestured at the ghost, the ghost’s mouth made an “O” before it vanished.

“There,” Shiro said, clapping his hands across each other. “Much better. Though now I’m gonna hafta listen to Kuroh scolding me for not doing it right the first time.” Shiro grimaced.
“Well from my point of view as an observer without Sight, it’s more interesting if you don’t get it right away,” Totsuka informed Shiro. “Especially when the ghosts get angry and do things that I can get on camera, though that wasn’t the case this time.”

“I’m sure you’ll get plenty of good footage today even without me messing up,” Shiro said. “But either way, Kuro would still nag, since he’s a perfectionist.”

“That must be rough,” Totsuka replied.

“It can be, but I still love my wife anyways,” Shiro replied, hugging himself and smiling an impishly sappy smile. He then looked over at Fushimi and added, “And no, he’s not actually my wife. Shikigami aren’t earthly beings and they are bound by contracts so it wouldn’t be right to get intimately involved with them. I just like to tease Kuro that he’s like my wife since it makes him really embarrassed.”

There was a biting retort at the tip of Fushimi’s tongue, but it went no farther as he thought of the way Yata reacted when embarrassed and how appealing it was. He understood where Shiro was coming from, more than he cared to admit. Thankfully, Shiro didn’t notice his hesitation, because at that moment, Reisi was suddenly thrown against the wall, causing him to release the mug, and the Matryoshka made a mad dive for the newly freed mug.

“Oh dear,” Totsuka commented. Kuroh’s sword flashed, causing the doll to roll aside, while Neko jumped to clap her hands around the mug much like a child catching a firefly. Instead of keeping her airborne as it had Reisi, the mug instead seemed intent on causing other mayhem as the few doors that remained unsealed began to swing back and forth on their hinges.

“Oh dear,” Totsuka commented. Kuroh’s sword flashed, causing the doll to roll aside, while Neko jumped to clap her hands around the mug much like a child catching a firefly. Instead of keeping her airborne as it had Reisi, the mug instead seemed intent on causing other mayhem as the few doors that remained unsealed began to swing back and forth on their hinges.

“Oops,” Shiro said, already moving into action to seal the remaining doors. It was a task that would have been easier said than done, as the first door he went to almost slammed shut on his fingers, and at another door some objects from inside the room had to be shoved back inside after the mug’s telekinesis tried to bring them into the hall for use as projectiles.

While Shiro sealed the remaining doors, the rampaging Matryoshka seemed to amp up its efforts to fight Mikoto and Kuroh and get to the out-of-control mug. Where it had initially seemed cowed by Mikoto, it was now savagely attacking the medium and the shikigami who stood in its way, butting against them with enough force to leave instant bruises, and opening its two halves to try and snap them shut as if biting, much like a certain yellow character from a video game commonly seen at arcades. Throughout it all, Totsuka happily filmed away.

Fushimi wasn’t sure what he should do at this point. He could flee to safety- a very appealing option to be sure, but one he wasn’t sure was viable after the way Shiro had slapped fuda on all the doors- or he could try and lend a hand despite the fact that he wasn’t sure how he possibly could. Besides, who needed his help more?

Neko was shaking her head rapidly, jingling her bells and creating a sort of rainbow mist around the mug. Fushimi could only assume she was changing the perception of the ghost in the mug to try and confuse its power and minimize the damage it did. Meanwhile, Kuroh swung his sword at the doll, only for the doll to dodge the sword and snap down on Kuroh’s left wrist, severing it. Kuroh yelled, lunging backwards as his left hand blurred and was sucked into the Matryoshka’s maw after the wrist that had attached it to the shiki. The doll increased in size, growing until it was as large as a cat. It followed after Kuroh, snapping its two halves hungrily, and Kuroh continued to retreat, stumbling. The Matryoshka leapt, ready to prey on the shikigami, and Fushimi reacted instinctively, tugging at the ghost with his power.

As soon as he reached out, Fushimi remembered Reisi’s caution that the ghost inside the doll
would only become more dangerous if released from its shell, as it would still be able to control the artifact that had trapped it as well as attack with its spectral body, and as such would be able to mount a multi-pronged attack. Yet even as Fushimi panicked, the seal keeping the ghost inside the doll did its job, and so rather than separating the ghost from the object, Fushimi’s thoughtless attempt to help succeeded, yanking the ghost and the doll containing it off course.

Before the doll could recover, Mikoto tackled it, pinning it down even as it writhed in his arms.

“Oi Shiro, put this thing to sleep, will ya?” Mikoto growled as the Matryoshka spasmed violently and flipped him over. Mikoto managed to continue the rolling motion so he was on top of the doll again, but it was clear he wouldn’t be able to hold on long.

“Already on it,” Shiro said, once again flitting through his sheaf of fuda to produce a blue-colored charm. He held it up in front of him with one hand while crossing it with the first two fingers of his free hand, murmuring an incantation. With a cry of “ha!” and a flick of his wrist that looked like something out of an anime, he flung the fuda at the Matryoshka, and the charm adhered itself to the doll, sealing the two halves. The doll gave a final shudder, before falling still.

“That should hold it until we can get it to Alphabet Squad,” Shiro panted, sounding as if he’d just run a marathon. Fushimi wondered if it was a result of his scurrying to shut the doors or if it was a by-product of the seal he had just used that left Shiro so breathless. Shiro turned to his fallen shiki, who was picking himself off the ground. “Are you alright, Kuro?”

“Yes, I apologize for the inconvenience,” Kuroh said. “My hand should grow back within an hour, but I shall have to practice more after this. It seems I am still inexperienced.”

“No need to be so hard on yourself, Kuro, that one was a nasty,” Shiro replied with a doting smile, stepping over to Mikoto and offering a hand as the medium got to his feet, careful not to jar the doll in his arms too much.

“Still, if it weren’t for Fushimi-san, that could have ended much worse,” Kuroh said stiffly. He executed a military turn and bowed to Fushimi. “To that end, I am grateful. My sincerest thanks, Fushimi Saruhiko.”

Fushimi flinched at the use of his full name.

“We’re not done yet,” Fushimi grumbled back, feeling uncomfortable with the show of gratitude. He didn’t like people thanking him. They were rarely sincere. They would use each other shamelessly, and act like some variant of a single phrase could make up for their selfishness. They weren’t actually grateful, they just didn’t want to feel guilty about inconveniencing others.

Except no one had asked him to try and help with the rampaging doll. He’d acted on his own, so it wasn’t like Kuroh had any reason to feel guilty for Fushimi’s intervention. Still, getting thanked was awkward. After all, it had been a thoughtless action that, had circumstances been even slightly different, could have been disastrous.

“Yeah, I suppose it’s a bit too soon to be catching our breath,” Shiro agreed ruefully, glancing over at Neko and the mug. “Munakata-san, got any suggestions?”

“At this point, the best course of action would be to break the seal and draw the ghost out like we’ve done for most of the other artifacts,” Reisi replied, pushing his glasses up his face with his middle finger. “We can reach a peaceful resolution with it should we calm it down, but to do that, we need it out in the open.”
“Mkay,” Mikoto said, and, handing the Matryoshka over to Shiro, he bent briefly to sweep up one of the shards from the shattered mirror and then advanced on Neko and the mug. Before anyone could react he snatched the mug from the shiki and slashed the bottom of it with the glass shard. Fushimi felt his ability kick in before he even tried to utilize it, and the ghost seemed to melt from the damaged porcelain.

“It’s going to attack, Mikoto,” Reisi warned. “Don’t fight back, just defend.”

“Yeah yeah,” Mikoto grumbled, sidestepping as the ghost wasted no time in attacking and aimed a double-fisted blow at him.

As Mikoto took well-timed steps to avoid the next blow, and the next, it looked almost like a dance of sorts. Mikoto did his best to subtly control the ghost’s movements, stepping to the right whenever he could so that the two mostly rotated in a counter-clockwise circle. The ghost, as it attacked, was wild-eyed, its chest heaving up in down in a remembrance of panicked breathlessness. There were even a few tears in the corners of its eyes.

Come to think of it, there had been a lot of tears shed in this office suite that day. Or at least, it felt like a lot to Fushimi, whose general reaction to crying was to turn around and let it be someone else’s problem. He was no good with tears. After all, he’d learned at a young age that crying not only failed to solve anything, it tended to make things even worse.

Finally the ghost stopped attacking, bending forward to brace spectral hands on nonexistent knees in a pantomime of trying to catch its breath. Mikoto stood by and watched for a moment, his eyes glinting golden before he reached forward and laid a gentle hand on the ghost’s shoulder. The ghost flinched, and Mikoto removed the hand as the ghost backed away, clutching itself for comfort.

“’M not gonna hurt ya,” Mikoto rumbled, his voice so low the words were barely distinguishable. “No one here wants to do that.”

The ghost cowered, and Mikoto sighed and took a step back, giving the ghost more space despite the fact that it had already backed up three steps or so. He sat down, legs stretched in front of him and arms braced behind him, turning his head upwards to stretch his neck a little.

“’Sides, I’ve got better things to be doing than punchin’ up ghosties,” Mikoto added. “Like napping. Naps ‘r good. Or there’s other things too.” He sat up a bit straighter, freeing his hands to hold in front of him, tapping off fingers as he made a list. “Like spending time with my boyfriends, or teasing my baby brother, or painting, or gaming, or working out… Lotsa stuff to do, so I ain’t got time for hurtin’ ya.”

The ghost stared at Mikoto, completely nonplussed, and Fushimi found himself doing the same, because, painting? Mikoto? Seriously? The world was certainly a weird place.

“So yeah,” Mikoto continued. “It’s all good. And y’know what else? If you want someone to help ya out with somethin’ that can be arranged. My friend over there’s an onmyouji, the kind that doesn’t hurt ghosts, and we’ve got some other friends who can also help you with any requests you might have and-”

Mikoto stopped talking as the ghost suddenly vanished.

“Oya, how unexpected,” Reisi said, fingering the pocketwatch that was allowing him to see ghosts. “For you to talk to a ghost to the point of it moving on so it doesn’t have to listen anymore is unprecedented.” Mikoto scowled at him before climbing to his feet and dusting off his hands.
“Shut up,” he grumbled. “It was ready to move on, and so it did. Anyway, that’s that done, right?”

“Not quite,” Totsuka said. “There’s still one more, remember? A thermometer, I think it was.”

“Yup, it’s still in there,” Neko said, pirouetting for no reason and pointing at the closet as she landed her turn.

“Oh right,” Mikoto huffed.

“How are we dealing with that one?” Fushimi asked. “I seem to recall we’ll all be violently ill if it is released from the artifact.”

“Seal it and take it to Alphabet Squad?” Shiro said, but it came out like a question addressed to Reisi.

“Yes,” Reisi nodded. “There’s nothing else we can do, really.”

Once again, the closet door was opened, but this time it was left ajar as Neko went in and brought out the thermometer, holding it on her two upraised palms in a way that might have appeared reverent were it not for the shiki’s tension or the way her hair was rising around her in a static-induced cloud again. Shiro quickly selected one of his fuda and muttered his incantation, then carefully laid the edge of the fuda along the length of the thermometer, attaching it almost like the fuda was a banner and the thermometer a pole to hang it from.

“Finally,” Mikoto huffed, his voice less irritated than it was weary. “Let’s head back to the others. I’m tired.”

Everyone nodded in agreement, and Totsuka ended his recording.

Their movements were noticeably stiffer as they trekked the short distance to the office at the end of the hall. Fushimi couldn’t speak for the others, but he knew he certainly felt achy and tense from using his ability so much, as if he’d spent an entire day in PE class. He idly wondered if it would be unethical to look and see if there were any artifacts on record that could function similarly to a hot water bottle, because he could really use something to warm his aching joints. He felt at least twice his age, and it wasn’t pleasant.

Shiro had to mutter something at the door and peel off the fuda he’d placed on it before they could enter. Once inside, he waited until everyone was past him and then shut the door so that he could collapse dramatically against it. Half of Fushimi wanted to say something scathing about it, but the other half of him thought that sinking to the floor sounded like a good idea right about then. He opted for the latter option, albeit in a more dignified manner- or as dignified as he could get when his mobility was approximately the same as that of a seventy year old grandpa with bad hips, a knee replacement, and several old injuries that are all capable of predicting the rain- and limped over to where Hirasaka was seated on the floor and eased himself down beside her. Awashima and Kusanagi were seated on a couch not too far away, while Reisi took the chair behind the desk and Totsuka seated himself in a small arm chair nearby, and Mikoto went to join Yata and Anna where they were still seated on the floor.

“How’s he doing?” Mikoto grunted, nodding at Yata. Despite the fact that the question seemed to be directed at Anna, Yata answered for himself.

“My head feels like it’s splitting in half, I feel like I’m floating, and despite Anna’s help Awashima says I’m definitely runnin’ a fever,” he sulked, his eyes sharpening long enough to glare at Mikoto.

“That’s whatcha get for bein’ a softie,” Mikoto retorted.
Fushimi couldn’t help himself.

“And you sitting around and making a list of things you’d rather do than hurt a ghost isn’t soft?” he butted in, his voice low but just loud enough to carry. He couldn’t repress the smirk that bloomed when he heard the suppressed laughter of the room’s other occupants.

“At least I wasn’t getting hurt doing that,” Mikoto protested.

“Nah, he’s right, Mikotan,” Totsuka said, his attention on his camera as he fiddled with it. “You’re just as soft as Yata-chan. You just like to put on a gruff front to hide it. At least Yata-chan’s honest about it.”

“Well you’re not getting any tonight,” Mikoto said sourly.

“Au contraire, mon cher,” Totsuka said with a flourish of one hand. “Mucchan is my boyfriend too, in case you’ve forgotten.”

“Totsuka, have you been reading foreign language phrase books again?” Kusanagi asked.

“Alright, that’s it,” Hirasaka said, and for a second Fushimi thought she’d decided she’d had enough of this shadowing business and would leave. The thought both pleased him and left him strangely nervous. “Would one of you guys please hurry up and tell us how things are going? Like, are you done yet? Were the ghosts too strong to handle? C’mon, gimme some deets already.”

“Yes, it would be nice if you could fill us in,” Awashima agreed, and Kusanagi nodded along.

“Oh right,” Shiro sighed. “Sorry. Um, well, we took care of the first two no problem, but then the next three kinda got out of hand- but don’t worry! It’s all fine now. And then the last one we just finished with.”

“Nicely done,” Awashima said. “Six exorcisms in a quarter of an hour, not bad.”

“Not quite,” Reisi said. “Two of the artifacts were merely sealed until we can take them to Alphabet Squad for disposal.”

“Alphabet Squad?” Hirasaka asked, arching an eyebrow. She looked at Fushimi, who shrugged.

“They’re ah, a group we know,” Kusanagi explained. “Part of our network, but, well, they’re… hm, how shall I put this… Their work is a mix of con artistry, pyromania, and a little bit of psychic talent, how about that. They run a shop that does fortunes and horoscopes and sells incense and candles, but more importantly, they know how to use cleansing fires which severely weaken ghosts, making them easier to exorcise. We mostly go to them when there’s a stubborn ghost that won’t leave an object tie. They burn the tie, and the ghost moves on.”

“They also hit on anything that moves, so be aware of that,” Awashima added acerbically.

“That’s mostly Chitose and Bandou,” Kusanagi said.

“So why’re they called Alphabet Squad?” Fushimi asked.

“That’s because they realized that their names sorta follow the Roman alphabet,” Kusanagi explained. “It’s a bit weird, since the one guy’s got a foreign name so they got it to work by using his given name rather than his surname, but they liked the name so that’s what they called their shop. That, and almost all their other ideas involved the word ‘flame’ and they didn’t wanna sound ‘gay’ in case it affected their customer base at all.”
“Sounds like a bunch of idiots,” Fushimi commented.


“So that’s it for the dangerous objects, then, hm?” Awashima asked, changing the subject.

“Yeah, now we just need to look over the rest of the stuff here to see if there’s anything else to take to Alphabet Squad and then I’ll probably ask Kukuri-chan or Sumika-chan to come hold a rite to take care of the rest,” Shiro replied. “Though I suppose we should also look to see if we can find out what happened to Mizuchi-san after he died. I’m willing to bet he’s become a dangerous ghost.”

“Well, according to his desk, his death was caused by one of the artifacts you guys are dealing with,” Hirasaka said casually. “The yo-yo. He originally thought it was another flop, but when he was cataloging it the ghost inside placed a death curse on him. I can’t say for certain, since ghost stuff is more your area of expertise than mine, but I think the desk may have become his tie, because I feel a lot of bitterness in recent history, until the bitterness is suddenly cut off.”

“If you’re right, then something happened to his ghost,” Shiro sighed. “Except with everything in this office, there’s practically no way of knowing. I could try one of my divinations, but… I doubt it’ll work with all the residue in here, and if we clear the residue out, we’ll also clear anything I could read. I suppose I’ll have to ask Uncle Miwa to ask someone from the other side at some point. Or maybe Crystal-san would know.”

“Well, anyways, let’s finish up here and go home already,” Mikoto said, straightening up. “If Mizuchi was here then I don’t like this place, even if that bad feeling is gone.”

“Don’t you mean was gone?” Kusanagi asked. “Because I was feeling fine for a while there, but I’m starting to get woozy again.”

“Come to think of it, he’s right,” Totsuka agreed. “Though it’s kinda worse this time, don’t you think? Like I might actually be sick if this keeps up.”

“Yeah, it’s almost as if…” Reisi said, frowning. He trailed off, and then his eyes went wide and began to dart around the room. They landed on one spot, and he cried “Yata-kun, what are you doing?!” right as Yata pulled off the fuda that had been used to seal the thermometer.
Warning: This chapter includes a tense dramatic situation much like one might see in a medical drama. If this is a trigger for you, please read with caution. Also, there are some possible inaccuracies in said tense dramatic situation, so please forgive me if you catch any.

As soon as Reisi drew attention to the problem at hand, all eyes were on Yata, and yet no one seemed able to move. Probably because of the wave of nausea that hit as the fuda was released. Even Shiro’s shikigami were incapacitated, and the onmyouji himself had barely lifted a hand to reach for his fuda sheaf before he was doubled over in discomfort.

Somehow, Fushimi was willing to bet that whatever ghost was inside the object was very much not happy.

“Shh, Chiyo-chan, it’s okay,” Yata crooned, and there was something about his voice that was both alien and familiar. “It’s me, Eri.”

“Oh dear, he’s at it again,” Kusanagi moaned, though it was hard to tell if he was that exasperated with Yata or if he was just feeling that ill thanks to the newly released ghost. “I swear, one of these days you kids are gonna give me an ulcer or twenty.”

“Nah, that’ll be the cigarettes and alcohol,” Mikoto grit out.

“Since when did you get a medical degree, doctor?” Kusanagi shot back in a hiss.

“No, Chiyo-chan, really,” Yata continued, seemingly oblivious to the conversation around him. “This guy was kind enough to lend me his body for a bit.” He paused as if listening, and then said, “Say that again? You kinda faded out… Oh, I mean that since I have no body of my own anymore, I needed to borrow one to talk to you dear. We died, remember?”

The nausea spiked, and Fushimi retched, though thankfully nothing came up. He wasn’t the only one. When he glanced around the room, he saw that every single face was either abnormally pale or flushed with fever, and many had closed eyes and were taking careful deep breaths.

“Oh sweetie, it wasn’t your fault. We got run off the road. There wasn’t anything else you could have done, babe. There’s no need to feel guilty or anything. But Chiyo, please, stop trying to hurt everyone. It’s not their fault, either. Besides, aren’t you tired? I am. Let’s move on together, please. Maybe in our next life, we’ll live somewhere that we can actually get married. Please?”

The strangely familiar tone of Yata’s voice finally registered in Fushimi’s brain. Anna. It almost sounded like Yata was using her persuasion ability. But no, that couldn’t be-

Wait. Yata seemed to be having a conversation with the ghost. And while Fushimi had originally assumed that was because of the ghosts possessing him, what if it wasn’t? On a whim, Fushimi closed his eyes and spread out his sixth sense, and almost gasped aloud at what he sensed. Scattered around the room were the various psychics, the two shiki, Shiro, and Mikoto, but there,
in the center, Anna’s gentle candle was flickering lowly as it bled into Yata’s sunlight, which in turn was a pale imitation of its usual self, like a weak winter sun hidden behind a fog of ghosts that were as thick as snow-burdened clouds.

Fushimi’s eyes opened back up as he began to shake. He hoped everyone would chalk it up to being racked by augue, but quite honestly, he was scared at what that might happen to the redhead.

“Kuroh, you can break the seal now,” Yata said, holding the thermometer out, his thumb and forefinger balanced on either end. “Chiyo’s ready to go.”

Kuroh tentatively stepped forward and unsheathed his sword, carefully running the tip of the blade along the length of the thermometer beneath Yata’s fingers. A green mist rose above the object, and at the same time an ember of light left Yata and joined the mist, and together they vanished. So did all symptoms of illness, and yet Fushimi still felt sick, just not physically.

Mikoto walked over to Yata and knelt in front of him.

“Anyone else in there wanna do anything foolish?” he asked, his mouth twisting in a wry smile. Yata just stared at him glassily before slumping against him. “Right, I’ll take care of this, so you guys get started on sorting everything else. Anna, you still got enough in you to help out?”

“I would only run out of Sight if I was about to die from energy deficiency,” Anna replied. “And that should be all that’s needed at this point, right?”

“Yeah,” Shiro said, stretching. “Thank fuck for that.”


“So Yata has most of your energy now?” Fushimi asked Anna.

The girl nodded.

“The ghosts are taking too much out of him, so he needed some,” Anna said. “I suppose you noticed him using my persuasion?” Fushimi nodded, and Anna smiled at him, looking proud. “It’s a bit of a side-effect when I help him out, since we’re both good at syncing with others and he’s so receptive to spiritual influences flowing through him. We could probably control it with practice, but we try to avoid situations where he ends up needing my energy.”

“Still, it seems like it was useful this time,” Fushimi mused.

“Yes, though only because he was able to channel a ghost who the other ghost was willing to listen to in the first place,” Anna said. “He’s burning through my energy pretty fast as well, even with about half the ghosts gone already. And even if he weren’t, well, it’s not really his ability and he hasn’t been through the things I have that made me stronger, so he still would struggle more than I would.”

“I see,” Fushimi said. He got to his feet, then added, “Anyway, we need to go collect everything with residue, right? I’ll get started on that.”

He headed for the door which Shiro was still in front of, and waited as the onmyouji moved out of the way, then headed out into the hall. Shiro followed after him, and began removing the fuda from the doors so that the offices beyond could be accessed.

It took Fushimi, Anna, Shiro, Neko, and the pocketwatch-aided Reisi about twenty minutes to collect all the items with residue in the main office, where Kuroh waited with his sword to cut the
seals on them. Once unsealed, the objects were sorted; most were put in a pile to await the rite from Shiro’s acquaintances the following day, but a few items were placed with the Matryoshka, to be taken for ritual burning. Fushimi was asked to pull ghosts from a few objects, but mostly he was able to rest once all the artifacts had been collected, which was a relief. He felt like he could have a team of professional masseurs work his aching muscles for an entire day and there would still be knots causing him aches even after they were done.

About fifteen minutes later, they were done for the day. Shiro and his shiki took charge of the items that were being taken to Alphabet Squad, and Fushimi couldn’t help but be glad that he wasn’t about to be dragged off to meet the supposed pyromaniac, semi-psychic, sort-of con-men. Yata had to be pulled to his feet, and when his legs almost failed him, Mikoto slung the shorter man over his shoulder. Yata didn’t even react to the treatment, and Fushimi couldn’t help but be worried, since he felt certain that Yata was the sort of person who would typically respond to being carried with much kicking and screaming.

Once they’d exited the building, Kusanagi paused and then said, “Seri-chan, can I ask you to come back to the bar with us, just in case?” Awashima nodded, but Kusanagi continued as if he needed to sweeten the deal. “I’ll provide coffee. Or tea. Or alcohol, but you only get one drink free because I’m not made of money. And maybe some light sandwiches since it’s just past lunch time. Oh, and that offer applies to everyone.”

“We’ll be by once all this if taken care of,” Shiro promised, shrugging the small load of artifacts in his arms that looked like the spoils of a jumble sale. Kusanagi nodded in response, and Shiro and his shikigami headed off to complete their task.

“‘Course we’ll be there,” Mikoto snorted.

“If Awashima’s going, I might as well,” Hirasaka said, smirking at Fushimi as if she knew she was forcing his hand. He rolled his eyes, and then noticed that Kusanagi had now turned towards him and raised an eyebrow as if waiting for an answer.

“Well we need to get ready to open, don’t we?” Fushimi asked. After all, Kusanagi had just pointed out that he couldn’t afford too many losses.

“No, not today,” Kusanagi said. “We just had a long morning, not to mention the day’s not over yet.” He nodded towards Yata. “But it would be good to debrief a little.”

Fushimi hesitated. He could go home. Right here, right now. There was nothing more that Homra needed of him today. But he didn’t want to. He was used to spending his afternoons at the bar, he supposed, and also Hirasaka was going and heaven knew she needed to be kept in check. And he was getting really worried about Yata. He didn’t even need to close his eyes at this point to feel how much Mikoto’s spirit had diminished, too busy being fed into Yata’s cooling warmth. It was less a warmth now and more a tepidity, and Fushimi didn’t like it. It just felt so wrong, somehow, and it scared him, because what would happen if any more heat was lost? Heat was life, and chill was ghosts, and Yata felt precariously close to becoming a ghost.

“Yeah, debriefing will be good,” Fushimi found himself saying, even though he didn’t see what there was to debrief on, and frankly he didn’t give a shit at this point, he just wanted to be present for whatever happened next because he was certain he wouldn’t like hearing about it secondhand. Not that seeing it himself would be much better.

“Great,” Kusanagi said, and he looked… relieved? Was there something Fushimi didn’t know about and should? It was almost enough to make him rescind his decision, but no, he’d said he’d go so he would. And if there was some nasty surprise in store for him at the bar, he would make
everyone suffer his wrath. “See you in a bit then,” Kusanagi said, and he and the usual Homra crew left for his van. Fushimi’s eyes couldn’t help but follow them.

“Since we’re all going to the same place,” Hirasaka said, jolting Fushimi out of his mini reverie, “why don’t you be a gentlemen and give us ladies a ride?”

