Adventures In Solitude

by jdphobe

Summary

"Imagine what you’d be now if you hadn’t been born where you were. You’d still be smart, slightly perverted, a little bit goofy, not to mention remarkably stubborn... But your smile would be open and honest, not just a means to an end."

Fifteen years after Assclass, Nagisa, now 30, has done a pretty bang-up-job of becoming a teacher. Happily married to Karma, Kayano, and Gakushuu, he’s ready to move onto his eighth year of teaching, now at the renovated E-Class building. Life is good.

But will everything he believes be tossed upon its head when he meets a strange student he quickly becomes convinced is the reincarnation of Korosensei? And what other strange secrets hide behind this seemingly average class of first years?

Notes

See the end of the work for notes.
The night before he meets him, things are the same as every year.

He’s hunched over the living room table, a blanket gingerly tossed over his lap. Student files and rough drafts of potential lessons scattered across the table and floor; he’s made a mess of his own home. But Nagisa Shiota is no underachiever, and his students only deserve the best.

The clock ticks just past 1AM and his vision begins to blur. But he shakes his head and reasserts his attention. He at least wants to get a start on next week’s science lesson before-

“Okay. That’s enough. It’s bedtime, Teach.”

Nagisa sighs as Karma saunters up behind him. “I just need to prepare one more thing,” he insists, reaching for a worksheet. Karma bats his hand away.

“Nu-uh!” he chides. “Someone needs his beauty sleep to make a good first impression on his students tomorrow.”

“...I just want it to be perfect,” Nagisa admits.

“And it will be. It has every year.”

“...Yeah. I know. I just worry.”

“Well, knock that off!” Karma quips. He leans down, reassuringly wraps his arms around Nagisa and proceeds to heave him over his shoulder.

Nagisa sputters and kicks. “Hey!”

“Sorry. It’s time to haul your ass off to bed.”

Nagisa sighs and gives up the struggle. Ah - The woes of just barely reaching 5’3 and weighing 110-something pounds soaking wet. “...At least let me clean up. I promised Kayano I would.”

“And she and I both knew you were lying through your teeth. Don’t sweat it. We can deal with it in the morning.” He makes his way across the room and down the hall, then makes a turn towards the stairs.

“Okay. But you can be the one to deal with her rage.”

“I’m not scared of her wrath. What’s the worst she can do? Gnaw my ankles?”

“This exactly is why we’ve all decided to oppress you for being tall.”

“Whatever you say, Nagisa.”
Nagisa rolls his eyes. “Listen. I know I can’t fight you. I’ll go to sleep. But can you at least put me down? I have my own two feet, believe it or not.”

“Absolutely not.” He snickers and enters the bedroom. Gakushuu’s faintly snoring. “I love manhandling you.”

“Please don’t word it like that.”

“Just try and stop me,” he challenges, tossing Nagisa into bed. Well - beds. They’ve actually haphazardly shoved two together. You’d think a relationship built on the heels of a famed bureaucrat, a loaded CEO, an esteemed movie star, and a significantly less impressive teacher trying his best could have come up with a more innovative solution- But the extent their dumbassery goes to astonishes him more and more every day.

Karma crawls into bed next to him and pulls the cover up over the both of them. “Okay, okay. No more manhandling.” He says, before leaning in close. “…For now,” he whispers.

Nagisa elbows him. “The hell happened to forcing me to get some sleep?”

“Can’t a man say goodnight?”

“Only if he’ll stop making barely-clouded references to our sex life.”

Karma chuckles, but gives it up as he snakes his arms around Nagisa’s back. “Alright, alright. Night, Nagisa. Try not to stress over tomorrow too much, okay?”

“…I’ll try.” Nagisa agrees, knowing that’s near-impossible. He leans into Karma’s hug and wraps his own arms around Kayano. It’s not their preferred cuddle position, with Gakushuu left ‘unsnuggled’ and leaning halfway off the bed, but there’s only so much you can do when one of your partners refuses to go to bed at a decent time.

Oh. Wait. That’s him.

“It’s just… I… I overthink it, y’know?”

“Here we go.”

“What if the kids don’t like me?”

“Considering they’re going to a school run singlehandedly by you, I think they’re either going to have to like you or suck it up.”

Nagisa snorts. “Oh. So they’re just going to have to deal with me, huh?” he retorts.

“Yes. That’s just what the rest of us do.” Karma pulls Nagisa closer and buries his face in his neck. “Seriously. You have nothing to worry about. You’ve been a hit every year, haven’t you?”

“I wouldn’t say a hit -”

“Half the kids from Paradise still message you.”

“W-Well! I have to check up on them, after all--” Nagisa sputters.
Karma chuckles. “And that’s why they all love you. You really do care. So give it a rest. You’ve spent the past three years getting the kinks worked out of Constellate, and it still went swimmingly. This should be better than ever.”

“...Yeah, I guess so,” Nagisa agrees. “I just… Really want to be there for them.”

“And you will. You always have.” Karma ruffles his hair. “Just trust your gut, okay? Everything will be fine. Now get some rest. Otherwise you’re actually going to give all those kids a reason to make fun of you in the morning.”

“Okay-- Okay--” Nagisa caves. “...Night, Karma.”

“Night, Nagisa.” Karma kisses the back of his neck, before finally rolling over.

...Yeah. Everything will be just fine. He’s had the best role model on the planet, after all. Things will be tough, they always are, taking in the kids he feels need the most help. But they’ll also pay off. They have every year before.

That said - He’s really wondering if it’s time to expand the building. And wondering how the kids will take to his… Unique methods. Every reaction is different. Oh! And he still needs to decide what to do with that math packet.

“Wait. One m-”

“Nope. *Nope. Shut it. Go to sleep. It’s one in the morning and if you overthink anything one more time at this hour, I will start breaking things.”

Nagisa shuts up. Fair enough, considering he pulls this just about every other night. “Night, Karma.”

“Goodnight, again.”

In due time Karma dozes off.

Nagisa turns over once, then again. Until the night before his first year of teaching he’d never thought it was possible to be so excited and nervous all at once. But every time, without fail, he finds himself wandering back to that feeling. It’s almost funny, considering how little he’d looked forward to his own Junior High Years.

It’s not like he could have known what was to come.

...But... Looking back on it, it had been a profound, earth-shattering experience for him. The friends he made, the lessons he learned, and the impact they carried. A... A lot of that was thanks to the efforts of the teachers. They’d helped him come to terms with who he was, find his place in the world, and helped carve his future. Holding that very own power in his hands... It makes him giddy and terrified all at once.

Because he can never underestimate the impact he can have on those kids. He can be there for them when no-one else is. And as scary of a responsibility as that is, he also thinks it’s entirely why he became a teacher.
Because if he’d needed it so desperately back then, so would hundreds of other kids. He’s so, so scared of screwing this up, but the reward for succeeding is worth so much more than that fear could ever deter him.

He just has to believe it’ll be fine. Trust Karma and trust his gut.

Well - On second thought - No human being should even remotely trust Karma Akabane. But here he is married to the arrogant bastard, so he’s long since crossed that threshold.

And, for once, he does have a point. What’s the worst that could possibly happen?

“One of these days I’m going to break my neck on this stuff.”

“If you manage to slip at all, much less break your neck on a bunch of worksheets, I will pay off your medical bills with my own damn paycheck.”

“You know for a fact you can’t do that.”

“Exactly. Because it’s not going to happen.”

“If he manages to break his neck on a bunch of worksheets I’ll probably start wheezing.”

“...Good morning to you, too.” Gakushuu grumbles.

Nagisa takes a bite of his breakfast and glances to where Karma stands in the doorway. Karma struts over to where Gakushuu sits across the table and slings his arms over the back of his chair.

“Okay. Okay. Enough.” Nagisa says. “I’ll get it.” He stands, toast in mouth, and feeling like an anime schoolboy as he makes his way over to the living room.

He crouches down and starts sweeping up his papers. He throws them into messy piles on the table. Someone sits down beside him and starts straightening out his mess.

“Need a hand?” Kayano asks with a smile.

“Yeah. That would be appreciated. Can you toss any pink papers or anything marked 4/4 into my binder?” he asks, pointing to a thick binder beside him on the floor.

Kayano heaves it up onto the glass table. “Of course.”

“I’m surprised you’re not chewing me out for leaving this mess in the first place.”

“No way. I figured it was Karma’s fault.”

Nagisa nods. “Most things are.”

“Mmmmmmyup,” Karma agrees, giving them a thumbs up from the kitchen table.

Nagisa collects the last of his worksheets from the floor. Quickly flipping through and yanking a
paper out of the pile, then flipping through one more time for good measure. He puts them down on the table.

“I think that’s everything,” he says, sliding the paper into the binder. Kayano hands him a few more papers. “Mind if I leave everything I won’t need today here?”

“Unless Gakushuu can somehow manage to break his neck with the papers on the table, I don’t have any objections.”

Gakushuu groans. “Oh, will you lay it off, Akari!? Like you’ve never complained about some minute nonsense before.”

“Fair enough, arthritis.”

Nagisa shakes his head and tosses his toast back in his mouth as he returns to the table. Karma’s made himself at home and is no longer clinging to a relieved Gakushuu.

“You nervous about the new batch of students?” Kayano asks as she pulls out the chair next to him.

“Petrified,” Nagisa admits.

“I wouldn’t worry about it. They’re going to have a great time.”

“That’s what I was trying to tell him!” Karma agrees through a mouthful of rice.

“I’m… Excited, too, though,” Nagisa admits, picking at his Yogurt. “I’ve looked over their files a hundred times, but you never really know what sort of people they’re gonna be until you meet them.”

“Hopefully there won’t be another Konishi,” Gakushuu says.

“…Konishi was a good kid!” Nagisa disagrees.

“Once he took a baseball bat to our television.”

“…Okay. So maybe he had a few issues…”

The kids at Paradise had been unruly at best. And oftentimes the kids he took in at Constellate weren’t much ‘better.’ But he tried not to mind. It was those who lashed out the most that most often needed the most help.

And most often took a baseball bat to their television.

“Speaking of atrocities committed against this household, have you hauled Mary off to the school building yet?” Karma asks.

“Yeah. I moved her over yesterday.”

‘Mary’ being a twelve foot, eleven-year-old Albino Burmese Python Nagisa had bought the moment he got out of high school and the only thing he’d ever discovered capable of getting under Karma’s skin. Now she mostly stays in the science room, both for the students to study, and to ease
Karma’s nerves.

“I also brought over Korokohai and the rats. It’s a pet-free house until July.” Korokohai, a dumbo octopus accidentally acquired through a friend of a friend of Okuda’s, and the rats being somewhat self-explanatory.

“Thank fuck. I am so tired of having her beady eyes stare me down.”

“For the last time, she’s not going to measure you out and eat you in your sleep. Snakes literally don’t do that.”

“And octopi don’t fly!” Karma refutes, throwing his hands in the air.

“You misused literally.” Gakushuu duly notes. “Snakes factually don’t do that.”

Nagisa smirks. “You heard the man. She’s not going to eat you.”

“Even if she could, I doubt she would,” Gakushuu adds on. “She’d get indigestion.”

Kayano snorts. “Sounds about right.”

Karma rolls his eyes and leans his chair back. “Bold words coming from a man who believes a snake would eat him.”

“I never said that,” Gakushuu says.

“For the last time! The snake’s not eating anyone!” Nagisa insists.

“...Yet.”

Sometimes dealing with his spouses feels like nailing jello to a tree.

Nagisa sighs and rolls his eyes. “I’m getting dressed.” He stands up and pushes his chair.

“Too cowardly to keep discussing the likelihood of your beloved pet eating me whole?”

“You are literally the only one debating this, Karma. The rest of us have common sense.” Nagisa remarks. “And, no. I just want to be there early. I have some tidying up to do. Speaking of, don’t you have work to be getting ready for?”

Kayano’s shoot doesn’t start until ten, and most of Gakushuu’s work consists of barking orders over the phone- but Karma, as a ‘backbone of their nation,’ also has to get up at ungodly hours. With an alarm clock and the desperate need for spooning at night on the table, the other two have just found themselves dragged along for the ride.

“Eh. I have a minute. You go ahead.” Karma waves his hand dismissively.

Nagisa nods and makes his way back up towards the bedroom. He grabs his clothes from the drawer and gently lays them on the bed. He then slips into them and swipes a familiar tie from his nightstand.

Karasuma’d pulled a few strings years back to get it for him, long after the commotion had died
down. He’d figured it’d serve as a fine memento.

“Why me?” Nagisa had asked. His classmates had all loved Korosensei.

“You’re the one following in the crazy octopus’s footsteps. I think he’d want it to go to you.”

That had been halfway through his first year of teaching. Admittedly, he’d shed a few tears.

He runs his thumb over the tie, noting the hole, before turning to the mirror, and tightening it firmly around his neck. He gives himself a smile.

“Wish me luck, Sensei,” He says to no-one in particular, before sliding on his vest and making his way back towards the kitchen.

...He still misses him every day.

It was Korosensei who’d helped him discover his passion. Nagisa would never not be thankful for that. When he’d felt so alone, and dealt with so much, Korosensei had reached out a tentacle. He’d steered him away from following a violent path and always truly believed in him. Nagisa doesn’t know where he’d be without him.

He’s not sure he’s even remotely living up to Korosensei’s legacy, but he hopes wherever he is, he’s proud.

“I think I’m going to head out,” he says, stretching.

“Not before we smother you in goodbye kisses, you ain’t,” Karma insists, waving Nagisa over.

Knowing he’s in for being lugged around like a sack of potatoes over Karma’s shoulder again if he dare ignores him, he makes his way back over to the table.

“Okay, okay--” he relents with a sigh.

Karma gives him a satisfied smile and leans over to kiss his forehead. “Good luck, okay?”

He makes his way around to Kayano. “Make sure to tell us everything when you get home, okay?” she says, pecking his cheek.

Gakushuu gives him a quick kiss on the nose, before curtly straightening his tie. “You’re going to do just fine.”

That’s what Nagisa keeps trying to tell himself.

He quickly returns their kisses, before heading into the living room, slinging his bag over his shoulder, and grabbing his binder. “See you tonight! I’ll make sure to tell you all about how it went.”

“Remember! You can’t possibly screw it up that badly!”

“Say hi to Kiyoshi for me!”

“Have a great day!”
And with that, he’s off. He can’t hold back a grin as he waves over his shoulder. Their relationship may be something akin to nailing jello to a tree, and their routine may be chaotic at best- But he truly does love the three of them. Even if it was a string of crazy coincidences that brought their convoluted polycule together, they make him happy every day. Six years of marriage is nothing to scoff at, after all.

...Yeah. Time flies. It feels like just yesterday that they’d tied the knot. And just a moment before that they’d even met. Has it really been fifteen years since that fateful school year? Sometimes it still feels like a dream to Nagisa.

He glances at the moon, still visible in the morning sky. With time it’s mostly returned to its natural shape, albeit smaller. But if he squints he can still catch a crack trailing across the surface or a chunk of debris drifting off to the side.

One day those hints will fade entirely and perhaps the world will forget what happened entirely. It’s crazy enough to him that the students he’s about to meet have never seen the full moon. They were born in a world without the apocalyptic scare and without Korosensei.

...He’ll teach them. He’ll teach them everything. Perhaps they’ll never see the full moon, or get to know Korosensei… But Nagisa will do everything in his power to make the past matter. Because it’s what he’s always done. And if that’s the one legacy he can leave, he’s content with that.

“When did you get here?”

Nagisa arrives at the school an hour ahead of time and still finds himself beat.

“If there’s one person more neurotic than him on the fucking planet-

“…Okay, Kiyoshi.”

Kiyoshi Karasuma: The one student Nagisa’d known ahead of time, and a handful in his own right.

The son of some very close family friends, Nagisa knows Kiyoshi well. Perhaps a little too well. In between his parents’ busy schedules and… Unconventional personalities, Nagisa and his classmates have spent a good amount of time over the past twelve years babysitting Kiyoshi. Despite a meek demeanor unfitting for anyone with the last name ‘Karasuma,’ Kiyoshi’s a kind soul, and Nagisa’s happy to see him here.

“Have you put your stuff away?”

“Yes,” Kiyoshi pipes up. “Apologies for inviting myself in. The door was open.”
“It’s fine,” Nagisa says as he places his own stuff down on his desk. “I leave it open for a reason.”
He zips open his bag and starts digging through for supplies. “Kayano says hi, by the way,” he
notes without looking up.

“Oh! Mom and Dad told me to send their regards, too. They’re very thankful about you taking me
in.” A moment of silence before a hurried, “And I am too, of course!”

Nagisa smiles. “Tell them it’s nothing. They did so much for me when I was your age. The least I
can do is return the favor.” He leans down and grabs three packs of pencils.

“I know, I know,” Kiyoshi whines. “You’ve told me the stories a million times. But it still means
so much.”

“Don’t sweat it,” he puts them on the desk before heading across the room. “We’re happy to have
you.” He crouches down and retrieves a textbook from the corner.

“Of course - I’m just… Aware I’m not your typical type of student,” Kiyoshi worries.

He takes another for good measure, then brings them back to his desk. “I don’t have a typical kind
of student, Kiyoshi. That’s the point. If there’s any way I can help you, then I’m glad to have you
in this class.”

“Very well…” Kiyoshi falls silent, fidgeting in his seat.

“…Try not to be too anxious about this year, alright?” he says, flipping open the textbooks. “It’ll be
just fine.” He knows he’s parroting words he doesn’t even believe, but he’d never dare show his
own anxieties in front of his students. He serves as their rock. And if he appears to believe, he can
only hope that will inspire the same in them. “Junior High is some of the best years of your life,
y’know.”

“You’re only saying that because your Junior High was feverishly abnormal.”

“Hey! No, I’m not,” Nagisa refutes as he cracks open his binder. “Sure, the assassination classroom
certainly was a plus… But that wasn’t the only reason I loved it.” He carefully retrieves his lesson
plan. “You’re going to learn a ton. And you’re going to make some really good friends.”

“I dunno about that…” Kiyoshi murmurs. Nagisa looks up at him, but he’s staring down at his
feet.

“…You will. Trust me. I know it sounds empty coming from me, but I had no idea what I was
doing at the start of Junior High, either. I’ll be here for you. So we’ll get this figured out, okay?”

Kiyoshi quietly nods. “…Alright. Thank you, Shiota-san.”

“That’s Shiota-sensei to you, young man,” Nagisa quips with a smirk.

“…I can’t believe you’re really my teacher.”

“And I can’t believe you’re really my student. When did you turn thirteen?”

“March Twentieth.”
“Okay, smart-aleck.”

He catches a tiny smile widen on Kiyoshi’s face. There we go.

“...Tell Yukimura-san I return my regards, by the way. Asano-san and Akabane-san, too!”

“I’ll make sure to.”

Nagisa’s eyes drift to the back of the room as he finishes unpacking his supplies. “You sure you want to sit all the way back there?”

Kiyoshi jolts. “Of- Of course! Unless you’d like me to move? I’ll m-” He’s already grabbing his books.

“No, no. It’s fine,” Nagisa reassures. Kiyoshi freezes before sheepishly placing his books back down. “It just seems kind of lonely back there.”

“Eh. I figure I’ll be fine. I’ll be sitting next to someone no matter what, after all.”

He has a point. “Fair enough.” It almost seems sort of cozy back there. But... “You sure you don’t want to at least scoot up? You could always take the anime-protagonist-window-seat.”

Kiyoshi’s face contorts with visible disgust as he glances towards the window. “I’d rather die. I… Think I’ll leave that honor to someone else.”

Nagisa chuckles. “Alright, alright. I’ll leave you to your corner. Can’t have you dying on me.” He glances at the clock, only to find they still have a solid fifty minutes before class begins. Okay - Maybe he overestimated how much he’d need to do before the students arrived. Especially considering he’d been tidying up the building for the past week.

He awkwardly sits down. Kiyoshi gives him a knowing look.

“Let me guess. You drastically overestimated how long you’d need to be here, and now you’re bored out of your mind?”

“Not bored,” Nagisa refutes. “I actually have a lesson plan I meant to finish up last night. Let me just -” He yoinks it out of his binder. “Might as well get some work done while I’m here.” He retrieves a pen from his desk and starts scrawling.

“Alright. I hope you don’t mind me just... Sitting here.”

“Considering you’re supposed to be here Kiyoshi, I certainly don’t.”

Kiyoshi gives a tiny nod and nabs his phone from his pocket. There’s a moment of long silence, as he absentmindedly scrolls, and Nagisa hurriedly writes.

“...I hope you’re right, Nagisa-sensei.”

“Hm?”

“That it will be a good year.”
And despite it all, Nagisa only finds himself hoping the same.

One by one, they arrive. And Nagisa tries his best to figure what to make of them. Of course he’s looked over their logs a million times. He’s been told what to expect. But he’d quickly learned that sort of thing was never good to follow as a complete rule of thumb. A student’s past never defined them, and the exterior persona they put out very rarely matched up with who they were on the inside. Surely these 26 were no different.

The students excitedly chitter with one another as they wait for class to begin. One seat remains empty.

A ginger-haired boy leans over his desk and makes loud conversation with the girl two seats right of him. She tries her best to shush him. Kazuki and Emiko Hisoka: Identical twins. He’s been told the former is a handful but trusts the latter to keep him under control. Not sitting directly next to him was a good first step.

The girl in between them keeps her nose firmly buried in her book, occasionally shooting an annoyed look Kazuki’s way. Rin Arakawa: An intelligent girl. Her father’d had the most wonderful things to say about her.

Two raggedy looking dark haired boys sit near the front with each other. They don’t attempt to spark conversation. Nagisa wonders why, before spotting the earbuds one of them has in. His music is blasting so loud it can be heard from across the room. But Nagisa figures he won’t bother him about it yet. He seems so content. They’re Yoshito Akira and Minako Mori, if he remembers correctly. He doesn’t think they know each other, but their similar appearances are enough to make him snort.

A short girl in a leather jacket attempts to chat with the properly dressed, purple-haired girl next to her, but she gives her a firm cold shoulder and a disgusted look. Riko Sakamoto and Fumiko Hisakawa. Riko sighs and snidely turns to the boy on her other side, unawevered by Fumiko’s icy indifference. Nagisa notes talking to Fumiko one on one in the future. He needs to learn whether that callous attitude is simply from a bad morning, a result of the wealthy lifestyle she clearly leads, or something more deeply worrying. And regardless of the reason, he’d like to see her treat her classmates with more kindness.

A pair of childhood friends whisper and pass notes. Five girls make boisterous conversation in the back. Kiyoshi keeps to himself, sending nervous glances at where the prickly Fumiko sits diagonally from him. And one seat remains empty.

Class was supposed to start ten minutes ago, but Nagisa really doesn’t want to start if someone’s just running late. He flips open his attendance list, scanning to see who’s not there.

Chiharu? No - He’s here. Kanon? Nope. Haurhi? He almost thinks he’s got it but notices her hiding out in the back. Oh. There it is!

Makoto Himura, huh? Nagisa squints and sends another glance towards the clock. Did someone seriously skip the first day? He thinks back on this kid, and what he’d read. He was the one who’d been expelled from his last school for-
The door slams open. “Sorry I’m late!”

A disheveled, messy black-haired boy stands in the doorway, panting.

Every eye in the room is on him.

“It’s… Fine,” Nagisa reassures. “Just take a seat. And try not to be too late in the future, okay?”

Makoto gives him a wide, relieved grin and makes his way across the room to sit down. He curtly takes the seat in front of Kiyoshi.

Nagisa taps the blackboard with a ruler but the kids continue to talk. He taps again, louder, this time. “Okay. We’ll be starting now!” Slowly but surely the chatter dies down to a few hushed whispers. About half the class is actually looking at him.

“Okay. Okay. Hello. Welcome to Constellate Junior High!” He greets, waving a hand. “I’m thrilled to have you all here. I hope you’ll enjoy the next three yea-”

Fumiko’s hand shoots into the air. She doesn’t wait for him to call on her. “Will we be starting ten minutes late every day?” she snidely asks.

“No. We won’t,” Nagisa clarifies. “Today is just going to mostly be a casual day, anyways. We’ll be going over what I expect from you, what we’ll be learning, and how exactly things will be here. As you know, it’s not quite like any other school.”

A voice shouts from the back, “We’re going to get to beat your ass, right? Because you were a part of that weird moon incident way back when!”

Nagisa almost rephrases the crude bluntness but thinks better of it. “You’ll get to try to ‘beat my ass,’” He clarifies. “But before we get to any of that, we have your studies to go over.”

A groan emanates from half the class.

“For one reason or another, each of you have ended up in this classroom. Whether it be for academic reasons, your behavior, or simply because you were in need of a solid support system.”

However, Constellate is not a low profile school or a punishment. In the mere few years of its existence, it’s already gained somewhat of a prestigious reputation. One that Nagisa almost loathes. Because his school is not for the ‘perfect’ students, just as much as it is not for ‘failures.’ It simply follows a different criteria for application than any other school he’s ever seen. He does not take in students based on their actual results for the entrance exams, but rather for who he feels would need his help the most. The concept of taking in students the rest of the world has given up on and fostering them… It’s all he’s ever wanted. It’s not a foolproof system. He’s received students who were perfectly well adjusted and he’s sure he’s let dozens more slip through the cracks (The thought haunts him), but he’d helped set so many children on the right path over the past three years. And, believe it or not, he’d quickly learned everyone could use a little support, even those seemingly well off. It was his job to find out how.

“And… I know you likely have mixed feelings about that. Some of you are probably thrilled to have ‘made it in,’ and some of you are probably just here on your parents’ behalf. Either way, by
the end of your time here, I hope you’ll look back on it fondly. Because I want learning to be something you can enjoy. And I think I can turn it into that. I haven’t had a single student come out of this class without some fondness for it.”

He hears murmurs and catches eye rolls. But he steels himself. He’s seen himself how well it works.

“You might not like everything. I’m going to work you hard. Because I know there’s great potential in each of you. And… I want to see you reach it. I won’t allow half-heartedness or let you dare give up in this room. Success is hard. But I promise I’ll be there to help you reach it through every step of the way. I’ll help you find what works best for you. Because reaching your peak potential doesn’t involve forcing yourself into a mold. As your teacher right here and now I can make you a promise: I won’t be giving up on a single one of you.”

He paces. “That is...What this school embodies. The principle it was founded on. And so… If you ever need a hand, or even just need anyone to talk to, I’m here. I know you don’t believe me yet, but I swear on my life - I’m here. As your teacher, I’m only obligated to serve as your confidant, too. So I hope you can come to trust me. And I hope this can be a wonderful year. And I hope you’ll be very proud of yourselves by the end of it.”

He smiles, claps his hands, and looks out over the class.

“Nice monologue,” someone snarks.

“I don’t know what sort of sappiness I expected from a teacher who looks like a grade schooler…”

“How fake can you get?” a boy leans over and whispers to his neighbor.

Nagisa pretends not to hear it. He’ll prove himself to them in due time.

Water balloons, BB Guns, and rubber knives are laid out before them.

Nagisa’s been called insane for this a thousand times before.

It’s not that he doesn’t know handing a pack of wild, troubled middle schoolers fake weapons is unprofessional at best- But he doesn’t exactly do things ‘normally’ around here.

Kiyoshi’s eyes are saucers. Several students excitedly bounce on their toes.

“I won’t make you wait another minute longer. Thank you for being so patient with me while I went over the school year and showed you around the building.” They’d hardly been. Going over the criteria was a goddamn nightmare. But it’s always nice to feel appreciated. “Let’s get to what you’ve really been looking forward to.”

He nabs a rubber knife off the ground and gives the kids a smile. “This is the part where, before anything: I need to give you a disclaimer of what this is all about. Believe it or not, it’s not about violence. I’m not doing this to encourage any dangerous behavior, and the moment any of you hurt yourselves, each other, or someone else, your rights to participate in this activity will be revoked.” He points the rubber blade at them with a stern look.
He'll be the first to admit the normalization of violence he’d had growing up was likely not the best influence. In hindsight, it came from the government’s eager readiness to risk and even indoctrinate children. They’d ended up being forced to take a life, and that still left some scars on him to this day. But the assassination system had held its undeniable benefits. Turning school into a competition of sorts between teacher and students that did not rely on academic factor alone was freeing. It’d helped him keep his focus and helped him come to terms with his own confusing violent thoughts.

He doubts he’ll actually even find any sense of bloodlust emanating from these kids. And if anything troubling pops up he’ll merely pull them aside and talk to them. Bloodlust alone did not make a bad kid or even necessarily put them on the wrong path. He knew that better than anyone. But it was always good to check in.

“This is supposed to be an enjoyable thing to get you more engaged in school. I’m NOT encouraging any of you to actually go out and commit murder. I hope I don’t need to say that.” Now that earns a few chuckles.

It had actually come to him at Paradise. With the safety that the word ‘kill’ had given him. The threat had felt like greeting an old friend. And then, one of the boys had tried to stab him. It’d been a month into the first trimester when a student had brought a blade into school. But Nagisa had been intuitive enough to sense the barely cloaked bloodlust. He’d clapped, firmly grabbed the boy’s wrist, and wrestled the weapon out of his hand.

So. They’d wanted to play violent, huh?

As sad as it was, the administration didn’t give a shit if Nagisa bent a rule or ten. The students had already been seen as disposable deadbeats, destined for a violent future. In some ways, they were just like the E-Class.

He’d went on a shopping spree and hauled his pack of harmless weapons into school. “Things are going to be a little different around here. From now on: Every time you answer a question correctly, I will let you make an attempt to ‘kill’ me. If you succeed, I’ll give you extra credit. Or even let you skip class if you’d prefer.”

They’d been fucking stunned. But the task he’d laid out for them was much harder than they’d first anticipated.

Turns out when you gave a bunch of vicious, emotionally repressed kids a way to vent their anger, it helped curb their actual violence. Sometimes you just wanna stab a teacher! And when he was proud of you for it? Some of them had never had someone tell them ‘good job’ in their entire lives!

Grades went up in no time.

Of course, things are a little different now. He isn’t some one-subject-teacher at a run-down school. He’s singlehandedly the only teacher running Constellate. And he doesn’t have superspeed, as much as he wishes he did. If he had kids trying to kill him after every correct answer they’d never get through the school year.

“As you know, a very long time ago, this building,” he gestures to the school building behind him, “was the prime location of the... Moon incident. Something I will eventually be able to teach you more about than you could possibly learn anywhere else. When Korosensei arrived I was one of
the students assigned to assassinate him. And, against all odds, it did wonders for my grades and attention span. It sounds crazy, but it’s no lie! And I want to give you the same opportunity.”

“Sadly, you can’t try to murder me all day. But during pop quizzes and PE Class, we’re going to have some fun, okay? Maybe if you behave we can even have games where you try to eliminate each other. In short: I’ll be giving you prime opportunities to compete against me.” He bends the knife with his finger. “Albeit with mostly harmless weapons.” He can’t regrow his limbs. Giving the First Years actual guns would be a fucking disaster. “And if you succeed in ‘fatally’ wounding me, I’ll reward you! Whether it be a small boost to your grades, an opportunity to ditch without me tattling, or another reward we could try to come up with together.”

“It’ll be no easy feat! I may look unassuming, fragile, and... Small,” he grimaces, “But I’m no pushover.” Nagisa’s dextrous, intuitive, and has a great reading on people. Plus he has a trick or two of his own up his sleeve. “You’ll have to use your every ability to succeed. And that surmises most what I want you to strive for in this classroom. To push yourself hard and use every ounce of your strength. Because you can do great things if you just try.”

A boy near the front raises his hand. “Like murder?”

“Well- No! Not like real murder.”

“So like pretend murder.”

Nagisa nods sagely. “Like pretend murder.”

A few kids are staring at him like he’s an insane person, but the majority of the class excitedly chatters. Now that brings a smile to his face.

“In the future, I’ll even let you go in groups and try to work out complicated plans. But for today why don’t we just fly solo? Who’d like to try first?”

Fumiko’s hand flies in the air. Nagisa’s pleasantly surprised. She’d struck him as someone who wouldn’t be very passionate about any sort of hands-on activity, much less this one. But he should know better than to judge a book by its cover. And he’s thrilled to have her on boa-

“I need to sit this activity out,” she bluntly states.

...Ah.

“Are you sure?” Nagisa asks.

“I’m certain,” she says. “My parents have told me I am not to participate. Nor do I have any interest.” He can’t help but wonder if her parents even read up on his school, but she answers that question for him. “They were well aware of the... Activities that take place, but I’m here for academic purposes only.”

Admittedly he’s slightly disappointed to see her shun the idea so quickly, especially on her parents’ behalf. But he does understand. Everyone has their own way of doing things, after all. “Alright. Happy to have you as an eager student.”

She gives him an unimpressed look and a curt nod.
“Can I sit out too?” a voice quickly pipes up.

Makoto. Now *that* has him surprised. He’d struck Nagisa as the overeager type. But he’s looking up at Nagisa with wide, pleading eyes.

“Of course,” Nagisa says. There’s no use arguing at this point. He’d never want to force them out of their comfort zone. At least not on the first day.

Makoto gives him a relieved look. “Thank you very much, Nagisa-sensei!” he says and rushes in for a hug.

Admittedly, it’s abrupt. But Nagisa would never shun affection from a student. Particularly already finding himself slightly wounded by Fumiko’s callous attitude. He reaches his arms out and accepts the boy’s embrace.

*POP!*

Nagisa freezes, suddenly finding his shirt soaking wet.

Every eye is on him. The class is stunned.

And Makoto bursts out into laughter. The other kids follow in suit. Snickers and gasps erupt as someone begins to clap.

“I’ll be going, now. I figure you won’t be doing much else on an introductory day.” Makoto states, whirling around. His own shirt drips as he pulls shreds of rubber out of his collar.

“Hey, now- No you won’t--” Nagisa tries to refute. “For one, if that were a real attack, it would have seriously hurt you as well.” He says, pointing at Makoto’s drenched shirt.

“Eh. Would have taken more than *that* to take me out,” the boy brags. “Stop trying to make up excuses. You’re just mad I got you on day one!”

And as much as he hates to admit it, Makoto has a point. He just can’t believe he fell for *that*. After *everything*!

...But that’s no excuse for undermining Makoto’s achievement. He’d been clever and quick thinking. Nagisa hadn’t even seen him grab the balloon.

“You’re right,” Nagisa admits in defeat. Admittedly this is going to make keeping up his untouchable image just a bit harder. “Good job. You can go. But next time no ‘fatally wounding’ yourse-”

Makoto’s already running inside.

Nagisa slowly blinks and turns to Fumiko. Makoto had to have grabbed the ‘grenade’ when he was preoccupied with her. “...Were… Were you in on that?” He asks. If so, they’d certainly made a good disaster duo.

She gives him a disgusted look. “Absolutely not!”

...Fair enough.
A hand shoots in the air. “Are we still going to get to try to kill you? Or did he win?”

Nagisa collects himself. “No, no. Of course you can still try to kill me.”

“Doesn’t seem like it’ll be too hard.” Someone snarks.

Nagisa feels his cheeks flush red with embarrassment, but simply leans down and begins passing out weapons. “We’ll just have to see about that,” he says. As he gives a BB Gun to Rin and tells Fumiko she can sit down and watch he feels a tiny hand tap his shoulder.

“...Can I sit out too? I don’t want to hurt you...”

Kiyoshi Karasuma, who Nagisa has seen load a real gun at his father’s behest, blinks up at him.

For fuck’s sake!

He’s in for one really strange year.

Chapter End Notes

Here we go, boys! My first long term fanfiction project in years. I’m so excited to buckle down and attempt this, and I’m so glad Assassination Classroom inspired something like this from me.

I suppose I shouldn’t go into exactly why I wrote this fanfiction yet, since that would entail quite a bit of spoilers, but trust me when I say tons of heart has gone into it and its planning. It’s a story at its heart about Nagisa, the people who have molded his life, and the way he can mold the lives of others. And I hope that shows.

And, of course, it’s a fanfiction about second chances. We haven’t quite gotten into the meat of things yet, but if the description has tipped you off any, things are about to get fishy around here. (Well. Octopussy? Hm. Now that I’ve typed that, I don’t think I enjoy that phrase!)

I hope the inclusion of Nagisa and his convoluted polycule isn’t a huge turnoff for anyone. I couldn’t quite decide what ship I wanted to go with, if any, for Nagisa’s future. So I just went with just about everything I shipped! Because the world needs more wholesome poly relationships. I would not describe this as a ship fic even remotely, but his relationship with his spouses certainly does play a part in the plot, and I have my fingers crossed that even if your eyebrow is raised right now I can sell you on this nonsense by the end of the fic. Don’t worry. I WILL explain how they ended up in this situation sooner or later. Because HOO boy they didn’t expect this either.

As a note they are not all dating. Nagisa is with all three of them, and Karma and Asano are with each other. Kayano is not involved with those two. That said, the ones who aren’t involved are all still close friends, and consenting to this entire ordeal. They have fun here.
I ended up going with Constellate Junior High for the name of his school, but it was HARD to decide. Because how on earth do you get something cooler than fucking Paradise!? There’s simply no improving on that. That said, I tried to stay with a sort of celestial/space theme. I was going to go with something based on the moon, but figured that would be a little bit too on the nose. So I went with Constellate! A word defined as “form or cause to form into a cluster or group; gather together,” which I think is sweet for him trying to nurture a bunch of misfits, while also sounding like constellation, which is always a plus.

Sorry for bombarding so many students on you in a single chapter, by the way. If it makes you feel any better: I’m just gonna say it here and now that the only ones you really need to pay any attention to are Makoto, Fumiko, and Kiyoshi. And I hope I’ve made that clear. The rest are all just to. Y’know. Have an actual school and not Nagisa teaching three children in a void. They’re a… Interesting trio, alright. And I can’t wait to delve into how they interact.

Music is a big thing that inspires my writing, and I can’t help but give it some credit. This fanfiction itself is named after The New Pornographers’ “Adventures In Solitude”, and the reason why will become pretty apparent PRETTY quickly if you give it a listen. I’ll probably end up listing off some songs that I listened to while I wrote every chapter, just because I love music like that. Some big influences for this one were Pokemon Mystery Dungeon’s “Goodnight”, Dear Evan Hansen’s “Does Anybody Have A Map”, Bastille’s “Lethargy”, Air Traffic Controller’s “Hurry, Hurry” and The White Stripes’ “We’re Going To Be Friends”.

And with that, I hope you’ll all enjoy Adventures In Solitude. Because I have a LOT planned, and you’re in for a wild ride.
“She was so proud of herself! She just - Had this expression on her face - God I can’t even describe it! And that’s day one! I’m so excited!”

There’s nothing on the planet that makes Nagisa more enthusiastic than his students.

“So I’m taking it your day wasn’t as bad as you thought it’d be?”

“Of course not.”

“Told you,” Karma says with a smirk. “It never is.”

It’s 7pm and Kayano just got home. Gakushuu’s whipped up a warm dinner and Nagisa is practically leaning over the table as he rambles about his day.

“I mean, of course I’m antsy, but it’s so nice to finally meet them. No more worrying about what could happen. Now it’s just me and them.”

“So they’re nice?” Kayano asks.

“I mean, as nice as they can be. This one boy - Kazuki? He tried to throw gum at my hair. And another girl, Haruhi, told me to “fuck off,” but it’s too early to pass judgments, really. You know how it is.”

Karma nods as he takes a bite of his food. “Yeah, yeah. You need time to weasel your way into their twisted little hearts. Middle schoolers are demons.”

“Wouldn’t you know?” Gakushuu interjects with a scoff.

“Never said I was exempt.”

“You still haven’t grown out of your demon phase, Karma,” Nagisa notes. “I think it’ll be fine. I… Think they’ll be good kids.” They always are. Quite frankly, Nagisa isn’t sure he believes in bad kids.

“How’d they take to PE?” Gakushuu asks.

Nagisa’s smile widens. “Great! They’re excited for it as always,” he explains. “There’s this one girl, Fumiko, who wanted to sit out- But I managed to get everyone else into it! Even Kiyoshi-”

“Oh! Kiyoshi! Did you tell him I said hello?” Kayano interrupts.

“Oh! Of course. He told me to ‘pass on his regards’ to you and the rest.”

Kayano can’t help but chuckle. “Oh my God.”

“Yeah, he’s as formal as ever. I think this’ll be good for him, though.”

“But at the very least apt revenge for what Karasuma put you through back in the day,” Karma jests.
“Everything’s revenge with you. I’ll have you know I’m thankful for what Karasuma-sensei put me through. It taught me discipline.” He’s managed to stay surprisingly fit with his training in mind. And thank fuck, considering he spends most of his day trying to keep rowdy preteens under control.

“I know, I know. I’m shitting you.”

Gakushuu rolls his eyes. He knows all about the crazy year they’d had by now. But more often than not all he can offer is a snarky comment in response to their stories. It’s not the sort of joke he’s completely in on, as much as they’ve tried to indoctrinate him. Sometimes, the only way to truly understand some inane horseshit is to be there for yourself. Nagisa still occasionally catches him trying to wrap his head around the logistics on what nonsense exactly he missed out on.

“Tell Kiyoshi I ‘return his regards~’” Karma says in falsetto.

Now that’s something Gakushuu can agree with. “Same here. Minus that patronizing tone.”

“Yeah. Think I’m going to cut that bit out either way,” Nagisa snarks. “I’ll tell him you said hello without making microaggressions against the middle schooler.” He feels like he’d been going somewhere else with this conversation. Shit. What was it?

“They’re not microaggressions. Kiyoshi and I are pals!” Now that cues some light bickering from Kayano and Karma, but Nagisa’s zoned out. There’s another story he’d wanted to tell his spou-

Oh, yeah. His surprise!

“Oh, oh! And guess what else happened during PE?” he interrupts with an excited smile.

“Don’t tell me someone got hurt,” Kayano says.

“Why would I have been so enthusiastic about someone getting hurt!?” Nagisa sputters.

“I dunno! My mind instantly just jumped to the worst possible conclusion!”

“And yet you mentioned that so casually!”

“Children getting skewered. A normal thing to discuss over dinner with the family,” Karma says.

“Blown up, actually.”

“Excuse me?” Gakushuu chokes.

Nagisa waves his hand. “No, no. I’m kidding. A kid did ‘suicide bomb’ me with a water balloon, though.”

“That isn’t exactly offering up any more context, Nagisa,” Gakushuu says.

“Okay, okay, so…” Nagisa leans forward excitedly. “We’re in PE going over the rules, and this girl, Fumiko, is like ‘I want to sit out.’ And I’m like, ‘Wow, okay,’ because no kid usually wants to pass up on the opportunity to stab me. And this other boy, Makoto, follows in suit, like ‘me too!’ And I’m like ‘Okay. I don’t’ see why not.’ And he’s like ‘Thank you!’ and then he hugged me…”

“No way-” Kayano says. She can already tell where this one is going.

“Yes way.” Nagisa refutes. “Of course I hug him! And the next thing I know I’m soaking wet. He’d jammed a water balloon up his shirt.”
“That’s exactly like what you pulled!” Kayano says in disbelief.

Nagisa can’t help but laugh. “I know! I was so surprised! Do you know what it’s like to be on the receiving side of that!? No wonder Korosensei was so mad at me!”

“That has got to be cheating.” Gakushuu comments, shaking his head.

“Oh, it was definitely cheating.” Though not the most low-brow trick he’s ever seen. That would have to go to the roomba incident, hands down. “We hadn’t even started yet, and technically he should have been disqualified for eliminating himself as well. But I wasn’t about to tell him that day one. He cheated, but he did manage to outsmart me nonetheless.”

“Please don’t tell me you’re going to let him walk all over you.”

“No way. I already told him he’d have to beat me fair and square next time. He was already sort of running off to ditch class, but I think he heard me.”

Gakushuu rubs the bridge of his nose and shakes his head. “You’re in for a handful.”

“I always am,” Nagisa admits with a shrug and a smile.

“That’s actually the first time someone’s gotten you day one, right?” Karma asks.

“Yes. Yamazaki got pretty close last year, but nothing like that,” Nagisa says. “You have no idea how taken aback I was! I’m still thinking about it. It was so clever, guys!”

“Try not to think about it too much. He’s going to sniff out your weak spots.”

“I’d like to see him try.” He knows to be on his guard around Makoto from now on. At least during the appropriate times. If Makoto tries to stab him during English they’re going to have to have a long conversation on when it’s acceptable to knife your teacher.

“Any other interesting stories? Or is getting blown up the highlight of your day?”

“Not really. It was mostly just first-day gruelingness. But… I really do have a good feeling about this year.” He pauses. “...’Killed off’ day one or not..”

“That’s good,” Kayano says.

“And does that mean you’re finally gonna let me get some sleep?” Karma quips.

“Oh, absolutely not. God knows my 3am thoughts are gonna come back to haunt me anyways.”

“...Delightful.”

“No, don’t worry. I’ll haul his ass off to bed tonight,” Kayano says.

“I’d like to see you try!” Nagisa jokes.

“If you three cause a ruckus, I will sleep in the guestroom,” Gakushuu gripes.

“Nooooooooo…” Karma sarcastically whines, leaning to dramatically drape himself across Gakushuu.

“Sorry, Gakushuu. We’re all in this sinking ship together,” Kayano says with a smirk.
“...Delightful.” Gakushuu growls, but makes no effort to get Karma off of him.

“Okay, okay! I’ll try to get some sleep,” Nagisa finally relents. “But no promises.” He’d managed to get some of his work done when he first got home but he still has a few more things he’d like to prepare after dinner. Right now he’s into the idea of popping in a movie and seeing if any of his spouses will snuggle him while he attempts to map out a few lessons. Something tells him at least one of them will take him up on the offer.

His phone buzzes once, then twice.

“Mind if I grab that?” he asks. It’s been going on and off all day.

“Trust me when you say you don’t want to.” Kayano sends Karma a disgusted look. But he only smirks in response.

...Great.

He nabs his phone from his pocket and blinks owlishly at his notifications.

Let’s see. A Snapchat from Sakura. Someone liked his Twitter post. And… 470+ texts from the Class-E Group Chat!

“...You look like you’ve seen a ghost. What the hell did they do this time!?” Gakushuu asks in disbelief.

Nagisa doesn’t say a word as he opens the group chat.

The E-Class Group Chat was the logical conclusion to trying to stay in touch with each other in such a busy world. Created shortly after their unforgettable school year ended, it’s become somewhat of a staple in the E-Class’s life. For the most part, it’s grown to be inactive over the years, but it does have its spikes. And whenever there’s a lot of messages, Nagisa knows either something seriously stupid or stupidly serious has gone down.

Scrolling up past 100+ messages of “Hey Nagisa”, he quickly figures it’s the former.

[3/27/2030 5:40 PM:] [Itona]: And that’s why I think Sasuke is the backbone of our society.

[UNREAD MESSAGES]


[4/4/2030 10:12 AM:] [Sugino]: Nagisa! How was your day?

[4/4/2030 10:20 AM:] [terasaka]: school hasn’t ended yet, moron

[4/4/2030 10:21 AM:] [terasaka]: he’s at work


[4/4/2030 10:25 AM:] [Maehara]: do you think he’s gonna get stabbed again?

[4/4/2030 10:26 AM:] [terasaka]: yeah lmao

[4/4/2030 10:28 AM:] [Isogai ♥]: CAN YOU GUYS NOT DISCUSS THIS IN A CHAT HE’S GOING TO SEE IN A FEW HOURS?
Nagisa rolls his eyes. Can’t help but love his middle school classmates spreading good-natured gossip about him.

[4/4/2030 10:40 AM:] [Rio]: Hey Nagisa
[4/4/2030 10:40 AM:] [Rio]: Hey Nagisa
[4/4/2030 10:40 AM:] [Rio]: Hey Nagisa
[4/4/2030 10:41 AM:] [Rio]: How was your day
[4/4/2030 10:42 AM:] [Isogai ♥]: Uh, he’s still at work, Rio. ^_^'
[4/4/2030 10:42 AM:] [Rio]: Hey Nagisa
[4/4/2030 10:42 AM:] [Rio]: Hey Nagisa
[4/4/2030 10:43 AM:] [Rio]: Hey Nagisa
[4/4/2030 10:43 AM:] [Sugino]: Oh my god is she ignoring you
[4/4/2030 10:44 AM:] [Rio]: Hey Nagisa
[4/4/2030 10:44 AM:] [Rio]: Hey Nagisa
[4/4/2030 10:45 AM:] [Isogai ♥]: :( 
[4/4/2030 10:46 AM:] [Rio]: Hey Nagisa
[4/4/2030 10:46 AM:] [Rio]: Hey Nagisa
[4/4/2030 10:48 AM:] [Maehara]: you’re not nearly as funny as you think you are. you know that, right?
[4/4/2030 10:49 AM:] [Rio]: Hey Nagisa
[4/4/2030 10:52 AM:] [terasaka]: YOU REALIZE YOUR FLOODING ALL OUR PHONES, RGIHT?
[4/4/2030 10:52 AM:] [terasaka]: YOU ARE NOT JUST BOTHERING NAGISA.
[4/4/2030 10:55 AM:] [terasaka]: IM IN A MEETING
[4/4/2030 10:55 AM:] [Hazama]: *You’re
[4/4/2030 10:56 AM:] [Rio]: Hey Nagisa


[4/4/2030 10:57 AM:] [Hazama]: Yeah hey real question what the hell is happening


[4/4/2030 10:59 AM:] [maehara]: DO YOU NOT KNOW HOW TO TURN OFF TEXT NOTIFICATIONS?

[4/4/2030 11:01 AM:] [terasaka]: IM NOT A FUCKING MORON

[4/4/2030 11:01 AM:] [terasaka]: IM JUST BORED DURING SAID MEETING

[4/4/2030 11:02 AM:] [Rio]: Hey Nagisa

[4/4/2030 11:02 AM:] [maehara]: the future of our country, everyone!

[4/4/2030 11:03 AM:] [maehara]: terasaka. not. whatever the hell rio’s doing.

[4/4/2030 11:04 AM:] [Hazama]: Guys

[4/4/2030 11:04 AM:] [Isogai 😊]: Trust me when I say I’d tell you if I had an answer.

[4/4/2030 11:05 AM:] [Rio]: Hey Nagisa

[4/4/2030 11:06 AM:] [Hazama]: ...

[4/4/2030 11:06 AM:] [Hazama]: Just ignore her. She’s bound to tire herself out eventually.

[4/4/2030 11:07 AM:] [Rio]: Hey Nagisa

[4/4/2030 11:12 AM:] [Rio]: Hey Nagisa

[4/4/2030 11:20 AM:] [Rio]: Hey Nagisa

[4/4/2030 12:00 PM:] [Rio]: Hey Nagisa


[4/4/2030 12:24 AM:] [terasaka]: FUCKING HELL

[4/4/2030 12:30 PM:] [Rio]: Hey Nagisa

[4/4/2030 12:30 PM:] [terasaka]: LOOK AT WWHAT YOU’VE DONE


[4/4/2030 12:33 AM:] [Itona]: ...

[Itona has left the chat]

[4/4/2030 12:33 PM:] [terasaka]: LOOK AT WWHAT YOU’VE DONE!!!
[4/4/2030 12:35 PM:] [Rio]: Hey Nagisa

[4/4/2030 12:50 PM:] [Rio]: Hey Nagisa

[4/4/2030 1:22 PM:] [Rio]: Hey Nagisa

[✧・゚:* Ritsu *・:*・:*・:*・:*・:* added Itona to the chat]

[4/4/2030 2:01 PM:] [Itona]: Thanks

[4/4/2030 2:03 PM:] [Rio]: Hey Itona


[4/4/2030 2:06 PM:] [✧・゚:* Ritsu *・:*・:*・:*・:*・:*]: ^w^

[4/4/2030 3:01 PM:] [Rio]: Hey Nagisa

[4/4/2030 4:23 PM:] [Rio]: Hey Nagisa


[4/4/2030 4:31 PM:] [Rio]: Hey Divorce Lawyer :(


[4/4/2030 4:51 PM:] [Karma]: I see…


...It goes on like that for a while.

Nagisa sighs and looks up at Karma. “Why do you guys love making my life a living hell?”

But Karma’s nose is buried in his phone.

Nagisa’s phone buzzes.

[4/4/2030 7:31 PM] [Karma] hey nagisa

Nagisa takes a picture of himself flipping the bird, and promptly sends it to his friends.

“...Something stupid, I take it?” Gakushuu groans.

Gakushuu’s been firmly excluded from the Class-E group chat. He couldn’t get in if he tried.
And… He’s tried.

Nagisa thinks he’s the lucky one.
“Yeah. Rio thought it would be a fantastic idea to spam the chat.”

“Not just Rio! Me too. Don’t downplay just how obnoxious I can be.” Karma brags.

“Rio started it,” Kayano snarks. “Don’t give yourself too much credit.”

Gakushuu rolls his eyes. “Okay, the usual. I see.”

In his youth, he’d made incessant efforts to weasel his way into their group chat, but with time he’s given up the effort. Growing up, he realized it was immature at best to try to force himself into a group that he bullied in middle school, and realized just about everything that goes down in that chat is dumb as all hell anyway.

Nagisa would have to agree. He only stays out of sentimentality.

He opens up the Snapchat. Sakura gives him a peace sign and a thoroughly unimpressed look. “Good luck dealing with the children. You’ll need it.”

He chuckles. For someone who was the child he was dealing with once, she sure seems to think that will be a difficult task. She’s not entirely wrong.

He leaves himself a mental note to snap her back in the morning. As apathetic as she can come off, she’s made sure to check up on him every year. As his first student, it… Means a lot.

“…Are you going to finish eating, or are you going to smile at your phone all night?” Kayano jokes.

Nagisa jolts “Ah-- I think I’m finished.” It’s been a long day. He doesn’t exactly have the biggest appetite.

“Okay, okay,” Kayano relents. “No going back to work, yet, though.” She insists, placing her hand on his. “Give yourself time to breathe.”

“…Yeah. I will,” he says, leaning into her touch. “…I was wondering, after dinner could we toss on a movie? How about your latest drama?” He decides he can get some work done after. It’s still early in the night, he has time to spare for them.

“…That sounds lovely.”

“That’s the one where they have you playing a sixteen-year-old girl, right?” Gakushuu asks.

“Yep,” Kayano says. “But I’ll have you know I nailed the role.”


“…Same here,” Gakushuu agrees.

Nagisa smiles and stretches. And even with such an intimidating year looming on the horizon, he finds himself relaxing the only way he knows how: Because of the people he loves.

Kiyoshi Karasuma has never been great with group work. Namely because he’s not great with people.

He’s good with them in theory. His mom’s walked him through the ups and downs of navigating conversation a thousand times. He knows how to make people laugh and he knows how to make people trust him. He was popular enough in his old school. He had plenty of friends. And he’s
sure, with some time, he’ll be popular here.

But it won’t get rid of that voice in the back of his mind.

He’s… Not like his parents. They’re some of the coolest people he knows. And he means that! Just about everything they do is helping hundreds, if not thousands of people across Japan. His dad’s cool and collected, and his mom’s a badass who won’t take no for an answer. They’ve saved, taken, and changed lives. They’re heroes.

And Kiyoshi is too afraid to approach a partner for group work.

He knows Nagisa isn’t antagonizing him. The man is doing his job! Hell, he’s not even looking his way.

And he knows the routine, too! There’s no need to put one more ounce of thought into it. Approach someone and give them an unwavering smile. Spark small talk or perhaps compliment them on something. “Hey. Want to work with me? I could use someone smart like you on board.” He thinks that’s the key to it. Butter them up. But is that wrong? Manipulative? Or is he just overthinking it?

He thinks he’s scared of bothering people. Because he’s scared of what other people think. Because even if he does everything perfectly, each and every person has their own facade. What if they return that smile to mask an annoyed twinge in their gut? A dismayed “Oh, for fuck’s sake, not him,” hiding behind friendly conversation?

He knows that’s not how people work. But that doesn’t stop him from overthinking it. And that just makes him more antsy. And that just makes him wait longer to approach another student. And that makes his head hurt.

Maybe if he waits long enough he can work with no-one. They’d let him do that at his old school. But he’d been told Junior High was going to be different. He told himself he was going to be different. He was going to be someone who wouldn’t hesitate. But telling yourself you would do something was super different than actually doing it!

Oh God. If he waits even longer will he get to work with Nagisa? He’s had teachers pull him aside in the past in classes with uneven numbers. It’s usually a petrifying thought, but he likes Nagisa. He likes that whole family. He’s comfortable with them. He’d love to work with Nagisa!

He quickly scans the class, trying to count. Is anyone absent? C’mon! C’mon! Someone be absent. He has to keep his fingers cro-

A hand slams down on his desk. Kiyoshi lets out a pathetic squeak

“You. We’re gonna work together.”

Makoto Himura stares him down.

Kiyoshi blinks, searching for something to say. But Makoto’s already pulling up a chair next to him.

He’s gotten a pretty good reading on Makoto over the past three days. With the seat directly behind him, Kiyoshi’s had a front seat view of his every move. The way he never seems to stop wiggling in his seat, and the bold way he speaks up over Nagisa. That ballsy, impressive stunt he’d pulled on the first day. Petty arguments he’d gotten into with his classmates and the utter disrespect he seems to hold for the sanctity of the classroom. He doesn’t seem like a bad person, per se. Just weird as h-
“You don’t talk much, do you?” He has his elbows up on Kiyoshi’s desk, looking across at him with wide eyes.

“I- Er-” He takes a second to gather himself. “Sorry. I was just thinking.”

Makoto nods quickly. “You can grab the stuff.”

It’s just now hitting Kiyoshi that Makoto hadn’t even asked to be partners. He’d just sort of decided. But sending a quick glance around the classroom, he realizes he’s dug this grave for himself. And as such, he sheepishly stands up and goes to retrieve their books.

Everyone else has made themselves at home. He sees people excitedly chatting up their partner as Nagisa scans the room a second time just to make sure everyone is content.

He’s content! He’s content, he swears!

He gingerly grabs two textbooks and worksheets, bringing them back over to his desk. Makoto nabs them in a flash, with a loud “Thanks!” and a wide smile.

...Kiyoshi awkwardly sits down.


*Does this guy ever stop talking?*

“I’ve never actually done this sort of thing before, so I might need a bit of help,” he continues to ramble, flipping through the pages.

*Okay. Clearly not.*

“...Alright.”

Makoto manages to find the right page. He messily scrawls his name on his paper. Kiyoshi follows in suit, then quickly begins to tackle his own half of the problems.

“Thanks!” says Makoto. “I know Nagisa sorta went over it, but I didn’t really get it.”

*Probably* because he barely seemed to be paying attention in the first place! But Kiyoshi doesn’t dare voice that.

“No problem.”

It’s simple work. Division and multiplication of negative numbers. Kiyoshi’s far from big on math, but it’s nothing he can’t handle.

Makoto curiously peeks over his shoulder as he works. Kiyoshi tries not to pay him any mind. (Emphasis on tries.) Don’t think about the strange boy looming ominously over him. Focus on the work. 46 times -32. *That’s... That’s-*

“Y’know, this class is super weird,” Makoto butts in. “And I’ve been to a lot of schools.”

GREAT. He’s one of *those* kids.

“...Yeah,” Kiyoshi says. “Shiota-sa-” He pauses. “...-sensei takes pride in doing things differently. He’s super passionate about it. He’s done it for a long time.”
Makoto blinks. “Do you know the guy? That’s a pretty casual way to talk about your teacher.”

That's rich, coming from the guy who addresses his teacher by first name!

“Oh- Mmm!” Kiyoshi sheepishly admits. “He’s a family friend. My mom and dad actually taught him way back when.” Family friend is putting it lightly. Sometimes Kiyoshi feels the Shiota-and-Gang family have watched him grow up more than his own folks.

Makoto smirks “...I thought so,” he brags. “I mean, not just because of that. You seem super comfortable around him.”

“Super comfortable?” Kiyoshi asks.

“Well, I mean, you never seem comfortable, but you at least seem to trust him. Which is cool, considering you look ready to cry just about all the time.”

Kiyoshi blinks. How had Makoto read him so quickly!? And with such candidness. The worst part is he doesn’t even seem to have meant it as a diss. That all too friendly smile is still planted firmly on his face.

“I - Well - Uh - Um- ” Kiyoshi sputters, reeling back. “...Yes, I trust Shiota-sensei. And yes, I am just about always ready to cry,” he tosses on with a halfhearted chuckle.

“Hey, well, that’s cool!” Makoto pauses for a long moment. He sends a quick glance Kiyoshi’s way. “The Nagisa thing. Not the crying thing. Duh.”

“...Duh,” Kiyoshi repeats.

“I kinda like how weird it is,” Makoto diverts. “I like the snake. And I like the mountain. And I like the work, even if I don’t get a lot of it. I like trying to attack Nagisa, too!”

Kiyoshi’s noticed that by now. Makoto’s made his fair share of attempts since that first day, but none have gone through as seamlessly as that initial ‘suicide bombing.’ Nagisa’s kept a close eye on the boy, now that he’s seen how conniving he can be. The whole class is seeming to take to it, in fact! The moment Nagisa mentions PE-Class, every head perks up.

Kiyoshi thinks it’s okay. Nagisa’s coerced him into trying, but it’s not really his strong suit. The thought of violence makes him squeamish, and he’s not exactly athletic, either.

...He supposes he should just be happy the others are having a good time. No use being a buzzkill.

“Yeah. It’s neat,” he agrees. “It’s actually inspired by his own classes. Wh-”

“The fucked up octopus thing, right?” Makoto interjects.

“Korosensei, yeah.”

Everyone knows about Korosensei. It’s a scandal from long before their time, but it weighs on the hearts of many. Each and every time they look up at the moon, there’s a reminder that something horrible happened. With research that was released shortly after by the United States in mind, there are still debates over whether or not the murder of the creature was unethical. And… Knowing more details than the average person, Kiyoshi has to agree it’s pretty sad.

…With the tie he wears like an albatross around his neck, Kiyoshi can only imagine how much sadder it is to Nagisa. His parents told him he’d taken it super hard back then. And it still seems
like he's taking it hard sometimes now.

Kiyoshi can't exactly blame him.

“I think he’s trying to carry on his legacy. And repeat what worked for him, I figure.”