“Ladies?” Fushimi asked back immediately, thankful that retorts were a reflex of his. “I only see your roommate. Is there another lady around here somewhere?”

Awashima couldn’t quite stifle her laugh at that, and Hirasaka rolled her eyes and playfully pushed Fushimi just enough that he had to take a step away from her to balance himself.

“I might stop by my place to get my laptop,” Fushimi warned on a whim. But if he was going to Homra for the afternoon, he might as well do something useful and look over that data he’d copied from Mizuchi’s computer.

“Just as long as we don’t have to go inside with you,” Hirasaka replied. “I, for one, would prefer not to see your crusty unwashed underwear lying around in inopportune places if that’s alright.”

“If you really think I’m that much of a slob, you are henceforth forbidden from ever referring to me as ‘fussy’ again,” Fushimi drawled back. Though in all honesty, he knew Hirasaka was just joking. Probably. She knew fully well that he considered his dwelling to be his own personal space, and found any visitors to be extremely intrusive.

He led the way to his car, and he and the two women piled in. As he drove, he couldn’t help asking, “So how did you two end up as roommates? It’s not like Hirasaka has a social life to meet new people or anything.”

Fushimi could feel Hirasaka’s bland glare on him, but he ignored it as Awashima replied, “Oh that story.” She chuckled lightly then explained. “As I mentioned before, I am a fan of history. Given that, it might not come as a surprise to hear that I frequented the cafe where Hirasaka worked previously, due to the historic aspects of some of their cosplays. I suspected Hirasaka was some kind of psychic based on her past life, and so I broached the topic and confirmed it. It just so happened that the end of my EMT training and start of my actual work coincided with the closing of the cafe and the opening of Hirasaka’s new office, and since we were both looking for new accommodations due to said circumstances, we decided to room together. I knew I could trust her because seeing past lives helps me to determine a person’s character, and she knew she could trust me because she used her own ability to run a background check on me.”

“You can tell that much by seeing a person’s past life?” Fushimi asked.

“It’s not an exact science, of course,” Awashima said. “But generally speaking, people resemble their past lives in some way, and psychics almost always have rather… unique, shall we say, past lives. They always stand out somehow. Hirasaka was a ninja, and while I have seen other ninjas, none of them are quite so evasive as her past life is. Her case isn’t something I can explain all that well, I’m afraid, but it stood out to me. Another example would be the trio of mediums at Homra: all of them were spiritualists of some sort in their past lives. You as well. And Shiro was almost exactly the same in his past life as he is now, same shikigami and everything. As for trustworthiness, people who were kind in a past life are often the same in their current life, and people who were cruel are often the same as well. It’s easy for me to tell what kind of person a past life was, so I can usually guess how trustworthy they are based on that.”

“I’m beginning to think your ability is a lot more menacing than I originally assumed,” Fushimi mused.
“Thank you,” Awashima said, sounding pleased.

“So what brought on the sudden curiosity about our living situation?” Hirasaka asked.

“What was that someone said to me the other day?” Fushimi asked in mock thought. “Something about wanting to make sure tolerable people don’t get killed from spending too much time in close proximity to axe murderers?”

“Aw, you do care,” Hirasaka deadpanned, and Fushimi almost ran a red light as he realized that it was true. Hirasaka was meddlesome and nosy and sometimes an outright pain, but she was his oldest acquaintance, and maybe even a friend. He shuddered at the thought. It may have been possible that he was actually friends with Hirasaka, but that didn’t mean he had to like it.

After they stopped by Fushimi’s apartment, the rest of the drive was silent. When they entered the bar, they found the usual music playing and Totsuka, Kusanagi, and Reisi keeping up a light chatter, but the air was still tense, like everyone was waiting for the other shoe to drop. On the couch where Mikoto usually napped, the three mediums were sitting together, Yata sandwiched between the other two with his head leaning back and eyes closed. Anna was watching him intently, and when wisps rose up from Yata like steam, she broke through the false cheer with a statement of “Nine.”

It took Fushimi a moment to process what that meant, but he realized it must be the amount of ghosts left in Yata. He felt a surge of hope, and found himself pausing as he set up his laptop to watch for more ghosts rising from the redhead. Sadly, in the few seconds he allowed himself to stare, none left. With a sigh, Fushimi continued transforming his commandeered booth into a workspace.

Hirasaka was perhaps a better human being than Fushimi gave her credit for, as she got him a cup of coffee from the pot Kusanagi had apparently made, and even reheated it since it had cooled a bit. It was exactly what he needed as he started with reading over Mizuchi’s essays on psychic theory. He read for a half hour or so, finding a lot of hemming and hawing and vague sentences that implied expertise but made it clear that the guy really had no idea what he was talking about. It irritated Fushimi, to know that Anna and several other children had suffered- and even died- at the hands of someone who was completely guessing at what he was doing.

Fed up with the bullshit pseudoscience papers, Fushimi was contemplating looking at the other files when Shiro breezed in.

“Everything taken care of?” Kusanagi asked.

“Yup, all good,” Shiro replied. “The guys say ‘hi’ and all that, but more importantly, Anna, Mizuchi is definitely gone from this world. I exorcised him myself just twenty minutes ago.”

“Oya, do tell,” Reisi said, swiveling on his stool and leaning towards Shiro.

“The Matryoshka,” Shiro said. “When it was burned, it split up into its component parts. There were six ghosts total, and one was Mizuchi-sensei. He was very indignant about being killed by one of his creations and consumed by another, at least as far as I could tell. I didn’t exactly ask Kuro or Neko to tell me what he was saying, I was a bit busy trying to send on the original ghost since it was still hostile, and then I bid our old enemy ‘good riddance’. I don’t think I’ve ever felt so vindicated while performing an exorcism before.”

“Serves him right,” Mikoto grunted.
“I’m just glad we undid the damage he left behind,” Anna said, frowning slightly. It seemed she didn’t quite agree with Mikoto’s sentiments. “And that he can’t hurt anyone else. Oh, three.”

“Let’s just hope his ideas died with him,” Kusanagi cautioned, ever the pessimist.

“Agreed,” Awashima said, nodding.

“Considering most of his ideas were absolute nonsense, I don’t think you need to be too worried,” Fushimi said with a disgusted snort. He looked over the other folder headings for Mizuchi’s files. He didn’t see any point in looking over the experiment records any further, so he he opened up the “subject data” folder. He didn’t really expect to find anything interesting or useful there, but he supposed he ought to at least look.

The files were, not surprisingly, organized by the names of the psychics and mediums whose data they contained. But there were more than Fushimi would have expected from Anna’s story. He scanned the names, seeing Anna’s file, and also a files labelled with Shiro’s and Mikoto’s names. And also…

“What the fuck” Fushimi hissed, aggressively clicking open the file he saw. He scanned the contents, his eyes going wide. “What the fuck?!” he repeated in a near-shout, shoving his laptop away from him in an unusual display of violence. But seriously, what the fuck?

“What’s wrong?” Hirasaka asked, coming to Fushimi’s side. Totsuka, Reisi, and Awashima all followed and hovered behind her.

“Two,” Anna said, then, “One.”

“His files of subject data,” Fushimi explained, breathing deeply so that he would be able to maintain a semblance of calm despite the alarm and rage and borderline panic he felt. “He has one on me. That shouldn’t be possible.”

“Lemme see,” Hirasaka said, sliding into the opposite side of the booth and turning the laptop around.

“Well maybe he heard about you somehow,” Totsuka suggested.

“Impossible,” Fushimi countered. “Until I came here, I never told anyone other than Hirasaka, so unless she told, which she wouldn’t have, there’s no way he’d know. But it’s not just that. Look at the file. He’s got data that he shouldn’t have, things that even I myself don’t know about. He even has detailed data about the lock!”

“Oh shit,” Kusanagi said. “That’s not creepy at all.”

Fushimi laughed, almost hysterically.

“No, not at all!” he agreed, his voice higher than normal and sounding eerily similar to that man at his most manic.

“Well from this data, he certainly knows you well,” Hirasaka said calmly. “His data even claims that your ability first presented itself when you were three months old.”

“Which is exactly the problem here!” Fushimi exclaimed. “How the hell would a man I’ve never even met know something like that?!”

“Do the other files contain such information?” Reisi asked.
“Let me check,” Hirasaka said. A few clicks later, she said, “Nope.”

“Then clearly someone who has been around Fushimi-san presumably since before he reached the age of three months, someone who is themself a medium, was the source of this data,” Reisi concluded.

“But…” Fushimi began, and then it clicked. “That fucking bastard,” he seethed. “Fucking laughing at me for staring at ‘nothing’ when he could fucking see them the whole time?!?”

“Not all mediums can see ghosts, you know,” Reisi informed him. “I’m sure you are aware by now that there are other ways to sense ghosts than just Sight.”

“Or he was just lying through his teeth,” Fushimi snarled. “Niki did that a lot. It was his favorite pastime.”

“Niki?” Anna voice wisped from the couch. “I know that name.”

“Friend of Mizuchi-sensei’s?” Mikoto asked, and Fushimi’s heart sank as Anna nodded.

“Sensei used to call him, to consult him on some of the experiments he wanted to try,” Anna said. “None of us ever met him, but we all were afraid of him, and resented him.”

“Well, I think we know who locked your ability now,” Hirasaka said. “Your file as good as says the informant was the same person who locked it.”

“Plus it’s exactly the kind of thing Niki would do,” Fushimi muttered miserably, placing his head in his hands. He clicked his tongue. “He knew how much I hated ghosts. Hell, he even made sure of my hatred for them by always mocking me for reacting to them. He would love me to be stuck with something I hate constantly around me.”

“No wonder you never talk about your father,” Hirasaka murmured. “Still, it could be worse. From what this says, he had the same ability as you, and used it to control what sorts of ghosts came near you. Guess he didn’t want you getting hurt by any dangerous ghosts.”

“It wasn’t out of any fatherly instincts,” Fushimi spat back. “He just wouldn’t have wanted his toy to get broken, that’s all. I wouldn’t have been any fun for him if I were in the hospital.”

“Well, whatever his reasoning behind the things he did, the point still stands that he’s the one who locked your ability,” Totsuka interrupted. “And since we swore to help you with that, that means it’s time for us to get serious about getting rid of your ghost. It’ll be taking care of two birds with one stone.”

“Or I could just get used to being stuck like this,” Fushimi replied despondently. “There’s no winning against Niki. He’s too smart, too good at tricking people. He’ll always be two steps ahead of us, or more.”

“They’re all gone,” Anna whispered, but Fushimi didn’t even hear her.

“Chin up, Saru-kun,” Totsuka soothed. “It’s okay, it’ll all work out.”

Fushimi was about to snark back with something biting, but all of a sudden Mikoto shouted, “Izumo, that thing! Now!”

Time seemed to slow to a crawl. At that moment, Yata was being laid out on the floor, his body completely limp and his eyes half-lidded. When Fushimi closed his eyes, he could barely sense any
sort of presence from the short medium. Over at the bar, Kusanagi bent and retrieved a red plastic box with white markings on the side from beneath the counter and tossed it across the room. Mikoto caught it as Awashima hurried over to the couch, ordering, “Get his shirt off.”

Fushimi could only watch as the red plastic box was revealed to be a portable AED and electrodes were placed on Yata’s chest. Awashima administered the first shock, then began checking for signs of resuscitation.

“No good, he needs more energy,” Awashima growled.

“Here,” Shiro said, moving to her side, and placing a hand on Yata’s head. Yata’s spiritual presence flickered, growing ever-so-slightly brighter.

“Let go, I’m giving him another jolt,” Awashima said.

Again, there was no result, and Shiro put his hand back to continue feeding Yata energy. As Shiro’s own spirit seemed to dwindle, Anna began to shake just as badly as she had back in the hospital, and she clutched herself nervously.

“It’s not enough,” Anna said.

“How much more does he need?” Awashima asked, already tentatively reaching out.

“Everything he can get,” Anna replied, her tone grimmer than Fushimi had ever heard it.

“Alright then, everyone with any kind of ability, please come here,” Awashima ordered in a calm and professional manner. “Yata-kun’s going to need whatever energy you can spare at the moment. Quickly please.”

Reisi, Hirasaka, and Fushimi all got up and went to the fallen medium’s side, tentatively reaching out to touch Yata. Fushimi wasn’t sure how to give his energy to someone else, but as he reached out, he could feel Yata’s need, could feel the last vestiges of his spirit reaching desperately for anything it could grasp. Still, Fushimi hesitated.

“He won’t- he won’t take on my ability if I give him my energy, will he?” Fushimi asked, fearful of what might happen if Yata began drawing ghosts in his current condition.

“No, that only happens with his and Anna’s abilities,” Mikoto rasped, his voice surprisingly papery. And perhaps just a little wet. “When he gets energy from her, they get too in sync and his ability steals from her.”

Oh right, Anna had said something like that earlier, too. Well, that was good enough for Fushimi. He placed his hand next to where Hirasaka’s and Reisi’s already rested on Yata’s upper body and began funneling his power to the other medium.

Fushimi wasn’t sure how long it was before Awashima’s voice cut in and said, “Alright, everyone clear, I’m trying again.”

He was reluctant to step back and be stuck being just a watcher again, but Fushimi knew he had to do it. Energy alone wouldn’t be enough to keep Yata alive right now. Awashima administered the jolt, and this time Yata’s eyes flew open for a mere second and he gasped. Awashima checked his pulse and felt for breath, then nodded, and the whole room let out a sigh of relief.

“He’s not out of danger yet,” Awashima warned. It was true, Yata’s sunlight soul was still too weak, too close to going out. Fushimi swallowed past a sudden lump in his throat. As the world
continued around him and everyone began discussing where everyone would go for the night, Fushimi could only stare at Yata, certain that if he looked away, the shorter medium would die.
At four in the morning, Fushimi finally gave up and called Hirasaka. He’d been haunted all night by thoughts of the day’s events and his reactions, and he’d come to an uncomfortable conclusion.

Despite the late- or early- hour, Hirasaka picked up on the second ring. She didn’t say anything, just waited for him to say whatever had been important enough for him to disturb her slumber.

“You were right,” he mumbled. “I do like him. Probably.”

“Fucking finally,” Hirasaka muttered. “I would ask what clued you in at last, but I think that should be patently obvious given the way yesterday morning went.”

Fushimi hummed, and then steered the conversation towards something that was marginally less uncomfortable.

“Hirasaka, how long have we been friends?”

“Wait, you mean you finally noticed that too?” Hirasaka snorted. “Wow, I’m surprised you haven’t combusted with all these new revelations.”

“So it’s been a while then?” Fushimi pressed.

“Do you really think we would have stuck together even after we went our separate ways if we were just people who tolerated each other?” Hirasaka asked. “Saruhiko, we’ve been friends pretty much all along. At least, that’s what I think. I didn’t realize it at first either, not until that time when we got that award for being among the top whatever number of students in the nation and I realized I was proud of both of us.”

“Why didn’t you ever say anything?” Fushimi asked breathlessly.

“Because it’s embarrassing, and because I knew that you’re too emotionally stunted to take that sort of information well. I didn’t want you to spiral into some sort of denial and start avoiding me. Speaking of which, now that you’ve finally acknowledged your crush, you’re not going to do that with him, are you?”

And there they were, back to where they’d started. He should’ve known Hirasaka wouldn’t be distracted for long. Hell, she probably hadn’t been distracted at all, and had just been humoring him.

“I don’t know,” he mumbled. “But does it even matter? You saw what happened today. For all we know, he went into cardiac arrest again and couldn’t be revived.”

“He hasn’t,” Hirasaka insisted, an eye roll evident in her tone. “Kusanagi and Shiro promised they would call if anything happened.”

That was true. Back at the bar, it had been decided that both Anna and Mikoto both were badly shaken and would need emotional support to get through the night. Mikoto went home with Reisi and Totsuka, and Awashima had volunteered her and Hirasaka’s apartment for a girls’ night, while Kusanagi accompanied Yata to Shiro’s family home where the redhead could be seen by a doctor and tended by the shikigami in service to Shiro’s family rather than Shiro himself. There were apparently a lot of them, and they would be able to aid in Yata’s rejuvenation by amplifying what little energy he had at the moment, something they’d apparently done on previous occasions.
“Maybe not,” Fushimi conceded. “But he’s going to need time to recover, so it’s not like I can do anything at the moment.”

“Well, I suppose expecting you to actually act on your feelings would be a bit much at this point,” Hirasaka mused, more to herself than Fushimi. “But if you ask me, you should confess. He seemed kinda dense, so he might not get it if you try to be subtle.”

“But if he doesn’t feel the same then it’ll just make things awkward,” Fushimi argued.

“Saruhiko, you sweet summer child who was actually born in late autumn but that’s just not how the saying goes,” Hirasaka sighed. “I hate to break it to you, but awkward is kind of a given when you’re involved. So if all you’re worried about is awkwardness, then you’ve got nothing to lose by telling him how you feel. And besides, he could also like you back, and wouldn’t that be nice?”

“No, because I don’t know what to do if he likes me back, either,” Fushimi grumbled.

“Take him out to sappy couples locations that you wouldn’t want to be caught dead at. Kiss him. Have sex. That’s usually about how dating works, from what I’ve seen,” Hirasaka suggested disinterestedly.

“Oh right, I forgot you’re just as perpetually single as me,” Fushimi drawled.

“At least I’ve been on dates before,” Hirasaka shot back.

“Being your coworker’s fake date to his cousin’s wedding so that his mom wouldn’t find out he was lying about having a girlfriend doesn’t count. You’re a lesbian.”

“True,” Hirasaka replied. There was a rush of air through the phone as she yawned. “Anyway, as riveting as this conversation is, I’d like to get a few more hours of sleep.”

“Well then hurry up and say all your ‘I told you so’s,” Fushimi said.

“I’m not going to gloat,” Hirasaka retorted. “I will certainly hold this over your head for the rest of your life and bring it up at the most embarrassing moments possible, but I have no intentions of rubbing it in your face that for once I knew something you didn’t, since I really don’t have a leg to stand on. You have an infuriating knack for obtaining information, and right now my worst nightmare involves you opening up a rival PI agency and stealing all my business.”

“Like that would ever happen,” Fushimi snorted. Being a private investigator would require more people skills than he was willing to muster up.

“I know,” Hirasaka laughed.

Amazingly, the bar was open the day after the hospital case. Anna, Mikoto, and Yata were all- not surprisingly- absent, but Shiro and his shikigami showed up as stand-ins since Shiro felt obligated to make up for the staff shortage that was technically his fault. Kuroh took over Yata’s place in the kitchen, while Shiro took Anna’s place waiting tables. Given that Neko couldn’t cook and was apparently a disaster waiting tables- according to Kusanagi anyway- she took over Mikoto’s role of bouncer. However, Neko wasn’t well suited to that job either, as she seemed to think she had to literally bounce, and she didn’t look the least bit menacing standing around with her arms crossed as she bobbed up and down on the balls of her feet.

On the second day, Mikoto showed up at the bar, claiming Anna had kicked him out since she was too stressed to control her abilities and thus her empathy picked up all the negative emotions he was feeling at the moment. He said it was just as well though, since sitting around waiting only
ever pissed him off and being at the bar would be a nice distraction. Neko remained the bouncer, however, since Mikoto opted instead to take a glass of scotch and sit down with Reisi.

Hirasaka showed up every day, offering moral support by calmly ordering drinks and making light small talk when Fushimi had free moments. He never brought up his recent realizations, and she never forced their conversations in that direction, but he knew that his early-morning phone call was the reason she kept coming, and not because she was feeling nosy.

Thankfully, their “special” clients had slowed to a trickle, and in the first week after the hospital case, they only had one new client come in, trailed by a ghost who meekly moved on after Mikoto glared at it for about ten seconds and cracked his knuckles for good measure. In the meantime, business at the bar was booming, making up for the many days they’d taken off recently. It was a welcome distraction from the confusion that had been following Fushimi since his call to Hirasaka, and yet he still couldn’t seem to forget what he’d realized. After all, every time he tripped over Shiro or stopped by the kitchen and saw Kuroh chopping vegetables like a machine, it just reminded him exactly who was absent from the bar.

After one week, Fushimi found himself approaching Shiro as everyone was getting ready to go home for the day.

“Er, Shiro?” Fushimi said, kicking himself mentally for how hesitant he sounded. It probably made it painfully obvious that he was nervous about what he was about to ask, which probably would make the reason for his request completely transparent. Then again, maybe not. People always said it was hard to tell what Fushimi was thinking and that he never showed any emotion.

“What is it?” Shiro asked, smiling like an idiot like he always did.

“I was wondering if I might accompany you home,” Fushimi said, carefully keeping his tone flat and even. “I wanted to speak with Anna about something.” That was a lie, but he couldn’t exactly say he wanted to go make sure Yata was recovering well and that Anna wasn’t spiraling into some sort of emotional abyss. Because yes, he supposed he was worried about Anna and Mikoto as well. It was hard not to, when Mikoto had gone through at least three bottles of scotch in the past week and had abandoned his usual glower in order to sit around moping. If Mikoto was in such a state, Fushimi doubted Anna would be any better.

“Actually, Anna-chan and Yata-kun already went back to their place, along with a couple of the rabbits,” Shiro replied. “But now that you mention it, a visit might be nice. The rabbits are some company, but they’re a pretty serious bunch, so I imagine Anna-chan could use some nice faces and pleasant conversation right about now.”

“I see,” Fushimi said, feeling like an idiot. It was an alien feeling for him, and an exceedingly unpleasant one at that. He was glad it wasn’t more familiar to him.

“If yer goin’ to our place, mind if I tag along?” Mikoto asked. “Bein’ there all the time’s rough, but so’s not bein’ there at all.”

“Just as long as no one else is coming,” Fushimi replied wearily, irritated at having more people along but resigning himself to the inevitability of it. “My car can’t fit any more people.”

“Oh, I can always have Kuroh and Neko take a break for a bit if anyone else wants to join us,” Shiro said cheerfully. “They’ll come back when I need them.”

Fushimi grimaced and his eyes involuntarily cut to Totsuka and Reisi, but neither of them invited themselves along, thankfully.
Twenty minutes later, they pulled up outside the heavily-warded house where the mediums lived. They were greeted by a peculiar individual who wore old-fashioned clothing and a golden mask with rabbit ears that covered his face from just above his mouth up. The “rabbit” referred to Shiro as “Yashiro-dono” and Mikoto as “Mikoto-sama”, and addressed Fushimi as “honored guest”. They (Fushimi thought the rabbit counted as male, though he wasn’t sure and wanted to be polite) led the three into the house, having the guests wait in the same living room where Fushimi had seen the photo album while they went to retrieve Anna.

When Anna came in, she looked completely different from what Fushimi was used to. She looked older for the most part, despite the fact that she was wearing a lion snuggly, complete with a hood maned with little felt semi-circles that was pulled up. She trudged sullenly into the room and collapsed against Mikoto, who placidly wrapped his arms around her and patted her back soothingly.

“I hate this,” Anna complained, contrasting her aged appearance by sounding younger than she was instead. “I hate it when everyone’s hurting and I can’t do anything about it, and I hate that I can’t stand anyone being around me right now because I hate that I’m all alone and I hate that I’m angry at Misaki for this when this one’s not even his fault and I hate that even though sensei died and has moved on, he’s still trying to take the things I care about!” Anna’s voice rose to a shout, and she clung tighter to Mikoto as she buried her face in his chest following her outburst.

Fushimi flinched, Anna’s words sounding a little too familiar to him. It made even more sense now, realizing that Niki had known this Mizuchi person, since it seemed they were two of a kind. The only difference was that Niki was a lot harder to get rid of. It sent a tremor of fear through Fushimi, one that made Anna flinch, but he couldn’t help it because what if Niki did the same thing and managed to torment Fushimi even after he’d been sent on?

“Yeah, me too,” Mikoto replied, squeezing Anna a little in comfort. “Just try and get rid of that anger before he wakes up, you know the rule.”

Anna sighed and nodded, but Fushimi frowned in puzzlement.

“What?” he asked.

“Gramps set up a rule where when one of us gets hurt bad by ghosts, even if it’s their own fault, we can’t yell at them about it,” Mikoto explained. “We’ve all had our brushes with death, and not just dealing with ghosts all the time, and it’s hard ‘nuff on us all even without people shouting ‘n shit.”

“That sounds like a pain in the ass,” Fushimi muttered. Mikoto chuckled in response, and even Anna managed a wet laugh.

“It is,” Mikoto agreed. “But ‘s definitely nicer waking up from almost dying and having smiling faces rather than people bitchin’ at ya.”

“So how is Yata-kun doing, by the way?” Shiro asked. “Is he napping right now, or-?”

Shiro cut off when Anna shook her head.

“He hasn’t woken up yet,” she said sadly. “He still needs a little extra energy to get through the day, but it’s getting less and less, so I think he’ll be okay.” She bit her lip. “I’m still scared though. He hasn’t been this bad since the time that ghost snuck up on us and used his body to run away to Hokkaido for a month.”

“Shit,” Shiro breathed. “That bad? He was only possessed for a couple of hours.”
“Yeah, but it was a lotta ghosts,” Mikoto pointed out. “We knew it would take an extra toll on him.”

“If it was going to put him in a coma though, we should’ve just exorcised them out or whatever,” Fushimi argued. Anna’s eyes turned on him, looking as if she were reaching an epiphany. Crap. He’d meant to keep those stupid feelings buried.

“Can’t say that now, though,” Mikoto shrugged. “The rule.”

“But-” Fushimi protested.

“’Sides, as much as I hate ta agree with our idiot, he mighta been right,” Mikoto added. “Who knows what woulda happened if the ghosts in him had panicked. Like Anna just said, ghosts have run off with him before. Some of ‘em were trying to accomplish things, but some just wanted ta get away. If he’s gonna get possessed, I’d rather him stay in sight, if ’s all the same. That way we can actually help him.”

Mikoto’s argument made sense, but it still irked Fushimi. They were just ghosts. Maybe they’d been people once, but they were dead now, and no longer had a place in the land of the living. Their will did not take precedence over the will of those still alive.

“Do you mind if I pop in and have a look?” Shiro asked suddenly. “I know you and the rabbits have everything under control but-”

“Please do,” Anna said, interrupting him. “I haven’t been able to properly recover from last week myself, and he’ll probably be running low soon, so maybe you could share some energy with him while you’re there.”

“Okay,” Shiro said, and left the room.