“...Awww. That’s almost sweet,” Makoto comments. “Nagisa seems pretty thoughtful.”

“...You really shouldn’t call him that,” Kiyoshi finally says.

“Why?”

“I dunno. It just seems rude. He’s, like, our teacher. Don’t you respect him?”

“I mean, yeah, _sorta._” Makoto gives a shrug. “I just don’t think he really _cares._ He went on that long rant about how he wants to be our friend. And he encourages us to _stab him._ He doesn’t feel like someone I need to be normal with.”

“Fair enough, I guess.” But the concept of addressing any teacher, even one he’s known his entire life, on first name basis still has his head spinning.

Makoto speaks up. “Hey. Can you actually give me a hand here?” he asks, pointing to a problem. It’s only now that Kiyoshi notices he hasn’t even made it through one. The paper’s covered in eraser-marks and frustrated scribbles.

He leans over to give it a look. Okay, okay. -22 times -53. “Well, when there’s two negative numbers you’re multiplying, the result turns into a positive number.”

“...What?”

“Think about multiplying negatives less like making something negative specifically, and more as switching the sign. When you switch it twice, it cancels out and goes back to being positive.”

Makoto’s silent, for once.

“...And how do you do 22 times 53?” He nervously asks.

“Wait. You don’t know that?”

“...Not really,” Makoto halfheartedly admits.

Kiyoshi sighs. It seems he has even more on his hands than he first bargained for. But nonetheless he takes the paper and starts to solve the base problem.

“If you don’t know this, you should really talk to Shiota-sensei about that,” he says. “I’m happy to help where I can, but I’m not really any sort of tutor.”

“Yeah, yeah, I will,” Makoto says, still leaning over Kiyoshi’s shoulder. “...You have nice handwriting,” he comments.

“...Eh?” Now that makes Kiyoshi pause for a moment.

“It’s neat,” he explains. “Very easy to read.”

Huh. Kiyoshi’s never really thought about that before. But admittedly it feels kind of nice to hear.
He finishes up the problem and slides the paper back Makoto’s way. “Did that help any?”

“Yeah! I think so,” Makoto says, fiddling with his pencil. He squints as he stares down the second question. “So… Like this, right?” He asks as he makes his own attempt. It’s Kiyoshi’s turn to watch him closely.

“Yeah, exactly. Though be careful with multiplying 9s. Oh, and don’t forget to add the negative symbol.”

“Oh!” Makoto nods vigorously. Seeming quite pleased with himself, he dramatically slams his pencil down as he finishes.

“You’re not done quite yet. You still have nineteen-something problems to go.”

“I know, I know!” he refutes with a giggle. “But just let me have this small victory.”

“Oh!” Kiyoshi relents.

“...I’m probably gonna need a hand with the division too,” Makoto says. “Hope you don’t mind giving me a bit more of a hand?”

“Not really.” Admittedly Makoto’s forthcoming, but Kiyoshi’s always been told to help where he can.

“Awesome!” Makoto fist pumps excitedly. “I knew I made the right choice picking you as my partner!”

“Ehhhhhhhh…” Kiyoshi skeptically wiggles his hand.

“Don’t diss yourself. I think you helped me out pretty good today, at least.”

“...Today’s not over.”

“Well, then,” Makoto huffs, sliding his chair closer. “Better get to helping me before Nagisa gets fed up with how much time we’re eating up, huh?”

He gives Kiyoshi a cheeky grin.

“...I suppose I should.”

And as the period drags on he finds himself minding the noise just a little less.

Fumiko, on the other hand, scares him.

She’s a petite girl, standing at roughly 4’11. With neatly kept short purple hair and a striking pout, she crosses her leg over her lap and stares daggers their way.

Their way? When had it become their way!? He is not affiliated with him!

“Morning!”

It’s 8:20 on a Monday morning. Nagisa hasn’t arrived, and Makoto is hellbent on conversing with the most demonic person in the class.

“...Good morning,” she returns, thoroughly unimpressed as she digs through her supplies.
Fumiko arrives at roughly the same time each morning. She unpacks her stuff and promptly gets to work. She speaks to no-one, and Makoto says hello.

She sits PE out and stalks with piercing eyes from the sidelines. She makes no hesitation in sassing Nagisa, and is equally rude to just about everyone around her. She walks the same route home as Kiyoshi, and never once speaks a word. He’s careful to keep his distance.

Makoto isn’t once deterred by the same hesitation, and Kiyoshi supposes that’s why he keeps finding himself drawn to him.

Regardless of the reception he receives, he greets Fumiko and attempts to make small talk. He waves each and every one of his classmates over as they walk in the door and ‘hello’s’ them with enthusiasm. Despite any weird looks he receives, it’s hard not to take to that warmth.

“How was your morning?” he asks, leaning over his desk. “It’s so windy out today, the walk to school killed me.” Yeah. His unruly mess of hair makes that much evident. “But it’s still way hotter out than I thought it would be. Are you excited for today’s lesson? I don’t really get it, but I know someone will give me a hand.” He winks with both eyes as he glances back at Kiyoshi.

Fumiko gives an apathetic shrug.

Sometimes watching the two of them converse feels like watching someone throw rocks at a wild animal. Fumiko’s irritation is just barely hidden. But who is he to intervene? The madman willing to step in between the beast and the even madder-man willing to prod it like that? No way, no how. No sirree!

Fumiko sends a look this way, as if asking him if he’s hearing any of this nonsense.

Kiyoshi avoids eye contact. Yeah. He’s feeling the heat of secondhand embarrassment pretty hard. Hanging out with Makoto tends to do that. But he just can’t tear himself away.

Makoto’s brash, and he’s bold, and he never once shuts up. But he’s undeniably charming, too. He’s simply not capable of being ingenuine. And as much as that causes mortifying things to spill out of his mouth, it makes his kindness feel all the more meaningful.

Kiyoshi’s still thinking about the handwriting comment. How he’d excitedly praised Rika Sakamoto’s shock pink hair, or the coolest hoodie Rikuto Gomi had worn to class. He’d even managed to toss out a passionate (and equally as insensitive) comment about how Nagisa’s height must help with his agility. He has something good to say about just about anyone.

...Even Fumiko Hisakawa.

“Nice coat!” he comments as Fumiko hangs something more expensive than the entirety of Kiyoshi’s life savings over the back of her chair.

“Mmmm.”

Nagisa finally enters. Fumiko pipes up with an irritated “You’re late.”

There’s one thing she actively talks about, and contrary to Makoto’s sickeningly sweet sunshine, it’s her distaste for other human beings.

Nagisa seems unbothered as he gingerly places his stuff on his desk. “Actually, I’m not. It’s only 8:25. I guess you gotta keep me on my toes, though, huh?”
Kiyoshi’s not sure how he does it. If someone spoke to him that way he’d shut down. He’s learned from experience that most of his fears are usually unfounded, but not with someone like Fumiko. He has no doubts she’d legitimately whoop his ass if he even so much as looked at her the wrong way.

But Nagisa - Nagisa’s not scared of her, either. Nagisa is patient, Nagisa is kind, and Nagisa has every right to be, considering he’s seen much worse from students. Kiyoshi wouldn’t be surprised if he’s had a chair thrown at his head before.

She huffs but doesn’t humor Nagisa with a response.

Makoto waves at him with all the enthusiasm he can muster, as if trying to make up for her lack of it. “Good morning, Nagisa!”

Nagisa gives a tired smile. “Hello, Makoto.” He’d stopped trying to correct him on formalities a week ago.

Makoto has a persuasive way to him like that. There’s something even more to him than the fact that watching his every action is something akin to witnessing a colorful, passionate kaleidoscope of a train wreck. He’s rude and he’s loud, but he’s a surprisingly smooth talker. He has a way of making just about anything seem reasonable.

That’s how he’d managed to get Kiyoshi Karasuma barrelling between Nagisa’s legs, fake knife flailing, when he’d roped him into an assassination scheme during P.E last Friday. It hadn’t worked... But he’d tried it! And that was just about the last thing he’d ever expected from himself. Makoto had just made it seem so reasonable!

He has a near-hypnotic quality to him. Beneath that goofy exterior, there’s something downright conniving in him- and it impresses Kiyoshi to his core.

And that’s why he thinks that Fumiko gets to Makoto so much. Because she’s not under his spell. While the rest of the class has taken to his shenanigans where they can, she’s dug her heels firmly into the dirt. But that only eggs him on further.

And so, every day, he watches the cycle of small talk ensue. He simply listens, and what he hears is a strange back and forth unlike anything he’s ever seen.

Nagisa gets up to write on the chalkboard and Makoto taps his foot. Class bustles and Kiyoshi catches Fumiko doodling in the margins of her notebook.

He doesn’t say anything.

Their conversations are weird enough as is.

Nagisa comes to know them quickly.

Kaya seems sleepy, but his head perks right up during Home Ec.

Terumi walks with a limp but she has a penchant for English and a knack for long-ranged combat.

Rin’s excellent with math, and it turns out she loves to mess with tabletop games after school.

Rikuto skates and Kiku has a fascination with swords. Hachirou thrives during science, but Chiharu is more suited for Ethics. Riko and Emiko hit it off quickly. Kazuki vandalizes the building, and
Rosey helps him wipe it down after class. Nagisa gets a plan figured out with Yoshito. It turns out he pays attention better when he’s listening to music. They agree to let him keep one earbud in. If his grades drop they can talk it over again.

Fumiko’s attitude doesn’t change. He can cross ‘had a bad day’ off the list of ideas as to why she’s like this. She makes snarky comments all throughout the day, but he never gives her an irritated reaction. He’s sure she’ll open up with time. He steps in when she’s cruel to her classmates, and watches her carefully, but otherwise lets her be. She doesn’t engage in assassination.

Kiyoshi’s as quiet as ever. Nagisa tries to gently push him to reach out to his classmates, but he also gives him his space. He knows it takes Kiyoshi time to adapt to a new environment. And even if his shoulders are tense now, he’ll grow used to things in time. He makes his best efforts to participate, however anxiously. And Nagisa’s already proud of that. He’s antsy, but Nagisa knows his presence is helping. He’ll have friends in no time.

...Speaking of.

Makoto Himura. His arrival is sporadic and his mouth never shuts- But he shows up each day with a smile. He doesn’t manage to get another “kill” in on Nagisa, who has to gently remind him not to get too off topic during class. He rolls his eraser around on his desk, and wiggles in his seat.

He made an effort to reach out to Kiyoshi seemingly just out of the kindness of his heart. He’s enthusiastic and he’s silly. He loves attention and making people laugh. He’s obnoxious and he’s petty. When Nagisa tells him to cut something out, he purses his lips and huffs. He has a skip to his step and a distinctly wide grin. In the weirdest way, he reminds Nagisa of someone else.

Well, except for one thing.

Makoto slumps over on his desk, letting out a dramatic sigh.

“This doesn’t make any sense!”

To say Makoto is behind is a massive understatement.

It’s not that he hadn’t known what he was getting into. His entrance test scores were… Not great, and his handwritten application letter had been littered with misspellings. Tons of his data was missing, seeing as how he’d been tossed between six separate schools before this.

But this is exactly why Nagisa does what he does. It’s nothing he can’t handle.

“What part aren’t you getting?”

“All of ittttt…” Makoto whines.

Makoto had come to him asking to be tutored about a week into the school year. And a week into their little arrangement, Nagisa’s learned the severity of the situation. The kid barely has a fourth-grade education. He’s missing out on very basic concepts. It’s nightmarish.

His job is very hard sometimes.

He reaches for the paper and gestures for Makoto’s attention. “Watch me,” he says, walking through the problem.

Makoto reluctantly sits up, eyes glued to his work. He squints, but doesn’t speak up.
“Okay. So what part are you having the most trouble with?” Nagisa tries to rephrase.

“First of all, I still don’t get why there’s an x. What are you doing with it? And why are they giving you the solution to the problem!?”

“Your goal is to figure out what the x is. It’s a variable. It can be anything.”

“If it can be anything, why can’t I just answer with anything I want?” Makoto retorts.

“Well, not that sort of anything. It has a concrete answer in each question. But X isn’t like Pi in that it represents one specific thing across different problems.”

“Pi?” Makoto asks.

“Okay... Don’t worry about that right now.” Nagisa handwaves. No need to make it more complicated than it already is. “Think about it this way. Let’s start small. You know two plus two equals four, right?”

“Duh.”

“Okay. So if the question is ‘two plus x’, and the answer is ‘four’, then what does that make the value of x?”

Makoto thinks it over, before hesitantly speaking up. “...Two?”

“Yeah! But the answer’s not always two. If ‘two plus x’ equals ‘five’, then what’s x?”

Makoto perks up. “Three, right!”

“Exactly!” Nagisa says. “They’re not giving you the answer, they’re presenting it in a different way.”

“Seems needlessly complicated,” Makoto gripes. But he seems more attentive nonetheless.

“Of course, things get more complicated when you work with bigger numbers. No-one wants to spend their time counting on their fingers what you add to ‘435’ to make ‘708’. That’s why you can reverse engineer it too. Because, for example, five minus two equals three.”

Makoto nods. “And so...” He begins scribbling on his paper, forehead scrunched as he intently works “...X would be 273!” He exclaims, proudly circling his answer.

He’s behind, but he’s not stupid. There’s no such thing as a stupid kid. It can take him a minute to get things, but he can get them. And while he doesn’t seem to always remember concepts, a basic reminder or gentle nudge is good at pushing him in the right direction. He makes a show of it, but he’s eager to learn. And he tries. Hard. He lights up whenever things finally click.

“Okay. Okay. Give me a few more. I’ve got this!”

Nagisa writes half a dozen problems for him. And in no time he’s hard at work, counting on his fingers, and biting his tongue.

“...Eight times nine is 64, right?” he checks, glancing in Nagisa’s direction.

“72,” Nagisa says. He still has trouble with his times tables. It seems he hasn’t had much experience with multiplication and division, if any at all. And big numbers still make him stumble, but he’s working on it.
“Okay!” Makoto says, scribbling out his previous answer.

Math isn’t the only subject he struggles in, of course. Nagisa’s gotten a pretty good estimate in on all of them and... Things aren’t great. He’s lacking basic knowledge of most history, fails to recognize a large number of kanji, and seems to have a misconception that science is capable of making literally anything and everything blow up. His English is lackluster, and Home EC gets him snoring.

Nagisa’s never seen anything like it. He has a lot of work ahead of him.

“Can… Can x be negative?”

“Of course.”

“Even if there’s not a negative symbol in front of the x?”

“Yeah. For the most part, there will never be negative symbols in front of variables. It makes things more confusing than needed.”

“...Okay, okay.” Makoto nods diligently.

He’d applied to the school himself, without parental involvement. The homemade application had proven that much. He’s here for a reason, and regardless of any lazy or uneasy vibes he gives off, that reason has to be that he wants to learn. He WANTS to be here. He wants to have a chance. And Nagisa’s damn determined to give that to him.

He finishes up his work and proudly slams his pencil down on the table. “Done!” he says, giving Nagisa an enthusiastic grin.

...His job may be hard, but hell if it’s not worth it.

He reaches for Makoto’s paper. “Okay. That’s enough math for now. How about you get started on your grammar while I check this?”

“Can I have a fifteen-minute break first?”

“Five,” Nagisa refutes.

“Thirteen.”

“Seven.”

“Ten.”

“Ten it is.” Something tells him he isn’t going to manage to get it any lower than that.

Makoto kicks his feet up on another chair, stretching lazily. “...And can I get a snack, too?”

“Of course.” Nagisa digs through his bag.

He’d asked for food day one of tutoring. Nagisa’d figured there was no harm in obliging. Turns out the kid has a sweet tooth. Admittedly he’s a little worried he’s not getting enough to eat at home if he’s so desperate to get something here, but he can’t jump to conclusions. It’s just as likely Makoto, mischievous as he is, just wants to see if he can weasel something out of his teacher.

...Nagisa figures he’ll let him have that victory.
He tosses a chocolate bar his way. Makoto tears it open with his teeth. And in an instant, he’s digging in.

“Hungry, huh?” Nagisa quips.

“Duh! All this hard work takes a lot of energy out of a guy!”

“You’re getting a hang of these concepts a lot quicker than I thought you would. We’ll be caught up in no time,” Nagisa says. That’s an exaggeration. This could take… Months. But it’s nice to look on the bright side! “You’re doing good.”

“I know.”

And with that boundless enthusiasm comes boundless confidence. Makoto clearly believes in his own abilities, and that’s a good sign. A… Lot of kids his age don’t, especially at his level.

“You still hanging out with Kiyoshi?” Nagisa asks.

“Yeah!” Makoto replies. “We’re, like, partners in crime. He is so smart!”

“...Partners in crime, huh?” Nagisa asks skeptically. Now he wouldn’t go that far.

Nagisa’s watched the two of them. Admittedly he still sees the way Kiyoshi’s shoulders tense around Makoto, but he seems happy to help where he can in getting him caught up. It’s a relief. He needs as much help as he can get. And something tells him someone like Makoto is a good influence for Kiyoshi.

“Okay, it’s more like I’m the mafia leader, and he’s the sniveling baby, but we still work together!” He pauses. “...I like him, though. He’s nice. So, yeah! I try to spend time with him.”

“I’m sure he really appreciates you doing that.”

“I know.”

“Huh-?”

“I figured he needed it,” Makoto says matter-of-factly. “When I first decided to be his partner, I saw him sitting there like some deer in the headlights. And I knew no-one else was gonna deal with him. So I was like ‘that’s the one!’ He seems upset pretty much… All of the time, but that only makes me want to try to be his friend harder!”

Nagisa blinks. “...That’s… Super sweet.”

Makoto gives a warm smile. “Eh. I try my best.” He crumples up the wrapper into a ball in his hands and places it on the table. “He’s smart. And funny, too. I like him. I like everyone here.”

That’s why Nagisa can’t stop wracking his brain over it. What happened here? Makoto’s clearly a thoughtful, kind kid. How could the system screw him over so badly? How had they let things get to this point? Why had no-one stepped in before now?

...Sometimes he hates the system he serves.

“Well, I think you’re plenty smart and funny, too. I’m glad you like it here, Makoto.”

Makoto beams. “Glad you’re glad I’m glad to be here.”
Now isn’t that a headache of a phrase? Nagisa can’t help but chuckle. “You know, if you don’t mind me asking, is that why you keep trying to talk with Fumiko?”

He’s seen the way they stubbornly interact. Every morning and every free period he goes out of his way to bother her.

“Bingo!” Makoto says with a pair of finger guns. “She is super mean. But… I think she’s lonely, too. She’s gotta be if she’s that rude. No-one else tries to talk to her.”

He’s not wrong. Everyone else is far too afraid of getting burned.

“But I’m not scared of her!” he continues. “So I’ll make sure she’s not lonely. Eventually, she’s gotta warm up to me. I’m a delight.”

“That’s very kind of you,” he says. “...Though make sure to give her some space, too. You don’t want to get on her nerves too much.” Then she might end up really disliking him. It’s a fine line to walk between persistent kindness and persistent pestering, particularly with preteens. He’s glad Makoto is stepping in to prevent her from isolating herself from her classmates, though. There’s only so much gentle nudges and group work can do.

“Yeah, yeah,” Makoto says. “Don’t sweat it, Nagisa. I know what I’m doing. Sooner or later she’ll be, like, my best friend. I just know it.”

Now that’s the sort of unbridled confidence Nagisa wishes he had. “Well, I can’t wait to see that happen. Good luck, Makoto.”

“No need. I don’t need it,” Makoto sneers. He’s silent, for a moment, before, “I think I’m ready to get back to work.”

Nagisa checks his watch. Ah - He guesses it is about that time. “Alright. Let’s get started on your gra-”

“Wait!” Makoto says, scrambling for the wrapper. “Let me toss this out first, ‘kay?” And in an instant he’s on his feet, darting across the room, and slam dunking it in the trash can.

...He really is a thoughtful kid.

That has to be why he reminds him of Korosensei. Beyond the wild smile. Beyond the stubbornness and the sweet tooth. It’s that he goes out of his way to make others feel better. It’s a trait not enough people have. They would have gotten along well.

He rushes back over to the desk, chair practically skidding as he slides in.

He’s a kind, intelligent, and good person- Regardless of what the world seems to think of him so far.

And that’s why his final similarity to Korosensei can’t mean anything. Why there has to be a reason. Why Nagisa can’t give up on him, despite the blaring warning signals.

Who cares if he was expelled from his last school for stabbing a classmate?

Chapter End Notes
I’m trying to keep this on an update schedule of roughly every 2 weeks, but… We’ll just have to see about that. I’m working hard, you know! School, work, AND writing? It’s enough to make my head spin. But I like to think I’ve gotten into a pretty good routine. I’m writing at least 500 words a day, if not more. So I’m slowly whittling away at this thing!

Alongside Nagisa’s spouses, I couldn’t help but also feature some of the rest of his middle school friends (“Friends”?). I think the idea of them keeping a group chat is super cute. And I had fun writing some shenanigans. So don’t count the rest out of the plot, yet! They’re on high alert! Who knows what they’ll get dragged into.

As for Nagisa’s spouses, I hope I’m doing a good job of making everyone warm up to them. It’s really a soft sort of dynamic, and I can’t wait to explore it more. Because fiction (And in particular fanfiction) never tends to explore relationships that are years old, and rather focuses on the meet cute. That’s excellent and all, but there really is something sweet about coming home to people you’ve known and loved for years. I think it’s a comfort Nagisa needs’s

Betch’ya didn’t expect some scenes from Kiyoshi’s perspective, did’ya? This fic isn’t gonna be solely from Nagisa’s perspective, although I’d still describe him as serving as our ‘protagonist’. You’re gonna get some scenes from not only Nagisa, but all of the kid trio, and Nagia’s spouses! Fun stuff. I had a lot of fun getting into Kiyoshi’s head, especially as someone who struggles with group work myself. His dynamic with Makoto is… Something, alright.

Fumiko’s a big ol meanie as usual. Nothing to go into depth on there. Sooner or later I’m sure she’ll open up. (Or not. Maybe she’ll just punch every other character in the face)

Andddd of course, that cliffhanger. Makoto is an… Interesting character, alright. But as for the details behind that situation, you’re gonna have to wait a little while. So stay in your seats! He’s probably not a bad person? But I suppose there’s no way to know for sure.

I actually finally drew profiles of the kids recently, so here they are! If you want an idea of what they look like, here you go! http://jdphobe.tumblr.com/post/183767492400/profiles-for-the-adventures-in-solitude-kids

Some songs I blared while writing this chapter were Artist Vs Poet’s “Kids Again”, Will Roland’s “Goin’ Viral”, Book of Mormon’s “You and Me (But Mostly Me)”, Cavetown’s “Lemon Girl”, and The Lightning Thief’s “Good Kid”. Give them a listen! They’re bops and thematically relevant.

Hope you enjoyed! And make sure to lmk what you thought! Because lord knows I love validation. I’m already hard at work on the next chapter, so I hope to see you soon!
Being approached by a stranger is bad. Being approached by a stranger who routinely looks like she’s going to tear you limb from limb is even worse.

“Hey, listen.”

Kiyoshi’s made a deliberate effort to avoid Fumiko on the way home from school- And she’s done the same. They’re not exactly social people. So he’s kept to himself and she’s kept to hers. It’s a nice little routine they have.

That’s why it’s so weird when she approaches him and firmly taps his shoulder.

“E-Eh?”

“Can you get your weird friend to stop bothering me?”

...Ah. So that’s what it’s about.

“I- uh- ah-” he sputters. “I… Don’t think I can really tell him what do do. He doesn’t listen to me…”

She gives him a disappointed look and walks ahead. She doesn’t dignify him with a response.

“I mean - Shit - We’re hardly even friends.” Well, now that sounds rude! “Well, we are? Maybe? I don’t really know the guy. He just kind of showed up one day,” he rambles. Before he knows it, he’s following on her heels. “He’s nice, really! Scary, too. But it’s not like I can get him to go away. He does his own thing. I think I’m just sort of along for the ride? I don’t know what happened, really-”

She sends a bewildered glance his way.

Eep!

“But I mean if you really want I can ask him! I just don’t think he’s going to change his mind! I don’t think he means any harm, though! I think he thinks you’re cool! But if you want me to try to get him to shut up I can try!” Her red eyes are piercing. “Actually, I should shut up! I’ll stop talking. Sorry for bothering you!”

It’s his turn to try to get ahead. He speedwalks around her.

“…I’m the one who approached you? Why the hell are you apologizing?”

“Sorry-!”

“…Oh my God.”

He doesn’t dare turn her way.

“Listen, listen- I’ll just be going now. No worries,” he reassures.
And believe it or not, she chuckles. “I’m starting to get why you haven’t just told this dude to get lost,” she says. “You are scared of literally everything. I knew this class was for lunatics, but you’re something else entirely.”

He nervously chuckles along. “Y… Yeah. Scared of everything and a little more than that.” He tries to walk faster. He really doesn’t need to keep talking with this girl. She puts him on edge. “…But, I mean - That’s - Uh, not actually why I’m in this class. My parents know Nagisa-sensei. They go way back.”

“Ah,” she says. “Your parents made you deal with this, too?”

“Well - I mean, I do wanna be here. I like it here, actually!” he says. “Nagisa-sensei, he’s…” He pauses. “He’s a very kind person.” He feels comfortable around Nagisa. More than he’d be around any other teacher. He’s known Nagisa his whole life! His parents would trust Nagisa with their lives. He can’t not stand up for him. “…A very good teacher, as well.”

“He’s okay,” Fumiko says. She’s sticking close. He’s not particularly inclined to make conversation in response, but the silence is deafeningly intimidating.

“My parents - Ah - Actually taught him back in the day. My dad was his PE teacher. And my mom taught him English.” Alongside… Other things. “They wer-”

“Wait. Seriously?” Fumiko interjects. She’s staring at him intently “Are your parents those government employees who live this way?”

“Those would be the ones.”


“Most people don’t,” Kiyoshi says. It’s not like he exactly resembles his parents. Well - He does, at least, physically. He’s been told he’s a ‘good mix of both,’ with his blond hair, tired demeanor, and ‘an eye from each.’ But his personality tends to put people off. When they find out he’s their son, they’re usually unimpressed at best.

God! Don’t let her think about that! She’s judgemental enough as is! He tries to change the subject “What do your parents do for a living?”

And she stops in her fucking tracks.

“Hisakawa? Fumiko Hisakawa?” she says

Wait. No way -

“They’re managing directors for a massive corporation? We live at the estate down the road? Don’t tell me you seriously didn’t know-”

“A- Ah! No! I know! I know!” he sputters. He just hadn’t managed to piece it together. God! How stupid could he be!? He’d known she was stupidly rich. Of course she was one of those Hisakawas. “That’s-!” His voice has managed to jump about ten octaves up. “Super cool!”

...She’s more thoroughly unimpressed than ever.

“Yeah. It’s something like that.”

He’s seen her house before. Estate is an understatement. They have three houses, and a wholeass
lake, for Pete’s sake! This isn’t a girl who’s going to ask to ‘speak to his manager.’ This is a girl who’s going to sue him for all he’s worth if he even looks at her wrong.

She must notice his unease. Namely because he’s suddenly walking stiffly as a board. “It’s not that impressive,” she says, but the smug intonation in her voice seems to suggest otherwise. “...So your parents were involved in the little moon thing, right?”

‘The little moon thing’. She says it so nonchalantly. The world they live in was changed forever! The apocalypse just about happened! People died! Of course the rich girl would call it the ‘moon thing.’

“Yeah. They helped with the little moon thing.” ...It sounds equally as stupid when he says it.

“...That’s pretty neat,” she admits. “Got any anecdotes?”

“Well - They actually met over it. The government needed a ‘real’ assassin in that room, and they ended up with my mom. They must have bonded pretty quickly, because - Uh - I exist! Yeah!”

God! How bad at this does he have to be!? Is he seriously implying he was procreated because the moon blew up!? He gives a nervous chuckle. “Really weird, thinking about that, actually. Parents had a meet-cute because of an octopus terrorist! Yayyyyy…” He gives apprehensive jazz hands.

“Not that he was actually a terrorist–”

Fumiko snorts. “An assassin, huh. Now that’s what sounds weird to me.” She’s keeping up in pace. “...What was he like? K-” she pauses. “The monster.”

“He was impossible for them to get a hit on. Wikipedia isn’t exaggerating. It’s hard for me to even imagine, but my dad says Mach 20 made his head spin. He’d be there one second and in the next he was gone. He’d sooner be giving you a makeover than fleeing from you, though. And if you did manage to get a hit in on him, he could regrow it like it was nothing.”

“Not like that,” Fumiko retorts. “Everyone knows that. That’s textbook knowledge. What was he like?”

“...Oh, I have no idea. I KINDA do, but I never met the guy, y’know?” A pause. “Obviously! He was - was before my time. But you probably know that. Don’t know why I said that-” he sputters. It’s hard to decide what to say. Of course he’s heard plenty of stories about Korosensei from his parents and the E-Class alike. But that’s nothing like getting to meet the larger-than-life man himself. “I… I guess he was loud and obnoxious and weird. He got on my parents’ nerves all the time.”

“Sounds about right.”

“He wasn’t a bad person, though. They… Actually liked him a lot.” Even if they hadn’t admitted it at the time. He knows for a fact both of his parents have a deep respect for Korosensei. “I’ve been told he was kind… And nurturing… And confident.”

“And responsible for your birth?”

Kiyoshi just about chokes. “Yes! That too!”

Fumiko cracks the tiniest smile.

“I - I - I think he had a big impact on just about everyone he met. I think that’s why a lot of people still think about him now. Because he’s more than just a piece of history. He’s a personality.”
Fumiko is quiet.

“...But that probably sounds kind of dumb, huh?” He asks.

“A little,” she admits.

“...And yet you still had enough interest to ask me about him,” he points out. “I’d say that backs up my point, at least a little.”

Fumiko blinks. “I… Suppose it does.

Kiyoshi can’t help but smile. He’s gotten a victory against her, however small.

“...That’s your place, right?” she asks, pointing a finger.

“Ah- It is.” He looks towards his house. He’d nearly walked straight past it. “...I guess I should get going, huh?”

“Yeah. Get out of this chill.” Quite frankly, it’s not even cold outside. Had she mistaken his quivering for shivering?

“...It was nice talking to you.”

Fumiko blinks, almost as if she hadn’t even realized this had turned into a conversation. “...You as well. I’ll see you around.”

And before he can respond, she’s on her way. He murmurs a quiet “Okay,” before turning towards his house.

...He sends one last glance her way. She doesn’t do the same.

Somehow she’s a lot less intimidating when he knows even she thinks about what happened to the moon.

It happens just about every year. This year, it happens to happen early.

He’s attempting to give Hachirou and Chiharu a hand with their science assignment when a loud voice cries out.

“Woah! What are you doing with them?”

And there Makoto stands, hunched in front of his computer. Kiyoshi stands behind him, tugging desperately at his hand.

“You never told us you knew a bunch of celebrities, Nagisa!”

And in an instant that has the class’s attention. Students spring from their chairs and rush over to join him. Gossip explodes in an instant.

Nagisa sighs and gives Chiharu and Hachirou a glance. “Excuse me for a minute,” he says, standing up, and hurrying to the growing crowd.

He sees about what he expected.

The gaggle of students are staring agape at his desktop background. He can’t exactly blame them,
considering it’s a photo of him and his spouses posing at the beach.

It’s a fond memory from two summers ago. Kayano has Nagisa pulled close and Karma’s snatched his favorite sun hat. Gakushuu’s grabbed ice cream for the four of them. You can already tell he’s getting a bad sunburn. Waves crash in the background. He can practically feel the joy radiating, even now.

“Is that Mase Haruna?”

“Gakushuu Asano!?”

“Who’s the third guy!?”

“...He’s a politician!”

“Akabane!?”

Karma would be peeved if he learned the kids sooner recognized his husband than him.

Every eye is on Nagisa. The volume in the room is growing louder and louder. Just about every student has rushed over to see what the commotion is about.

“Nice job photoshopping yourself in with your celebrity crushes, Shiota-sensei.”

“What are you doing with them?”

“Are you friends!?”

...Well, he supposes there’s no avoiding this one. All things considered, the four of them try to keep their relationship on the down low, but sooner or later his students tend to find out. Whether it be through desktop backgrounds or shady paparazzi magazines.

“Spouses, actually,” he says with a smile.

And in an instant, his students explode into chatter. He can hardly hear them, with them all trying to shout over each other.

“Oh, what a joke! There’s no way they’d date you.”

As if he hadn’t been telling himself that from day one. Life sure had a way of surprising him. He still remembers his astonishment when Karma and Gakushuu had asked him to join their relationship in third year, and the whiplash he’d received when he’d learned Kayano had been crushing on him since middle school.

“Yes way,” he says, whipping out his phone. “I’ve got more pictures, if you don’t believe me.”

“SHOW US.” The answer is practically unanimous.

In theory, he hates to disturb class, but there’s enough of a commotion as is. He knows they’ll be more focused afterward if they get the answers they’re looking for. Plus, he could never pass up an opportunity to talk about his spouses.

“Oh, okay,” he relents, shuffling his way through to the front of the crowd. He leans down and starts to swipe through his photos.

Kayano ready for the first day of her new shoot. Gakushuu with his nose buried in a book and an
adorably focused look on his face. Karma taking a selfie after snatching his phone and Kayano subsequently photobombing him. The time Gakushuu and Karma fell asleep on the couch together. And, of course, the picture Kayano had taken and sent him afterward of himself struggling to haul them off to bed.

The class has reached outright pandemonium by now. Rosey practically snatches his phone trying to get a better look. He yanks it away, but can’t help but laugh. He gets their bewilderment. If he learned his teacher had pictures of a multi-millionaire entrepreneur and controversial politician spooning on his couch, he’d be a little baffled, too.

“But- But how!?” Kanon demands.

“We went to Junior High together,” he explains. Most everything in his life comes back to the moon incident. “So be on your toes. You never know! You could meet the love of your life or the next big name in this very classroom.”

The volume in the room goes up tenfold.

“Like hell the next Asano goes here!”

“Is it true Haruna’s working on a sequel to Stray God!?”

“Is Akabane as mean as he looks?”

“How’s the sex!?”

Nagisa sputters. “Okay! Okay! One at a time. I’m... going to refrain from answering that one-!” He’s just about being mobbed. “Raise your hands. I’ll - I’ll call on you.” For a literal school, he doesn’t employ the simple tactics nearly enough.

Rikuto’s hand shoots up. “What are they really like!? In person?”

“Obnoxious at best, unbearable at worst,” Nagisa says. Gasp ensue. “I’m joking - I’m joking…” he reassures. “They’re wonderful people. And not nearly as intimidating as you’d expect them to be. I’ve had multiple pillow fights with them. They’re not nearly as cool as they’d want you to believe.” He gives a smug smile.

Kazuki waves his hand in the air “How’d you manage to pick up so many hotties, Shiota-sensei?”

“I wish I had an answer to that one,” Nagisa replies.

Minki jumps up and down. “What’s it like being loaded!? I never would have guessed you were a gold digger!”

“Okay- First of all, I’m not a gold digger-” Nagisa sputters, finger raised. “I love my spouses very much.” So no, he’s not planning to assassinate them, regardless of what Karma would have had you believe back in middle school. “Second of all, we try to live modestly. What doesn’t end up going into projects like this school, or purchases like… Those,” He motions to Korokohai “Finds its way to helping people in need. Everything you hear about Asano’s company's charity work is true.”

He and his family had… Rough teen years, to say the least. They have ideals they hold close to their hearts. The least they can do is try to donate to organizations for abused children, disabled students, battered women, transgender youth, and prisoner’s rights. Because they like to think they can make an impact on the world.
“Awwwww…” Emiko murmurs.

“I think they should donate a water slide to the school,” Matsuya says

Nagia chuckles. “I’ll… See what we can do.”

Aina’s hand shoots up. “So does that mean Asano-san’s not really as scary as he looks?”

“I wouldn’t quite say not scary,” Nagisa says. His husband’s resting bitch face doesn’t exactly give off the wrong idea. However… “But I’ll have you know he has a soft spot. Just don’t let him know I said anything.” He raises his finger to his lips.

Sometimes he gets choked up thinking about how far Gakushuu’s come. In middle school he had legitimately terrified Nagisa. But getting to know him over the course of high school… Realizing their situations were more similar than they’d have liked to admit: They bonded. Quick. He’s come a long way in opening up. And even if he’s still perfectly capable of giving an intimidatingly pretentious cold-shoulder, he’s a lot kinder than he’d ever give himself credit for. He doesn’t always know what to say, but he always makes an effort to be there. Nagisa’s thankful for that.

A few students giggle. “Well now you’ve got to tell us embarrassing stories about him!”

“No, no. Those are stories for another day.” Lord knows he has too many to share without derailing class entirely.

“What about Haruna?” Ryoka asks, hand up. “You’ve got to tell us about her latest movie! Is she ever coming back to TV dramas?”

Sometimes he feels like he’s being mobbed by the paparazzi. What is he? A gossip magazine on the topic of his own wife? “Kaya- Ak- Blah- Mase’s movie is coming along great. She’s working hard on the sequel to Stray God. Afraid I can’t disclose any details, though.” He feels dumb as hell tripping up over her name, but what can he say? Kayano’s become a bit of a nickname over the years. For something that started as a blatant lie, it seems to bring Kayano a lot of happiness. It’s just stuck. Calling her Akari is alien enough. Having to use her stage name? It’s too much for his clumsy ass. “As for her TV dramas, she’s taking things day by day. We’ll just have to see what interests her, huh?”

“Tell her I think she’s a great actress!”

“And that she’s very pretty!”

“I like her legs.” Rika tacks on.

“Please don’t objectify my wife,” Nagisa says.

Terumi meekly raises a hand. “…Is that last guy mean? He seems mean.” She points knowingly at the photo of Karma stealing Nagisa’s hat.

“He’s a politician. Of course he’s mean.” Rin snarks.

“I’ll have you know Karma is a kindhearted, brave, and intelligent individual. He’s stayed by my side through most everything and has never once hesitated to stand up for me. He’s driven, skilled, and handsome. He is single-handedly the meanest person I know.”

Karma’s mellowed out a lot over the years. He knows which lines not to cross, and tries to use that egotistical heart of his for good. That said, it did take Nagisa twenty minutes to get that “atrocity of
a hat” back, so Karma hasn’t exactly completely turned over a new leaf. The man runs on malice. By now it’s become more a part of his charm than anything else.

The students whisper and gossip.

“Okay - Okay. Don’t tell him that, either,” he says. “I love Karma. So when he inevitably invites himself into this classroom, tell him that instead.”

“When he invites himself into this classroom!?”

“I’m sure you’ll be seeing him around sooner or later.” Karma tries to make time to peek out of work early and bother Nagisa’s students at least a few times a year. He says it’s good for ‘getting to know his husband’s kids.’ For someone who holds himself to such high standards, he sure retains the attitude of a bored, ditching middle schooler. “So be on your best behavior.” If they’re not, it’s practically a guarantee Karma will take that bad behavior and up it to eleven.

“Will we get to meet the rest of them!?”

“Oh! Oh! I want Mase to sign my poster!”

“Please let us meet them, Shiota-sensei!”

“They seem so nice!”

That’s… One word for it.

“I’ll try my best,” Nagisa reassures. “But I think that’s enough talking about my spouses for one day. We need to get back to science.”

Rosey groans. “But you didn’t even tell us how you got together! And how you REALLY met. The details! Was it also at that cool assassin school? Are they cool assassins?”

“That’s a story for another day. Get back to your seats.”

“Promise us you’ll tell us,” Rosey says, standing firm. “You can’t leave us curious! I’m on the edge of my seat!”

“Okay, okay…” Nagisa says with a reluctant smile. “I promise.”

That seems to sate her. She skips back to her chair. Kiyoshi awkwardly follows. Other students follow in suit, gossiping loudly with each other as they sit down.

“You gotta promise to tell us how the foursomes are, too!” Kazuki snickers, slinking back to his seat. His sister shoots him a glare.

“I am… Not doing that.” Nagisa says.

Makoto doesn’t return to his seat, even as his classmates get back to focusing on their projects. Nagisa gently reaches for his shoulder.

“You’ve got to get back to work, bu-”

“…Asano, huh?” he asks.

“Excuse me?”
“He just didn’t strike me as your type.” His brow furrows in thought. Now that he thinks about it, Nagisa realizes Makoto had been uncharacteristically quiet throughout that entire conversation.

He supposes a man like Gakushuu isn’t exactly who you’d expect to be married to a meek teacher like himself, but...

“And Karma Akabane, known sociopath, did?”

Makoto blinks, then shrugs it off. “I guess you’re right,” he says, shaking his head. “Neat, though. You guys seem really happy.” He gives a smile, then quickly diverts. “Mind if I use your computer for a second? There was actually something I wanted to look into. That’s why I snuck on here in the first place.”

“Oh. So you weren’t just trying to cause trouble,” Nagisa quips.

“N-No!” Makoto sputters, shoulders raised. He genuinely seems a bit hurt. Nagisa can’t help but feel bad.

“Alright, alright,” he says. “Go wild. I trust you. Five minutes, though. After that, you’ve gotta get back to work.”

Makoto’s smile returns in an instant. He swivels the chair around and gets right to work. “Thank you, Nagisa!”

“No problem,” Nagisa says, turning back towards the class. He’ll leave Makoto be. The least he can do is try to trust him. And it’s not exactly like even if he is planning something atrocious it’s anything Nagisa can’t handle. What’s the worst he’s going to do? Look up porn?

*Oh God. That’s actually a pretty terrifying thought.* Nagisa bites his lip and parades across the room, praying not to hear anything alarming blare from the speakers.

He finds himself making his way over to where Fumiko sits. He’d noticed she’d been the only one not to invite herself over to his computer during the commotion. She’d simply sat, unamused, with her cheek resting on her palm.

He leans down.

“Sure you don’t want to see the pictures?” he asks. “There’s some real good ones on here.” He feels bad not engaging her. He can’t let her feel left out.

“Not particularly,” she says. “...I actually already knew.”

“Huh?” Nagisa says.

“About your spouses. It’s one of the reasons I considered this school prestigious.” She never once looks up from her work to meet his eyes.

“Well I’m glad you did your research,” Nagisa says. “Though a bit hurt you’re only here for my spouses. What about some respect for ol’ Shiota-sensei, huh?” he jokes.

She doesn’t grace him with a response.

Nagisa sighs. “Well, I’ll stop bothering you. Let me know if you need any help with your work,” he says, straightening up.

“Mmmm...”
He can’t push her too far, either. He knows when he’s being more annoying than helpful. Baby steps, he supposes.

He makes his way back over to Chiharu and Hachirou. He’d nearly forgotten he was giving them a hand until he noticed Chiharu looking over at him with pleading eyes. “Okay, okay. Sorry about that. Where were we?”

The classroom returns to the normal routine. In time, Makoto returns to his seat. And as Nagisa walks Chiharu and Hachirou through the basics of chemistry he tries not to worry about Fumiko and how stubbornly she keeps to herself.

Fumiko’s routine is a simple one.

She wakes every morning at 6:45. She slides out of bed and she gets dressed. She readies herself any further, then makes her way down the spiral staircase, and walks through the lounge into the dining room.

Oftentimes, the others are there before her. This morning is no different. Her mother and father are seated at the end of the table, with her sisters seated across the side.

She sits down next to Tsuna and carefully pulls her chair in.

“Fumiko.”

“Mother,” she greets.

Her father gives her a curt nod. They don’t exchange any further formalities.

Quite frankly, she’s much happier without the show made of it. What purpose does it serve? They may not be a sentimental family, but they get by.

Breakfast is already made. Her plate has been waiting for her. She reaches for her meal and begins to pick through her salad.

She’s aware she needs to be on her way by 7:30. The walk to school is a long trek from her family’s estate. More often than not she prefers to head out earlier. It gives her leisure time when she arrives at the building. She keeps a close eye on the grandfather clock.

Milk, salad, toast, yogurt, eggs, and cantaloupe. It’s an underwhelming meal. She doesn’t voice that.

Mother’s fork clinks. Meiko coughs. Father shuffles ever so slightly. No-one speaks up.

...They don’t remember.

“School’s been well,” she says.

Father nods. “I’d hope so.”

“...I’m doing well in my History classes.”

He doesn’t respond.

“You should try to apply that same drive to your mathematics classes,” Mother chimes.
“I will,” she says.

“Sayuri aced her college applications. She’s going to be a scholar, you know.” Oh, she knows. “If you ever need… Further help, you know your sister is always an option.”

She hates the way she says it. She hates being looked down on. She doesn’t let it show. “Of course. I will keep that in mind.”

Her parents stare at her.

“Forgetting something?”

Her shoulders lower. “...Thank you, Sayuri.”

Sayuri gives an apathetic shrug. She knows she won’t help her. She won’t even come to her. That’s okay. They don’t do family time.

“You know this is just about your last chance, Fumiko. You’ve exhausted our every last effort.” Father says.

She sighs. “...I know.”

“We just want what’s best for you. You’ll make us proud, won’t you?” Mother asks.

“Of course.”

“Good girl.”

She doesn’t make any further effort to speak. She’s not sure why she’d tried in the first place. It’s as she said: She much prefers the silence.

She halfway finishes her meal and stands. She leaves her plate on the table. “I should head out soon,” she says, walking across the room. “I don’t want to be late to class.”

Father nods. “Behave yourself.”

“I will,” she says. She’s done her very best to make them proud. Although her grades remain rather lackluster, she wishes to believe that an institute like Constellate will give her an edge.

“Remember not to participate in the ‘assassination,’” Mother reminds her.

“I’m aware.” She has no interest. Nor would she ever.

As deeply as the historical impact of the moon incident fascinates her, the concept of recreating it feels trite at best and insensitive at worst. Shiota-sensei will never truly capture what made that period of history so interesting. Nor would it ever have been a piece of history meant for someone of her standing to partake in in the first place.

While she must admit she’d be deeply interested in learning the further intricacies of what occurred at that very school, going about such violent affairs is no way to accomplish that. She doesn’t see why her teacher can’t simply crack open a textbook or share stories from his own experience.

How is it she’s already learned more from the Karasuma son than she has from her own teacher?

She slides on her coat and retrieves her bookbag, then pulls it on over her shoulders.
7:10. She supposes it’s not a bad time to head out.

No goodbyes are exchanged as she makes her way out the door.

It’s a chilly day out. Although she’s been told she’s oversensitive in regards to those matters. So perhaps not objectively.

She’s aware that she’d managed to irritate father. It’s nothing new. But she’s also well aware she’ll need to apologize when she arrives home. That’s what she gets for attempting to engage with him: Chewed out.

She typically avoids the effort. But she’d gotten her hopes up about today being different. That was her first mistake.

She readjusts her bookbag. Whatever. It’s not worth the effort. She knows she’s the problem child, and she knows she’s needy, and she knows she’s at the prestigious screw-up school for the bragging rights of a turnaround story. This has never been about her sake. But she doesn’t have the luxury to complain. They don’t like her. And she doesn’t like them. She doesn’t need them. She’s not sure why she’d tried.

She’s passing the Karasuma household now, but the boy is nowhere in sight. As much as she hates to admit it, she almost wishes he was. He’s far from an engaging person to be around, but the few conversations they’ve had have been okay. Plus, she knows he doesn’t have the guts to call her out for being ‘disrespectful.’ Not that she’d dare gossip about her parents to him. She has a reputation to keep up.

Doesn’t make it any less cathartic to imagine.

She arrives at the foot of the mountain in due time. She bites her lip as she stares up. She hates the dramatization of it all. It’s not meaningful to run the school up there, it’s just obnoxious.

...She knows that’s not true. She’s just angry. She knows why Shiota-sensei stays here, and she can even make a couple guesses as for why he runs the school by himself. It’s a piece of something important. Something fascinating. Something even she wants to know about. And of something broken. A cog in a machine that was smashed to bits fifteen years ago. And no matter what he does, he can never recreate what it once was.

...She and the school are alike, in that way. With such a heavy heirloom to carry.

Or maybe it’s just a school. And the mountain’s just a mountain. And she’s just a bitter girl overthinking things.

Either way, by the time she reaches the top her feet ache.

She enters the building. It’s a tiny, pathetic, thing. She’s sure he’s done his fair share of tidying up. A ‘labor of love.’ But that doesn’t make her impression of the place any less lukewarm. It would be more interesting left ramshackle. At least then it could be a relic of the Moon Incident. What it is now is a lifeless husk. She can’t even bring herself geek out about standing in the shadow of history. Because she knows why she’s here. And she doesn’t want to be.

She arrives at class and lays her head on the desk.

She hardly notices as the others begin to arrive. In fact, she’s half asleep when she hears the stomping of excited feet.
Shit.

This is the last thing she needs to deal with right now.

She’d almost managed to go an entire day without wasting a thought on Makoto Himura. Can’t he see she’s stressed enough as is right now!? The last thing she needs is some weirdo harassing her!

“Fumiko-”

She sits up, fists clenched. “Can you just leave me alone alrea-”

And that’s when she notices the slice of cake.

“...W… What’s that?”

He cautiously takes a step back. “I figured out it was your birthday. So I thought I’d do something for you-”

Her heart stops.

He doesn’t seem to notice. He gingerly places the cake down on her desk, before beginning to dig through his stuff. “I know it’s nothing special, but I figured it was the least I could do for getting on your nerves.” He nervously smiles as he pulls something pink out of his bag. “I nabbed you this, too. I know it’s nothing like your usual fancy-schmancy taste, but I still hope you’ll like it.”

She shakily reaches for it and unfolds. A bright pink scarf: With a massive bow on the front.

“Me and Kiyoshi noticed you get cold easily! And I thought you could use a splash of color in your life.”

Oh. Yeah. Kiyoshi. Her eyes drift his way. He’s anxiously looking on, fingers clasped.

“...He told me about how you two became buddy-buddy! And he… Also told me about how you wanted me to stop bothering you. So after this, if you want me to leave you alone, I’ll buzz off. But I figured I’d at least make it up to you first.”

Fumiko blinks back tears. Her parents hadn’t even remembered-

She runs her hand over the scarf. It’s soft. “How…?” she sputters “...How did you even know?”

“Well, I heard you bragging to Rika that you were almost thirteen, so you should be in charge! And I figured that ‘almost’ implied your birthday was soon. So I snuck onto Nagisa’s computer and got the exact date. Turns out it was a lot sooner than I thought!”

“...That’s a bit stalkerish.” Is all she can find in herself to say.

Makoto shrieks under his breath as he covers his face with his hands. “Is- Is that how you see it!? I just wanted to try being sweet and endearing!” He just about makes a 180° turn. “I-I’ll be going now! Goodbye forever!”

“Hey- Hey! No!” she snaps, reaching for his shoulder. “It… It actually means a lot.” As pathetic as he looks right now, she can’t help but be touched.

“It… Does?” he asks.

“...Yeah. It does,” she admits. She hadn’t expected anyone to go out of their way like that for her.
Much less someone she’d treated like shit for the past month. Maybe she’d been too quick to judge him.

He whirls around and wraps her in a bear hug.

“Ack!”

“I told you she’d love it!”

*Or not!* She can hardly breathe!

She struggles to get away, elbowing and hissing. He releases her, excitedly bouncing on his toes.

“Try it! Try it!”

“The cake or the scarf?”

“Yes.”

She picks up the fork and takes a bite of the cake. It’s a homemade, rudimentary thing. Made of ingredients so cheap she could likely pick up something better-made mass produced at the grocery store. But… It’s sweet.

Makoto eagerly watches on. “Do you like it!?”

She reaches for the scarf and fits it snugly around her neck. “It’s okay,” She says.

“Well, hey! ‘Okay’ is the best thing I’ve gotten you to say about anything I’ve done yet! I’ll be counting that one as a victory!” Makoto chuckles.

Fumiko rolls her eyes. “...How did you even think of this?”

“Told you. I wanted to make it up to you.”

“But *birthday cake?*”

“Well, I for one, love sweet things. Nothing would better cheer me up or work as a bribe to make me stand someone than cake. I just crossed my fingers and hoped the same would apply to you!” Makoto grins and points. She freezes, mid-chew. “Looks like I was right on the money! You love it.”

“Now I wouldn’t go *that* far-”

“And yet you’re eating the cake anyways,”

She stares down at the plate. “…Indeed I am.”

“Plus… I think… It’s just nice to have someone think about you like that. Someone going out of their way to say ‘I care’ on your birthday. It’s enough to make me weep!”

Well isn’t someone dramatic? Fumiko ignores the fact that she’s on the brink of tears herself. “…Yeah. I guess so.”

She falls silent. Even Makoto shuts up as she finishes up her cake.

“Sorry I couldn’t bring the whole thing. I got a hunch Nagisa would yell at me if I brought an entire cake in.”
“Like hell you care about how Shiota-sensei would react,” Fumiko quips.

“...Okay! Maybe not! Maybe I just wanted to eat the rest of the cake myself. But is that really that blameworthy!? It looked so good!”

Fumiko blinks in disbelief. “You ate the entire cake?”

“Hey! Hey! Not the entire cake!” Makoto argues.

“The entire cake minus a slice.”

“...M-Maybe so! And what about it!?” he nervously responds. Somehow he seems far more embarrassed by the most mundane nonsense in comparison to the actual bullshit he pulls every day.

Fumiko can’t help but chuckle.

“I’ll make you another one sometime--” he sputters. “I mean. If... If you don’t mind.”

“Eh?”

“If... You don’t mind that I keep getting on your nerves. I get it if I’ve been going too far, but I just think you’re really cool.”

“...I’ll think about it,” Fumiko says. “If you keep bribing me with cake.”

“Is that all you want from me!?” Makoto sputters.

What can she say? She’s an entrepreneur at heart. She smirks. “Is that not a deal you’re willing to make?”

Makoto huffs. “Only if you’re willing to let me keep eating half the cakes.”

“More like seven-eighths of the cakes.”

“Hey! Don’t spring all this math on me all of a sudden! I get overwhelmed! I’m no good at that stuff, you know!”

Kiyoshi finally perks up. “I can verify he’s not.”

Makoto squeaks. “Hey-! Don’t try to humiliate me in front of Fumiko! Not when we’re finally becoming friends!”

She nearly refutes it. But seeing Makoto lean back to elbow Kiyoshi, and that genuine grin spread on his face, she can only think about how drastically it contrasts the numb coldness of her father’s eyes.

...What else does she have to lose?

‘Friends’ can’t be too bad.
HERE WE GO, BABEY! Chapter 3! Ahaha. I never expected to get this far. But I’m really getting into a groove! I genuinely feel like I’m making good progress on this, and I’m proud of that.

Fucking finally we get a chapter delving into Fumiko a little. She’s a complicated character, and I’m glad to finally show some more sides to her, even if she still is a bit of a rudeass. (Fun fact! The average cantaloupe costs about thirty dollars in Japan. Fumiko turning her nose up at that breakfast is… Something, alright.) Ultimately though, she’s just a kid, and I hope I haven’t alienated ya’ll from her too much in the past.

And, of course, we’ve also gotten to see another odd thing or two about Makoto. When are we getting a chapter delving into HIM? Afraid I can’t answer that one. But all of his oddities are certainly leading up to the plot, so stay on the edge of your seat!

I’m really enjoying working on the friendship between the three of them. Because, yes, DUH, the three of them were going to become friends. What sort of trio would they make if they hated each other!? They all have a sort of neat dynamic to them. And I’m going out of my way to make sure they all interact. Because the way canon Assclass’s trio seemed to have a gap (In the fact that Karma and Kayano hardly interact despite being in the same friend group) drove me nuts. (Fun fact 2: The Kayano and Karma specifically thing is also something I’m going out of my way to avoid. They interact in this household. They’re pals, and I hope that’s shown, even if I haven’t gotten to have too many scenes with Nagisa’s spouses yet.)

On the topic of Nagisa’s spouses: Don’t worry. Nagisa will keep his promise, and so will I. I’ll explore how the four of them got together, and some insane stories from their youth. But you’re gonna have to sit and wait patiently, just like Rosey!

If you’re curious about why certain types of charity were brought up: They all have personal reasons for the characters. Some of them are self explanatory. Nagisa and Gakushuu have very strong feelings about child abuse, and all of the E-Class advocates for kids with learning disabilities considering their prior situation. Kayano’s always trying her best to stand up for women (And men! And everyone!) in abusive situations, considering the one Aguri was in. It’s something she feels very strongly about. Prisoner’s rights are because of the atrocities that happened to Korosensei as a death row criminal. And trans youth is because I headcanon Nagisa as trans! I’m now sure how/if it’ll ever come up in the fic, but the Nagisa I write is 100% a trans man. Good for him! (Fun fact 3 (I’m really treating you today): Kiyoshi is trans as well. Though once again I’m not sure if this will ever actually come up)

Some songs that helped me write this chapter were Emmanoodle’s cover of Fine, Great, I Love You Because’s I Don’t Want To Talk About Her, Jubyphonic’s cover of A Realistic Logical Ideologist, and Vienna Teng’s Stray Italian Greyhound. Give them a listen! You’ll see where they fit in. ;)

That’s all, folks! Hope you liked the chapter! Make sure to tell me what you think! Another chapter will be up before you even know it!
More often than not, Kiyoshi wakes up to the family dog’s excited licks.

This morning, in a brilliant and unexpected development, he awakes to said dog’s furry ass in his face instead.

“Taro!” he yelps, coughing for air and gently pushing the fluffy white Samoyed off of him. For fuck’s sake! He’s gonna feel like he has fur in his lungs for the next three days.

Taro tilts his head, tongue lolling out. Oblivious to the emotional grief and subsequent respiratory issues he’s caused his debatably asthmatic owner, he nudges Kiyoshi’s hand with his snout.

Kiyoshi sighs and pats his side. He can’t stay mad for long. “Good morning to you, too.”

He glances at the clock. 7:12, huh? Yeah. It’s about time he should be getting up. He sits up and stretches.

Taro gets the gist. He hops off the bed and scratches at the door, then sends an expectant look Kiyoshi’s way.

“Not even going to let me brush my teeth, huh?” Kiyoshi asks, sliding out of bed.

Taro stares blankly.

Kiyoshi’s gonna take that as a no.

He opens the door. Taro barrels out of the room. A shout and an exasperated ‘Shit! You’re up already!?’ echo down the halls.

Kiyoshi chuckles. Sometimes he wonders why Taro doesn’t just sleep with his parents. With a baby face and silky-soft fur, he’s easily top contender for ‘favorite son’. But Taro’s technically his dog, regardless of what his dad would have you believe. And as such, the overgrown needy baby curls himself up at the foot of Kiyoshi’s bed each night.

...And shoves his fuzzy ass in his face each morning.

Kiyoshi slips into his clothes, quickly brushes his hair and teeth (his dog's will be damned), and tosses some food into his fish tank. Then, coughing one more time, just for good measure, he follows after Taro.

“Morning, Mom,” he says as he enters the living room.

“Your mutt’s all over my ass again,” Irina Karasuma, his truly one-of-a-kind mother, complains.

Taro’s firmly planted himself on Mom’s lap. From the coffee spilled on the couch, something tells Kiyoshi he’d invited himself there rather haphazardly.

“Yeah. I can see that,” Kiyoshi snarks.

Mom must notice him staring at the stain, because as she makes an effort to shove Taro off of her
she pipes up. “Oh. Don’t worry about that. I’ll just make your dad deal with it when he gets home.” She grins.

Ah yes, Dad. Busy with work as always. He’s been practically MIA for the past two days. Not that Kiyoshi can complain much. Mom’s work is equally as hard. So he’s pretty lucky to even have one of them at home.

Something tells him Dad isn’t going to roll with Mom’s demands. No matter how hard she whines, begs, or demands, he’s going to firmly stand his ground, then tell her with a blank face, “You made the mess. You clean it up.”

And she will. She’ll moan and groan the whole way through, but something tells Kiyoshi she enjoys it when he pushes her around.

“Good luck with that one,” he says.

“What? You don’t believe me?” Mom dramatically huffs. “I’ll have you know for a fact I can make your father do anything I want!”

_In bed, maybe._

God! His parents are freaks!

“Okay, okay. Whatever you say, Mom.” He relents. “But if you’d like, I can clean it up before I go to scho—”

“Oh no, no. You don’t worry about this bullshit,” she interrupts. “If you really wanna be helpful, can you get the mongrel off of me?”

Kiyoshi whistles and pats the side of his leg. In an instant, Taro hops off of Mom’s lap and trots to his side. He seems relatively unbothered for having been called a ‘mongrel.’ Kiyoshi wishes he had the same thick skin. Or blissful obliviousness. Either works.

“I made breakfast, by the way,” Mom says. “Nothing fancy. But what do I look like? Your dad?” She kicks a leg up on the couch. “I’m no housewife.” At least not until she needs pity or a favor. Then she’s the softest most fragile maiden on the planet. It seems like a switch she can flip in an instant. No-one ever falls for it, but she certainly tries her damndest.

That said, he does smell toast.

"O-Oh! Thank you."

“It’s in the kitchen.”

He peeks his head in and grabs two slices of toast plus a plate. Taro follows close behind, gaze locked on the food.

“I’m no—”

He’s relenting before he can even finish his sentence. He tears a piece off of one his slices and slides it Taro’s way. He gobbles it up in an instant.

“Are you feeding him again?” Mom shouts in. “This is why he’s getting fat, you know!”

Something tells him Taro isn’t particularly phased by his weight.
“Can you grab me a coffee while you’re in there, by the way?” She adds on. “Someone spilled mine.”

“Of course!” Kiyoshi replies, already pouring her a cup. He gives Taro his best attempt at a disappointed look.

He re-enters the living room, hands Mom her coffee and sits down next to her. He usually prefers to eat in the kitchen, but she isn’t that sort of tidy. So he supposes he doesn’t mind laxing about just this once.

“Thanks,” she says as she grabs her drink. Taro starts to make the motions to join them, but a nasty glare on her part shuts that down. He settles on curling up near their feet.

“I spent way too long lint rolling the couch yesterday to let you get your way, you beast.”

Kiyoshi doesn’t bother to tell her the moment Dad gets home Taro’s going to be on the couch again anyways. For someone with all the approachability of a brick wall, he sure does love that dog.

“Beast. Is that what we’re calling him now?” he jokes.

“Would you prefer smug bastard?”

“I suppose I don’t have any strong preference, now that you mention it,” he relents, taking a bite of his toast.

...Admittedly, he doesn’t get to talk to his mom as often as he wishes he could. It’s nice to just be able to spend time with her. Even if she is making microaggressions against the dog.

“How’s school been?” she asks. “Are you still friends with that weird boy?”

“Yeah. Just yesterday he dared me to eat glue.”

“Did you eat the glue?”

“No, Mom. I didn’t eat the glue.”

She almost seems disappointed. “Pussy.”

He rolls his eyes and leans on her. He’s a ‘pussy’ for many, many, reasons, but he wouldn’t exactly name that as the top one. He’d call that basic self-preservation.

“Have you made any other friends?” she asks. “Getting along well with your classmates? You know if anyone’s giving you issues I’ll get ‘em.”

“Please don’t ‘get ‘em,’” Kiyoshi says.

“Not making any promises.”

Kiyoshi rolls his eyes. “I’ve been fine. Everyone’s nice. Well. For the most part. There’s this girl, Fumiko—”

Mom makes a slicing motion across her throat. He slaps her hand down with a giggle. “No! No! She didn’t do anything! I was actually about to say I think we’re finally starting to get along.”

He’d still call ‘friends’ a stretch. But they’ve found a peace. She seems to have opened up more
ever since Makoto reached out to her. Kiyoshi and her have started walking together to and from school. She still doesn’t talk much but that’s okay. She’s a lot nicer than he’d first anticipated.

“So no putting a hit in on her?” Mom asks.

“No putting a hit in on her,” Kiyoshi retorts.

Taro whines and paws at the couch.

“I’m putting a hit in on you,” Mom growls.

Kiyoshi hurries to eat his toast faster. Something tells him if he doesn’t get a move on his fuzzy accomplice is going to finish his breakfast before he can.

“How’s Nagisa been?” Mom asks. “Still as crazy as ever?”

“He’s been well,” Kiyoshi says. “But, yes, he’s just as crazy.” He pauses. “And just as short.”

Irina snickers. “Now that’s not a surprise. He hasn’t gained an inch since middle school.”

“...It’s almost sad.” Not that Kiyoshi can talk, measuring in at 4’10. But he has an excuse, considering he’s fucking thirteen, and desperately hopes his trash talk won’t jinx him and doom him to an eternity of step stools and asking someone else to grab things off the top shelf.

“Have you got a hit in on him?”

“Will you stop it with the hitman thing?” Kiyoshi begs. Ex-assassin or not, her shtick is getting old. “No. I haven’t. If I’d ‘assassinated’ him, you and Dad would be the first ones to know.” He pauses. “Well- Other than my classmates! Of course they’d be the real first ones to know. Because they’d see it. But, like, other than that: You guys.”

Mom chuckles. “Well, I’ll be waiting on the edge of my seat. I know you can whoop his ass.”

“I am not doing that.”

“Okay, okay,” Mom relents. “You can politely shoot him then immediately apologize.”

“Much better,” Kiyoshi says. “My grades have been pretty good, too. He really is a quality teacher.”

“He learned from the best,” Mom admits. “Me, of course. Not your Father and that octopus.”

And to think for a moment he’d almost believed she’d genuinely complimented another human being.

“Midterms are already in a few weeks,” Kiyoshi says. “I can’t believe it’s already been, like, a month. I’m really nervous.”

“I’m sure you’ll do just fine.” Mom reassures, ruffling his hair. “You’re a smart kid. And if you ever need someone to help you study your English-”

“...That would be great.” Admittedly English is easily one of his best subjects. But he’ll take any opportunity he can get to spend more time with her. “As long as you promise to not teach me more wacky sex terms. Something tells me those won’t be on the test.”

“Because Nagisa is a coward and a menace.”
“I’ll make sure to pass that onto him,” Kiyoshi snarks.

“Hey! Hey-! No!” Mom shouts. Oh. So now she cares about her reputation.

“No taking it back now.” He doesn’t tell her that he’d never actually say that. Even paraphrasing someone else, he’s pretty sure if he called his teacher a ‘coward and a menace’ to his face he’d just about piss himself.

She grumbles and growls, crossing her arms and staunchly averting her gaze.

“How’s work been?”

Mom shrugs, quickly letting up on the angry act. “Same boring shit as always. Just routine. I’m bored out of my mind,” she admits. “When are they going to have me do some real work?”

As bad as he feels, Kiyoshi has to admit he much prefers her doing ‘something monotonous.’ Both her and his father have been sent overseas for months on dangerous missions before. And without fail he always ends up fearing they won’t come home this time.

...He doesn’t voice that. They’re heroes. They’re doing important work. He’s just a selfish coward. He can’t dare ruin that for them.

“I dunno. Hopefully soon,” He says. “They can’t keep you pent up at home for too long. Otherwise, you’re gonna start to get to Taro’s psyche,” he jokes.

Mom snorts. “Oh. So now that’s what the Japanese government’s latest initiative is? Protecting his fat ass?”

“Yes.” Kiyoshi nods.

“I’m quitting my job and becoming a stripper.”

You know. How you talk to your son.

Kiyoshi rolls his eyes. “Ew.” He stands. “And on that note, I should get going before I have to hear any more details about your future stripperhood. Sorry! Not interested.”


He peaks his head in and grabs his stuff. Taro ever so diligently follows in suit. Mom stands and grabs him as he starts to follow Kiyoshi towards the door.

“Hey. No,” she says. Something tells Kiyoshi Nagisa wouldn’t particularly mind if he actually brought Taro into class, but it’s for the best he stays home. They can’t let his hubris go unchecked.

“Sorry, buddy. I’ll see you this afternoon,” he says, giving Taro a quick pat on the head. Then he turns and starts to make his way towards the door.

“Hey,” Mom interrupts. “You really gonna go without saying goodbye?”

Kiyoshi’s face flushes. “Of- Of course not!” he sputters, wheeling around. He rushes over and gives her a hug.

She wraps an arm around him and squeezes. “Have a good day, okay?” She gives him a kiss on the forehead and squeezes even tighter just for good measure. “Love you.”
Kiyoshi beams and leans into her embrace. Then, as much as it pains him, he pulls away and walks to the door.

“...See you later, Mom.”

“Seeya,” she says, giving him a wide smile. “Have fun with your friends, okay?”

“I’ll try my best.”

“Try not to overthink it!” she shouts as he closes the door behind him.

He can only hope she’ll still be home when he returns.

He sends one last hesitant glance towards the window as he starts to begin his long trek to school. And he swears he can see her stroking the dog.

...Heh. Softie.

He turns the corner and sees a familiar face.

“Hisakawa-san!”

He hopes he hasn’t kept her waiting too lo-

“About time you showed up. I was just about to ditch you,” Fumiko says with a curt wave. He doesn’t doubt it for a second.

“A-Ah! Sorry!” he sputters. “I got caught up with some stuff at home. My mom was home and the dog was bothering her and we had to catch up becau-” He cuts himself off. “Well, I guess you don’t want to hear about any of that!” he nervously chuckles. “Feel free to just go on without me next time. I’d hate to be a bother-”

Fumiko gives him a blank look. “I was joking.”

Eep!

Well how was he supposed to parse that!? She’d said it so seriously!

“Come on,” she says, starting to walk. She doesn’t notice that it takes him a good ten seconds to collect himself and scurry after her.

An intimidating girl indeed. In the strangest way, he likes that about her. He can’t exactly get tangled up in worries about what she surely must think of him when she’s willing to voice her distaste aloud. She doesn’t make an effort to hide her feelings. He knows exactly what she thinks of him. And while it’s not exactly flattering, it’s far from as bad as it could be.

“Nice day, huh?” he asks.

“Eh,” she responds.

She’s not wearing her scarf this morning. Or any morning, for that matter. She’s made a distinct habit of leaving it at the school and putting it on as she arrives. He can’t help but wonder if she’s embarrassed to wear it home. Nonetheless, Makoto’s been thrilled she’s taken to the gift at all.

And scarf or not, boy oh boy is she layered up. He must admit the sight of a girl wearing a designer coat in early May is a sight to see. Not that she’d be pleased to hear of the humor he finds in that
situation. So he keeps his damn mouth shut.

In fact, he doesn’t mind the silence, seeing as how she’d bothered to wait for him at all.

They arrive at the school in due time. And one trek up the mountain later and their aching feet have brought them to their destination. They peek their heads inside to a mostly empty classroom.

Haruhi sits in the back steepling her fingers. Riko and Chiharu quietly gossip. And Nagisa’s intently focused on his notes. He doesn’t even seem to notice them enter the classroom.

Kiyoshi gives him a wave with a quiet “Hi, Shiota-sensei,” and he looks up in surprise.

“Oh! Hello!” he responds. “Good morning, you two.”

Fumiko returns a quick “Morning,” and heads to her desk. She never once looks his way.

...But hey! She’s trying! So an A for effort!?

Kiyoshi takes his seat diagonal of her. He carefully unpacks his bag as she reaches into her desk and retrieves her scarf. She secures it snugly around her neck.

Rika glances over from her desk. “Looking cute, Hisakawa-chan!” she says with a smile.

“...Ah- Thank you,” Fumiko responds.

It feels like just a week ago she’d have told her to “Fuck off,” albeit in a more proper and distinctly less crude gazillionaire-people-way. Slowly but surely she’s finding a place among her classmates, however small that may be. It makes him feel proud. He hadn’t exactly done the hard part of the work, but it still feels pretty nice to know they’ve managed to weasel their way into her shriveled up heart.

She’s still not having any hand in ‘assassination.’ He can’t exactly blame her. It’s an intimidating endeavor. But it’s still sort of sad to see her sitting alone on the sidelines.

With time, the rest of the class slowly pours in. Terumi and her posse meet with Haruhi, and the Hisoka twins seem to be bickering as they walk in through the door. Komoshi falls asleep at his desk the moment he arrives, and Minki ever so cautiously pokes him with a ‘cool stick’ she’d found outside.

Kiyoshi sends a glance Fumiko’s way. Whether they’d admit it or not, they’re anticipating a sunshiney face.

Makoto bursts down the door at 8:20. Considering role call is at 8:30, and he’s managed to show up past ten before, it’s not too shabby.

“Morning, Nagisa!” he greets, moseying over to his desk and subsequently slapping a paper down. “I finished my short story!” he says. “Sorry ‘bout the wait.”

“It’s fine,” Nagisa replies with a smile. “And good morning to you as well.”

Makoto beams before skipping over to his own desk. And Nagisa gets right to work on grading. Kiyoshi must admit he can’t help but feel a little bad for him. He’s seen Makoto’s grammar, and it’s atrocious. He has a long read ahead of him.

Makoto pays no mind as he slides into his chair. “Morning Kiyoshi! Morning Fumiko!”
Fumiko gives a tired smile as Makoto leans forward to greet Matsuya.

As wholly exhausting as he is to be around, Kiyoshi can’t help but smile as well. Makoto manages to perk every head the moment he enters the room.

“I am so tuckered out,” Makoto rambles. “I didn’t sleep, like, at all, last night. And don’t tell Nagisa, but I totally forgot and crammed my assignment last minute.”

He’d already been given an extension! How ballsy can he be!?

“Probably still better than mine,” Kiyoshi admits. “It turned out so bad.” They’d been told to write a short story or anecdote with a twist ending. Pretty fun in concept, but less so when your ideas all dry up. His lack of retention of basic grammar concepts aside, at least Makoto has creativity going for him. But Kiyoshi? Kiyoshi’s life just isn’t interesting.

Makoto roughly pats his shoulder. “Aw! Don’t say that!”

Well. Wasn’t interesting.

Makoto turns to Fumiko. “What did you write about, Fumiko?”


“Eh. I’m sure you did great,” Makoto says. “You know all sorts of big words! Like ‘Literature!’”

Fumiko shoots him a look. “Are you an imbecile?”

“Or ‘imbecile!’!”

Fumiko lets out an exhausted sigh. “I’ll take your word for it.”

Makoto grins. “I think Nagisa will like my story, too! I think I thought of a really funny twist!”

Kiyoshi’s not exactly sure he trusts Makoto’s idea of funny, but he’ll have to go out on a limb here.

That’s when Nagisa drops the paper.

Kiyoshi’s the only one who seems to notice. How he scrambles to grab it as it drifts down through the air. He clutches it tight, hand shaking ever so slightly. There’s this wide, frazzled look in his eyes. Almost like he’s seen a ghost.

‘Funny,’ huh?

...What the hell could Makoto have possibly written!?

Nagisa finds himself flipping through Korosensei’s advice book the moment he gets home.

He keeps it and the yearbook in his bedside drawer. More often than not he pulls them out when he’s not feeling quite sure about himself.

But this… This is different. What Makoto had written… It’s-

He turns the pages as fast as he can.

He knows he’s not going to find what he’s looking for. He’s managed to read the thing cover to cover half a dozen times. There’s all sorts of surprises in it, including teaching tips he’d never
thought he’d need. But to hold out hope for what he wants to see hidden in some secret nook or cranny he’d missed? It’s inane.

An ‘I’m still here.’

He’s thought many times about where Korosensei went after he died. He’s never been a particularly religious man. He’s always liked to think he lived on in that building. That him and Aguri not only resided there, but were cheering him on every day.

How is it that a single boy can put an end to such a nice thought?

He skims through the pages. High school tips and tricks. A recipe for a meal he’d thought Nagisa would enjoy. Advice for dealing with particularly unruly students and his prediction for what would happen in the next Sonic Ninja movie. Doodles of his face and witty proverbs. Long winded stories. Encouragement throughout the whole thing. He’d even left advice for if Nagisa changed his mind and decided to pursue assassination after all.

He’s had a word to throw in on just about everything. It had seemed like there was nothing he hadn’t thought through.

But it turns out he hadn’t written any advice on what to do when a student reminds Nagisa of him. Eerily so. No ‘here’s what to do when I return in the flesh,’ or even a ‘knock that off, Nagisa! You’re far too smart to entertain that thought.’

...Nothing.

Nagisa’s completely in the dark.

He sighs and closes the book. He puts it in its rightful place back beside the yearbook and closes the drawer.

He knows he should be working on his lesson plans. But he just can’t get it out of his mind. He heads into the study and boots up the computer.

It’s a high-end thing. It’s on in no time at all. He opens Google and stares blankly at the search bar.

...What do you even ask?

‘Korosensei.’

He doesn’t know why he types it. It’s nothing he doesn’t already know. Pictures of that wide grin and essay-long think pieces over whether or not the only adult he’d ever loved deserved to be murdered in cold blood.

‘The Reaper.’

Now that’s just clipart of skeletons in hoods and screencaps of a Death Note character.

‘The Reaper Assassin.’

He clicks on the Wikipedia article. It’s a bare-bones thing. Not even a picture.

“The Reaper is the pseudonym of an alleged serial killer who’s said to have operated across the world from the late 90s to the mid-2010s. The killer's identity remains unknown, as does the validity of the claims of his existence. It is unknown whether The Reaper was a single killer, multiple affiliated killers, or several unrelated…”
He loses interest about there. He’d almost forgotten what he’d learned to call ‘assassination’ in his youth was perceived as ‘serial murder’ by the world at large.

He knows he’s not going to learn anything more about Korosensei than he already knows. He was an elusive man. And he’d already learned the most he could from the source himself. Quite frankly, he doesn’t need information. He just can’t get him off his mind.

He hesitates. He knows what he really wants to Google. But he just feels foolish.

…

‘Reincarnation.’

Now that just yields definitions. That’s not what he needs!

‘Is reincarnation real?’

He’s not sure why he’d expected an answer. Of course not. At least not in a way anyone can prove. At best, he’s finding religious accounts. At worst, he’s finding crackpot conspiracy theories.

‘Student reminds me of dead teacher.’

Now that’s just gibberish. There’s nothing to it, Nagisa! Stop overthinking it! It’s just… It’s just…-

‘Am I losing my goddamn mind?’

He sighs and slumps down on the desk.

“...You okay?” A familiar voice pipes up. A face peeks out from behind his browser window.

...Ritsu.

He’d almost forgotten about her entirely. She has a habit of keeping tabs on their digital footprint. As big-brother-esque as it may seem, he knows it’s just her way of trying to connect. She lives a drastically different life from them, after all.

“Absolutely not.”

Her brow furrows in concern. “Do you wanna talk?”

...Not particularly. He knows he’s just following a madman’s trail. But he hardly even has the guts to voice that. He gives a defeated shrug.

She minimizes his tab and perches on his taskbar. She kicks her feet back and forth. “...Thinking about Korosensei?”

“What made that much obvious?” he snarks.

He knows she misses him too. They all do. It’s been years. But he’d changed their lives so profoundly. Even as they’ve moved on, he’s sure their thoughts wander back to him more often than they’d like to admit.

How could they not? He hadn’t died a natural death. He’d been taken from them.

...And Nagisa had been forced to do it. He knows it’s what Korosensei wanted. And he thinks he’d have regretted it for the rest of his life if he hadn’t done it himself. But once every so often it
haunts him when he stares at his hands.

At the very least it had answered the burning question in his heart: He just wasn’t cut out for killing.

Ritsu blinks. “I guess that was sort of a silly question,” she says. “You’re thinking about something a little more complicated.”

Nagisa sighs. “Yeah. I know. It’s stupid. But is it really so bad t-”

Ritsu cuts him off. “…It’s not stupid.”

“People don’t come back from the dead, Ritsu.”

“For one, reincarnation isn’t ‘someone coming back from the dead.’ You should know that, silly,” Ritsu says. “For two, AI don’t tend to have self-awareness, either. Korosensei always had a way of doing what he wanted.”

It had certainly seemed that way. At least, finally, until he couldn’t save himself. Sometimes Nagisa still wonders if he hadn’t wanted to be saved.

“…So you believe me?” Nagisa asks.

“Well, I don’t believe you. But I don’t not believe you, either,” Ritsu says with a smile. She rests her head on her hands. “Why don’t you let me in on what’s going on? I’ve been meaning to hear about your class, anyways.”

Nagisa hesitates. “Well… There’s this boy: Makoto. And he… He… He reminds me of him in every way, Ritsu,” he rambles. It spills out. “I don’t even know what it IS. I mean, he’s petty, and he’s kind, and he’s funny. But it has to be something more than that.”

Ritsu curiously tilts her head.

“It’s something about his smile. I can’t even describe it-” That wide, unfaltering grin. Of course, it’s not exactly the same. If a normal ass human person tried to replicate that, he’s pretty sure they’d sprain something. But… But… “It has this energy. The way he looks at me. The things he says. The things he does. I just can’t shake it. And I know that’s insane. But every day it gets more and more uncanny.”

“The things he does?” Ritsu asks.

“Well, like… Remember what I told you guys happened day one?”

“The bombing, right?”

He’d ended up excitedly telling the entire group chat the story the moment they’d gotten the ‘Hey Nagisa’ thing worked out. Now that had earned a round of applause.

“That was him?” Ritsu asks.

“Mmm,” Nagisa responds. “And then, just today… He…” he pauses. “We had a creative writing assignment, right? You’ll never guess what his story ended with.”

“I probably can. But try me.”

“It was tentacles all along.”
“...Excuse me?” Ritsu sputters. Turns out she couldn’t guess it, huh?

Nagisa blinks. “Oh. You weren’t around for that, were you?”

Ritsu quickly shakes her head. “N… No?”

“It was a writing assignment Korosensei gave us before you showed up. It had to end in ‘It was tentacles all along.’ Understandably we poked a ton of fun at him. Because no story could have possibly made sense with *that* as the plot twist. Turns out it was a lot more realistic of a development than we’d have thought.” Considering ‘tentacles’ just about explained everything that had happened over that insane year.

“I bet that gave Kayano a heart attack, huh?”

“Oh, totally,” Nagisa says. “She kept a straight face, but I’m sure she must have been terrified for a second there.” Even with the limelight masterfully angled away from her, she still must have had at least a little paranoia she’d been caught red-handed.

Turns out Korosensei was encouraging them to write a piece of his life story.

“That *is* a pretty weird phrase.” Ritsu agrees. “And I’m gonna guess this isn’t something the public would know about?”

“No way,” Nagisa replies. “I’d forgotten about it entirely until now.”

“Let me double check,” Ritsu says, hopping off of her makeshift seat. She re-opens Google and types into the search bar.

‘It was tentacles all along.’

As expected, nothing. Results involving combinations and mishmashes of the words, but not what they’re looking for.

“You’re right. Nothing.” She says.

“Exactly. I know it sounds insane, Ritsu. But *how else?* It’s him. It has to be. It *has* to be-”

Ritsu turns back his way and cocks an eyebrow. “You feel really strongly about this, huh?”

“...Yeah. Admittedly.” Nagisa fiddles awkwardly with his tie. How could he not? It’s hard not to overthink…

Ritsu takes a seat on the search bar. “Have you told your spouses?”

Nagisa hesitates. “No…” he admits. “How can I just spring that on them? They won’t believe me. Karma would never let it go. He’ll give me shit for the rest of my life if I breathe a word of this.”

“That’s not true..” Ritsu says. “They love you. I’m sure they’d try their best to understand.”

“And what if I’m wrong? This is a huge jump to be making. I can’t get their hopes up.”

“You’ve already gotten your own hopes up pretty high.”

Nagisa frowns. “...I wish there was a way to just know. Is there anything you can do? I mean, you have the entire internet at your fingertips.”
Ritsu sighs and shakes her head. “Even I don’t have an answer to this one, Nagisa. But I think you should follow your heart.”

“And for what? It’s not like I can even say anything to Makoto-”

“Of course not. But a good place to start would be saying something to your loved ones. I think they’d really appreciate it.”

“I’ll… Try,” Nagisa replies.

“And keep working hard to give Makoto a good future.”

“Of course.” Nagisa nods. “It’s… It’s what I’d do regardless. What I’d do for all of my students. They’re my world.”


“…Thank you for checking up on me, Ritsu,” Nagisa says.

“It’s nothing!” she cheerily replies. “It’s the least I can do for my beloved classmate. Keep me updated, okay?”

“I’ll make sure to.”

“Good. And never call yourself crazy again.” She pouts. “Because I’ll break right into your desktop as many times as it takes to remind you you’re not.”

“Thanks, Ritsu. That… Means a lot.”

“I told you. It’s nothing.” She glances to the side. “But I should probably get going. There’s actually a Hatsune Miku stream I’ve been wanting to attend?”

Nagisa chuckles. “Yeah. I won’t hold you up any longer. See you around, Ritsu.”

“Seeya! Keep what I said in mind, okay? And? Protip? In the future try to use incognito when you’re looking up stuff you’d be embarrassed for me to see.” And before he can even reply, she’s gone. She truly is an enigma.

Nagisa shuts down the computer and stands. She’s given him a lot to think about.

Nagisa can’t sleep.

He listens to Gakushuu softly snore and turns over once, then twice. More than anything he just wants to pull his pillow over his head and scream.

...He doesn’t do that.

He’d managed to drift off for a little while earlier, but it hadn’t lasted. His thoughts had been too disjointed. They’re swimming around in his head and it feels like he’s drowning. He’s been called an overthinker before, but this is different. It’s too important. He needs to do something. He needs to say something.

But he can’t. He can’t. None of this makes sense. If he breathes a word of it he’ll never hear the end of it. This isn’t your run of the mill conspiracy. It’s about someone so deeply important to them. There’s such a weight behind even the mere mention of Korosensei. He can’t just throw that
name around. Not after everything he did for them. Korosensei would be disappointed in him. He’d stare down at him and shake his head. “I’m gone. And there’s nothing you can do about it.”

...Makoto’s unsettling smile is burned into his mind.

No. Not disappointed. Don’t think that way. Korosensei would never. He’d squint and bring his tentacle to his chin. “Now is that truly what you think, Nagisa?” He’d chuckle and grin the way he always did. “Then don’t drop it. I didn’t teach you to give up, now did I? Even if you don’t find the answer you’re looking for, there’s no harm in asking questions.”

Nagisa turns over.

It’s not that easy! He has more important things to be focusing on! The last thing he needs to do right now is go on a mad goose chase! The school year’s just begun. He can’t afford to lose sleep over the impossible belief that Korosensei’s somehow returned from the dead. That. Doesn’t. Happen.

“AI don’t have self-awareness,” Ritsu had chided.

...And octopi don’t fly.

What if he’s right? What if, against all odds, it really is him? Could he live with himself if he let that go by right under his nose? Is it wrong to not say something to the others? Karma? Kayano? The E-Class? Makoto himself?

Ritsu had encouraged just opening up to his spouses. But it’s more complicated than that. It’s stressing him out enough as is. They... Don’t need that in their lives too. Or even worse, what if they don’t believe him? What if they stare him down and see him losing his mind? Throwing around the name of the one adult they’d ever loved so casually? It’s disrespectful!

Quite frankly, it’s none of Gakushuu’s business. It’d only bring Kayano more grief than it’s worth. And Karma would never let it go. The last thing he needs to do is turn himself into a fat joke in the eyes of the people he loves.

...He knows they’d be upset if they learned he was carrying this alone. They don’t do secrets. He shouldn’t be scared of them. They’ve done nothing but love and support him. Why can’t he bring himself to trust them?

...Probably because he can’t trust himself.

He rolls over.

And of course he can’t say anything to Makoto. He has enough on his plate as is. The last thing he needs is an adult in his life getting him wrapped up in utter nonsense. If Korosensei had taught him anything, it’s that it’s best to let people come to their own conclusions. And support them when they do. People don’t need someone to tell them how to live their life. They need a supportive shoulder to lean on.

...At least, that’s the ideal.

“Just keep working hard to give Makoto a good future,” Ritsu had said. Nagisa wishes it was that easy. It’s what he wants for all of his students. And he tries! He works his ass off! But what if that’s not enough? He’s not like Korosensei. What if he can’t help them? What if he can’t help
him? He could very well be failing the one person who’d gone above and beyond for him! What if he’s not good enough!?

He realizes he’s yanked the blanket off his spouses in his tossing and turning.

…

He stands up. He needs to get his mind off things. Because he’s never going to sleep at this rate. He tosses the blanket back onto the bed and makes his way downstairs. He reaches the kitchen, paces in circles, and crashes straight into Kayano.

She yelps.

“S-Sorry!” Nagisa sputters. “ Didn’t realize you were up—”

“Yeah. I was just grabbing a glass of water.” She squints. “Why are you up? You’re not looking too hot.”

Always a lovely thing to hear from your wife!

“Was just… Thinking,” Nagisa replies.

“That’s real specific.” Kayano pauses. “You… Haven’t gotten much sleep, have you?”

“No,” Nagisa admits.

“Yeah. I figured. You’ve been tossing and turning all night.” Nagisa feels his face flush red. Shit. Had she noticed? He hopes he hadn’t been keeping his spouses up. “…Is something wrong? You’ve been acting weird all day.”

“It’s just something that happened at school.”

“…Wanna talk about it?”

_Hardly._ “You wouldn’t believe me.”

“Oh, geez,” Kayano snarks. “Thanks for all the credit. Hit me.”

Nagisa sighs. “…You’re not going to let me drop this, are you?”

Kayano blinks. “Nagisa, if you really don’t want to talk, I won’t pester you about it. But you’re my husband. I know when something’s wrong. I’m happy to help where I can.”

“It… It’ll be a long conversation.”

Kayano pulls aside a chair at the kitchen table. “I have time.”

Nagisa hesitantly takes a seat opposite of her. He clasps his hands and stares downwards. He desperately tries to steel himself. She’s right. He needs to share it. Otherwise he’ll never clear his mind. He takes a deep breath.

Kayano notices his discomfort. “You don’t have to if you don’t want t-”

But he beats her to it. There’s no turning back now!

“Kayano, can I say something crazy?”
Chapter four! Chapter four! Chapter four!

Nagisa’s really off his shits, huh? ...Or is he? WE know the answer to that question. He, however, does not. Poor Nagisa. I had a lot of fun playing around with his internal dilemma, as cruel as that sounds. What can I say? “Dead mentor back from the grave” is... Not exactly commonplace. Sorry, Nagisa. You're going out on a bit of a limb here. You've GOTTA doubt yourself at first.

I’m happy to finally introduce some of the normality in the Karasuma family life. AND to introduce a 36 year old Irina. Peak MILF material... She’s super fun to write. PROBABLY not a great mom, but she tries her best. I love her, and I love her dynamic with Kiyoshi. (And don’t worry. Known brick shithouse Karasuma WILL be appearing sooner rather than later. It’s not a family without him.)

Taro was also super fun to write. And you can thank my friend Sho for his existence entirely! That’s right, I’m CALLING YOU OUT, SHO. But in like! A good way! >:3c. When he first read Assclass, he instantly came to me with “Karasuma needs a dog. Karasuma DESERVES a dog.” And like any good friend, I gave Karasuma (And his family) the fucking dog. I’ve regretted nothing since. Taro is Kiyoshi’s emotional support dumbass.

(Fun fact! Taro can mean “Large son.” There is LITERALLY nothing funnier to me than a dog being named that.)

I’m a bit sorry for all the Kiyoshi perspective. Somehow it feels like all the kid based scenes are skewed his way. That said, only a BIT sorry. Because he’s easily the most normal of the bunch, and we need a semi-average narrator to ground us. No worries, however! As our first Makoto scene is coming next chapter. Are you excited to finally get a look into the head of the enigma?

Needless to say I had fun writing Ritsu, too. Not to be a Kagepro fan on main, but the way I had her interact with Nagisa’s desktop was totally inspired by the way Ene from Kagerou Project interacts with Shintaro’s computer. Ritsu’s a super interesting character to me, and I’d love to do more with her than just give her a minor role in this fic sometime in the future. For now, though, I just hope she has fun on her date with Hatsune Miku or whatever.

Sorry to leave ya'll on a bit of a cliffhanger. But it seems like Nagisa is finally gonna spill some beans? We’ll just have to see how that goes, huh?

Some songs that helped me write this chapter were Simple Plan’s I’m Just A Kid, Passion Pit’s Carried Away, Bastille’s Lethargy (You’re gonna notice this one come up a LOT.), Owl City’s Alligator Sky, Owl City’s Angels, and Fun’s Some Nights.

I hope you enjoyed! Let me know what you thought! And see you with the next chapter soon! o7
Story Time

“Kayano, can I say something crazy?” Nagisa blurts it out without thinking.

Kayano’s brows furrow in concern. She scoots in closer, very quiet. “...Of course?”

“O... Okay.” He takes a deep breath. “You’re going to think I’m losing it, but I swear I can explain. So please, just let me-”

“Nagisa-”

She reaches out for his hand and clasps it tight. “Don’t worry about that. I’d never. So just talk to me.” She squeezes his palm and tenderly rubs the back of his hand. “...What’s bothering you?”

He’s half tempted to close his eyes to avoid seeing her reaction. But he knows there’s no avoiding these sorts of things. So instead he makes hesitant eye contact and forces it out.

“I think Korosensei’s back.”

Kayano’s hand stiffens. The immediate look on her face is indecipherable. Nagisa can’t help but freeze up as well.

“Just let me explain-”

“Okay,” she says softly. He hates the pity in her eyes.

He knows why she’s worried! He’d feel the same for her in an instant! He’s worried for himself! But she has to believe him. She has to.

“There’s... This boy in my class: Makoto.”

Kayano’s eyes flicker with recognition. “The one who blew you up?”

Nagisa nods. “Yeah. That’s the one,” he replies. “I... There was something about it, Kayano. Everything about the situation. It felt like I was playing it out scene by scene. The moment he touched me, I knew I’d messed up. I sensed this... This Something.”

Bloodlust?

He shakes that thought off.

“And ‘kaboom.’ He grinned at me like he’d thought of the cleverest trick in the world.”

Kayano’s quiet. She seems deep in thought. “...And I have to admit that’s odd. But you can’t just jump to conclusions, Nagisa.”

“I know-” he says. “I... Didn’t. If anything, he’d just reminded me of Korosensei. Someone who would have gotten along with him. But today something happened, Kayano. And I... I...” he drifts off.

“You?” she asks.
He struggles to put it into words. Finally, he stands.

“Just let me grab it.”

He stands and retreats into the living room. He grabs his binder. Returning to the kitchen, he places it down on the table with a hefty ‘thump.’ He pulls Makoto’s paper out and slides it Kayano’s way.

She’s already begun reading it as he starts to explain. “I had them doing a creative writing assignment for Literature. The only guidelines I gave them were that it had to end with a plot twist. I expected pretty typical stuff. ‘The whole thing was actually a dream.’ Or ‘And then they all died: The end.’ They’re middle schoolers. I wasn’t exactly looking for Shakespeare. But Makoto took me by surprise.”

Kayano flips the paper over. And as she finishes reading, her eyes rise to meet Nagisa’s.

She doesn’t say a word.

“There’s no way he could have known about that,” Nagisa says. “I had Ritsu search the entire internet. There isn’t a trace of ‘It was tentacles all along.’ That was our moment. Everything that happened in that classroom- The world would have never wanted to hear about it. They wanted a monster. And so we never would have wanted to share. That belonged to us. It wasn’t another thing for them to twist!”

Kayano nods. She still doesn’t speak.

“And I know it’s crazy. I know it’s nuts. But… But… Please tell me I’m not losing my mind.”

She hears the tremble in his voice. She squeezes his hand. “…Weirder stuff has happened to us,” she admits. “But, I mean… How can you know?”

“I can’t. But how else can you explain it?”

…She doesn’t have an answer.

“I’ve… Admittedly never really thought about this stuff before,” he says. Of course, he and Gakushuu have had late night discussions on the moral and ethical relevance of all sorts of religious concepts- But those were always in the context of theory rather than actual belief. They were the mere set up for a brain twister that sparked intellectual debate.

…And the set up for later being half choked out by Karma and Kayano, who just wanted to sleep and not listen to their thirtieth conversation on whether or not death qualified as an abstract concept.

“…But… It has to mean something, doesn’t it?”

Kayano shrugs. “I’d like to think so, but it’s not that easy…”

“You have to admit it’s a nice thought at the very least, isn’t it?”

Kayano’s very quiet.

“…I guess,” she finally says.

“Korosensei’s… Korosensei’s life was very unfair.” Sometimes he reflects on the fact that at thirty, it’s entirely possible he’s outlived Korosensei. He never knew exactly how old Korosensei was, but the thought of being older than his mentor makes his heart ache. He’d died young. He really had.
“So, so much happened to him.” He’d never had a home! A family! And when he finally found a place where he was happy, the world just couldn’t let him keep it. “He deserved better.”

Kayano doesn’t respond.

“He loved us. More than anything.” He’s reflected on it a lot. Korosensei had given up everything for them. And there had never once been a moment of hesitation. They were his world. His light! And… He was theirs. “What if… What if that’s why? What if that’s how? What other reason would he need? He has to be here. He needs that second chance. More than anyone. And it’s because of how much he loved us.”

He realizes what he’s saying the moment he says it. And he catches Kayano blinking back tears in the dim light.

...He’s forgetting someone.

He reaches out a hand and places it on her shoulder. “I…”

“I loved her. With my life-”

How could he forget, even for a moment? Aguri had raised Kayano; Molded her into the person she is today. Kayano had very nearly died trying to avenge her. He’d never have met Kayano if not for how deeply she’d cared for her sister. That year had affected her more than anyone. She’d… Loved them both. And she’d lost more than even he had. If her vehemently protective nature, and the green streak she keeps in her hair say anything, it’s that.

Shit.

He searches for words. “...I’m sure she’s out there somewhere too-” is all he can find.

Kayano softly shakes her head. “I just… Hate the thought that he’d ever be without her. That’s not what either of them would have wanted.”

...And she’s right. He’d never noticed it at the time- But in hindsight Korosensei had carried a certain heaviness with him. There’d been a deep sorrow hidden behind that endlessly supportive smile. Even Korosensei had had his regrets.

Nagisa knows the feeling all too well.

There’s a pit in his stomach.

“I... I’m sorry,” he says. “I didn’t mean to imply-”

“I know.” Kayano cuts him off.

“Ohay,” he replies. Something tells him this conversation is over. “I’m sorry. I just had to get that off my chest. But… Maybe I was wrong,” he admits. “You have a point.”

Korosensei had only loved one thing as much as he loved his class. And that was Aguri Yukimura.

“...I said it’s fine.” Kayano repeats. The irritation bristles in her voice. But when she sees Nagisa flinch backward, her shoulders lower. “I... Know you didn’t mean to,” she says.

“...Okay.” Nagisa says.

Silence.
“I think we should get back to bed,” Kayano says. “Thank you for telling me what’s going on.” Her words feel empty.

Nagisa awkwardly stands. “...And for the record: She loved you. With her entire heart,” he reassures.

“I know.” Kayano stands. “You don’t need to tell me that. I don’t want to dwell on it any more than I already have.”

With the fire in her heart, he can’t blame her.

They silently return to bed. He reaches to slide an arm around her, but hesitates, and settles for a, “Night. I love you.”

“...Love you too,” she replies.

He turns over and stares at the wall. Gakushuu and Karma sleep like babies, bodies tangled in a knot. And Kayano tries her best not to dwell.

But with Makoto’s grin on his mind, Nagisa can’t do anything but.

The next morning is weird.

Here’s the thing. Nagisa knows what happened last night wasn’t exactly a fight. At least he wouldn’t like to think about it that way. But regardless of what he calls it, he’d still hurt Kayano’s feelings. And the worst part is he can’t even apologize for it without bringing up the topic again and reopening the wound. Kayano’d told him to drop it. The last thing he needs to be debating is what her dead sister deserved.

(The world, of course!)

...But is life fair?

Now that’s food for thought. And somehow that’s far more distracting than his actual breakfast.

It’s not even that he’d meant to not mention her. He’d just forgotten. But did that just make him an even bigger asshole!?

“Oi.” Karma snaps his fingers. “You gotta get something on your stomach,” he says. “So eat up.”

Nagisa takes a bite.

“Someone didn’t sleep well last night, did he?” Karma asks.

“Does it show that badly?”

“Bags under your eyes for days, babe!”

Kayano rolls her eyes. “Don’t give him too much shit, Karma!”

She’s pretending nothing happened. Sometimes it’s hard to tell what she’s legitimately over and what’s still bothering her. She’s one damn good actor, after all.

It can make for a nasty combination with his emotional denseness. It had taken him seven years to notice she’d been harboring feelings for him, for fuck’s sake! They’d drifted apart a bit during
those years, and he can’t help but feel like during that time he’d been a pretty shitty friend. He’d felt… Bad about everything that had gone down. And she’d made a deliberate effort to avoid him in her own right.

They’d only reconnected after a class reunion. Nagisa hadn’t managed to attend, as he’d been busy with student teaching, but Karma had had a nice long talk with Kayano. Shortly afterward he’d pulled Nagisa aside and told him what he’d pulled with his former best friend was a pretty dick move. And it had taken that for Nagisa, with all the social awareness of a fucking middle schooler to realize ‘Oh my God, that WAS a dick move.’

Thankfully, she’d been willing to reconnect. And they’d hit it off in no time. Turns out they’d been so close for a reason. They just clicked! And… It turns out she’d drifted apart from him in fear of holding him back. She hadn’t wanted to “become a distraction.”

...Never! She was someone he held dear. And even as the years have passed by, and that rekindled friendship has grown into something more intimate, he’s lived in fear of letting her feel that way about herself again. It’s… Something they’ve talked about extensively. And they’ve made massive strides in being open with their feelings when it comes to communication. But last night Nagisa reached a new low.

...He knew he shouldn’t have said anything.

Wait! Fuck! No! That contradicts the ‘Open and loving communication with your spouse to avoid further issues’ thing. Gah. No. He’s glad he told her. He just wished he’d gone about it in a different way. The conversation had ended on such a sour note. But it’s too late to give it any closure now. Are they really just going to pretend that didn’t happen?

“Admit it! You think his eye bags are sexy, anyways!”

Now that derails his train of thought.

“Wha-?” he sputters.

Karma snickers. “I knew you were zoning out,” he says. “Welcome back to the real world, bud. We’re discussing the whether or not you look hotter exhausted.”

“Why would I be paying attention to you arguing over whether or not I’m sexier sleep deprived!?”

“Because it’s a deeply important topic of discussion. Cast your votes now.”

“We all know you’re merely trying to cause a scene, Karma,” Gakushuu says.

“Now why on earth would you say that?” Karma feigns.

“Because if perpetual exhaustion made you consider someone’s ‘ass more tappable,’ and your words, not mine, for the record: I’d be the most attractive person in this household,” Gakushuu replies, downing a cup of coffee.

“I’ll have you know you’re plenty h-” Karma stops right in his tracks. “Wait! Did I just get you to admit you’re not the hottest person in this house!? He begins to wheeze with laughter.

Gakushuu jolts. “You very well know I didn’t mean it that way!” he hisses.

But it’s too late. Karma’s already back on his bullshit. “The narcissistic, egotistical Gakushuu doesn’t think he’s hot!”
Gakushuu promptly raises a middle finger.

“Jeez, jeez!” Karma reels back. “No need to take your insecurities out on poor, innocent me.”

“Oh. So that’s what you’re calling yourself now?”

“It’s much healthier than calling myself unhot.”

“I- I didn-” Gakushuu sighs and gives it up. He knows better than anyone else under this roof when Karma’s just yanking on his chain.

Nagisa can’t help but roll his eyes. Kayanos’ stifling laughter as he stands up. “I’m getting dressed.”

Karma gives a nod of acknowledgment. “Okay, okay. I see how it is. You don’t have time for our hijinks. Gotta be a responsible adult and all.”

Now that’s one word for it. He slides out of his chair and begins the walk up to the bedroom. He swears he hears Karma groan “C’mon! Don’t look at me like that.” Under his breath. “I’m just screwing with you. You’re a delight.”

“I am a fucking delight!” Gakushuu triumphantly (and loudly) agrees, confirming Nagisa’s suspicions even from halfway across the house. “A provocative, hot and sleep deprived delight!”

Karma mumbles some words of agreement, the fondness undeniable in his voice.

Admittedly, those two have come a long way since middle school, too. There was a time when their relationship had been built entirely on one-upping each other. And although they still have a tenancy to get on each others’ nerves, they know what lines not to cross. When the two of them had gotten together during first year, Nagisa had been seriously worried about how that would end. But they’ve grown up a lot over the past fifteen years. So… It turns out it hadn’t ended in disaster. It’s ended up in heated debates over the breakfast table, and a relationship with all of the love (And all of the pettiness) of a bickering old married couple.

He lays his clothes on the bed and reaches for his tie.

“You didn’t eat.”

Kayano stands in the doorway, a concerned look on her face.

“Wasn’t hungry,” Nagisa says. He avoids eye contact.

Kayano sighs. “…Still thinking about last night?”

“Yeah,” Nagisa admits.

Kayano sits down on the bed. “Listen. I’m not mad at you-”

“I know,” he says, pulling his pajamas off over his head.

“I’m sorry I snapped.”

“You didn’t snap,” Nagisa matter-of-factly reassures. He knows all about aggression. It’s something his spouses are careful to keep in check around him. But this wasn’t that.

“I still hurt your feelings.”
“And I hurt yours,” Nagisa replies with a shrug. “...I feel bad about making you cry.” He pulls his pants up and slides on his uniform.

“...You didn’t mean to, Nagisa,” Kayano says, reaching for his hand. “It was just... A lot to think about,” she admits. “I couldn’t deal with that last night. I couldn’t.”

“I don’t blame you,” Nagisa replies. She tugs on his hand, and before he knows it he’s taken a seat on the bed as well. “...I shouldn’t have dumped that on you.”

“Don’t say that.” She places her other hand on the back of his hand. “...You shouldn’t have to deal with this alone.”

“I mean, I told Ritsu-” he tries to divert.

“That’s different,” Kayano insists. “You’d have felt bad hiding it from us.” She pauses, a concerned look spreading across her face. “...Have you even told the others?”

“No.”

Her lips purse. “Nagisa...”

“I know, I know-” he admits. It sounds bad. “But you know for a fact Gakushuu wouldn’t believe me.”

“No. I don’t know that-” Kayano refutes.

“Do you believe me?”

Kayano’s quiet.

“...I’m not sure I’d go that far,” she admits. “But I support you. And I will no matter what.”

It’s Nagisa’s turn to fall silent. Kayano leans on his shoulder.

“It’s not that I don’t believe your credibility, Nagisa. And it’s certainly not that I think you’re losing your mind. I’m just worried.”

“I’d argue those are the same thing,” Nagisa points out.

Kayano sighs. “Why do you have to be so difficult?” she asks.

“I’m, like, ten sorts of stressed right now.”

“Then let me help,” she replies. “...You should know we’re always here for you. Something tells me Gakushuu would put a lot more faith in you than you’re giving him credit for. He’s not a cynic. He just likes his proof. The moment you give him something to go off of like that essay-”

“And Karma?”

“Excuse me?”

“Karma’s never going to let me live this down, Kayano! At best, I’m going to become a big fat joke to him. At worst, he’s going to be pissed at me for spitting in the face of Korosensei’s legacy like that! After everything he did for us! He died for us. How can I insult him like that?”

He doesn’t even realize he’s raised his voice until he hears his heart pounding in his ears.
Kayano looks him in the eyes. “Do... You even really believe this, Nagisa?”

Nagisa’s shoulders lower. “...I don’t know.” But he’d like to. He’d really, really like to.

“Then maybe you should hold off on telling them,” Kayano admits. “But you shouldn’t hold off on trusting them. You shouldn’t be scared of Karma. He’s your husband, for Pete’s sake-”

“I know-”

“You keep saying that. But you know he’d be hurt if he heard you were thinking about him that way...” Kayano frowns. “Korosensei was just as important to him as he was to us. He deserves to know. And you’re even more important to him. He’d never, and I mean never look down on what you find truly important. He’d only ever want what’s best for you. He promised that the day he married you.”

...Kayano’s right. He’s not fourteen anymore, either. Karma is one of the loves of his life. He’d never want to hurt Nagisa. Smug and snarky and rude, but his husband nonetheless. He knows what lines not to cross with Nagisa anymore, too. Gender jokes and death jokes, and most certainly jokes about anything that would take Nagisa so much courage to come forward with in the first place.

“We all promised that. And... Until you find enough of a reason to believe your theory or not, I’ll be here for you.”

Nagisa’s eyes water. He’s... Spent a very long time terrified of messing up. Terrified of scaring Kayano away again. It’s taken hard work, but they’ve made leaps and bounds in being more open with their feelings when it comes to communicating with each other.

...He wouldn’t have it any other way.

“...Thanks, Kayano.”

“No problem. You should probably start heading out,” she admits. “...Sorry for the distraction. Last night just kind of left a bad taste in my mouth.”

“You and me both,” Nagisa agrees. “And don’t apologize. It means a lot. That you care so much, I mean.”

“Of course I do.” She leans away and brushes up his outfit, before reaching for his tie.

“And... When it comes to, well, everything. I’ll keep her in mind. Because you’re right. Korosensei would never. Not without her.” Yeah. He’d like to believe the world is at least some sort of fair. How could it not be, when he’s surrounded so thoroughly by people who love and support him?

“Thanks. That means a lot.” She finishes tying his tie and gives him a tired smile. “...Have a nice day, okay?”

“I will,” he promises, and tries his best to mean it.

She reaches for his tie and pulls him in for a kiss on the cheek. His cheeks flush bright red.

“Kayano-!” he sputters.

“Sorry,” she says with a giggle. “The mood felt too somber.” She pushes him off the bed and onto
his feet. “I won’t hold you up anymore. But next time you don’t trust us, try to remember this, okay?”

Nagisa nods. “…Alright. I will.” And that he knows he’ll mean.

He makes his way across the room.

“Oh! And say hi to Makoto for me, okay?” Kayano shouts. “Conspiracy or not, he sounds like a wonderful kid.”

“Will do,” he replies. He makes his way downstairs and is stopped for his daily (and all-too-mushy) goodbye kisses. And looking into Gakshuu and Karma’s eyes, he has to wonder if Kayano is right.

…He can trust them about this… Right?

Makoto’s mornings are uneventful.

He slides out of his futon and stretches with a smile.

The sunlight is filtering in through the window. Glancing at the clock, he figures the exact time is 8:02. It’s a little later than he likes to get up, but better late than never, he supposes!

His dad snores uninterrupted on the couch. It’s a rare occurrence he’s up before Makoto is. He doesn’t particularly mind. He knows the man works hard, if the scattered bottles around the couch indicate anything about his stress levels.

Welp! No time to dwell on that! It’s time for school, silly!

He doesn’t dilly-dally. He wiggles out of yesterday’s clothes and into today’s attire, quickly running his fingers through his hair before bursting out the door.

He makes his way through back alleys and across roads, only slowing down when he skids to a stop at a certain alleyway. He peeks his head in and cups his hands around his mouth. “Miss Nao!?” he shouts curiously, but quickly remembers the time. Ah! Shit! School. Right. His feline friend can wait.

She seems to be a no-show today, anyways.

He resumes his sprint down the streets. He feels like an anime boy running for his life, or at least his grades, toast in his mouth and everything. Well - Minus the actual toast. He hadn’t had time for breakfast, or any actual breakfast ready at the house.

His stomach rumbles incessantly.

He makes a stop at the street corner 7/11.

*Eh. He has time.*

He peeks his head in the automatic doors and revels in the air-conditioned safe haven of the convenience store. It’s a hot day out, after all! He snakes around to the sweets aisle with a calm, collected smile.

It’s not a particularly busy day. It’s about as crowded as the typical 7/11. A handful of folks loiter around, catching up and catching breakfast. No-one looks his way. They don’t notice. With such a
perfectly crafted poker face, how could they ever?

He snags an ice cream and a small box of strawberry pocky, then proceeds to immediately make his exit without paying.

He waits until he rounds the corner to tear open his ice cream and dig in. Another job well done!

He’s well aware it’s not exactly “right,” but he’ll do what he needs to to get by. He’s very quickly learned that sometimes in the real world, it’s each man for himself. You can’t always do what’s right, but he likes to think he makes up for it in other departments. Like his sparkling personality! He’s a nice dude, he swears!

There’s a skip in his step as he saunters down the street, even reflecting on how no-one’s looking out for him but himself.

That’s okay. He’ll do the looking out for himself and for everyone else.

He’s got the route to school pretty much memorized by now. It’s a long walk, but even taking a shortcut or ten it’s basically a straight line. If he hurries, he’s sure he can make it by nine.

A half hour late ain’t too bad! So far the worst time he’s managed to clock in was eleven, and he’s pretty sure nothing’s going to be usurping that level of blatant misstep anytime soon.

Hell! Mistakes and all, it feels like he’s doing better at school than ever.

He likes school. He likes his classmates! And most importantly, they like him. It feels like all his hard work is finally paying off. Nagisa looks out for him. After years and years of “Makoto, no,” “Makoto, why!?!”, upturned noses and disappointed stares, it’s so relieving to finally hear a “Good job,” alongside that reassuring smile. It really, really feels like Makoto’s finally found someone who believes in him.

Admittedly he’s not sure he can trust him entirely yet, but he wants to. And that’s a new one.

Constellate isn’t like his other schools. It’s not boring. They don’t yell at him for moving or yell at him for talking too much. And they certainly don’t seem the type to expel him for impulsive decisions, gratuitous violence, or lighting the toilet on fire. (Come on! It had been one time!)

There’s life to the school. When it’s warm outside they’ll pack up their stuff and study outside or run through the forest for a hands-on lesson. Nagisa cracks jokes when he fumbles and lets them pass around the snake during downtime. Flowers blossom in the garden, and Nagisa lets them tend to them if they promise to be gentle.

Then, there’s assassination. Now there’s something he’d never have seen at another school. Makoto’s never felt anything like it; The way it makes his blood race. When he gets his hands on a blade, it’s like he’s right at home.

He reaches the mountain and looks warmly at the building perched on top.

Constellate feels like home.

The way every head rises when he enters the room. The compassionate warmth of his friends and the homely architecture of the old building. The way the sunlight filters in through the windows and the faint smell of sawdust. An excitement to finally really, truly learn. A safe haven of knowledge. The comforting familiarity of his teacher’s outstretched hand.
...Nagisa feels like home, too.

That has to be why he worked so hard. Signed up and sifted through all the paperwork himself, headache be damned. He’d had to. He’d needed to. The moment he’d even heard of Constellate, it’s sole teacher, and the thoroughly loved building it occupied.

...How could he not?

He’s seen it in his dreams all his life, after all.

“I want to learn more about him.”

The words stop Nagisa in his tracks.

He and Makoto had been going over his Japanese. Makoto had been struggling with a certain phrase and Nagisa had taught him a trick Korosensei had given him back in the day. He’d only mentioned his teacher offhand, but Makoto had sprung forth the moment the words had come out of his mouth.

“Excuse me?”

...Hearing him ask about him puts Nagisa on edge.

Ever since he let the thought enter his mind, he’s had trouble looking Makoto in the eyes.

‘I think Korosensei is back.’

It’s inane. It’s dumb. It’s refutable for a plethora of reasons. But it’s an itch he just can’t scratch, and he’s seen the way it’s puzzled Ritsu and Kayano as well.

Makoto stares him down with that smile. “Korosensei. You talk and talk and talk about him, but never give us any details!”

“Well, you’re in luck, buddy. We’ll actually be going over it in class, eventually. Korosensei. What happened to the moon. Everything.” Strangely enough, it’s actually a pretty big hallmark for history. Or. On second thought, is it truly that strange? Of course, the earth-shattering, world-changing, superpower who’d “destroyed the moon” is bound to be something to remember. But at the same time, it feels like such a mundane thing from his childhood. Lazy summer memories of trying to tip their teacher into the pool and run-of-the-mill days spent with their heads buried in textbooks etched into the walls of history.

Makoto whines. “But I wanna know about him now! Like… Who he was!” He leans forward on the desk. “Please, Nagisa? Just for a little bit? I promise I’ll get right back to work afterwards!”

Nagisa thinks. If… If Makoto is in some way related to Korosensei, he deserves to know about him. And if he isn’t, what is there to lose? He’ll get to share some fond memories of the teacher he just can’t get his mind off of, and give Makoto a well-deserved break.

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“Okay, okay,” he relents, tossing Makoto a bag of Konpeito with a smile. “We can take a quick break and talk about Korosensei.”

“Yes!” Makoto shouts with a triumphant fist-pump.

Nagisa has to give him a quick reminder to use his inside voice as he scoots his chair in. Technically they’re the only ones in the building, but who knows? He could always scare the
“...So... What do you know about Korosensei already?” Nagisa asks.

Makoto’s quiet. He taps his finger on his desk, deep in thought. “Well... He was cool, and a teacher, and had superpowers, and blew stuff up.”

Nagisa stares in disbelief. “Is that all you’ve learned about him?” Other schools’ handling of the topic has always pissed him off. He knows it’s irrational to expect other people to understand the event to the same extent he does, but all that seems to go around about his late teacher is either barebones facts or blatant misinfo. He knows a decent amount of Makoto’s lack of knowledge can likely be chalked up to his lackluster education in general, but he’s flipped through actual textbooks as well, and they aren’t much better.

Makoto’s lips purse. “Well... He was yellow. And slimy. And... He taught here, right?”

Fuck, man! He sure did!

“Yes, of course,” Nagisa replies. He’s talked about it pretty extensively? “In this exact building.”

Makoto’s eyes seem to light up. He glances all around the room with wonder, letting that sink in.

“He showed up early in the school year,” Nagisa says. “It was a surprise to all of us. Our previous teacher had been absent for about a week when Karasuma-sensei showed up with him.”

“Who?” Makoto asks.

“Karasuma-sensei. He worked for the government. Well... Works. A real gruff, no-nonsense military type with a soft spot. He was given responsibility for taking care of Korosensei. Now he’s mostly settled down, though. He’s actually Kiyoshi’s dad.”

Makoto nods sagely. “Oh! I actually knew that! He told me.” He pauses. “You shoulda’ just said ‘Kiyoshi’s dad’ off the bat.”

Nagisa chuckles. “I’ll keep that in mind next time.” He pauses. “At first we were completely baffled. I mean, you can’t even begin to imagine what it was like: Not only having such a strange person show up to take the role of your teacher, but being told it’s your sworn duty to kill him.”

“I dunno,” Makoto says. “That’s sort of what you pulled on us. And we’re not too phased,” he brags. “At least, I’m not!”

Nagisa smiles. “Well, I’m glad to hear it, Makoto.” Even if he’s slightly offended at the implication that he also qualifies as ‘such a strange person.’ “We were almost intimidated. But we got to know Korosensei in no-time.” At first, they’d feared he looked down on them. And in some ways, he had. But he’d also looked at them in a way no teacher had before.

“For an octopus monster, he was nothing like his appearance would have suggested,” Nagisa explains. “Yes, he had superpowers. And slimy tentacles. A goofy smile and yellow skin. But there was so much more to him than that.” He pauses, giving Makoto a contemplative look. “He was... Kind. And he was smart. And he was embarrassing.”

“Embarrassing?” Makoto asks in disbelief.

“As petty as a man could get,” Nagisa reassures. “Loud and goofy and easily jealous. He’d cheer
us on from the sidelines as loud as he could, like some sort of overbearing mother. But as much as it got on our nerves, we always knew it came from a place of love.” At least, in hindsight. At the time it was just about as mortifying as you could imagine for a ten-foot octopus to show up to your high school applications clapping and cheering as rapidly as he could. (VERY rapidly, for the record.)

“Don’t get the wrong idea, though!” Nagisa says, remembering Korosensei’s own sore spot for ‘slander.’ “He was… The nicest teacher we’d ever had. He was funny, and he was stubborn, and he never gave up on anyone. He found a way to make friends wherever he went.” Well. Almost everywhere he went. Nagisa decides to refrain from mentioning Korosensei’s porn habit for now.

He looks over at Makoto munching intently on his candy. “He had a sweet tooth, too. One even worse than yours, I’d bet.”

Makoto huffs. “No way!” He says, cramming his mouth full of candy with the intensity of any preteen who’s been told he’s been bested.

Nagisa yelps as Makoto coughs, still ferociously shoveling Konpeito into his mouth. “Stop!” he begs. “You’re gonna choke, Makoto!”

Makoto mumbles something about being unable to die, but it’s hard to decipher with his mouth so full. With a little (Okay. A lot-) more coaxing, Nagisa manages to get him to stop funneling pure excess sugar down his throat.

“...He sounds pretty cool,” Makoto finally admits. “You know. For a guy who liked to blow things up.”

“The coolest,” Nagisa agrees. He glances out the window. “He didn’t actually destroy the moon, you know.”

“Woah! He didn’t!?” Makoto’s mouth hangs agape.

Now that’s one thing the world never would have believed the class on. Korosensei had taken public blame for what had happened to the moon to gain his notoriety and therefore his position. There’s no proof the actual culprit had ever existed. And who’d have possibly believed a bunch of dumb kids secondhand accounts of a moon rat?

“Nope,” Nagisa says. “He took credit for it, but he’d never even been to space.” He purses his lips and smirks. “Korosensei was a lot better at playing a supervillain than actually being one.”

“Heyyyyyyy. I’m sure he was at least sort of threatening,” Makoto refutes, arms crossed. “...But if he didn’t destroy it, what did?”

Korosensei had refused to tell his students about his past for as long as he possibly could. All things considered, he doesn’t exactly feel like it’s something Makoto needs to learn about right now. He doesn’t want to scare the kid with talk of antimatter. That’s not the part of Korosensei’s legacy they should be reflecting on, anyways.

“Eh. I think I’ll make you wait til’ the class reaches the Moon Unit for that one. I can’t give away all the plot twists, now can I?”

Makoto whines. “C’mon! Tell me! Tell me! Tell me!” he chants, slamming his hands on the table.

“Aw, rats,” Nagisa says, just barely holding back a snicker at his ingenious comment. Now that one’s gonna come around like a boomerang and hit Makoto square in the forehead in a few
months. “Can’t I get a break? I’m just trying to keep things fun for you.” If Korosensei had managed to keep his forbidden backstory on the down low for so long, Nagisa will do him one better. If not to be a mysterious mentor figure, then out of pure spite.

“Come on!” Makoto groans. “At least tell me some sort of badass story about him!”

Nagisa strokes his chin. “Let me see. Once he tore out our flowerbed and we proceeded to tie him up and hit him with sticks,”

“That’s not badass at all!”

“Okay, okay. What about the time he decided to do impromptu Naruto cosplay while tutoring my classmate?”

“That’s even less cool!” Makoto shouts.

“This guy was actually a real loser, wasn’t he!?”

Nagisa can’t help but laugh. Korosensei was certainly capable of being rather ‘badass’ when he put his mind to it, but more often than not he was just a goofy loser. He thinks that’s an important part of Korosensei to carry on. Both in lieu of how he wished to be perceived distancing himself from his past, and how he put the people around him in such a bright mood. It makes him seem down to earth. It makes him seem human. And… He was. Nagisa wants his students to know that, more than anything. That Korosensei was just like them.

...And, admittedly, it’s just hilarious to see Makoto’s reactions. Y’know... If he really is-

No. Please don’t think that way. Not in front of him.

Nagisa sighs. “The biggest loser we knew.” It had helped him feel like one of them. In a world where every teacher had felt like an enemy, he’d been willing to put himself on their level. He smiles sadly reflecting on the memory.

Makoto’s quiet, munching on his candy. He observes Nagisa’s face closely. “…Seems like you were really fond of him,” he finally says.

Yeah. He’d just about saved Nagisa’s life. All of their lives. He looks out the window. The moon’s no longer visible by this time of day. “Yeah. He was a good man. I miss him every day.”

He can’t help but wonder if he’s putting too much on Makoto’s shoulders. It’s not like he doesn’t know what it’s like to feel forced into a mold. Is… Is he going about this wrong? He never wants Korosensei, or Makoto, or any child to feel the way he had back then.

...The feeling that Korosensei had given him the courage to liberate himself from.

Makoto wraps his arms around Nagisa. He jolts. He hadn’t even noticed him scoot his chair closer.

This time, there’s no explosion.

“You seemed sad,” Makoto admits. “Sorry I asked about it.”