“I’ll go with him,” Mikoto said, he stretched his arms, then looked at Fushimi and pointedly said, “Didn’t you have something you wanted to talk to Anna about?” before following after Shiro.

Fushimi was sorely tempted to go out to his car and leave.

“Did you really have something you wanted to talk to me about?” Anna asked, her tone a little too understanding for Fushimi’s liking. He grunted in response. “You know, there’s no shame in wanting to check on someone when you’re worried about them,” she added after a pause.

“Is there?” Fushimi asked bitterly. “Worrying about people is somewhat new to me.”

“I know,” Anna said. He glanced at her askance and she smiled ruefully. “Empath,” she reminded him.

Fushimi clicked his tongue.

“I’m glad you finally realized how you feel,” Anna said. “Even if the timing isn’t very good. He’ll be okay, Saruhiko. I won’t tell you how he feels, since that’s something the two of you need to work out for yourselves, but I wish you luck. You’re not as sad or angry or afraid as when you first came to us, and I think it would be good if you could stay that way. You deserve it. We all know you’re a good person.”

“I’m not,” Fushimi countered.

“So you’ve said,” Anna reminded him. “But I think that’s something you were made to believe by
someone very evil. It’s not the truth you know.”

“If anyone made me believe that, it was me,” Fushimi drawled. “And if I’m very evil for making myself believe that, then I can’t possibly be a good person after all, meaning I am right and I’m not a good person.”

Anna shook her head.

“You’re wrong,” she insisted. “You’ll see. Also, you’re welcome to come by and visit Misaki any time. The rabbits will let you in, even if it’s late.”

“Thanks,” Fushimi said, though a large part of him wanted to deny that he might even consider taking her up on the offer. He hesitated, and then said, “So this is normal then? Him being in a coma or whatever? That’s his backlash?”

“No,” Anna shook her head. “Sometimes he just gets sick, like a cold or the flu. He only sleeps when he was completely drained, and can’t wake up until he’s recovered.”

“If it’s that much of a risk for him, then why does he do it?” Fushimi asked angrily, not sure who exactly his anger was directed at or why. “Why purposely seek out ghosts when they’re likely to half kill him?”

Anna pursed her lips, but she didn’t look angry. She looked unhappy, in a way that made Fushimi think she might actually be of the same opinion as him.

“Misaki doesn’t want us to have to fight alone,” Anna said slowly. “He… what he says is that he wants to support us, and be there for us if we need him, but he’s scared. He doesn’t want to be left behind, though he’ll never say that. He’s scared of the ghosts, but he’s scared of being alone even more. And he’s too stubborn to listen to anything we say about it, too.” She frowned a little, and Fushimi couldn’t help but snort almost fondly. Typical Yata, trying to hide his insecurities behind caring too much.

After that, Anna showed him to Yata’s room so that he would know where it was when (not if) he came to visit. He went inside, but didn’t stay long, since he didn’t like seeing the medical equipment that had been set up in the room, or Yata lying there looking unnaturally pale - or at least, pale for him. He was still a shade darker than Fushimi’s own pallid complexion, but compared to his usual tan, it was positively ashen. The only words Fushimi could manage to find during his short visit were, “Hurry up and wake up, you idiot.”
It irked Fushimi to no end that Anna had been right: he did go to visit Yata. He went every day after work, sometimes bringing some of the others along with him (because of course he got found out, these people shared everything danggit). He never said much during his visits, not seeing the point, but at the same time, he couldn’t help but repeating the sentiment he’d shared with Yata on that first visit. He knew that he was probably saying it for his own benefit rather than Yata’s, though he couldn’t really fathom why. Maybe he was trying to remind himself to talk with the medium, or maybe he was using it as a way to cope with his newfound feelings. Either way, each day passed without Yata waking up.

It hadn’t been quite a week since then, and Fushimi felt strangely drained. It wasn’t from sharing his energy with Yata, although he had done a little bit of that. Instead, he suspected that it was from his concern over Yata, and also from seeing way too much of Shiro and his shikigami for the past couple of weeks. It was like those three existed just to torment Fushimi with their enviably close relationship and their random shenanigans that were worthy of a comedic routine.

It was after yet another long night of working another shift with all the wrong people when, in the midst of clean-up, Kusanagi’s phone went off. Fushimi paid it no mind, until he finished up his duties for the night and was about to head back to the locker room to change and flee this hellhole when Kusanagi told him to wait a moment, listening intently to the phone at his ear. He grinned, then said a farewell and ended the call before announcing to the room, “It seems Mr. Sleepyhead has finally decided to rejoin the land of the conscious.”

There was a brief moment where everyone paused to decipher Kusanagi’s meaning, and then Mikoto threw his head back and let out an almost animal cheer.

“That’s great!” Shiro enthused, while Totsuka and Reisi approached Mikoto to be wrapped up in a bear hug.

“Try not to get too worked up, I told Anna we’d be there in about half an hour,” Kusanagi told them, smiling at the display in front of him.

“Well then what are we waiting for?” Mikoto asked, releasing his boyfriends so abruptly that Totsuka almost fell over. He rounded on Fushimi, and for a terrifying moment, Fushimi feared he would be the next hugging victim, but then Mikoto just jabbed a finger in his face and said, “You, let’s go. I love Izumo to death, but compared to you he drives like a fucking grandma.”

“I drive a van, Mikoto,” Kusanagi sighed. “It’s not built for speed or sharp turns, I have to take
things slow or else that monster will roll.”

“Doesn’t change the fact that you’re the only car that’s actually below speed limit,” Mikoto retorted. “Seriously, even Gramps drove faster than you do, you snail.”

Fushimi didn’t even bother to try and hold back his snort. A small part of him tried to deny that he was actually happy about the news on his own and wanted to believe that Mikoto’s giddiness was just contagious, but he knew better. Anna and Hirasaka- Douhan, he supposed he should call her these days- were right: he did have a tendency to lie to himself about certain things. Well this wouldn’t be one of them. He was glad to hear that Yata was awake. He’d missed the redhead, even if they hadn’t really talked much thus far. But maybe they would talk more from now on.

Kusanagi may have told Anna half an hour, but Fushimi and Mikoto made it there in just under twenty minutes. Fushimi rolled his eyes as Mikoto was out of the car before the engine had been cut, barely keeping his feet under him as he raced inside. On another day, Fushimi might have clicked his tongue, but today, he felt… indulgent. He shook his head and followed after Mikoto’s entrance, finding the three mediums just inside, Mikoto dangling Yata upside down with a huge grin on his face as Yata shouted useless protests. Fushimi crossed his arms and leaned against the wall, just watching even as Yata caught sight of him and pleaded for assistance.

Eventually, Anna pointed out that Yata would pass out unless righted, so Mikoto relented and adjusted things so that he was holding his “brother” princess-style instead.

Despite Mikoto’s complaints about Kusanagi’s driving, the rest of the crew arrived just then, even though Fushimi and Mikoto hadn’t even been there five minutes.

“Well hello there, Princess Aurora,” Kusanagi teased. “It’s good to see you up again, though I think we all expected someone else to be your Prince Charming.”

Yata blushed crimson (though it was a bit hard to tell since his face was still red from being held upside down) and glared.

“The fuck?” he squawked angrily. “I’m not a fucking princess!”

“That’d be a lot more convincing if you hadn’t just pulled a Sleeping Beauty act on us,” Fushimi murmured, his eyes darting over to catch Kusanagi’s gaze in teasing-induced solidarity.

“Sh-shut up,” Yata mumbled, and Fushimi idly wondered if it was possible for a human being to become incandescent, because Yata’s face was certainly making a valiant effort of doing so.

“Whatever, it’s good to see you back on your feet,” Mikoto said, finally putting Yata down. The younger medium was a little shaky in his stance, but he straightened his beanie and grinned at everyone assembled.

“It’s good to be back,” he replied. “But man, am I never doing that again.”

“So does that mean that if you get possessed by a horde of ghosts again, you’ll let us chase them out?” Shiro asked offhandedly, although his tone implied he knew the answer.

Yata made a slightly strangled noise that sounded a bit like “urk”.

“W-well, you know how it is,” he stammered. “I-I knew that letting them stick around wasn’t a good idea, but once they’re inside, it’s pretty hard not to sympathize with them, a-and they weren’t trying to take over or anything, even that one chick, Emi or whatever, I had to tell her to take control and do the talking. And just, it wouldn’t have been a problem if there weren’t so damn
many this time. Besides, you know I’m not that smart. It’s hard enough to think without a bunch of ghosts all talking like it’s a freaking shopping mall inside my head.” Yata shuddered.

“But you would do it again, wouldn’t you?” Fushimi asked quietly. Yata shuffled and looked at his feet, not saying anything. Fushimi clicked his tongue. “Idiot,” he muttered irritably.

“Well yeah, that’s our job,” Totsuka said gently. Everyone turned to look at him, and he smiled, cheerful as usual despite the tension that had been building. “Isn’t it though?” he persisted. “We go around and do what we can to help ghosts in order to allow them to achieve peace, right? Even at the risk to ourselves? It’s dangerous sometimes, but we know it’s the right thing to do so we do it anyway.”

“Indeed,” Reisi agreed. “It is our duty to ensure that the interference of those who have passed ends as pleasantly as possible for both the living and the deceased.”

“The dead are dead, they’re just too selfish to accept it,” Fushimi bit back. He then sighed. This really wasn’t the time for an argument. They had come to see the newly-recovered Yata and celebrate, not snap at each other. “Whatever. It’s good that you’re awake again. I was getting tired of that shikigami bitching at me about my attitude every time I had to go to the kitchen.”

“Ugh, I know!” Yata agreed. “He never stops!”

“Nagging is just Kuro’s way of showing he cares,” Shiro insisted. “He’s awkward with feelings, that’s all. Here, I’ll summon him so you can ask him yourselves.”

Before anyone could protest, Shiro whistled a single long, low note, the sound reverberating with better acoustics than the room should have allowed. As it echoed off into space, Kuroh appeared at the onmyouji’s side, and a white kitten dropped onto Shiro’s head. The kitten transformed in a puff of smoke into Neko, who was leaning against Shiro’s back with her arms looped loosely over Shiro’s shoulders. Kuroh, meanwhile, took a look around, frowning slightly.

“Is there some reason we are congregated in the entryway instead of going further inside and getting comfortable?” the shiki asked. “With the barriers in place on this house, it should not be possible for ghosts to get in. Unless… you don’t suspect that a burglary is taking place, do you?”

“No, we just got a little caught up in greetings, that’s all,” Kusanagi assured Kuroh. “Since we’re all just glad to see Yata-chan recovered and all.”

“I see,” Kuroh said. “Shall I prepare some refreshments for some festivities then?”

“The rabbits already made some snacks, but thank you Kuroh,” Anna said.

“Oo, are we having a game night then?” Totsuka enthused. “I call first round!”

Before long, everyone had reconvened in a cozy den that had a kotatsu pushed off to the side with some cushions for sitting stacked on top, a few beanbag chairs, a loveseat, and an entertainment center stocked with a large TV, each of the major consoles, and several games for each. It even rivaled Fushimi’s own setup, which he prided himself on. A popular racing game was set up, and Reisi, Totsuka, Shiro, and Neko claimed the controllers for the first match. Reisi won, though mostly due to the others’ complete lack of skill rather than his own. The next round, Reisi went against the three mediums and was completely left in their dust. For the third round, Fushimi joined in, and he enjoyed the way everyone patted him on the back in congratulations when he almost got first.

Around the time they switched to a fighting game, Fushimi left the group to go get some air. He
was by no means the first to do so: Kuroh had lasted all of five minutes before escaping to the kitchen, Kusangi had gone and called Awashima and Douhan and was waiting for their arrival, Mikoto had left for a smoke, and Totsuka had been carried off to a guest room by one of the rabbits after falling asleep. As Fushimi left, he couldn’t keep a small smile off his face at the sight of Yata enthusiastically swearing at both the game and the other players while Shiro just laughed and Anna calmly threw trash talk back. It had been surprising to hear the even-tempered girl slew insults with the best of them, but he supposed it was a given considering who her “brothers” were.

Fushimi wandered for a bit before finding the back door, slipping outside into a grassy yard with a zen garden at the back that seemed luminous in the moonlight. It was a soothing sight, and Fushimi found his thoughts scattering as he viewed it.

“Pretty, ain’t it?” Mikoto’s voice drifted into Fushimi’s awareness, and a second later Fushimi belatedly recognized the scent of cigarette smoke in the air. Looking around, he noticed the redhead sitting barely a meter away, looking out into the sky while his cigarette dangled from his fingers. “It looks best at night like this.”

“Is that so?” Fushimi asked, not really interested in this particular subject. Sure, the garden was nice and all, but that didn’t mean he wanted to sing its praises with anyone.

“Yes. Sucks though, since it makes it hard to paint.”

“Do you really paint?” Fushimi asked in disbelief, because this was the second time it had been mentioned, and it still seemed very incongruous.

“Yes,” Mikoto replied, taking a drag on his cigarette. “It’s like the martial arts: learned it to help me keep my anger in check. Gramps and Uncle Miwa taught me. Mostly brush painting and watercolor, though sometimes I play with spray paint just for fun.”

“What, graffiti?” Fushimi asked.

“You can do a lot more with spray paint than just mark up walls,” Mikoto replied. He was silent for a moment, focusing on increasing the speed at which he reduced his cigarette to a stub, and Fushimi hoped that would be the end of their conversation. It wasn’t.

“You’re right, you know,” Mikoto said out of the blue, about half a second before Fushimi would have made his excuses and headed back inside. “About the ghosts. They are selfish.”

“If you understand that, then why bother with them?” Fushimi asked. “Why dedicate so much effort to fulfilling their wishes?”

“A few reasons,” Mikoto said without missing a beat, as if he anticipated the question. Then again, after the opinions Fushimi had already expressed, only an idiot wouldn’t expect that. “One is that to us, they’re just as real as you and me. With our abilities, sometimes they almost seem more real, and it’s like the living are the ghosts,” Mikoto took a drag on his cigarette, blowing the smoke out into the night air and watching it dissipate before continuing. “Second is that it’s what we were taught to do. Gramps used to say that we have abilities for a reason, and what other reason could they be for but to help the ghosts? I dunno if he’s right or not, but ’s not like I’ve found any other answer.

“Third thing, ghosts may be selfish, but the living are worse. At least with the dead if you give ‘em what they want then they’ll be gone. With the living, they just keep taking and taking. We’re greedy sons of bitches, us living people.” Mikoto shook his head, ashing his cigarette in a tray he’d brought with him. “Fourth, someday, we’ll end up like them too. We may not become ghosts, but
we’ll definitely die. It’s scary to think about, and it doesn’t get any less scary once it’s happened to ya, least not from what we’ve seen. Way we see it, might as well let the last faces they see in this world be ones that are trying to help them out, right?” He paused to make eye contact, and his expression was the softest Fushimi had ever seen. “Plus, there’s this moment, sometimes, right before they’re gone. It’s over real fast so it’s easy to miss, but there’s just this raw emotion like nothing you’ll ever see anywhere else. It’s indescribable, but it’s just so beautiful that, to me at least, it makes it all seem worth it.”

“I suppose you have some points there,” Fushimi admitted, mulling the information over. “But I still don’t see how it’s worth killing yourselves just for them. Especially if you’re looking to help them; how are you supposed to do that if you yourself are dead?” He shook his head. “You’re all foolishly sentimental in my opinion.”

“Yup,” Mikoto said, stubbing out the remains of his cigarette. “If those reasons aren’t enough for you, then look at it this way: what we’re doing probably builds up good karma or some shit. We’ve got no idea what comes after this, but who knows, maybe by helping them out while they’re still on this side, we’re building up favors for when we end up that side. Insurance or whatever, right?” He raised an eyebrow at Fushimi, and Fushimi bristled at how well these sentimental fools were getting to know him. At least Anna had her empathy to help, but Mikoto had no right to read Fushimi’s motivations so well.

“I suppose…” Fushimi mumbled.

“There ya go,” Mikoto said, reaching out to ruffle Fushimi’s hair as he got to his feet. Fushimi glared at him, and Mikoto withdrew.

“Sorry, habit,” the medium said, raising his hands in surrender. “Don’t stay out here too long, you’ll catch cold. Plus I definitely need to get back at you for beating me earlier. Gotta prove that was just a fluke and all.”

“Yeah, whatever,” Fushimi grumbled, but he was trying his hardest to contain a laugh. It seemed the sentimental fools were rubbing off on him. And the worst part? He wasn’t entirely sure that he minded.
Fushimi Gets Hit On

Chapter Notes

Warnings: entitled people, uncomfortable flirting, vague mentions of terminal illness

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Fushimi did not smile when he saw the mediums back at Homra the next day. His heart did not do a strange and unnatural-feeling flutter in his chest when Yata grinned at him, especially since Yata was grinning at everyone that day. Instead, he was very sensible, as always, and when Yata greeted him with an overly bright “Heya Fushimi-san!”, he merely grunted and asked “Are you really up to working when you just spent two weeks unconscious?”

And he definitely did not melt a little inside at the way Yata scowled just a bit at that and grumbled back, “Yes, mom.”

So all was back to normal. Shiro and his shikigami were back at their little office and out of the Homra staff’s hair, Yata was in the kitchen goofing off with Kamamoto and trying to juggle spatulas during the slow moments, Mikoto was sitting at the bar, smirking at everyone with his menacingly good mood, and Anna was going from table to table, being welcomed back by regular customers. Fushimi supposed he was a little bit glad to see them back, even if Anna had smiled knowingly at him the first time they made eye contact.

The next week proceeded smoothly. They got two new customers, both of whom had simple cases that were fixed in the hours before the start of shift. In both cases, Reisi had stated that Anna could handle things alone, and she had. It surprised Fushimi at first, to see the rest of the crew benched, but he noticed the way Mikoto would periodically tense up, sniffing the air with an almost manic look on his face, and how Yata seemed extra hesitant to leave the safety of the kitchen. It was clear that the mediums were feeling wary after their encounters at the hospital. Still, Fushimi wasn’t about to complain. In his opinion, it was about damn time they started taking some precautions. Especially Yata.

Despite Anna and Douhan’s advice, Fushimi made no effort to talk to Yata. Yes, he had a crush on the guy, and yes he had finally admitted it, but he still didn’t know the guy all that well. A couple heart to hearts here and there didn’t really make up for the fact that they had very little contact with each other. Besides, even if he were planning on heeding their advice, there was no way things could work out with his ability locked like it was. A ghost magnet and the most possessible person in existence? Yeah, that would go over real well. Like a lead parachute.

Besides, even if he had a crush on Yata, he still had no intentions of sticking around Homra once things with Niki were sorted out. Spend the rest of his life waiting tables at a bar and chasing ghosts in his off hours? No thanks. It was all well and good to admire Yata when they saw each other on a regular basis, but once Fushimi was no longer at the bar every day, would there really be anything to serve as the foundation for any kind of relationship? Probably not.

All in all, anyone with any sense would come to the conclusion that trying to approach Yata romantically just wasn’t practical.

Of course, the brief respite from hunting down ghosts had to end sooner or later. And it did, with a
young man who breezed through the door one evening and sashayed straight to the bar. He plopped himself on one of the stools and announced, “I’m Sakiguchi Naoto and my uncle has a haunted cabin and I want you to be the ones to get rid of the ghosts.” His voice was almost obnoxiously loud, and carried so that most of the patrons in the bar heard him clearly. Fushimi could easily tell which customers knew of Homra’s connections to the spiritual, and which didn’t, based on the way the former group shifted uneasily or leaned slightly as they listened in, and the latter group either looked alarmed at the mention of ghosts or scoffed and watched the new client as if expecting him to put on a show for them.

“I saw you guys on the Jungle site,” Sakiguchi continued, either not noticing or not giving a damn about the other customers and their reactions. “You guys passed their credibility tests, and the past clients they interviewed gave you high satisfaction ratings too. Plus I like your dynamic in the videos you did with them. So, are you going to exorcise my uncle’s cabin or not?”

Fushimi had disliked this man from the moment he walked in. There was just something about Sakiguchi’s body language that rubbed Fushimi the wrong way, and now he recognized it: entitlement. It was so obvious after hearing the way this guy all but demanded they take on his supposedly haunted cabin. There had been some guys like that back when Fushimi was in school, and they were usually the most irritating to deal with. Sure, it was usually fairly easy to dig up some dirt on them, but they believed themselves to be untouchable, and even if you did knock them down a few pegs, they always seemed to climb right back up and keep going.

“We’ll need a few more details than that,” Kusanagi replied blandly, his jaw clenched in a way that said he wanted nothing more than to have Mikoto throw this guy out but knew that it was foolhardy to do so without a good reason.

“Oh, of course,” Sakiguchi said, and launched into a chatty narrative that made Fushimi wish for a pair of ear plugs. “So. My uncle- who dabbles in real estate in his spare time- often buys so-called ‘haunted’” (here Sakiguchi made very exaggerated air quotes, rolled his eyes, and smirked) “properties. You know, places where the previous owner died suddenly or violently and everyone’s scared their ghost will show up, or places where people claim to have heard disembodied screams but it’s really just some bad plumbing or something. And then he’ll rent them out to people- friends usually- for a little while to prove that there are no ghosts, and then he can sell the place for more than he bought it for and make money. Not that he needs money, of course- our family is very influential- honestly, I think he just does it because he doesn’t believe in ghosts. Or didn’t, I should say, because events at the cabin have led him to reevaluate that opinion.”

“Get to point already,” Fushimi gritted out unheard under his breath as he cleared off a recently emptied table. His assessment of their new client was steadily deteriorating.

“And what events would those be?” Kusanagi asked in a sweet voice that seemed to contain every last shred of the man’s patience. Apparently the bartender agreed that Sakiguchi was going on too many irrelevant tangents.

“So Uncle Shinichi just got this place last week, and yesterday he and his tenant-to-be went to check it out. And like, it was kinda rainy yesterday, you may recall, and so they had the headlights on. But as they got closer to the property, the headlights got really dim and started flickering and went out. Now of course, Uncle assumed that it was just a car problem, and ignored it. So he and the tenant go inside, and right away they see a man falling, and he hits the floor and then just disappears. Freaky. In the den, they see this woman sitting in a chair, and they can see right through her. They also can’t get the electricity to work at all, and when they get out flashlights so they can search the place for projectors, those don’t work either. And again, they assumed that there was an explanation, nothing an electrician and some new batteries couldn’t fix, so they decided to leave
and come back after getting someone out there to look at the breakers. But then as they drove away, uncle’s headlights came on all of a sudden, and so did the flashlights that hadn’t worked. And since the flashlights were working again, they decided to head back, but when they did, everything went out again. This happened three times. It’s gotta be ghosts, I know it is. So when Uncle told me all this, I knew that Homra was the group to go to.”

“Right,” Kusanagi said tensely. “So, er, why didn’t your uncle come himself then?” A valid question, that. It would have saved the entire bar’s ears from the annoyance of Sakiguchi’s ramblings. Unless his uncle was also a chatty type.

“I said he doesn’t believe in ghosts right?” Sakiguchi said impatiently. “If he doesn’t believe in ghosts, why would he believe in mediums? As far as he’s concerned, you’re just a bunch of frauds. Luckily, I know better, otherwise he’d never get that cabin cleared of ghosts.”

“Still, it would be more convenient to talk to the witness himself, not a secondhand source,” Kusanagi sighed. “If he came himself, we could verify whether or not he’s been in contact with ghosts.” Sakiguchi’s eyes flashed angrily, and he opened his mouth to protest, but Kusanagi put up a hand and cut off any argument before it began. ‘I’m not saying I think you’re lying, just that, as you said, many reported ghosts are things that can be explained away. It’s rather bothersome for us if we end up going all the way out to your uncle’s property only to find that it’s all an elaborate prank or the result of overactive imaginations. We like to be certain before we agree to anything, please understand that.”

“Well, I am certain, so you should come by tomorrow,” Sakiguchi all but ordered. “I’ve got the address and directions on how to get there written down here, and I’ll be expecting you to show up at noon.”

“Bossy little twit,” one of the customers at a nearby table muttered into her cocktail and Fushimi wondered how much trouble he’d be in if he gave her a free drink for that.

“We’ll be there,” Kusanagi said defeatedly. “Provided that we can fit it into our schedule.”

Their schedule happened to be wide open, but Fushimi still felt like kissing the man for that little caveat. First of all, it gave them a possible out, and secondly, it implied that Sakiguchi’s haunted cabin was low on their priority list- something that would surely rankle someone as self-important as their new client.

Sakiguchi huffed, then added, “Oh, and make sure you bring the full team. My sister’s also a fan, so she’ll be coming by to meet you guys. She likes that scaredy-cat guy in particular; do you think he’d be willing to give her his number?”

Fushimi had been getting ready to take orders at a table that was pointedly ignoring the fiasco, and he almost broke his pen and crumpled his order pad hearing this guy so blatantly try to set Yata up with someone (because it had to be Yata that Sakiguchi was referring to). Whatever, at least he could comfort himself with the fact that Kusanagi had said before that Yata was gay, so this sister of Sakiguchi’s didn’t stand a chance.

“Sorry, but we keep a strict policy against fraternizing with clients,” Kusanagi replied, and at this point Fushimi was just about ready to label the bartender a hero. “It would be unprofessional.”

“We’ll see about that,” Sakiguchi had the arrogance to say, and then handed over a slip of paper before turning and leaving the bar, all without ordering a single thing. Asshole.

Unfortunately, they were still taking said asshole’s case. A quick search on Kusanagi’s phone
showed that their client’s family rubbed shoulders with some pretty important people, making it hard to refuse him, and besides, all the bleeding hearts of Homra wanted to go help the poor ghosts stuck at this cabin. And so, the next morning, Fushimi found himself arriving at the bar at 10:30 so that they could be sure they’d make it to the client’s cabin by noon.

The drive took them out of the city and into the woods. The roads they took twisted and turned, and it was probably picturesque if you went for that sort of thing. It was also just long enough to be rather boring. Eventually, they arrived at the cabin, and wouldn’t you know it, what that entitled brat Sakiguchi called a cabin was, in fact, a lodge. It wasn’t as big as the mansion the book ghost had been in, but it had two stories and probably had a half a dozen bedrooms.

Fushimi was a little surprised at first when Yata didn’t get out of the van, but then he remembered that, in the early cases he’d done with Homra, that had been the norm. He was mildly relieved by it in any case, since Fushimi had felt apprehensive about Yata walking with them into an unknown situation where there could be multiple ghosts. Not that he didn’t think everyone would do their best to protect the possessible redhead, he just… worried. As he had been doing ever since the hospital case. It was getting on his nerves just how much of his brain was dedicated to being concerned for Yata these days, and if this was what having a crush was like, he felt he’d been much better off without wasting brain cells on such matters.

They’d actually arrived early, so Fushimi nearly had to bite his tongue off to hold back a retort when Sakiguchi greeted them with, “Ugh, finally! I thought you guys would never get here!”

Kusanagi seemed to be gritting his teeth for the same reasons, and so Reisi was the one to step forward and offer up a diplomatic greeting of, “We apologize for the inconvenience, the drive is marginally lengthy.”

“Yes, well,” Sakiguchi said disinterestedly, sneering slightly at Reisi.

Despite his best efforts, Fushimi clicked his tongue in annoyance. Because really, how could he not? The noise instantly drew Sakiguchi’s scowl, which vanished into a peculiar combination between a grimace, a leer, and a friendly smile.

“Well hello there,” Sakiguchi said, pushing Reisi to the side a sashaying up to Fushimi, still looking like he smelled something awful. “I don’t remember you being in any of the videos Jungle did with Homra. Are you new?”

“Fushimi’s a medium who has been working with us for research purposes,” Kusanagi lied smoothly, his previous case of self-induced lockjaw miraculously cured. He stepped between Fushimi and Sakiguchi, all smiles as he took over. “But let’s not waste any more of your valuable time with idle chit-chat, shall we? Anna do you sense anything?”

Unfortunately, Sakiguchi wasn’t so easily deterred.

“Research, eh?” he asked, sidling around Kusanagi and taking Fushimi’s arm in his own. He leaned in, causing Fushimi to lean away as much as he could in turn. “What sorts of things are you researching? I’m all ears.”

“My research involves drawing ghosts to me and then placing them in nearby vessels. Objects usually, although people will do in a pinch,” Fushimi lied with a pointed look at the client, hoping he would take a hint. He pried the arm off for extra measure, but Sakiguchi just leaned even closer.

“Sounds fascinating,” Sakiguchi purred in such a way that Fushimi was certain the other man hadn’t heard a word he’d said.
“Saruhiko,” Anna’s voice cut through the air, a warning that he’d been lax with his mental shields again and was hurting her with his murderous intent. But since she said no more, Fushimi used it to his advantage, walking over to her and saying, “What is it, Anna?”

“You forgot to grab one of the charms from the van,” Anna replied, her face impassive and her voice calm, as if she really was reminding him of something that had been previously arranged and not giving him an excuse to escape the client for a few moments.

“Oh right, how silly of me,” Fushimi deadpanned back. It wasn’t as convincing as Anna, but it wasn’t like he’d ever claimed to have great acting skills. He headed back to the van and slid open the door, then leaned inside and pretended to be rooting for something under his seat.

“Are there any rules against murdering a client?” he grumbled.

“Course there are. They might become just another ghost for us to deal with, plus they can’t pay us if they’re dead,” Yata snorted. He paused, then added in a mischievous tone, “But if you need any help hiding the body, let me know.” Fushimi looked up to meet Yata’s grin with one of his own.

“Y’know, maybe you should stay out here with me,” Yata said after a moment, his eyes darting to the side and a faint blush rising on his cheeks. “I mean, it’s not that safe for you, either, right?”

“I think the main danger today will be how much that man tries my patience,” Fushimi grumbled. “I’ll manage.”

“Well, I guess,” Yata said tugging on his beanie. “Looks like they’re going in, you should join them.” He slumped back in his seat as Fushimi straightened, and for a moment, Fushimi entertained the notion of actually going along with Yata’s suggestion and staying in the van. But even as he thought it, he heard Totsuka’s voice calling back for him, actually using his name for once. Perhaps Totsuka could sense that in this situation, the use of a ridiculous nickname was unforgivable. If Sakiguchi picked up on that moniker… Fushimi almost shuddered at the thought.

“Okay, see you later,” Fushimi said awkwardly, closing the door and leaving the van behind. As he joined the others, Sakiguchi fell into step beside him, asking “Sooo, Saruhiko was it? Strange name. And your last name is Fushimi. No relation to Fushimi Kisa, by any chance? My uncle— not Shinichi, I meant my uncle Norimasa- he does a lot of business with Fushimi Kisa. Lovely woman, and excellent taste in wine.”

Fushimi’s jaw clenched more and more with each word that came from Sakiguchi’s mouth. Yes his name was strange. He could thank that man for that one. And while he was indeed related to that woman he preferred not to be reminded of the fact, as did she. And to hear her called a “lovely woman”? Ha! Fucking laughable.

“Anyway, Saruhiko- may I call you that?- I was wondering if you would like to join me for dinner tonight. I’ve got reservations at Taiguile restaurant, they’ve got excellent seafood soup and I’m sure you’ll enjoy it. I’d be happy to treat you.”

“I have work tonight, and I don’t like seafood,” Fushimi replied flatly.

“They’ve got other dishes too,” Sakiguchi pressed. “And as for work, just take a night off, it’ll be fine.”

“Maybe, but I’m also not sure how my girlfriend would feel about it,” Fushimi said, hoping that pretending to be straight and in a relationship would be enough to deter Sakiguchi. He had a picture of Douhan on his phone that he could use in a pinch. It wasn’t a very flattering photo, and he only
had it in case he needed some blackmail against her, and perhaps he should delete it since he’d realized they were friends, but it might be enough to bail Fushimi out. And if not, a few quick texts and she would probably agree to pretend to be his girlfriend so long as he paid her back somehow.

“She could come to, I don’t mind,” Sakiguchi said oozily, and Fushimi wanted to cringe.

“Well I do,” Fushimi gritted out.

They proceeded through the house, Anna and Mikoto apparently wanting to sweep the whole place for ghosts before they got to work. As they walked, Fushimi did his best to ignore Sakiguchi’s further attempts at being an absolute cretin and seek out any residue from the corners of his eyes, but he wasn’t very successful in either endeavor. Mikoto kept sniffing, and Anna’s eyes wandered, taking in every last detail. After they made a circuit of the place, they reconvened near the entryway for a quick game plan meeting. It was hard to say whether it was intentional or not, but somehow they ended up in a huddle that managed to exclude Sakiguchi.

“There’s a few ghosts here, not just the two were mentioned to us,” Mikoto grunted. “Passives, all of ‘em.”

“They all came here to die,” Anna said. “I can feel it. They wanted to spend their last days somewhere nice. They’re not upset about anything, they’re just a little lost. They’ll need help finding their way, but that’s all we need to do.”

“Except since they’re passives, it could mean a bit of a wait,” Kusanagi sighed. “Right?”

“Excuse me,” Sakiguchi said, trying and failing to nose into their circle between Totsuka and Anna. “What are passives?”

“‘Passive’ refers to a ghost that is not always present near its tie,” Reisi explained. “There are many theories about where such ghosts go when they are not with their tie; some believe that they temporarily move on, others believe they can roam the world freely through a dimension that is often called ‘the ether’, a few believe the ghosts merely fall asleep, and then there are those who would claim the ghosts simply cease to exist when they are not around, which begs the questions of how they rekindle their existence, and why is some trace of them left behind? Obviously, the last theory doesn’t hold much water in my opinion.”

Sakiguchi blinked, not following, and Fushimi felt a flash of smugness at seeing the annoying man’s confusion.

“My personal hypothesis, however, is that passive ghosts are merely entering a mode of existence that conserves as much energy as possible, allowing them to increase their chances of successfully interacting with the living when they enter their active phase again,” Reisi continued. “It would certainly explain how the ghosts here were able to be seen by non-mediums such as your uncle and his tenant.”

“Er, right,” Sakiguchi said. “So, um, how long is this gonna take exactly?”

“Some passives can go years between manifestations,” Totsuka said helpfully.

“But- but these ones will come out sooner, right?” Sakiguchi sputtered.

“Yeah, they will,” Mikoto replied. “‘Cuz we’ve got our own personal ghost magnet.” He reached around behind Reisi’s back to clap and hand on Fushimi’s shoulder, and Fushimi scowled at him. “We’ll have ‘em outta your hair in a jiffy.”
“Excellent!” Sakiguchi said, clapping his hands. “So, why don’t you guys get started then?”

“We should go to a central location,” Anna said. “The upstairs living room would be a good place to draw them to.”

She led the way to the room in question, and gestured to an armchair for Fushimi to sit in. He made himself comfortable, then closed his eyes and spread his power through the house, tugging on every wispy shadow he came across. They were reluctant to obey him, and he had to reshape his power in his mind from ropes to spoons, scooping the ghosts up and carrying them over. Eventually, they were all in the room. He opened his eyes to see several sickly looking people hovering around him.

“It’s okay now,” Anna said. “You can rest. Don’t try to sleep, just let go. I’m sure you can find your way out.”

A feeling of peace permeated the room as she spoke, and one by one the ghosts vanished, content looks on their faces as they finally left.

“Wouldja look at that,” Mikoto murmured. “All the ghosts gone, and it only took about ten minutes. Nice going Fushimi.”

Fushimi allowed himself a small smile at the praise as he got to his feet. His head was turned downward, so most likely no one saw it anyway. He’d smoothed it away by the time he looked up, and was able to maintain his more usual bored expression as they headed back to the front of the house.

“There you are!” a young woman exclaimed as they proceeded down the stairs towards the front door.

“Well hello to you too, Hana-chan,” Sakiguchi greeted.

“Oh stuff it,” Hana replied. “I am really upset right now. I met that cute redheaded guy outside and thought he was giving me his number, only it turns out it was just some note for his friends. And then he up and drove away! Talk about insulting.”

“Up and-” Kusanagi breathed, cutting off halfway. He looked stricken. “But Yata-chan can’t drive, and I still have the keys,” he finished, his voice so small it could barely be heard. Thankfully, Sakiguchi seemed to have missed it.

“I’m sure you’ll get his number next time,” Sakiguchi soothed.

“Might we see this note you mentioned?” Reisi inquired politely, dismounting the staircase.

“Here,” Hana said, stomping over and all but shoving a folded piece of paper at him. Reisi unfolded it, and everyone from Homra craned their necks to read over his shoulder. Fushimi felt his stomach plummet like a rock as he read the words scrawled on the paper:

“Come and play with me, Little Monkey.”

Chapter End Notes

First off: in case it wasn't patently obvious, they're gonna be dealing with Niki now.
As such, things are gonna get a little dark. There will be further warnings as things come.
Second: Due to the aforementioned incoming arc, this fic is nearing the end. I still don't have a final chapter count, but I'd guesstimate 5-7 more chapters. Maybe. We'll see.
Third: Since I had some ideas that I ended up cutting since they weren't really necessary or helpful to the plot or character developments, I may end up writing them as a sequel. Possibly. I have other things I want to work on, so that will probably be on the back burner, and it may not be as appealing when I get back around to it. Again, we'll see.
And finally, a small thing from this chapter: the fictional restaurant mentioned, Taiguile, gets its name from the Mandarin Chinese for "too expensive". In other words, I imagine it to be a swanky, overpriced place.
Over the course of the next five minutes, Reisi and Totsuka convinced Sakiguchi and his sister to go ahead and leave, claiming that Yata would be back for the rest of Homra once he’d run an errand at a small store they had passed on the way to the lodge. Kusanagi tried calling Yata, but the medium’s phone was off. And Fushimi… Fushimi just tried to breathe through the sheer panic he felt.

There was no doubt who the note was from. And since the note had been given to Hana by Yata, that meant that the redhead was now possessed by Niki.

Despite all his fears of Niki, and all that Niki had done, Fushimi had never expected that Niki would possess anyone, even such a convenient host as Yata. After all, he had made himself scarce ever since Fushimi had first gone to Homra, so Fushimi had assumed that Niki was wary of the mediums, and maybe even afraid of them. Apparently, he’d assumed wrong.

Worse still was that Yata was supposed to be safe from all ghosts. Even now, he could hear Anna and Mikoto nearby, having a hushed conversation in whispers and hisses, trying to figure out how Yata could have gotten possessed from within the safety of the warded van.

Barely a minute after the Sakiguchi siblings’ cars had driven off, two new cars pulled up. The front doors of one car flew open, and Shiro and Neko sprang out, rushing to their sides. The driver of the other car, Kuroh, got out more sedately, a grave look in his eyes as he stood by his vehicle.

“I’m so sorry, guys!” Shiro exclaimed. “I was doing divinations, and there were some bad omens but I was having trouble interpreting them and by the time I figured them out, I realized that we wouldn’t get here until it was too late to do anything but give you a ride back to town.”

“I didn’t see this coming either,” Reisi replied, his mouth twisted bitterly. “I should have. But I did not foresee any danger for Yata if he stayed in the van.”

“Yeah, but you probably weren’t factoring Niki in when you made your predictions,” Fushimi said sourly. “He can always find the loopholes that other people miss.”

“Plus there’s always the chance that Yata left the van,” Kusanagi pointed out. “If he needed to use the bathroom, for example, he might not have wanted to call one of us for an escort. Or maybe he heard something or sensed something and decided to check it out.”

“Well, no use crying over spilt milk,” Totsuka said.

“Like Yata’d cry over that,” Mikoto snorted. “He’d probably celebrate instead.”

“Tatara is right,” Reisi said. “We need to get back to civilization and begin searching for Yata-kun. Fushimi, do you have any ideas where our target may have gone or what he might be up to?”

“What he’s up to is easy,” Fushimi replied darkly. “He’s always up to no good. As for where, it’s
almost definitely *that place*, but that won’t necessarily help us.”

“Why not?” Reisi asked.

“Because it’s fucking huge, and he knows it like the back of his hand. And while I know it too, no doubt he’ll set up booby traps all over the damn place.”

“Well we can’t just leave Yata with him,” Mikoto growled. “We’re getting him back.”

“But that’s exactly the point,” Fushimi spat, feeling hysteria bubbling up inside him and making him want to giggle maniacally. “He’s the prize. If we want him back we’ll have to play Niki’s little games. His rules went into effect the moment he managed to possess Yata.”

“I’m not sure I want to play some game where a hostage is the motivation for playing,” Kusanagi said.

“Of course you don’t,” Fushimi snorted. “You never want to play one of Niki’s games. The only person who ever has any fun or ever wins is him, everyone else is just a pawn for his entertainment. But he always finds a way to make you dance the way he wants.”

“Wait, if no one wins, then what happens to Yata-san?” Shiro asked.

And there was the question that had been plaguing Fushimi’s mind since the moment he saw the note. Because Fushimi had a terrible feeling that he knew the answer, which was nothing good.

“Don’t worry, it’ll be fine,” Totsuka said, and Fushimi wanted to slap him. Yes, optimism was Totsuka’s thing and all, but there were some situations where there just wasn’t a silver lining to the storm clouds, and this was one of them. “After all, if you really thought there was no winning against this ghost, you would never have come to us, right?”

Fushimi blinked. That was… surprisingly logical. He had sought a way to get rid of Niki, and had been led to Homra. And despite all the obstacles that prevented him from being rid of *that man*, he was still with them. Somewhere, deep down, he had managed to scrounge up those irrational emotions called “trust” and “faith”, and had placed them with Homra. He believed that Homra could help him be rid of this ghost, and if he believed that, then it must mean that he also believed they could win against Niki. And if they could do that, then maybe Yata would come out of this one okay after all.

Or maybe he was allowing himself to succumb to Totsuka’s positive-thinking delusions, but at the moment, he didn’t really mind. It certainly felt better than being pessimistic.

“Well, whatever the case, nothing will happen as you sit here and mope,” Kuroh said. “Let’s head back, and you can use the drive to think about what can be done.”

Conceding Kuroh’s point, the group divided up into two cars. Mikoto, Reisi, and Totsuka all went with Shiro and Neko, while Fushimi accompanied Kusanagi and Anna to Kuroh’s car. Before they’d even pulled out, Kusanagi had created a group chat so they could brainstorm despite the separation. Most of what was submitted to the chat was absolutely worthless, though there were a few ideas that weren’t bad even if they wouldn’t work. Like when Totsuka suggested calling Douhan to help them figure out what sorts of things Niki had set up in *that place* for them; it was a good idea, but it wouldn’t work because *that place* was simply too large for Douhan’s ability. Even if she stretched her power to the max, she still wouldn’t be able to get the whole building, and what she did get would be so overwhelming that she wouldn’t be able to sort out anything useful.
In the end, as soon as they arrived at the bar, Fushimi requested some paper and began to draw up blueprints of that place from memory. The blueprints weren’t perfect, not by a long shot, but they at least showed the floorplan of the house. If their dimensions were a little bit skewed here and there, well, it was a bit much to expect someone to remember the size of rooms he hadn’t seen in years with precision. With this, their group would be able to spread out to search without everyone who wasn’t with Fushimi getting lost.

Kusanagi was just taking pictures of the finished blueprints to put on the group chat when Fushimi’s phone rang. He had no doubt who was calling him. Apprehensively, he picked up the call and put it on speaker, placing his phone on a table as he waited with bated breath for the person on the other end to speak. Given Niki’s love for theatrics, it didn’t take long.

“Once upon a time,” Niki began, and Fushimi’s stomach churned to hear Yata’s familiar voice taking on those sickening sing-song inflections. While Yata tended to bring his pitch up and down a lot as he spoke, it usually stayed high or low for a little bit. Niki, on the other hand, bounced from pitch to pitch like a child playing hopscotch, crescendoing and decrescendoing like a professional orchestra (Fushimi wouldn’t be surprised if that man had studied music at some point—he’d studied most subjects for a little bit before growing bored of them—and all his knowledge of music was reflected in mellifluous voice). The frequent changes in pitch sounded so very different, that only on the occasional syllable where Niki’s pitch matched Yata’s natural style of speech did Fushimi remember it wasn’t his father brought back to life speaking into the phone.

Niki hadn’t continued, meaning he wanted a response.

“I could hang up you know,” Fushimi said, his voice low and dangerous and hopefully prompting that man to get the hell on with it. Niki responded by laughing, too high compared to Yata’s laugh. Of course he wasn’t fooled by Fushimi’s lie. They both knew that Fushimi would never have answered in the first place if Niki didn’t have something of value to him, something that would make him listen.

“Once upon a time,” Niki repeated, his voice bubbly with the last of his manic giggles, “there was a man who had a little monkey. The man loved his monkey very much, and together they would play all day long. What fun they had! The man was never bored when his little monkey was around.

“But one day the man fell ill. The whole time he was ill, his monkey never once came to see him, how cruel.” Niki’s voice took on a mock injured tone, and Fushimi could just picture the way Niki would shake his head. “The man died all alone, no one to care for him. Despite all the love he’d given his monkey, his plight was ignored. Luckily for the man, his monkey could see ghosts, and so the man knew that even after he died he and his monkey could still play together. But the monkey ignored the man, even though he could see him. He even went and befriended some nasty ghost-eating lions to keep the man away.

“But the man was understanding, and he was willing to forgive his monkey. Because he knew his monkey better than anyone, and he knew that his monkey would never manage to get along with the lions. The monkey could pretend to himself all he wanted, but in the end, the man was all he had.

“Still, the monkey needed to be punished for being so mean, and so the man decided to give him a taste of his own medicine. He selected a new toy from among the lions, for there was a member of their little pride that was actually a weak little kitten, the perfect toy for the man. He lured the kitten away from the pride, and tamed it into an obedient little pet. And so, little monkey, tell me, how does this story end?”
The others had all crowded around the table as Niki spoke, and their expressions were all either horrified, furious, or both. He took in their faces- Anna’s pursed lips, Reisi’s grimace like he’d sucked a sour candy too long, the wide eyes of Shiro and hunched shoulders of Neko, the grim contenance of Kuroh, Kusanagi’s clenched jaw, the burning glare of Mikoto, and Totsuka’s smile that was plastered on with a sort of enraged tension. Yeah, Fushimi could relate to what they were feeling. He held up a hand when he saw a few mouths opening to spit out retorts, taking a deep calming breath before he replied.

“Well, if the monkey truly had fun with the man, then surely he’d go back to the man and beg for forgiveness,” Fushimi said, the lightness of his voice surprising even him. Usually he had to feign detachment to keep his true emotions from breaking free, but Totsuka’s earlier words had him feeling surprisingly… confident. Maybe Fushimi alone would never beat Niki, but he didn’t have to. Homra would help him. Maybe it was only to save one of their own, or maybe it was because helping people and kicking some ghost butt was simply what they did, but Fushimi entertained the notion that maybe it was because they considered Fushimi one of their own as well, and would have backed him up even if Niki were alive and didn’t have Yata as a hostage.

Niki laughed again, cackling madly at Fushimi’s careful answer. It implied that things would go how Niki wanted, while admitting that they wouldn’t. “If” was never a lovelier word to Fushimi.

“The game is hide-and-go-seek,” Niki gasped between peals of laughter. “You’re it. Don’t keep me waiting, little monkey. If you do I might accidentally break my new toy in my boredom.”

A chill ran down Fushimi’s spine as Niki abruptly hung up.

“Wow, what a touching father-son relationship,” Kusanagi said sarcastically, disgust for Niki very much evident in his tone.

“He certainly seemed to think so,” Kuroh commented lowly.

“He’s insane,” Fushimi informed them bluntly. “Which that alone makes him a menace, but he’s also a genius so he’s twice as dangerous. Anyway, we’d better get moving, you heard what he said about waiting.”

“Wait, when he says ‘break his new toy’...” Shiro began.

“He won’t do that,” Fushimi said quickly, trying not to give the others too much time to think about the words. “He wouldn’t want his fun to end too quickly.” What he didn’t say was that Niki was an expert on inflicting pain, had studied medicine specifically for the purpose of figuring out the best ways to hurt a person while damaging them as little as possible, and had gotten plenty of practice in perfecting his methods.

“Fun is never something that should come at the expense of another human being,” Reisi said. “One man’s pain is not something that should bring about another man’s pleasure.”

“Unfortunately, we don’t live in an idealistic world where people always do what they should,” Kusanagi pointed out wryly. “Anyway, I agree with Fushimi, we should get moving.”

They piled into the cars outside, and Fushimi gave directions for Kuroh, Shiro’s car following after them. All too soon they were pulling up at the end of a familiar gated driveway, the manor Fushimi had grown up in only about a hundred feet away. He had hoped never to come back here again.

Fushimi knew that woman still owned the place, but no one had lived here since he’d moved out after high school. It had only been a couple of years, and yet the state of the place suggested it had
been abandoned for much longer. Then again, in a way it had, and Fushimi had been abandoned along with it.

All in all, the place looked haunted, which was probably yet another reason Niki had chosen it. It would be a place full of unpleasant memories for Fushimi, good memories for Niki himself, and had a perfect spooky atmosphere to lend to the latter’s theatrics. The sight of it made Fushimi want to vomit with disgust.

The gate was closed, but it wasn’t chained shut so it would be simple enough to open it. Not that a chain would have been much of an obstacle for Fushimi. Taped to the bars was another note, this one reading “Ready or not, here I come”.

“Isn’t that what the person seeking is supposed to say?” Totsuka asked, frowning in confusion.

“Do you really think that he won’t be seeking us even as we seek him?” Fushimi asked. “Simply letting us hunt him down and get what we want is no fun for him: he wants to watch us struggle.”

“Y’know, I’m beginning to understand why you’re such a pessimistic ass all the time,” Kusanagi hummed.

“What are you talking about, I’m a perfectly pleasant person,” Fushimi deadpanned back. “I just have to put on an act to keep from making Totsuka look like a grump.”

“We need to go in,” Anna interrupted abruptly, and Fushimi almost jumped at the sound of her voice given how silent she had been since they left the lodge in the woods.

“Right, let’s split up then,” Kusanagi said. He turned to Reisi, and asked, “Pairs sound good?”

Reisi nodded. “That does seem most logical,” he agreed. “Though of course Shiro and his shikigami will stay together.”

“Just make sure there’s a medium in each pair,” Shiro cautioned.

After a bit of shuffling, they paired off so that Kusanagi and Mikoto were a pair, and Anna and Totsuka were together, leaving Fushimi paired with Reisi. They then took out the map Fushimi had drawn and sectioned it off so that they wouldn’t all end up searching the same areas. Satisfied, they entered the gate, and walked up to the front door. After they tested it and found it unlocked- not that Fushimi had expected it to be locked, since that woman could never be bothered with such things and that man wanted them to be able to get in- Fushimi and Reisi split off to walk around to the garden out back in order to make sure that both sides of the house were properly covered.

The garden had once been artfully landscaped, the plants carefully cultivated to ensure maximum beauty. Wilting blooms were immediately clipped, weeds were pulled almost before they even dared to show their leaves, sickly plants were quickly disposed of, and the shrubs were pruned to perfection at all times. It had been maintained with exacting standards, so that when that woman hosted guests of any kind, she could show off her extravagant flower beds as if she had anything to do with them, the same way she showed off her house and her possessions and her son. She couldn’t tell a daisy from a delphinium, she didn’t actually live in the house, most of her possessions had been bought for her by interior designers, and she sometimes had to be reminded of her son’s name, but they were all things that could contribute to her image so in front of others she was proud of them.

Nowadays though, as they turned the corner of the mansion, the sight that greeted them was one of ruin. There were few flowers, and it wasn’t just the autumn season. The shrubs were wildly
overgrown, and the few topiaries had completely lost their shapes. Grass had taken over many of the flowerbeds, and the remaining plants had a scraggily look to them, like survivors of a battle who, battered and exhausted, came stumbling to back to camp after a mission gone wrong, having fought their way through waves of enemies just to make it to safety. All in all, it was obvious just how long it had been since the garden had been attended to.

As they entered the house, Reisi was thankfully quiet, both in his movements and his commentary. His only words were ones that were necessary for ensuring the two of them were on the same page, and nothing more. But it was a blessing that could be easily overlooked, as the others were sending constant commentary via text message. The group had agreed to keep in touch regarding their movements and any discoveries, which meant that Fushimi couldn’t afford to simply ignore the barrage of texts that had been coming into their group chat since the others had first entered the house, but of the dozens of texts that had been sent, only a few had actually been relevant. Yes, he knew that the fountain room was extravagant, and no, he did not have an explanation for why anyone would need a fountain room in their home; he’d always found it ridiculous himself. And he was more than aware that the main staircase was impressive, because almost everyone who came to the house said so. And there was really no need for Shiro to send them all a picture of Kuroh’s face when he caught sight of the rats that had apparently moved in once the human residents had moved out (if not sooner, since Fushimi, the primary resident, had only ever used a small portion of this great big mansion). If anything, the constant texts weren’t just annoying, they were a dangerous distraction that their group really couldn’t afford.