“No, no. Don’t worry,” Nagisa reassures. The last thing Makoto needs to do is taking care of him right now. “…Thanks, Makoto. It means a lot.”

Makoto squeezes tighter. “No problem.” He says, before pulling away with a reassuring smile.

...Yeah. He won’t tell Makoto what he’s thinking about. He makes that promise to himself right then and here. He can’t dare risk destroying that smile.
“We should probably get back to work,” Nagisa finally says.

“Okay,” Makoto relents, but pauses. “...Can you tell me more stories about Korosensei sometime? This was fun.”

...But that he can do. Stories won’t hurt.

“Of course.”

Chapter End Notes

CHAPTER 5! CHAPTER 5!

I can’t believe I’m already on Chapter 5. FUCK, man. I’m making good progress. Feels awesome!

It feels really relieving having Nagisa finally open up to someone, even if it didn’t go exactly ideally at first. What can I say? Do you expect ME to just write a fic about reincarnation and NOT overthink the ethics and implications behind it? No siree! I’m just like Nagisa and Gakushuu, awake at 4AM overthinking things. I don’t exactly have an answer to Nagisa and Kayano’s question, but I DO have this wonderful comic to meme on their conversation. So enjoy? That?
That said, I didn’t want their tension to go on too long. They’re definitely a couple who openly communicates with each other. They’ve had years to figure out how each other tick, so they definitely know some things about conflict resolution that younger couples wouldn’t know. That’s definitely something I deliberately wanted to explore with this fic: How Nagisa and his spouses (Who I’ve nicknamed the Moonrise Quartet, for the record) try to openly understand each other’s emotions and serve as each others’ rocks, even if they stumble sometimes.

If you had any doubts, yes: The cat’s finally out of the bag. Obviously Makoto IS the reincarnation of Korosensei. But even he himself doesn’t seem entirely aware of it yet, now does he? Which just raises the question: Does he deserve to know? Or is ignorance bliss?

I’m sorry about his Crimes. He’s a problematic child. And yes, no worries, you WILL get to meet the mysterious “Miss Nao” eventually. She’s a delight. I hope you enjoyed the first scene from Makoto’s perspective, because it’ll be the last one for a little while! (Sorry! As the mystery of the fic he’s gotta stay a BIT of an enigma!)

The scene with Makoto and Nagisa interacting was of course a delight to write. I love how they interact, and all things considered they make for an interesting teacher &
student duo. Both their shenanigans and their serious conversations manage to pull on my heartstrings.

I also hope you enjoyed the “aw, rats” joke. Because I just about lost my shit writing it.

Some songs that helped with writing this chapter were Stars’ Dead Hearts (OOF this one hits hard thematically. I love it, though.), Fun’s C’mon, Electric Light Orchestra’s Mr. Blue Sky (I consider this one a huge theme song for Makoto), Aladdin’s One Jump, and The Long Winter’s It’s A Departure.

I hope you enjoyed the chapter! Let me know what you think! The next one will be out before you know it! o7
Karma has a bad habit of inviting himself into Nagisa’s classroom, and Nagisa has a bad habit of letting him get away with it.

For a man of such high standing, he truly hasn’t changed a bit.

It’s halfway through English, at about 10AM, when he moseys on in through the door and tosses a textbook in the trash can with a casual, “Yo!”

Now that disrupts class in an instant.

Students burst out into chatter. A few stand up. Kiyoshi covers his face with his hands. And Nagisa’s perfectly organized lesson grinds to a halt.

Well. He can’t say he hadn’t warned them.

“It’s him!”

“Random politician guy!”

“Akabane!”

“Oh, so I see I have some fans already!” Karma says, sauntering across the room over to Nagisa’s desk. Something tells him this is going to be a long day.

“What are you doing here?” Nagisa asks.

“Got off work early,” Karma replies. “Figured I’d stop by and get to know your latest batch of little bastards. Hope you don’t mind?”

Nagisa shrugs. “Not at all.” As… Abrupt as it is, it’s always a delight to see Karma. And there’s only so much hands-on lessons can do for kids’ attention spans. Sometimes they need something truly entertaining, and sometimes that something truly entertaining is his trainwreck of a husband.

“Thanks, babe,” he says, leaning in for a kiss on the cheek. Students “ooh,” “aah,” gasp and groan. There’s even an annoyed, “Get a room!”

Karma turns towards the kids and looks them over like a hawk searching for its next kill. Nagisa reaches to put his books away.

Terumi’s hand shoots in the air. “Does this mean the lesson is over?” she asks eagerly.

“For now,” Nagisa relents. “Everyone can take a break. Karma time.”

A cheer resonates throughout the room. Hooting, hollering, and slamming palms on their desks, the students begin to chant. “Karma time! Karma time!”

Nagisa jolts. “Guys! Guys- A little quieter-” he insists, practically stumbling over his own feet. “No need t-”
He loses his composure when Karma joins in. “Karma time! Karma time!” Nagisa grins and covers his mouth with his hands as he desperately tries to hold back laughter. For a grownass man, he’s still as effective at disrupting school as when he was a fourteen-year-old brat. Seeing him lead a rallying cry dressed up in his suit is too much.

Kiyoshi looks just about ready to implode. He refuses to look Karma’s way.

“Work on practicing your vocab while he’s here, okay?” Nagisa finally instructs. It’s not like Karma (Who’s now prowling around the room as the cheers die down) can hound them all at once.

He stops at Yoshito’s desk with a grin.

“And you are?”

“Yoshito,” the boy replies, thoroughly unimpressed.

It’s okay. Rosey, seated directly behind him, has enough enthusiasm for the both of them. “Sir! Sir! Sir!” she hounds. “Is it true you’re the love of Shiota-sensei’s life?”

Yoshito and Minako let out collective groans. Rosey shoots them an offended look as Karma leans on the desk. “Well, I’m not sure I’d go that far. But, yes, if the kiss didn’t tip you off, we’re hitched.”

Rosey gasps. “I knew it!” It’s not exactly a bold conclusion to reach, considering Nagisa’s explicitly told the whole class this, but he figures he’ll let her have this victory. “You gotta tell us how you met!”

“Yeah!” Kiku shouts from across the room. “Shiota-sensei refuses to tell us!”

Nagisa stands up, sputtering. “H-Hey! That’s not-”

Karma dramatically gasps. “Nagisa! How could you!”

“I’m saving it!” he cries in his defense.

Karma snickers. “You really wanna know, kids?” Just about every head in the room nods in exhilaration. “Because I’ll share what he won’t.”

He pauses, giving the severity of the situation a moment to sink in, before leaning in with a smirk. “…We met over Sonic Ninja.” He stage-whispers.

“Over what!”

“Oh! My dad loves those movies!”

“Ew! They’re so old! Like Naruto!”

“No wonder he was embarrassed to share!”

“That can’t be it! There has to be more to it!”

“You’re right,” Karma admits, shaking his head in defeat. “…I left out one crucial element of how we fell for each other…”

“Tell us! Tell us!”
Ah, WcDonalds. The prime location of middle school hangouts when your town genuinely has nowhere more interesting to go. The only place where he’s ever had the delight of seeing Karma in a ball pit, and the bane of Gakushuu’s existence.

“Excuse me?” Haruhi chokes.

“There’s nothing else to say: WcDonalds dates.”

“Are. Are you going to expand on that one?”

“No,” Karma says, matter-of-factly. Nagisa swears he hears Fumiko murmur something about “hating poor people” as Karma struts to the other side of the room.

“Any other questions?”

“You can’t just not explain that!” someone hisses.

“Any other questions?”

Kaya meekly raises a hand.

“Yes! You! Little boy!” Karma points. “What is it?”

“...Is your hair natural?”


“...The color.”

“Eh?”

“I meant the color,” Kaya says, the bafflement clear in his tone. “...I’d sure hope you’re not balding. It’s just that it’s a very bright red...”


Kaya shies back.

“I’m kidding. I’m kidding!” Karma quickly emphasizes. “It was a fair question.” Any question about him may as well be. If nothing else, Karma loves to talk about himself.

“Okay. I’ll ask a serious question,” Fumiko says, looking at him skeptically. “What do you even do?”

“Bureaucratic work,” Karma says matter of factly, slinking towards Fumiko. Kiyoshi looks away as he reaches her desk.


“Oh, it’s boring adult stuff,” Karma handwaves. “I’m sure it’s nothing that would interest you much.”
“Try me.”

Nagisa sees Karma raise an eyebrow. He gives him a nod as permission to go right ahead and explain. It may be ‘boring,’ but anything can make a good learning opportunity. Especially with a charismatic speaker like Ka-

"I get to piss everyone off, and get a fat salary for it."

“I... See,” Fumiko says through visible distaste. “I don’t see why that’s worth the pay grade they give someone like you. There are MUCH more important jobs out there than ones for people with inflated egos like you.” Her voice is absolutely vitriolic. Nagisa can’t help but wonder if Karma’s inconvenienced her family sometime in the past. Seeing as how often the needs of the state tend to clash with the needs of the people, and things grow even more particularly complicated when wealth is involved… Yeah. It’d be a good reason to know his name.

Karma reels back from the demonic middle-schooler. “Awww, c’mon! You think it’s cool, don’t you Kiyoshi?”

Kiyoshi lets out an ‘Eep,’ but quickly nods. “Of- Of course! Akabane-san does very important work.” It doesn’t take much detective work to figure he’s all sorts of embarrassed to be seeing Karma here. Nagisa can’t exactly blame him. Karma and Kiyoshi’s relationship is… Strange, at best. While Karma’s as much family to him as anyone else from the E-Class, he’s also the sort of family you don’t want to be seeing in public. Nagisa gets it. Karma’s spiteful, humiliating, and has more than once slung Kiyoshi under his arm like a sack of potatoes.

“See? Kiyoshi supports me.”

Kiyoshi’s deeply awkward expression would suggest otherwise, but Karma only leans in closer.

“Even if he is totally embarrassed of me. Which is no way to treat your Uncle Karma.” He snickers and affectionately ruffles Kiyoshi’s hair, before turning to his next victim. Kiyoshi shoots the back of his head a look that says ‘if I were a braver man I would tear you limb from limb.’

“Any other questions?”

“Is it true Shiota-sensei’s picked up two other hotties?” Ryoka asks. “Or did he, like, totally photoshop them in?”

Why is his personal life starting to feel like the subject of a harem anime!?

“Hotties, no. Spouses, yes.” Karma says without missing a beat.

“I’m telling them you said that,” Nagisa says.

“Pah! I’m not afraid of Gakushuu-“

“He’s not the one you should be worried about,” Nagisa specifies.

“Fair point!” Karma says with a chuckle.

“Oh! Oh! Oh! I have a question!” Kazuki says, standing up and putting his hand high in the air. Nagisa opens his mouth to protest, but it’s already too late.

“Mm?”

“How’s the sex?”
Now that takes even Karma aback. “I- Uh- Well-” He stumbles over his words, face an uncharacteristic shade of red, before settling on “Undisclosable.”

“Bo- ring.” Kazuki complains, but Karma stands firm. He knows all about how to egg someone on, and would never once fall for one of his own tactics. He’s many, many, many things, among them spiteful and inappropriate, but willing to describe his sex life to a pack of ravenous twelve-year-olds is beyond even him.

He regains his composure quickly. He leans down and places a palm on Kazuki’s desk. “If I may ask you a question…” He drifts off.

“Kazuki.”

“Kazuki: How is yours?”

*There’s the spiteful and inappropriate!*

Nagisa scrambles over to usher Karma away from his desk. “Okay! Okay!” He says. “No more questions about sex! Not until that unit! *Let’s work on our vocab!*”

To his credit, Kazuki doesn’t ask about their sex life again.

Karma continues to pester the students. Eventually, Nagisa begins to lose interest, only paying half attention to make sure he behaves as he gets to know the kids. But he quickly looks up from his grading when he hears a certain name.

“And you are?”

“Makoto!”

Now *that* has his attention.

Karma gives him an impressed look. “You’re the little scamp who fleeced Nagisa day one, yeah?” Makoto nods proudly. “Yep!” he boasts.

“Congrats. You’re the first to pull that off, you know. He was totally embarrassed.”

*Was not!* Nagisa thinks. Once he’d gotten over his initial shock, he was all sorts of proud. But seeing the way Makoto’s face lights up, he figures he’ll let him believe that.

“Oh, I *know.* He tried to make up all sorts of excuses about why it didn’t count,” Makoto huffs.

“How *could* he!?” Karma asks, feigning total disbelief.

“I dunno!” Makoto says, equally as taken aback.

“Well I’m gonna need to have a nice long talk with him about respecting his students,” Karma says, prompting a snicker from Makoto. Now if *that’s* not a joke. Karma and he both know he spoils them a little too much. “Have you managed to pull off any more kills yet?”

“No,” Makoto shamefully admits. “He’s good.”

How could he not be? He’d spent his youth not only seeking to succeed in pulling off the ultimate assassination, but also desperately trying to survive his own fair share of assassination attempts. After dealing with threats like Takaoka and The Second Reaper at age fifteen, a bunch of first
years can hardly pose a threat. He knows equally as much about avoiding assassination as he does participating in it.

“Sure is,” Karma brags. “Bet he’s not as good as me, though.”

“You make that sound like an invitation,” Makoto snarks.

“Hey! We all got some intense training as kids. I could avoid death just as well as poor tiny Nagisa.” Of course he had to go there. “Who knows? Maybe sometime you can try to take me down.”

“Yes!”

“But first I’m afraid you’re gonna have to make more of a dent on Nagisa. I gotta keep up my impression of a hard-earned ‘final boss.’ You keep taking him out, okay? You’re the sort of kid he comes home and tells us stories about. We’re relying on you for our entertainment.”

Makoto nods firmly. “Will do!” Before holding out a hand, “It was nice meeting you, Karma.”

“And you as well, little guy.” He returns the handshake with a smile.

That’s when there’s a shriek.

Teaching is a dangerous profession. Risk of injury is just an everyday part of the job.

Okay. That’s not super true. But Nagisa’s not exactly the average teacher, nor did he have an average education. His midterms and finals were laced with a sense of danger. Each and every test sandwiched in between assassination attempt after assassination attempt.

While he hasn’t exactly been murdered on the job, he’s faced his fair share of difficulties. He’s broken his ankle tripping during PE, and once received a concussion tearing apart a particularly vicious fight. His hands are littered with little nicks and scars. An even bigger scar runs down his shoulder from a since-resolved incident at Paradise. It’s not particularly odd for others to be brought into the line of fire, either. Kayano’d almost lost a finger visiting class, and Mary was nearly decapitated when a student had decided he’d had enough.

So he supposes Karma being stabbed in the thigh with a pencil isn’t particularly out there. But it had come out of nowhere.

They’d been hitting it off without a hitch. And then he’d lunged. Even the uncannily overprepared Karma had been taken by surprise if his scream was anything to go by.

Needless to say, Nagisa had grabbed Makoto by the wrist and dragged him out of the class. He’d put Emiko and Chiharu as class representatives in charge for the time being, and told Karma to deal with his wound while he deals with his student.

Makoto sits across from him, staring at the floor. His hands are clasped nervously over his lap, but he doesn’t say a word.

As often as its students get into trouble, Constellate technically doesn’t have an office. It’s something he’s thought over while considering expanding, but can’t quite see the point considering Constellate technically doesn’t have a headmaster either.

...Yeah. He does things differently here. And most times he likes to believe that’s for the best. But
staring down Makoto from across the desk, he must admit even he sometimes has his doubts.

Constellate doesn’t need an office. When trouble inevitably shows its head, he simply takes the kid who caused the incident into the makeshift teachers’ lounge, (Also quite frankly unnecessary when he thinks about it,) and talks calmly.

This time will be no different.

“Makoto. What happened?”

Makoto shuffles antishly, still firmly refusing to make eye contact. Finally, he says “I just felt like it.”

Well isn’t that enlightening?

Nagisa sighs and steeplets his fingers, pushing back the twinge of irritation in his gut. Teaching isn’t always as easy as it looks.

Kids are difficult to work with. They’re impulsive and they’re difficult and they’re avoidant. But he’s dealt with his fair share of students before, and if there’s one thing he learned, it’s that they always, always have their reasons.

Makoto’s no different.

Nagisa leans closer. He takes a deep breath. “I’m not going to yell at you,” He says. “I just want to know what made you feel that way.”

“I saw the opportunity and I took it.”

They’re walking in circles here.

The way Makoto says it is particularly cold. Enough to make Nagisa doubt Makoto’s the sincerity of Makoto’s personality for a moment. But reflecting on his conversation with Makoto about why he’d chosen his friends, he doesn’t have the heart to see him as anything but kind-hearted. It’s too soon to peg him as simply violent. Nagisa had had his own bloodlust in his youth, after all. And while ‘I saw an opportunity and I took it’ isn’t exactly how he would have worded it, that’s beside the point.

What stops him in his tracks most, however, is that he hadn’t suspected a thing of Makoto until this moment.

Well, that’s a fat lie as well. He’s suspected a lot of things about Makoto, a massive, Korosensei shaped suspicion among those. But he’d never suspected bloodlust.

He usually has a pretty good handle on this stuff. Sure, Makoto’d had a prowess for assassination, but Nagisa’d mistaken it as the simple enthusiasm he seems to have for everything. The way Makoto had retained his easygoing smile throughout the entire ordeal… It’s… Ugh. It reminds him of himself.

But that’s only a reason to give him stronger support! Not to shun him.

“What opportunity?” he repeats, attempting to muster as much patience as he can.

“I dunno how to word it,” Makoto says, shrugging. “He just leaned in REAL close, and I suddenly thought ‘this is my chance!’”
Nagisa blinks.

“His guards were down. And I didn’t have time to reach for my knife! And he SORTA gave me permission, so I didn’t see why not.”

...Permission. Nagisa’s not sure he’d call it that, but he supposes Karma had egged Makoto on. “I… Guess,” he says. “But-”

“And he was picking on Kiyoshi. Which was SUPER mean.”

“He and Kiyoshi are very close, Mak-”

“And, I dunno! I just wanted to.” He’s speaking up before even giving Nagisa a chance to finish. It’s clear he feels the need to justify himself, even if said justifications are... Unorthodox. He has to feel at least a little guilty. “...You wouldn’t get it.”

“...You don’t know that. What kind of ‘wanted to?’”

“I dunno,” He seems to be falling back on that phrase a lot right now. “Do you ever, like, think about doing something you really shouldn’t do? And… You just keep thinking about it? I dunno. It’s dumb and scary.”

Nagisa gets it. At least, he sort of does. While at first it could easily be pegged as Chuunibyou fantasies, his youth was littered with all sorts of irrationally violent thoughts. Even before Korosensei showed up. Thoughts that had convinced him he was deeply irredeemable and dangerous. A person predestined to hurt people. A natural born killer.

With time, and with therapy, and before any of that: Support from Korosensei, he’d realized none of that defined him. And even that his psyche was not warped and cruel in the first place. That it had merely been marred by his upbringing and his anxieties filling his mind with terrifying impulses. He’s learned how to control them and subdue them, realizing he’s just as nonviolent as anyone else, even in spite of the blaring alarm in his head demanding he clap-stun Makoto right this moment for even daring to lay a finger on his husband.

...It’s not scary. It's sad.

“No. I get it, Makoto,” he admits. “But you can’t just act on those thoughts.” It turns out invasivity and impulsivity make for a pretty unpleasant combination, particularly in a twelve-year-old with all the self-discipline of a goddamn freight train.

“...It’s not like I’d act on the big ones,” Makoto says. “It’s not like I aimed for his jugular.” He pauses, seeming to seriously consider that thought. “I totally could have aimed for his jugular.”

Nagisa frowns. “Okay, no. Don’t do that,” he says. “But you can’t act on any dangerously impulsive thoughts, Makoto. You could have really hurt him.” And he had hurt him. His feelings, surely, more than anything. Now that’s one way to get a bruise on your pride.

“I just said I wouldn’t have really hurt him,” Makoto huffs.

“But you could have by accident. What if you’d hit a vein?” Nagisa refutes.

Makoto’s quiet.

Nagisa knows he wasn’t being malicious. That much is clear. He’d had a dumb thought and acted on it because he thought he’d be rewarded or find humor in it. But that hadn’t made hearing
Karma’s scream any less terrifying.

“Sorry,” Makoto finally mumbles.

“It’s okay,” Nagisa replies. “Karma will be fine.” He’s weathered much worse.

“...Alright,” Makoto says, before hesitating. “And you promise you’re not mad at me?”

Nagisa places a reaffirming hand on the table. “I would never.”

“And you don’t think I’m scary? Or bad?”

“No, Makoto.” He’s seen far worse. “I think you just need some help.”

“...Even if I have thoughts like that a lot?”

“Even if you have thoughts like that a lot.” Any other answer would be nothing short of hypocrisy. Looking at Makoto from across the table, he sees someone he knows all too well. “I promise I can help. We’ll work on making sure you’ll never feel like you need to do something like this again.”

“I won’t-” Makoto says firmly.

Which only leaves one more difficult topic to breach.

“Okay. And I hope you won’t mind me having you sit out of assassinations for a bit.”

Makoto jolts. “Hey! No!” He cries. “That’s no fair-! You just said you weren’t mad at me!”

“It won’t be permanent.”

“But you can’t just do that! You should have given me a warning!” Makoto whines. A warning before what!? Makoto went in for the ‘kill’!? Nagisa hadn’t anticipated a thing! “Like a three strikes and you’re out thing!”

Nagisa shakes his head. “No, Makoto.”

He doesn’t particularly like the idea of corporal punishment, all things considered. But this is different. Makoto needs to know he just can’t get away with his actions scot-free. The moment someone takes advantage of others ‘just because they can’ is the moment they lose track of their own strength. If this is truly bloodlust, Nagisa needs time to cull it and offer Makoto support. He can’t risk it. Not with that sort of thing.

“C’mon! Just a second chance! I won’t let you down!”

“Makot-“

“He was so smug! Did you see the way he was looking at us!? He threw a textbook in the trash! He was so mean to Kiyoshi! And he’s dressed up all pretentious! You gotta admit he sort of deserved to be stabbed, don’t you!?”

Before Nagisa can disagree, the door creaks open. Karma peeks his head in. “What’s this about ‘deserving to be stabbed’?”

Makoto lets out an equally embarrassed and indignant yelp.

Karma invites himself into the room. He seems no worse for wear, minus a barely-noticeable hole
bored in his pants. Nagisa doesn’t spot blood. He figures Karma probably cleaned the injury quickly and bandaged it up underneath his clothes.

It’s a relief to see him okay.

Makoto pulls his legs up on his chair, sitting with his arms wrapped around his knees. He doesn’t look Karma’s way.

“You really got me good,” Karma says, strutting up behind him.

Makoto perks up in an instant. “Really?”

“Don’t encourage him!” Nagisa says in disbelief.

“Yeah, really, “Karma says, completely ignoring Nagisa. “I didn’t expect a thing. Who knows what kind of damage you could have wrought?”

“Karma-” Nagisa repeats.

“What?” Karma asks. “You’re his teacher. You should be thrilled I’m giving him encouragement. Isn’t it your job to, like, help him blossom and shit?”

“I am begging you to encourage him on literally anything other than that. I can’t let this happen again.”

“Okay, okay,” Karma relents. “This is where I, the mature and responsible adult here need to stop being the bane of Nagisa’s existence and remind you that stabbing people is bad. Don’t actually do it again.” He leans in and stage whispers. “You still stabbed me real good, though.”

If Karma doesn’t get himself under control in five fucking seconds, Nagisa’s pretty sure he’s gonna end up stabbing Karma.

Makoto giggles. “...So you’re not mad at me, Karma?”

“Nah,” Karma says. “Who knows? Maybe you’ve got a bit of a penchant for this kind of thing. Want me to teach you how to knock someone out in a single hit sometime?” He pauses. “Or how to deliberately not knock someone out so you can extend their suffe-”

“Karma!”

Karma snickers. “I’m fucking with you, I’m fucking with you,” He says. “Don’t do that. Y’know. Unless you really need to. But yeah, we’re cool”

“Even though I called you a smug asshole who deserved to be stabbed?”

“Especially because you called me a smug asshole who deserved to be stabbed.”

Makoto grins wickedly. “I like this guy!”

Nagisa’s suddenly terrified of the combination he’s created. Like Pop Rocks and Diet Coke, something tells him these two are a concoction that will only wreak destruction if they’re in the same room for more than fifteen seconds at a time.

So, y’know, like Karma and every single malicious preteen on the planet.

It’s only after fist-bumping Karma that Makoto leans back in his chair and returns to his dispute.
“See? Karma’s not even mad. So I should be able to assassinate you.”

“No,” Nagisa repeats. This is the part where he should say something about a valuable learning experience, but he knows Makoto would only parrot it back at him with twisted meaning. “It’s to help you learn you can’t do things ‘just because,’ especially when it’s ‘just because’ you have the high ground against someone. You might think it’s stupid, but I bet next time you want to do something impulsive, you’ll think about this.”

Makoto seems to mull that over.

“Plus, it won’t be completely boring. You can keep Fumiko company while you’re sitting out, okay? I bet she’d really appreciate it.”

He hesitates, before nodding. “Okay,” he finally says. “I hadn’t even thought of that-” And Nagisa is sure glad he had thought of it. If he hadn’t, he could have been here arguing with Makoto all day.

“Thank you for working with me,” Nagisa says. “We’ll get things worked out, okay?”

“Okay,” Makoto repeats.

Nagisa smiles, stands, and stretches. “Let’s get back to class, then, okay? No use in wasting any more time.”

Makoto jumps onto his feet. “Will you be coming too, Karma?”

“Nah,” Karma admits, shrugging. “I think I’ve had enough of being maimed for one day.” Makoto shoots him a wounded look, but the moment he sees Karma’s shit-eating grin it fades. “I’ve technically got more work to do. But tell ‘em all about how badly I was mutilated, okay? Tell all the kids I was rushed to the hospital and they don’t know if I’ll make it.”

“I am not doing that,” Nagisa says.

“I am!” Makoto ever-so-helpfully disagrees.

Karma dramatically wipes his forehead, staring up at the ceiling. “It’s already been… Infected, Doctor,” he says in his best fake-nurse voice. “He’ll have to receive a Tetanus shot right this instant.” He pauses. “Wait - Fuck. Do I actually need a Tetanus shot?” he asks, belated bewilderment in his voice.

“I’d go to the doctor just in case,” Nagisa says.

“Great. Look what you made me have to do,” Karma whines at Makoto. “Little demon.”

Makoto’s taking it in stride by now. He’s starting to get the hang of how Karma ticks. He cheekily sticks his tongue out. “Sorry, looks like you’re gonna need to get stabbed again!” he says. “Actually, sorry, too, though. Needles suck.”

“Eh. I think I’ll survive,” Karma says, yawning. “Be seeing you around, kiddo. From one little demon to another, I can’t wait to see what you pull next.” With that, he flashes a lazy peace sign, whirls around, and begins to make his exit.

Not before Nagisa grabs him by the back of his shirt. “Forgetting something?” he asks, a smug intonation in his voice.

“No! No! I don’t mind!” Makoto shouts. “Get sappy in front of me! Get sappy in front of me!” It’s practically a demand.

“Aw hell,” Karma relents, before pulling Nagisa in for a kiss. He wraps his arm comfortably around his back.

...Makoto’s still ‘d’awwing’ when they pull away.

“There you go, loverboy,” Karma says, face still flushed as he turns away. “Seeya at home.” And with that, he’s gone.

Makoto must notice the mushy grin on Nagisa’s face, because he lets out another delighted, “AWWWWWWWW.” It’s almost intimidating, having a child stare at him with all the delighted intensity of a mother who just heard her son got a boyfriend.

He herds Makoto back to the classroom with a smile on his face. As much as Karma can yank on his chain sometimes, they mesh well for a reason. He makes him happy.

And, hey, intentionally or not, Karma had managed to put Nagisa’s internal debate to rest. There’s nothing else to think over. Korosensei wouldn’t have done that.

...Would he?

No. He wouldn’t have done that.

He recalls the equally as dirty and equally as ‘polite’ trick Karma had pulled on Korosensei the first time they’d met.

...Would he?

No. He wouldn’t have done that. Korosensei was a lot of things, but vengeful was none of them.

Makoto proudly brags to his friends about “All the blood” Karma had had “Pouring from him” across the room.

Korosensei as a twelve-year-old boy, however?

...Would he!?

No. He wouldn’t have.

...Would h-

That thought goes on for a while.

They end up arriving home around the same time. It’s not intentional, but it’s a pleasant surprise to meet up with him again. Nagisa fumbles for his keys and unlocks the door.

Needless to say, Karma’s first words when he walks in the house are “I got stabbed today!”

Gakushuu, sitting on the couch, is staring at him like he grew a second head. “You what?” he sputters, slamming his book on the table and rushing to his feet. He freezes halfway to Karma’s side. “Wait. Is this, like, an actual stabbing, or is this a Nagisa saying ‘I got blew up today’
stabbing?” he skeptically asks.

“Actual sta-”

“Bit of both,” Nagisa interjects. “Don’t worry. It’s a… Bit of both.” He breathlessly reassures, elbowing Karma’s arm.

“Okay. Just tell me if he’s actually hurt-”

“He’ll be fine,” Nagisa says. “A kid just poked him with a pencil today.” Certainly underplaying the panic he’d felt when it had gone down, but Karma’s making it sound like his leg has been sawn off.

“Oh, good,” Gakushuu says, promptly sitting his ass back down and picking his book back up. “I can go back to not giving a shit.”

Karma pouts and rushes over to his side. “Awww, c’mon! Don’t you want to see?” he asks, placing his foot on the couch.

“Not particularly.”

Karma pulls up his pant leg anyway. He’s bandaged the entire injury up excessively. Something tells Nagisa he just wants something to tell stories about it. It’s not exactly like he can get in actual fights anymore.

Gakushuu doesn’t give it a second glance. Or a first glance, for that matter.

“I isn’t this the part where you’re supposed to kiss it better!?” Karma indignantly asks.

Gakushuu doesn’t dignify him with a response.

That’s where Karma, like any responsible adult, slumps onto the couch, practically crushing Gakushuu in the process.

“Nagisssssaaaa,” he whines. “Gakushuu doesn’t love meeeeeeeeee.”

“That’s not true!” Gakushuu hisses, desperately attempting to push Karma off of him.

“But isn’t it?” Karma melodramatically asks. He doesn’t budge an inch. “Gakushuu hates me.”

“Yes! Right now I do!” It’s considerably hard to ‘manhandle’ Karma away from him, considering he has a solid five inches on Gakushuu.

“I’m in a loveless marriage…” Karma continues to wistfully monologue.

“My ass!” Gakushuu refutes.

“Then say it!”

Gakushuu continues to elbow and kick at Karma, resembling a particularly rabid cat more than a billionaire CEO. “Karma!”

“Say it!” Karma eggs.

Gakushuu writhes and squirms.
“Okay! I love you! I love you! I love you! I love you! I love you!” he shrieks. “Will you can it?!”

That’s when Gakushuu manages to successfully knock Karma off of him, namely because falls off the couch and sends them both tumbling to the floor.

They lie dazed on the ground for a moment, before Karma pushes himself to his knees. He sorely rubs his elbow. He and Gakushuu stare at each other, silent.

“Well, that hurt!” he finally says.

“You think you’re hurt? I think I threw out my back,” Gakushuu mutters, sitting up.

Karma grins.

“...Want me to kiss it better?”

Gakushuu finally loses it. A smile peeks through his cold-faced facade. He “snerks,” before bursting out into full-on laughter. “Absolutely not!” he says, hauling himself back up onto the couch.

And despite his complaints, that spark of amusement in his eyes never fades, even as he regains his composure. When Karma takes a seat next to him, he doesn’t even boot him from the couch. Whether out of their deep love or simple appreciation that Karma’s using the couch as intended instead of as a way to smother him is left unclear.


Nagisa, however, has no time for their delightful antics.

There’s more important things on his mind.

No sooner than he starts to leave the room does Karma speak up. “You really gonna pass up an opportunity to spoon?” he asks.

Nagisa shrugs. “I’m not feeling too well,” he admits. It’s not entirely untrue. “I’ll be back later, you needy asshole,” he jokes, giving Karma a smug smile before making his retreat.

Kayano’s not home. She still must be at a shoot. He can’t help but curse at that. This is a topic he’d actually really like to touch on with her right now.

He enters their room and flops down on the bed. For a moment he considers scavenging the closet for Karma’s self-help book, but quickly decides against it. For one, that seems like a blatant invasion of his privacy. For two, Karma’s self-help book is equally as thick as his own. It could take months to truly dissect. And for three, if Korosensei truly had any remaining grudge against Karma, he doubts he’ll find it voiced in that book. That book is more likely filled with advice such as “Karma, don’t do that,” and “Karma, stop.”

He hears something thump onto the ground downstairs and rolls his eyes.

“Karma, stop.” Indeed.

He knows more than anything he should just call a family meeting and breach the topic to all of them. But he can just imagine the condescending look on Karma’s face. “Karma, don’t do that.” he notes, rolling over.

He’d meant what he’d said to Kayano. He can’t risk getting their hopes up. But, well, shit - He’d
already gone and gotten her hopes up, hadn’t he? Is he being unfair? If so, to who?

He must admit, despite any skepticism, it’s a nice thought. One that crosses his mind each time he sees Makoto dart across the classroom, or laugh at his own shitty joke. Maybe it’s what he deserves. And maybe this time, they can finally get it right.

He’s the teacher here. He has the power to help him before anything goes wrong. What went down today proves that much. He has the power to help all of these kids before anything goes wrong. And, hell, Korosensei or not, changing someone’s life is a pretty nice thought.

Something tells him Makoto won’t be hurting anyone again anytime soon. And that’s an even nicer thought.

...He doesn’t even realize he’s dozed off until he feels someone gently shaking his shoulder.

Dazed and drooling, Nagisa disorientedly rubs at his eyes. “Wh-?”

“Dinner’s ready,” Gakushuu says.

Nagisa groggily blinks. “O… Oh,” he says, sitting up. He quickly realizes he doesn’t even know how long he’s been asleep. “...What time is it?” he asks.

“Half past Seven,” Gakushuu curtly replies. “You really meant it when you said you were feeling unwell, huh?”

“...Yeah,” Nagisa admits. “I had a long day at school.” And a lot on his mind.

“I can imagine,” Gakushuu says. “What even happened with the menace?”

It takes Nagisa a moment to process who he’s talking about. “I told you: A kid prodded him.” He pauses. “Where is the menace, anyways?”


Nagisa hesitates. “Is Kayano home yet?”

“Not yet.”

Nagisa sighs. It seems even a nap hasn’t gotten his mind off things. He doesn’t motion to stand.

Gakushuu turns. “I’ll meet you in the kit-”

“Wait. Can we…” Nagisa pauses. “Can we talk, actually?”

Gakushuu stops midstep and looks over his shoulder. He gives Nagisa a perturbed look. “Your dinner’s going to get cold.”

“I know,” Nagisa admits. “But… But something’s been bothering me.” He bites his lip. “Please?”

...He can tell Gakushuu, he tells himself. Gakushuu was never close to his late teacher. He’d never even met the man. There’s nothing to lose.

Gakushuu sighs and returns to the bed, plopping down next to Nagisa. “What is it?” He asks, frowning deeply.
“It’s about Karma getting stabbed,” Nagisa admits, sitting up. “...Some stuff’s been on my mind. I’ve already talked to Kayano about it, but…” He drifts off. “I dunno. I don’t feel right hiding anything from you. And I feel like you can point me in the right direction. I mean, you’re smart, right?”

Gakushuu cocks an eyebrow. “I’d hope so? In fact, I’m deeply insulted by my husband insinuating he has any doubts as to the validity of that statement.” He cracks a smug (And equally as exhausted) smile. “Sure. Let’s talk about Karma getting stabbed. It’s my favorite topic, I’ll have you know.”

His reaction upon first hearing of Karma’s injury earlier would suggest otherwise, but considering how graciously he’s willing to hear out Nagisa’s crackpot conspiracy theory, Nagisa will let that one slide.

He takes a deep breath. In... And out. How can he best possibly explain what’s going through his mind? The rationale behind his last hope? How can he put into words the minuscule breadcrumbs that seem to suggest something so cosmically earth-shattering as Korosensei's return to the supergenius that is Gakushuu Asano?

“I think it was revenge.”

Okay. So that wasn’t any of the intelligent banter he was aiming for.

Gakushuu just about chokes. “E-Excuse me!? What the hell did Karma do to piss off a twelve-year old that badly?” He pauses, letting that sentence sink in. “Other than everything, I mean.”

“Oh. No, no, no. Not like that-” Nagisa quickly corrects. “It’s not as crazy as it sounds--” he protests. But his shoulders quickly sink. “...It’s... Crazier, actually,” he solemnly admits. “Some really strange stuff has been happening in my classroom, Gakushuu. Super strange. And... This is just the latest incident. I swear something is going on. But it’s going to sound weird. So please just hear me out. Please don’t think I’m crazy.”

Gakushuu firmly places a hand on Nagisa’s shoulder. “…I would never think you’re craz-”

“Korosensei’s back.”

The atmosphere in the room shifts near instantly.

“E-Excuse me?”

“I know it sounds nuts-”

“It sounds a little more than nuts-”

“You just said you wouldn’t call me crazy!”

“And I thought you were gonna, like, talk about Karma cyberbullying a middle schooler! Not that!”

“Just listen to me-” Nagisa says. “…Please.”

Gakushuu’s quiet. The desperation in Nagisa’s voice is loud and clear. “…I’m listening.”

Gakushuu’s gaze is piercing. Nagisa feels a little sick. “…I don’t think he, like, faked his death, of course-” Nagisa quickly clarifies. “He would never.” He’d loved them far, far too much to have put
them through something like that. “...I think he’s been reincarnated. Which I know sounds ridiculous--”

“Just a tad. Since when were you a born-again Buddhist?”

“I’m not. But unless this kid is a mind reader, I don’t know what other explanation there could possibly be!” He clasps his gently shaking hands together. “The boy in my class, the one who stabbed Karma: He knows things he has no way of finding out. The way he went after Karma was exactly like what Karma pulled on Korosensei when he first met him. He turned in an essay with an inside joke that never left the E-Class. How he bombed me, even! Terasaka goaded me into doing exactly that back when I first met Korosensei-!”

“This is Makoto you’re talking about?” Gakushuu’s heard his fair share about the elusive boy.

“...Yeah. It’s Makoto,” Nagisa admits. “But it’s not even just events. It’s everything about the way he carries himself. I hear his laugh and I think I’m losing my mind-”

Gakushuu opens his mouth to respond to that, but nothing comes out. He sighs. “...You can chalk all of that up to coincidence, Nagisa.”


“You told Ritsu?”

“...Yes,” Nagisa says. “And now I’m telling you-”

“And you’re saying you’ve brought this up to Kayano?”

“Yes-”

Does she believe you?”

Nagisa’s silent.

“...I see,” Gakushuu comments.

“Okay! Maybe not yet! But it’s complicated!” Nagisa refutes. “She said she’d support me-”

“She’s probably worried sick about you!” Gakushuu snaps. “You don’t have any proof of this, Nagisa-”

“No shit! What do you want me to do? Write up a report? I’m no scientist!”

“Then call Okuda! Takebayashi!” Gakushuu dramatically throws his hands in the air. “I have Koyama’s number right here!” He’s already reaching for his phone. “You want me t-”

Nagisa lowers his hand. “No. I don’t think this is the sort of thing that can be proven by science, anyways-”

“Then why did you just sa-”

“I just want some kind of reason!”

“And you don’t have any! Why are you even telling me this? Simply because you want me to validate your opinion? I can’t do that without any solid facts-”
Nagisa groans in frustration, falling back on the bed and covering his face with his pillow.

“You need to understand the weight those kinds of claims carry, Nagisa. If what you’re saying were true, it would change the foundation of our world. Think of its implications religiously! Ethically! Scientifically! Morally! You’re expecting me to go out on a limb here and listen to you make broad claims about the nature of the very universe.”

...Nagisa doesn’t have a response to that.

“Why are you even telling me this? Have you told Karm-”

“Because I thought you’d trust me!” Nagisa abruptly shouts. “I’m so sorry I wanted to try putting a little faith in my husband! I’m so sorry I opened up to y-”

Gakushuu flinches back.

“...Are you crying?”

...Nagisa reaches up to rub at his eye. He… Is, isn’t he?

He and Gakushuu exchange a silent look

“I’m sorry,” Gakushuu finally admits. “I didn’t realize it had escalated that far.” Nagisa notices his hand shake ever so subtly as he speaks.

“I’m sorry too. I shouldn’t have shouted,” Nagisa admits.

Admittedly, neither of them take well to arguments. It’s just not the way they were raised. Nagisa collapses into himself, and Gakushuu ends up desperate to ‘win.’ It makes for a poor combination.

“...It’s fine,” Gakushuu says.

But they’re working on it. At the very least, they know when to drop things.

“I know I’m getting worked up-” Nagisa sits up and scoots closer “But… Things have been crazy, lately,” he admits. “...I didn’t really expect you to believe me. If anything, I was hoping you could knock some sense into me. But that was…” he pauses. “That was really harsh.”

“...I know,” Gakushuu replies. “But you have to admit that was a lot to dump on me out of the blue.”

“...I know,” Nagisa says in turn.

“I’m sorry if it feels like I was just shooting you down. I’m just worried about you.”

“I’m worried too-! I’m really, really scared,” Nagisa quickly realizes his voice is raising again. “...That’s why I wanted validation,” he says, quieter. “You don’t have to agree with me. But a hug would at least be nice.”

Gakushuu wraps his arms around Nagisa. “Now that you could have just asked for.”

Nagisa leans into his embrace.

“...Can we try that again?” he asks. “No arguing, this time.”

“Well I’m not just going to tell you what you want to hear, Nagisa-” Gakushuu refutes.
“I know. But just let me make my case. Let me finish.”

“...Was I speaking over you again?” Certainly. The man has a nasty habit of it.

Nagisa quietly nods.

“Okay. This time I’ll just let you talk. And this time you don’t call yourself ‘crazy’ or ‘dumb.’ You make your case and you stand by it. You don’t need to degrade yourself to get your point across.”

And he doesn’t have a competition to win. They’re on the same team.

He runs his hand through Nagisa’s hair.

...Yeah. They’re working on it.

“It’s everything about the way he carries himself. It goes beyond the coincidences themselves,” Nagisa admits. “It’s who he is. It’s not just that he stabbed Karma. It’s that he looked at me with eyes that said ‘Look what I just did!’ It’s not just that he turned in that essay. It’s that immediately afterwards he told me he wanted to learn more about Korosensei. It’s the way he devours sweets, and how he covers his face and shrieks when he’s embarrassed. Have you ever just met someone and felt like you were looking at an old friend?”

Gakushuu contemplates that question, but has no answer. He nods for Nagisa to continue.

“I might not have proof. At least not what you would call proof. But I recorded Korosensei’s behavior for a year. His weaknesses. His quirks. What made him tick. I observed it all. And I know what I’m seeing. I’m seeing a boy who’s privy to events he has no way of knowing about. And… I’m seeing a boy who reminds me of someone I loved. A boy who laughs the same way and smiles the same way and even shrieks the same way. I don’t know what else I’m supposed to think.”

Gakushuu’s quiet. He uses his free hand to rub his chin.

“...I suppose you knew the man better than I did,” he finally admits. He’d never gotten the chance to meet Korosensei, himself. By the time he’d learned of the man giving the E-Class a much-needed push (Much to his chagrin, at the time), Korosensei had already been quarantined. Sometimes it still seems like he feels he missed out on something.

Nagisa quietly nods. He looks Gakushuu straight in the eye.

Gakushuu sighs. “This is… Really important to you, isn’t it?”

Nagisa nods again. “I mean, how could it not be…?” He asks. “I don’t think I’ll ever forget that year. So seeing anything like it… I…” He drifts off. “I have to admit the thought makes me feel a bit better. Maybe… Maybe I can finally make things right.”

Gakushuu slowly pulls away. “Very well, then. I’ll let you believe whatever you want.”

Nagisa feels a huge weight lift from his shoulders. He breathes a sigh of relief.

“I won’t believe you blindly, much less enable you. But… I will stand by you. I’ll even assist you in recording actual proof of your hypothesis. Real proof. Truly inexplicable situations like the essay you mentioned. Not that the twelve-year-old boy likes candy or has a laugh that gives you the heebie-jeebies.”

“It doesn’t give me the heebie-jeebies-” Nagisa interjects.
“Or has a laugh that reminds you of a dead man. Better?” Gakushuu doesn’t bother to pause. “I’ll be there for you. However, the moment this negatively affects your mental health or you breathe a word of this to the kid, I step in.” And with the grave tone in his voice, Nagisa knows he means it.

“...Okay,” Nagisa replies. “Sounds good.”

He’s already made careful consideration in regards to not telling Makoto. And as for his rapidly deteriorating mental health, that’s sort of always standing on shaky legs, but he appreciates Gakushuu’s concern.

They're silent.

“And so you’re not telling Karma?” Gakushuu finally asks.

“...No,” Nagisa admits. He averts his gaze.

“Good call,” Gakushuu bluntly replies.

Now if that isn’t the exact opposite of Kayano’s reaction. He can’t help but feel a tad offended for Karma’s sake.

“...Gakushuu,” He says, knowing full well he’s a goddamn hypocrite. The sharpness in Gakushuu’s voice just rubs him the wrong way.

“Listen. I love Karma more than life itself. But Karma is also an asshole who just spent all afternoon pushing me off the couch. He’s not really the sort of person to talk to about this sort of thing.” He pauses and taps his temple. “At least not until you can definitively prove your thesis.”

Nagisa supposes he doesn’t have the energy to debate that one.

“Okay. C’mon.” Gakushuu stands. “Nice talk, but I bet now our dinner is really cold.”

Nagisa chuckles. “Oh gosh. I bet it is.” He stretches as he stands and awkwardly scratches his back. “Look at what we did.”

“What you did,” Gakushuu quips.

“...Thanks for talking to me, Gakushuu.”

“No worries,” Gakushuu replies. “I’d argue it’s just part of the job description, being your husband and all.” He pauses. “Plus, you’ve always done the same for me.”

“And- Uh - I’m sorry again about shouting earlier.”

“Don’t overthink it. Me too. Now get in the kitchen before I have something to really be upset over.”

Gakushuu makes his exit, and Nagisa follows in suit.

Karma’s clearly been waiting. He has his feet kicked up on the table.

“You realize we’re eating on that, right?” Gakushuu gripes, pushing his legs off of the table.

“Well greetings and good evening to you too, my loving husband,” he snarks in response. That said, he does keep his appendages to himself. “Your dinner’s cold, by the way,” he says. “What were you doing in there? Did you join Nagisa in his catnap, or were you sneaking in a little quickie
without me?”

Gakushuu sputters. “Absolutely not!”

“Awwww. What? Can’t have a good time without me?”

Nagisa quickly pulls in his seat. “Nah. We were just having a talk about some stuff. You don’t have to make everything weird.”

“Not with that attitude.”

Gakushuu groans and pulls in his own seat.

Karma’s right. Their food is cold. But Nagisa figures he’ll survive. It’s a few minutes into his meal when he hears the door unlock.

“I’m home!”

Kayano. Oh… That’s convenient. Something tells him he should have just waited to talk to her about this, but another part of him is glad he told Gakushuu. They’re all working on this together after all, aren’t they?

Which only leaves one more difficult conversation to be had.

Karma excitedly waves her over. And as Kayano makes her way in from the living room, he enthusiastically leans over on the table and boastfully shouts.

“Guess who got stabbed today!?”

Oh for fuck’s sake!

Chapter End Notes

Chapter six! Chapter six!

Karma time, babey! And not just because of his prelevance in the chapter. But ALSO because he got what was coming to him. Love me those double meanings, haha.

This chapter was suppeeerr fun to write. I love Karma's banter. He's hands down easily one of the most fun characters to write, and I'm glad I got to showcase him and Gakushuu a bit more in this chapter, alongside Makoto, even if characters like Kiyoshi, Kayano and Fumiko ended up taking the back seat for a bit. (Haha I'm just now realizing this is the first chapter in a while entirely from Nagisa's perspective. Don't worry, in the next chapter we'll be getting some other POVs ;) )

But it seems Makoto is more troubled than either he or Nagisa initially let on, huh? It's okay. Nagisa will try his best to be there for him, even if his batshit crazy actions are only making Nagisa's life ten times harder considering they're only spurring on his crazy conspiracy theories.

I'm glad to write Nagisa finally opening up to Gakushuu. And that they found some sort of resolution. If you can't tell by now, I'm definitely not trying to milk big
arguments for drama. Even if Nagisa and his spouses disagree on things, they're ultimately there for each other, and as grownass adults know when to drop things. They're decently emotionally responsible, and I'm proud of them for that. But if confronting Kayano went decently... And confronting Gakushuu went decently... Hoo boy... What's gonna happen when he confronts the elusive KARMA? If he's even brave enough to at all.

Special thanks to the 3-E Headcanons Discord group for helping me figure out how to have Karma describe what being a bureaucrat is and coming up w that clever joke. Because LORD knows I don't know what a bureaucrat does. I was THIS close to heading over to /r/explainlikeimfive and ask there, haha.

Some songs that helped me write this chapter were First Date's In Love With You, Imagine Dragon's Polaroid, Noah and The Whale's Five Years Time, Barenaked Ladies' One Week (Karashuu at its finest ahaha), Next To Normal's He's Not Here, and Lenka's Don't Let Me Fall. Give em a listen!

I hope you enjoyed the chapter, and make sure to let me know what you thought! W summer coming up I'm going to have more and more time for writing soon, so prepare for even more updates! And buckle in. Because things are only going to get more in depth as the chapters continue.
...Makoto Himura is an enigma.

Like, the more Fumiko sees him, the less she understands him.

He’s brash, but he’s considerate. He’s dauntless, but easily embarrassed. He makes her laugh, and he makes her want to sock him in the face. He’s surprisingly clever, and he’s climbing the school building.

He’s attempting to scamper up the side of the worn-down schoolhouse, one foot planted firmly on the windowsill and an outstretched hand reaching for the roof of the doorway.

“You’re going to break your neck,” Fumiko comments.

“Sounds fun!”

She rolls her eyes and turns her head, but never quite averts her gaze.

...How could she? This is far too weird.

Makoto’s been stuck with her during PE for a three unceremonious days now after his little stunt in English. The first day he’d bombarded her nonstop with conversation. The second day he’d snuck in a fistful of Pokemon cards and bombarded her with nonstop conversation. And the third day he’s decided to try impromptu parkour, nonstop conversation ever-so-graciously included in some sort of surrealist package deal.

“This is a lot harder than it looks!” he comments, scraping a foot against the window.

She figures it’s just about as difficult as it looks (Very, for the record,) but knows by now it’s not worth it to debate with him.

“I’m not sure what you expected,” she says, instead. “Why are you doing this again?”

He shrugs. “Bored,” he simply comments, feeling no need for further clarification.

...That’s about what she expected.

She has to admit, at first she was slightly intimidated to be benched alongside him after what he did to Nagisa’s husband. But she quickly realized that had to have been a fluke. Because he’s as harmless as ever. The same dumb jokes and senseless banter. Watching him flounder in a desperate attempt to make it onto the roof only seals her doubt. He’s more likely to suddenly transform into a straight-laced and serious straight-A student than he is to stab her.

She knows her parents would have an aneurysm if they found out she was hanging with such a lowlife. If they hear a word of this, she’s in for a massive punishment. On one hand, she understands their perspective. He’s an impulsive and grimy stubborn delinquent with a history of violence. He’s not exactly prime friend material.

But there’s one thing she’s discovered about Makoto Himura that they would never notice.
He heaves himself up onto the roof of the doorway.

He can accomplish most anything he sets his mind out to do.

She scoots away from the stairway and out from under the cover of the doorway. Partially to get a better look at Makoto’s latest stunt, mostly to avoid being crushed when he inevitably caves the overhang in.

He stands tall, cupping his hand above his eye and dramatically looking back and forth.

“I can see everything up here!” he declares proudly.

“I highly doubt that,” she replies.

“I can too!” he huffs. “I can give a full report…” He leans forward, dangerously close to slipping and cracking his goddamn head open. “Yes, yes…” he comments with a wide smile, putting on his best sports announcer voice. “There I can see Hachirou making a strike at Nagisa with his patented Hachirou Spin technique.”

“He doesn’t have that.”

“He does now!”

Hachirou is the most boring person she knows. (With Kiyoshi as a persistent runner-up.) When he manages to patent a spin kick she’ll eat her own shoe.

“Nagisa makes a swift block with his right elbow! And swerves out of the way! But what’s this!? Chiharu’s behind him! How will he ever evade this brilliant plan!? He ducks and he rolls!” He’s shouting at this point. Fumiko wants to find it dumb, but she’s already stifling snickers.

“He’s back on his feet! And he’s triumphant! Rosey rushes in, and with a well ti- SHE BIT HIM!?” He drops the act in a millisecond. “Hey! No fair! I want to bite him! Why didn’t I think of that first!?”

Ew. Ew. Ew. Fumiko hates other middle schoolers sometimes.

She can see Nagisa down the field reprimanding Rosey with a composure she can’t possibly imagine keeping if someone bit her.

“...Okay. That’s interesting and all, but I could actually see all of that from down here.” As much as she wishes she didn’t. “Got any sights I can’t see up there, or did you do all that for nothing?”

Makoto huffs and cranes his head. “I have such a good view of the mountainside! I can see the trees and the forest and the-”

“Can see all of that, too,” she interrupts.

“Oh yeah!? Well, I bet your view isn’t as good as mine!” He cheekily sticks his tongue out. And he even quiets down as he looks out over the horizon. “...You can see the whole world from up here.”

“The whole world?” she skeptically asks.

He’s uncharacteristically silent. There’s this weird look in his eyes. She nearly asks him if he’s alright, but he returns to his usual chipper self before she gets the chance.

“Eh! The whole school. Close enough,” he cheerfully pipes up. “Everyone looks like little ants
from up here. Even Nagisa! It’s cool. I feel like a king up here.” He glances to his side. And his
eyes seem to lock onto something. His smile quickly shifts into a wicked grin. “Plus, can you do
THIS down there?”

In an instant he’s up on the actual roof, darting alongside its steep slope. Fumiko jolts and
scrambles to her feet.

“What are you doing?!”

“Gonna jump on the shed!” he admits, never once slowing down.

She finds herself chasing after him. The worn-down wood of the roof creaks under his shoes.

“Oh my God! You’re really going to break your neck now!” she shouts in disbelief.

“Nah!”

“You’re gonna put a hole in the ceiling!”

“Am not!”

She quickly glances between him and the rest of the class. “I’m telling Shiota-sensei!”

“Don’t you dare!”

Before she can protest one second more he makes the leap. Her heart stops in her chest as he flies
through the air. And he comes tumbling onto the shed with a loud ‘thump.’

He lays still.

She stares, breaths ragged and panicked.

He bolts to his feet with a triumphant cheer. “That was awesome!” he proclaims, pumping his fists
in the air.

She breathlessly sputters for breath. “What is wrong with you!?”

He must spot the abject horror on her face. He bursts out into giggles. “You were actually worried,
weren’t you!? You really do care!”

Her worry is quickly replaced with indignation. “I didn’t want to be the one to tell Shiota-sensei
that the imbecile went and maimed himself!”

Makoto seems unbothered by her sharp words. He quickly hops off the side of the shed.

“Are you finally done acting like a maniac?”

“Nope! Just can’t get back up on the school from there. Even I know that’s too high of a jump.”

Fumiko stares in disbelief. “You’re getting back up on the school!? Why!?”

“I told you: Bored!”

This time he scales it with no trouble. He’s seemed to have learned from his last climbing
misadventure.

He plops down, legs dangling from the roof of the doorway. Then he scoots over and makes a
beckoning motion. “You should join me up here!”

She does a double take “Absolutely not!”

“Awwww! C’mon! Why not!?” he asks, shoulders slumped.

“Because it’s idiotic! It’s dangerous! It’s pointless!”

Makoto cocks an eyebrow. “I see. I see,” he says, nodding sagely. There’s a smug intonation to his voice. “I get it.”

“You see?” she asks, annoyed.

“I see it clear as day! You’re just too scared!”

Fumiko feels irritation rise in her gut. “I am not!” She refutes.

“Are too!” He says, looking down on her with a shit-eating grin. “Whatever! Whatever! More room for me!”

He stretches and leans back against the building, making himself comfortable. That wide smile of his never once falters. And she must admit, that’s what makes her snap.

She grabs at the windowsill.

He’s right. He looks like a king up there, content and triumphant. He seems so happy. So free, so unchained; Held down by nothing. It’s no different from how he always carries himself, but she sees it more than ever with the sunlight beaming down on his face.

Oh, how she wishes she could feel like that.

She pulls herself upward and outstretches her hand towards the roof. Arms sore and breath short, she leans as far as she can. She can feel the triumph rising in her chest. Just a little further - It’s almost within her reach: A world where she doesn’t have to let herself care what others think.

What others think-

She freezes up at the thought. Glances back over her shoulder, and stares at her classmates across the field. That’s all it takes. She loses her footing and comes crashing to the ground.

Now that catches Nagisa’s attention in an instant. He and the rest of the class are rushing over to her and Makoto, who leaps down from his golden throne.

“You okay!?” he asks.

She blinks, before pushing herself to her knees. “Yeah. I’m fine,” she says. She’s had the breath knocked out of her, but nothing more. “It wasn’t a bad fall.”

He offers a hand to help her to her feet. She doesn’t take it.

“I said I’m fine,” she repeats, irritation prickling in her voice. She hurries to her feet.

Nagisa and the others have caught up with them by now. “Are you alri-”

“Oh my God! You totally ate shit!” Matsuya shouts over him.
“Did you break anything!?” Minki demands, reaching out for an arm. (And terrifyingly enthusiastic about that concept.)

“I don’t see any blood,” Kazuzki complains.

“What is WRONG with you people!?” Kiyoshi sputters.

“Did it hurt!?”

“Are you gonna die!?”

“Please don’t die!”

“Guys, guys-- Not now-” Nagisa interrupts, trying his best to hush them all. “Are you alright, Fumiko?”

She feels her lip quiver. Each and every eye is on her. She hates the feeling. “I’m fine.”

“What happened?” he worriedly asks.

...She can’t find words.

It’s okay. Makoto finds them for her. “It was my idea. I was bored, so I thought it would be fun to climb on the roof!” he says as if it’s the most obvious things on the planet. “Fumiko didn’t want to, but I pressured her. I’m sorry.”

Nagisa blinks. He seems at a loss for words “You shouldn’t be climbing on the roof, either, Makoto.” He pauses and furrows his brow. “...At least not alone. If you’d like we can all climb on the roof together sometime.”

Is he fucking nuts!?

“AFTER I MAKE SURE IT’S SAFE-” he’s quick to comment. “UNTIL THEN, NO FURTHER CLIMBING ON THE ROOF--” he clarifies. “There are learning experiences to be found in doing stupid, dangerous things, but I’m afraid it’s my job to supervise you and make sure those stupid, dangerous things aren’t deadly.”

Makoto pouts. “O-kay.”

...And Fumiko finally realizes now every eye is on him.

She lets out a sigh of relief.

Nagisa checks them over one more time just for good measure, but quickly learns what they already know: They’re just fine.

The other kids are beginning to grow antsy. And Makoto must see it clear as day because he pipes up with an “Okay. You guys can get back to your murder now. We’re A-OK.”

“You sure?” Nagisa asks.

“Of course. Does this look like an injured guy to you?” He begins to dart in circles, although whether or not he’s trying to show off his relative uninjury or just exert some of that boundless energy is unclear.

“And you, Fumiko?” Nagisa asks.
“Mmm.” She reassures. “I’m alright. I’m sorry for causing a scene, Shiota-sensei.”

“Hey. It’s okay,” he reassures. “Just don’t do it again. You just about gave me a heart attack.” He pauses. “And that goes for you too, Makoto,” he says, interrupting Makoto, who’s already halfway up the building again.

He slides down with a groan. “Oooookaayyyy.”

At this rate, Nagisa’s going to need a child leash for this kid!

Nagisa gathers the other students up and begins to make his way back across the field. But she reaches a hand out.

“Wait- Shiota-sensei-” She speaks up.

He stops. “Huh?”

She opens her mouth to ask him if he’s not mad at her. But quickly thinks better of it. With the silent way he carries himself, his disappointment rings loud and clear. No clarification is needed.

“Nevermind,” she says. “Forget it.”

“You sure?” he asks, cocking an eyebrow.

“Certain,” she replies.

He must know better than to bother her any further, because he gives her a nod and continues on his merry way.

She sits down and sighs. She hates the way her classmates glance back over their shoulders at the two of them. Kiku whispers something to Terumi, and Nagisa has to usher a worried Kiyoshi along.

The last thing she needs is their pity, much less their scorn. She’s not some topic of discussion for those lowlifes!

She feels a tad bad the moment she thinks it, but not particularly excruciatingly. It’s true, after all, isn’t it? She’s above them. What did she do to deserve to be in a class full of degenerates and dimwits?

Makoto plops down next to her, finally tuckered out from his little impromptu marathon.

...A class where boys like him can get away with stabbing world-famous politicians.

And still, she can’t hate him. She wishes she was him!

“You didn’t need to take the blame for me back there,” she finally says.

“Oh?”

“In front of Shiota-sensei. You didn’t need to say you pressured me into it.”

“I sort of did,” he says with a shrug.

“Still. You’re sort of in hot water with him as is.”
“Exactly. Not like I can get in any more trouble with Nagisa than I already am.”

How can he be so nonchalant about that!? His future could be on the line!

“You really don’t care about anything, do you?” she asks.

“I try not to sweat it too much,” he admits.

*He doesn’t even care that she… She-

“I’m sorry I ruined your game.”

He blinks. “Hey! You didn’t ruin it! You just wanted to join in!”

“And I got scared-”

She’s just… Not that sort of person. She should have known better than to try that. Does he know how *humiliating* it is for someone like her to be caught participating in nonsense like that? To have her classmates look down on her!?

“Hey. There’s nothing wrong with being afraid. There’s always a next time.”