Fushimi and Reisi started on the top floor and worked their way down, knowing that elsewhere some of the others would be doing the opposite. It was difficult for them to try and keep their search patterns irregular enough that Niki wouldn’t be able to predict them, but still thorough enough that they actually stood a chance of finding him. Progress was slow-going because of the need to keep an eye out for any obstacles, whether due to decay or Niki’s intervention (indeed, Fushimi and Reisi had to skirt around rotted floorboards in multiple spots, and had to disarm a motion sensor that would have triggered a device that would have dropped a bucket of marbles on them, and the others had reported trip wires and a pellet gun and some sort of noxious gas that caused wooziness but seemed otherwise harmless). Also slowing things down was the fact that Niki had rearranged the furniture so that it cast lots of deceptive shadows, causing the need to take the time to carefully examine each room they entered.

Shiro was the first to report a sighting of Yata, or rather, Niki in Yata’s body, but he and his shiki had been unable to pursue due to the accidental activation of a trap that functioned much like the airbag in a car. Mikoto and Kusanagi spotted their quarry next, but he managed to slip away from them as well.

After half an hour of searching, Fushimi and Reisi had made their way down to the second floor when a text came in from Totsuka, reporting that he and Anna had cornered Niki in a room the guest suite, which was also on the second floor, and just around the corner from where the bespectacled duo were. After the previous two escapes, their group wasn’t taking any chances, so Fushimi and Reisi immediately headed for backup. They rounded the corner and headed down the hallway, peeking through doors and listening for voices that would help them identify the room Anna and Totsuka had found Niki in. About a third of the way down the hallway, they identified a room where Yata’s voice could be heard wheedling, “But Anna, it’s me. Really!”

For a second, Fushimi’s heart soared, thinking that Yata had managed to fight Niki off, but then Anna’s reply reminded him just what an actor Niki could be.

“Stop it. I know you aren’t Misaki. You can’t fool my eyes.”
Fushimi and Reisi located the correct room and slipped inside, taking positions on either side of the door as they surveyed the room. It had once been a bedroom, but the bed was long gone. There was a large wardrobe against one wall with a sheet draped over about half of it - the kind of wardrobe you’d think one could travel to a magical land through like in a book. There were a couple of arm chairs and a divan that were also covered in drop cloths, and a desk in the corner that was leaning badly, having deteriorated with age and disuse. Across the room, there was a door to an en suite bathroom. Totsuka stood in the empty space where the bed would have been, once upon a time, looking dazedly shocked, while Anna faced Niki/Yata in front of one of the arm chairs.

“A-Anna, it’s me, I’ll prove it,” Yata’s voice whined, and again, Fushimi almost believed it. It certainly seemed like Yata in front of him. But if Anna said otherwise, Fushimi would trust her. Niki had tricked him plenty of times before, and besides, Anna’s senses were much sharper when it came to ghosts and things.

“Shut up,” Anna ordered, her voice angry. “Get out of Misaki’s body.”

In front of Fushimi’s eyes, Niki seemed to peel away from Yata, like a snake’s skin being shed at high speed. Anna turned to Fushimi, and he already knew she was going to ask him to use his power to keep Niki from running away or repossessing Yata, but she never got the chance to do so. Just as she opened her mouth, Reisi made a noise like he was trying to give a warning, but it was too late. Niki reentered Yata’s body and lunged forward, pinning Anna to the wall with a hand at her throat.

“Tsk tsk,” Niki giggled chidingly. “You forgot to set a time limit, little girl. Ah, but that voice is even more troublesome than I would have thought, let’s silence it for a bit, shall we?”

The hand at Anna’s throat squeezed, causing the girl’s eyes to water and Fushimi’s blood to boil with surprising rage. How dare Niki use Yata’s body to hurt Anna? Just because they were near Fushimi, did that mean Niki thought he had a right to mess with them and add to their traumas too?

“Niki, you-” Fushimi began, but he didn’t know what he was planning to say. Any insults would only amuse Niki. Besides, at the sound of his voice, Yata’s body turned to face Fushimi, and any words were lost at the sight of the expression that definitely wasn’t Yata’s. Niki/Yata’s hand loosened, allowing Anna enough air to cough violently, and his eyes lit up in a way that only ever meant trouble.

“Little Monkey!” Niki exclaimed, delighted. “You came!”

“Yes, because getting rid of ghost bastards like you is my job now,” Fushimi somehow found the words to reply. Niki merely laughed, too high pitched and hysterical.

“Ha! As if you could ever get rid of me!” Niki cackled, and then his laughter suddenly stopped and his voice deepened, looking Fushimi in the eye with a leer. “Face it, Little Monkey, you need me. After all, without me, who knows what nasty ghosts you might have encountered up until now. You never would have been able to handle some of the ones I kept away while you were little. And don’t forget who it was that kept that little brat from possessing you a month ago, never would have fought him off on your own, no you wouldn’t.” Niki shook his head.

“If I’m weak to ghosts, it’s only because you locked my ability the way you did,” Fushimi spat, causing more peals of laughter to escape that man. Niki wiped a tear from his eye with his free hand, the other still holding Anna by the throat, though thankfully no longer squeezing the breath from her.

Pounding footsteps echoed in the hallway outside, and Reisi tugged the door open, waving an arm
to draw whoever was there. Seconds later, Mikoto burst in, Kusanagi on his heels. The two took in the sight of Yata’s body holding Anna, and barrelled over, Mikoto decking Niki/Yata and sending him to the floor as Kusanagi went to Anna and began checking the girl for injury as she wheezed for breath. Mikoto loomed over the possessed medium, eyes blazing with an internal wildfire.

“If you don’t get out of my brother right this instant,” Mikoto growled, but Niki interrupted with more acting before the threat could be finished.

“Mikoto! Oh thank fuck. You’ve gotta help me!”

Mikoto just set his jaw and bent over to lift Niki/Yata by the shirt.

“Hm, not fooling you?” Niki asked, not at all perturbed. “In that case, I think I ought to let you know a little something. Anything you do to this body, your precious little brother will be the one to feel it, not me.”

“Oh yeah?” Mikoto asked lazily, as if he weren’t practically vibrating with fury. “And what makes me think I’ll believe that?”

“Go ahead and try it,” Niki sneered, and his face shifted in an odd way, so that the left eye went blank, then refocused, suddenly filled with fear. Yata’s fear. Mikoto actually hesitated, and Niki’s grin widened. “See? A ghost that knows what he’s doing can choose what he does and doesn’t control. I have control of this body, but I’ve left the inconvenient little things to the original occupant, like the pain receptors. It took a little bit of work to perfect it, but I’ve already confirmed that I don’t feel any of the pain anymore!” Niki threw back his head and laughed again, and Mikoto shoved him away in revulsion. The moment Mikoto let go, Niki skipped back to a safe distance.

More footsteps could be heard in the hall, and Niki/Yata suddenly sighed.

“Ah-ah, why must everyone interfere with my fun?” Niki moaned. “This is not how the game is supposed to be played, it’s too boring this way. We’ll have to change the rules. Let’s see… From now on, only my Little Monkey gets to play. If anyone else comes for me, then I’ll hurt this body, how about that? I’ll go and hide now, so try and find me more quickly this time, Monkey!” With that, Niki/Yata vaulted over the divan and darted over to a square on the wall, an old laundry chute. Before anyone could stop him he’d yanked it open and climbed inside, making his escape just as the rest of their group entered the room.
The chute had barely swung shut behind Niki/Yata when Mikoto pivoted and glared at Fushimi.

“Oi, you don’t mind if I kill that fucker, right?” he growled.

“Like hell I’d mind,” Fushimi snorted, crossing his arms. “I just want him gone. I don’t have any sadistic desires to watch him suffer and be exterminated in the most brutal way, but at the same time, I hardly think he deserves a nice happy ending. Do whatever you have to, but after everything he’s done- possessing Yata, choking Anna, and everything I’ve experienced at his hands myself- I have no mercy left for that man, paternal relation or not.”

“Normally this is where someone would call you a cold-hearted piece of shit,” Kusanagi mused. “But after what we came in on, I think you get a free pass. Though don’t you need the ghost to unlock Fushimi’s ability?”

“Nah, killing him should work for that too,” Mikoto said. “Their power can’t stick around once they’re gone.”

“Er, could someone tell us what we missed?” Shiro asked, his eyes darting from person to person in confusion. Behind him, Kuroh maintained a much more stoic expression with his hands clasped behind his back, while Neko leaned forward and held a hand over her eyes like she was shielding them from the sun as she surveyed the room. “What’s this about choking Anna?”

“The ghost did that,” Reisi said. “She tried to use her power, and while she succeeded, he found a loophole.” He paused and even though Fushimi wasn’t looking at Reisi he could feel the psychic’s gaze on him as Reisi added, “Just like Fushimi-kun warned us about. I’m afraid I didn’t see the result until the exact command had been uttered, and well… there was little time to give warning. That’s twice today I have failed us.”

“Don’t be so hard on yourself,” Mikoto said, walking over to clap a hand on Reisi’s shoulder. “Your ability has all kinds of limitations and shit, right? Caveats and nuances and, I dunno.”

“You really should leave the cheering up to Tatara,” Kusanagi commented. “You really suck at it.”

“No, I do appreciate the effort,” Reisi said, smiling. “But speaking of Tatara... Tatara, are you okay?”

Fushimi hadn’t really noticed until then that Totsuka had yet to move an inch from where he’d been standing, and his expression hadn’t changed at all. His eyes were focused on thin air, and it almost made Fushimi wonder if Totsuka wasn’t possessed now as well. But no, that was supposed to be nearly impossible, and how would a ghost have possessed him with Anna right there?
Totsuka still didn’t respond, and Mikoto and Reisi stepped towards him cautiously, crossing the room until they were at his side, and Mikoto said, “Hey, Tacchan?”

Totsuka started, then leaned into his boyfriends, his body tense.

“I know he wouldn’t say that,” Totsuka said cryptically, his voice shaky and ever-so-slightly wet. “I know that I’m the only one who thinks that way, but it sounded just like Yata.”

“Tatara?” Reisi asked, gently pressing for details.

“Anna was in the room across the hall, within shouting distance,” Totsuka said. “We figured if either of us found anything, we’d make some noise, get the other to come running, but that way we could search even more. I saw him and texted everybody, but before I called for Anna, he started talking. Saying how he didn’t know where he was or how he got there and how glad he was to see me. Even if… Even if it was… someone worthless and unwanted, like me. A leftover, cast aside by everyone. Not good enough for-”

“Shut up please,” Reisi said, his voice feigning pleasantness while being sheer ice.

“Reiko, I know it’s not true, really;” Totsuka sighed. “I know it is, but it’s the kind of thing I can’t help thinking. And hearing someone else, someone close to me say it, it makes it harder to ignore. Even if it wasn’t really him saying it.”

“We’ll tell Yata about it after and he’ll grovel and make you a pineapple upside-down cake to apologize,” Mikoto said. “And probably try to teach you to skateboard again, and offer to lend you all his favorite video games. He’s even asked why I bother with Reisi when I also have you.”

“Silly, our relationship works precisely because it’s the three of us,” Totsuka said, laughing weakly.

“Yeah, well, he’s an idiot,” Mikoto said, patting Totsuka on the back as Reisi stroked the cameraman’s hair.

“Anyway, I kinda zoned there for a bit I guess,” Totsuka finished.

“At that point I took over,” Anna rasped. “He tried to convince me he was Misaki, but I could tell he was lying. I tried to make him-”

“That’s about where we came in,” Fushimi interrupted, not wanting Anna to strain her abused throat. He quickly explained what he and Reisi had witnesses with far more succinctness than anyone else from Homra would have used, sticking to only the most necessary facts. He turned back to Shiro and his shiki as he finally finished the explanation they had asked for and almost not gotten.

“He also threatened to hurt Yata if anyone other than Fushimi goes after him,” Kusanagi added.

“So what now?” Totsuka asked.

“We could always go after him cloaked by Neko,” Shiro suggested.

“It won’t work,” Reisi said immediately, shaking his head. “I don’t know what will go wrong, only that it will end in avoidable misfortune. I can only presume that our opponent is too canny and will notice even the slightest of mistakes.”

“That would be Niki,” Fushimi grumbled. “He’d actually kinda liked the Neko idea. Facing Niki
alone… scared him. He’d been up against Niki plenty of times before, and each experience had left him with new cracks in his self-worth, renewed self-loathing, and doubts about his own sanity. This time would be even worse, because Fushimi had probably started to finally heal from all the emotional damage he’d suffered as a child, and Niki was taking advantage of that. “What if you still had Neko cloak keep everyone from being seen, but I went in first to distract him?” Fushimi added.

Reisi took a moment to ponder this.

“We’d have to be careful,” he finally replied. “But if you could find a way to get the ghost out of Yata, we might be able to pull it off. I’m sure you already know this, but watch what you say to him, Fushimi-kun. If he figures out you are stalling, this plan will fail.”

“Alright,” Fushimi nodded. “Anyone have any better ideas, or is that what we’ll be running with?”

“Well, I hate to be that jerk, but someone’s gotta throw it out there,” Kusanagi said. “When he says he’ll hurt Yata, how badly does he mean? Maybe we should just ignore his threats and go in full force.”

“No,” Reisi insisted, shaking his head. “The ghost knows that we can’t do much so long as he is possessing Yata-kun; we simply cannot harm our comrade. He’ll use that to his advantage, and we’ll end up with more instances such as what happened to Anna. If we do not heed his warnings, then we will all get hurt, not just Yata-kun.”

“And it’s not like we can just ditch him, which would be the other devil’s advocate suggestion,” Kusanagi sighed.

“Yeah no, not happening,” Mikoto snapped.

“I know it’s not,” Kusanagi protested, raising his hands in surrender. “I’m just saying we still need to consider the unpleasant options since there might not be a way to end this in a way that makes us happy. It might be too late in the game to get the best ending, so we need to take some risks to get a good ending and not the bad one, right?”

“Oh my god, he just referenced video games,” Totsuka gasped in mock horror. “You guys are really rubbing off on him!”

“Just to be clear, abandoning Yata-kun will certainly not lead to a good ending,” Reisi informed them gravely. “It may even lead to some deaths, which others present would be framed for. Under no circumstances can we do such a thing.”

“In that case, it seems our only option is going with Fushimi’s suggestion after all,” Kusanagi said.

“Couldn’t we lay some traps of our own?” Shiro asked. “Like, maybe Kuroh could jump down from above, or-”

“If it’s in conjunction with Fushimi’s plan, it is a possibility, but we will not have the time to coordinate traps of our own before the ghost runs out of patience,” Reisi interrupted.

“So it looks like I’m going to have to go find him then,” Fushimi grumbled. With a click of his tongue, he turned to leave, but was stopped by Anna’s voice rasping his name.

“Saruhiko, you’ll be alright,” she informed him. He tilted his head just enough that he could see her and gave her a wry, skeptical smile. He very much doubted he’d be alright. In fact, he wasn’t sure “alright” even fit on his emotional radar. But even if it did, this was Niki he was going against,
and Niki had the person Fushimi had allowed himself to develop feelings for in his clutches. It was a bitter irony, that he’d come to Homra to get rid of Niki but had instead given Niki the ability to hurt him more than ever before.

Not for the first time, Fushimi found himself privately ruing the fact that he’d fallen for Yata. He couldn’t help pinching himself, to make sure that he was awake and that this wasn’t a nightmare. The pinch hurt, and he clicked his tongue again: it would have been nice if none of this was real, but no, he couldn’t get that lucky, could he?

Fushimi made his way down to the basement, starting his search where the laundry chute would have emptied. Though now that he was down here, he knew where to go. He may not be able to outsmart Niki, but he could predict him to a certain extent. After all, Fushimi knew Niki better than anybody. Very few people got to see the real Niki, and those that did rarely saw the facade he hid behind, but Fushimi was well versed in both sides of that man. He may have only seen Niki sparingly, but he still saw that man with more frequency and for longer durations than anyone else. He knew Niki, just as Niki knew him.

There was a cellar in the northeast corner of the basement in which that man had once locked Fushimi. Niki had arrived home unexpectedly, and had unhurriedly chased the then six-year-old Fushimi through the house, pretending to be casually searching for his son rather than deliberately herding him to yet another nightmare. He’d even pretended to be oblivious that Fushimi was in the cellar when he’d locked it, just as he’d seemed to be oblivious to the gruesome-looking ghost that had been inside. The ghost hadn’t been able to harm Fushimi, but it had certainly terrified him, and had given him nightmares. It was the last time Fushimi had allowed himself to be scared of ghosts, at least until he came to Homra and started coming across ones that were actually dangerous, such as the one he was about to face.

Sure enough, when Fushimi entered the cellar, he saw Niki waiting, hovering above Yata’s slumped over body where it leaned limply against the wall. As Fushimi entered, Niki reentered the body, and Yata’s eyes opened as his face formed Niki’s pout.

“I know I said not to keep me waiting too long, but don’t you think that was a little too fast, Monkey?” Niki complained. “Haven’t you ever heard of suspense?”

“I’ve never been a fan of doing what other people want me to,” Fushimi replied, slowly reaching out his power and cocooning it around the body in front of him, preparing his trap to drag Niki out. He needed to be subtle, but forceful enough to guarantee that his prey would not slip out of his grasp. He would never get a second chance with Niki.

“Trying to be a rebel?” Niki asked, arching an eyebrow as he pulled out a switchblade. “It doesn’t suit you, Monkey.” He flicked out the knife blade and began tracing patterns on Yata’s arms with the back of it, smiling as he watched the movements of the metal.

“It’s not rebelling, it’s simply not giving a damn about anyone else,” Fushimi replied, trying not to watch the knife as well. He felt like he needed to swallow, but there was something caught in his throat.

“Oh, but you do care, Little Monkey, foolish as it is,” Niki smirked, pausing in his patterns to look Fushimi in the eye. “You care about those mediums, including this idiot. I thought I’d taught you better than that, but I suppose you are too stubborn for your own good. Emotions are such ugly things, Little Monkey. You’re better off without them. We don’t need emotions, you and I, so you should just give up on them.”

“They certainly are inconvenient, I’ll give you that,” Fushimi admitted. “But tell me, why were
“Why wasn’t I in this body when you entered the room?” Niki asked, anticipating the question. He held the knife loosely as he gestured with his hands to accompany his speech. “Simple. I want this body to last. It’s a unique opportunity, and I refuse to waste it by overtaxing this body and causing it to die. So long as I take little breaks here and there, I should be able to make it last for quite some time, perhaps even longer than its normal lifespan. You might even say I’m doing this idiot a favor, extending his life and giving him the chance to do far greater things than he’d ever manage on his own. It’s a shame about the height though.”

“I don’t know, I think it’s rather nice, getting to be the one looking down at you for once,” Fushimi replied, and he couldn’t resist a grin when he saw the flash of irritation in Niki/Yata’s eyes. Niki wasn’t anywhere near as emotionless as he believed.

“Careful, I might decide I don’t need you,” Niki warned, brandishing the blade. “I’ve begun to grow rather fond of this new toy, you know. It’s so… fragile, in the most delicious ways.” He shivered, grinning, a glazed look in his eyes as he brought the knife back to Yata’s skin, this time lingering around his throat. “It gets damaged so easily and yet still manages not to break completely; a new sort of challenge compared to you who always seeks ways to protect all your little cracks. I could have such fun with this one…”

“They’re all like that,” Fushimi pointed out, and mentally cringed. Oh sure, why not just serve all of Homra up to Niki on a platter?

“Oh, I know,” Niki leered, once again pausing the knife. “I’ve seen this idiot’s memories. Some of them are quite entertaining. I found the ones with you in them particularly intriguing. You should have seen your face when he punched you, Little Monkey! Though I must give you credit, the way you’ve gotten this moron wrapped around your finger is a work of art. He’s willing to pour his soul out to you and even believes himself to have feelings for you, all because of a single conversation. Bravo, Monkey, bravo.”

Fushimi tried to keep a straight face, but he wasn’t sure he succeeded. As always, Niki found a way to get to him. If Yata trusted him, it was not because of an act of manipulation, it was because he’d earned it, just as Yata had earned his. He hated Niki for implying that it was all a calculated scheme, because it wasn’t. And Yata’s openness wasn’t something to mock either. And the suggestion that Yata might also have a crush on him… Honestly, Fushimi wasn’t sure what to think about that, because it would be just like Niki to have picked up on Fushimi’s own feelings and to have deliberately lied to convince Fushimi those feelings were reciprocated just to torment him. He would just ignore that part for now. If he heard it from Yata directly, then he would believe it. But only if he heard it from Yata.

“But that’s enough chit-chat, don’t you think?” Niki continued, bored with the silence that had fallen as Fushimi processed his thoughts. He lowered the knife, holding it in front of himself and idly flicking the blade in and out of its casing. “Don’t think I can’t feel you trying to pull me out of this body, Monkey. It won’t work you know. Surely that wasn’t your plan?”

“And if it was?” Fushimi replied, raising an eyebrow and trying not to panic. Okay, Niki had figured him out. So what? There had to be a way he could still do this.

“Monkey,” Niki gasped in mock astonishment. “I’m so disappointed! That was really your plan? I would have expected better of you!”

“I haven’t had a real challenge in years,” Fushimi retorted. “What did you expect? I’m out of practice.”
“Yes, I suppose that’s true,” Niki conceded. “People with intelligence like ours are far and few between. The only one who even came close is that Hirasaka girl, though I suppose your new friend Munakata might also be a worthy opponent.”

“Hirasaka may be smart, but she doesn’t like bothersome things,” Fushimi pointed out, grateful that he hadn’t broken the habit of calling his friend by her last name yet. “And while Reisi is definitely above average, I’m not sure you should be so quick to dismiss the others. Kusanagi seems to be pretty wily himself, and Totsuka can be annoyingly perceptive when you least expect it. His surprise logic is not something to be taken lightly.”

“I appreciate the warning,” Niki drawled with more sarcasm than Yata had used in the months Fushimi had known him. “But I know you’re stalling, Monkey.”

“Of course I’m stalling,” Fushimi snorted, feeling oddly confident and brash. “You discovered my original hastily thought-up plan, so now I’m rushing to try and come up with a new one which might actually work. It takes time to come up with a counterattack that is actually worthwhile against an opponent like you.”

“What’s this, now you’re trying flattery?” Niki teased.

“Unfortunately for me, it’s the truth,” Fushimi spat. Niki grinned.

“Hm, alright, I’ll allow it,” Niki said, nodding and crossing his arms. “You can stall as long as you want to, so long as you keep me entertained.”

“In that case, allow me to tell you a story,” Fushimi replied, feeling a smile blossoming on his own face as a plan of sorts began to form. He sat down on the floor, cross-legged like some elementary school kid. He remembered the position being a lot more comfortable as a kid, now that he thought about it.

“Oh goodie,” Niki giggled, half mocking, but half intrigued and amused. He was listening.

“Once upon a time,” Fushimi began, wondering how the hell people told stories usually. Storytelling was a social activity, and one that usually involved small children, so it was completely alien to him. Still, he had to try, since he’d already begun. “There was a monkey. The monkey was locked in a cage, all by itself. However, this monkey was very intelligent, and so one day it picked the lock on the cage and escaped.”

“How clever,” Niki commented, using the knife to clean his nails.

“Not particularly,” Fushimi replied. “It was the obvious thing to do, and it wasn’t any real challenge. It was just a matter of the monkey bringing itself to actually do it. But anyway, the monkey left its cage and went out into the world. It traveled alone for a while, but eventually, it met some other animals. At first, it didn’t like the other animals, but the monkey had found out it was being hunted and the other animals could keep it safe. But as it spent more time with them, the monkey began to actually kind of like the other animals. They were annoying, certainly, but they were also more complicated than they seemed, and the monkey liked seeing the deeper sides of them. They were also honest in a way that other animals weren’t, and genuinely kind.”

As he spoke, only half-thinking about what he was saying, Fushimi’s mind was whirling, trying to find some sort of solution to this situation he was in. He had to find some way to catch Niki off guard, had to do something unexpected. It might not accomplish anything, but it might also create the opportunity for the others to make their move, assuming they noticed the chance he created.

“It was indeed,” Fushimi agreed, nodding, still trying to think of something Niki wouldn’t expect. But Niki could always anticipate his every move; every dodge, every recoil, every attack. No matter how he tried to fight back…

Or he could just not fight back.

“But that was part of what fascinated the monkey so,” Fushimi continued. “Their kindness was useless, and only ever got them hurt, yet they never hesitated. It defies all logic, don’t you think?

“Anyway, the monkey stayed with the other animals, and they became friends, but then one day the hunter attacked one of the animals that wasn’t the monkey and took it away. The only way the animals could get their friend back was if they defeated the hunter.

“Now, the thing about this story is, there’s two ways it could end,” Fushimi informed Niki, looking him in the eye. He could see Niki’s curiosity there, and behind that, he thought he could see a flicker of Yata’s fire trying to burn its way through.

“Which are…?” Niki prompted.

“Well, the first ending is that the hunter wins,” Fushimi said simply. “The animals can’t get their friend back, and the monkey can’t escape the hunter. Game over.”

“That does seem like a likely ending,” Niki said, nodding along. He flicked the knife closed and pocketed it, having lost interest in the tool since he wasn’t using it to inflict pain.

“Perhaps,” Fushimi said. “But in the second ending, the animals win. They send the monkey to distract the hunter, while the rest of them set a trap which the hunter doesn’t find out about until too late.” He stepped up close to Niki, until they were barely a foot away from each other. “Personally, I like the second ending better,” he added, leaning in. “So, which ending do you think it’ll be? Care to place a bet?”

Now Niki was the one whose mind was whirling, and Fushimi could even see it. It was thrilling, to have set Niki off balance for once instead of the other way around.

“You’re bluffing,” Niki finally said, but his voice was uncharacteristically uncertain.

“Yes,” Fushimi admitted. “I am. But whether you meant to do so or not, you managed to take something from me that I refuse to lose, and therefore, I will beat you, no matter what it takes.”

He could see the laughter bubbling up inside Niki, thinking he’d just been given a golden piece of information that he would be able to hold over Fushimi’s head. He really didn’t get it. But then again, Fushimi hadn’t really expected him to. Love was something Niki would never feel, after all.

Before Niki could laugh, Fushimi made his move. He threw all of his power around Yata’s body, pulling on it for all he was worth, while at the same time, he leaned forward and pressed a kiss to Yata’s lips.

Chapter End Notes

... sometimes really stupid things seem like good ideas, particularly when you are
desperate.
In other news, I'm gonna go crawl in a hole and hide from shame until the next chapter gets posted.
In hindsight, Fushimi wasn’t sure where the idea of kissing Niki/Yata had come from. But he was sure that wherever the idea had come from, it was probably some cliche fairy tale or romance story, with some idiotic “love conquers all” theme going for it. So while it had seemed a good idea at the time, later on, the memory would never fail to make him cringe.

Surprisingly, it actually worked. He felt the exact moment where Niki’s shock overwhelmed him, and where his power overcame the ghost’s barriers and severed his connection to Yata’s body, causing the medium to fall to the floor as he was freed of Niki’s control.

Just to be safe, Fushimi backed away from Yata, pulling Niki along with his power as he went. He only made it three steps before Kuroh phased through the ceiling above them, unsheathing his sword as he dropped down to Niki’s side. Niki thrashed against the hold Fushimi’s power had on him, but before he could break free Kuroh had stepped behind him, wrapping one arm around Niki’s torso while the other held the naked sword to Niki’s throat, keeping him in place.

Fushimi barely heard the hurried footsteps of the others entering the room. He was vaguely aware that most of them rushed to Yata’s side to check on him, but for the most part, his attention was completely honed on Niki. He didn’t trust Niki not to have something up his sleeve, after all, and besides, he knew that he needed to watch whatever came next. He had to see what it was like, and he felt that in some strange way, he owed it to the man who had been such a huge shadow on his life. And also he’d never believe Niki was really and truly gone unless he saw it himself. Even then, he was sure he’d still have his doubts.

Mikoto’s hand clapped down on Fushimi’s shoulder, making him jump, but Fushimi’s eyes still stayed on Niki. Oddly, he felt his sixth sense expanding, making him aware of the positions of the other occupants of the room even as they weren’t within his line of sight.

“Kuroh’s got him now,” Mikoto said. “You won’t need your power, so pass it on to me. It takes a lot of energy to get rid of a ghost like him.”

“It’s all yours,” Fushimi murmured back, his voice sounding distant and foreign to him. He held out a hand and when Mikoto took it, he pushed his power into the other medium. He felt Mikoto move away, felt Anna and Shiro both pass their power on to Mikoto before Mikoto went to Yata’s side and again, power passed between them. Mikoto’s usual wildfire presence surged, a blaze so hot that Fushimi felt like he would be burned away until there was nothing left of him. He wondered if that was what would happen to Niki.

Niki appeared almost relaxed, but Fushimi knew he was just trying to lure Kuroh into a false sense of security. Kuroh held firm, though, not letting his captive escape. Niki finally began to squirm as Mikoto stepped up to him, but to no avail.

“Ya know what I’m ‘bout ta do to ya?” Mikoto asked, his hands in his pockets and his posture
leaning back slightly as he looked at the ghost he was about to destroy.

Niki laughed, and he seemed to be saying something, though of course only Anna and the shikigami could hear. Mikoto glanced at Kuroh, who shook his head.

“It’s nothing worth repeating,” the shiki said stiffly.

“Ah, I kinda figured,” Mikoto grunted. He sighed, then shifted into a fighting stance, one leg back and his left arm down while his right arm was crooked with its fist at his hip. In a swift movement, he lunged, his right arm snapping forward to strike palm-first into Niki’s chest.

Fushimi’s heightened sixth sense felt all the power Mikoto had borrowed knifing into the ghost with that strike. Niki’s mouth flew open, and while Fushimi couldn’t hear it, he felt the scream, like in a movie when a blast shatters windows into countless tiny shards of glitter. It almost bowled him over, but he couldn’t move, not even to fall. As Mikoto drew his hand away, a dark hole appeared in the chest of the ghost, its edges glowing as it spiraled larger and larger, consuming the ghost from within. Niki writhed in Kuroh’s grasp, his eyes rolling until they met Fushimi’s. The look that Fushimi saw there…

It wasn’t hatred. Just as he didn’t love, Niki didn’t hate either. And besides, Fushimi had been his favorite toy. No, Niki didn’t hate him. There was malice there, but that was because malice was Niki’s default emotion. But there was something else, something that left bile in Fushimi’s throat.

Betrayal.

Niki had the gall to look betrayed, as if Fushimi was the cruel one here. Fushimi wasn’t the one who had used his son as a plaything for more than a decade. He wasn’t the one who had taken pleasure in causing injury, who had picked at every insecurity, who had turned people’s traumas against them. Niki had been an absolute bastard to Fushimi for so long, and yet he still acted like Fushimi owed him something, like they had some sort of father-son bond.

Fushimi merely glared back as Niki was swallowed by the hole in his chest, watching until there was nothing left of the ghost but a black ooze that slowly dissolved like smoke on a windy day. He felt a lightness in his chest as the lock on his ability was undone with the passing of its creator, and felt a sigh leave him. This was it. The moment he’d been waiting for, where all his ghost problems were solved in one fell swoop. He wasn’t sure whether he should say “goodbye” or “fuck you” as a farewell, so he settled for neither. It wasn’t like Niki would ever know what he said after all.

Only once Niki was completely gone and Kuroh had finally sheathed his sword did Fushimi look away. There were an uncomfortable amount of eyes on him, surveying him as if waiting to see if he would snap. For the first time since he came to Homra, he felt judged, and it made him want to scream, want to do something that would give them an actual reason to be judgmental. He shifted uncomfortably, until Anna came up and took his hand.

“You did well Saruhiko,” she said. “Thank you.”

He blinked, confused, but a glance showed the others nodding along and smiling at him. It seemed the judgment had all been in his head.

“You don’t think I’m inhuman for not being too upset by his annihilation?” Fushimi asked. Anna shook her head, and he could just see Mikoto exaggeratedly rolling his eyes.

“You have no obligation to care about someone who was clearly abusive,” Reisi said gently, and again it caught Fushimi off guard. Sure Niki had been terrible, but despite the obvious wrongness
of his treatment, Fushimi had never thought of it as abuse. He knew that abuse wasn’t just taking beatings from angry or drunk family members. And had anyone else described experiences such as the ones he had with Niki, he probably would have recognized it as such. But he had somehow never connected the word with the torture Niki had put him through for all those years.

“You’re right,” Fushimi agreed, finding himself smiling as well. “I don’t.”

A strangled noise caused everyone to turn their attention on Yata, who was being helped to his feet by Neko. Apparently the ginger hadn’t noticed who was helping him up until his eye level had reached Neko’s upper torso, and so he was left embarrassedly staggering away, his face bright red.

“Glad to have you back,” Kusanagi remarked drily.

“Yeah yeah,” Yata grumbled. “It wasn’t my fault, y’know. Stupid ghost tricked me.”

“Because that’s oh so hard to do,” Totsuka teased.

“Hey!” Yata whined.

“Allright, alright, let’s quit arguing and head on home,” Kusanagi interjected. “By the way, Yata-chan, you wouldn’t happen to remember where that ghost left my van, would you?”

“Garage,” Yata grunted back. “It was upstairs, I think? There was like a kitchen or something nearby? And-”

“I know where the garage is,” Fushimi interrupted.

“Huh? Oh yeah…” Yata said, his gaze avoiding Fushimi all of a sudden. That stung, but Fushimi supposed he couldn’t blame Yata. He did look all too similar to that man after all.

“Hey Little Monkey?” Yata’s voice said, and Fushimi automatically tensed. Only one person used that nickname, and Yata had been possessed by said person not even five minutes prior. But the tone was wrong, and he could see Yata’s face, his expression full of a sincerity that was so completely Yata that it couldn’t be Niki talking. Could it? “Your dad was one fucked up piece of shit.”

Okay, that was definitely Yata. What a relief.

“On that point, we most certainly agree,” Fushimi stated, then turned on his heel and led the way out of the cellar. He pointed the way to the front door for Shiro and his shiki, and then took the others to the garage to retrieve Kusanagi’s van. It took a little while before they were ready to go, mostly because they had to listen to about ten minutes of Kusanagi bitching and moaning over some new dents and scratches in the paint that the van had acquired with Niki/Yata behind the wheel.

The ride back was silent, since no one wanted to spur more complaints from Kusanagi after his previous rant. Shiro and his shiki were already waiting for them at the bar, though Fushimi felt that they could have just gone home already. He was getting more and more comfortable with everyone at Homra, but that did not include the onmyouji and his sidekicks. Maybe someday, but not just yet.

Inside the bar, everyone moved into their usual posts, and Fushimi found himself automatically seating himself in one of the booths as well. As soon as he sat down, he realized that like this, with everyone in their habitual spots here in the bar, he felt relaxed. It wasn’t exactly home, but it was somewhere he was welcome and had a place.
Kuroh was the only one who did not obey the pattern. Instead of taking position at Shiro’s shoulder, he retrieved a first aid kit and approached Yata.

“Are you in need of any assistance?” the shiki asked.

“Nah, I’m-”

“That ghost said he hurt you,” Kusanagi pointed out.

“Implied, actually,” Reisi corrected. “But yes, a check-up is definitely in order at this point.”

“It’s not that bad,” Yata grumbled, rolling his eyes. “He didn’t wanna damage me. Or at least, that’s what he was thinking when he stopped himself from breaking any fingers. He wanted to though.”

“But there are injuries?” Reisi asked, having seen through Yata’s attempted deflection.

“It’s just a scratch, really,” Yata insisted, but obediently lifted his shirt to reveal a long cut along his left side. There were a few hisses at the sight of it, but Kuroh prodded it a couple times before announcing, “It looks worse than it is. As he said, it seems the ghost did not wish to cause his host too much injury.”

“That’s it, just a scratch?” Fushimi asked, skeptical. He knew what Niki was like, after all. Niki didn’t have much self-control when it came to the pain of others.

“He just bent my fingers back mostly,” Yata said, shrugging. “Enough to hurt, but he made sure not to break ‘em, so they should be fine.”

“He really was holding back,” Fushimi murmured, more to himself than to anyone else.

“On the outside, maybe,” Yata mumbled, shuddering. “But as for the rest… I’ve never seen a mental prison like the one that guy made me.”

“Mental prison?” Fushimi asked.

“Er, yeah, that’s what I call ‘em,” Yata explained. “See, when ghosts possess you, there’s different things that can happen to the part that’s you, you know? Like, me being me, ghosts can simply push me out, but there’s other things they can do, things that can also happen to anyone else who gets possessed. They can put you to sleep, kinda, or they can sorta like, wall you off I guess? It’s like you’re watching everything you do through a window. But if they make you sleep they have to keep you asleep, and if they wall you off, you can always break out.

“So what some ghosts do instead is they trap you in a memory. Or it’s usually a memory anyway, though it can also be a desire or a feeling. It can be yours or theirs, but they wrap it around you and it’s really hard to find your way out. Sometimes you can’t even tell that what you’re seeing or feeling isn’t real. You’re just trapped, which is why I call it a mental prison.”

“That makes sense,” Fushimi said.

“So what was so odd about the mental prison this guy made?” Kusanagi asked.

“It was…” Yata shuddered again. “For one thing, he didn’t just use one memory. He used… I don’t even know how many, they just sorta blended together. Mine, his, it was just as mixed up as when I had all those ghosts in my head last time. And he could like, change the way I saw the memories? Like, sometimes I was him, and sometimes, I… wasn’t.”
“So you’re saying he could adjust the perspective of a memory?” Reisi inquired. Yata nodded. “Intriguing. Go on, was there anything else?”

“Not really,” Yata said, shaking his head. “It was just really fucked up, that’s all.”

“I see,” Reisi said thoughtfully. “And earlier, you said that the ghost tricked you? Would you please be so kind as to elaborate as to what you meant by that?”

“Er, well, I kinda… thought it was Saru?” Yata said, blushing. “Like, I was in the van, and I forgot to bring any games so I was just sitting there bored, and then I heard Saru calling me and saying you guys needed me inside, so I got out and he was already walking away so I went to catch up only when he turned around, it wasn’t Saru. It was that ghost bastard.”

“I apologize for the resemblance, but unfortunately, my genetics aren’t something I can change,” Fushimi stated blandly. He wasn’t sure how he felt about the way Yata had adopted the nickname that man had used for him. It was decidedly uncomfortable, but he could still feel his heart flutter at being called so familiarly by Yata of all people.

“Since when do you call that guy ‘Saru’?” Mikoto asked, as if reading Fushimi’s mind.

“Huh? I did?” Yata asked, his face trying to blush and go pale at the same time.

“Yup. Three times,” Totsuka pointed out.

“S-sorry,” Yata mumbled, turning to Fushimi. “I didn’t mean to be rude, honest! Just, ghosts don’t always leave when they leave. Like, he’s all gone and all, but he’s still kinda there a bit?”

“What he means is that his thoughts can be influenced somewhat by ghosts who had very strong thoughts when they possessed him,” Shiro clarified.

“It’s fine,” Fushimi said, praying that the heat in his face wasn’t a return blush. “Totsuka’s already deadened me to ridiculous nicknames, so it’s not like you calling me that will be that much of a bother.”

“So we can all call you fun nicknames now, or just Yata?” Mikoto asked, and Fushimi glared at him.

“H-he probably means everyone, it’s not like I get special treatment or anything right?” Yata stammered, then laughed hollowly.

“And if I did mean just you?” Fushimi asked, arching an eyebrow. He was rewarded with a shocked look on Yata’s face as the hand that was reaching up to nervously scratch his head froze. His jaw hung open, and he blinked a few times before reddening and turning away.

“Saruhiko, I think Misaki’s had enough trouble today without you teasing him,” Anna scolded hoarsely. “Besides, you still haven’t told us how your ability is now that your ghost is gone.”

“It’s what it should be,” Fushimi replied, grinning. “I can make the switch now, so I should be able to repel them.”

“So a few practice sessions at the cemetery and you should be ready to leave us, huh?” Kusanagi mused. “Just when I was getting used to having two full-time chefs. Oh well, these things happen.”

Fushimi froze. That’s right, with his ability unlocked, he had no reason to stay here anymore. Unless…”
Unless what, he actually became a full-time member of Homra? Yeah right. He’d be happy to serve his last plate and wipe his last table. And the ghosts would always be bothersome, so there was nothing here for him.

Nothing but friends, that is. He’d miss them, if nothing else.

And maybe helping the ghosts wasn’t so bad. Like Mikoto had said, it was good insurance for once he himself died, right?

“I guess it’s just a matter of figuring out how long it’ll take you to master the rest of your ability and then we can decide on your last day and all that,” Kusanagi continued. “I think you should probably have one practice session before we make anything final.”

“Yeah, of course,” Fushimi said, trying not to feel like his insides had magically disappeared.

There wasn’t much to say after that. Once Yata’s first aid was completed, Shiro and his shiki finally left, and Fushimi ended up following soon after. He went straight home and immediately started up one of his favorite games, but he couldn’t seem to get into it. After he died the fifth time (he never died playing video games), he finally gave up and stared blankly at the continue screen, trying to quell the painful emotions rising up in him. Niki was gone, but he felt more tormented than ever, all because of the prospect of leaving Homra.

Wasn’t that just typical? The moment he found a place to belong, it was already time to leave it behind.
Not surprisingly, Fushimi ended up calling Douhan. Right now, he couldn’t make sense of things unless he said them aloud, and he was not about to start talking to himself. He’d been told in the past that he was a shitty conversationalist, after all. And, since he couldn’t talk to anyone from Homra about all this, Douhan it was.

She showed up at his place with a bag full of several different bread items from a convenience store, two liters of his favorite artificially flavored grape soda, and a bottle of vodka. If he were a bit more imaginative and prone to exaggerations, he would’ve claimed she looked like an angel. As it was, he told her that if she was trying to put him in her debt, it was working.

“So what’s the emergency this time?” she asked as they settled in front of his coffee table since he didn’t have an actual table anywhere. “Did you botch things when trying to ask him out? If so, please forgive me if I can’t manage not to laugh at the details. I’ll do my best to be supportive, but some things are just too funny not to laugh at.”

“It’s not about him,” Fushimi said, rolling his eyes. Then he clicked his tongue, because that wasn’t strictly true. “Well, maybe a little, but it’s not just him?”

“I’m listening,” Douhan said, pouring two cups of soda and dosing one with vodka for herself. She selected a melon bun and unwrapped it, biting into it as she waited for Fushimi to talk.

“I- We took out my father’s ghost today. He possessed Yata, and-”

“Woah woah woah, back the fuck up,” Douhan insisted, raising a hand to her mouth when she nearly sprayed crumbs. “Did you just say that your shitty old man showed up, possessed your crush, and got taken out, all in one evening?”

“I suppose you want to know exactly what happened?” Fushimi asked.

“You’re damn right I wanna know what happened. I have to know if we need some more serious comfort food.”

“Thanks, but we don’t,” Fushimi said. “It was actually not nearly as bad as I would have expected from that particular situation.” He proceeded to fill Douhan in on what happened, the two of them working their way through the breads and slowly reducing the contents of the bottles. She listened silently, until he got to the part about his desperate idea.

“Okay, stop right there,” she said as soon as he finally admitted to the kiss. “There are so many things that need to be said about this, but for now, let’s start with the most important one. Have you ever heard of a thing called ‘consent’?”

“Yes, of course I’ve heard of-” Fushimi began, rolling his eyes. That was a mistake, since his eye roll meant he failed to see Douhan pick up a nearby cushion and wallop him with it.

“Then why the hell did you kiss him in a situation like that, you dunce!” Douhan demanded. “Do you really think a possessed person can give consent? Not to mention he doesn’t always remember things from when he was possessed. I am so disappointed in you right now, you coward!”

“First off, I needed to get that man out of him by any means necessary. Second, it was the first idea I had that seemed like it might actually work. And third, I was kissing Niki just as much as I was kissing Yata, so do you really think I’m thrilled about the experience either?”
“You still owe him an apology,” Douhan said. “But anyway, what happened after that?”

Fushimi continued to regale her with Homra’s adventure, finishing off with the scene at the bar and the subsequent feelings that had prompted him to call her.

“I see,” Douhan nodded as he finished. “Letting go is always hard, Saruhiko. But it’s not like goodbye has to be permanent or anything. You can always go back as a customer, and besides, that crew doesn’t seem like they’ll just let you walk out without a second glance.”

“But it won’t be the same,” Fushimi sighed. “That bar, Homra… it was starting to feel like a place where I belong. I’ve never had that before, not anywhere. And now I’m going to lose that.”

“So find a new place to belong,” Douhan suggested. “You did it once, you can do it again. You’ve been growing a lot recently, this is just another step of that.”

“You make it sound so easy,” Fushimi grumbled.

“It could be,” Douhan said lightly. “As it happens, I was thinking about asking you to come work with me. I’ve been getting a good amount of business, and I could use a partner now, particularly one who’s as good with technology as you are. You wouldn’t have to deal with clients directly all that much, field work would be entirely at your discretion, and you could choose your hours and easily take your work home if you wanted.” She took a sip of her drink, then raised her eyebrows at him over the brim of her cup and added, “And you know, that flexible schedule would come in real handy if Homra ever needed the help of a ghost magnet on any of their cases.”

Fucking Douhan. She knew him way too well. What she was offering him sounded pretty ideal.

“I’ll think about it,” Fushimi said, picking up his own cup and drinking to hide a grin. When he lowered the cup again, his face was bland as he asked, “So will I need to submit a resume and attend an interview and all that?”

“Oo, that’s tempting,” Douhan said, tapping her chin with one finger. “You’d probably squirm so much during the interview, it’d be great. Unfortunately, our HR department, aka me, is a little short-staffed at the moment and doesn’t really have time to come up with interview questions and do all that stuff. Let’s just say you’re hired and leave it at that. If you decide you want the job, that is.”

Of course he wanted the job, and she knew it. But the nice thing about Douhan was that she could be pretty good about playing along- at least, she could when she felt like it.

“So, I’ll be working for you now, huh?” Fushimi murmured. “Talk about sinking to the bottom.”

“Oh please, like working at a bar is so much better than being the IT guy for a PI office,” Douhan snorted. “Besides, I said I could use a partner. Not an underling or sidekick or whatever. You’d be working with me, not for me.”

“Still sounds absolutely terrible,” Fushimi deadpanned back. “Alright, I’ll do it.”

“Great,” Douhan said. “Now, since you left your game on and I’ve had nothing to look at for the past hour but that game over screen and your face, I suggest a night of drunk gaming. Sound good?”

“Not at all,” Fushimi said, reaching for the bottle of vodka so he could add some to his soda. “Let’s do it.”
The sound of his phone ringing the next morning (or afternoon, he wasn’t really sure what time it was, other than that it was way too bright) made him regret his decision. He fumbled for it and swiped the screen to answer, and after a couple tries managed to get his mouth and throat to work together just long enough to say, “No,” then hung up. With a groan, he moved an arm over his eyes.

“Remind me again how you convinced me that getting drunk was a good idea?” he asked Douhan.

“Funny, I was about to ask you the same thing,” Douhan replied. At least she sounded almost as miserable as he felt. “Ugh. Good thing I always carry some painkillers, there’s no way I’ll ever manage to get any half-decent hangover remedy down your picky gullet.”

“Give ‘em,” Fushimi said, stretching a hand out in the general direction of her voice.

Of course his phone decided to start ringing again just then. He swiped it open again and groaned, “I’m not available. Don’t call back,” and hung up again. “Fucking telemarketers,” he grumbled. He could have sworn he’d blacklisted his number to all telemarketing companies, but there were always new ones popping up so maybe it was time to hack some more records.

“Here you go,” Douhan said, passing him a small plastic bottle. Oh yeah, the painkillers. He sat up reluctantly, moaning with the way his head spun and the aches and stiffness of sleeping on the floor overnight. He was never doing this again.

It took him three tries to unscrew the lid on the painkillers, but he finally managed it, and proceeded to down two pills with stale grape soda straight from the bottle. There was very little left, so it was highly unlikely he’d be sharing with anyone. He took a second swig and swished it around his mouth, trying to relieve the foul aftertaste of the previous night’s drinking.

“Charming,” Douhan commented. He just grunted back. He was hungover, what did she expect? Refined manners worthy of a dinner with royalty?

His phone chimed with a text coming in, and he winced, but at least it wasn’t another phone call. He grudgingly unlocked his screen, his eyes watering at the brightness of the pixels as he tried to make sense of the text swimming in front of him. He realized his glasses weren’t on and squinted to find them, and, once they were located, shoved them on his face.

“What the fuck?” he mumbled, frowning.

“What is it?” Douhan asked, leaning over to read over his shoulder.

“Sorry to have disturbed your sex or whatever, but Anna wanted to know if you’re up for some training.” The text was from Mikoto.

“Would it be inappropriate to ask if his brother’s groaning gave us away?” Fushimi asked Douhan.

“Very,” she replied.

“Yeah, I suppose you’re right,” Fushimi grumbled. “It’s too early for this shit.”

“It’s already half past one,” Douhan pointed out.

“Fine, I’m too hungover for this shit.”

“Amen to that,” Douhan agreed.
“I suppose I should just call him back,” Fushimi sighed. “If I just text he’ll probably keep teasing me about supposedly having sex.”

“I know I would,” Douhan smirked back. He scowled at her and made the call, holding the phone away from his ear until he heard a, “Yeah?” from the other end of the call.

“For the record, I was not having sex, I’m just hungover,” he drawled into the phone.

“W-w-w-w-w-” someone stammered. Someone who sounded suspiciously like Yata. He double checked the call info, but he had indeed called Mikoto.

“Yata, why are you answering Mikoto’s phone?” Fushimi asked.

“Why the hell are you calling him to tell him if you were having sex?!” Yata yelped back, his voice way too loud for Fushimi’s still throbbing head. There was a coughing fit from the other end, and then the sound of a nose being blown.

“No, I called him to tell him that I’m hungover since he was the one who assumed the reason I didn’t want to answer the phone was because I was having sex,” Fushimi explained patiently. “I did not call him to discuss my sex life, and I definitely did not call him to have people shout at me and make my hangover more miserable.”

“Oh, uh, sorry,” Yata whispered, then sniffled. It wasn’t actually any better than the yelping.

“So where is he, if you’re answering his phone?” Fushimi asked.

“Taking a dump, I think,” Yata replied, and now that his voice was at a normal level, Fushimi noticed the telltale thickness of clogged sinuses. “I can tell him you were just hungover though, and not… doing that other thing.”

“Thanks,” Fushimi replied, only half sarcastic. “Also if you could tell him that there’s no way I’m dealing with any ghosts while my head feels like it’s about to fall off, that’d be helpful too.”

“Got it,” Yata said. He fell silent, but Fushimi could still hear him breathing on the other end.

“Hey, um, Saruhiko? I can call you that right?”

“Do I get to call you Misaki?” Fushimi asked.

“Er, I guess I don’t mind that much if it’s you…” Yata mumbled. “But um, Saruhiko, I um, I wanted to say sorry.”

“For what?” Fushimi asked.

“Well, like I said, that guy was pretty fucked up, and well, the memories he used for the mental prison, they were mostly memories of, uh…”

“Of me?” Fushimi asked. “The things he used to do to me?”

“Y-yeah,” Yata replied, his voice choking in a completely different way now, like he was on the verge of tears. “I’m so sorry, Saruhiko. That stuff is private, and it’s not fair for me to know about it without you telling me. And the things I- I mean he- did… That shouldn’t happen to anyone. And what I said about him switching things up in the memories, I meant that… sometimes I was him, and sometimes I was you. And I don’t know which was worse, being treated like that, or actually doing that to someone, and- and fucking enjoying it. I’m sorry.”
“You don’t need to apologize, none of what happened yesterday is any fault of your own. That was all Niki’s fault, and maybe mine for not… not warning you guys as to what he was like, and for not insisting that we dealt with him sooner.” And now Fushimi’s voice was getting thick too. But he supposed Niki would never be an easy subject to talk about. For either of them.