There shouldn’t be a next time! She’s better than that! This isn’t how her parents raised her!

...*Oh God. Her parents. Once they get wind of this-*

Her chest tightens.

It must show on her face, because Makoto notices in an instant.

“What’s wrong?”

She reels back and regains her composure. “Nothing’s wrong,” she quickly reassures.

“I dunno. You look pretty upset.” Makoto pauses. “Hey. It’s *okay* that you’re still scared that you’ll fall again! I fall from high places ALL the time. You get used to it.”

What is *wrong* with this kid?

“No. That’s not it,” she says. “It’s not something you’d really get.” Now that came out more bitter than intended. “It’s not something anyone in this class would get,” she tacks on.

“Hey! You don’t know that!” Makoto refutes with a huff. “Maybe I won’t know what it means or how to help. But I can listen!” He leans forward, placing his palms on the ground with determined vigor. He’s looking at her with wide eyes.

Something tells her he’s not going to take no for an answer.

“I just realized Shiota-sensei is probably going to tell my parents about what happened…” she admits.

“And they won’t think it’s cool as hell?”

“No! They won’t think it’s ‘cool as hell!’ They’re going to be so disappointed in me-”

“...But you tried something you’ve never tried before!” he argues.
“Exactly! I’m not supposed to do that, Makoto. We can’t all lead some perfect worry-free life like you,” she snaps.

Makoto’s eyes widen. His mouth hangs open, speechless, in the tiniest frown. “I…” he searches for words. “…I guess you’re right.” He says with a sad smile. But like a switch flicking on, he’s back to his usual demeanor in no-time. “Then you should try talking to Nagisa. Tell him how you feel.” That determined spark in his eyes returns.

“It’s not my place to tell a person of authority what to do,” she refutes.

He blinks. “That’s dumb.” He’s on his feet in an instant. “I’ll talk to Nagisa, then.”

She grabs his wrist in an instant. “Don’t-” she says, anger quivering in her voice.

“Why not?” he asks, tugging at his arm.

“I- He’d- It’s-” she sputters. Why doesn’t he seem to get that he’d only be digging her into a deeper hole!? Life isn’t some magical fairytale where everything can be resolved with a heart to heart talk! “Just don’t. Please.”

He must hear the desperation in her voice, because he stops struggling. “Okay,” he says, sitting down. “But… I’d try not to worry too much, anyways. Nagisa’s not a snitch. Why would he tattle on you to your parents about something he’s planning to encourage you to do later? That doesn’t make any sense.”

Admittedly, he has a point. She lets go of his wrist.

“He’s a good guy. If you can trust anyone, I think it’d be Nagisa,” he says.

...That’s easier said than done when you live in a world like hers.

He reaches into his pocket. “Hey. No use in dwelling on any of that, right?” He says. “Wanna play more Pokemon?”

It’s not exactly proactive in regards to literally any of her issues, but who is she to say no? They’ve still got a good half-hour left in PE. It’s better than sitting around feeling sorry for herself.

“Sure.”

He slaps the cards down on the ground. “Heck yeah! Dibs on having the Zangoose this time!”

“Whatever you say, Makoto.”

His bright smile returns as he dishes out her set of cards. And as they play the game no doubt arbitrarily as to how the rules intended, she can’t help but feel a little sad.

If only she could be the sort of kid who climbed on rooftops, too.

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Two days later, the tables turn.

It’s about 10:30 at night, and Fumiko’s half asleep when she hears a faint shouting outside her window. She groans and turns over, pulling her pillow up over her ears. Midterms start tomorrow. She doesn’t need her sleep disrupted by some stray animal or what-have-you. Her grades are miserable enough as is.
But the shouting doesn’t let up. And her tune quickly shifts when she processes it as belonging to a person.

She hurries out of bed and creeps over to the window, shoulders tense. She draws back the curtain, thrusts open the window and demands:

“Who is it!?”

It’s redundant the moment the words leave her mouth. Because she recognizes the intruder’s face the moment she sees it.

“Makoto!?”

He’s standing maybe fifteen feet from her house, craning his neck up to look in the window. Still in his school uniform, he’s as disheveled as ever. A baffling sight to see.

He gives a tiny nod.

She’s having trouble breathing. He can’t be here!

“What are you doing here!?”

He shuffles awkwardly. “I…” He mumbles “Can you please let me in?”

Her jaw drops. Let him in!? Let him in!? If he’s even seen here, her life is over! What is he thinking!?

Her silence must speak volumes, because in an instant he’s rambling. “I- I’m sorry. I couldn’t find Kiyoshi’s house and yours is really big and I saw it and… And…-” he drifts off, at a complete loss for words.

...It’s a far cry from his usual demeanor. He anxiously knits at his hands.

Fumiko can’t help but stare. “Makoto, I can’t-”

That’s when she notices tears dripping down his cheeks.

“Makoto?”

He blinks up at her, sputtering for breath.

“What happened?” she asks.

“My dad… He… I… He-- He’s mad, and I--” he whimpers. “I just can’t be home right now. I can’t,” he firmly states. He’s quivering. And he looks so, so alone.

...

“…Come in.”

The words are out of her mouth before she can even process what she’s saying. She can’t believe herself! What is she thinking!? If her parents catch wind of this, she’ll be finished. But seeing him stand there, shivering in the night…

“You can come in,” she repeats, more to herself than anyone. “Just don’t let anyone see you,” she hisses. She turns and heads towards the hallway. “I’ll unlock the doo-”
“You don’t need to,” he quickly reassures. She wonders what he means until she hears a scrambling noise. And in ten seconds flat he’s pulling himself in through her window.

He climed!? 

He tumbles in onto her floor and shakily gets to his feet. Even in the dark of her room, seeing him up close confirms her suspicions: He’s been crying.

“Thank you thank you thank you-”

“Be quiet!” she hisses. “I’m really not supposed to have you here. So keep it down!”

He blinks. And for once, he listens. “…Okay.”

He stands awkwardly in the middle of the room, watching her closely.

“Er- You can sit down,” she reassures as she hurries over to shut her window and lock her door. He plops down on her bed, looking thoroughly relieved. He’s rubbing at his eyes with his hands. She grabs him a box of tissues but after a few, he’s right back to wiping away his tears with a balled fist.

“…What happened?” she asks.

“I told you-” he says.

“You gave me what barely qualifies as barebones details,” Fumiko retorts.

“I mean… Can you explain again, or whatever?” she retries, taking a seat next to him.

“Gahhhh. I don’t know. It’s hard to explain,” he says, flopping back on her bed.

She looks over at him, staring up at her ceiling. And finally, she thinks she maybe sees a piece of herself in him. “Try. Maybe you won’t get your point across, but I can listen.”

“Well, like… Sometimes my dad gets really mad,” Makoto admits. “And it’s like, not really a big deal, though? It’s just sort of how things have always been. I don’t see him around a lot, and when I do he’s usually really stressed. And I don’t blame him! He’s a good guy. He just… Has to work really hard because of me. And sometimes he yells at me, but that doesn’t really matter, either.”

She can’t believe her ears. “…I would argue-”

“No, no. It’s okay-” he interrupts. “We’re fine. We’re cool. It’s not something I mind. But tonight I just… I don’t know what happened. He got home and he woke me up and he slammed the door and I…” He pauses. “I don’t know. It scared me.” He sniffles. “And I know that’s silly.”

“It’s not silly!” She’s hardly processing the words coming out of Makoto’s mouth. He… What?

“But he’s never actually hurt me before!” Makoto says. “And he wouldn’t. He loves me.”

…Somehow she doubts that.

“I don’t know why I got so scared,” he admits. “I was just thinking about some things, and I had to get out of there. I tried to find Kiyoshi’s place, but I couldn’t. But I saw yours and it was all big and recognizable. And I know you’re probably embarrassed to have someone like me around, and I’m
“No, no. That’s not it.” He’s known? And she’d chalked the way he’d interacted with her up to ignorance. But he’s known she’s been judging him all along... “You… You haven’t done anything,” she admits. “My parents… They just… Hate everyone.”

“...I’m sure that’s not true-” Makoto refutes.

“...Even her.

“And sometimes, I think I do, too. But I’m trying not to. I’m trying not to. I’m not embarrassed to give you a place to stay. I’m scared. Because… They wouldn’t think you deserve it.”

Makoto blinks in confusion, then frowns. “Are you going to get in trouble if they find out I was here?”

Fumiko hesitates.

“Yeah. A lot,” she admits.

“I should go.” He stands and hurries over to the window. He’s already prying it back open by the time she bolts to her feet and grabs his wrist.

“Are you delusional!?!” she asks.

“It’s not a hard climb-” he insists, tugging at his hand.

“I’m not letting you go back there-”

“You said you’d get in t-”

“They don’t need to find out.”

Makoto stares. “You’re lying to your parents?”

Fumiko bites her lip. “Please don’t word it like that,” she begs. Her gaze drops downwards. “It’s... Just tonight. Tomorrow first thing after school I’ll show you where Kiyoshi lives. But I can’t turn you away tonight. It... It wouldn’t be right.”

Makoto finally stops struggling. And a tiny smile creeps up the corners of his lips. “…Awww. You really do have a soul.”

Fumiko rolls her eyes. “Don’t test your luck,” she snaps, shutting the window and shoving him back over to the bed.

He sits back down without complaint.

It’s unsettling, how quickly he’d been willing to shoo himself out like some sort of stray pet. Is that how disposably he sees himself?

He’s antsily rubbing his hands together. “...Thanks, Fumiko. It means a lot. I know I’m overreacti-”

“You’re not overreacting,” she butts in. She’s not letting him downplay that one.
“But I just don’t get why I freaked out like that… I’ve never been scared of him before.” He sighs. “He’s probably really worried about me.”

Fumiko’s quiet. “Maybe… Maybe it’s not that you, or even he’s, changed. Maybe it’s that the people around you have. Like you’re realizing you don’t deserve to be treated that way. Because now you know people who would never treat you like that.”

“Like you?”

Fumiko freezes, anger rising in her chest.

Okay, so maybe her life is a little abnormal, but it’s nothing like his! She… She’s not coming to any realization about how she deserves to be treated! And she’s certainly not suddenly having some perspective shift. She doesn’t need to! Because her parents aren’t awful!

Her shoulders defensively raise. “I… No, it’s not-”

“You’re not being way nicer to me?” Makoto asks, starting at her in confusion.

“Eh?”

“You said I know people who would never treat me like that. Like you.” He pauses. “I was trying to give you a compliment?”

Fumiko’s shoulders lower. “…Oh.”

Christ! Why had she gotten so defensive? Now she’s gone and made a fool of herself. There she goes! Needing to make everything about her-

“Yeah. Like me,” she says.

“…Maybe,” he says. He’s quiet, as if mulling that over. Then finally, he turns to her. “Hey, Fumiko, do you ever have weird dreams?”

Well if that isn’t a shift in topic.

“Not particularly,” she admits.

“Oh…” He frowns. He’s staring at down his hands. He opens his mouth to speak, but quickly closes it again. And before he can manage to find his words, his stomach grumbles.

Fumiko shoots him a look.

“What?” he asks.

“When’s the last time you ate?” she replies.

Makoto’s quiet.

“When?” she repeats. She’s not taking a nonanswer on this one.

“…This afternoon.” He mumbles, shifting awkwardly. “Nagisa gave me some Pop Rocks.”

_He hasn’t eaten since 2PM, and the last thing he had on his stomach was Pop Rocks!?_

Fumiko stands up. “I’ll get you something.”
"No, no. You don't need to. I can just nab something from the 7/11 tomorrow morning-" he insists.
"You and what money?"
"Nab," He repeats, making a swiping motion with his hands. "Y'know."

Fumiko’s jaw drops. *He's robbing a 7/11!?*

"*Nope,*" she bluntly says, grabbing his wrist. She doesn’t even think twice about it as she yanks him up off the bed. "We’re getting you something right now."

Makoto must catch the irritation in her voice, because he doesn’t fight back any further.

She unlocks and opens the door, then creeps out into the hall. He tiptoes after her.

"Follow me,” she whispers. “And *be quiet.*"

He nods.

She slinks down the hallway, careful to steer clear of the direction of her parents’ room. She watches her shadow carefully and holds a finger to her lips as they reach the top of the staircase.

Even with a firm warning administered, Makoto can’t quite manage to hold back a gasp. His eyes are like saucers staring down the massive spiral staircase.

She gives him a nod and a smirk, then guides him down the stairway. There’s a skip in his step, even as he’s careful to retain his quiet stealthiness. He’s looking up and down, around and about, taking in every painting and banister with a childlike wonder.

They descend past the second floor and reach the first.

Makoto hops off the stairs, thoroughly impressed. He mouths something, but she can’t quite make it out.

"What?" she whispers.

"*This place. Is. Awesome.*"

Eh. She’s seen cooler.

She walks through the lounge, and through the dining room. Over expensive beige rugs and past the ornate grandfather clock. Past the piano and throw pillows and lush curtains. And past the intricately carved dining room table where she sits silently each morning.

Makoto’s quiet as he tiptoes after her.

This silence is different.

He looks her way every time he spots something impressive, a stunned look on his face. And he points excitedly each and every time something catches his eye. He makes a silly face when she stumbles over the carpet and worries about the noise, sticking his tongue out as if to say “Don’t worry about it!”

...It works.

They reach the kitchen. She opens the fridge, the light from inside utterly blinding in comparison...
to the dark house. Squinting, she motions to the fridge, as if to say “Take your pick.”

He nabs a thing of pudding.

*Not that pick!*

“Pick something that will actually fill your stomach,” she hisses.

“This will fill my stomach.” he insists.

“No. It won’t.” She pushes the pudding back into the fridge.

She digs through the fridge, shoving aside meal after meal she turns her head up at. It’s not exactly as if they keep leftovers. Finally, she sighs and pulls out the container of cantaloupe.

Makoto cocks an eyebrow.

“We don’t really keep ‘quick meals’ around here,” she explains.

“*Pick something that will actually fill your stomach,*” he chides.

Fumiko huffs and shuts the fridge.

“Wait wait wait—” Makoto says. “How about how I have both?” He reaches for the fridge. “Pretty please? To... Fill my stomach?”

Fumiko sighs, relents, and retrieves him the cup of pudding. He grabs at it excitedly and pumps his fist in victory.

They creep back upstairs, careful to not make a sound. And by the time they reach her room, Makoto’s face is dry.

Fumiko pops open the cantaloupe and sits down. But it’s only as Makoto tears open the pudding she comes to the acute realization they’ve forgotten to grab a spoon. Makoto seems to mull their fatal mistake over for roughly half a second, before promptly deciding to lick it up himself.

Fumiko stares. “That’s disgusting.”

Makoto gives a shrug. “Gotta do what I’ve gotta do!”

He cleans the cup in no-time. She slides the container of cantaloupe his way. He gives her a quick thanks and scarfs it down.

It takes him maybe two minutes to finish his meal. He sets the containers aside and flops down on the bed, letting out a sigh of relief.

“And what do you say?” she asks.

“Oh! Thank you!” He pipes up, turning her way with that sincere smile of his.

...Sincere?

Is it? How can he be sincere at a time like this? Is he truly happy-go-lucky, or is he back to masking what hides behind that grin?

As if reading her thoughts, he speaks up. “Listen. I’m, uh- Sorry you had to see me like that. I hope
it won’t change what you think of me.”

Fumiko blinks. “Of course it will,” She admits. She’s not going to lie to his face, even for the sake of tact. She’s just not that sort of person.

Makoto seems rather dejected by the notion. He frowns and averts his gaze.

“But does that have to be a bad thing?” she asks. “I’m not sure what sort of answer you expected me to give, but there’s no way this could possibly not change my perception of you. You came crawling to my window a sniveling mess. But in a weird way, I’m glad it happened.”

“‘Scuse me?”

“Not what happened to you of course!” she clarifies. “But… That you ended opening up to me. I’m glad I could see the real you.”

He’d always struck her as so above it all. Happy-go-lucky and free. As much as she hates to admit it, she’d been jealous. Knowing someone who finds so much genuine wonder in the small things worries just as much as her, it’s… Reassuring. He’s also scared. And if he can scale rooftops even when he’s scared, maybe she can too.

“Listen. I’m sorry about the other day.”

“Wait, what?” he seems genuinely confused.

“What I said during PE. That you wouldn’t get what my life is like. That you lived in some carefree world. That was presumptuous of me. It turns out… Your life is way harder than mine could ever be.”

He gives a shrug. “I dunno if that’s true,” he admits. “I think your parents suck, too.”

“N-no they don’t! Not like that-” she refutes.

“Well… Maybe not,” he says. “But it’s still unfair. You shouldn’t have to sneak around in the middle of the night just to feel safe. They’re your parents. They should love and support you. You shouldn’t need to feel like you’re hiding from them.”

Fumiko gently clutches the bed with her hands. She’s silent,

“I guess...” she finally admits. “...I guess it does kind of suck.”

And it’s only then that she knows, deep down, that what she said earlier… About everything changing when someone’s finally kind to you… It is about her.

Her lip quivers. Why does she feel ready to cry!?

Makoto must notice that, too. Because he speaks up. “How about our lives can suck together, okay?” he says with a smile. “Better to be on a sinking ship with a friend.”

It’s horrible, but she laughs. Despite it all, she covers her mouth with her hands and she laughs.

...He laughs too.

She can’t know for sure, but she’d like to think this time it’s genuine. That even despite his sadness, he truly does have a penchant for finding the best in a bad situation. She can’t conceive surviving a life like his otherwise.
Quite frankly, she can’t even conceive how he’s survived on his own thus far.

He yawns, stretching like a goddamn cat.

“You should probably try to get some sleep,” she says. It’s only now she’s realizing just how tired she is.

He gives a curt nod. “...Yeah. That would be nice,” he says. “I’ll be gone by morning, okay? So don’t worry about your parents. I’ll sneak right back out the window!”

She really doesn’t like that idea. She can’t exactly think of a productive counterplan, but he’s seriously going to break his neck at this rate.

He must catch the worried look on her face. “Hey. Don’t worry about it. I’m good at being sneaky! Just like a spy!”

With all the creeping around they’ve been doing, they really have been spies, huh?

...The thought makes her feel kind of cool.

He scrambles to make himself comfortable. Before finally curling up in the fetal position... At the foot of her bed.

“...Can you just be normal!?” she asks in exasperation. “You’re not a dog! I’m not going to yell at you for using my bed as intended!”

He perks up and worms his way under her covers. “Oh! Alright! Just had to make sure!”

He hadn’t made sure, for one! He hadn’t even asked! What does he think he is, her charity project!?

That said, he’s comfortable under her covers in no-time. She tucks herself in and turns over to face the wall opposite of him.

“...Night, Makoto.”

“Night,” Makoto says. “And... Thanks again. I don’t know what I’d have done without you,” And with the quiver in his voice, that much she knows he means.

Holding back tears, her own voice quivers, too. “...You’re welcome.”

He dozes off in no-time. She follows in suit. That night, she dreams of climbing higher.

And as promised, by morning, he’s gone.

It’s hard keeping a secret when your relationship is founded on trust. It’s doubly hard keeping said secret when it’s practically out in the open as is.

It’s a lazy Saturday. Kayano and Karma are seated on the floor, controllers in hand, and tensions through the roof.

“Oh, fuck you!” Karma cries.
“Get good!” Kayano shouts triumphantly in response.

You know, the usual way people talk to each other when playing Mario Kart.

Nagisa and Gakushuu are settled on the couch behind them. Gakushuu’s trying to pretend to be thoroughly occupied with his phone, but Nagisa catches the way his eyes flicker towards the television each time one of his over-enthusiastic housemates lets out a victory cry or a melodramatic groan.

Nagisa, on the other hand, is recording it.

“Go Kayano!” he cheers, phone in one hand.

“Oh! I see how it is!” Karma snidely grumbles.

“What can I say? She’s in first. I’d like to side with the victor, thank you very much,” he says with a sheepish smile.

“Oh, fuck you, too,” Karma mutters, flipping him the bird. “At least Gakushuu’s on my side, right?”

“Absolutely not,” Gakushuu says, not even bothering to look up from his phone. “For one, I know better than to place my bets on a man who’s willing to make crass hand motions instead of paying attention to the actual video game.”

Karma rolls his eyes. “I am paying attention! See!? Look!” he says, making a turn and drifting straight into an Item Box. The roulette spins, and his grin grows wicked as it lands on a Blue Shell.

“Ha! See!? It’s time for some karma, baby!” He says, pumping his fist in the air. Neither Gakushuu or Nagisa comment on how many times they’ve had to bear that pun.

Kayano doesn’t say a word, merely stares intensely at the TV as she watches the Blue Shell race towards her. She leans towards the screen, eyes narrowed and teeth clenched.

Karma punches her shoulder. “And, oh, how the tables have turned!” He boasts. “Will our breastless braggart finally meet her untimely end!?”

There’s one fatal flaw in Karma’s plan, however. And Nagisa can see it coming from a mile away. What Karma doesn’t notice in his cutthroat arrogance is what rests in Kayano’s own item box…

The moment the Blue Shell swirls overhead, she dashes out of the way, leaving the explosion in the dust.

‘Power Shroom, baby!’

She races over the finish line, condemning another braggart entirely to his own untimely end.

Of course, being a polite and mature woman of high-renown, she takes this victory in stride.

“Eat shit, Karma!” she shouts, pushing him over with all the force of a goddamn semi truck. He goes tumbling over like a stack of dominos. She half-giggles, half-gasps. “C-Christ! Are you okay!?"

“Physically, yes. Emotionally, absolutely not.”

Gakushuu can’t help but snicker. “You wouldn’t have won either way, jackass. You were not
going to make a recovery from tenth place.”

“If I was going down she was going down with me.”

“Okay, sore loser.” Rich, coming from Gakushuu.

“You up for another round?” Kayano asks. “Or are you too scared of me beating you again?”

“Oh, you know you’re on!” Karma sits up with a refound vigor. “You two want in this time?” He asks, looking back over his shoulder.

“Nah. I think I much prefer playing spectator,” Nagisa says, waving his phone in the air. He was never exactly a Mario Kart prodigy. His skillset rests more firmly within the area of something like Pokemon: Strategy based.

“Are you legitimately asking me if you want me to play a competitive video game with you?” Gakushuu asks.

When someone dare challenges him, tensions tend to rise awfully fast. Gakushuu is beyond competitive. He’s brutal. With all the composure of a tilting preteen balls-deep in a game of Fortnite, he’s arrogant at best, and demented at worst. Not only in his teen years had he literally bit a controller in half during a particularly heated game of Rocket League, but he’s single-handedly the reason both Mario Party and Monopoly are banned from the household.

“ABSOLUTELY.”

He cracks his knuckles and races to grab a controller, a wicked grin of his own spreading across his face.

Nagisa gives a tired chuckle. He has a feeling things are about to get intense, but trusts the four of them to unplug the Nintendo Verse before Gakushuu actually ends up giving himself a concussion.

“Thought so,” Karma says with a smirk. “Playing Mario Kart is much more fun than airing our Mario Kart drama out to your weird nerd friends, anyways.”

Gakushuu rolls his eyes as he returns to his seat. He has an aloof face on, but Nagisa can catch the way he’s vibrating in anticipation. “For one, I am not ‘airing our Mario Kart drama out to my weird nerd friends.’ I’m not even talking to my weird nerd friends. I’m filing our tax reforms.”

Ah yes, Gakushuu’s weird nerd friends. Where there is darkness, there is light. Where there is sadness, there is joy. Where there is Mario Party, there is the marginally less irritating Mario Kart. And where there is Nagisa’s downright-maniacal, barely-functional and chat-spamming whirlwind of friends, there is Gakushuu’s social circle of responsible adults.

...The Virtuoso group chat.

To be truthful, it existed long before the E-Class group chat actually made its debut. But sometimes Nagisa wonders if it’s only managed to stick around this long out of pure spite. Any and all actual grudges between the two groups have long since faded with time, but it’s hard to truly shake that childish pettiness. Ever since time began (Or at least ever since Nagisa’d met Gakushuu,) one principle has stood tall and true: What the E-Class has, the A-Class must have.

...Jealous losers.

It’s nowhere near as untouchable as they’d like to keep its reputation, however. It may not have its
local Rio, or its… In-depth discussions of Sasuke, but where the E-Class group chat has never been touched, the Virtuoso group chat certainly has.

...It’s been infiltrated.

Needless to say, there’s a reason they’re on the sixth iteration of the Virtuoso group chat. Namely because ‘The Red Menace’ has a penchant for weaseling his way right into their tight-knit collective and dishing out what qualifies as borderline cyberbullying in the form of pure, unadulterated chaos.

...Either way, Nagisa has no complaints about Gakushuu keeping in contact with his friends. He’s glad they’ve managed to stay in touch. And something tells him having ‘normal’ people to text once in a while helps Gakushuu keep his head on his shoulders. Mario Kart is great and all, but sometimes Gakushuu’s the sort of guy who just needs to talk about real adult things like business forms and stock markets.

“Okay. Whatever you say, gossip,” Karma quips.

Gakushuu flashes his phone, displaying Turbotax in all of its glory.

...And filing taxes.

Gakushuu quickly pockets his phone, before selecting Mario to compete against Karma’s Yoshi, and Kayano’s Isabelle.

An… Indecipherable look crosses Karma’s face. Nagisa can tell where this is heading the moment he opens his mouth.

“Picking Mario, because you want to ride me tonight, huh?”

Gakushuu kicks his back. “Picking Mario because I’m going to throw you off a cliff.”

...Ah. Much more apt.

They start up the race. Karma tries his best to jumpscare them as the countdown starts, but to no avail seeing as how they’ve seen this trick a million times before.

Nagisa’s phone buzzes. Speaking of his own barely-functional friends…

He whips out his phone and opens the E-Class group chat.

[UNREAD MESSAGES]

[5/24/2030 2:00 PM:] [chiba]: ?????????????????

[5/24/2030 2:00 PM:] [Yoshida]: No.

[5/24/2030 2:00 PM:] [Rio]: Well answer the question, Chiba

[5/24/2030 2:01 PM:] [Rio]: Why not?

[5/24/2030 2:01 PM:] [Yoshida]: Horses can’t eat pineapple on pizza.

[5/24/2030 2:01 PM:] [Okuda]: I’m pretty sure horses can’t even eat pineapple?

[5/24/2030 2:01 PM:] [Rio]: Why do you people love crushing my dreams?
Hayami: Why do you love saying things that make me want to hit you with a chair?

Rio: WAIT WAIT WAIT OKAY OKAY OKAY

Rio: WHAT IF IT UNHINGED ITS JAW?

Several people are typing...

Nagisa decides to put this conversation to rest before it can escalate.

Nagisa: I’d say I’m sorry to interrupt whatever the hell is currently going on, but giving it a quick glance over, I don’t think I am, actually.

Nagisa: Does anyone want to see Karma losing at Mario Kart or am I going to have to sit on this treasure myself.

Yoshida: Hand it over. I am literally begging you to end this conversation.

Rio: OOOHHH? Go-karting blackmail? You know I’m interested, chump. ;)

Nagisa doesn’t appreciate being called chump, but figures he’ll share their little escapade anyways. He sends the video.

Kanzaki: oh!!! go kayano!!

Yoshida: DID SHE JUST CONCUSS HIM?

Nagisa: Ahahaha, no. He’s fine.

Okuda: I looked it up and horses can eat pineapwhat did Karma do?

Nagisa: “Git wrecked.”

Rio: LMAOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO

Rio: Also where’s Gakushit?

Nagisa: Please don’t call him that.

Nagisa: He’s on the couch filing our taxes.

Hayami: Instead of playing Mario Kart??

Nagisa: I know. I’m surprised, too.

Rio: You say, on the couch talking to us instead of playing Mario Kart.

Nagisa: I

Nagisa: I’m no good at it, okay!? It’s a hard video game!

Rio: lol. mario kart too hardcore?

Kanzaki: be nice rio! >/\ not everyone can take to things right away!
Nagisa sighs and rolls his eyes. Sometimes he wonders if it’s even really his friend group that’s chaotic, or if it’s just Rio. He can’t even begin to imagine how Okuda deals with her. That is, until he remembers he deals with Karma on a daily basis. And, hey, as annoying as Rio is, she’s a lot less brutal than she was all those years ago. She’s left her days of misgendering Nagisa behind her, and moved onto greener pastures such as referring to Kanzaki as “a mlg gamer.”

His phone buzzes again. And this time it’s not from the E-Class group chat.

...It’s a DM from Ritsu.

Nagisa looks up from his phone and glances at his spouses. Gakushuu’s leaning towards the television. Karma elbows Kayano, who stifles a cackle.

Things have been… Complicated with Karma. And he knows it shows. Karma’s an intuitive guy. And he thinks that’s what gets to him most about trying to keep this secret. Karma knows they’re tiptoeing around something, and it can be hard to tell just how hurt he is by that sort of thing. He has a tenancy to bottle things in enough as is.

And he means it. He’s thought it over a lot. Talked about it with Kayano and Gakushuu, too. Gakushuu’s still firmly of the belief that it’s best left unsaid, but Nagisa just can’t agree with him on that one.


[5/24/2030 2:20 PM:] [Nagisa] What if he reacts badly?

[5/24/2030 2:22 PM:] [Ritsu]: I also saw that you were 14.
[5/24/2030 2:23 PM:] [✧・゚:*:*:*:Ritsu *:*✧・゚:*:*:*:] Did you just text me “...”?

[5/24/2030 2:23 PM:] [✧・゚:*:*:*:Ritsu *:*✧・゚:*:*:*:] I won’t bother you anymore, but I just figured I’d check in. And I’m glad you told the others.

[5/24/2030 2:24 PM:] [✧・゚:*:*:*:Ritsu *:*✧・゚:*:*:*:] Good luck, Nagisa! And on a completely unrelated but mandatory note, also I’d highly recommend don’t check the group chat right now! Rio’s sending photos of horses with unhinged jaws!

...Nagisa decides to take her word for that one.


He pockets his phone and returns his eyes to the television.

Gakushuu speeds over the finish line with a triumphant shout. Karma groans and flops backwards. “You get way too into everything. It’s Mario Kart. You don’t gotta play it like it's fucking League of Legends, Mister God of Gaming.”

“Sounds like someone’s just mad he lost,” Kayano chuckles. She’d only secured fourth place for herself this time, but something tells Nagisa she’s content just seeing Karma bested at all.

Gakushuu’s smirk widens at his 'God of Gaming' comment. At first it seems like one of Karma’s typical quips. But a quick once-over, and it’s easy to tell that not only is it intended to push Gakushuu’s buttons, but to re-enforce his self-worth.

It’s surprisingly eloquent. And it’s surprisingly unrare. Thinking about it, Karma pulls this sort of thing all the time. The entire game he’s been shouting “Come on!” and “Cut me some slack!” in between a string of profanities.

...Ritsu’s right. They’re not fifteen anymore. Karma is a mature, thoughtful, and wonderful person who’s learned with time the impact his words have on others. He may be intimidating. And he may be childish. But he’s grown up where it matters. And so has Nagisa. So he’s going to grow up and talk to his goddamn husband. They’re on the same team, and they’ve waited long enough.

“Hey. Uh. Can you actually sit this next race out?” He says, tapping Karma’s shoulder. “There’s… Something I wanted to talk about.”

Now!? Okay! Apparently, he’s doing this now!

Gakushuu and Kayano exchange a look. Karma curiously raises his eyebrows, but quickly stands. “Yeah, sure. I was getting real sick of their nonsense, anyways,” he says. “Try not to have too much fun without me, ya smug bastards,” He tacks on. “Because I WILL be back for a rematch.”

“Okay, okay. Whatever you say, Karma,” Kayano says. It’s clear her mind isn’t where her mouth is. Meeting her eyes, it’s easy to tell she knows exactly where this is headed. Gakushuu bites his lip. But Kayano gives him a reassuring nod.

Nagisa leads them into the guest room. It’s the closest private place, and he doesn’t exactly feel like retreating all the way upstairs to their bedroom. He sits down on the bed.

“Oh. Okay, okay. Just like a forewarning that this is. Really serious. So, like, I’m about to dump some heavy shit on you, okay? Keep that in mind. Because… This… Uh…” he drifts off. “This means a lot to me.”
“Okay,” Karma says, taking a seat next to him. “Serious mode engaged. Hit me.”

“...And this is gonna sound craz-” He remembers Gakushuu’s warning not to degrade himself. “...Sorta weird. This is going to sound sorta weird. And it’s okay if you’re mad at me for it. But let me explain first. In fact, I think I’m. I think I’m just going to blurt it out. If I don’t, I don’t think I’ll ever be able to say it.”

Karma’s eyebrows have practically escaped his face. “...Okay?”

His eyes meet Nagisa’s. And Nagisa feels panic rise in his gut. With so, so many ways this could go wrong, it’s hard not to fear this could destroy the delicate balance they’ve found. But it’s too late to turn back now. If he doesn’t say it now, he never will. And that’s completely unacceptable. He braces himself, balls his fists, and forces it out.

“Korosensei’s back-”

...This is his least articulate claim yet! What is wrong with him!?

Karma cocks an eyebrow.

“...Go on?”

It’s hard to read his face, but his initial reaction is nothing Nagisa could have expected. He's not angry, sad, amused, or even confused. There’s a simple curiosity in his eyes.

Nagisa steadies his breathing.

“Some… Super weird stuff has been happening in my classroom. It’s… This boy…” Ah. There’s no use beating around the bush. Karma’s met the kid. His little incident’s half the reason Nagisa’s even thinking about this! “It’s Makoto. He’s been acting strange.”

Karma blinks. “Stabbing people sort of strange?”

“Stranger,” Nagisa says. “Ever since the beginning of the year, he’s pulled off all sorts of strange stuff. He’s the boy who blew me up on the first day. He turned in an essay with the phrase ‘tentacles all along’ in it. And then, most recently, he, yes, stabbed you-”

“...Just like I stabbed Korosensei,” Karma finishes.

Nagisa gives a tiny nod. “He knows things and does things he has no way of knowing about. But it’s not just that. He… Reminds me of him. He’s kind and charismatic. Funny and thoughtful. Dorky and petty. Which I know doesn’t mean anything, but I look at his grin and I swear I just see it. See him. I know it’s out of nowhere. But… It really just feels like I’m side by side with an old friend.” He pauses. “Like… He’s Korosensei reincarnated.”

Karma’s silent. He mulls that over. His gaze slowly travels around the room. He doesn’t look Nagisa’s way.

Nagisa tenses up. He’s quickly regretting saying anything. “You don’t have t-”

“I believe you.”

Nagisa freezes. He can’t believe his ears. “W-What!?”

“I believe you,” Karma repeats.
“W- What!? Why!?” Nagisa sputters. “Kayano and Gakushuu thought I was losing my mind! Why do you believe me!?”

Karma blinks. His expression almost seems hurt. “Hey. What’s that supposed to mean? ‘You?’”

Nagisa hesitates. “...It’s just... I know you like to pick on us. And I know you wouldn’t do it over anything actually serious. But I guess I was afraid you wouldn’t take this seriously. I’m having trouble taking it seriously myself.”

Karma absentmindedly taps his fingers on the bed. “This is about Korosensei, Nagisa. I’d never take it anything less than completely seriously,” he pauses. “Plus, you’re forgetting one key detail: I’ve met Makoto.”

“Eh?”

“Kayano? Gakushuu? Neither of them has met the kid. But me? I have. I’ve been maimed by him. I know exactly what you mean. I was starting to wonder if he had something to do with Korosensei, myself. You seem to be forgetting I was Hindu born and raised.”

“W-What!??” Nagisa sputters. “I wouldn’t have expected that from you-” he admits. “Thinking anything similar, I mean.”

“And that was your first mistake: Expecting anything from me. I’m a wildcard, baby. The moment you try to predict what I’m thinking is the moment you’re screwing up bigtime.” He chuckles.

Nagisa lets out a tired chuckle of his own. “...I guess you’re right,” he admits. “...It was wrong of me to assume you’d just make fun of me.”

“Yeah, it was.”

“I should have just called a family meeting. Talked to all of you,” Nagisa says. “But... It was so overwhelming. I was scared of you all teaming up on me.”

He knows that’s a ridiculous notion. His spouses have all reacted a hundred percent supportively. And they always have. Even with each bump in the road, they’ve always been there for each other. It’s what they do. It’s irrational at best and offensive at worst to feel afraid of them. He hates to admit it, but he knows it’s a product of how he was raised. Even surrounded by people who love him, he’s petrified by the idea of one mistake sending them spiraling into a yelling fit.

Karma’s quiet.

“...And I guess I just felt like you of all people would be the fastest to call me crazy. Or...” He dwells on the exact feeling that resided in his gut as he hesitated. “...That you’d be mad at me. I know that Korosensei was...” He thinks of a boy free-falling off of cliffs and wrestling on the forest floor. “...Very important to you. I know he was very important to you.”

Karma wraps an arm around Nagisa’s shoulder. “He was important to all of us,” He reassures. “Including you. Don’t you ever doubt the intensity of how deeply you respected that man. I’m not mad. I’d trust your opinion on him over anyone’s.”

Nagisa can’t help but choke up. He barely manages to get out a “Thanks.”

Yeah. Korosensei was important to him. More than anything. He still doesn’t know if he’d have managed to get out of that situation alive to be sitting here with Karma today if not for his teacher.
“In the dumbest way, I’m relieved to hear this is about Korosensei. You came in here all ‘We need to talk about something SERIOUS. And please don’t be mad. Because this has been a long time coming… I’m… I’m so sorry Karma, I…”’ Karma imitates in the most melodramatic voice possible. “I thought you were about to ask me for a divorce, for fuck’s sake! And I was like ‘over Mario Kart?!’”

Nagisa bursts out into laughter. “No! No! Oh my God, no!” he sputters through his giggles. “Not at all!”

Karma gives him a satisfied smirk. “Good. Try not to give me a heart attack next time.”

“Alright, alright,” Nagisa relents, leaning into his embrace. “No promises, though.”

“Asshole,” Karma replies.

They fall silent. Nagisa listens to his breathing.

“So what are we going to do about Makoto?” Karma finally asks.

“Eh?”

“If he really is Korosensei. Do you have some sort of plan, or did you just want to bring this up to me?”

“Just wanted to bring this up to you,” Nagisa replies. “I think all I want to do… All I can do is just keep trying to give him the best life possible.” He pauses. “What I do for all my students.” He can’t help wonder if he deserves something more. A life better than ‘best.’ Is that even achievable? Or is that plain and simple favoritism at best?

...He shakes his head. No. He can’t focus on him more than any other student. Not even if they are right, much less when he’s going out on a limb. It’s just not fair. He’ll just have to try harder than his hardest for the all of them.

“Well, that I know you’ll do a great job at. You’ve already pulled it off a hundred times before, haven’t you?” Karma reassures. “Don’t worry about it. He’s going to be the luckiest student in the world.”

“I dunno if I’d go that far-” Nagisa protests.

“Well I would. You’re a kickass teacher, so stop being self-deprecating.”

Nagisa’s not sure that one’s possible, but he gives a tiny nod anyways.

“He’s depending on you. So you gotta be on the top of your game.” He pauses. “Are you planning on telling him about any of this?”

“No,” Nagisa quickly replies. “Kayano and Gakushuu don’t think I should. And I don’t think so, either.” All too well he can remember an adult hovering over his shoulders and telling him who he should be. It’s people like those who make him still have trouble trusting his loved ones fifteen years later. That’s the last sort of person he needs to be. “It’s… Not fair to put any of that on him. It’s just not right.”

“Fair,” Karma replies. “And so you’re not even going to tell him about us?”

...The E-Class. The birthplace of Korosensei’s happiest memories.
“I’m not even going to tell him about us.”

Karma mulls that over. But even he doesn’t seem to have a satisfactory response to that one. He stands. “Well. Is that all you had to talk about?”

“Yeah,” Nagisa replies.

Gakushuu yells profanities from the living room.

Karma gives him a grin. “See? That was no big deal. I’m not that hard to talk to. So let’s go right back to being a team, and whoop their asses at Mario Kart.”

“I am not playing Mario Ka-”

Karma slings Nagisa over his shoulders. “Oh yes you are.”

“No, I am not.”

“I’m not taking no for an answer,” Karma chides. “I just had to be the last one to be privy to your Korosensei conspiracy theory. I’m an excellent sport, but we’re playing some goddamn Mario Kart.”

Nagisa slumps. “You know what? That’s fair.”

Karma laughs. “I thought so. And what do you say?”

“Sorry, Karma.”

“Aw hell no! That’s just beating yourself up more. I think I like the sound of ‘thanks, Karma’ a lot better.”

Nagisa smiles. “Okay, okay. Thanks, Karma.”

“See? Much better! No more secrets in the future.”

Nagisa nods. “...Yeah. No more secrets in the future.” And this time, he means it.

Another shout echoes from the living room.

“Now let’s get in there before Gakushuu bites another controller in half.”

“Okay. Let’s.”

And with his final secret out in the open, Nagisa finally feels a weight lift off his shoulders.

Chapter End Notes

Hoo boy. Chapter 7.

I received a comment a few chapters back pointing out my story was getting a little darker. And I was like “HOO BOY… You have no idea.” Ahahaha, yeah. Adventures In Solitude is definitely a fic that delves into some darker topics, and with the full fledged nosedive into the topic of child abuse this chapter, I think that’s finally starting
That said, I never want Adventures In Solitude to feel like a bleak story, and I hope no-one is coming out of this story feeling sadder than they did before they read it. I’m trying to be very careful to balance the dark topics with lots of jokes, and I hope intersplicing topics like intergenerational trauma and child abuse with more lighthearted topics like roof climbing and Mario Kart is doing the trick. Because ultimately I do want this to feel like a hopeful story. About how the people who love you can help you get past such f*cked up things. And I feel that theme shows with Nagisa and his spouses and their individual traumas, but it’s clear the trio is still finding their place in the world. That said, I do think they’re finally starting to find some comfort in each other, and that’s a relief.

Just in case I’ve finally added content warnings of all potential sensitive topics that will be gone over in the fic to the tags.

I hope no-one, like, interprets what went on with Makoto and Fumiko as a romantic thing. Yes, they shared a bed, but it wasn’t at ALL meant that way, and if anyone makes NSFW jokes I’m gonna beat them over the head with a lamppost. I meant to moreso recreate that feeling of when you’re a kid and over at a slumber party and you’re up way later than your friends parents’ said you could because you’re under the covers with a flashlight reading books and watching movies at 2% volume as opposed to the intimate sort of sharing a bed.

In general I’m having so much fun capturing the unique absurdity of youth, even in between the darker topics. Does anyone else remember sneaking to the fridge at 1AM or playing Pokemon cards but not knowing the rules? They’re such specific oddball experiences, but I hope they resonate with people!

Anyways yes I had fun showcasing the parallels between Makoto and Fumiko, and I’m glad they’re starting to realize despite their pessimist and optimist dynamic, they’re a lot more similar than they’d like to admit.

Sorry there wasn’t a ton of Kiyoshi this chapter! Good news is next chapter is pretty much ENTIRELY Kiyoshi focused, so try not to miss our boy too much! He’s still around. Just doing things like actually participating in class and getting a good night’s sleep, unlike SOME heathens.

And, of course, Karma. Karma Karma Karma Karma.

I’m curious: Did anyone guess Karma would have a MUCH less hostile reaction than Nagisa expected? I had lots of fun playing up how much Nagisa was afraid to come forward to him, but ultimately Karma is a SUPER intuitive guy. He’s always a step ahead. So him sensing some plot bullshit going down was only to be expected.

FGDSHJK

But that only leaves one question… If Nagisa’s finally opened up to all of his spouses, what is he supposed to do NEXT?

I guess that’s for me to know and you to find out!

Some songs that helped me write this chapter were Tuck Everlasting’s Top of The World, Dear Evan Hansen’s For Forever, Twenty One Pilot’s The Run And Go, Garfunkel and Oates Go Kart Racing (As a note this one is extremely NSFW. Be
cautious), and Panic! At The Disco’s Come On.

I hope you liked the chapter, and I hope to update again soon! My summer just started, so I’m hoping to bump my updates up to a faster rate. No promises, though! Make sure to let me know what you thought, and see you soon!
Elephant In The Room Time

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When Makoto tells the two of them he has a secret to show them, Kiyoshi half expects to be led into some decrepit back alley and stabbed to death.

And he is led into some decrepit back alley, so hey! They’re halfway there!

“What is he doing?” Kiyoshi whispers.

“I wish I knew!” Fumiko hisses under her breath.

After school, he’d pulled them aside and informed them about his super cool secret. Told them he was missing tutoring and everything today just to show them. Before they could protest they were already being dragged by the hand throughout the city. Kiyoshi decided he hadn’t had anything better to do with his afternoon and sent his dad a quick text telling him he’d be home late. (Not that he figured his dad would take notice either way.) ‘What’s the worst that could happen?’ he’d told himself.

He’s very quickly learning he should never ask that question where Makoto’s involved.

His unpredictable friend had led them down winding street after winding street (In the direct opposite direction of both Kiyoshi and Fumiko’s houses, mind you,) commenting on the “best shortcuts.” And just as Kiyoshi’s unease had finally peaked, he’d skidded to a stop at a particular alleyway... Then darted in. “Wait here! I’ll be right back!” he shouted over his shoulder reassuringly.

That was ten minutes ago.

Fumiko lets out an impatient huff.

Quite frankly, he’s baffled she’d followed them at all. She has even less tolerance for Makoto’s bullshit than his own.

...Which… He supposes isn’t saying a lot, but he’d like to think he has some sort of spine!

“...Do… You think we should go in after him?” he asks.

“Absolutely not. That’s how you get hobo staring at you.”

Because that’s the biggest thing they need to be worrying about in a rundown alleyway!

Kiyoshi’s just about ready to call it quits and declare him dead when Makoto comes rounding the corner. And with him comes the most horrible noise Kiyoshi has ever heard.

An absolutely outraged caterwauling echoes down the street, shredding at Kiyoshi’s ears. But it’s only as he sees something thrashing for dear life in Makoto’s arms that he processes it’s emanating from some kind of living being.

“Everyone… I’d like you to meet Miss Nao!”

Makoto proudly holds up his prize, and Kiyoshi’s mouth falls agape.
In Makoto’s hands is single-handedly the ugliest cat Kiyoshi has ever seen. And sure, he’s a bit of a dog person, but he likes cats plenty! To be honest, he’s not sure if this thing even qualifies as a cat. To be honest-er, he’s not sure if this thing even qualifies as an animal. Hissing, spitting, and just about on the brink of foaming at the mouth, it stares him down with the most unadulterated hatred he’s ever seen radiate from another living being. (Is it even alive!?)

Mangy and malnourished, with fur matted in ways he hadn’t even conceived possible. Nicked ear and massive underbite. This isn’t a street cat. This is a taxidermy gone horribly wrong. This is an alien’s idea of a street cat. This is a sick joke.

He finally finds his words.

“WHAT IS THAT!?”

“It’s Miss Nao!” Makoto repeats as if it’s the most obvious thing in the world.

“Miss… Nao?” Fumiko asks, the confusion as evident in her voice as it is in his. Misery must love company or something, because Kiyoshi’s relieved to know she finds this thing as absurd as he does. Otherwise by now, he’d be half convinced he was losing his goddamn mind.

“Yeah! I’m working on my English, so I named her ‘Miss,’” Makoto proudly states.

Kiyoshi notes that that is absolute gibberish, but decides to save that one for later, because they have much weirder shit on their plate.

‘Miss Nao’ hisses and screeches, clawing at the air in a desperate rage.

“Is… Is it rabid?” Kiyoshi finally finds the strength to ask.

“No!” Makoto refutes. “She’s just shy around strangers. C’mon… They’re my friends! They won’t hurt you,” he whispers reassuringly, not bothering to answer the real question here as to whether or not she’ll hurt them. “Say hi, Miss Nao!” he says, grabbing one of her paws and waving it in their direction.

It’s only now Kiyoshi notices just how scratched up Makoto is. His pant legs are torn to hell and back, and his arms are a bloody mess. Did... Did he let this cat beat the shit out of him!?

Okay! Okay! That answers his question! This cat will definitely hurt them!

“Are you SURE it’s not rabid?” Is all he can find in himself to repeat.

“No! She’s not rabid,” Makoto huffs.

Kiyoshi decides to let the whole ‘receiving a microaggression over misgendering a cat’ thing slide just this once, namely because he’s pretty sure if he doesn’t intervene in roughly five seconds said cat is going to tear Makoto’s throat out.

“Well… She seems awfully angry,” he says, pointing at Makoto’s arms.

“Oh. Yeah. She kinda gets like that. It’s okay. I’m used to it,” he cheerily replies. “Me and Miss Nao go WAY back. We met like a year ago.” Is that his idea of way back!? “We’re BEST friends. I throw her food scraps on the way home from school!” He holds Miss Nao close to his face and gushes. “That’s right! Isn’t it, Miss Nao!?”

Watching Miss Nao yowl in Makoto’s face, Kiyoshi can’t help but wonder if that’s what they’re
also going to feel like after hanging out with Makoto for a full year.

A scary thought!

“Okay! Okay! Please put her down!” He finally intervenes, lowering Makoto’s arms. “I think she needs a break!”

Finally, Makoto complies. He places the cat(?) on the ground with a smile. And against *all fucking odds*, the cat doesn’t run away. Instead, she makes herself at home on top of a nearby crate, staring Kiyoshi down with her hateful eyes.

**E-Eep! Somehow this is worse!**

“You guys wanna try and pet her?” Makoto asks.

Kiyoshi takes one look at his shredded arms, and quickly decides that’s going to be a big, fat, “NO.”

Fumiko shakes her head. “Thanks, but no thanks,” she says the apprehension clear as day in her voice.

“Your loss,” Makoto replies, plopping down next to Miss Nao and stroking her head. She shoots him a look that says “You are this close to losing your eyeballs,” but Kiyoshi can’t bring himself to care, seeing as how he’s just glad the death glare is off him at this point.

“...How did you even find this thing?” Fumiko asks.

“Well, one day it was raining super bad while I was walking home from school. And I heard her yowling her head off! And I was like ‘Oh no!’ Because who just ignores a crying kitten in the rain-”

“Waitwaitwait-” Kiyoshi interjects. “Kitten?”

“Yeah? She was just a baby. So I helped fi-”

“You said you’ve only known her a year!”

“Mmmhmm? So I he-”

*There’s no way that cat’s only a year old!*

Upon first seeing her, Kiyoshi’d assumed she was on death’s door. If that cat’s a year old, then his mother is still in her prime.

“Yes she is!” Makoto huffs. “I dunno what to tell you! Miss Nao’s still young and beautiful!” He leans in close to her face. “You are! Aren’t you, Miss Nao? Yes you are! Yes you are!” he gushes.

“The story,” Fumiko reminds him. “Get back to the story.”

“Yeah! Right!” Makoto sits up. “So I help find her shelter for the day, ‘cause I knew I probably couldn’t take her back to my place. But I started worrying ‘how’s she gonna get food?’ Because she’s just a little girl! And I decided I’d take care of her! No! More than that! That we’d become BEST FRIENDS. I didn’t really have a lotta friends at the time, so I was like ‘Yes! Prime opportunity!’”

Kiyoshi genuinely can’t tell if his bewilderment is still coming from the ‘kitten’ thing or the fact
that Makoto just dropped he’d never had friends before so cheerily.

“And what do you know! I succeeded! Now I try to check up on her every day. When I nab stuff from the 7/11 I make sure to pick up some snacks for her, too.”

Wait, what?

Kiyoshi blinks. “...Nab stuff from the 7/11?”

Fumiko shoots him a death glare. Eep! Is there something he’s missing here!?

“Yeah. Y’know-” Makoto says, making a swiping motion with his hands.

“Well! I’m sure she must appreciate it!” Fumiko intervenes, elbowing Makoto.

It’s not hard to discern the sudden topic change. Don’t tell him Makoto’s roped her of all people into stealing from the local convenience store!

He decides to drop it for now. But he makes a careful mental note to bring it up to Nagisa as soon as possible. Whether for sport or for survival, he’s not exactly sure he likes the idea of Makoto stealing cat food from the 7/11.

“...Yeah. I’m sure she does,” he agrees.

“Oh. I know she does.” Makoto grins. “Watch this.” He brings his hand down her back and starts to stroke. He must finally hit her sweet spot, because despite every horrible noise, deranged wheeze, and demonic yell she’s let out over the past fifteen minutes, she releases the softest purr. Rubbing her head on Makoto’s arm, her satanic aura dissipates in an instant.

If he didn’t know any better, Kiyoshi’d almost find it cute!

Makoto must notice his gushy expression, because he smirks. “See? I told you. She’s not scary, just shy.”

Fumiko takes a step forward. “You know what?” she says. “You’ve got me. I’ll bite.”

Makoto perks up.

“You’ll pet her!?”

“I’ll pet her.”

She makes her way over to Miss Nao. She hesitates, but meets Makoto’s eyes, kneels, and runs her hand down the cat.

Kiyoshi flinches, but to his surprise, Miss Nao doesn’t lunge. Fumiko’s hand remains intact for now. Miss Nao lets out another satisfied purr.

“Awwww!” Makoto says. “I think she likes you!”


“You want in on this, Kiyoshi?” Makoto asks.

“Sorry, I think that’s still gonna be a no,” Kiyoshi admits.
“Awww! C’mon! She doesn’t bite!”

_He’s just not so sure of that, taking one look at Makoto’s punctured ankles!_

“Uh- No,” he repeats.

“C’momnnn! It’d be fun! Don’t be a pussy!”

**ADORABLE PURRING OR NOT, HE ENJOYS HAVING FINGERS! HE WON’T BE DUPED, DECEIVED, OR BAMBOOZLED!**

“I’m quite content with my role as the ‘pussy’ of the friend group, thank you very much.”

“Pet her! Pet her! Pet her!” Makoto chants.

“Okay, no - Drop it,” Fumiko finally intervenes. Her voice is no-nonsense. “If he doesn’t want to, he doesn’t want to. Don’t be obnoxious about it.”

Makoto lets out a sigh, but relents. “Okay, okay.”

“It’s like you said. More for us.”

Makoto perks up. “Oh! You’re so right!”

Kiyoshi lets out a sigh of relief. He’s thankful she stepped in. Because that was either starting to get really irritating, or really anxiety-inducing. He can’t tell.

“Yeah. I think I’m content to watch from afar,” he says, before mouthing a quick ‘thanks’ to Fumiko.

She gives him a curt nod.

The petting ensues for a while longer. But before they know it, Miss Nao stands, hops off her crate, and darts back off into the dark of the alleyway.

“Oh! Seeya!” Makoto says, waving after her.

Kiyoshi’s not sure if he’s disappointed or relieved to see her go.

“Ah - Sorry if we, like, scared her off earlier than usual,” he says.

“What!? No!” Makoto replies. “All you were doing was standing there. Don’t apologize for _that_. She just likes her alone time. Only so much of me she can take, y’know?” He gives a cheeky smile. “She actually kind of reminds me of you guys.”

_E-Eh!?_

There’s a long moment of awkward silence as Kiyoshi searches for words. Something, something ‘Hey! It’s not that there’s only so much of you I can take!’

Fumiko beats him to it.

“Going to extrapolate on that?”

“Y’know! Cold and scary on the outside!” He holds his hands up near his head, curling his fingers like claws. “Sweet and thoughtful on the inside!” He clasps his hands over his heart. “Or... “ He
holds his hands up by his cheek and says in falsetto “Shy and apprehensive initially… But…” He flexes. “Super cool in reality!”

...Kiyoshi blinks. On one hand, he’s offended on a deeply fundamental level upon being even remotely compared to that excuse for a cat. But on the other hand… He’s never been called ‘super cool’ before.

*Why is it Makoto’s so capable of turning the weirdest shit into compliments!?*

“I - Er - Thanks,” he sputters. “For the compliment. The cat compliment.”

“You’re welcome, my dear friend!” Makoto says with a salute.

Despite seeming fairly flattered as well, Fumiko’s interest has dropped exponentially now that there’s no longer a cat within fifteen feet of her. She stands.

“Is that all you had to show us?” she asks.

Makoto nods. “Yeah! I wanted you guys to meet her! You’re the first ever! Not even Nagisa has had the pleasure of making her acquaintance yet!”

Kiyoshi is personally victimized by the mental image of him bringing that thing into class. That ‘yet’ tacked onto the end of Makoto’s sentence has him nervous in particular.

“Please never let her meet Shiota-sensei,” he begs.

“No promises!” Makoto says with a smirk.

Fumiko rolls her eyes. “In that case, I should get going home. I don’t want to be late,” she admits. “Thank you for letting me meet her, Makoto.”

Makoto nods. “No problem! Let’s meet up here again sometime, okay? Next time I’ll bring the laser pointer!”

Fumiko chuckles. “I’ll see what I can do.” And she starts making her way home. “Goodbye.”

“Seeya tomorrow!”

“Bye!” Kiyoshi quickly adds on.

And before they know it, she’s gone.

Kiyoshi stretches. “I should probably get on my way, too,” he admits. “If I’m too late, my dad might get worried about me.” He highly, *highly* doubts it, but it’s a nice thought.

“Alright!” Makoto says with a nod. But he’s not letting Kiyoshi go quite yet. “You should totally let me meet your dad sometime. Y’know. In return for me letting you meet my totally awesome kitty cat.”

Kiyoshi’s looking for the nicest way to say Makoto would get on his father’s last nerve when Makoto continues to speak.

“I mean, he like, sounds so cool. Teaching Nagisa and Karma and all! I bet he’s a badass. Is it true he’d fight them?”

“I - Er-” Kiyoshi sputters. “‘Fight them’ is a bit of an exaggeration. Sometimes he’d just do what
Shiota-sensei’s doing now. Y’know? ‘Strike me in practice for trying to get a hit in on that octopus. If you can’t get me, you’ll never get him.’"

Makoto nods vigorously. “I bet he has so many neat stories about things that went down! About himself and Korosensei and all of their students! Pretty please let me talk to him sometime?”

Kiyoshi sighs. “I mean, I’m not opposed, but he’s not exactly the storytelling type.”

“So?” Makoto scoffs. “I’m not about to be deterred by that! I’m sure with a little perseverance I can chisel through that gruff, no-nonsense exterior of his.”

_Gah! How had he gleaned that much from ‘not the storytelling type!’? This kid’s intuition is CREEPY!_

“Like I said, I’ll see what I can do,” he replies. “But my dad’s… Actually not home a lot.”

“Oh.” Makoto frowns deeply. “…That’s sad.”

“I’m used to it,” Kiyoshi says with a shrug.

“Well, I’d still like to meet him, sometime. Maybe talk to him about the right way to treat his son!”

_“PLEASE DON’T.”_

“I’m joking, I’m joking. I’m sure he’s just busy with work. I get it. My dad works a lot, too.”

Kiyoshi sighs. “Yeah.”

He knows for a fact Makoto wouldn’t get what it’s like to fear every day your dad might not come home, but he doesn’t want to be a downer. He keeps his mouth shut.

Makoto must notice the somber atmosphere, because he places a firm hand on Kiyoshi’s shoulder and gives him a grin. “Maybe you can even let me meet your mom! I heard she’s smoking hot?”

Kiyoshi chokes on his own spit. He tears himself away from Makoto.

_“Don’t say that about my mother!”_ he shrieks, feeling his cheeks flush pink with humiliation.

Makoto snickers. “It’s not MY fault you have a MILF of a m-”

_“NOPE! I am not having this conversation!”_ he snaps, pushing his way past Makoto.

Lord knows he’s already had it a thousand times before. Kid after kid after kid seems to be convinced his mom is the ‘hottest piece of ass on the planet.’ A deeply uncomfortable notion, considering, you know: The fact that she’s his _goddamn mom_! She’s happily taken by his father, thank you very much!

“Awww, c’mo-” Makoto tries to insist through his giggles.

Kiyoshi’s already storming off. _“NOPE! I’m not doing this today! Or tomorrow! Do not bring this up at school tomorrow! Goodbye! Have a horrible day!”_ He begins the long trek home, speedwalking as fast as humanly possible.

Makoto’s laughing up a storm. _“Jeez-! Jeez!”_ He says, quickly tailing Kiyoshi. “Didn’t realize it was such a sore spot! Just wait up a second!”
Despite knowing far better than to give this maniac the time of day, Kiyoshi skids to a halt. He lets out a sigh. “What is it?”

“Okay, okay, okay-” Makoto says, panting as he reaches Kiyoshi’s side. “First of all, you are a fast walker when you’re mad. Second of all, I’m sorry I called your hot mom hot.”

Kiyoshi lets out an irritated “Tch.”

“But third of all, I mean that, okay?” Makoto admits, sheepishly jamming his hands in his pockets. “I’d… Really love to meet your parents. Some stuff’s gone down recently, and I…” He pauses. “Well, anyway, I’ve heard they’re very good people. It’d mean a lot to me if I was able to say hello sometime.”

It’s a surprisingly genuine request. Makoto’s staring him down with those quivering puppy dog eyes of his. He’s not exactly sure why Makoto’s so invested in meeting his pseudo-celebrity parents, but… Admittedly it’s nice to see that sort of sincerity from Makoto.

“Like I said, I’ll see what I can do. For you to meet up with the both of them.” He pauses. “As long as you never call my mom hot ever again-”

Makoto doesn’t even seem to process what he’s saying. He fist pumps excitedly, then slaps Kiyoshi on the back. “Thanks, Kiyoshi! No promises, though!” He cheekily sticks his tongue out. And before Kiyoshi can protest, he’s gone, darting off towards wherever his own home is.

Kiyoshi sighs. He can only hope Makoto doesn’t call his mom hot to her face. The last thing she needs is more ammunition.

...Obnoxious prick.

*Makoto, that is! Not his own mother!*

Annoying as he is, though, Kiyoshi does like the idea of having him over. Fumiko, too. Maybe one day when both his parents are home, he can invite them over. He can’t help but remember what Makoto had said earlier. About not having friends. He may be weird, but Kiyoshi’s friendship must mean a lot to him. To Fumiko, too. They might be a handful, but he thinks he’s starting to like having them around. No-one’s ever showed him their cat before.

...Yeah. He likes that. Maybe, just maybe, they’re the first real friends he’s had, either. And they deserve to see his place.