“Besides, if anyone needs to apologize here, it’s me,” Fushimi admitted, suddenly aware of Douhan sitting just a few feet away and looking over Fushimi’s video game collection with far too much interest for someone who only ever played video games on rare occasions. At least she was trying to pretend she wasn’t hanging on Fushimi’s every word. “When I was trying to draw that man out, I needed to take him off guard, and I needed to generate physical contact to increase the effect my ability would have on the ghost, and kissing was all I could think of to accomplish both. I shouldn’t have done that without your permission, and I’m sorry. If this were to happen again, I’d try and think of something else, I promise.”

“It’s fine,” Yata insisted quickly, then coughed some more. “I mean, I did kinda wonder if that was for me or for him but… I get it. So it was nothing special then? You- you wouldn’t wanna, maybe, I dunno, try it again, sometime?”

“I… could be interested,” Fushimi admitted. Because honestly? The kiss last night had sucked. And while Fushimi had no experience to speak of when it came to kissing, nor had he given much thought to the subject in the past, he was suddenly filled with the conviction that it could be great if done right. Like maybe if he was kissing Yata, and only Yata, and Yata were actually kissing him back.

“Uh, was that a yes?” Yata asked, and Fushimi almost laughed. At the very least, his lips curved upward in a smile that he couldn’t contain.

“You have to take me on a date first,” he replied. Somewhere at the back of his mind, he wondered where this new, brazen version of him had come from.

“I was getting to that!” Yata squawked. “Geez! So, uh, you wanna, maybe, come over sometime? Next weekend? I should be over this cold or whatever I caught ‘cuz I was possessed again by then. And I’d invite you to a movie and make it a proper date, but well… you know how it is. Ghosts are everywhere and all. But we could still watch a movie! Or play games, or-”

“Misaki, may I remind you that I can now keep ghosts from coming anywhere near me?” Fushimi pointed out. “And by extension, you, if you’re with me? But watching a movie at your place sounds better than going to some crowded theater. Just promise me that Mikoto will behave himself, okay?”

“Oh shit, I forgot about him and Anna,” Yata gasped. “On second thought, can we go to your place instead? They’ll tell everyone and make things super embarrassing!”

“My place doesn’t have any ghost protections. Yours does,” Fushimi stated.

“Yeah, but you can keep the ghosts away right?” Yata’s voice was nothing but hopeful. He sniffed again, which only added to the effect.

“Hmm, I don’t know, I haven’t practiced at all yet,” Fushimi drawled. “Maybe I need to do some training first.”

“Saruuuuuu,” Yata whined.

“You’re the one who asked me out,” Fushimi reminded him.
“Geh. Whatever, Mikoto’s back from the bathroom, so I’m giving the phone to him. Talk to you later, okay?”

“I thought you were gonna be nice and explain things to him for me,” Fushimi said.

“Tough luck,” Yata replied unsympathetically.

“For you, maybe, I’m hanging up,” Fushimi retorted, and did so.

“Someone’s got a da-ate,” Douhan sang as Fushimi lowered the phone.

“Oh shush,” Fushimi bit back, throwing a bread wrapper at her. He missed by a mile though, since bread wrappers are not very aerodynamic. Still, it was the principle of the action that counted.

The next day, Fushimi had his first practice for repelling ghosts. He and Anna drove to the cemetery as usual, and went for a walk among the headstones. She had him remain neutral at first, then they walked up to ghosts and she had him send them away. Even the most reluctant ones obeyed. It was easy, using his power now, almost effortless. He could even switch readily between drawing ghosts and repelling them, and could even set up a perimeter large enough to force all the ghosts out of the cemetery if he wanted to.

The practice ended early, with Anna congratulating Fushimi and telling him he could manage on his own now. His ability was fully under his control, and there was nothing more she or the others at Homra could do to teach him about it. For something that he’d been looking forward to for so long, it sure felt dissatisfactory to hear that. It just meant he could leave Homra behind, that much sooner, and while Douhan had given him a job offer that he wanted to take up, he still didn’t like the idea of leaving the bar and its staff members.

After the practice, Fushimi talked to Kusanagi and arranged his last day. They didn’t decide on a specific date though, since Fushimi wanted to stick around for one last case. He told Kusanagi it was because he wanted a chance to test his ability in a more practical situation, but that wasn’t the truth. He just wanted a reason to linger at the bar he’d gone to with such reluctance and which he had spent so much time at for the past couple of months. Not that he would ever admit that to anyone at the bar. And also he didn’t want his last memory chasing ghosts with Homra to involve the guy he liked being possessed by his psychotic father. In fact, he’d prefer his last ghosthunting memory not involve Yata being possessed at all. It’d be nice to have a nice peaceful case to end with, and maybe then he’d see that thing which Mikoto had talked about, the moment before a ghost vanished in which the ghost displayed raw emotion that was so amazing.

But regardless of whether he stuck around for one more case, Fushimi’s days at Homra were numbered. All too soon, he would be leaving, and that thought felt like a death sentence.
For the next few days after Niki was obliterated, Yata was confined to the staff room due to his possession-induced cold. He stayed there, wrapped in blankets, with half his face hidden by a surgical mask to prevent contamination. He was surrounded by all the essentials, such as a dozen tissue packs, a trash can for all the used tissues, a large bottle of hand sanitizer, a mug which contained either tea or juice, his gaming console, a stack of manga, a package of throat lozenges, and a sachet of lavender just in case any ghosts came by. He looked cute, all bundled up in a blanket burrito, but Fushimi wasn’t about to tell him that. Instead, he simply snuck a picture on his phone when he was visiting and asked if there was anything else Yata needed—there wasn’t.

Fortunately, Yata wasn’t all that sick, Kusanagi just didn’t want him handling any food until he was no longer contagious. Fushimi understood now why, back in Yata’s hometown, Mikoto had said that there were too many nurses at Homra. More than once, Yata was caught trying to remove his blankets or get up and walk around, only to be accosted by concerned parties such as Anna or Totsuka who would insist he rest some more and wrap up so he wouldn’t catch a chill. Each time, Yata pulled a face, but otherwise obeyed since resistance was futile. It made Fushimi privately vow to never ever let Homra know if he fell ill; he didn’t think he could stand their care.

Their next client— the last client Fushimi would assist Homra with— showed up four days after Niki had been destroyed. The client was a foreman at a construction site, and reported that the patrolmen they had hired to make sure no vandals did anything overnight kept getting stuck in place, unable to move a certain limb until dawn. They’d all individually reported getting chills down their spines on their patrols and described the place as “eerie”, and the foreman admitted he routinely felt like he was being watched when he was on site, and, being a superstitious man, had decided to seek out professional help. As usual, Anna’s Sight confirmed that there was indeed a ghost involved, and they promised to show up the following night to help out.

Of course Reisi and Totsuka were both just about in orgasms coming up with theories as to what might be going on at the site. The two had been asked to research the site and see if they could discover anything that might be what drew the ghost there, or if they could figure out why people were being frozen so that their group could avoid such a fate, and had been excitedly going about their tasks like children on a scavenger hunt, enthusiastically seeking the clues to their prize. Only in their case, the clues pretty much were the prize. Weirdos.

They closed the bar early in order to make it out to the construction site. On the way there, Reisi and Totsuka were still coming up with ideas, but one thing they had agreed on was that the haunting was likely caused by the construction activity: according to them, construction often dug up or damaged things that were important to resting spirits, causing them to get upset and start acting up. They were full of gristy stories about construction site hauntings they’d read about or experienced, and they weren’t shy about sharing them, even if the rest of the crew seemed less than thrilled by it. Yata had put on some headphones and was playing music at top volume to try and drown them out, Kusanagi had already asked them to “please for the love of all that you hold dear, shut the fuck up” at least three times, Mikoto’s scowl was deeper than ever, and even Anna was beginning to look uneasy. Though maybe that last one was because of all the tension everyone else was radiating.

As for Fushimi, he was doing his best to tune the ghost enthusiasts out. He really didn’t want to
hear about the “ice touch” ghost which had caused people it touched to suffer everything from frostbite and mild hypothermia to actually freezing to death, or about the ghost that had caused several improbable accidents that had resulted in nearly a dozen gruesome deaths. At least he could console himself with the fact that the ghost they would be dealing with hadn’t managed to kill anyone so far.

When they arrived, it went much like Fushimi’s first cases with Homra, with Kusanagi getting out first and talking to someone, then returning to the van to collect the rest of their group. The only difference now was that they all got out of the van, even Mikoto and Yata. The latter stuck close to Fushimi’s side, and the dark-haired medium couldn’t help but grin at that. He liked that Yata was close enough to smell, and also that he was the one Yata was turning to when scared. Of course, that was because Fushimi could keep ghosts from getting anywhere near Yata, but the fact still remained that he made Yata feel safe.

“So, I’m voting we all patrol this place together, sound good?” Kusanagi suggested, his eyes giving a telltale flicker to Reisi and Totsuka to prove that he was unnerved after hearing their tales.

Everyone in the group gave their immediate assent, and Mikoto even glared at Reisi as if daring him to contradict the suggestion. Reisi merely smiled and nodded once, thankfully.

“I think we’ll find that the outcome will be relatively similar no matter how we proceed, however moving as a group should yield an additional result that I think will be helpful in the long run,” Reisi agreed, smiling enigmatically to himself. There was a pause as they all looked at him quizzically, until Kusanagi shrugged and said, “Well okay, let’s go then.”

Anna took the lead, followed by Kusanagi. Fushimi went next, with Yata hot on his heels, and the three boyfriends took up the rear. They entered the construction site, which appeared to be new apartments, and began their patrol. After checking the lobby and the office area and finding nothing, they headed to the first apartment. It was a bit tight with so many people, but they were still feeling nervous about dividing the group. Even without Reisi and Totsuka’s stories, the memories of some of their recent cases hung heavily over them, reminding them of the dangers of splitting up.

Like the office section of the apartment building, the first two apartments they visited bore some light residue, but nothing noteworthy. It was in the third apartment that they finally got their first clues as to what was causing the watchmen to get stuck, in the form of a glowing substance splattered about the main room that they didn’t need their flashlights to see. It reminded Fushimi of some sort of fungus, or perhaps a mold. Curious, he crouched next to a spot in the corner that was about knee height, trying to get a closer look.

“Ectoplasm,” Mikoto announced, leaning over a spot with a bored look on his face.

“How exciting,” Reisi enthused, at the same moment Kusanagi shuddered and said, “Gross.”

“Is this another one of those things you all know about but due to my lack of proper education on the subject, I don’t?” Fushimi asked, twisting his torso to turn and look at the rest.

“Yup,” Totsuka confirmed. “It’s pretty cool stuff, ectoplasm. There’s all sorts of functions that have been attributed to it: decay, poison, tracking, detection, why, I’ve even heard of ghosts who used their ectoplasm to see instead of their eyes. Reipippi’s theory is that every ghost that can produce it can use it in different ways.”

“Fascinating,” Fushimi mumbled, having tuned out pretty much everything after “yup”. Totsuka’s endless gushing about the supernatural was one thing he most certainly would not miss once he
was gone. He turned back to the clump he was examining, and tentatively reached a hand out to poke the ectoplasm.

"Indeed," Reisi said, just as happy to talk about his extrapolations as Totsuka was to share all the legends he’d heard. “In fact, I’d think it’s safe to say that the ectoplasm is likely what has been causing the watchmen to get stuck, seeing how it is invisible to those who lack Sight.”

Of course Reisi shared that particular tidbit right as Fushimi’s hand touched the ectoplasm. The binding was immediate, and Fushimi bit back a curse as his fingers became stuck to the wall as if held there by the strongest glue.

“You could have mentioned that sooner,” Fushimi grumbled as he reached for his power, pushing it at the ectoplasm to free his hand, only to find that his repulsion had no effect on the ghostly substance. He growled in frustration.

“Wait, you mean you touched it?” Yata asked. With a huff, Fushimi nodded.

“Oh dear, that is most unfortunate,” Reisi said, but there was a bit too much amusement in his voice for him to succeed at sounding sincere. Bastard.

“Yes, it is,” Fushimi agreed testily. “How do I get it off me?”

“You don’t,” Mikoto said. “It’ll come off when we get rid of the ghost that made it, or in the morning, whichever comes first.”

“Oh joy,” Fushimi drawled, shifting so that he was sitting with his back against the wall adjacent to the one his hand was stuck to. “So tell me, does this situation have any other little bonuses you forgot to mention?”

“For further ‘bonuses’ as you put it, perhaps it would interest you to note that ectoplasm is often derived from a ghost’s bodily fluids,” Reisi offered. Fushimi glared, wishing that looks really could kill.

“So you mean I’m stuck to a fucking biohazard? I better not catch anything from this,” Fushimi spat back, wrinkling his nose.

“Well, there have been cases of ectoplasm with disease-inducing properties,” Totsuka chirped.

“Totsuka, I don’t think that’s helping,” Kusanagi said.

“It’s really not,” Fushimi confirmed.

“Well, we’re not gonna help him any just standin’ ‘round all night,” Mikoto pointed out. “Let’s go find the ghost that caused this.”

“Wait, we’re just gonna leave him behind?” Yata asked. “What if the ghost shows up while he’s stuck here?”

“Yata-chan, I think Fushimi doesn’t really need to worry about ghosts now that he can repel them,” Kusanagi said gently.

“Well, yeah, but like…” Yata sputtered, but he trailed off rather than finish whatever he was saying. It was hard to tell without a flashlight beam focused on him, but he seemed to be blushing. “Ah, whatever!” He suddenly exclaimed. “I’ll stay with Saru, so you guys go on ahead!”
“Sure thing, Yata-chan,” Kusanagi said, and there was a grin in his voice.

“Have fun you two,” Totsuka added.

“But not too much fun,” Mikoto input cheerfully.

“Oh, fuck you guys!” Yata snarled.

“I’m sure we all appreciate the offer, but no thank you,” Reisi said.

“Could you just go already?” Fushimi griped, his free hand covering his face as best it could. This was humiliating.

“We’re going,” Anna promised. She, Kusanagi, and the boyfriends began to exit the apartment, before she stopped and added, “If the ectoplasm vanishes it’ll mean we finished and will be coming back here. In case you do get up to anything.”

“We’re not going to be doing anything, dammit!” Yata yelled, he turned his back on the group and kicked at the ground, grumbling to himself. The others finally left, though Fushimi had a feeling it was mostly so that Yata wouldn’t hear them laughing. “Gya, those jerks!” Yata huffed. “Why are they so embarrassing”

“Pretty sure that’s their way of showing they care about you,” Fushimi drawled.

“Che,” Yata muttered. “Whatever. I’m still totally gonna get them back for this.”

“And how do you plan on doing that?” Fushimi asked. “Because I doubt any of them will be easily embarrassed.”

“Unfortunately, you’re right,” Yata sighed sitting down next to him. “At least for Reisi and Totsuka and Mikoto. But Kusanagi-san’s easy enough to embarrass. You just gotta mention that cold-hearted woman and he gets all panicky, it’s kinda funny.”

“And Anna?”

“I’m not picking on Anna!” Yata insisted. “Besides, I just gotta embarrass someone else and she’ll feel it.”

“Yeah, I suppose secondhand embarrassment is very real for her,” Fushimi said, nodding.

“Yeah…”

“But you know, you could have saved yourself some embarrassment by going with them instead of staying here,” Fushimi pointed out.

“Yeah but, like… you always look really lonely by yourself,” Yata said, shifting to slouch a little lower. “Like, I get that you don’t really like being around people much, but like, when you’re left alone, you sorta watch everyone, and you just look really alone.”

“Your vast vocabulary never fails to impress,” Fushimi noted.

“Yeah, yeah, not everyone can memorize a fucking dictionary like Reisi,” Yata grumbled. “But my point is that I thought maybe it would be nice if someone stayed with you. And I kinda wanted to stay with you, since you won’t be around as much soon and all, and yeah we’re gonna go on a date and all, but it won’t be the same, y’know? P-plus being near you is probably the safest place to be, right? Since you can repel ghosts and all.”
“Right,” Fushimi said, but he could feel a smile tugging at the corners of his lips. “Well, thanks. And I know what you mean, about how it’s going to be different from now on.”

“Yeah…” Yata sighed. “I’ll miss you. Even if we still see each other. I’ve just gotten used to having you around, is what I mean.”

“Come with me,” Fushimi blurted out, and then mentally kicked himself. It was a topic he’d been meaning to discuss with Yata, but that was not at all how he meant to broach it.

“Huh?” Yata asked.

“I just meant… You always talk like being a medium is your only option, but it doesn’t have to be,” Fushimi explained. “If you wanted to do something else, I could help you. I can make it so you never have to see another ghost, Misaki. You- you wouldn’t have to be afraid anymore.”

Yata smiled at him, but it wasn’t his usual blinding grin. It’s brilliance was faded and melancholy.

“Thanks, Saru, but I could never do that,” Yata said softly. “I appreciate it, but… I don’t want to rely on you for that. I don’t want to become some kind of leech. I am scared of ghosts, and I don’t like being possessed by them, but I think it’s still worth it. Besides, there’s really not much else I can do. I’m not that smart or talented or anything, just really easy to possess. And even without ghosts being around, I think I’d still keep expecting them to show up, so I’d still be scared anyway.”

“That’s completely illogical,” Fushimi said, not sure which part he was referring to. But really, who chose to stay in a line of work laced with constant fear when another option presented itself?

“Well dumb people like me aren’t very good at logic,” Yata retorted, lightly elbowing him. “I just gotta go by feelings. And what I feel is what the ghosts feel, so of course I’ll choose to help them in the end. Especially since I can kinda relate to them, just a bit. I mean, one thing that most ghosts you meet get upset about is that no one can see or hear them anymore. Like, the people they care about the most suddenly won’t listen to them or look at them and will just walk right through them. Even ghosts that hold no grudges will become poltergeists and such because of that, and just, before my parents split, my dad was treating me like that. He just pretended I didn’t exist, and yeah it was kinda my fault but I didn’t know that and I didn’t get it, and all I knew was that suddenly one of the most important people in my life no longer loved me. He ignored me, and whenever he couldn’t do that, then all he felt was hate. It sucked.

“And aw, shit, I really shouldn’t be complaining about my dad when I know yours was even worse,” Yata said, tugging his beanie down closer to his eyes. “Sorry, I just got used to thinking my dad was as bad as it gets, but… y’know what, you probably don’t wanna talk about this shit. I’ll shut up now. Sorry Saru.”

“It’s… fine, I think,” Fushimi said slowly, twisting his hand into the fabric of his shirt. He wanted to reassure Yata but also, it really was fine, strangely enough. “I never really thought of that person as a father. So in some ways, you did have the worse father, since I lacked one to begin with.”

“Yeah but-” Yata protested.

“No buts,” Fushimi interrupted sternly. “Besides, I don’t think misery is supposed to be a competition. But I also don’t think that you have to spend your life dealing with ghosts just because your dad rejected you because of your ability to interact with them.”

“Haaaah? Who the hell says my dad has anything to do with it!” Yata snarled, jumping to his feet
“That wasn’t the point! The point is, it sucks to feel all alone because everyone’s ignoring you, so I wanna make sure no one has to feel that way, even ghosts! They’re just trying to reach someone, and we can help them. Maybe it seems stupid to you, but whatever.”

“Stupid and irrational are two separate things, and I am inclined to believe your insistence on continuing to throw yourself into danger is the latter,” Fushimi replied calmly.

“Yeah well, I’m fine with being either of those,” Yata said boldly, crossing his arms and straightening his posture. Fushimi clicked his tongue.

“Idiot, that’s not something to be proud of.”

“Well neither is running away with my tail between my legs,” Yata shot back, a grin replacing his earlier sulk. “So thanks for the offer, but I’m good.” He nodded, but then the grin suddenly faded and was replaced with a sheepish look. “Though, if you, y’know, did repel ghosts when we’re just hangin’ out and stuff, that would— I’d really appreciate that,” Yata added. Fushimi wasn’t sure, but he thought there might be a hint of pink dusting Yata’s cheeks.

“It almost sounds like you want to spend time with me,” Fushimi said, half to himself.

“The hell?” Yata yelped. “Of course I wanna spend time with you! I asked you on a fucking date, didn’t I?”

“Because I told you to,” Fushimi pointed out. “And you’re just nice enough to comply with my selfish request.”

“I wanted to ask you out even before you said that!” Yata yelled back. Fushimi cringed, because he really was too loud. In such a quiet and empty place, it wouldn’t be at all surprising if the others could hear him. “I said that, didn’t I?”

“Not in so many words,” Fushimi replied. “It was more an implication, one which you might not have meant.”

“Why the hell wouldn’t I have meant it?” Yata asked, glaring at Fushimi.

“Because thanks to me, you got possessed by a demented psychopath. Niki wouldn’t have targeted you if it weren’t for me.”

“Ha, yeah right,” Yata barked, flapping a hand and rolling his eyes in disagreement. “Maybe you’ve forgotten, but I’m kinda an old hand at this. Psychopaths? Seen ’em. And yeah, he was definitely the worst by far, but he’s still the same type as the rest of ’em. As long as they get what they want, they don’t care who gets squished, so to them, I’m just a nice convenient meat sack. Most of them would just stick around until my body can’t handle it anymore and I kick the bucket just like them. That guy at least had the decency to let my body rest a bit so that he wouldn’t wear me out too fast. ‘Course, he felt the need to fucking knock me out before he did that so I wouldn’t run away, but whatever. So, um, what was my point again?” Yata scratched his head, narrowing his eyes as he tried to think. “Oh right. Ghosts like him will never pass up a chance to possess someone like me, so even if you and I were strangers he still woulda done that.”

“But he wouldn’t have gotten the opportunity if I weren’t around,” Fushimi argued, his voice louder and harsher than he intended.

“Maybe not, but we wouldn’t have got rid of him if you weren’t around either,” Yata retorted, dropping to the ground in front of Fushimi and crossing his arms.
“But I’m just like him!” Fushimi shouted. “Can’t you see that? I look just like him, I don’t care about people either, I’m every bit as evil as he ever was! It’s all he ever taught me after all!”

“Hm, I guess you’re right about the looks, but I think that’s the only thing that’s really the same, isn’t it?” Yata replied, tilting his head to one side. “I mean, the outside’s similar sure, but the inside’s completely different, and that’s what counts, right? Do you really think we woulda let you into Homra if you were at all like him?”

“He was a liar, and an actor. Fooling people was easy for him.”

“But we’re not talking about him, we’re talking about you,” Yata insisted stubbornly. “And there’s no way you woulda fooled all of us for this long. I mean, Anna, Mikoto, Shiro and I all can sense what you’re like inside, and it’s way different from that guy. And Awashima said your past life went around banishing some really nasty ghosts. And Reisi didn’t sense you ever hurting us, and Totsuka is also pretty good at sensing bad people, and Kusanagi asked around about you and the worst anyone said was that you were a grump which we already knew by that point. You’re different from that guy.”

“But we had the same ability,” Fushimi said. “Or at least, I think we did. I’m not sure…”

“Yeah, probably,” Yata agreed. “I mean, someone had to put all those ghosts inside that music box, and it sure as hell wasn’t that bastard Mizuchi. It’d be easy for someone with the power to draw ghosts. But having the same ability doesn’t mean you’re the same inside. Like, we all discussed it once, what we all sensed from you and from that guy. Anna said that guy was pitch black and like a giant bloodstain, and Shiro said he was nails on a chalkboard and loud explosions, and Mikoto just said he reeked like all the worst smells put together, and to me, he felt like when you’ve got a fever and you’re so cold and way too hot at the same time and it’s just miserable. But for you, Anna said cool blue. Shiro said you sound like water flowing over rocks. Mikoto said you smell like the road when it rains. And for me, it’s like when you go to the beach.”

Yata closed his eyes and smiled, taking in a deep breath. “Yup, the beach. You go there and lay out in the sun for a bit, and the longer you lie there, the hotter you start to feel, until you feel like you’re gonna just burn up, and so you finally go and get in the water and it’s just the right temperature: cool enough to stop the heat from melting you, but still warm. You’re that water, Saru. You’re just right.”

“So I’m water, huh?” Fushimi mused. “But you guys are like fire. Aren’t you worried about burning out?”

“Tell that to Reisi,” Yata huffed, rolling his eyes. “The others all compare him to the ocean. And maybe he is, but he’s the ocean in someplace cold, where the waves touch your feet and jump back yelling because it’s fucking freezing. But whaddaya mean, we’re all fire?”

“Anna’s like a candle, only bigger,” Fushimi explained with a sigh. “Gentle fire. Mikoto’s a wildfire. He feels like he’ll burn anything in his path. You’re… like the sun.” He blushed, because it sounded super embarrassing out loud. Hopefully Yata wouldn’t notice. “You can be blinding.”

“Uh, thanks?” Yata said, frowning in confusion.

“But even if I’m not like him, that still doesn’t give you a reason to ask me out,” Fushimi said, quickly changing the subject.

“You’re seriously being a pain, you know that,” Yata grumbled, lowering his head and breathing deeply before lifting it again to look Fushimi in the eye. “I didn’t like you at first. You toted around
ghosts and were rude and your attitude pissed me off. When I decide I don’t like someone, it’s hard to change my mind. But you did. And since then, you’ve been… well, you’re pretty cool, and smart, and you listen to all my whining and shit and then you always manage to say the right thing. You’re kinda a grump, but you’re still pretty nice. And you’re really good at video games, and you seem pretty interesting, and also you’re… really good-looking…” Here, Yata lowered his head again, tugging his beanie low over his ears. “And like, I think I’d like it, if we k-kissed again, and… I think you’re someone I could, I dunno, fall for, or something.”

“Ditto,” Fushimi replied.

“Huh?” Yata asked, raising his head.

“Almost everything you said is the same things I’ve felt around you,” Fushimi replied. “At first I thought you were a loud, aggressive, coward, but then you turned out to be… infuriatingly brave, obnoxiously self-sacrificing, painfully stubborn, and all sorts of other complicated things. And like I said, you’re blinding. And… you’re just right too. Warm sun on a cool day. You say the right things, the things I don’t want to hear but want to hear more than anything, you’re not as good at video games as me but you put up a good fight, and I’m not bored around you. And while you’re a bit scruffy, you’re not too bad looking yourself. And I also think I’d like it if we kissed again, especially if you were actually kissing back, so get over here already.”

Yata’s jaw worked, but no sound came out, and he blinked several times before emitting a strange creaking noise from his throat.

“Unless you expect me to come over there, in which case, perhaps you’ve forgotten that I can’t?” Fushimi added lightly, swinging the arm that was still stuck to the ectoplasm.