Kiyoshi checks his phone compulsively on the way home.

[5/29/2030 2:01 PM:] [Kiyoshi]: I’ll be home a little late! Makoto says he has something to show us. See you soon!

[5/29/2030 2:03 PM:] [Dad]: Ok.

[5/29/2030 2:03 PM:] [Dad]: See you.

That was maybe a half hour ago. They haven’t exchanged anything since.

Days alone with dad are weird. It always feels like there’s an elephant in the room they’re ignoring. He stares at the phone as he walks.
On my way now.

He waits antsily for his phone to buzz in response.

Days alone with dad are quiet. Neither of them are talkative.

It takes him three minutes to reply. Kiyoshi feels paranoid for even tracking it.

Alright.

...He doesn’t ask how it had been.

Most of all, days with dad are lonely.

He pockets his phone and sighs.

He makes it two minutes before he checks again.

That same ‘alright’ stares back at him, equally as unimpressed.

“He showed us a cat” he starts to type, but quickly backtracks.

“Guess what we saw today?” he tries again.

He even gives “School was good” a shot.

He deletes that, too.

He just can’t word it right. And to be honest, he doesn’t know why he bothers. His dad won’t care about that.

Sometimes it feels like his dad won’t care about anything. Least of all about him.

It’s no secret that he’s a disappointment to him. Kiyoshi knows that more than anything. It's simply become a fundamental fact of the universe. Gravity attracts, seasons turn, and his family regrets having him.

He sighs and pockets his phone.

He’s not sure what he wants, really. Because here’s the thing: He’s not unhappy. If anything, he lives a fantastic life. He’s well off and well fed. He has plenty of interests, and now he even has friends. He’s going to a school most people could only dream of. And it’s not that his folks don’t love him… They just…

...Wish he could be so much better?

It’s dumb. What else can he possibly ask for?

He kicks a stone as he walks.

He doesn’t think he’ll ever feel good enough. And he’s come to accept that, too. He’s lived his entire life in a bubble, chained down by those all too familiar fears and anxieties. They've just become normal. And he supposes that’s okay. It’s just a matter of life. He has his good days, and there are even moments when he likes himself. Moments when he forgets. Moments where he gets by.
But somehow, days with dad always seem to remind him.

He checks his phone one last time for good measure.

...Dad doesn’t have anything else to say.

It takes him roughly a half hour to get home. He unlatches the door and peeks his head inside.

“Hey,” He says.

“Hey,” Dad says, sitting on the couch with a laptop in front of him.

Taro’s nestled into his side. There goes all of Mom’s hard lint rolling effort. He perks his head up as Kiyoshi takes off his shoes.

“Hey, Taro,” Kiyoshi tacks on.

The dog doesn’t respond. It’s just the two of them.

Silence.

“How was school?” Dad finally asks.

“Good,” Kiyoshi uneventfully answers.

“And your thing with your friends?”

“Good,” Kiyoshi repeats. He opts to not tell Dad about the cat.

“That’s good,” Dad comments. And that’s the extent of it.

‘Good talk’ Kiyoshi almost snarks. But he decides against that, too. That feels more like a joke his mom’s inclined to make.

...She doesn’t overthink it like him.

“Mmmm,” he decides on, instead. He places his book-bag on the floor. “I think I’m going to head up to my room. My head hurts. I think I could use a nap.”

“Okay,” Dad says, piercing eyes never once looking away from Kiyoshi. There’s this indiscernible look on his face. “Do you want me to wake you up at a certain time?”

“Nah,” Kiyoshi responds. “I think I’ll just see how long I can go.”

“Okay.”

That silence hangs over the room once more.

“Take the dog with you,” Dad says. His mouth says “He’s been bothering me all day,” but his eyes say ‘you look like you need him.’

...Kiyoshi will take what he can get. He whistles. Taro hops up and trots over to his side.

“Sleep well,” Dad says as he gets back to his work.

“I will,” Kiyoshi unceremoniously replies.
And that’s that.

He makes his way to his room and flops down on his bed.

He focuses on redirecting his thoughts. It’s a strategy he’s adept at. He steadies his breathing, buries his face in Taro’s fluff, and runs his fingers through his fur. It’s silky soft. Much softer than Miss Nao’s.

Well. He thinks it is, at least. He’d been too pussy to pet her, too.

God! What is wrong with him!?

He’d totally disappointed Makoto. Fumiko had stood up for him, but he knows deep down she’d judged him for it, too. If she had done it, why couldn’t he? Because he was too cowardly, that was why. It was just a cat. What’s the worst it could have done to him?

Dad would have just petted the cat.

And there he is again.

He can’t blame Dad for being awkward around him sometimes. Mom, too. He gets it. He knows that he was entirely unplanned. That he’d been a last minute decision. That he’d thrown their lives entirely off track. A three hit combo.

He’d be disappointed if he gave birth to himself, too. They’d sacrificed so much for him, and he’d turned out the sort of son who overthinks everything, panics subsequently, and then hides himself away in his room.

It feels like they’re always just going through the motions. Kiyoshi disappointing, Mom overcompensating, and Dad pretending he’s happy with the life he’s living.

He feels that familiar hitch in his breath and reminds himself again not to dwell on it. A routine he knows all too well, considering sometimes it feels like ‘dwelling’ is all he ever does.

Gah! Don’t think about how badly you’re trying to think about thinking about avoiding it!

Think about your dog. He reminds himself. Your friends. You’re excited to have them over, aren’t you?

...And he is. When he’s not running himself in circles about what they must think about him, he likes his friends. And he thinks he mostly likes them because he doesn’t tend to run himself in circles about them as much as he does over other people. With them, he gets exactly what he sees on the tin. Fumiko’s too blunt to hide her distaste over anything he does, and Makoto has too little of a filter to hide anything that goes through his mind. They let him know what they really think of him.

...And they still like him.

Maybe they don’t care about the cat. In fact, they probably don’t care about the cat. Sure, Makoto had seemed disappointed, but he’ll probably have forgotten about it entirely before tomorrow. And yeah, Fumiko may be a little judgmental, but she has far more valid things to tear him apart over.

...They don’t care about the cat.

That releases some of the tightness in his chest. It’s nice when he can manage to untangle his
thoughts. Point out the contradictions. Figure that what he thinks isn’t always what’s true. It’s the one asset he has when he gets this way.

Yeah. His friends make him feel a bit better.

Taro nuzzles his side. Taro makes him feel a bit better, too.

He can’t wait to show them Taro. He bets Makoto will love him, even if Fumiko might turn her head up at him a little. He just hopes Makoto doesn’t end up spooking the dog with his overzealous energy.

...He’s excited to show them his room, too. His book collection, his PS6, and his Nintendo Verse. He wonders if they’ve ever played Pokemon before. Even if they have, he bets they don’t have a shiny Absol like he does! Have they ever read Fullmetal Alchemist? Or what about Warrior Cats? Makoto will probably gush over his fish, but something tells him Fumiko will be more impressed by his study corner or his chemistry kit. He can’t help but wonder if they’ll make fun of his diary, and briefly entertains the idea of hiding it in his closet, before quickly figuring no, they won’t give a shit. As long as they don’t read it, at least.

He leaves himself a mental note to “get a massive fucking padlock before he invites his nosey friends over.” The last thing they need to be learning about is his daddy issues or his fear of the dark.

And despite himself, he even finds himself looking a little forward to it... The idea of having them over. Something tells him it’ll be a fun night.

At least, for the most part.

There’s only one flaw in Makoto’s seamless plan. How exactly does he plan to get through to the ‘gruff, no-nonsense’ Karasuma, when his own son can’t even seem to do that?

Being a teacher means making hard decisions.

And Nagisa finds himself face to face with one after Kiyoshi approaches him with a concern.

The past two weeks had been going seamlessly. With all of his spouses on the same page, Nagisa had finally been ready to buckle down on operation “Give Makoto (And The Rest of His Students!) A Good Life.”

Midterms had flown by, and while there were definitely some fumbles, the kids were feeling good about themselves, and Nagisa could see exactly what areas he needed to double up on in regards to helping his them study. Tutoring with Makoto was going great, and Gakushuu was helping him record his suspicions. Karma invited himself into the classroom one more time just for good measure (No stabbings involved this time,) and Kayano seemed thankful Nagisa had opened up to the others.

Spirits were high, and it felt like Nagisa was finally back on track in regards to getting his head back on his shoulders.

“Makoto’s been stealing things,” took that fragile normality he’d found, torn it out of his hands, smashed it with a fucking baseball bat, and then run it over with a truck.

“He’s been what?”
“Stealing things,” Kiyoshi’d repeated. “He let it slip when he was, uh-” He hesitated. “Showing us his pet. Said he takes things from the 7/11. Usually I’d think he was making it up to seem cool. But… I just don’t think he’s that kind of person?”

“I’ll… Look into it.”

That had been two days ago. And he’s seen it everywhere since then.

The snacks Makoto boldly carries into class every morning, and his irregular schedule. But more so than that, than the misdemeanor looming above his head, the confirmation that his misbehavior in class may have more serious roots. That his dirty clothes are more than an unruly boy’s rough-and-tumble nature, and that the candy he demands from Nagisa is indeed a necessity, not a bragging right.

...That the stabbing had been learned behavior.

Makoto strikes Nagisa as a lot of things, but the sort to rob a store for fun is none of those. He needs to step in.

It’s 5:30PM on a Wednesday afternoon. Nagisa and Makoto are just finishing up their studies, and Nagisa’s looking for a way to breach the subject.

Nagisa’s had this talk with students what feels like a thousand times now, but it never gets any easier.

Makoto slaps his pencil down on the desk with a grin. “And that’s that!” he shouts triumphantly, having finally fumbled his way through a particularly difficult Science worksheet. “Got anything else for me to do while you look that over, or can I get going?” He’s bouncing in his seat, no doubt enthusiastic about the idea of getting on with his day and returning to… Whatever it is he does when he’s not on school grounds.

He’s talkative about his studies. He’s talkative about his friends and about his interests. But he’s uncharacteristically secretive about his personal life. And that’s bad sign number 2.

“I was actually wondering if we could talk about something before you head out?” Nagisa asks. “Real quick? It’s actually pretty important.”

Makoto shrugs. “Sure! I’ve got time to blow,” he says, scooting in his chair. “What is it? Have you got more stories about Korosensei?”

“Not exactly,” Nagisa replies. “It’s about you,” he says, pretending that those aren’t ostensibly the same thing. “Listen, uh - I don’t want this to sound like an accusation. So don’t think I’m mad at you. Because I’m not. I’m just worried. But I’ve been observing you, and I’ve heard some rumors.” He knows better than to namedrop Kiyoshi. “...Is it true you’ve been stealing things?”

Makoto blinks. His mouth hangs open, but he’s silent.

Nagisa has to admit that was sort of abrupt. Probably the last topic Makoto expected him to breach, in fact? His mistake-

“Sorry. That was a bit sudden,” he admits. “But like I said, I’-”

Makoto finally finds his words. “It doesn’t really matter,” he quickly says.

Excuse me?
His defensiveness speaks volumes. If Makoto had just been making things up, something tells Nagisa he’d have just admitted it as opposed to avoiding the topic entirely. No. They have a real problem on their hands.

“That, uh - Does kind of really matter, buddy,” Nagisa says. He holds a hand out. “But… You can talk to me about this, okay? There’s no need to lie. I’m not going to rat you out. I’m just scared you’ll end up getting in trouble.”

“I said it doesn’t matter-”

“Makoto.”

Makoto’s shoulders lower. “Maybealittle,” he admits, averting his gaze. “But it’s not, like… A big deal. It’s just a fun thing.”

Nagisa can’t exactly believe that, either.

“Makoto, I know you would never do something like that just for the sake of it.” Perhaps one could argue the Karma incident proves otherwise, but Nagisa simply can’t agree. Even that had had its own twisted reasoning. As irrational as he can seem, Makoto calculates his every move. “...Is there another reason you’re doing this?”

He knows it’s best for Makoto if he can manage to coax a confession out of him as opposed to making any bold statements. The last thing he wants to do is make any big conclusions about his home life. And he knows from personal experience that if anything is going on during after school hours, it’ll most help Makoto reclaim his agency to come to that conclusion himself.

“No, Nagisa,” Makoto says, standing up. “Listen. I’m just gonna go, okay?”

“No,” Nagisa says sternly. “We need to talk about this.”

“And I told you it's not a big deal!” Makoto insists.

“It is. If you’re not doing this for fun, it’s my job to step in. It’s my job as your teacher to protect you, after all,” Nagisa points out. “And if you’re just doing this for fun, you’re hurting people. An employee might get in a lot of trouble because of what you’re doing. You’re not that sort of person, are you, Makoto?”

Makoto shuffles awkwardly, averting his gaze. “...No,” he admits, staring at the floor.

“And you’ll get in even more trouble if you get caught.”

“I won’t get caught,” Makoto quickly reassures. “I’m really good at it-”

“You don’t know that. You’re not invincible, Makoto.”

“Eh, I’m close enough-” Makoto jokes, giving him a nervous grin.

He’s not joking his way out of this one. Close enough? Close enough!? Nagisa knows better than anyone that even ‘close enough’ to invincible isn’t enough to save your hide when you’ve fallen far enough!

Makoto must notice his upset look. “Look. Don’t worry. Please don’t waste your time on this. I’ll be fine, Nagisa.”

“No, you won’t-” Nagisa snaps. “Please talk to me, Makoto. Is there anything going on at home?”
He doesn’t even realize he’s made that leap until it’s already out of his mouth. Whatever, whatever. It’s obvious enough. The way he carries himself. The things he does. How he talks about himself. Waste your time? This is his job!

...The way he freezes up at Nagisa’s accusation.

“N-No!” he sputters. “Home is good, really! My dad tries super hard!” He wheels around and begins to parade off. “In fact, I should really be getting home to him right now- Seeya!”


Makoto sighs and stops. He lets out a frustrated “What?”

“Are you getting enough to eat at home?”

Makoto’s quiet.

“...No,” he admits.

Nagisa’s heart snaps in two. He’d seen it coming, but it’s still horrific to hear. “Y-”

“But-! Like! He shouldn’t have to get in trouble because of it! So don’t worry!” Makoto quickly clarifies. “We get by! I get by! I take care of myself, okay?”

...And you’re just a kid! That’s not okay!

“You don’t have to anymore,” Nagisa says. “You should never have to get by on your own. I’m not going to get your dad in trouble,” he reassures. At least not until he looks into the situation more. It’s… Always hard to break away from a situation like that when you really do love the person hurting you. “But you’re not alone anymore. You can always come to me for help,”

“Okay, okay, whatever-”

It’s easy to tell he’s not taking him seriously. “I mean that, Makoto.”

“I know! But please don’t stress out over me. Trust me when I say there’re people who need your help way more than me.”

“It’s my job to take care of all my students, you included.” He’s clearly going through a lot as is. The last thing he needs to be worrying about is the concept of inconveniencing Nagisa. “I’ve done this a very long time. You’re never asking for too much by asking for my help. If you ever need something to eat or a place to stay-”

“I. Don’t.”

“...Then what do you intend to do, Makoto?” Nagisa asks.

“Keep doing what I’m doing,” Makoto says, heading towards the door.

Nagisa feels his heart pound in his chest. Something tells him once he’s out that door, there really will be no getting through to him. He can’t let that happen.

“And what do you do when you get caught?” he asks impatiently.

_Not again!_
“I won’t.”

“You. Will.”

He will. And the world won’t bat an eye. They won’t see the impoverished, traumatized kid who tries so, so hard. They won’t see the child afraid of becoming a burden. They’ll see the thieving, unstable, bloodthirsty teenager. Something dangerous. A ticking time bomb. His life will be over before it even gets a chance to begin. Because he got off to a bad start. Because no-one tried to step in before now. Because he doesn’t believe he deserves good things to happen to him. Because not everyone can be like Nagisa! It takes all his patience to be this way! To see in others what he saw. But the world doesn’t understand! It never has!

People take their first impressions and they run with them. If nothing else proves that, the crimson barrier that loomed over this building fifteen years ago does.

Makoto stops in front of the door, hand shaking.

“No…” he softly says.

“Why won’t you just accept help from anyone?” Nagisa asks

“I don’t. Need it,” he repeats.

“Yes you do!” Nagisa snaps.

“Why do you even care so much!?”

Makoto reaches for the door.

“Because I can’t let you get hurt again, Korosensei!”

Nagisa only processes he’s exploded after the words have left his mouth. He stands trembling, blinking back tears.

Makoto stares at him with wide eyes.

...He messed up.

What is he doing!? Yelling at a kid in a tone that reminds him all-too-much of his overbearing mother? Clutching at the table with a death grip? Letting his emotions get the best of him in front of a kid whose situation he gets? Of course he’s scared of being a burden! It’s not that easy to shake that feeling-! How could he forget what it’s like to be so vulnerable in that situation!?

...How could he let his delusions slip in front of Makoto?

Neither of them speak.

“I-” He finally sputters. “I’m sorry. I was…” he stumbles over his words. “I was thinking about another situati-”

“No,” Makoto interrupts, slowly pulling himself away from the door.

...A massive grin spreads across his face, and the atmosphere in the room shifts in an instant.

He says it with a renewed vigor.
Chapter 8! Chapter 8! And a week earlier than I expected to have it out! ;P I’ve been writing 1k words a day, just like I wanted to. And while I’m not sure I can keep that up throughout ALL of the summer (With Artfight in July after all ahaha), I can certainly try!

I don’t know whether to describe this chapter as pretty uneventful, or extremely eventful.

Miss Nao is a delight, and I had TONS of fun writing her. She’s just genuinely hilarious. Fun fact: Initially Makoto was drafted without any pets due to his home situation, but Miss Nao came into existence because of a Justshowerthoughts post. It was something along the lines of “Owning a cat to catch mice is like hiring an assassin” and I laughed at the word assassin, went “sweet assclass reference” and decided Korosensei 2 NEEDED a cat in that place.

If she even is a cat. Kiyoshi’s still not super sold on that one.

I also had fun getting to delve into some of Kiyoshi’s daddy issues. Self loathing up in this house tonight. Obviously I don’t think Karasuma would exactly make an unloving dad. He’s trying. But I don’t think he’d make a very good dad either, and I think that’s bound to have a pretty negative impact on a deeply insecure person like Kiyoshi.

Hey, though! On a lighter note, Kiyoshi reads Warrior Cats. Which is… Always a delightful thought? His favorites are Ivypool and Ravenpaw. His favorites from FMA (Which was mentioned as well) are Al and Pride (He thinks the latter is TERRIFYING, but cool)

But none of you exactly care about Kiyoshi right now, do you? (Okay, no. Who am I kidding? You totally do. The kid’s a fan favorite. He lights up a room.) Nagisa not only just learned about Makoto’s home situation, but let Makoto in on the elephant in the room. (Thus the chapter title. Hehe)

Good going, bozo. But with Makoto’s reaction… Who knows? Maybe this will go better than either of them could have possibly anticipated.

Guess you’ll just have to wait til the next chapter to find out! Like I said, hopefully it’ll be here soon with the updated writing schedule, but I can’t make any promises.

Some songs that helped with writing this chapter were Zoey Van Goey’s You Told The Drunks I Knew Karate, Pokemon Mystery Dungeon’s Guildmaster Wigglytuff, Mother Mother’s Infinitesimal, Radical Face’s The Mute, and The Lightning Thief’s The Tree On The Hill.

I hope you enjoyed! And I’ll try to update again soon! See you then!
"Because I can’t let you get hurt again, Korosensei!"

“You think so too, don’t you?”

Let’s take a step back. Because Makoto’s had a LONG few weeks, and quite frankly, he can’t believe he just said that aloud either.

Nagisa’s staring straight through him.

It all begun with Nagisa.

When Makoto had first caught wind of Constellate Junior High, it had felt like an earth-shattering revelation. Feverishly poring over pictures of the mountainside school, a feeling had resided in his gut more firmly than ever. And although he’d been quick to peg some of that quaint certainty he’d felt up to the all-too-alluring idea of getting to shoot down an adult as part of the curriculum, something more persistent had never ceased nagging at him.

No. He’d been certain. The moment he’d first scaled that mountainside and set his eyes on the aged school, he’d finally found the word he’d been searching for.

‘Familiar.’

He’d been there before.

Of course, it had changed. Fresh zinnias and daffodils bloomed in the flowerbed. The roof had been repaired and the refreshing feeling of air conditioning had hit his face the moment he’d entered the building. The shed seemed to have been rebuilt entirely and the floorboards no longer creaked under his footstep.

But running his hand across the wooden walls… Taking in the glow of the dim overhead lighting, he’d known it for certain.

This was the place from his dreams.

They’d never quite been clear. Blurred faces- simply pieces of foggy memories. But he’d known without a shadow of a doubt that his heart told him he was returning ‘home.’

The boy from his dreams had been there as well.

28 of them? There'd been 28 of them, he'd decided. The figures in his dreams. 30 if you count the adults. It was hard to remember them all. He wasn't certain of their names or their faces, but he knew he’d loved them.

The moment he’d seen him, it had felt as if the fog had finally lifted from one face.

He’d been taller. Not by much, but enough. He’d stood prouder, shoulders straight, and smile genuine. Crescent tie around his neck and hair cut shorter than before... He hadn’t been sure as to why, but it had almost made Makoto feel proud.
...What had his name been?

Nagisa. It had been Nagisa.

He’d tested it out, and it had felt right on his tongue.

Nagisa had never even noticed Makoto’d called him the name before he’d introduced himself by full name.

It had all just sort of grown from that: The sight of an old friend.

The feeling of the blade in his hand. The smell of the mountain breeze. And Nagisa’s diligent lessons.

His dreams had turned vivid, blossomed forth into beauty from the vague. Colorful and familiar. Tender and heartfelt. Laughter he couldn’t quite place reassuring to his ears.

And the more he looked, the more he found.

Kiyoshi had spoken up about his parents and something had clicked in Makoto’s mind. Ah, yes. They had worked here, hadn’t they? He was happy they’d remained together. Their son was a spitting image of the both of them.

He’d snuck onto Nagisa’s desktop searching for the date of Fumiko’s birth. And instead, he’d been greeted with the sight of two more familiar faces. A redhead with a smirk, and a girl he swore looked so different, albeit with eyes he’d never mistake.

Had he known the third? A man standing tall, with piercing eyes and apricot hair. He’d felt so taken aback, seeing him laugh alongside the three of them.

No. No. He’d definitely seen that face before.

G... Gakuho...?

No. That wasn’t right.

The boy. There had been a boy. They hadn’t gotten along. That was it. That’s why he couldn’t remember him. He hadn’t been a part of the safe haven that Makoto found in his dreams.

A “He just didn’t strike me as your type” is all he could find it in him to comment.

And still, he’d been happy for him, too.

Fumiko’s face had lit up when she’d received her birthday gift. And something had unlatched in the back of his own mind. He knew that feeling, didn’t he? Yes. He’d received a gift, too. They’d sung softly, the candlelight illuminating their faces. All 28 of them. His... His 28...

Students?

A teacher. There was no doubt about it. He’d been a teacher. Just like another someone he was hearing an awful lot about.

He’d had to stab Karma. He knew that the moment he saw him. He’d been overjoyed to reunite, but the competitive streak in his gut demanded it of him. ‘Get even’ it had said. ‘He’ll understand.’

And he had. Makoto, however, hadn’t quite understood until three days later. He’d dreamt of the
same snide boy and the exploding pain that shot across his hand the moment they’d first shook hands.

...Knife shards taped to his palm. The thought made Makoto burst into laughter the moment he woke. Now *that* was way more clever than a pencil!

It was almost as if he’d seen it all standing on the roof. For one precious moment, he’d been swept back in time. And up there, on top of the world, he’d seen an army of kids trying to land blows on a tall, black haired man. A chuckle had nearly escaped his lips when he’d caught Fumiko’s stare and had been thrust back into reality.

Even before that, he supposes he had to have known. Why else would he have asked Nagisa to tell him about Korosensei? He’d felt it in his bones. The utter joy that surrounded him each time he stepped foot in this building. It had to mean something.

Memories of looming far taller than he stands. Beautiful sights and sweet sounds. The wind whipping on his face as he soared through the air. Memories of loving. *Of being loved.*

And the more he learned, the more he believed. Nagisa was describing him. Each story he told, each anecdote he shared, Makoto felt an absolute truth to.

Looking up at the patchwork moon each night, he’d known that beyond a shadow of a doubt.

He’d been looking for a way to bring it up. Nagisa deserved to know. His voice dripped with grief each time he spoke of Korosensei, and it broke Makoto’s heart. Who was he to continue to allow him to feel that way? That’s not what a teacher did! They had reunions to share! Things to catch up on! There was no time for anguish!

But still, where to even begin? Would Nagisa even *believe* him?

Yes, even the ever-impulsive Makoto had found himself at a loss for words.

But it turns out Makoto didn’t need to breach the topic. His teacher has done just that for him.

Nagisa’s heart stops in his chest.

*W… What was that Makoto just said? No. There’s no way.*

He’d known deep down that from the moment he let himself believe Korosensei had come back, he was setting himself up for disappointment. It just wasn’t likely. It just wasn’t possible, despite any evidence he’d set up in his mind. At… It’s very best, it was something to make him feel better. And… At it’s very worst, it was far too heavy of a weight to put on a child’s shoulders.

*He hadn’t even meant to let it slip!*

But Makoto’s staring at him with determined eyes.

No. This is a mistake. He’s just misinterpreting him.

“P… Pardon?” Nagisa manages to sputter.

Makoto closes the door and takes a step forward. He’s antscily bouncing from foot to foot. “...That I’m related to Korosensei.” He pauses, sending a glance to his side. “Well, no. That I *am* Korosensei.”
Nagisa scrambles to his feet. He feels lightheaded. He can’t tell if he’s sick or giddy.

*He’s… He’s back-*

Nagisa has to hold back tears.

“I- I didn’t mean t- I shouldn’t have - Well -” He fumbles over his words. “I… I mean… What, uh… What led you to come to that conclusion?”

Makoto gives him a look.

“N-Not that I- Don’t believe you-” *God! He believes him more than anything!* “I’d just… Like to hear it. I’d really like to hear it.”

Makoto gives him a tiny nod. And then a surer one. “I’d be glad to,” he says. “But… I think we should sit down first. You’re shaking.”

Nagisa only notices it when Makoto points it out. He desperately tries to steady his breathing and returns to his chair. He pulls out another and beckons Makoto over. Nagisa quietly sets their schoolwork aside and Makoto takes a seat next to him.

In a moment, the mood of the room has shifted from tense to poignant. Nagisa gently reminds himself they need to return to the topic of Makoto’s actions before the day is done, but right now there are much more important things on their hands.

Makoto knits his hands. He’s grinning. It’s hard to tell whether he’s nervous or relieved. Quite frankly, Nagisa can’t tell which he’s feeling, either.

“So, like, even I know it’s a bit out of the blue to admit I think I’m your dead teacher,” Makoto awkwardly admits.

“To be fair, I accused you of being my dead teacher first.”

Makoto lets out a giggle. It’s more familiar than ever. “Touche,” he admits. “Okay! Uh! Where do I begin? I thought this would be a lot easier than it actually is-”

“At the beginning would be a good idea.”

“Oh! Right-” Makoto shuffles in his chair. “So… This is gonna be a BIT creepy, but I’ve always dreamt about this place. About you. About your spouses. And about some other guys, too.”

*‘Some other guys, too.’*

“That’s no way to talk about your students,” Nagisa says. Then quickly remembers Makoto hasn’t actually sold him on the idea of this yet. He reminds himself that he’s just dealing with a kid here. He needs to be careful not to spur him on too much. “Well, your theoretical students. You haven’t quite convinced me yet.”

Makoto’s face flushes with embarrassment. “Hey! I’m not saying I don’t care about them! I just… Can’t remember most things yet.” He covers his face with his hands, and it’s Nagisa’s turn to chuckle.


“Well, at first they were super vague and annoying. Like… I’d see a quick shot of someone’s face. Or this place.” He motions around the room. “But… It would happen all the time. All my life I knew it had to mean something. Because even when I couldn’t tell what was going on, it felt
Hey! That’s not entirely true. Nagisa and his friends have done a fair share of revitalizing the school building. But he supposes it has the same sort of rustic vibe to it, so he’ll let it slide.

“I had to get in. And I like sorta convinced myself it was just because this place was SUPER cool, but I knew it was more than that.” He pauses. “I applied myself, y’know. I bet you couldn’t even tell!”

“Oh, no. I could tell.” Nagisa admits. “It was… Part of that enthusiasm that sold me on accepting you.”

“Ah! Then it was an excellent decision on my part!” Makoto exclaims.

Nagisa has to gently remind him to get back on track.

“Oh, yeah. The dreams. They got way crazier after I saw this place in person. I could actually make sense of what was going on! I knew I was here, and I knew some of the people, too! Like you. You were so little!” He snickers, before tossing on a quick, “Age-wise. Height you were about the same.”

“Ha-ha, very funny,” Nagisa replies. “What sort of things did you see?”

“Well… For the most part, they were mundane. At least as mundane as you could get at this place. Study sessions and stuff. But I loomed over everyone! And… I was the smart one. Helping you guys like you’re helping me. And sometimes even that got a little more exciting. Like… In one, there was this girl…”

‘Very specific.’ Nagisa thinks. He doesn’t say that. “…What happened with her?”

“Well, I remember she was struggling with one of her subjects. Language, I think? She was convinced she’d never be any good at it. But it didn’t matter, because she was really good at something else. And I was like ‘no way!’ and helped her with the one she liked, but was secretly training her in the one she hated the whole time! Then she, like, hoodwinked me! Or I hoodwinked her.” He pauses, awkwardly scratching at his shoulder. “Like I said. I don’t remember everything.”

“Okuda,” Nagisa says. He… Remembers that happening. And he hadn’t shared that one with Makoto. “Yeah. She was struggling with her Language. But she was a prodigy in Science. You helped her concoct a formula to try and kill you…”

“But… It didn’t work,” Makoto makes sure to specify.

“Sure didn’t. Most of our attempts didn’t. It just kind of messed with your body instead.”

Makoto smirks. And it’s like a lightbulb flickers over his head. A spark of recognition in his eyes. “Yeah! Right And that’s what I wanted all along! I tricked her to show her the power of how important her words were!” He vigorously nods. “And those were the real cool sorts of stories. Not the studying ones. The assassinations. Your big knives and you all trying to hold me down but failing.” He smirks triumphantly, and Nagisa can practically visualize the lines of green across his face. “Oh! Oh! Or how the robot girl went apeshit at first!”

...He’s not exactly sure that’s how Korosensei would have worded it, but Ritsu did indeed ‘go apeshit.’

“Yeah. They brought Ritsu in from Norway. She didn’t exactly get along with any of us at first.
Did you know one of our classmates taped up her guns at first?"

Makoto giggles at the thought. “Well, that’s one way to get her!” He says. “But… She calmed down eventually, right? How’d that happen?”

“I don’t know. Why don’t you tell me?”


Absolutely not. If… He is who he says he is, he’ll figure that one out on his own. At least, given some time. He’s a smart cookie. “No way.” Nagisa says with a shrug. “I think I’ll let you remember that one for yourself. Good story, really! Much more interesting in person.”

Makoto pouts. “This is JUST like the moon thing. You’re so annoying.”

“Says the most annoying teacher on the planet. Consider it retribution.”

Makoto lets out a half-laugh, half-groan. “Says the guy obsessed with praising him!” he says, bitterly sticking out his tongue.

“Fair point,” Nagisa says, chuckling. “But I’m still not cracking. It’ll feel a lot more rewarding when you figure it out on your own.”

Makoto rolls his eyes, but finally sits up. “Okay, okay,” he relents. Then pauses. He stares at the table, deep in thought, then subsequently realizes he was in the middle of telling a story. “Oh-! I got distracted,” he sheepishly admits. “Uh. Where was I?”

“You were saying your favorite memories were of the assassinations.”

Makoto nods. “Yeah. That was it,” he says. “...And then I got to try it for myself! You have no idea how cool it felt to be on the other end of that situation.”

“Hey. I do, actually. I’ve gone from assassin to assassin-ee, I’ll have you know.”

“Target. The word is target.”

“I think I prefer assassin-ee.”

Makoto promptly ignores him. “I tried it out, and I thought… ‘I’ve done this. I’ve felt this before.’ And it wasn’t just that. Studying by your side… Hearing stories about your friends… Seeing you all grown up… Learning about who Korosensei was… It was like looking into a mirror. It’s one of those things I just knew in my gut. You know what I mean, right?”

“Yeah. I think so.”

Makoto nods firmly. “Of course you do. You feel it in your gut too, don’t you?”

“...Yeah. I think so.”

Makoto gives him a smile. “But I know gut-evidence isn’t exactly conclusive, so that’s why I shared all that stuff I shouldn’t know first! Smart, huh? So. What do you have to say? Believe me?”

It’s Nagisa’s turn to nod.

“...Yeah... I think so.”
Makoto’s right. Even more than just the hard facts (Which there are PLENTY of now), he feels it in his gut. Looking across the table at the tiny boy, and seeing him pump his fist in victory, he knows he’s looking at an old friend. For a moment, he’s fourteen again. And Korosensei is alive.

...Maybe he’s not the same. And maybe he doesn’t remember everything. But he’s alive. And he’s here. And he has a second chance. And that's enough to make Nagisa burst into tears.

“WOAH WOAH WOAH!” Makoto says, putting his hands up in the air. “This was supposed to be, like, a fun thing! A happy reunion! Don’t cry! Don’t cry-”

Nagisa quickly wipes at his eyes and apologizes. “I’m sorry. You’re right. I shouldn’t cry in front of you.” Korosensei or not, Makoto’s still just a kid. “...I’m happy to see you. There’s nothing to cry about.” Still, he’s blinking back tears. “I just... This is a lot... To...” He drifts off, stifling a ‘hic.’

Makoto hurries out of his seat, and rushes over to Nagisa’s side. He wraps him in a hug. “...Hey. Hey. It’s okay. I’m here.”

Nagisa finally breaks down. Like a dam bursting, tears stream down his cheeks. He returns Makoto’s hug, holds him tight to his chest, and lets out a pathetic whimper.

He knows it’s not right to dump this on Makoto, but he can’t hold it back a second longer. So, so much has built up over the past fifteen years. His regrets and his worries and his grief piling up inside his chest until he could barely breathe. To have Korosensei right here... To hug his long lost teacher... It’s downright overwhelming.

Makoto keeps saying “I’m here,” and rubbing circles on his back. “I’m here. I’m here. I’m here.” The more Nagisa hears it, the more he chokes up. And though he can still barely breathe, he thinks... He thinks this is a good cry. Yeah. This is a good cry. Because he’s right here.

...He never wants to let go.

“I missed you,” he whimpers.

“...Hey. No need for that,” Makoto replies, squeezing him tighter. “I’ve been right here two whole months. You didn’t know... But I was right here. So no need to start crying now, okay?”

Nagisa gives a tiny nod. “...Okay.”

There’s so, so much he wants to ask him. Just how much does he remember? Where’s Aguri? Does he miss her? Does he remember her at all? And what about the dangers they’d faced as a class? The downright traumatizing moments laced in between those wonderful days? Does Makoto remember killing?

...Does Makoto remember dying?

So, so badly, Nagisa wants to apologize. Say every day he wished he could have found another way. That he should have fought harder. Been smarter. Forced the world to understand. How long has it haunted him? The blood on his hands...?

But he doesn’t say anything. If Makoto doesn’t remember, Makoto doesn’t remember. The last things he needs to be dwelling on are assassinations in a war-torn world and grief of his own.

...The last thing he needs to be dwelling on is Nagisa taking his life.
“I’m here.” Makoto reminds him, and Nagisa decides that’s the last thing he needs to be dwelling on, too.

“...Yeah. You are,” Nagisa says, and with one last squeeze and a shaky breath, pulls away. “...You’re right here.”

“And I’m not going anywhere this time.”

Nagisa reaches up and wipes his tears away. Makoto’s right. He’s here to stay. Nagisa will make sure of that.

“T... Thank you,” he says. “Thank you, Sensei. If... If there’s anything you ever need-” He pauses. “I’m... I’m here, okay? If your memories ever bother you, or... If your life related to any of this is ever too much, I’m here. So please:” He says. “Hear me out and talk to me about what’s going on. No arguing, this time? I’m here for you. I promise.”

Makoto’s quiet, but Nagisa’s unflinching.

Because he will give Makoto the best life possible. No matter what it takes.

...He’s not going anywhere this time, either.

Ah. So they’re back to this again, huh?

Makoto had hoped touching on the whole “am literally your dead teacher” thing would be enough to distract Nagisa from the much less interesting “living on the poverty line” thing.

“...I told you. That’s really not necessary, okay?” he reassures. “I can take care of myself.”

Nagisa shoots him a wounded look. “Makoto-” he says in exasperation, but quickly cuts himself off. He sighs. “...Maybe you can. But you don’t need to prove yourself to anyone. Even if you can get through this alone, you don’t need to. These things are a lot easier with someone supporting you.”

It’s not about ‘proving himself.’ At least, he doesn’t think so. It’s just... He’s always gotten by. His life is good! He doesn’t see why he needs to go changing that now.

“I know, I know-” he says.

“You’re saying that, but you’re not listening,” Nagisa points out.

He’s not entirely wrong.

Makoto gives an indifferent shrug. “I just don’t see why this is important. I’m happy, Nagisa.”

Nagisa’s brow creases. “Until you get in trouble.”

“IF I get in trouble.”

Here’s the thing, Makoto can’t really process the idea of ‘getting in trouble.’ Being ratted out by 7/11, or having his dad thrown under the bus. Things have gone on this way for this long. He theoretically knows things can go wrong. He can even imagine what would happen. The fallout of his actions. But he can’t bring himself to care? Because it’s not real. It won’t happen.

Nagisa bites his lip. Makoto knows he’s frustrating him, but he supposes he’s avoiding
inconveniencing him in the long term. The last thing he needs is Nagisa worrying about him.

Nagisa’s silent, for a long moment. He’s absentmindedly tapping his finger on the desk. Makoto’s close to speaking up when he says

“Okay. Let me try a different approach.” He looks Makoto’s way. “It would really mean a lot to me if you heard me out. As you can tell, I’ve…” He takes a deep breath. “Missed you a lot. I’ve missed you a lot. It’s been a very long time, Sensei. We have a lot of things to catch up on. And we won’t be able to do that if you end up getting yourself into hot water.”

Makoto shuffles awkwardly.

“And I know you don’t want that. You know what I bet you want? To see everyone again. Hear how they’re doing. Your students are up to a lot of cool things now that they’re all grown up. But what I want is for you to be able to grow up and do cool things yourself. I’m sure you must know that feeling, right?”

...Makoto remembers the pride he’d felt at seeing Nagisa thriving.

“...Yeah. I guess so,” he mumbles.

“So meet me in the middle here. Please,” Nagisa says. “I’m not asking you to overturn your life. And I’m not asking you to leave your dad. I would never ask that. I just want you to let me offer you help where I can. Is that too much to ask?”

“No,” Makoto admits. “I just… Aren’t there people who need that more?”

“If there are, I’ll help them too,” Nagisa says, matter-of-factly.

“...And what if this isn’t a big deal to me?”

“Then we don’t need to turn it into a big deal. We’ll start small. Let me give you a place to have a roof over your head in case of emergencies, and let me get in contact with a guy who can get food on your plate. And, of course, you stop stealing. That’s all. Otherwise, life goes on as normal. That doesn’t sound too stressful, does it?”

“...No,” Makoto admits. In fact, it sounds… Sort of nice.

“Good. And… If you work with me on this, I’ll work with you, too. I’ll do my best to get you in contact with the others.”

Makoto perks up.

“You will!?” he shouts.

“I will. I can’t promise it’ll be immediate. Because this is… A lot to dump on them. But I will. And until then, I’ll tell you all about how they’re doing. In fact…” He smiles. “Why don’t I bring in that old yearbook sometime? So you can see their faces. Well. If I can even manage to lift it. That thing is huge.”

Makoto holds back a giggle as the mental image of a massive book resurfaces in his mind. Thick enough to be used as a goddamn battering ram.

“I’d… I’d love that!” he admits. He can’t even begin to imagine what kind of amazing things they’re doing by now-
“Then we have a deal? I give you a hand, and you stop stealing?”

Makoto hesitates.

“...And you’re sure it won’t be a bother to you, Nagisa?”

Nagisa’s taken aback. “Of course not!” He sputters. “The... The opposite, in fact. I’m... Not sure if you remember, but I didn’t exactly have the best childhood, Sensei.”

Oh. Makoto remembers. A screaming woman yanking Nagisa by the hair. The memory of her is half of what had made him so afraid of his father the other night. Her shrill tone reminded him of him, and suddenly he’d been terrified their own nightly yelling matches would escalate into violence, too.

Makoto doesn’t say that. He gives a curt nod.

“But you helped me through all of my struggles. Even when I was difficult. You’ve done... So much for me. And I know I can never do exactly what you did for me, but please, let me try. Let me repay the favor.” He tries not to let it show, but his voice drips with desperation.

...Makoto can’t endure a moment more.

“...Okay. You have a deal.”

Nagisa gives him a relieved smile. “Thank you, Makoto. I promise you you won’t regret this. I’ll get in contact with my guy, and bring the yearbook in tomorrow. In the meantime...” He digs through his pockets. “Take this.”

He tosses something Makoto’s way. He barely manages to catch it.

“W... What’s this?”

“Spare house keys. You’re welcome at my place at any time.”

Makoto stares at the keys in his hand. “Y... You had these on hand!?”

Nagisa holds up two fingers. “I had two. I always try to make sure to in case of emergencies. You never know when a student will need you.”

“W-Where will I stay!? I mean- If something happens at night!??”

“There’s a reason we have a guest room, buddy.” Nagisa smirks. “I’ve been in this business for eight years. You start to have a few tricks up your sleeve.” He even writes down his address for Makoto.

Makoto scrambles to Nagisa’s side. “T-Thank you!” He says with a grin. It’s his turn to hug Nagisa. “You... You have no idea how much this means.”

Nagisa hugs back. And this time, he doesn’t cry. “Believe it or not, I think I do. This means a lot to me, too. Thank you for working with me.”

It feels like forever before they pull away.

But finally, Nagisa sighs, gently pries Makoto off of him, and glances at the clock. “You should get going,” he admits. “Seems I’ve kept you a bit later than usual.”
...Holy hell. Is it really already seven!?

“Yeah. I guess you’re right,” Makoto replies, fiddling with the keys in his hands. “Miss Nao is probably waiting for me.”

Nagisa gives him a weird look.

“My cat. Miss Nao. Kiyoshi told me not to tell you about her, but she hasn’t actually done anything bad. He just thinks she’s creepy.” He huffs and sticks his tongue out. “We’ll get food for her too, right?”

Nagisa nods. “Of course. We’ll get plenty of food for her too.”

Makoto smiles. “Thanks, Nagisa. I guess I should go now.”

“Just for now. I’m sure your family’s worried about you.”

Makoto knows that’s not true. The tone in Nagisa’s voice is a clear indicator he knows too.

“...Yeah.”

“Come over sometime soon, okay?” Nagisa says. “I... Don’t exactly know how I can get you in contact with everyone, yet, but let’s just say Karma and Kayano know most of what’s going on. And... They’d love to see you.”

Something tells Makoto they’re going to cry all over him, too. But that’s okay. He can’t exactly blame them.

And hey. He’s missed them, too.

“I will. Thank you for everything, Nagisa.” He makes his way towards the door. Nagisa’s staring at the back of his head. It feels so weird to leave now. After everything. A reunion like this should never end, he thinks. “See you tomorrow?”

“See you tomorrow, Sensei,” Nagisa says. And it’s a promise.

Makoto walks out the door, sending one last glance back over his shoulder. “Remember to bring the yearbook!” he shouts.

“I’ll see if I can lift it!” Nagisa quips. “And I’ll keep you updated on the food situation too, okay!?”

Makoto nods. And with that, he shuts the door on his teacher and student.

“See you,” he reminds himself. It’s not goodbye forever. Nagisa’s made that much clear.

Makoto treks his way down the mountain and turns towards home. His gaze drifts back to the keys in hand.

...They make him choke up.

To be frank, he doesn’t really care about getting to go himself. He’s still not sure he’s worth Nagisa’s time. He’s not sure he ever will be. But the way Nagisa had had them on hand... It makes his heart burst with pride.

Nagisa’s grown up into a truly compassionate, truly thoughtful person. To witness the boy who
had loathed himself, who had doubted he had a future thrive... To take part in that future himself... It’s beautiful.

Something tells him he hadn’t ever considered his own place in the future before.

Not even now. As Makoto. Nagisa had been the first one to step in and tell him “you matter too.”

Yeah. He’ll go. He’s not sure if he deserves it, but it’s the least he can do for Nagisa’s hospitality. If nothing else, Nagisa deserves that much. Plus, Nagisa is right. There are some other people he’d like to see.

Makoto grins. The future looks bright. And even making his way back towards a bleak home, there’s a skip in his step as he reflects on not only the escape he’s found, but the kind boy he’s raised.

Nagisa stares at the door for a good three minutes.

He can hardly process what just happened.

K… Korosensei… He’s really-

He feels his breath hitch again. Okay, no. Don’t do that, Nagisa. The last thing he needs to be doing right now is shedding more tears. That’s not what Makoto had wanted. This… This is a good thing. This is the best thing!

He dazedly pats his pocket in search of his phone. Whips it out, and stares at the screen.

He’s acutely aware of the texts he needs to make. It’s only just now he’s realizing his spouses aren’t exactly going to be pleased with his initial slipup, but he can only hope they’ll feel the same joy that’s bursting in his chest when they hear exactly what had gone down after.

He opens their private group chat.

[6/3/2030 7:14 PM:] [Nagisa]: Are you guys home yet?

[6/3/2030 7:15 PM:] [Kayano]: On my way now!

[6/3/2030 7:15 PM:] [Karma❤️]: Yeah we are. Why are you not home yet? Ended up having to go overtime tutoring the kid?

Ah. He faintly notes he hadn’t actually finished grading Makoto’s science assignment. He’ll have to get around to that.

[6/3/2030 7:16 PM:] [Nagisa]: Something like that.

[6/3/2030 7:17 PM:] [Nagisa]: Listen. Uh. I’m calling a family meeting when I get home, okay?


[6/3/2030 7:18 PM:] [Gakushuu]: What did you do?


[6/3/2030 7:18 PM:] [Kayano]: Is everything okay?


[6/3/2030 7:19 PM:] [Nagisa]: I’ll explain it all when I get home.


[6/3/2030 7:21 PM:] [Karma❤️]: About Makoto??


[6/3/2030 7:22 PM:] [Nagisa]: I also gave out a spare set of housekeys. So expect a guest in the coming days.


[6/3/2030 7:24 PM:] [Kayano]: ????

[6/3/2030 7:24 PM:] [Kayano]: Is he okay?


[6/3/2030 7:25 PM:] [Nagisa]: Like I said: I’ll explain when I get home.

[6/3/2030 7:26 PM:] [Kayano]: Okay!


[6/3/2030 7:27 PM:] [Kayano]:


Nagisa sighs and exits the group chat. Okay. That’s that. He has that conversation booked. What was he supposed to do next?

Oh, right!

He opens his DMs with Muramatsu as he begins to pack his books.

[6/3/2030 7:30 PM:] [Nagisa]: Hey.

[6/3/2030 7:30 PM:] [Nagisa]: You there?

[6/3/2030 7:30 PM:] [Nagisa]: Another kid came up.

After high school, Muramatsu had really picked up his old man’s shop. Business is booming, and
his dishes are ‘less mediocre tasting than ever,’ if Itona’s ravishing review is anything to go by. He
and Nagisa have had an arrangement for the past few years, ever since a similar situation came up
at Paradise.

[6/3/2030 7:32 PM:] [Nagisa]: If a Makoto Himura stops by, give him anything on the house. Bill
it right to me.

While he’s more than willing to give Makoto food off of his own plate, he realizes there’s
something socially isolating about feeling like he’s ‘begging for scraps.’ Sometimes a kid just
wants to go out and have a real meal. So Nagisa will do his best to arrange things with the
connections he has.

[6/3/2030 7:33 PM:] [Nagisa]: He’s a nice kid.


He decides not to mention the whole ‘dead teacher reincarnated’ thing for now. Quite frankly, he’s
not sure how to bring that up to his own spouses, much less an ex-classmate he hardly talks to
outside of noodle-related affairs.

Jeez. Had he really made that promise to Makoto? That he’d get him back in contact with
everyone? It’s only now striking him just how difficult that’s going to be. Everyone’s busy with
life. And something tells him they’re not exactly going to believe him on the spot, so it’s not like
he can just drop the kid into the group chat.

He’d just been so desperate to get Makoto to hear him out. The terror of letting his life go off the
rails again had been petrifying. He’d said the first thing he thought of. It had been a miracle it even
worked.

He guesses it’s only the right thing to do, though. Makoto deserves to see them again. Nagisa is a
man of his word. And although he’ll advise Makoto against spilling the beans to anyone, he will
get him in contact with them. Just… One by one. Sending him Muramatsu’s way, and letting him
stop by to visit Karma and Kayano is a good enough start. Now he just needs to get the rest figured
out.

He finishes packing his books. And then gently tucks Makoto’s science paper into his folder,
edges it into his bag, and zips it up. He looks around the room for any last things he needs to
grab, before slinging his bag over his shoulder and making his way out of the building.

He needs to get on his way home. There’s no doubt his spouses are on the edge of their seat.

He’s not exactly sure how he’s going to break the news to them. Should he tell them the good news
or the bad news first? Is there even bad news? Like, yeah, he’d sort of slipped up and told Makoto
what he’d directly promised Gakushuu he wouldn’t tell Makoto, but it had all ended up for the
best.

...God, Gakushuu’s going to be pissed.

He can’t exactly fault him for it. If this hadn’t ended up going exactly how it had gone, Nagisa
would be pissed at himself, too. He’d sworn he wouldn’t influence Makoto like that. Being told
who to be is a bit of a sore spot for he and Gakushuu both.

...But does it really count if Makoto had come to that conclusion before him?

Makoto had certainly been firm about his conclusion. And he’d had proof to back it up. Isn’t that
what Gakushuu had wanted? Because if Makoto sharing personal anecdotes isn’t proof, he doesn’t
know what is.

Plus, he’s sure Makoto would have brought it up to him eventually, either way. Even if he’d
seriously messed up in breaching the topic himself, not saying anything would have only been
delaying the inevitable.

...Yeah. He has to be firm about his conclusion, too. He hadn’t done the right thing, but it had
ended up playing out the right way.

Life is weird like that.

He’s not sure Kayano will believe him, either. At least, not until she sees Makoto in person.
Something tells Nagisa hearing the words out of the horse’s mouth will sell her on the idea.

...He hopes she won’t be too depressed by the other elephant in the room.

He gets it, he really does. Even seeing Makoto talk about his carefree memories, the idea of
Yukimura-sensei not being around was weird. She’d deserved better, too.

He doesn’t exactly know how to resolve that. But he supposes all he can do is be there for Kayano.
When the grief inevitably resurfaces, he’ll be there to comfort her, as he has a thousand times
before.

It’s the least he can do for her.

He has a feeling Karma is going to have a field day. Now that he knows Karma’s been on the “dead
teacher reincarnate” train as long as he has, it’s a relief. To know he unequivocally has someone
who will back him on this. He probably won’t show it, but Karma will be as excited as a little kid.

How could he not be!? His teacher’s okay!

The very thought puts a skip in Nagisa’s step. And he feels it, too. The depth behind what this
means… Although there have certainly been struggles over the past few months, he’s seen Makoto
thrive, too. He loves to learn, and he’s steadily starting to understand his lessons. He makes friends
everywhere he goes, and he’s surrounded by people fond of him. He finds a reason to laugh about
everything, and that excited, familiar, smile of his never once seems to fade.

...He’s happy.

Nagisa doesn’t know exactly how he’s going to get Makoto in contact with the rest of the E-Class.
He doesn’t know exactly how he’s going to break the news to his spouses, and he doesn’t know
exactly how he plans to deal with Makoto’s home situation yet.

But his teacher is here. And his teacher is happy.

That’s enough to put Nagisa’s worries to rest for now.

Chapter End Notes

AHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHHA SORRY ABOUT THAT CIIFFHANGER
GUYS. Believe it or not, it killed me just as much to leave off the last chapter on that.
But I had to. I just couldn’t resist. Gotta put you guys on edge sometimes! And I’m sorry in advance for any big cliffhangers like that in the future. (Because trust me. There WILL be some)

Yes, yes, of course Makoto is Korosensei. Well. Sort of. The reincarnate of him. Like he said himself: He doesn’t exactly… Remember everything? But he is who I’ve been leading up to him being. It’d be a real dick move of me to NOT confirm that at this point. So here we go! Nine chapters into the fic and we finally know for certain the guy I’ve billed as the reincarnation of Korosensei is indeed Korosensei.

I had a LOT of fun writing this chapter. It was a very emotionally charged moment for both Nagisa and Makoto. Makoto dealing with finally admitting the truth and “coming home,” and Nagisa dealing with all the grief he’s built up over the past fifteen years being toppled over. But it was a sweet moment, too. And I hope their reunion made you shed as many bittersweet tears as it made me.

But with that out of the way, there’s only one question left: What now? Nagisa still has a lot to tell his friends and family. And no doubt Makoto’s going to want to embrace his past life to its fullest. This fic is just beginning, and now that I’ve gotten to the first big plot moment, I hope you’ll only continue to enjoy it more and more from here!

Some songs that helped me write this chapter were Do Better by Say Anything, Light by Sleeping at Last, Saturn by Sleeping at Last, the titular Adventures In Solitude by The New Pornographers, and Somewhere Only We Know by Keane.

I hope you enjoyed the chapter! I don’t think the next chapter will be up by next week considering it’s a very long one, but I’m still writing 1k a day, and I hope you don’t mind the wait and return to every other week too much!

Thanks for reading, and make sure to tell me what you thought! Seeya soon! :D
Karma has a feeling something huge went down before Nagisa even arrives.

When Nagisa enters the house looking like he’s seen a ghost, that just about confirms his suspicions.

The three of them are sitting in the living room. Gakushuu and Kayano lounge on the couch and Karma’s made himself at home on the recliner across from them. Kayano had only ended up getting home a few minutes earlier and was just really getting comfortable when the door creaked open and Nagisa made his entrance.

It doesn’t take much observation to note he’s been crying. His eyes are a puffy red. So either he’s been doing copious amounts of Marijuana, or he’s had a massive sobfest. The latter is much more likely considering he works exclusively around children.

Kayano pats the seat next to her. He gives her a nod in acknowledgment and flops down on the right-hand side of the couch. His exhaustion is palpable.

“What on earth happened?” Gakushuu asks.

“Well, I have good news and bad news,” he says (Which is always a wonderful thing to hear!) “Well, I’m not sure if I actually have bad ne-” he starts, but pauses. “Wait. No. I definitely have bad news. I’ll start with that. That’s the most comprehensible thing here.”

That’s a great sign!

“Okay, so, like I said: Makoto. I gave him an extra set of house keys. I managed to find out that things weren’t too good at home.” Nagisa sighs. “His dad’s pretty clearly neglecting him.”

“...Ah,” Karma says.

That… Explains a lot. Growing up unsupervised is a double-edged sword. On one hand, yeah, it really sucks to miss out on basic familial affection. On the other hand, you do learn street smarts real quick. You need to when you end up acting out every day in a desperate plea for attention.

The whole wacky whimsical stabbing thing makes a lot more sense now.

“I don’t think he’s being hit or anything, but he is being borderline starved. I’m going to be keeping a close eye on him in the future. I also sent a text Muramatsu’s way-- But I’m hoping to give him a place to stay here.”


Nagisa inviting students over is nothing new. He’s worked with high-risk, misbehaving, and oftentimes impoverished students for the majority of his career. It’s not something his spouses particularly mind. Admittedly it tends to end in a smashed TV or two, but it’s nice to have another face around the house. And, y’know, to salvage futures and stuff. But mostly the ‘you need at least five people to party’ thing.
Plus, with the whole crackpot conspiracy theory they have going on, something tells Karma Makoto is more than welcome around the house. They need to get to the bottom of this, after all.

“So what’s the good news?” Kayano asks.

“Oh, well—” Nagisa drifts off, searching for the words.

And speak of the devil. He can’t be certain, but Karma has a feeling he knows where this conversation is headed.

“If I may go out on a limb:” he speaks up. “Something to do with Korosensei?”


_Ah. So Nagisa’s found another clue, has he?_

All eyes are on Nagisa. Kayano leans closer. Gakushuu’s uncomfortably fiddling with his tie.

“Well, then. Let us in on it! We’re all a pro-Korosensei household here,” Karma insists. “How shocking can it possibly be?”

“He told me he’s Korosensei.”

Karma chokes.

**THAT’S A LITTLE MORE THAN A CLUE!**

“He what!?” Gakushuu shouts.

“W-When!? How!?” Kayano asks.

The room explodes into chatter in an instant. Nagisa can’t even get a word in.

“Oh, okay! Shut up, everyone!” Karma interjects. “Let the man explain!”

“...Okay,” Kayano says.

And every eye is on Nagisa once more.

“It actually… Came up because of the neglect thing,” Nagisa admits. “I was trying to offer him help and get more details on the situation, and it got… Really intense. He wasn’t cooperating with me… And I…” He pauses, before meekly admitting "SortaadmittedIthoughtthewasKorosensei.”

Gakushuu’s reaction is instantaneous. “You WHAT!??” he growls, rushing to his feet. Kayano has to grab him by the back of his shirt. Nagisa flinches back.

“I- I know it was a bit of a slip-up—”

“A slip-up!? You promised!” Gakushuu’s voice cracks with anger. He tears away from Kayano’s grasp, but doesn’t make a motion to head towards Nagisa. Instead, he stares him down with those piercing eyes.

Nagisa doesn’t meet his gaze. “...Okay, no. I really fucked up,” he admits. “Even if it was just a moment of impulse, I broke your trust. And that wasn’t right of me.”

Gakushuu doesn’t speak.
“But please: Hear me out. I’ll explain the full extent of what went down. And then you can make your decision.”

Gakushuu hesitates, sending Nagisa a vitriolic glare, but hesitantly sits down as Karma pulls him back.

Karma can’t exactly blame the guy for being pissed. He has daddy issues with a capital D. He’d been told who he was supposed to be his entire life. And if he and Nagisa had actually had a talk about specifically avoiding this? Hoooo boy. That said, Nagisa has a tenancy to clam up, and giving him a panic attack isn’t exactly going to help either of them in this situation.

He’s a little peeved at how Nagisa handed this, too, anyway. But he’s also not sure if he’d have done anything differently in Nagisa's shoes. He knows his Sensei well enough to know he’s a nosy bitch.

“As soon as I said it, Makoto started… Staring at me. And then, with this big grin on his face, he went ‘You think I’m Korosensei too, don’t you?’” Nagisa explains.

“Oh my God,” Kayano says.

“Well, someone sounds certain,” Karma quips.

“When I was like ‘Hey, wait. What the hell does that mean?’ He scrambled over, sat down, and explained. The tension in the room shifted immediately. It’s like he’d completely forgotten I was arguing with him. That this was… Way more important to him.” Nagisa pauses. “And it was. I really think it was.”

Karma cocks an eyebrow.

“He told me… He’d dreamt of the E-Class his entire life. About Kunugigaoka. And about us. That he could never really make sense of it, but that the moment he heard about Constellate he flipped out. He admitted he didn’t remember everything. Not even… All of our names,” he awkwardly explains. “But that he knew this place was important to him, even though he’d never been here. That those people were important to him, even if he didn’t know who they were.”

The idea of Korosensei not remembering them is… Weird at best, and unnerving at worst. But to be fair, Karma would probably have trouble remembering all of his classmates in the same situation. He has enough trouble remembering half his background-character-esque classmates as is, seeing as how sometimes it seems their entire personalities boil down to “I make shitty food” or “I’m into motorcycles.”

...On second thought, maybe that’s just his distaste for the Terasaka Squad showing.

“Of course, none of that was enough for him to come to any conclusions. At least, not until he started attending Constellate. He said the moment he stepped in the building, things got crazy intense and specific. He started remembering things like assassination attempts. Or… Mebeingalittlebitshorterbutnotmuch.” Nagisa’s face flushes pink, his ‘has been the height of a middle schooler his entire life’ complex clear as day. “And some of these things he told me were, like, not only super in depth, but super obscure. Do you, uh - Remember Okuda’s assassination attempt?”

How could he forget? Korosensei nyooming around the room and his prior impromptu Sonic the fucking Hedgehog cosplay was an event for the ages. Okuda was someone Karma’d always kept a close eye on, namely because he’d been convinced with enough badgering she would finally make
him some cyanide, chlorine glass, or at least “a Benadryl.”

...She had not ended up making him a Benadryl.

That said, however, he does remember her attempt on Korosensei’s life. Karma nods, as does Kayano.

“No. I don’t remember any of this,” Gakushuu reminds, with an irritated skepticism in his voice that seems to imply ‘and neither does Makoto.’

“Well… Basically, he told me all about how he remembered ‘some girl’ struggling with her Language classes. And how she thought she was okay off because she was good at Science. But he helped her concoct a formula to kill him while also helping her figure out a way to sell him on chugging something that was most-definitely poison.”

“Which is… Exactly what happened,” Kayano clarifies. “Minus the ‘some girl’ thing. Okuda has a name.”

‘Aw! C’mon, Kayano. Okuda may have been your best friend and all, but it’s probably for the best to admit she’s pretty forgettable too.’ Karma thinks, completely throwing his cyanide dealer under the bus.

“He had a few super specific stories like that. He also told me about Ritsu ‘going apeshit.’” Nagisa pauses. “His words, not mine!”

Eh. Karma figures ‘apeshit’ is pretty much how he’d word it, too.

“And… I can’t figure any way he’d know these things without… Well, telling the truth about this. No-one knew these things,” Nagisa says. “We kept it all to ourselves. It was our secret. So hearing him say that himself… That he knew all this… Oh my God. You have no idea how overwhelming it was-”

Kayano nods. “…I can imagine. I’m getting a little overwhelmed just talking about this.”

“I… I’ll admit I started crying,” Nagisa says. “I just couldn’t take it-”

Mmmyep. Karma had deduced that one out ten minutes ago. “Yeah. You looked pretty exhausted coming in through the door,” he admits. “I figured you’d been crying.”

“...Yeah. A lot,” Nagisa sheepishly admits. “The idea of him having a second chance was just… Too much. Too good to be true. And… As soon as I started crying, he hugged me. And patted my back. And said, ‘Hey. Don’t cry. I’m right here.’ And I lost my mind, guys. I know my Sensei. And the reassuring way he held me... That was him-” He’s getting choked up again just talking about it.

Kayano places a reassuring hand on his shoulder. Gakushuu’s still.

“That’s it. It sealed the deal for me. I know for certain: He’s Korosensei. I mean, come on! He remembers everything-”

‘Everything’ being a massive exaggeration considering Nagisa just admitted he didn’t remember Okuda’s name, but Karma will let that one slide.

“That’s… That’s great!” Kayano says. She’s trying to keep collected, but Karma can spot a massive grin turning up the corners of her lips.
“Indeed,” Karma agrees. “B-”

Gakushuu cuts him off.

“And how do we know you didn’t just tell him all of that?”

Nagisa stares.

“...W...What?”

“How do we know he actually remembered all of that, and that you didn’t just tell him everything?” he indignantly repeats.

“Gakushuu-!” Kayano hisses.

“I- I would never--” Nagisa sputters. “This is too important to me-”

“Exactly,” Gakushuu says. “Am I really supposed to believe you’re not seeing what you want to see in that boy? For ~Korosensei’s sake?~”

“Gakushuu-” Kayano sternly repeats.

“What!? You know I’m right, Akari,” he snaps.

“No. I think you’re being an asshole,” Kayano argues.

Gakushuu’s fist clenches. “It’s not fair to him!” he snarls.

“I know it’s not!” Nagisa refutes. “I never said it was. I know I shouldn’t have said what I said. But he told me himself-”

“You say!” Gakushuu refutes. “There are all sorts of ways to get into someone’s mind and subconscious! How do I know he came to that conclusion himself??”

Nagisa stares blankly. “N- N- No!” He sputters. “I… W… No-! I would never!”

“Cut it out,” Kayano demands. “You’re being a jackass.”

“I’m being a jackass!?” Gakushuu repeats in disbelief. “I’m the only one looking out for this kid!”

“I am looking out for him as much as I can!” Nagisa butts in.

“Then why am I the only one worried about what this is going to do to him!? A middle schooler should not be occupied with who he was in a ‘past life!’”

“He was already thinking about it before I said it-”

“You say! I’m hesitant to believe that one, Nagisa!”

“So you’re calling me a liar?”

“Yes! I am!”

Karma’s head darts back and forth, and his breath quickens. He feels anger rise in his chest, but before he can deduce who at Kayano bolts to her feet with an exasperated “Get out-”

“Excuse me!?”
“Get out. You’re just making Nagisa upset, and you’re not contributing anything to this conversation. If you think you’re the only one who has any stakes in or issues with this situation, then you are a self-centered asshole. The rest of us are plenty upset about what’s going on, so unless you think you’re allowed to make a rational assessment about our teacher, a man you never met, mind you, get out.”

Gakushuu’s jaw drops. “I… I…” he says. And he gets to his feet. “Fine,” He snaps. “I see I’m not wanted.” He storms out of the room and firmly shuts the door with a thud.

Karma only faintly realizes he hadn’t spoken an entire word that entire conversation as he watches him go. His breathing is ragged, but he slowly unclenches his fist.

He doesn’t know what he’s supposed to think. Because here’s the thing: he doesn’t exactly think either of them are completely wrong. (A rare occurrence with him.) He firmly believes that boy’s his teacher in the flesh. But Gakushuu makes a very fair point in bringing up that’s something potentially insanely influential for a child to be dealing with.

That said, however, he doesn’t think Nagisa made it up. And… He thinks he wants his teacher to remember him.

Nagisa sighs. “…You shouldn’t have said that, Kayano.”

“He was being an inconsiderate jerk.”

“You should still apologize to him-”

“I just don’t like that he thinks he can talk to you that way-!”

“It’s not like it’s a regular occurrence, Kayano. He’s just really stressed about this.” Nagisa pauses. “I should talk to him,” he says, standing. “Just the two of us. That… That wasn’t how that was supposed to go-” As he steadies his breaths, an icy calm look that Karma hates forms in his eyes.

Karma stands, too. “Don’t,” he says, placing a hand on his shoulder. “He’ll burn himself out in time.”

He knows Nagisa’s ‘snake eyes’ all too well. What he’d at one point considered scary, he’s now come to know as ‘Nagisa dissociating in a desperate attempt to stay calm during tense situations as a result of extreme trauma.’ It’s a lot less cool when you word it that way and a lot more sad. But it’s equal parts depressing and traumatizing if the situation escalates enough. He hates it when Nagisa lets himself get that detached.

“But-”

“Please. He’s stubborn. Just give him space.” Karma gets it. He’s similar. When he’s mad, he’s mad. Nothing much can simmer him down other than time. Or a fistfight. But mostly time.

He supposes that’s why he tries not to get too invested in arguments nowadays. That said, hearing his husbands be called a ‘manipulative liar’ and a ‘self-centered-asshole’ in the same breath stings a little.

Nagisa sighs but relents. “Fine,” he says, awkwardly sitting down.

His emotion returns to his eyes. He seems ashamed.

“I know I went about that wrong. I shouldn’t have told him. But he did tell me everything else
himself. I would never make that up—"


Karma decides it’s due time for a topic change. He’ll deal with Gakushuu himself. “Well, then. He better be stopping by, soon.” He pauses. “The boy in question. I mean, you gave the kid house keys. We better be seeing our teacher for ourselves, soon. You can't hog all the heartfelt reunions.”

“Of course,” Nagisa says. “I wouldn’t be surprised if he dropped by tomorrow. He was really excited to see you two.” He lets out a nervous chuckle. “I feel like if I hadn’t told him it was time to get heading home, he would have tried to drop by today.”

“Awww. Why didn’t you let him?”

“It was seven o'clock, Karma.”

“So? The night’s still young! Me and him have very important things to discuss, I’ll have you know.”

“Do I want to know?” Nagisa asks.

“Nope. Remember? I’m a wild card.”

For one, he’s really gotta bring up the whole stabbing thing. He has a quaint idea about how he can use that topic to his advantage. But he decides to leave that one as a surprise for Nagisa and Kayano.

“Karma, I am literally **begging** you not to bully the child,” Kayano says.

“Hey! Hey! I never said I’d **bully** him… Just maybe poke fun at him a little.”

“And I’m sure he’ll be very proud of how much you’ve grown up.” Kayano snidely comments.

“Damn right! As obnoxious as ever, but six foot **and** a massively successful bureaucrat? He’ll be delighted by how I’ve managed to achieve my dreams without ~changing who I am~ or whatever.”

Kayano snorts. “I guess you’re right. If you’d suddenly become a model citizen, he’d be like ‘this can’t be right! Where’s my most disobedient boy!?'''

“‘My most disobedient boy?’” Karma repeats.

“Student. The word you’re looking for is student,” Nagisa says.

“That’s the one,” Kayano replies.

Karma snickers.

“Listen. We’ve all had a long day. Excuse me for not remembering my basic vocabulary,” Kayano says.

A silence falls over the room.

“...So that’s that?” Karma asks.

“...That’s that, I suppose,” Nagisa replies. “That’s all I had to say about Makoto. That... He’s Sensei, yeah.”
“Well that wasn’t too hard, was it?” Karma asks. But the empty spot across from him on the couch is hard to ignore.

“I guess,” Nagisa admits. “I... Should have gone about that differently. I mean, I don’t know how, but there had to be a way of saying that without upsetting Gakushuu.”

Karma shrugs. “I wouldn’t overthink it. He’s emotional.” And Nagisa had hit a sore spot. He was bound to upset Gakushuu no matter what he said. “I’ll talk to him later, okay? After he’s had some time to brood.”

“I mean, I don’t think he’s going to just drop this one-”

“And I don’t expect him to,” Karma replies. “But I’ll try to hear him out when he’s less in the moment.”

Nagisa gives a tiny nod. “I just feel bad this is causing so many arguments. I’m stressed too, but… I’d like to think it’s a good thing. I really would. So I don’t want this tearing us apart.”

“Tearing us apart?” Karma snorts. “Don’t worry about that, Nagisa. We’ve been through way worse. A little bit of dead teacher drama is nothing. Give him time. Something tells me he’ll change his tune once he actually meets Makoto.”

The kid had an energy to him. And even if he’s never met Korosensei, something tells Karma Gakushuu will feel it. He’s persuasive and he’s charismatic. It’s hard not to fall under his spell.

In that way, he actually reminds Karma of himself a little.

“And for the record,” he says “I’m glad you told all of us right away. I don’t think I could have stood it if you’d hidden all of that from us for weeks on end again.” Korosensei is a them issue. And as Nagisa’s spouses, so are Nagisa’s thoughts.


“Hey. I was right about Makoto, wasn’t I? I’ll be right about this, too.”

And laying back in his recliner, Karma closes eyes. Because he knows he will be.

And true to Nagisa’s word, Makoto shows up the next day.

Kayano’s in the lounge working on replying to some emails when she hears Nagisa unlock the door, boisterous footsteps in tow. An impressed “Wow!” echoes from the other room. Kayano pockets her phone, stands and makes her way towards the door, but Karma, sitting on the arm of the other couch, shakes his head.

“Let’s not pounce on the poor kid,” he says, in a tone barely masking the fact that he’d love to ‘pounce on’ the poor kid as well. “We don’t wanna overwhelm him. Let him get a look around the place first. Then Nagisa can bring him in here.”

“Fair,” Kayano replies, taking a seat on the couch and shouting “We’re in here!” over her shoulder.

“Coming!” Nagisa shouts back.

Gakushuu is nowhere to be found. He hadn’t wanted part in this reunion. Instead, he’s in the guest room sulking. He’s been avoiding them all day. Karma’d talked it over with him last night, but he
hadn’t shared the details of how that had gone with Kayano.

Now that she’s had some time to cool off, she’ll admit she’d been a little harsh with him. But the moment had just felt so heated. All of them had had worries about what had gone down with Makoto. She hated the way he’d acted like the only rational one in the room when there were things bothering all of them about this.

...Even if her worries were distinctly different than his.

Still, she’d hit a sore spot. And she’ll apologize. When he apologizes to Nagisa. She’s not budging until then, at least. She figures she owes herself that much dignity.

The footsteps grow louder, and the boys make their entrance.

Kayano’s not sure what she expected Makoto to look like- But what she’s met with is a perfectly ordinary kid. With dark messy hair and dark eyes, he stands just barely over five feet. He doesn’t strike her as particularly different than any other kid Nagisa’s taught in the past.

Then she meets his eyes, and she finally gets what Nagisa’s been talking about.

He’s staring at them with complete wonder. Bouncing from foot to foot; excitedly fidgeting. And the ecstatic grin on his face stretches from ear to ear.

“H-hey!” he says, his voice cracking with something overwhelming. “Kayano! Karma!”

Is it… Pride?

He can’t hold back a second longer. He rushes towards them. And before she knows it, she’s being tackled by a bundle of excited twelve-year-old. She falls back on the couch as he seizes her in a hug. “It’s so good to see you again! I missed you!”

“A-Ah! Makoto-!” Nagisa says, scrambling to his side. “Be careful-”

“He’s staring at them with complete wonder. Bouncing from foot to foot; excitedly fidgeting. And the ecstatic grin on his face stretches from ear to ear.

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“A-Ah! Makoto-!” Nagisa says, scrambling to his side. “Be careful-”

“No, no- It’s fine,” Kayano reassures, having to hold back a laugh. She returns Makoto’s hug. “I missed you too…” She pauses. “...Sensei.”

And it feels so, so right to say.

He’s quivering like an overexcited puppy. But it’s not much sooner then he’s buried himself in her neck when Karma speaks up.

“Hey. No hugs for your real favorite?”

“Hey! I don’t have superspeed!” Makoto whines. But he’s already weaseling his way away from Kayano and making a divebomb towards Karma.

And for one second, she briefly worries he’ll knock Karma off the couch. But as over prepared for this situation as any, Karma catches the feverishly excited boy in his arms. He’s got Makoto in a hug before Makoto can even wrap his arms around his shoulders.

“Yes, yes. I missed you, Karma!”

“Good, good.” Karma smiles, content. But quickly that relieved smile grows into a devilish grin. He tosses Makoto back over his shoulder. Makoto lets out a surprised yelp, seeing as how he’s now being suspended upside down. “Because we need to talk.”
“Karma!” Nagisa shouts.

Karma ignores him completely. He stands, his grip tight on the wriggling Makoto. “Sensei,” he says, his tone indecipherable.

“What!”? Makoto wails, elbowing his back.

“Sensei.”

“What!?” Makoto’s wail grows into a shriek.

Karma can’t keep that cool collected facade for long. His voice edging on giggles, he says “Why’d you stab me, Sensei?” Kayano hadn’t thought it was possible for a voice to simultaneously drip with so much malice and amusement at the same time.

“That’s what this is about!?” Makoto cries in disbelief.

“Karma! Let go of him!” Kayano snaps.

“Why’d you stab me, Sensei?”

“Karma!” Nagisa shouts in a voice all too sadly used to this.

“Why’d you stab me, Sensei?”

“I DUNNO, KARMA! WHY DID YOU STAB ME WITH A KNIFE!?” Makoto shrieks.

“SOMETIMES YOU DO THINGS JUST BECAUSE! AND SOMETIMES YOU DO THINGS BECAUSE YOU REALLY WANNA GET BACK AT SOMEONE!”

Karma smiles, content, and drops Makoto back on the couch.

“Gotcha,” He says with a smirk.

“Scuse me?” Makoto asks as he sits back up.

“I know you’re our guy,” Karma says matter-of-factly. “You’re our Sensei.”

“Like there’d been any doubt!” Makoto hisses.

Kayano’s still completely lost. What’s he going on about? “And how exactly did you come to that conclusion?”

“When Makoto stabbed me,” Karma proudly explains. “It was weeks before Nagisa let him in on any of this. If his motive was really to ‘get back at me’ like he just admitted, then he remembered the little trick I pulled long before Nagisa breathed a word of this to him.” He looks Makoto’s way. “He’s our Sensei alright.”

He pauses.

“Plus, y’know: The way he shrieked when I tossed him over my shoulder was so Korosensei. That pathetic horror and desperation? I’d recognize it anywhere.”

Makoto’s face flushes with embarrassment. “Glad to see you haven’t changed at all, Karma…” he grumbles.

“Well, that was some wonderful detective work, Karma,” Kayano admits, holding back a giggle.
Yeah, she’d pretty much already believed Nagisa, but it’s nice to have more proof. “But you really
didn’t have to torture the kid to get that answer.”

“Literally? Of course not. But emotionally? It was an irresistible notion.”


“Are you censoring yourself because I’m your teacher or because I’m a kid?”

To be frank, Kayano herself doesn’t even know the answer to that one!

He turns Karma’s way. “Hey! Hey! It’s okay, though. I mean, he just did what I taught him to,
right? Glad to see he remembers after all these years.” He smiles. “Keep up the good work!”

Nagisa sighs. “Please don’t encourage him.”

“Nope! You heard our sensei. It’s waterboarding time.”

“KARMA HE IS TWELVE AND IF YOU WATERBOARD HIM I WILL PERSONALLY GUT
YOU LIKE A FISH.”

Makoto giggles. “But you guys have definitely changed a little, too. I’m glad to see you’re finally
willing to stand up for yourself against him, Nagisa.”

“Comes with years of experience,” Nagisa sheepishly admits. “After a while, you just get used to
it.”

“Gee. Thanks.”

There are things Makoto doesn’t notice, too. Kayano’s 98% certain that if Nagisa had threatened to
‘gut Karma like a fish’ fifteen years ago, Karma would have just about
pissed himself. By now, she
knows all about Karma’s little complex. And with Makoto putting it into words like that… It’s
hard not to be proud of how far their relationship has come.

“You too, Kayano!” Makoto says, his head shooting her way. “You’re so grown up! And so pretty!
I saw one of your movies a few months ago! It was sososososo good! Though really sad, too! I
started crying! A lot! But I guess that’s okay because it means you did a good job!”

Kayano giggles. “Well, thank you!” She says, taking an awkward half-bow half-lean considering
she’s sitting on the couch. She can’t exactly place her finger on which movie he’s talking about,
considering she’s participated in a fair number of tearjerkers, but that’s besides the point.

“You’re all so good at what you do! Even you, Karma!” Makoto rambles. “It’s so, so, so cool to
see what you’re all doing! I wanna see it all! Tell me about everything!”

“Maybe not today, buddy,” Nagisa says with a laugh. “We’ve had a long fifteen years. But
remember, you’re welcome here anytime. So there’s plenty of time to catch up.”

Kayano nods. “Let’s watch more of my movies together sometime, okay? There’s a few I’m really
proud of.”

Makoto nods vigorously. “I’d love that!”

“Well, shucks,” Karma says. “Gonna have a bit more trouble showcasing my work to him. There
isn’t exactly a ‘bring your dead teacher into work day.’”
Makoto pouts. “Well, there should be!”

“I’ll see what I can do.”

“And I suppose you already know most of how I’ve been doing, huh?” Nagisa says. “I mean, you come to my school every day. What do you think…?” He pauses and glances to the side. “Of what I’ve done to the place?”

“I think it’s great, Nagisa!” Makoto proclaims. “Having air conditioning so I can breathe is a nice touch.”

“Yeah. I thought so too.” Nagisa says, cracking a smile.

“But you haven’t showed me everything.” Makoto continues. “You haven’t told me about all your other students! From before this year! Were they nice? Or did they beat the shit out of y-”

“One student took a baseball bat to our television,” Karma interjects.

“Ah! I see! Those kind of students,” Makoto notes with a knowing smile. “Are they doing good? I wanna meet them, too!”

“One thing at a time, Makoto,” Nagisa says.

“Okay, okay, okay. But one day!” he replies. “And you gotta tell me about how you all got together, too! More than just ‘McDonalds!’”

“We will, we will,” Nagisa says. “But I’m saving that one for the whole class. Remember? I promised.”

Makoto nods vigorously. “But I’ll get, like, the director’s cut, right? All the saucy secret stuff you can’t say in front of them!”

“I try not to keep secrets with my students…” Nagisa admits with a laugh.

“Says the guy who won’t even tell me what really happened to the moon!” Makoto huffs. “Which reminds me!” He turns his head towards Kayano, then Karma. “You guys gotta tell me all about the things from back then, too! Nagisa’s bringing in the yearbook to show it off, but I bet he won’t remember everything. And I want to know it all! Because…” He pauses. “I think this was all really important to me. So it still is now.”

Kayano nods. “...Of course. We’ll share everything.”

Admittedly, the idea of him not remembering moments between them is… Bittersweet. She’s happy he can move on with his new life, but some of her fondest memories come from that year at Kunugigaoka. And moreso than that, she can’t help but feel there are some things Korosensei would never have wanted to forget.

...People Korosensei would never have wanted to forget.

“Hey. Sensei,” she says. “Do you remember…-” But drifts off as he turns his head her way. He looks at her with an overjoyed grin, and she feels her heart sink. “...Uh-” She says. “That time we made a giant pudding?” she improvises.

...Okay. So maybe she won’t share everything. She can’t make him feel that again.

“What!? No!” Makoto replies, his eyes wide with wonder. “We made a giant pudding!? What’s
giant!? How big’s giant!?” he demands.

“I dunno…” Kayano says. “Only taller than the school.”

“No fair! No fair!” Makoto cries. “I wanna eat a giant pudding again!”

...He deserves to live in a world where his biggest worries are over giant pudding, not lives lost.

Kayano forces a smile.

“Yeah! It was awesome,” she says. “Not sure I can do it again, though. It was sort of my magnum opus, you know?”

“Well it’s time for a magnum opus two!” Makoto huffs.

“I don’t exactly have government funding on my hand this time.”

“Yes you do!” Makoto says, dramatically pointing at Karma. “Karma, make her make me a giant pudding.”

“Well, you heard the man,” Karma says. “Now you’ve gotta.”

“It’s your paycheck, Karma,” she reminds him. “If that’s really what you want…”

Makoto snickers. Karma rolls his eyes, but doesn’t exactly turn down the idea, either.

“Oh! Yeah!” Makoto says, finally distracted from the topic of ‘gargantuan pudding’ “There was something else I was meaning to ask you guys. What was it again?” He flicks his finger against the side of his head. “...Right!” He exclaims. “Where’s Asano? How’s he doing? I thought he was a part of this family.”

“He is,” Nagisa quickly reassures. “He’s just… Not in the best mood right now.”

Makoto frowns. “Oh. Is it because of me?”

“No, no--” Nagisa quickly reassures, brushing off Makoto’s scarily accurate insight. “You didn’t do anything.”

“...Can I try and talk to him?” Makoto asks.

“I dunno if that’s the best idea,” Nagisa admits. “I think he just wants to be left alone.”

“Pretty please? Just a little bit! I won’t bother him too much.”

“Makoto--”

“What’s the worst that can happen? He’ll yell at me a little? I won’t care!”

“He won’t yell at you-”

“Then I don’t see the issue here. Just let me stop by and say hello. I wanna see how he grew up, too!”

Makoto sends puppy dog eyes Nagisa’s way. And that must be enough to make him crack, because he lowers his shoulders and lets out a reluctant “I guess.”

“Yes!” Makoto proclaims, already bolting to his feet.
“Just ask him first! If he doesn’t want to talk, give him some space.”

“I will! I will! Don’t you worry!” And with that, Makoto’s off.

Kayano’s only just noting they hadn’t even told him where Gakushuu was when Nagisa shouts “He’s in the guest room! Take a right down the hallway!” Over his shoulder. Whether or not Makoto heard him is unclear, because he does not grace them with a response.

Kayano lets out an exhausted laugh. “...Is he always like that?”

Nagisa and Karma speak up at once. “Yeah. Pretty much.”

“...Well I’m glad to see he’s as stubborn as ever.” She pauses, staring down the hallway. “Do you think that’s going to be okay? Him bugging Gakushuu?”

“They’ll be fine,” Karma reassures. “Gakushuu knows how to stand up for himself. If he doesn’t wanna hear it, he won’t hear it. He’s plenty stubborn, too.”

That sounds like a disaster waiting to happen: An unstoppable force meeting an immovable object. But Nagisa pipes up before she can voice that thought.

“Plus, I trust Gakushuu not to, like, snap at him. He’s patient with the kids.”

It’s true. Nagisa’s brought home a fair number of students over the past eight years. And inexplicably, sometimes it seems Gakushuu is the most patient of all with them. Even when Konishi had wrecked their house, he’d only let the faintest twinge of irritation show. Insanely contradictorily to his actual emotions, seeing as how the moment they’d been alone he’d buried his face in his hands and screamed.

If he could face that with a calm and collected face, surely a little bit of Korosensei-esque shenanigans will be nothing in comparison.

“You’re right,” she says. “I just hope this won’t stress him out more.” But she quickly decides it’s time for a topic change. Now that the elephant in the room that is Makoto is out of the way they’ll have plenty of time to talk to their moody spouse once he leaves. “...It’s weird seeing him again. Korosensei, I mean.”

Nagisa nods. “...Yeah. All through class today, I kept getting this surreal feeling. Like… ‘I’m his teacher, huh?’ I… Never could have dreamt up anything like this.”

“...He’s different.” Kayano admits. Rasher. Blunter... Happier. “I mean, not a lot, but a little.”

“So are we, I suppose,” Karma points out. “It’s been a long time. He’s led a new life.”

Kayano nods.

“It’s nice seeing him, I think,” Karma admits.

“Of course you’d think that, seeing as how you got to torture him.” Nagisa quips.

“I didn’t torture him.” Karma rebukes. “I was just reliving some memories. For old times sake!”

“Memories of Korosensei screaming his ass off?”

Karma nods sagely. “Memories of Korosensei screaming his ass off.”
That reminds her. “...It’s crazy. Thinking that he doesn’t remember everything.” She pauses. “That
he doesn’t remember most things.”

“Yeah...” Nagisa admits, nervously scratching his shoulder. “But I think that’s for the best. I
mean... He’d seen some messed up stuff. If... If he only ever remembers the good things that went
down in that classroom, I think it’s for the best.”

Kayano frowns. Indeed, she’d come to the same conclusion. But it’s depressing to hear Nagisa
second it. She quietly nods.

Nagisa must notice the look on her face. He always was good at seeing through her acting. At least,
after learning just how much he’d failed to notice in middle school. “...You wanted to bring up
Aguri earlier, didn’t you?”

“Ah. That explains the awkward pudding transition,” Karma comments.

Kayano nods. “Yeah. But you’re right. It’s just not right. We don’t need him asking questions we
can’t give him fair answers to. If... If we tell him about her, his first question will be ‘where is
she?’”

...Gone. She’s gone forever. And he’s not.

“I’m not putting him through that heartbreak. That’d be selfish of me.”

Here’s the thing... She’d been over Aguri.

Well, not over. You don’t get over your dead sister. Aguri had practically raised her. Looking back
on it, she served more of the role of a mother than anything. She’d been deeply important to
Kayano.

But it had also been fifteen years. She’d moved on. It didn’t hurt when she thought about her
anymore. Aguri was simply a happy memory to look back on. Kayano had gone on with her life.
And she’d been certain that somewhere her lost sister was proud of her.

...Now she’s not so sure. And it seems to open the wound all over again. After years of feeling
okay, that stings.

She supposes she just has to tell herself that she’d be okay with this. That she’d be happy for
Korosensei. She’d never once complained about the life she led. And she’d died proud of her
legacy.

...At least, that’s what Kayano likes to think.

“...It’s not selfish, Kayano,” Nagisa says, reaching out to place a hand on her shoulder. “I know
why you feel the way you do. And I’m sorry for putting this on you-”

“You’re not putting anything on me,” she reassures. “I’ll be fine.”

“If you say so. But... While we’re working through... All of this, remember I’m here for you,
okay?”

“We’re here for you,” Karma butts in. “Me and Gakushuu may not be into you, but we’re still your
family. So when Nagisa’s being dense, always remember we have your back.”

“Hey-!” Nagisa says.
“It’s true, isn’t it?” He looks Kayano’s way.

“...Maybe a little,” she cheekily admits.

Nagisa pouts in response.

“Thanks, though,” she says. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

And she appreciates it. She doesn’t say that enough, but she appreciates it.

With the heaviness in her chest that she just can’t seem to shake, now she needs it more than ever.

Gakushuu heard the kid enter the house. He anticipated that much. He did not, however, anticipate the child barging into his room.

He’s in the guest room, laptop to his side, and book open across his lap when the door creaks open and the infamous Makoto peeks his head in.

“Hey!” he says. “I finally found you! Looked all over the house!”

‘It’s really not that difficult to find the guest room’ Gakushuu notes, but does not speak up. He gives Makoto a curt nod.

Makoto pays no mind to the awkward air of the room. “I’m just gonna invite myself in, okay?” he says, stepping into the room.

He doesn’t particularly stand out. From Nagisa’s description, Gakushuu’d somehow expected to see a boy with an uncannily wide smile. But there’s no resemblance to the enigmatic Korosensei to be found here. Black hair. A tad heavyset. Decently dressed. He’s… Just a kid.

Yeah. That’s what Gakushuu had thought.

“Hope you don’t mind me peeking my head in!” Makoto continues. “I’m just so thrilled to meet you! Can we talk a little? I know we weren’t exactly acquainted, but… I figured it’s still my job to check up on you!”

Gakushuu snorts. It’s clear if he doesn’t intervene, no-one will. Why does he always have to be the responsible one?

“I don’t mind,” he says. “Come in, come in.” He scoots over and beckons the boy his way. “You’re Makoto, right?”

Makoto quickly nods. “The one and only!” He says, taking a seat next to Gakushuu. “And you’re Asano!” He pauses. “We’re not exactly on ‘Gakushuu’ terms, are we?”

“No. We’re not,” Gakushuu confirms. He just met this kid. As his teacher, Nagisa may not mind being disrespected that way, but Gakushuu finds it more than a little weird.

“Okay,” Makoto says, turning his attention towards Gakushuu’s lap. “Watch’ya reading?”

Gakushuu’s eyes drift towards his lap. “Ah... That. Nothing special,” he admits. It’s some meandering romance novel ‘I’m mostly just looking for something to take my mind off of work.’ He motions towards his laptop. That’s a bit of a lie. More than anything, he’s looking for a way to take his mind off of the fact that his husband blatantly lied to him over this kid.
“Cool! Is it good?”

“Mmm.” Gakushuu shrugs.

Makoto falls silent. Gakushuu feels bad for giving him the cold shoulder, but he doesn’t exactly know what to say.

“So...” Makoto says. “A CEO, huh? It must be cool being so successful.”

Gakushuu gives another shrug. “It’s simply the result of much hard work.”

“Well, that’s good,” Makoto replies. “It’s important not to lose that ethic. It’s nice to see you’re as diligent as ever!”

“Mmmm.”

“I bet your dad’s proud of you,” he adds on. And Gakushuu feels his heart stop in his chest. “I worked with him back in the day, you know! Very smart guy.” He pauses. “You actually look just like him, now.”

Gakushuu feels disgust rise in the back of his gut. It’s bad enough to hear that from himself in front of the mirror each morning, much less from some kid who has no idea what he’s talking about.

“Actually,” Gakushuu says. “Me and my dad don’t talk. So if you think you worked with the man, I think you got the wrong impression.”

They haven’t talked for years. Sometimes, it still makes Gakushuu sad. But... He feels better about himself now that he’s no longer in contact with his dad. At least, he thinks so.

...It’s hard to tell sometimes.

Makoto shies back. “…Oh,” he says. He stares downwards. “…That’s sad.”

“Yeah. It is.” Gakushuu snaps.

Makoto’s anxiously knitting at his hands. His gaze has drifted off Gakushuu.

“Listen. I’m not mad at you-” Gakushuu says.

“I know,” he replies. “You don’t believe me, though, do you?”

“No. I don’t,” Gakushuu admits. That came out a bit harsher than he’d intended, but- “You need to look at this from my perspective. You can’t just jump to a conclusion like that. Especially at someone else’s behest-”

“It’s not at someone else’s behest-” Makoto refutes.

“Are you sure?” Gakushuu asks. “Did Nagisa ever whisper anything in your ear? Subliminally suggest this to you?”

“No!” Makoto responds, louder this time. “He would never. You should trust him more than that…”

And Gakushuu knows that. He knows it more than anything. Nagisa loves him. Nagisa has been by his side for almost thirteen years now. And he’s never faltered. But he just can’t forget how it felt: His dad whispering in the back of his mind. That’s why he can never let it happen again. He can’t
let another kid feel that way, no matter how low the chance is.

It’s not that he doesn’t know that he’s coming across as an asshole. He’s perfectly self-aware. And he knows that he’d really hurt Nagisa. But it stings. Why does no-one else seem to care about this possibility? Nagisa of all people should know how terrible it is to tell a child “this is who you’re supposed to be.”

He only realizes he’d fallen silent when Makoto nudges his side.

“...I know,” he admits. “It’s just...” He tries his best to articulate his words. “I don’t like the way this happened.”

Makoto looks to the side. “I’m sorry you’re fighting because of me.”

“N-No!” Gakushuu quickly refutes. “This isn’t your fault. We’re not fighting because of you. We’re just worried about you.”

“Aren’t those practically the same thing?” Makoto says with a shrug. “...You four don’t need to worry about me, okay? I can look out for myself.” And he sounds so sure of his words. But Gakushuu can’t believe it for a minute.

At his age, Gakushuu thought he’d had the whole world figured out. That he could fend for himself. But deep down, more than anything, he’d just wanted someone to tell him that none of what was happening to him was his fault.

“Asano-san...That stuff you described earlier...” Makoto says. “Did... Did your dad do all that to you?”

Gakushuu lets out a “tch.”

“...Yeah. Something like that,” he finally says.

Makoto frowns deeply. “...Oh,” he says. He hesitates, before placing a firm hand on Gakushuu’s shoulder. “...I’m sorry I didn’t notice.”

Gakushuu reels back. “Excuse me?”

“Even if you don’t believe me: I’m sorry. Because I don’t need you to believe me. I believe me. And I’m sorry I couldn’t protect you. I never realized how bad things were. You seemed very confident...”

Mmm-hm. No-one noticed. Alllll the attention had been on the troubled E-Class. No-one had paid any mind to what exactly the kids at the main campus had been going through. “You can’t struggle. You’re perfect. Work harder. Work harder. Work until you snap.” No-one asked why they’d lash out like that. And when the story of Kunugigaoka came out, they’d just been the bullies.

No-one had noticed that Koyama had stopped taking care of himself for months on end in favor of his studies. No-one had noticed that Seo slept four hours a day at best. And no-one had noticed that Gakushuu’s father brainwashed, beat, and berated him behind closed doors.

...Not even the ever-perfect Korosensei.

He knows it’s an unfair resentment. It’s true: Hindsight is 20/20, and they’d been plenty cruel, too. There’s things he’d done that Gakushuu regrets every day. He’d been the bad guy. And no-one
watched out for the narcissistic asshole.

...Well, except Nagisa.

Their friendship is a big part of what got him through High School. Nagisa had offhand texted him a thanks for the whole ‘paparazzi incident,’ and against all odds, they’d hit it off. Nagisa had a benign aura to him. He’d never once needed to be competition. Unequivocally, despite their differences, he and Nagisa had been equals from the start. And that was new. He hadn’t been a ‘threat.’ That comforted Gakushuu.

But it was more than that. Although he’d seen Karma more often, and even fallen for him first, Nagisa had seen something in him that no-one had before. An intuitive perception born from his own mother, that dared him to ask Gakushuu the one thing no-one had before:

“You’re hurting too, aren’t you?”

And from the moment that came to light, Nagisa had been there for him. They’d protected each other through each low point, and been there to bandage each others’ wounds. Gakushuu had been there to help Nagisa pack his boxes when he finally moved out of his mother’s home, and Nagisa had been the one to place a hand on Gakushuu’s shoulder all those years later and beg him to cut his father off.

...Nagisa saw him. It would have been impossible not to fall in love with him.

Yeah. Seemed,” he finally says. “That’s the keyword. But don’t worry about it. I’m getting better every day.”

And in part, that’s all thanks to Nagisa.

Makoto nods. “I mean, I guess- But that doesn’t mean I shouldn’t have stepped in.” He pauses. “I just… Trusted your dad, you know?” He steeples his fingers. There’s this strangely authentic guilt dripping from his voice. “…Like, I- I noticed the bruise… But he promised he was going to get better-”

Gakushuu freezes.

He shouldn’t know about that-

It’s true, Gakuho hit Gakushuu a number of times, including during Korosensei’s ‘reign.’ But it had remained more of an open secret than anything. And those days are long past. There’s no way for Makoto to know that -

Unless...

Nagisa told hi-

No. No, no, no, NO. Gakushuu knows one thing for certain, and it’s that Nagisa wouldn’t share that. No matter how bad his delusions were, no matter how high his hopes got, he would never share that with a stranger. They’d weathered the storm together. Nagisa knows exactly what it felt like. The one thing Gakushuu cannot believe, no matter how bad, is that Nagisa would share the story of his abuse.

...Makoto has to know another way. And that only leaves one option.

“Well, sometimes people lie,” Gakushuu says. “Me and my dad never fixed things. I’m sorry to
disappoint.”

Makoto leans in to hug him. Wraps his arms around Gakushuu’s side, and squeezes tight. “I’m sorry I couldn’t fix things for you.”

“...It’s fine. I survived, didn’t I? Believe it or not, I didn’t need you.” That came off harsher than he’d intended as well. “I had… Plenty of other people by my side.”

And his husbands’ faces are clear in his mind.

“...You really are who you say you are, aren’t you?” Gakushuu asks. “...You haven’t been lying.”

Because he knows Nagisa is better than that. If Nagisa’s above sharing the story of his abuse, then he’s above perpetrating it. Gakushuu should have given him more credit.

“That’s what I’ve been trying to say this whole time!” Makoto replies. “I can’t believe you’re finally coming around!”

Gakushuu shrugs. “...Eh. I reflected on some things. And that left no other possibility.”

Makoto smirks. “About time you used that big brain of yours,” he chides, tapping his forehead.

“I suppose so...” Gakushuu admits.

It seems he has some apologies to make. To Nagisa and Kayano both. Because he’s made his decision. He’d rather believe in an impossibility - Believe that this world is truly strange than he would believe Nagisa would ever willingly hurt him. He just can’t fathom it. Not after they’ve had each other’s backs for so long.

...He’d rather believe that the universe itself is crazy than dare believe his husband is.

He’ll put his faith in the whole ‘Korosensei’ thesis for now. As unfair as it would be for him to tell Makoto who he’s supposed to be, it’s equally as unfair of him to tell Makoto who he’s not. That’s Makoto’s decision to make. All Gakushuu can do is try his best to help.

He doesn’t know how. But he will. If this is so important to Nagisa… If this is so important to the others… It’s the least he can do.

Makoto’s still bragging about winning over his belief when Gakushuu motions towards the door.

“Okay, okay. It’s time you get on your way,” he says. “I’m not sure you remember, but I have a book I’m supposed to be finishing up.”

At least, that’s what he says. In reality, he needs to figure out what the hell he’s going to say to Karma, Kayano and Nagisa. He can’t exactly do that with a twelve-year-old babbling in his ear. And regardless of the fact that he tries to have as much patience as possible about Nagisa’s students (After all, he knows just how much it sucks to be treated like garbage as a kid,) there’s only so much he can take.

“Oh! Of course!” Makoto says, springing to his feet. “Thank you for hearing me out, Asano-kun!”

Gakushuu’s lip twitches. Asano-kun, huh...? He’s not exactly how keen he is on a literal child referring to him as -kun, but he’ll take it any day over Gakushuu-no-honorific-at-all.

Plus, if he’d wanted to express any distaste about the way Makoto had referred to him, it’s too late
now. Makoto’s out of the door in an instant. He bolts like a streak of lightning, nearly tripping on the carpet as he shoots out of the room.

Gakushuu snorts. That had certainly been… An experience. He’s not sure what he’d expected Makoto to be like, but that wasn’t it.

Rash. Thoughtful. Dumb as hell.

...He’s not sure what he’d expected the elusive Korosensei to be like, either.

He hears something skid, and then the scuttle of wild footsteps as Makoto reels back around. He peeks his head into the doorway.

“Oh! One more thing! Congrats about your relationship! I really didn’t expect it, but… You seem a lot happier!”

Gakushuu’s lips purse, but before he can grace Makoto with a response, he’s already on his way again like a goddamn freight train.

“I think you make a good couple!” he shouts down the hall, and then he’s gone for good.

Forgetful, too. Gakushuu notes. Makoto Himura has a one-track-mind, if nothing else.

He’s not entirely incorrect, though. If he may say so himself, he thinks his spouses and he make a pretty good goddamn couple. Even if… Sometimes they do stumble along the way.

But these stumbles feel different. They’re rare, and they’re intense, and they’re forgivable. They work through things. They always have. And most importantly: Yeah, when they’re not stumbling, they do make him happy.

...He’d never gotten that with his old family.

He leans back against the bed, licks his thumb, and turns the page of his book. Okay… He’ll finish this up, think over what he needs to say to his spouses, and have a concrete apology ready by the time Makoto leaves the house.

He hears Makoto chattering excitedly with the others, even from halfway across the house. He yelps and he laughs and he shouts.

He’ll figure out what to do with him as well.

If it’s what he truly wishes to believe, then indeed he can be Korosensei. But Gakushuu will do him one better. He’ll watch out for Makoto. And make sure Korosensei’s legacy never becomes too much to bear.

...He’ll be there for Korosensei where Korosensei wasn’t there for him.

Karma and Kayano are tag-teaming to make dinner when Gakushuu peeks his head into the kitchen. Nagisa’s the first one to notice, thoroughly unoccupied with much more than his phone, seeing as how he’d served his dinner duty last night.

Makoto left about an hour ago. He’d wanted to stay longer, but had quickly become concerned about his father when he realized the time. Nagisa had offered to let him stay for dinner, but he’d
shook his head and said he’d take him up on the offer next time.

He hadn’t exactly shared how the conversation with Gakushuu had gone outside of “Good.” Something about him being “Grumpy but funny?” And knowing both Gakushuu and Makoto, that could mean just about anything.

Gakushuu’s hands are in his pockets. He doesn’t exactly seem to be ashamed. It’s not like he’s walking into the room with his tail between his legs. But he does have a genuine frown on his face. He may not be the type to project his self-defeat openly, but with time he has become someone willing to admit he’s wrong.

...Not that he had been completely wrong. Nagisa still knows he’d been slightly unfair to Makoto, but he’s not willing to step down on this now. He’s spent his entire life learning to advocate for himself. He knows what he believes, and this is it.

Karma catches Gakushuu out of the corner of his eye. He’s got this stern look on his face. He nearly drops a comment along the lines of ‘look who’s finally out of his lair,’ but quickly decides against it.

“Hey,” he says, keeping his eyes on dinner.

“Hey,” Gakushuu returns.

“Feeling any better?” Nagisa says.

“Somewhat,” Gakushuu replies.

Kayano’s quiet. Although it’d be easy to mistake some of her cold shoulder for anger, Karma has a feeling it’s mostly guilt. She’d ripped into Gakushuu yesterday. Even he knows she’d gone too far, and he loves a good catfight.

“I heard you talked to Makoto?” Nagisa asks.

“Indeed,” Gakushuu replies. “He’s… A peculiar kid.” He’s walking Nagisa’s way.

“That’s putting it lightly,” Nagisa says with a chuckle. “I hope he didn’t give you too much of a hassle.”

“Of course not,” Gakushuu replies pulling out a chair and sliding in next to Nagisa. “He certainly gave me some things to think about.”

Karma has to hold back a satisfied smirk. That ever-so-slightly defeatist tone is in Gakushuu’s voice. This is bound to play out interestingly.

“Like?” he asks, still never looking at Gakushuu as he continues to prepare to the meal.

“A lot,” Gakushuu says. “Let’s talk, okay?”

Bingo.

These sorts of conversations are always Gakushuu’s least favorite.
It’s not that he thinks he’s irrefutable, but admittedly it still sucks to swallow his ego. Especially when ‘his ego’ comes from such a place of vulnerability.

There’s no use beating around the bush, however.


He still thinks it’s a ridiculous notion, but he doesn’t know what else to say. He’s wracked his brain over it for the past few hours now, and no other possibility had come to light.

Nagisa’s mouth falls ever so agape. He’s as surprised by this as Gakushuu is, evidently.

“W… What?” he murmurs “What did he say?”

Gakushuu sighs and drums his fingers on the table. “Some… Things I knew you wouldn’t share with him,” he admits. “Things that I would even define as… Slightly harmful.” He pauses. “I… Don’t know what other way he could have come to collect that information unless you were telling the truth.”

Well. There is one other option. That Nagisa himself had shared that. But even with hours of reflecting on it: That had continued to come up as a definitive ‘no.’ Nagisa has only ever had his best interests in mind. And genuinely: Unlike certain people that have been in Gakushuu’s life.

Yes. This is the only way. So he’ll swallow his ego if he must. He’ll apologize. Because Nagisa’s feelings matter too.

Kayano’s not sure Gakushuu himself even notices the slight quiver in his voice.

Gakushuu is a very strong-willed man. He keeps very few secrets. He has a tenancy to brag and oftentimes sees himself in an extremely narcissistic light. He has an incredible amount of pride and belief in himself, barring the very few topics he refuses to breach.

So in between that and the restless tone in his voice, it’s not too hard to piece together what exactly Gakushuu is talking about.

Either Makoto had shared his inexplicable fear of the Kahoot Owl with him, or he’d dropped details about Gakushuu’s abusive father.

P…Probably the latter, on second thought.

A certain air takes over the room whenever Gakuho Asano is brought up, and Kayano recognizes that icy feeling as clear as day.

Yikes.

Nagisa must have put the pieces together, too, because there’s an insanely distressed look on his face.

Kayano bites her lip and looks his way.

“J-Jeez, Gakushuu… I’m sorry.”

Nagisa wouldn’t have let Makoto into his room if he’d realized he was going to start gossiping about stuff like that. He knows Gakushuu hates it when that topic is breached. It’s half of why
Gakushuu had gotten so upset at him over the Makoto-Korosensei thing in the first place.

“It’s fine,” Gakushuu reassures. “...It’s clear he just didn’t know any better. We… Cleared that one up.”

Nagisa gives a tiny nod.

“And frankly, it should be me apologizing to you,” Gakushuu admits, averting his gaze. “...As… Upsetting as the things Makoto shared with me were, they did solidify your evidence,” he specifies. “I was… Unfairly harsh on you.”

'Yeah. You totally were.'

But… Nagisa gets where he was coming from.

“No, no. You were just worried about him.” He says, placing a hand on Gakushuu’s shoulder.

“Exactly! It felt like I was the only one! You get why this was upsetting to me, right?”

“Of course,” Nagisa replies.

“But leaping down his ass wasn’t exactly going to fix anything, either,” Karma quips from across the room.

Gakushuu scowls deeply, but gives a shrug. “I know,” he replies. “I'm sorry. I got far more intense than I’d intended to with the things I said. I should have known you wouldn’t have manipulated Makoto.”

Of course not! Nagisa’s not mad, though. Maybe he had been a little at the time, but he knows it’s just a remnant of how Gakushuu was raised.

He gets it. The way he’d flinched as Gakushuu’s shout is the same. Sometimes they’re still recovering from the paranoia their homes gave them.

...But the good news is Gakushuu’s willing to admit he was wrong and apologize. And Nagisa’s willing to realize Gakushuu would never lay a hand on him. That’s more than their parents ever would have done.

As hard as it is sometimes, they make a pretty good team.

“It’s fine, Gakushuu.” He pauses. Ah. He’s forgetting something important, too. “I forgive you.”

Ah… If Kayano won’t speak up herself, Karma supposes he’ll need to step in.

“Your turn,” he says, nudging her with his elbow as he chops their food.

“Of course,” she says. She still has this weird defensiveness to her posture, but she does turn Gakushuu’s way.

“So… I kind of went off on you.”

“You did,” Gakushuu says.

Kayano sighs. “...Listen. I went way too far. I don’t know what came over me,” she admits. She’s not looking towards the counter, so Karma makes sure to diligently watch the stove in her stead, as
opposed to looking towards Gakushuu’s inevitable wounded face.

He hates seeing him look that way.

“I guess I’m just stressed too. This has… Reopened a lot of old wounds for me,” Kayano continues.

And that’s open secret in the room number 2. She doesn’t say it’s Aguri who’s stressing her out, but it’s pretty easy to piece together.

He decides to avoid looking her way too.

Admittedly, Gakushuu’s only a little eased by hearing Kayano apologize.

She’s still explaining her side. “...But it wasn’t fair for me to snap at you like that. I’m still mad you yelled at Nagisa like that, but I shouldn’t have made it personal.”

Which, fair enough… But...

“You understand when you say things like that, that makes me feel like that’s how you think about me on a daily basis, right?”

The whole ‘violent narcissist’ thing is still a bit of a sore spot. He knows he’d been horrible to people when he was younger. But he tries to do better every day. He just wants to be a ‘good person,’ whatever that is. It feels like the only thing he can do to shake his dad’s violent legacy.

“Of- Of course not!” Kayano sputters. “I don’t really think you’re a self-centered asshole.” She pauses in this way Gakushuu doesn’t particularly like, but he tries to shove his unease to the side.

“You’re… A very thoughtful person, Gakushuu. I just hated that you thought you could talk to Nagisa that way.”

“I know…” Gakshuu admits. “You just made things very personal.”

“I know,” Kayano agrees. “And I’m sorry.”

“Admittedly I was getting pretty peeved at the way you were talking to Nagisa, too,” Karma admits over his shoulder. “I was gonna stay out of this, but if we’re having a heart to heart I am sorta glad Kayano snapped before me, because I was this close to knocking some sense into you.”

An empty threat considering Gakushuu knows Karma would never lay a finger on him, but appreciated nonetheless.

“Guys, guys!” Nagisa pipes up. “You don’t need to protect me. I’m perfectly capable of standing up for myself.”

“Considering your ‘standing up for yourself’ is anything from curling up in a ball to threatening to skin someone alive, forgive me for taking that with a grain of salt,” Karma snarks.

Nagisa sheepishly covers his face. “Touche…”

That said, the atmosphere in the room seems to have lightened significantly. And Gakushuu feels he’s made his case.

“Now that it seems we’ve gotten all that sorted out, that only leaves one thing left to discuss: Makoto”
Ah yes, the infamous, Kayano notes.

“First and foremost, on the topic, I must extend a genuine apology for one last thing:” Gakushuu admits. “You were right about that much, Kayano. You knew the man and I did not. Although I wish you had taken my concerns more seriously-”

Nagisa interrupts him. “And we will,” he reassures. “In the future.”

Gakushuu nods before continuing. “...I wasn’t in any position to make an assumption about him. Having met neither Makoto nor Korosensei, I was out of my area of expertise. So I apologize if I came across as presumptuous, much less stepping on the toes of something I know was so important to you.”

“Is important to us,” Nagisa clarifies. “Makoto is important to us.”

Kayano nods along. The meeting earlier had only been a few hours long. In the full scope of things it had been very brief. But she’d enjoyed getting to ‘know’ Makoto. He reminds her of Korosensei in the best ways, and Nagisa’s right to specify he’s as important as ever.

“Of course,” Gakushuu agrees. “And with him being so important to... The lot of us...” He pauses. The tone in his voice sincerely makes Kayano doubt he has much fondness for Makoto himself, but considering Gakushuu isn’t particularly fond of children, that much is fair. “What do we intend to do from here? For him?”

“Good question,” Kayano says.

“This... Korosensei,” Gakushuu continues. “He... Saw and engaged in some rather messed up events, did he not?”

“Just a little bit of homicide,” Karma jokes. “Yeah. The dude was the most infamous killer on the planet. He’s seen all sorts of fucked shit.”

Gakushuu rolls his eyes at the crude wording. “Indeed. Which is why I must step in once more, just in case. This may be perceived poorly, and I apologize in advance: But I must ask: Do you seriously intend to inform him of these matters?”

“Of- Of course not!” Nagisa is quick to clarify.

“We actually discussed this earlier. We’ve made an executive decision to... Avoid bringing those things up.”

“Only Korosensei’s happy memories need to matter,” Nagisa admits with a frown.

Well, most of Korosensei’s happy memories.

Kayano bites her lip and reminds herself ‘it’s for the greater good.’ But it’s hard not to imagine Aguri rolling over in her grave.

Nagisa must spot the look on her face. “At least, for now,” he says. “If he wants to know the nitty gritty stuff when he’s older, then I think he deserves to. Those are his memories, after all. But no, I don’t intend to let him in on anything that I think would harm him.”

“I still wouldn’t put that down as a certainty, though-” Kayano clarifies. “Only if he asks. Otherwise... I think it’s best we just let him live.”
Aguri’d want him to be happy, too, after all.

Nagisa listens attentively to Gakushuu voicing his concerns.

“Very well,” Gakushuu says. “I agree that’s for the best. If we even remain in contact with this boy as he gets older.”

“We will,” Nagisa says. “I keep in contact with all my students. Korosensei or not, he’ll be no different.”

It’s true. Just this morning he’d received a text from a Paradise student asking for advice about college. He tries to be there for his kids no matter what, and he doesn’t want that to fade once they graduate. He’ll always be their teacher, no matter how much they grow.

...And Korosensei will always be his.

Gakushuu nods. “But furthermore: My final worry is the potential pressure you’re putting on this Makoto’s shoulders. What happens when he fears he either cannot live up to the gargantuan legacy of Korosensei, or feels he must become Korosensei? While imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, I very much figure you don’t want him to be changing anything about himself in this case.”

Despite voicing worry that his takes may be perceived as controversial, Gakushuu’s doing a better job than anyone at putting Nagisa’s thoughts into words.

“Would you believe me if I told you that’s actually part of the reason I hesitated to bring this up for so long?” he asks. “I… One hundred percent get where you’re coming from, Gakushuu. I’m scared of putting him under that sort of pressure, too. So… I won’t let that happen.” He pauses. “We won’t let that happen. All I want is for Makoto to live the best life possible. Telling him how he’s supposed to act to be would only be detrimental to that. We won’t let him feel that way.”

...Not when it’s a feeling they know all too well.

“Thank you,” Gakushuu says. “That’s all I ask.”

“Plus? If I may make a confession?” Karma asks. “I think I like the new Korosensei better,” he stage-whispers.

Kayano snorts. “You’re only saying that because he’s willing to cuss in front of you.”

“What can I say? He’s totally unhinged! It’s hilarious.”

Nagisa’s not exactly sure ‘hilarious’ is how he’d word ‘willing to do things like shank Karma,’ but he snorts along anyways.

Karma slides dinner onto the table. “Well, I’m glad you all had your heart to heart. In the meantime, I actually finished making us dinner.”

Kayano sheepishly blushes, realizing she’d gotten distracted entirely. She mumbles a quick apology, before finally taking a seat.

“What do you all want to drink tonight? Since it seems I need to do everything around here.”

“Water, please,” Nagisa says. It’s been a long day. Anything else and he thinks he’ll combust.
“I think I’ll second that,” Kayano says.

“Wine, please,” Gakushuu says.

“Of course,” Karma says, grabbing a gin for himself. He pops it open with a bottle opener, before pouring the rest of their drinks and sliding them their way. “Bon appetit.”

“Thanks, Karma,” Nagisa says as Karma takes a seat next to him.

“Watch’ya think?”

“It’s okay,” Gakushuu snarks, taking a bite.

“It’s okay!?” Karma repeats “And after everything I’ve done!”

“Sorry, Karma. Serving your basic duty as the housewife of this family isn’t worth any extra praise,” Kayano tacks on. Gakushuu smirks smugly in response. Nagisa’s glad to see they’re back on good terms. Good terms being ‘tag-teaming to roast Karma,’ of course.

Nagisa chuckles and takes a bite of his dinner. But he can’t stay silent for long.

“Hey. Gakushuu? Uh… Thanks for… Thinking about all that. I’m really excited about Makoto, but you’re right. Sometimes I need a reminder that I still need to think things through. So… Thank you for looking out for him. And for bringing up your worries. I feel like maybe earlier I made it seem like your feelings didn’t matter, and I never want that to happen. I don’t want to fight about this again. So, tell me how you feel, okay?”

Gakushuu averts his gaze, staring intently at his dinner plate to avoid showing Nagisa his quivering lip. “Of course,” he says.

“You too, Karma, Kayano,” he says. “...We gotta work together on this. I need you guys more than ever.”

“Of course. I wouldn’t have it any other way,” Kayano says.

“You’re sappy tonight,” Karma points out.

“Kinda had a reunion with my dead teacher then a heart to heart with my spouses in the span of the past four hours. Forgive me for being a bit sappy.”

Karma smiles. “Are you kidding me? I love it.” He takes a sip of his drink. “You’ve got a point. We gotta look out for him. And we’ve gotta look out for each other. So let’s toast on it: To Makoto, and to us.”

And as silly as he feels clinking his glass of water against gin and wine, Nagisa thinks he likes the sound of that.

To Makoto, and to us.

The next day Makoto invites himself into Matsuraiken like he owns the place.

“Yo! Muramatsu!”

You know, how you talk to a guy you’ve never met!
When Makoto had first let Kiyoshi and Fumiko in on the whole “Nagisa gave me a free fast pass to this ramen place” thing, Kiyoshi had been a tad surprised. But he’d been happy, too. Because, y’know, getting free ramen is decidedly better than stealing from the local 7-Eleven.

Plus, he’d known well enough that Muramatsu was a good guy. They’re not exactly close, but he’s well aware he’s another kid his parents taught back in the day. He’s been to his place once or twice, and Muramatsu babysat him a few times growing up. They’re acquaintances at best, but he’d been glad Muramatsu was doing this for Makoto. And as such, he’d gladly agreed to come scope out the place with Makoto and Fumiko. Sure, literally anywhere he was invited to by Makoto was bound to be weird, but what was the worst that could happen?

Makoto doing literally everything his social anxiety constantly tells him not to do, apparently!?

The good news is he’s not alone, and all social conventions haven’t magically vanished from the planet, because Fumiko is shooting Makoto an equally as baffled look.

Before she can chastise him, however, a man peeks out from behind the kitchen door. It’s been a few years since Kiyoshi’s seen him last, but he’d recognize the delightfully bland and slightly exhausted Muramatsu anywhere.

“Hey. You must be the Makoto I’ve heard so much about,” he says.

Makoto nods eagerly in response. He’s almost wiggling, excitedly stepping from foot to foot.

“And hey! Is that Kiyoshi back there?”

Kiyoshi only just now realizes he’s hidden behind Fumiko. He awkwardly steps out away from her.

“Mmmmmmyep-” he says, suddenly acutely aware of the fact that he’s horrified to be seen with Makoto in public.

“Long time no see. I’d heard you were in Nagisa’s class this year, but I didn’t expect to see you here. You friends with him?” he asks, pointing his thumb at Makoto.

“Uh! Yeah! Kinda!” Kiyoshi sputters. “We… Uh… Workongroupprojectstogther.”

“Neat, neat,” Muramatsu says, evidently not giving nearly as much of a shit about this as Kiyoshi is. “And you?” he says, looking Fumiko’s way. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen you around here before.”

“That’s because I don’t typically attend low-quality establishments,” she matter-of-factly states. “I’m just here for my friend.” She points at Makoto, before holding out a hand. “Hisakawa. Fumiko Hisakawa.”

Muramatsu leans over the counter and awkwardly takes her hand, trying his best to return politeness to the girl who just addressed his life’s work as hot shit.

Kiyoshi shoots him an apologetic look, hoping it’s enough to make up for both of his friends. He sincerely doubts it, but he thinks he’ll combust if he lets Muramatsu think he’s one of them.

“But I suppose none of that really matters, huh?” Muramatsu says, pulling his hand away. “You’re here for food, right? Usually I’d make your friends pay, but just this once it can be on the house. Kiyoshi’s an old friend, and it seems Miss Hisakawa needs some persuasion on the quality of my work. So watch’ya thinkin?”
Makoto quickly scans the menu overhead. “I’ll take Tonkotsu!”

“Good choice, good choice,” Muramatsu comments, turning to Kiyoshi. “And you?”

“Er- Shio please.”

Muramatsu nods. He doesn’t even need to ask Fumiko.

“Shoyu,” she says.

“Alright. I’ll be on that in a jiffy! In the meantime, you can sit down over there,” he says, motioning to a booth towards the corner of the restaurant. “I’ll bring it your way, so feel free to just get comfortable.”

Makoto nods and skips over to the booth. He shouts, “Try not to make it too bland!” over his shoulder, before sliding into his seat. Fumiko follows, letting out a deep sigh.

“S-Sorry,” Kiyoshi quickly apologizes. “...They… Don’t watch what they say.”

Muramatsu shrugs. “Eh. Don’t worry about it. More than anything I’m just surprised Nagisa told him about the ‘bland’ thing. That’s a new one. I’ve heard it a hundred times before, though. So it ain’t gonna get to me now. Something tells me he’ll be pleasantly surprised by the quality of my ramen, anyways.” And with that, he turns and returns to the kitchen.

Kiyoshi slides in next to Fumiko, looking across the table at Makoto.

“Hey, real question? What the fuck?”

Makoto tilts his head. “What?”

“You can’t just talk to someone that way. Do you even know that guy?”

Makoto pauses, thinking that one over. Finally, he leans towards Kiyoshi with an excited grin.

“No. Yes. Kinda!”

Kiyoshi cocks an eyebrow.

“There’s actually something I’ve been meaning to tell you guys!” Makoto says, his voice shifting into a stage whisper. “Can I share a secret?”

Kiyoshi frowns. “...Well… Last time you said that you showed us a malformed cat, so you’re either gonna pull another fucked up animal out of your ass, or try and sell us cocaine.” Needless to say, whatever Makoto’s about to share will be interesting, at the very least. “I don’t see why not?”

Plus, he highly doubts Makoto will take no for an answer.

“E-Eh!?” Fumiko butts in.

“Huh?” Makoto asks.

“Y-Y-You’re not really selling us drugs, right!?” she asks, genuine horror in her voice.

“No,” Kiyoshi reassures. “He’s not selling us cocaine. I was just making a joke.”

Fumiko seems to have completely missed that, because only now do her tense shoulders lower. “...Oh.”
“No, no,” Makoto says. “This is way cooler than drugs. This is life changing. Earth shattering. Insanely cool. I’ve been meaning to bring it up to you guys forever now, and I think now’s the time. You guys wanna know my secret?”

Kiyoshi nods. And Makoto leans in even further. He grins and whispers into Kiyoshi’s ear.

“I’m Korosensei.”

There’s no way Kiyoshi heard him right. What did he just say...?

“Excuse me?” Fumiko asks, a baffled curiosity to her voice.

“I’m Korosensei,” Makoto firmly repeats.

“T… The Korosensei?” Kiyoshi asks, his mouth dry. The claim is utter horseshit, but the way Makoto says it is filled with conviction.

“Duh. How many Korosenseis do you know?”

“B-But what does that even mean?” he replies. “Of course you’re not! I mean, look at you-” he says, motioning to Makoto. There’s not a tentacle or tie to be seen. Plus, you know, the more significant factor in this equation: Korosensei’s been dead for fifteen years!

Makoto glances at his hand, but quickly shakes his head. “Well, not in that way!” he says as if it’s the most obvious thing in the world.

“Then in what way?” Kiyoshi quickly retorts.

“The reincarnation. I’m the reincarnation of Korosensei.”

Kiyoshi sputters. “T-That doesn’t-”

“Just hear me out,” Makoto interrupts. “I’ve known there was something off about me my whole life. I mean… I never felt like I belonged.”