“Y-yeah, I know, but… now?” Yata asked, his voice rising an octave on the last word.

“Why not?” Fushimi asked.

“You said I had to take you on a date first!” Yata accused, his voice cracking in multiple places.

“Consider it a preview,” Fushimi replied. “Unless you’re nervous?”

“Like hell I am!” Yata shot back, always one to rise to a challenge. It would have been more convincing if his voice was steadier. He crawled over to where Fushimi was seated, situating himself on one side of Fushimi’s legs and leaning in close. Suddenly Fushimi was the nervous one, because that had been hot and also what was he supposed to do now?


That turned out to be a mistake. Their foreheads crashed, and their noses bumped, and Fushimi pulled back with a wince.

“Ow, fuck!” Yata complained. “What are you doing, I thought you wanted to kiss!”

“Well pardon me if I don’t exactly know what I’m doing here,” Fushimi snapped back, irritable in his mortification. “There aren’t exactly manuals on this, so you have to learn by experience, which I lack.”

“But you’re hot,” Yata said bluntly, blinking.

“I also refuse to stoop so low as to kiss someone who does not attract me,” Fushimi retorted. “If
“you saw the types I went to school with, you’d understand.”

“Heh, I bet you’re just picky,” Yata laughed.

“Well what about you? Don’t you have experience?”

“Not as myself I don’t,” Yata replied, his voice cracking again. “And I try not to pay attention when ghosts go using my body to kiss people- that’s just weird. It’s not like it’s easy to find hot guys who believe me about the possession thing and are cool with it, y’know.”

“I suppose that could be a bit of a problem,” Fushimi admitted. “Alright, fine. Let’s try again. Tilt your head a little, I think that’ll help us avoid another nose collision.”

“Fine,” Yata agreed, and leaned in again, angling his head while Fushimi did the same. This time, they managed to meet halfway without any disaster, and only then did their eyes fall shut.

Almost as soon as their lips met, Fushimi felt himself raising his free hand to cradle Yata’s face, not wanting this to end any time soon. He felt Yata’s arms snake around his shoulders, and slid his hand back behind Yata’s head, pushing it up under the redhead’s beanie as one kiss became two, three, many. Because the kiss (kisses) was all the sparks and tingles and ridiculous fluttery feelings he’d ever heard people describe in the annoying romance novels they’d had to read in his literature classes and in movies he’d reluctantly sat through with Douhan. He was melting in the heat of the sun, and he didn’t mind it one bit; he was enjoying it too much after all.

When Fushimi’s other hand was abruptly released from the ectoplasm, he ignored the pins and needles of numbness that were invading the limb and lifted it to encircle around Yata’s back, pulling his body closer as their mouths opened and teeth clacked and things became a bit (a lot) sloppier, but somehow more delicious. He was flying higher and higher with each moment, and nothing could pull him down.

Except the sound of a throat being cleared, and, when he and Yata dazedly pulled away from each other, the sight of the rest of their party standing in the entrance to the room.

Chapter End Notes

Yes, Reisi did see Fushimi getting stuck and Yata staying behind with him. I’m sure he’s very satisfied with the results.
Yata sulked the entire ride back to the bar. Fushimi would have done the same, but he was too busy glancing side-eye at his… boyfriend? Was Yata his boyfriend now? They were going on a date soon, but maybe it wasn’t official until you’d actually gone on the date. Or maybe the first date was just some sort of trial, and it took a few dates before you were allowed to claim the other person as your own.

Whatever, point was, Yata sulking was cute, and that sight kept Fushimi from sulking as well.

They were about halfway back to the bar when Fushimi belatedly remembered what Reisi had said about staying together leading to something interesting, and had a sinking feeling that Reisi had known Fushimi would get stuck and Yata would opt to stay with him, and that they’d end up kissing. Normally he would have been annoyed by the nosy psychic, however, he supposed that just this once, he could forgive it given the good results. However, he’d still need to make sure to discourage such interference in the future, and not just from Reisi: from all of Homra. Maybe he should go through Douhan’s background check folder after all, in hopes of finding some blackmail material.

It was a little hard going home that night, since the next day would be his last working at Homra. He couldn’t sleep that night, feeling a sense of impending doom that made his chest cavity feel empty, like there was something trying to fill up his lungs and turn them to ice so that he wouldn’t be able to breathe. He spent the night desperately trying to distract himself, losing a couple of hours to some suspense drama he wasn’t even interested in before switching over to binging some old movies. They were terrible, but they kept his mind off that feeling that was trying to swallow him up.

The next morning, Fushimi arrived at Homra bright and early, figuring his final shift was no time to break his habits. When he spotted Yata playing games in one of the booths, he went to sit with the copper-haired medium, who didn’t seem the least bit focused on his game based on how badly he was losing and the way his eyes kept straying towards Fushimi. It was… pleasant, to know he could have such an effect on the object of his affections.

When Yata got one game over too many, he turned the game off with a sigh and shoved it in a pocket of the cargo shorts he was wearing despite the cooling weather. He slumped against the wall with his arms tucked behind his head, eyes turned towards the ceiling in boredom.

“Are you sure you don’t wanna keep playing your game?” Fushimi said, finding it unusually difficult to keep his voice steady. “If you try really hard, you might actually last more than a minute this time.”

“Fuck you,” Yata replied without any real venom. “I can totally last longer than that.”

“Sometimes I wonder if you aren’t intentionally setting yourself up for embarrassment,” Fushimi murmured to himself, trying to ignore the temptation to point out the potential risque implications of Yata’s last two statements.

“What was that?” Yata asked, twisting to look at Fushimi.
“Nothing,” Fushimi replied.

Just then, Kusanagi came from the back hallway and walked over to their booth.

“Hey you two, could you do me a favor?” he asked.

“Sure thing,” Yata replied automatically, and Fushimi gave him the stink eye before turning to hear Kusanagi out.

“Great,” Kusanagi said. “I was supposed to get a delivery today from one of our suppliers, but the truck they use for deliveries broke down and they can’t get a replacement until tomorrow. Trouble is, part of that delivery was some vermouth that I really need today. If you guys could go over there and get just the vermouth, they can deliver the rest tomorrow, and everything works out.”

“Is the order all that big, because if not, we could just get it all if we’re driving there anyway,” Fushimi pointed out.

“The truck broke down in their loading dock, and it’s tight enough back there that you won’t be able to get close,” Kusanagi informed him. “And you can’t get at the front with a car either, since it’s on a pedestrian-only street. Besides, I’m not sure Yata-chan knows how to go by car- we usually just walk there since it’s only a few blocks away.”

“Besides, it’s a nice day out, doncha think Saru?” Yata asked, leaning forward eagerly. It was hard to say no to that face. Although, now that Fushimi thought about it, it was a rather nice day out. It was the kind of cloudy that softened the sunlight without making the world dim, and cool bordering on being cold, but still comfortable enough with a jacket on.

“I suppose,” Fushimi admitted.

“Then it’s settled, let’s go!” Yata cheered, surging to his feet with a fist raised in the air. He then paused and turned to Kusanagi and asked, “Um, which place is it that we’re going to? There’s a couple of ‘em that I remember…”

“Fukuda’s,” Kusanagi replied, and Yata’s grin solidified.

“Got it!” Yata said. “C’mon Saru, let’s go!”

Fushimi sighed and got to his feet, wondering where on earth Yata could muster up such enthusiasm from. He didn’t think he’d ever felt that energetic about anything, not even as a child. But then again, Niki had always had a way of sapping the energy from him.

The bell above the door jingled as the two of them headed out. Through all his shifts at Homra, Fushimi had learned to tune that sound out, but now the sound cut into his consciousness, reminding him of the first time he’d walked through that door. It had been annoying, back then, as had just about everything else: Shiro, his office, the need to relocate to Homra, the bar’s atmosphere, the people inside, the whole fiasco when Fushimi brought ghosts with him… But now, looking back through the lens of time with his current experiences, it was a fond memory. Not to mention it made him want to laugh, thinking about the way Mikoto had tossed Yata back into the hall.

“Oi, Saru, you comin’ or not?” Yata asked loudly, walking backwards and glaring impatiently at Fushimi. A few passers-by gave him odd looks from the use of such a bizarre nickname.

“You’re going to walk into that light pole,” Fushimi replied, and was satisfied to see Yata whip his head around to look where he was going, only to see that he wasn’t anywhere near any obstacles.
Fushimi used those precious seconds of distraction to catch up to Yata.

“The hell?” Yata exclaimed. “There’s nothing there, you jerk!”

“I was just messing with you, Misaki,” Fushimi said lightly.

“Che, whatever, asshole,” Yata retorted sullenly.

“Shouldn’t you be a little nicer to your ghost repellent, Mi-sa-ki?” Fushimi teased.

“Shut up!” Yata shot back. “I’ve got one of Shiro’s charms, I’d probably be fine without you!”

Fushimi wasn’t convinced, and he didn’t think Yata was, judging by the way Yata’s eyes darted around for ghosts.

“Well then shouldn’t you be nicer to your boyfriend?” Fushimi jested, his heart rate picking up as he prayed he hadn’t made a mistake. Yata turned the same shade of red as the traffic light at the intersection they were approaching.

“W-well maybe if my boyfriend wasn’t being such a dick,” Yata managed to reply, and Fushimi felt his face reddening in response at hearing the terminology confirmed. They really were boyfriends then.

They waited in silence when they reached the intersection, watching the cars go by and trying to will their mutual blushes away. Finally, the light changed and they crossed, Yata skipping ahead a bit. He slowed when he reached the other side, walking at a snail’s pace.

“Hey, um, Saru?” Yata began, and Fushimi wondered if maybe “boyfriend” had been a mistake, and Yata was about to cancel their date or something. “I was wondering… about what you said last night. About you thinking that I didn’t actually like you. And I meant to ask you, but I kinda forgot, what with, you know.”

“The kissing?” Fushimi interrupted, just to be able to watch Yata blush again.

“Yeah, that,” Yata said, closing his eyes and putting the back of his hand to his mouth. “But, like, why would you think that? Or think that you’re the same as that guy, or… all of that. I just, I don’t really get it.”

Fushimi sighed. He’d been kind of hoping that conversation had been forgotten, but he supposed that after all the times Yata had opened up to him, he ought to do the same in return.

“You have your insecurities, I have mine,” Fushimi said, half-hoping his low tone would be lost in the sounds of city life around them.

“Oh,” Yata said. Then, “Is it because of what the things that man would say to you? Because you know none of that’s true, right? He was a liar, you said it yourself.”

“Misaki, he used to mix truth in with his lies,” Fushimi sighed. “That’s what made him such a good liar. And there are some things that are easy to believe and hard to refute, even though they’re false.”

“Well I’m gonna prove they’re false,” Yata said confidently. “I’ll tell you however many times it takes.”

“Just telling me isn’t enough to prove it, you know,” Fushimi pointed out.
“So I’ll keep telling you until it is,” Yata insisted. “I’ll tell you the truth so many times, that you forget what the lies even were in the first place!”

“That sounds annoying,” Fushimi huffed, but he couldn’t keep from smiling. Yata noticed the curve of his lips, and responded with one of his blinding grins.

“Then I guess it’s a good thing you like me,” Yata smirked.

“Mm, debatable,” Fushimi deadpanned, and Yata shoved him, making him stagger.

“Fuck off,” Yata grumbled. “You’re too grumpy to agree to go on a date with me if you didn’t like me, so I know you’re just messing with me again.”

“When did you get so astute?” Fushimi asked, miffed that Yata had seen through him so easily.

“As-what?” Yata asked, and Fushimi snickered. “Che, whatever.” He glared at Fushimi, then suddenly stopped in his tracks, looking around. “Oh shit, we’re going the wrong way.”

“I thought you knew where we were going,” Fushimi said, raising an eyebrow.

“I do!” Yata protested. “I just got mixed up with one of the other places! It’s got a similar name and the streets they’re on look kinda the same, just in opposite directions.” He turned around and began retracing their steps, leaving Fushimi to follow. Fushimi didn’t like that they’d been wasting time, but he supposed that at it wasn’t so bad given the present company.

“So,” Yata said, and Fushimi felt a subject change coming. “How are you doing? I mean, after dealing with that ghost and all. That musta been rough for you, right?”

“It can’t have been worse than Anna going through the office of a deranged lunatic who had custody of her for a while or you facing a ghost who almost took over your life,” Fushimi mumbled, uncomfortable.

“Those were different,” Yata said. “I mean, I chose to help Yuuya, and Anna wanted to face her past too. You didn’t get a choice with your dad. Plus, I dunno, I kinda feel like you had it worse? Like, I guess what Anna went through might have been as bad, I don’t know since she always blocks that stuff off, but facing that piece of shit had to be way worse than facing Yuuya was for me.”

“Maybe it was, maybe it wasn’t,” Fushimi said. “I think I always knew that there would be a time I had to face him. At least this time, I didn’t have to do it alone. Having everyone with me, it helped more than I would have expected. Not to mention that he messed up. He shouldn’t have possessed you like that. It just gave me extra motivation to do whatever it took to be rid of him.” When Fushimi glanced over at Yata, he saw the redhead’s eyes were wide, and there was a hint of a smile tugging at the corners of his lips. “Besides, he’s gone now. It still feels a little surreal, but I know he won’t ever do anything to hurt me or the people I care about again. But what about you? You said his mental prison was bad, and you were aware of what was happening for parts of it, weren’t you?”

“Oh, yeah,” Yata said, looking down at the sidewalk beneath his feet. “He was definitely the worst ghost I’ve experienced, but that kind of shit is part of what Gramps trained me to deal with. I won’t say that it doesn’t still piss me off, what he showed me, but I can handle it. I’ve got Homra to support me after all. And Shiro, and all the different shikigami… I’ll be okay. As for the awareness… I did have kinda a general idea of what was going on, yeah.”

“Even what happened to Anna?” Fushimi asked gently. He wasn’t sure he should be bringing it up,
but at the same time, he thought it was something Yata needed to know, and might need help facing.

“Yeah, that too,” Yata said softly. He then laughed, though it sounded brittle. “I can deal with that, too. I mean, apparently it’s not the first time I’ve hurt someone close to me while possessed.”

That one sentence made something click for Fushimi.

“It was your dad, wasn’t it?” he asked. Yata nodded, his fake smile wobbling as a nerve twitched in his cheek. “And it’s the real reason why you don’t go home, isn’t it? You think you’ll try and hurt your family, and scare them. That’s what you meant when you said they’d think you were a freak if something happened.”

“Yeah,” Yata sighed. “I mean, what I said about not going home before, that was all true but… my kid siblings don’t even know me. And if we finally meet, and then I try to kill them? There’s no way they could forgive me for that. Or should.”

“But your siblings at least believe in ghosts, right? They’ll know what’s going on,” Fushimi pointed out.

“Yeah, I know it won’t be like last time,” Yata said. “For one, I’ll probably have some idea of what happened, at least. With my dad, all I know is that we went on vacation, and the first day everything was fine but then the next my dad suddenly hated me, and when we got back we started going to family counseling and everyone kept asking me why I tried to kill him, and I had no clue what they were talking about. My mom offered to tell me more but at this point, knowing won’t change anything.”

“I’m sorry,” Fushimi said.

“Me too, a bit,” Yata admitted. “But I’ve got a good family now, so it worked out I guess.”

“Do you mean Homra, or your step-dad and siblings?” Fushimi asked.

“Both,” Yata grinned. “Though since we’re kinda on the subject: about your offer to keep the ghosts away. It doesn’t have to be anytime soon, but would you maybe be willing to come visit my family with me and do that sometime? Like, that way I can visit them without problems, and also, I know it’s kinda early for it, but I would get to introduce you to my family? As my boyfriend?”

“That sounds nice,” Fushimi said, thinking of Mrs. Yata’s hugs. “I only hope they’re not all as loud as you.”

“Heh, I hate to break it to you, but my little sis’s even louder,” Yata grinned, causing Fushimi to groan half-heartedly.

For the rest of the walk, their chatter was more light-hearted, talking about idle things such as their likes and dislikes, hobbies, and skills. It was mostly meaningless, but it left Fushimi feeling unusually content and gave him a few ideas for future dates.

When they finally arrived at the shop, the proprietor told them that Kusanagi had called to say they were coming, and had apparently volunteered them for a couple of other small deliveries nearby. Fushimi wanted to refuse, but he didn’t have a good reason for backing out at this point and Yata seemed on board with the idea, so he ended up spending his early afternoon toting around boxes of alcohol until his arms were sore and probably had a few new bruises. Even Yata seemed to be tiring by the time they were able to pick up the vermouth Kusanagi had requested- thankfully they only needed to take one bottle each- and head back to Homra.
As they walked through the door, Fushimi barely had time to take in the balloons and streamers decorating the bar, clashing horribly with the dignified atmosphere of the place, before several people jumped out from under the tables and shouted “surprise” or blew on kazooos while throwing confetti. The usual crew was there, as well as Shiro and his shiki, and Kamamoto had come out of the kitchen and Awashima was perched on a bar stool as well, and even Douhan was there, though she wasn’t wearing the conical hats the others had and had settled for sitting at the edge of a booth and waving a stick-like contraption with an end that spun around and made noise.

Scowling suspiciously, Fushimi turned to look at Yata, who appeared to be just as baffled as he was. He was staring at a banner near the ceiling that Fushimi hadn’t noticed before, one which said, “Farewell, Fushimi-kun”.

“The hell?” Yata asked in bewilderment.

“We wanted to hold a send-off party for Saru-kun,” Totsuka chirped in reply. “But Reisi said Saru-kun wouldn’t show up if he knew about it, so we made it a surprise!”

“Damn straight I wouldn’t have shown up for this nonsense,” Fushimi grumbled, because as touching as it was, there was no way in hell he would ever consent to wearing one of those stupid party hats.

“Well how come you didn’t tell me about it?” Yata whined.

“Yata-chan, you’re terrible at keeping secrets,” Kusanagi explained gently. “You would have inevitably let something slip, and Fushimi being the highly intelligent person he is, he would have noticed and either surmised what was going on or asked you about it, and you can’t lie to save your life, kiddo. You woulda spilled, and it would have completely defied the point of making it a surprise.”

Yata blushed, and Fushimi had to fight to keep a straight face as he lightly pushed Yata forwards so they could properly enter the bar and divest themselves of the bottles they carried.

“Not being able to lie isn’t a bad thing,” Fushimi said lowly, for Yata’s ears only. “It means I know that you mean what you say, Misaki.”

“Well of course I mean it!” Yata hissed back, garnering attention since he was actually audible. “But just so you know, I can keep secrets, really!”

“Oh please, you ended up telling grandfather what we were getting him for his birthday for eight years straight!” Shiro called from his post across the bar.

“Shut up, I was a kid then!” Yata protested over the peals of everyone else’s laughter.

“Shut up, I was a kid then!” Yata protested over the peals of everyone else’s laughter.

“From there, things took on a more party-like agenda. There was a cake baked by Kamamoto, and games, and it was actually kind of fun. At some point, Fushimi found himself next to Douhan, who was sitting back and watching Totsuka trying to balance a ping-pong ball on his nose.

“I think I’ll probably get rid of that folder you gave me,” Fushimi said casually. “I have some idea of what’s inside it, and the rest… I think I’ll find out on my own.”

“You sure?” Douhan asked. “It’s not like you to be so trusting.”

“They haven’t given me any reason not to,” Fushimi replied. “But plenty of reasons why I can, so I will. Besides, you would have told me if you thought any of them were dangerous, rather than just giving me a folder. I know there have been some incidents for them, but something tells me those
incidents were as a result of their abilities.”

“From what Seri told me when I set out to do the checks on them, probably.” Douhan agreed. “Besides, from what I’ve seen, they look out for their own, and to them, you’re part of their group. Go ahead and burn the folder, if that’s what you want. If you change your mind, I can just find all that again.”

“I’ll keep that in mind, but I have a feeling I won’t need it,” Fushimi replied.

“Huh, an optimistic Saruhiko,” Douhan mused. “Not something I ever expected to see, and something I would have imagined being terrifying, yet it’s rather refreshing. I’m glad to see you happy.”

“I know what you mean,” Fushimi admitted, a small smile on his face. “This sort of feeling is really strange to me, but I think I like it.”

“Good, you deserve it,” Douhan said firmly. “Now, if you don’t mind, I need to grab Seri and have a little chat with that boyfriend of yours. Make sure he knows better than to ruin your newfound happiness.” Douhan sent Fushimi a wink as she got up from her seat.

“Try not to scare him too much,” Fushimi sighed, feigning exasperation. “I actually like him, you know.”

“I do know that,” Douhan acknowledged. “But you ought to take that up with Seri, since she said she’ll handle all the threats.”

“Does she usually go to such lengths for strangers?” Fushimi asked, raising an eyebrow.

“I vouched for you, and that’s enough for her,” Douhan informed him. “Seri’s a loyal type like that. It’s a shame she doesn’t play for both teams, but oh well. She and her bartender are ridiculously cute, so I am glad to support them too.”

She waggled her fingers in a parting gesture and, as she’d stated, she snagged Awashima’s arm and with matching evil grins, the two women cornered Yata. Fushimi supposed he ought to be a nice boyfriend and go to the rescue, but he decided to sit back and enjoy the show instead. After all, he had a feeling he’d be getting a similar talk soon, and while he did trust everyone at Homra, he had no doubt that if he angered them, they would find ways to make him pay. In fact, he thought he might hold them to it, since Yata deserved to be treated right.

Before long, it was time to put the bar back in order for opening, though most of the decorations stayed up, much to Fushimi’s chagrin. His final shift was fairly painless, though more than a few regulars stopped him to say their own goodbyes and wish him well. It was a little awkward, since one woman broke down crying and a couple people wanted to shake his hand or even hug him, but he got through it alright. The night passed in a blur, and before Fushimi knew it, they were cleaning up, and then he was removing his things from his locker and heading out to his car, closing one chapter of his life and starting a new one.

When Fushimi showed up for his date with Yata three days after the party, Kusanagi, Anna, Shiro, and Mikoto were all waiting for him, to give him the predicted shovel talk. It was a bit hard to take them seriously though, since Shiro was about as threatening as a dust mote, Anna was too sweet to actually hurt anyone unless she absolutely had to, and for all that Mikoto was aggressive and could probably break every bone in Fushimi’s body, he also happened to be wearing a fluffy pink hoodie and a face mask when Fushimi arrived. Honestly, Kusanagi was the only one Fushimi felt he really needed to watch out for.
After escaping the quartet of protective family members, Fushimi found Yata in the living room, bent over a large book.

“Being nostalgic again?” Fushimi asked teasingly.

“Nah, I just thought you might wanna see this one,” Yata said, and held the open album out to Fushimi. The dark-haired medium took it, and his jaw fell open at what he saw. All the pictures on the page were recent, and many of them included him. “That first time you were here, you said your family wasn’t really album people,” Yata explained. “And Mikoto said you seemed kinda sad about it, so Totsuka tried taking pictures when he could, and Shiro helped some as well. And for the rest, he went through his footage and tried to find some decent frames. They wanted to include some pictures from the party, so that’s why you’re only getting it today.”

“This is…” Fushimi said breathlessly, at a loss for words.

“That scary chick that you're friends with also gave us some pictures to put in,” Yata continued, bulldozing onwards almost desperately. “They’re at the beginning. And there’s some empty pages at the back so you can keep adding to it.”

“I don’t really take pictures that often, so you’ll have to help me with that,” Fushimi said. “Perhaps if we go anywhere together, we can take pictures then, or we can keep relying on Totsuka and Shiro to take pictures on cases.”

“But you won’t be around for cases anymore,” Yata replied, frowning.

“I might,” Fushimi said lightly. “If you guys need me. I’m going to be working for Douhan, and so my schedule will be flexible enough to join you guys now and then.”

“Wait, really?” Yata asked, the beginnings of one of his blinding grins forming on his face.

“Really,” Fushimi nodded.

Yata practically tackled Fushimi with his excited hug.

Fushimi’s first day working for Douhan was not as productive as he would have liked, due to her feeling the need to grill him about his date. He found it annoying, since it wasn’t really any of her business and all they had done was watch movies and eat food. But at the same time, he was thrilled she asked, because it gave him an excuse to talk about how stupidly cute Yata was when he spent ten minutes trying and failing to catch popcorn kernels in his mouth, or how irritating it wasn’t really whenever he had to interject some snarky commentary about how unrealistic the ghosts in the horror movie they’d watched were. It had surprised him that Yata could stand horror movies, but apparently they didn’t scare him since he could tell the ghosts weren’t real since he couldn’t sense them, and therefore they lost their scare factor to him.

After work, Fushimi drove out to an old warehouse near the waterfront. He parked behind a familiar box van and walked over to a small cluster of people waiting near the main entrance to the warehouse.

“Ready to hunt some ghost?” Mikoto asked as Fushimi reached them.

“Only if Misaki’s making us milkshakes after,” Fushimi drawled back.

“That can be arranged,” Kusanagi agreed, inclining his head.

“Alright then,” Fushimi said. “Let’s go.”
As they walked into the warehouse, Yata grabbed Fushimi’s hand and entwined their fingers. Not so long ago, Fushimi would have resented the action and shaken the redhead off. Now though, it brought a smile to his face. He didn’t really know what lay ahead of him, but it didn’t matter. He had people who cared about him, and who he cared about in return; they’d get through whatever came their way together. It didn’t matter how many ghosts followed him, because from then on, he intended to only look forward.

Chapter End Notes

And it's time for the obligatory end-of-fic rant. I don't know whether to throw a celebration or go into mourning now that I've finished this...
First off, sorry about the length of this one. I knew it wasn't gonna be a short idea, but I didn't expect it to become a freaking novel. Oops.
Secondly, to people who were interested in a sequel: I did get started on that, but I'm working on multiple other projects so it may be a while before that gets off the ground. But thanks for the interest! When I first mentioned the possibility, I kinda expected a lack of interest since this fic got so long.
Third, as always, thank you for kudos and comments. Those are always really encouraging, and some of the comments on this were really helpful. As in, more than once, comments reminded me of things I'd forgotten about and needed to fix. So yeah, commenters: you guys made this fic better than it might have otherwise been. I take my hat off to you, and bow with a fancy flourish. You have my deepest gratitude.
And last, thanks for reading this fic. As much as I enjoy writing, it feels kinda pointless if no one wants to read the things.
Alright, I'm done. Enjoy the rest of your day.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!