And neither has Kiyoshi! But that doesn’t mean he’s suddenly the second coming of an octopus! It means he’s an outcast.

“I’ve always had these strange dreams. Of… Things I shouldn’t know about. Faces I couldn’t recognize. The same place over and over and over again. I could never place my finger on it, but I knew it was home.”

“Or it was just a weird dream,” Kiyoshi points out.

“Kiyoshi has a point,” Fumiko admits. “I… Dream about weird things all the time. I’m not sure that means what you think it means.”

“Let me finish!” Makoto says. “I didn’t recognize any of it at least until I got to Constellate. But then I knew what I was seeing. It was the place from my dreams! Right down to the shitty overhead lighting and the fresh smell of the mountainside. I was coming home. And then I met Nagisa. Guys…” Makoto takes a deep breath. “Nagisa. Karma. All of them. I remember them when they were little.”

“You can’t prove that,” Kiyoshi says.

“Yes I can. I know things I shouldn’t know. Nagisa’s first assassination attempt: Some older boys
bullied him into strapping a grenade to his chest. He hugged me and then they set it off. He nearly got seriously hurt.”

“...You could have looked that up,” Kiyoshi refutes.

“No, I couldn’t have. Look around. There’s nothing on Kunugigaoka online. At least, not on the class of 2015. What the government didn’t scrub, the class didn’t share.”

“It’s true,” Fumiko admits. “I’ve done my own research on the topic. It was a bit of a fascination of mine for a while. What went down that year, I mean. Even in textbooks there’s very little information, especially personal anecdotes. It’s all been covered up.”

“He made it up, then,” Kiyoshi offers.

“Nope. No I didn’t,” Makoto says. “Just ask Nagisa himself.”

“What?”

“Ask him what happened! He’ll tell you exactly what I just said. He’ll back up all of this. Because Nagisa believes me.”

Kiyoshi raises an eyebrow. “No way,” he says.

“Yes way,” Makoto replies. “Invited me over to his house and everything. I had a wonderful reunion with Karma and Kayano and everything. Ask him. He’ll second all of this,” Makoto pauses. “I think. Now that I think about it, he sorta told me not to share this with anyone, but you guys are different. You’re my friends, not the E-Class. Not that they aren’t my friends! But, like, I guess it’s easier to explain to you!”

Is it? Kiyoshi’s head is spinning.

“I-I’m just not sure how I can-” Kiyoshi drifts off. What is he even supposed to say? ‘Believe this?’ Pretend he does? Process this at all! That’s his parents' dead coworker Makoto is talking about.

“I know, I know,” Makoto replies. “But please, just trust me on this. Do you ever know something so deeply in your gut that it has to be true?” He’s frowning now. “This… This is important to me. And it’s important to Nagisa, too.”

... “We believe you,” Fumiko says, and Kiyoshi chokes on his spit.

‘We do!’

She shoots him a look that says ‘just work with me.’ He gulps and hesitantly nods his head.

Makoto pumps his fist and cheers under his breath. But before he can boast any more, their ramen is ready. Muramatsu slides it onto the table with a hospitable grin.

“Enjoy!” he says.

Makoto nods eagerly, and it’s only now Kiyoshi notices the look in his eyes. He’s genuinely staring at their waiter as if he’s an old friend. He’s not stringing them along. He’s genuinely out of his mind.
Kiyoshi bolts to his feet.

“Fumiko? Can we talk for a second?”

“Not right now-” she says, but he’s already grabbing her hand.

“Please? I think we really need to talk. Makoto, you watch the ramen in the meantime.” The delicious scent is wafting through the air, but Kiyoshi can’t even focus on it in the light of these insane developments.

Fumiko does try to pull away, but relents. “Fine,” she says. “We’ll be right back, Makoto.”

Makoto watches Kiyoshi drag her outside with wounded eyes.

The moment the door is shut, he’s staring her down “Y-You don’t actually believe him, do you!?”

Fumiko’s lip curls. She takes her hand from Kiyoshi and wipes herself off. “Of course not,” she answers. “But I’m not gonna refute him. And you shouldn’t either.”

Kiyoshi’s quiet. Once she’s satisfied with wiping off his germs or whatever, she looks his way. There’s a deadly seriousness in her eyes.

“Listen. I’m not sure if you’ve been paying attention,” she says. “But… Makoto’s had a hard life,” she admits. “He’s seen a lot. I think he needs this.”

“H-huh?” Kiyoshi asks.

“Listen. It’s not really my place to disclos-”

“No. I mean-- Why would he need this?”

“He’s used to being helpless, Kiyoshi. If he wants to believe he’s a superpowered martyr capable of accomplishing inhuman feats and helping everyone around him, then so be it. Please. Just let him have this.”

Kiyoshi slowly blinks. He supposes she has a point, but this whole thing is still leaving a weird taste in his mouth. “But what about what he said about Nagisa? There’s no way he-”

“That doesn’t matter,” Fumiko interrupts. “Now let’s get back in there before he thinks we’re gossiping about him.” She pauses. And when Kiyoshi stands, shellshocked, it’s her turn to tug on his hand. “He’s a lot more perceptive than you’d first give him credit for. I have no doubt he knows exactly what you’re thinking. So you’re gonna go in there and you’re gonna say ‘Okay, I believe you,’ and mean it.”

“B-But I don’t!”

“Then you’d best well pretend. If you want to worry about something, then worry about preserving this for him. Do you think you can do that for me?”

Kiyoshi opens his mouth to disagree, but sighs and nods. It’s just not worth the effort. And quite frankly, he’s afraid of what Fumiko will do to him if he disagrees any further. “Of… Of course,” he says.

“Good,” Fumiko replies, finally releasing her iron grip on his wrist. “Thank you, Kiyoshi. I… Think this will mean a lot to him.”
Kiyoshi gives an uneasy nod. “I guess…”

“Plus, even if it’s not true, it’s sort of cool to think about, isn’t it?” Fumiko asks. “I don’t see any problem with playing pretend.”

That’s easy for her to say as someone who had the luxury of the Korosensei mystery being a simple childhood interest. But that’s his parents’ dead coworker Makoto is talking about!

He just keeps nodding, ignoring the pit in his stomach.

Fumiko leads him back into Matsuraiken. Makoto notices them right away. He waves them over and shouts an enthusiastic, “Hey!” through a mouthful of ramen.

“Hey,” Kiyoshi says, sliding into his seat. Fumiko quietly nudges him as she sits down. Kiyoshi gulps, takes a bite of his ramen, and forces it out. “Me and Fumiko had a talk. I - Uh - Believe you.” He says.

Makoto grins. “I knew you’d come around!” he says, turning Fumiko’s way. “Thank you, Fumiko!”

Fumiko gives him a smile. “You’re welcome.”

“I have so much to tell you guys!” Makoto rambles. “You have no idea how much went down back then! Did you know Karma was a little shit as a kid?”

“Yeah. I actually think I could come to that conclusion myself,” Fumiko snarks with a smirk.

Kiyoshi stares into his ramen as the topic shifts to something about a younger Nagisa. And with his ears ringing, he can’t help but wonder if this is really okay.

Why had Makoto brought Nagisa up like that? Makoto would never bring up someone he knew would refute his point. But there’s no way in hell Nagisa could be backing this horse. Kiyoshi knows how much Korosensei meant to him. He… He couldn’t roll with this simply for Makoto’s sake

...Could he?

Fumiko had said not to worry. But Kiyoshi worries. He worries about Makoto, worries about Nagisa, and worries about what this means for him as the one and only son of Irina and Tadaomi Karasuma.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter 10, finally! Sorry about the wait on this one. It's a HEFTY one, clocking in at almost 15k! Admittedly it's a long read, but I felt all of these segments went together thematically, and I wanted to wrap up the initial after-reactions of Makoto's revelation in this chapter so I could start the next arc with Chapter 11. Hope it's not too much,ahaha!

Before I get into the actual authors notes: I'd like to go on a record and say something. The other day I was browsing the bookmarks and kudos of this fic, and I saw some concerning things. This won't apply to most of my readers, but I feel a strong need to
say it anyway, because thinking about it made me violently ill: PLEASE DON'T READ THIS FIC IF YOU SHIP ADULTS WITH MINORS. And ESPECIALLY not if you think it's acceptable to ship Nagisa and Makoto or Nagisa and Korosensei. This is a story, at heart, about abuse and recovery from abuse, and I'm DEEPLY uncomfortable with anyone interpreting it in a way that further solidifies the cycle of abuse. If you ship adults and vulnerable kids this story isn't for you. No ifs, ands, or buts about it. Get out.

With THAT disturbing ass sidenote out of the way (I hope that didn't dampen your enjoyment of the chapter, but I felt it needed to be said for my own sanity), onto the actual author's notes for, y'know, my readers who have morals!

As expected, Karma and Kayano were thrilled. And Gakushuu was... Gakushuu. But of course I had him come around, too. I hope when it comes to the arguments between the Moonrise Quartet things don't feel wrapped up too quickly or too easily. Because it's not that they're perfect and always know how to fix things. They've just learned how to communicate after years of living together. Which isn't to say they're flawless, but most of their dysfunction comes from internalized issues rather than issues with each other, and I think that shows a bit in this chapter. Some deeper issues as to their inner dysfunction will actually be delved into next chapter, so be prepared!

Needless to say, I'm not dropping the Aguri plot thread. Kayano's bound to be thinking about, y'know, her dead sister at a time like this. And I, known biggest Aguri stan on the planet, am as well. But as for answers, I have none. Is the world really just that unfair?

I had a TON of fun writing the reunion and interactions between the RGB trio and Makoto. They had a lot of fun. I love the way they play off of each other, and I can't wait to write more of them in the future. Because they ARE gonna be interacting a lot. You know Makoto's never gonna leave them alone. They're his students, after all! >:0

I'm also REALLY proud of how the entire segment with Gakushuu and Makoto turned out. If Atlas (Read Atlas. It's canon to this fic) and his inclusion in this fic didn't make it obvious, I have... a lot of feelings about Gakushuu. And a lot of the time I'm sad he couldn't find a safe place like the E-Class students did. In some ways, I think he resents that. But... He's not a bad person. He's trying hard to move on from his own personal burdens every day.

And of course, finally, the Newtime trio! I had THE MOST FUN with this bit. Tender reunions and heartfelt apologies are great and all, but sometimes you just wanna write dumb kids being kids. I'm glad Kiyoshi at the very least is pressing (x) to doubt on this, because Fumiko's really just letting Makoto go hogwild, huh? (I mean, he IS Korosensei, but THOSE TWO have no way of knowing that)

Some songs that helped me write this chapter were Your Fault from Into The Woods, Maybe by The Submarines, Sicilian Crest by The Mountain Goats, Coming Home by Skylar Grey, Viva La Vida by Coldplay, and Therapy from Tick, Tick... Boom.

The next chapter should be up on the weekly schedule, so you won't have to wait long! I hope you enjoyed, and I can't wait to see you then!
With Nagisa’s biggest worry cleared up, life seems to return to some semblance of normality.

No - It returns to something better.

The school days go by swimmingly. They burn through math and science lessons alike. After school, Makoto stays for tutoring, unless he’s made plans with his friends. And after tutoring the two of them will flip through the yearbook. Nagisa will share stories, and Makoto will toss in his own anecdotes. They’ll laugh and reminisce, reflecting on the time they’d tackled the baseball game, or how Korosensei had built the pool out back. And then they’ll talk about how their classmates are doing now.

“Terasaka's a politician!? You've gotta be kidding me! Does he work with Karma!?”

Oftentimes Makoto stops by their house after. Stuff’s himself with a much-needed meal, excitedly converses with Karma and Kayano, and even attempts to weasel his way under into the prickly Gakushuu’s heart. It must be working at least a little, because Gakushuu makes sure to ask where he is on the days he doesn’t come over.

When Makoto’s done and dealt with, Nagisa falls into the gentle embrace of his spouses’ arms. They reminisce about the good times, too. Then create new fond memories... Snuggled up to each other playing Pokemon on the couch, or falling asleep to the backdrop of Kayano’s latest flick.

Before he knows it, a month’s passed by. Nagisa's in high spirits and considering ending Makoto’s assassination prohibition soon when he comes to the realization of just what day is fast approaching.

Parent-teacher meetings.

Now that they’re a good four months into the year, he’s gotten a chance to know his students rather well. He knows their strengths, and he knows their weaknesses. He knows where they struggle and, ideally, he even knows some of their ambitions. But starting to know them means it’s best to get a peek at their home lives and make contact with their parents. And that's never an easy feat.

Nonetheless, Nagisa steels himself and readies for the meetings. He tidies up the classroom, sends out notices to the parents, and gives the kids a heads up to pass the info on. He does one last check over of their progress reports and before he knows it, it’s the 16th.

Parent-teacher meeting time.

The first meeting scheduled is with Rin’s father. Nagisa goes over her grades with pride. She thrives most in Chemistry and Mathematics, but she’s able to pick up most anything with little effort. She struggles to communicate with her peers, but the ones she has taken to she gets along with well. Her father is delighted by her progress, but Nagisa voices concern he’s been told he’s not home enough.

Rin’s dad admits he’s been insanely busy with work. Ever since Rin’s mom passed away three years ago, he’s had to take up two jobs. He feels his tight-knit relationship with his daughter is falling apart, but isn’t sure what he can do about it.
Nagisa tries to slide him some money under the table and says Rin is welcome at his place anytime if she ever needs a place to stay. Her father gracefully turns it down, but thanks him for the opportunity, and asks Nagisa to continue watching out for his daughter.

The more he learns, the more depressing it gets.

Yoshito was bullied intensely throughout all of primary school due to some sort of reputation passed down by his older sister. By the time he was pulled out of sixth grade, he’d been slammed into the wall so hard it left scars.

Two years ago Emiko was kidnapped and nearly drowned. Nagisa is genuinely baffled he hadn’t been let in on that before the school year had started. But it had only come up when he brought up her aquaphobia. That certainly explains Kazuki’s defensiveness of her, but just how nonchalant her parents are about the entire experience leaves a horrible taste in his mouth.

Minako was placed into a foster family just last year after being taken from an abusive home. Rosey comes from a family of compulsive hoarders. Misaki had been suffering from leukemia for years up until a few months ago and lives in fear of it relapsing. Hachirou’s self-esteem is down the drain. Minki’s parents talk over Nagisa the entire meeting. Riko locks herself in her room for hours on end, burying her face in her laptop. The problems seem to go on and on, and range from mild to fucking horrific. Aina’s failing math and Rikuto’s mom stumbles home drunk each night.

Of course, it’s not all bad. Chiharu has a massive extended family with no shortage of good things to say. Haruhi’s friends are the first she’s had in a long time, and seeing her hang with them after school brings her parents to tears. Matsuya got a part-time job this trimester, and Komoshi’s dad is so excited about his progress he slams a geode on the desk and says Nagisa can keep it as a thanks. (Nagisa doesn’t get it, either.)

He’s halfway through the list when the Hisakawas make their entrance.

The atmosphere of the room changes in an instant.

They’re extremely formally dressed and walk with their heads in the air. They have this look on their face that makes it seem like they really don’t want to be here.

Nonetheless, Nagisa waves them over. He has two chairs pulled out in front of his desk. They give him a judgemental look over and he suddenly feels strikingly self-conscious about his own mode of dress. A simple blue vest over his punctured hand-me-down tie is unimpressive at best compared to Mr. Hisakawa’s precisely fitted suit, but Nagisa quickly attempts to shake the feeling. He’s modest, that’s all!

“Hello,” he says as they slide into their seats. Mr. Hisakawa’s lip curls with disgust as he pulls himself in.

“Sorry about the mess,” Nagisa quickly adds on. Up until now he’d been rather proud of how he’d fixed up the room, but the disgusted way Mrs. Hisakawa looks over his classroom quickly makes him doubt that. “Things have been busy. You know how it is. Kids.” He lets out an awkward chuckle.

The Hisakawas don’t laugh.

“We’re here to talk about Fumiko,” Mr. Hisakawa says, an unamused look in his eyes. Nagisa’s not sure why he tried that. From his head to his toes, he’s a no-nonsense man. Carefully dressed with his dark black tie, his equally dark hair is carefully slicked back. His brown eyes, almost
“Indeed. What has she done?” Mrs. Hisakawa adds on. As bad as Nagisa feels thinking about it this way, she’s equally as off-putting. With her long, carefully groomed purple hair, and her dark eyes, she’s dressed in a blouse and skirt combo he’d reckon is more expensive than his average paycheck. She impatiently taps her high-heeled foot on the wooden floor.

“What has she done?” Nagisa repeats, an even fouler taste growing in his mouth. “Er- Well - Fumiko’s done excellent, actually,” he says. “Her History grades are exceptional, and she’s no slacker at Science, either. Although she still struggles with Geology, she has an incredible understanding of Chemistry and Biology. She’s a hard worker, and she-”

“I’m sure she is,” Mr. Hisakawa dismissively interrupts. “But as for her other grades?”

Nagisa hates the way he says it. Why is he so quick to jump onto where she struggles? Where she excels, she excels, and she’s already come a long way.

“...She still struggles with math,” he admits. “Additionally, her English and Language grades are mid-level. But she is making progress. I’ve considered inviting her over for tutoring, seeing as how I’m already tutoring another student she gets along with in similar subjects, but she’s told me she’s incredibly busy with after school activities.”

“Indeed,” her mother confirms. “She has piano and viola lessons. She’s also studying French, practicing flower arranging, and most-recently learning the art of fashion design. She has no time for that sort of thing at your establishment.”

‘...Your establishment.’ Ma’am, it’s a fucking school!

“Additionally,” her father interjects. “She still has plenty of time at home to study. She just doesn’t. She doesn’t exactly exert herself when it comes to her work.”

Nagisa knows that to be untrue. But he bites his tongue and stays quiet. It’s clear her parents aren’t very fond of her, and he knows from experience if he voices any concerns about their parenting, she’ll be the one to be punished for it, not him.

“Of course, of course,” he says. “I just worry about how you expect her grades to improve at this rate.”

“To be frank, I don’t.” Mr. Hisakawa says. “Fumiko is... Not incredibly intelligent.”

It takes all of Nagisa’s self-control not to frown. He takes a deep breath, does what he’s always done, and hides the bloodlust rising in his gut behind a passive smile. He steeples his fingers, tilts his head, and resists the urge to grab Mr. Hisakawa by the throat.

“I’m not sure it’s fair to undermine her achievements like that,” he manages to say in a completely neutral tone. “Fumiko certainly thrives in other areas. When it comes to her skills, she’s the top of my class. Although I’d certainly never wish to diminish your concerns, as they come from an incredibly valid place, positive reinforcement does wonders.”

He gives another smile, just for good measure.

Mr. Hisakawa frowns, and Nagisa feels his gut twist. “While I’m sure that’s easy to say considering the… Fiber of your class, you must understand Fumiko comes from an extremely renowned family. She’s a head above the average student,” he pauses. “Or, at least, she’s supposed to be. That’s our issue here.”
“I’d strongly prefer you don’t talk about my class that way,” Nagisa says, still hiding any twinge of irritation from his tone. “We may be an unorthodox bunch, but I’m proud of what I’ve accomplished here.”

Mr. Hisakawa nods. “Of course, of course. My apologies,” he says with all the sincerity of Karma during a game of Go-Fish. “I was not aware you did not view things the same way.”

Nagisa feels bile rise in his throat. Had this man seriously anticipated him to be the sort to look down on his own students!? The very notion makes him ill. He’s well aware those sorts exist, considering a youth filled with teachers like Takaoka and Asano-sensei, but he’d sooner die than view his kids as anything less than extraordinary.

He shakes his head, still refusing to let his irritation show. “My students are my pride and joy.”

Mr. Hisakawa’s lip twitches with disgust, but he doesn’t say anything.

...The horrible realization that he’d only send his daughter to an institution full of children he doesn’t respect if he didn’t respect her either is rising in Nagisa’s gut, but he doesn’t say anything either.

“Fumiko’s done wonderful,” he decides on, instead. “She’s a delight to have in class. And although she was…” He wants to say ‘standoffish,’ but fears that sounds too critical. The last thing he needs to do is give these people fuel to punish her. “...Antisocial at first, she’s quickly learned where she fits in. She gets along with her peers wonderfully. In particular, she’s made good friends with two boys seated near her, so there’s no need to worry about her being lonely.”

That doesn’t earn any sort of applause from the Hisakawas either. Nagisa is running out of topics here! Do they want to hear that their kid is lonely!?

“I see,” Mrs. Hisakawa says, absolutely no enthusiasm in her tone. “...Is there any other concerns you have to breach about our daughter, or can we be on our way? Our schedules are incredibly packed.”

“I see,” Mrs. Hisakawa says, absolutely no enthusiasm in her tone. “...Is there any other concerns you have to breach about our daughter, or can we be on our way? Our schedules are incredibly packed.”

“Of course, of course,” Nagisa says. “I’ll have you on your way as soon as possible.” He quickly looks over his papers. “I actually only have one concern in regards to Fumiko,” he says.

Mr. Hisakawa groans. “How has she acted out this time?”

“Oh, she hasn’t acted out at all—” Nagisa quickly reassures. “I just have some worries about her participation in certain class activities. I’ve had a discussion with her, and is it true the two of you have forbidden her from participating in assassination?”

It’s Mrs. Hisakawa’s turn to look repulsed. “Of course!” she says. “That’s no way for a proper young lady to be behaving. The last thing we need to be putting in her mind is thoughts like that.”

‘Thoughts like that?’

“I understand your concerns, ma’am. I had the very same concerns when I first entered the assassination program myself,” Nagisa says, holding his hands up. But I must reassure you, my PE program does not encourage violence, and the moment anyone actually aims to hurt another I’d take quick action. Instead, the program focuses on skills like problem-solving, teamwork, and quick thinking. I really think it would be helpful for your daughter t—”

“Absolutely not,” Mrs. Hisakawa snarls. “She’s disobedient enough as is.”
“Of... Course,” Nagisa agrees, feeling violently ill. “I just worry about her feeling left out of class activities. I’m not sure you were aware, but Fumiko is the only one sitting out of assassination.” He decides not to mention Makoto for now. Makoto’s impromptu stabbing doesn’t exactly help his point. “...I worry she’ll get lonely.”

“She’ll be fine,” Mr. Hisakawa matter-of-factly says. “She’s a strong girl. I think she’ll survive.”

Nagisa sighs. It’s clear these two aren’t going to budge.

“I see...” he says, staring at his hands.

Silence.

“Is that all you had to discuss?” Mr. Hisakawa asks.

“Yes,” Nagisa says.

“Then that’s all of our concerns as well. We’ll be on our way.”

“Thank you for taking time out of your busy schedule to talk about her,” Nagisa says. “It means the world to me.”

The two of them don’t respond. Merely a curt nod, and go on their way.

And with that, Mr. Hisakawa and his horrible wife are gone.

The moment the door closes, Nagisa lets out a massive sigh of relief. His fist starts to shake. And finally, he can scowl. They’re far from the worst parents he’s dealt with, but the way they talk about Fumiko hits a little too close to home. He’s starting to see why she turned out the way she did.

But that only strengthens his resolve. If they won’t support their daughter, he’ll be there in their stead.

He spends a full minute catching his breath, before straightening his tie and forcing his smile. As miserable as the Hisakawas were to deal with, he still has a full night of parent-teacher-conference-ing ahead of him, and the last thing he needs to do is give any of the other parents a bad impression.

Before he knows it, Mrs. Takamoto peeks her head into the room, and things continue as planned.

Minki’s mom feels disconnected from her. Nagisa gives her the scoop on some of Minki’s interests and sends her on her way.

Kiku’s father is worried about potential trauma from a car accident his daughter was in last year. They talk about her process, and Nagisa promises to keep an eye out for any signs of discomfort.

Kanon’s mom admits Kanon came out to her last month, and she’s worried about how her daughter will fit in the class. But Nagisa, bisexual extraordinaire, tells her Kanon will be right at home.

Ryoka’s mother is as loud as she is. Kaya’s parents are cold, but polite. Aina’s parents are brought to tears over her A in English, and Makoto’s parents don’t show up.

At first, Nagisa thinks he’s simply making a mistake, but as the minutes pass by, an unsettling realization starts to dawn on him. He checks his phone one more time, just for good measure: But it’s exactly as he’d expected.
Mr. Himura had scheduled a meeting at this time (Or to be precise, ten minutes ago,) he just hadn’t shown.

The bitter taste returns to Nagisa’s mouth. There’s so much he’d intended to discuss with Mr. Himura. Among other things: His son’s grades, the neglect allegations, (well, “allegations.”) and Makoto staying over at Nagisa’s place. To see him bail entirely leaves an even fouler shadow over an already poor first impression.

But he supposes it’s not great to assume. Maybe he’s just late! He frowns, begins to nervously pace, and sends a text his way.

[7/14/2030 7:24 PM:] [Nagisa Shiota]: Hey! We had a parent-teacher meeting scheduled at this time. Are you on your way?

He waits one minute, then another. But Masuyo Himura doesn’t grace him with a response.

He sighs, pockets his phone, and flops back onto his chair. His gut twinges with irritation. He couldn’t even bother to give him a heads up!? How big of a selfish asshole do you need to be? He’d booked time for this! Surely other parents would have been glad to fill this slot, but now all he can do is wait.

...It’s like he doesn’t give a shit about Makoto’s future. No, not ‘like.’ He doesn’t. Nagisa’s conversations with Makoto have made that abundantly clear. But still, he’d wanted to hold out on some sense of hope. That he would have at the very least wanted to hear what his son was up to.

He shouldn’t have expected anything else. It was Makoto who had to sign up to Constellate himself. Upon first seeing the application, Nagisa had found it both charming and worrying. On one hand, it showed a sort of determination he’d never seen before, but on the other hand, he’d had to wonder why the boy’s parents hadn’t filled it out themselves.

And now he has his answer. It’s hardly a satisfactory conclusion, though. It’s not the first time something like this has happened. And he’s sure it will be far from the last. He’s had parents stumble in drunk, confrontational, or not show their faces at all. Hell, he’s had parents walk into his classroom just to shittalk their own kids.

The way Mr. and Mrs. Hisakawa had openly insulted their daughter still hangs heavy in his mind.

He just doesn’t get it. He doesn’t get how these people can be blessed with such kind, intelligent, and unique kids, only to shun them. Don’t they see they’re failing them!? Don’t they know they won’t be kids forever? Don’t they see they’re messing them up for life? It’s easy to point fingers and say ‘of course they do.’ But in reality, it’s a lot more complicated than that. Nagisa knows these people. Nagisa was raised by one of these people. They really do think they’re doing the right thing.

...This is why he could never be a parent.

It’s a debilitating concept. The idea of screwing up someone so royally without even having the gall to notice. As a teacher, he has somewhat of an outside perspective. He can piece together a student’s perspective before their parents. That’s a valuable asset. And he likes to think because of that he can step in to prevent disaster as much as possible…. That he can let these kids know they deserve to be loved - That they are loved. But it’s hard. And he’s so, so scared he’ll fail these kids worse than their parents ever could.

With all they’ve been through, the stakes seem so high. He can’t afford to mess up.
He shakes his head, spins in his chair, and clears his mind. It may be a depressing reality, but he can’t focus on it. There’re still parents for him to deal with, aren’t there? He can’t go into a slump quite yet.

And speak of the devil, the door thrusts open.

“What’s up, cumsluts!?”

Nagisa jolts, tense and startled as his head snaps towards the door. But his shoulders quickly lower when he catches sight of familiar blonde locks.

“Don’t say that,” an exhausted voice commands as another familiar figure follows behind her.

Irina and Tadaomi Karasuma. Nagisa’s surviving teachers and the most dysfunctional but loving pair of adults he knows.

A genuine smile crosses Nagisa’s face as he waves them over. “Missed you too, Bitch-sens- Er -Irina,” he says, quickly reminding himself that that was an acceptable name to call her when he was fourteen, not now that he’s a working adult.

“No, no. No need to be a stranger,” Irina says with a smile. “Bitch-sensei works just fine. I dunno what I’d do at this point if you brats stopped trying to get under my skin.”

Nagisa chuckles. “I know, I know,” he says. “It just feels so unprofessional. I’m teaching your son now, y’know? What would he think?”

“I’ll have you know Kiyoshi would agree.”

“He most certainly would not,” Karasuma says as he sits down. Irina slides into the chair next to him.

Nagisa has to agree with him. Kiyoshi loves his mother more than the world itself. Last time Nagisa’d almost called her by the borderline-slur in front of him he’d just about had a stroke.

“Anyway, anyway- That doesn’t matter,” Nagisa says. “It’s a relief to have you here. Let’s talk about Kiyoshi.”

Karasuma nods. “How has he been doing?”

“Great!” Nagisa says. “His grades are awesome. He aced his midterms. His English and Science scores were some of the best in the class. And he’s getting along with his classmates incredibly well.”

“Has he started to make friends?” Karasuma inquires.

“Sure has,” Nagisa confirms. “He gets along well with all of his classmates, but he’s really been taken in by this boy and girl seated next to him. Fumiko Hisakawa and Makoto Himura, if he’s said anything about them. I think they’re a pretty good match. He’s… A good influence on them. And it’s nice to see Kiyoshi coming out of his shell.”

Irina grins and grabs Karasuma’s hand tight. “Did you hear that?” she whispers, delight dripping from her voice. “He has friends!”

“I have ears, Irina,” Karasuma gently reminds her, but the tiniest smile crosses his face as well when he looks Nagisa’s way. “...Thank you,” he says. “I’m... Thrilled to hear that.”
He may say it with a mostly straight face, but he’s not fooling anyone. Nagisa’s known Karasuma longer than Kiyoshi’s been alive. He knows pride when he sees it.

He understands their excitement. He’s watched Kiyoshi grow up, too, after all. And Kiyoshi’s always had trouble with forming genuine bonds. Nagisa thinks it’s a result of his anxiety. Kiyoshi is incredibly capable of getting along with most anyone he meets, but it’s very rare Nagisa’s seen his relationships go beyond friendly acquaintances. He likes people (Or doesn’t, he’s plenty polite with people he can’t stand, too,) but doesn’t trust them to like him back.

Nagisa gets it. He really does. He’d grown up with similar feelings. But Makoto and Fumiko are different, much in the same way the E-Class had been for him. It’s a relief to see Kiyoshi fitting in with them so seamlessly.

“No problem,” he says with a nod and a smile. “I’m thrilled to see him doing well, too.”

“He actually asked about inviting some friends of his over the other day,” Irina says “I was like ‘What!? He’s getting along with people already!?’ So it’s… Good to hear it from you, too. Are they nice?”

Nagisa blinks, Makoto’s daredevil grin and Fumiko’s unamused scowl clear in his mind.

“…Eh. Enough.”

Irina must understand no-one is perfect, because she shrugs, chuckles, and says “Good enough for me.”

“Are you planning on actually letting them come over?” Nagisa asks.

“Duh,” Irina replies. “He’s just been incessant on both of us being there for it. Which is so hard in between work, y’know? It feels like they’re giving us more hours every week.”

“We’re doing important work,” Karasuma points out.

“Never said we weren’t. Just saying we’re also busting our balls.”

“Don’t word it like that,” Karasuma begs.

“How about tomorrow?” Nagisa says.

“I wish,” Karasuma says, rubbing his temple. “They’re already shipping me off tomorrow. There’s some stuff I’m supposed to investigate in Sudan. I’ll be gone before morning.”

“This is what I mean!” Irina whines, leaning Karasuma’s way, and dramatically rolling her head on his shoulder. “We’re so busy! We don’t even have any time for getting hot and he-”

“Irina, breathe one word of our sex life to Nagisa and I am dragging you out of this room right here and now.”

Irina pouts and drapes herself across him further. “Presumptuous, much!? You didn’t even let me finish! How do you know I was gonna talk about sex?” She whines.

“No, no,” Karasuma says. “Give me one way to finish the phrase ‘hot and he-’ without it leading up to something sexual. Come on.”

Irina pouts, but doesn’t give him an answer beyond a murmured “Asshole.”
“Let’s talk about your son!” Nagisa reminds them, desperately trying to avoid any thoughts about his teachers’ deranged sex life. “W- Where were we again?”

“His friends,” Karasuma says, shooting Irina an exhausted look.

“Ah… Yeah.”

He can’t help but empathize with Kiyoshi’s loneliness a little. Gone before morning? That’s a heartbreaking concept. He can’t imagine what it’s like to have parents’ so busy they can’t even make time to meet up with your first real friends. It’s not like Kiyoshi would insist on the two of them being there if he was anything except proud. This must mean a lot to him, too. To have that opportunity turned down time and time again…

No, that’s not a fair assessment. Karasuma’s right: They do important work. It’s not right for him to judge them over that.

“I’m sure you’ll find a time,” he says. “I get it, schedules are the worst. Thank you for both managing to make it here despite that.”

“Couldn’t miss it for the world,” Irina says. “Gotta check up on how our little boy is doing!” She pauses. “Kiyoshi, for the record, not you. Though we do need to check up on you, too.”

Nagisa sighs with all the vitriol of a five-foot grownass man just addressed as a little boy.

Karasuma must catch the pure rancor emanating from Nagisa, because he shakes his head with disappointment and says, “How has everything else been? Is he doing well with assassination?”

Nagisa, who still has pipe dreams of shooting up to 6’10 upon hitting age 31 appreciates the abrupt topic change.

“Awesome!” He says. “He doesn’t have a lot of physical strength, but he’s super agile. At first he was sort of hesitant to participate, but Makoto’s helped him with that, too. The moment he realized I’m not in any actual danger I think he let himself start having fun. He’s a good planner. I think if he had the initiative to take charge and be a leader more often he could really trip me up.”

“Just give him some time,” Irina says with a smirk. “I’m sure he’ll whoop your ass eventually.”

Nagisa smirks back. “I’m sure he will.”

“Which only leaves one last topic for us to address, I feel,” Karasuma says. “Do you have any worries? I know entering middle school has been a big shift for him.”

“Actually? He’s been doing great,” Nagisa admits. “Of course, he still gets anxious easily, but we’ve been working on it. And like I said: I think his friends are helping him come out of his shell. I’d try not to worry too much.” He gives them a grin. “He’s on the right track.”

Karasuma lets out a sigh of relief. “That’s good to hear. We can’t thank you enough, Nagisa… We don’t…” He pauses, before shaking his head. “Things have been difficult with raising Kiyoshi. So thank you for looking out for him.”

“Don’t thank me,” Nagisa says. “It’s nothing. You did the same for me, after all, didn’t you?”

It’s true. He’s been in Kiyoshi’s shoes. Maybe not to the same extent, but all those years ago when he had been an insecure, scared little kid, Karasuma and Irina had had his back.
“Sure did,” Irina admits with a grin. “It’s still crazy that you little twerps are already all grown up. It feels like just yesterday I was stuck changing your diapers.”

Nagisa snorts. “I don’t think we were that young, Irina,” he says, though he definitely feels what she’s saying. Every day his middle schoolers seem to feel younger and younger in comparison to him. Born in the year 2017? That’s not a real year! Those aren’t real students! Those are infants

“Eh. Young enough to make me feel stuck on babysitting duty.”

“You must have at least enjoyed it a little if you’re still around to pester me.”

“Don’t get too attached to the idea,” she jeers. “I just need someone to babysit my own twerp.”

“Simply a mother bitch performing her duty of watching out for her bitchling?” Nagisa snarks.

“I thought you were going to be mature this year and leave the whole ‘bitch’ thing behind?” Irina asks.

“Eh. I couldn’t resist,” he says, cracking a smile. “The room was starting to feel too stuffy without it.”

“This is why I hated working with you kids,” Irina grumbles, barely managing to mask her own smile.

Nagisa chuckles. Karasuma doesn’t laugh along with them, but he does participate in his own way with an unamused snort.

“I’m actually… Really glad you two showed up,” Nagisa admits, leaning back in his chair. “You have no idea how long my day has been.”


“Gee, thanks,” Nagisa says, briefly reconsidering just how much Irina and Karasuma actually did to help with his own anxieties.

“Let me guess. Insufferable parents?” Irina asks.

“Not even insufferable,” Nagisa says. “Just shitty. This pair comes in and just starts degrading their own daughter. Then they look my way like they expect me to join in. Like I’m not sure you realize, lady, but that is not my job. I’m supposed to nurture your kid, not tear them down.”

In the years following the closure of the E-Class system, Nagisa had often dwelled on how something like that had been allowed to come into fruition in the first place. Like, aside from Gakuho’s totalitarian policies, the fact that any of their parents had allowed them to be treated that way. But as he’d entered teacherhood himself and gotten to meet all sorts of people, he’d come to the horrifying realization that a lot of people hate their fucking kids.

People like those, people like the Hisakawas, make the world a little more dystopian. And they make his job a lot harder.

“Another guy didn’t even show up,” he continues. “I think I’m losing my mind.”

“So I’m taking it we aren’t taking the award for most distressing parent-teacher meeting home tonight?” Irina asks.

Nagisa scoffs. “Absolutely not.”
“Well fuck. We’ll have to step up our game next year.”

“We’re not doing that,” Karasuma says, eyes glued to his phone. “We should probably get going, actually. I need to get up early tomorrow.”


“Hey. It’s like we said: Wouldn’t have missed it for the world,” Irina reassures. “We’ll pass on the kind words to Kiyoshi, okay?”

Nagisa smiles and nods. He stands and exchanges a quick hug with Irina and a firm handshake with Karasuma before saying his goodbyes and sending them on their way.

He flops back on his chair with an exhausted groan. But one quick look over his schedule later, and he realizes they’d been the last meeting of the night. It’s a relief to have ended things on a high note.

What he’d said to them hadn’t been embellishment. He swears he would have had a fucking mental break if he’d had to deal with another parent who just couldn’t muster up the energy to give a shit about their own kid. Kiyoshi may have his issues, but at least he has parents who can pretend to care.

...Well, who do care.

He just... Can’t stop his mind from wandering. The way they’d rushed themselves out. The way they’ll probably rush to bed the moment they get home. It’s sad to think Karasuma will be gone before morning. What must that be like for Kiyoshi? Where’s the time for him? Nagisa knows his parents have been in and out all his life, and that’s a depressing reality… Even if they love him.

No. Even though they love him.

When he’d been young, it had seemed like the two of them had their lives toget-

Well. That’s not true, either. Even then, he’d known Irina was a complete weirdo. The woman would cuss out children and smoke a pack of cigs right in the school building. She was equal parts strange and endearing in regards to her behavior, and as the pieces of her past had come together… As her students had learned just what parts of growing up she’d missed, her behavior had started to make sense.

But Karasuma? Man, Karasuma was the responsible one. In a classroom with Mrs. Horndog and Takoyaki-for-brains he’d seemed like the only sane man. He’d been the adult in a room full of kids and adults who’d never gotten to be kids.

But as Nagisa had reached adulthood himself, even that curtain had been peeled back. Now Karasuma just seems... Sad. The awkward, stilted way he approaches things. And the uncomfortable way he silently shuffles when his son’s issues come up.

If they don’t have it together, then no-one can. Sometimes that feels certain. They’re the ones Nagisa looked up to most, after all.

...Well, except Korosensei. But Korosensei hadn’t exactly had the best parenting track record, either, to be completely fair.

And he does look up to them. He does respect them. He’d felt more relieved than anything when he’d caught sight of their familiar - their friendly - faces. He’d never doubt that. They’re his role
But they’re not perfect parents, either. And watching the way Kiyoshi carries himself... The insecurities he seems to voice every day of his life... it makes his heart ache.

...Because the adults he trusts the most don’t know what they’re doing, either.

He gets the call at 8:12.

He got home at half-past 7. Ate dinner with his spouses, and complained about just how insane his day had been. At 8 Kayano had peeked out for an early bedtime, while Karma and Gakushuu had retreated to do some of their respective paperwork.

Nagisa’s fiddling with his phone and checking up on some of his ex-students’ Instagrams when his phone starts to ring. He scrambles to answer it, considering the last thing he needs is the Sonic Ninja theme song blasting throughout the house (The house that his wife is trying to sleep in, mind you) at 8 in the evening.

“H-Hello!?” he answers, acutely coming to the realization that he hadn’t even noted who was calling him. For all he cares, he’d just picked up a spam ca-

“Hello,” a familiar deep voice answers.

Nevermind. He’s picked up something worse.

“...Hi, Gakuho,” he says, desperately attempting the disgust from his voice.

Gakuho Asano: Gakushuu’s father, and the ex-principal of Kunugigaoka. Nagisa had met him a fair number of times in his youth, and barring graduation, none of them had exactly been positive. He’d tried his best to respect the man for what he was: A skilled and hardworking leader who just had a few issues. But as he grew and grew, and as he got to know Gakushuu better, all the respect that he’d had for his former principal had quickly faded.

...Much like his own belief in his mother had petered out throughout the years.

“What do you want?” he adds on, careful to keep his tone polite. He’s not exactly fond of the man, but being needlessly rude won’t fix anything, either. “It’s sorta late, y’know.”

“I’m aware,” Gakuho replies, the closest thing he can muster to an apology in his tone. “I tried to call you earlier, but you didn’t pick up.”

“Ah,” Nagisa says. “Must have missed it. I was busy with parent-teacher meetings.” He gives a stifled laugh. “Busy day, busy day.”

Gakuho doesn’t laugh back. “As for what I’m calling you for: I actually had an inquiry about your school.”

Nagisa bites his tongue. That’s about what he’d expected. Ever since he opened Constellate, Gakuho’s been jumping up his ass. In fact, before he’d even opened the school, Gakuho had offered to let him come teach at his new cram school. But in between the hustle of Paradise and the whole ‘seriously abused his husband’ thing, Nagisa had had to turn down the offer. It’s clear Gakuho respects him as an educator, but Nagisa can’t really return the praise considering he feels Gakuho hardly respects him as a PERSON. He just can’t. Not with how poorly Gakuho had treated him when he was a deeply insecure 14-year old.
“Huh?” Nagisa asks. “Hit me. You know I’m always happy to talk about Constellate.”

*With literally anyone except you!*

Nagisa shuffles uncomfortably on the couch.

“I was wondering as to what you were planning to do for your sports festival. We’ve been planning some pretty grand things for Fukujusō, but we’ve been looking for a competitor. If you’re not planning anything, we’d be honored to face off against your students.”

Nagisa sighs. “Sorry. We already sort of have plans,” he admits. And it’s not a complete lie! He’s been planning a sort of intra-class competition for the second trimester in place of a sports festival. Think Capture The Flag meets Paintball meets Cops and Robbers, tourney style. He’s been toying with the idea for a little while, and it sounds pretty fun. At least more fun than competing against his husband’s abusive father sounds. The last thing he needs is his students getting called, like, a slur by a 56-year-old man.

“Ah… I’d expected as much,” Gakuho says disappointedly. “A shame, but an understandable one. I suppose I’d just been eager to hear about what your students are getting up to. I’ve heard fascinating things, you know.”

He and Nagisa both know that’s not the real reason he’s calling, but Nagisa doesn’t dare voice that.

“Ahaha. I’m flattered to hear that,” Nagisa mumbles. “I’ve been working really hard, so I’m glad to hear the news is getting out there.”

“Indeed. You just finished up with your first round of students, yes? How was that?”

“Oh, great,” Nagisa says, desperately wishing for this conversation to just end already. “It’s crazy how well students can thrive when they actually have a proper support system.”

He doesn’t realize how passive-aggressive that sounds until Gakuho falls abruptly silent.

“I- Uh-” Nagisa says. His instinct is to apologize, but on second thought he’s not going to apologize for saying that children deserve to have people supporting them, no matter how polite he’s trying to be. Gakuho would have to be a fucking psychopath to disagree with that notion.

“Of course,” Gakuho finally says. He doesn’t argue with Nagisa, so if he’s a psychopath he’s decided to keep that one to himself. “And how are your new students?”

“They’re amazing,” Nagisa says without a moment of hesitation. “Clever and hardworking and creative. What about yours?”

“They’re intelligent.” There’s a long pause. “And bright. They’re intelligent and bright.”

Nagisa supposes he’ll take that over just ‘intelligent.’

To be frank, he’s a little unsettled Gakuho got back into the teaching industry at all. After the allegations came out about Kunugigaoka, he’d been swiftly removed from his position to save face. And Nagisa had anticipated that to be the end of that. Truly, he’d felt a little bad for Gakuho, but understood it had probably been for the best.

...Gakuho had gotten back into the system within two years.

By 2017 he’d opened up his own brand new school. Admittedly, it was nothing grand, just a
humble little cram-school in the plains. But it had still left a weird taste in Nagisa’s mouth, especially considering Nagisa was just really getting to know Gakushuu. In hindsight, nothing concerning has come out about Fukujusō. In fact, Nagisa’s only heard great reception from his former students. But it still feels wrong, somehow.

Like… ‘After all you’d done to us… After all you’d done to your own son, why do you get a second chance?’

He knows it’s a hypocritical notion. After all, Korosensei’s entire school year had been one big second chance. Because of Korosensei, Nagisa tries his best to believe that if anyone genuinely wants to redeem themselves, they’re capable of it. But it’s hard to scrub the way Gakushuu flinches when someone raises their voice from his mind.

It’s not even that Gakushū’s a completely bad person. He’s friendly enough. Formal, but polite. (At least, to the adult Nagisa.) And not only is Fukujusō genuinely successful, but he’d sold the E-Class building and property to Nagisa and the others on a massively reduced price. Nagisa never could have opened Constellate where he did without Gakushū’s help. And Gakushū had sent him a letter of congratulations the moment Constellate opened its doors.

So it’s not that Nagisa isn’t happy for Gakushū. He is! Plenty! At least, he wants to be. He’s just a little scared, too.

“That’s awesome,” he finally says. “But, uh - I should really get going. Like I said, it’s late.”

It’s not really. Often he ends up staying up far into the AM hours. But he can’t carry on this conversation a moment longer. The awkward Gakushū brings up far too many convoluted feelings.

“Very well,” Gakushū says. There’s a long moment of silence, before he begs, in an almost childish voice. “Tell Gakushuu I said hello, okay?”

...And there it is. The real reason he’d called.

“Of course.” Nagisa says. “I’ll pass it on.”

“...Thank you,” Gakushū says. And without another word, he hangs up.

Nagisa sits in silence.

It’s four years ago that Gakushuu had cut Gakushū off. And it had been Nagisa’s idea. Gakushuu’s competitive streak against his father had never really faded, even as his respect for the man dwindled. As he’d come to loathe Gakushū for what his father had put him through he’d only sought further to usurp him. And it never once ceased to be deeply stressful, for Gakushuu or the people around him. So finally, Nagisa and Karma had put their feet down and begged him to stop keeping up with his father. It had seemed the only way possible to get him to stop trying to outdo him and just live his own life.

It’s still a decision Nagisa has complicated feelings about. Gakushuu’s doing much better as far as he can tell, but oftentimes he worries that wasn’t his decision to make. A hypocritical notion, considering it had actually been Gakushuu and Karma stepping in that made Nagisa finally cut off his own mother.

In his third year of high school, she’d had a particularly manic breakdown. She hadn’t been happy with his plans for his future job and had flipped out on him. It resulted in several broken ribs and a trip to the hospital.
He’d been dating Gakushuu and Karma for about a year at that point. And they themselves flipped out a little, too. Gakushuu in particular begged Nagisa to just abandon his mom.

It had been a painstaking decision to come to.

Nagisa loved his mom. And he still does. He worries about her every day. She’s… Not a bad person. With time, and with perspective, it’s been easy to learn that she was pretty clearly traumatized in her own right, too. She’d been hurting. And it was something even he couldn’t fix. Fuck, man, he was just a kid. Of course he couldn't! But she had been mistreated, perhaps like her mother before her. And she’d passed on the torch. Finally, when she’d grown up and found the control she so desperately craved, she’d mistreated her son in her stead.

...And he could just as easily mistreat someone in the future.

The notion leaves a twisted, sick, feeling in his gut.

Either way, he’d eventually succumbed. He’d remembered his promise to his mother on that fateful night, holding the torch high. If worst were to come to worst, he’d graduate from her, too.

...So he had.

He still considers it one of the hardest things he’s ever done in his life. But Karma and Gakushuu had been there to help him pack his boxes and move into a temporary apartment. They’d been there for the emotional stuff, too. And they’d been there for him when he’d called them during late-night breakdowns, desperate to rescind his decision.

‘His mom needed him! He’d been wrong!’

But he never went back. And so, years later, when he’d worried for Gakushuu in the same way, he’d placed his hand on his shoulder and talked from experience.

“It’s time to let go.”

He wishes Gakuho would make this easier on Gakushuu. Ever since the cutoff, he’s tried desperately to stay in contact with Nagisa. He frames it as a coworker sort of thing. And while Nagisa doesn’t doubt Gakuho respects his accomplishments, he knows deep down it’s about Gakushuu. He just wants his son back. But it’s too late for that. And Nagisa’s sick of being used as a mouthpiece for ‘hellos’ that only bring back sour memories.

*If you wanted your son to love you, you should have loved him when he needed you, jackass!*

He sighs and stands. Pockets his phone with an ever-so-shaky hand and makes his way into the lounge.

Karma’s no longer there. Gakushuu’s sitting on the couch, neatly organized paperwork propped up against his lap on a binder.

Nagisa takes a seat next to him.

“Where’s Karma?” he asks.

“He finished up,” Gakushuu says. “He bothered me for a little while, but I told him to scram considering I’m trying to work.”

“Hope you don’t mind me bothering you for a little while?” Nagisa asks, leaning gently on
“Not at all. At least you know when to shut your mouth,” Gakushuu replies, leaning back onto him.

He’s quiet. Just focuses on Gakushuu’s presence. The sound of him breathing up and down, and the lavender gleam in his eyes.

**Why had someone tried to smother that out?**

“You look stressed,” Gakushuu finally says, his eyes flickering between Nagisa and his papers. “Thinking about the parent-teacher meetings again?”

That’s his second time today hearing the whole ‘you look stressed’ thing. He’s starting to think he really needs a cold shower.

“Sorta,” he says, falling silent for a long moment. “Your dad called.”

Gakushuu frowns deeply. “Oh,” he simply says.

In the past he’s discussed whether or not it was healthy for him to tell Gakushuu these things. But ultimately his need to tell the truth came out on top. He thinks Gakushuu at least appreciates the sincerity. He’s someone who places cold hard facts above ‘simple’ feelings.

...On second thought, that’s probably his dad’s fault, too.

“He framed it as a school thing again,” Nagisa explains. “But he told me to ‘pass on his regards’”

Gakushuu’s lip curls with disgust. “Ew.”

‘Ew,’ indeed.

“Next time I’m blocking him,” Nagisa says. “I’m sick of this. It’s not fair to you, and it’s just annoying to me.”

“...You don’t need to do that,” Gakushuu says. “I know how important connections are in the industry. I wouldn’t want t-”

“The industry?” Nagisa says with a snort. “It’s *education*. I think I’ll be fine. I’m already doing great, aren’t I?”

Gakushuu pauses. He puts his things aside, placing his binder on the table. Deep in thought, he returns to his seat beside Nagisa.

“I have no doubts that man would blackmail you. The last thing we need is him tarnishing your name.”

Nagisa… Sincerely doubts he would. Perhaps the Gakuho they’d known in the past, but nowadays he seems almost… Defanged. Where he was once an opportunistic, ruthless sociopath, he seems to have devolved into a sad, estranged, jackass. He has ‘improved,’ at least morally. But he hadn’t when it had really mattered. So as thankful as he is for the whole ‘probably not going to get blackmailed’ thing, he’s not about to give Gakuho the Nobel Peace Prize.

“I’d like to see him try.”

Gakushuu’s frown doesn’t fade. “...He’s dangerous, Nagisa,” he says, shuffling uncomfortably. “Listen. Why don’t… I talk to him. Just this once. I know how to get through to the man. I’ll
simply tell him to leave you alone, and—"

“No, Gakushuu,” Nagisa says.

Gakushuu frames it so logically. In his coldly calculated way. ‘Only once,’ he says ‘Something, something, I know the inner mechanisms of that bastard’s mind.’ Like it’s for the greater good, and he’s the only hero who can stand up and defeat the villain.

But Nagisa sees right through that horseshit. It’s not objective truth that only Gakushuu can get them out of this situation. It’s just another argument Gakushuu wants - No, needs - to win against his father. More than life itself he wants one last hurrah - The last laugh - The victory he’s so desperately craved to find over Gakuho.

...But he won’t find it talking Gakuho down from contacting Nagisa. Nagisa knows that much. It’ll simply re-enforce that his self worth comes from how he compares to his father, and leave his victory as hollow as each that had come before it.

“It’s not healthy.”

Gakushuu gives a frustrated sigh, pinching the bridge of his nose. “I- This isn’t about- This isn’t about me-” he mutters. “I simply wish for him to leave you alone. And I don’t want you to confront him. It’s only going to make him mad. Let him think it’s my decision.” he pauses. “It is. That… I don’t want you talking to him. That I don’t want him in my life at all.”

A solid argument, minus the whole ‘I don’t want him being mad at you, so I’ll face his wrath instead.’ A touching notion, but a fucking depressing one.

“I know. And I’m proud of you for that,” Nagisa says. “But don’t worry about me. I’ll deal with him. And then we’ll never have to think about him again.”

Gakushuu shuffles uncomfortably.

Nagisa knows what he wants. He wants a glorious confrontation that closes all the open ends. He wants to feel powerful. He wants to feel in control. He wants to feel safe. Nagisa gets it. He gets it more than anything. But this won’t give him that. It’ll make him feel more unsafe than ever.

Because… Real life doesn’t work like that. You don’t just get to punch your abuser in the face and march off victorious. Because that doesn’t fix what they did to you.

A victory won’t mend you. Regardless of how badly Gakushuu wants to believe everything can be won. Gakuho’s done his damage. And that doesn’t mean he’s won, either. No-one won. Now all Gakushuu has left to fight against is himself. Because Gakuho won’t give him peace. He’s a selfish jackass who will only make him remember how he got this messed up in the first place.

But… He’s not exactly sure how to articulate that. He’s not sure any words could ease the ache in Gakushuu’s gut. So instead he leans on his shoulder, breathes deeply, and rests a hand on his lap.

Often, Nagisa wonders if he’d made the right decision about his mom. He misses her every day. Or, at least - He misses what they could have been. But… He likes to think he’s doing better. And he also likes to think that’s because of the decision Karma and Gakushuu helped him make. He’s still not sure they’ve convinced Gakushuu to do what’s right. It’s too early to tell. Four years seems like a long time, but in the scope of years of mental degradation, it’s not. He doesn’t know if this will fix Gakushuu. He doesn’t know if either of them can be ‘fixed!’ But… He has to believe. And he has to protect Gakushuu from his own demons.

“Okay,” he says, trying to come to a compromise. “How about… You listen. Next time he calls
me, I’ll let you listen, and you can hear me give him a piece of my mind. Tell him I don’t want anything to do with someone who hurt my soulmate. I’ll face him. And then we never think about him again. Does that sound good?”

Gakushuu’s quiet.

“That sounds good,” he reluctantly admits.

“Alright. Then it’s a plan.”

He doesn’t know if it’s a good one. He doesn’t know if it’ll offer closure. He doesn’t even know if closure exists! But he has to try. Because he’s sick of thinking about anyone hurting the people he loves.

Gakushuu snuggles up against him. Slowly blinks and rests his head on Nagisa’s shoulder.

“Thank you.” He pauses. “...I know I’m being difficult.”


Gakushuu sounds close to tears. “...Yeah. You always have.”

Nagisa gently runs his fingers through his hair. “I try my best.”

But sometimes, he fears that’s not enough. That no matter how hard he tries he’s just not capable of protecting the people around him. And he should. As a teacher - And as a husband - He’s supposed to know these things. The people who have been there for him always have. But... he doesn’t. And that’s his own demon to fight. The one fear he may never be rid of... That he's been thinking of all day: That he won’t be enough for his students. For his friends. For his spouses. Or for...

He speaks softly. “Hey... Gakushuu. Do you remember when Kayano asked us if we wanted a baby?”

Gakushuu jolts. His mouth opens, then slowly closes. He’s quiet, for a long moment.

“Of course,” he says. “...That’s awfully sudden to bring up.”

Nagisa sighs and anxiously places his free hand in his pocket. “I know. I’ve just been thinking about it all day.”

It had happened three years ago. Kayano had brought up the idea, and Karma had been ecstatic. Nagisa and Gakushuu had fell hesitantly on board at first, but it had been too much. Two months into the pregnancy Nagisa had had a massive panic attack and confessed he wasn’t ready for this. He’d wanted to make them happy, but knew he couldn’t trust himself. Knew he wouldn’t make a good dad. He didn’t know what to do! It’s not like he’d ever had loving parents himself!

Soon after, Gakushuu had tearfully confessed to having similar anxieties. They’d talked it over for a long time, and ultimately came to the conclusion to terminate the pregnancy and wait to have a child until the two of them were ready.

...If they’d ever be ready. Nagisa doesn’t feel like he ever will be.

Meeting the Hisakawas. Not getting to meet the Himuras. Watching the Karasumas flounder, and hearing the undeservedly self-pitying Gakuho across the phone. It seems like reminders are all around him.
“Ah. So the parent-teacher meetings did get to you,” Gakushuu notes.

“Just a little,” Nagisa admits. “It’s like… These people don’t realize they’re screwing up their kids! Then your stupid dad had to call, and I dunno - It makes me mad! He genuinely seems to believe he’s the victim here. After everything he did to you. I’m… Scared, Gakushuu. I’m scared I’ll end up the same way.”

Gakushuu silently places a hand on Nagisa’s shoulder.

“I… Don’t know what I’m doing. Sometimes it feels like I’m drowning. And… It feels like that wouldn’t be happening if it hadn’t been for my mom. Do you… Do you ever feel like they messed us up for life?”

“Of course,” Gakushuu says. “Every day. But that’s why we made the decision we did. To not put anyone else through that.”

“...Which is… Fine.” It’s not. It’s really not. Because it’s not that Nagisa doesn’t want to have a family. He loves the idea. And he knows Gakushuu does, too. He wants to watch someone grow up. He wants a child to give everything he never had. And he wants to give Kayano and Karma the life they deserve. “But… Other kids are relying on me, too.”

So, so many of them don’t have a support system of their own. And so, so many parents don’t know what they’re doing. Rin’s father said he loved her more than life itself. And the way he gushed about her left Nagisa with no doubts about that. But she’s still left feeling abandoned. Minako’s foster family doesn’t know what to do when he flies into a rage, and Irina Karasuma seemed genuinely surprised when she heard the news that her son had made his first real friends at thirteen.

They’re lost. And they’re confused. And they don’t know what they’re doing. They don’t mean to… Or they do, (The Hisakawa’s cold eyes still stick out clear in his mind.) but… It feels inevitable their kids are going to grow up broken, too.

They’re relying on him. He’s all some of them have. They need him like he needed Korosensei. But… He’s not Korosensei, and he never will be.

“What if I can’t help them, Gakushuu? They need me. But I don’t know what I’m doing.” He’s so, so good at pretending he does. At least, in front of them. But he doesn’t. He can’t fix Makoto’s home situation. All he can do is try his best to make up for it! He doesn’t know what to say to Fumiko on Monday. How to truly let her know she’s worth something and have her believe it. He doesn’t know how to tell Kiyoshi he belongs, or make his dad stay home for one day. “...What if I can’t help them?”

He’s not their parents. He can’t replace them. He can try all he wants, but there’s 24 of them, and only one of him. If even one falls through the cracks, he knows he’ll never forgive himself. “What if I mess them up?”

Gakushuu slowly takes his hand off of Nagisa’s shoulder. Reaches for his hand, and squeezes it tight.

“...You won’t, Nagisa. I know that much for certain. You work yourself to the bone. To the point where we worry. You care. You care more than anything.”

“And what if that’s not enough!? What if I can’t fix them?”

Gakushuu’s very, very quiet.
“...Then they’ll survive,” he says. “At risk of sounding apathetic or cruel, they’ll survive. Maybe you can’t fix them. But you can be there for them. Even when the world shatters around them. I know you will. And I know they’ll be okay. You know why I know that?”

“...Why?”

“...Because we turned out pretty okay, didn’t we?”

Nagisa slowly buries his face in Gakushuu’s chest. Gakushuu rubs his back in circles as Nagisa focuses on the way he breathes up and down. They’re hurt, and they’re messed up, and they’re scared. But they’re alive, and they’re together, and they’re okay. They made it this far.

“Yeah. I guess we did.”

It’s Gakushuu’s turn to run his fingers through Nagisa’s hair. “...They’re already off to a better start than most. You’re there for them. And… As reluctant as I am to say this, most teachers aren’t. They… Already have a lot more than I had. You’re their Korosensei. Their beacon.”

And Nagisa keeps trying to tell himself that. Every day. But when he watches Misaki cry and he doesn’t know what to say… When he finds himself up in the dead of night, his head pounding as he desperately tries to finish up next week’s lesson plan… He knows he’s not Korosensei. He knows he never will be. That’s a notion he’d tried to come to terms with before he’d even become a teacher. But sometimes… It hurts. Because sometimes he still hurts. And if Korosensei couldn’t protect him, then there’s no way he can protect anyone.

“Mmm,” he says.

“You know what that feels like. You’ve told me all about it,” Gakushuu says. “...The way you felt when that man gave you the first praise you’d ever received in your life. You’re doing that for them, too. So don’t you dare fucking degrade yourself. Maybe… We wouldn’t make good dads. But that’s different. It’s not your job to be their father. It’s your job to be their guide. And if you ask me, I think you’re the best guide they could possibly have.”

Nagisa has to blink back tears.

“Those kids idolize you. You’re their hero. So if you ever doubt yourself, just remember that.”

Nagisa slowly nods. “Of course.” He lays for one moment more against Gakushuu’s chest, then pulls himself away. He looks Gakushuu in the eyes and musters a tiny smile. “...Thanks, Gakushuu. I know I was being a little difficult there, too.”

Gakushuu gives a shrug. “Don’t worry about it,” he says. “...You were just worrying. And I get it. I worry too. But I believe in you. And I believe your students will be alright.”

And Nagisa tries to believe as well. But deep down, he doesn’t want to believe his students will be alright. He wants to know. He wants to know one day Minako will feel okay. He wants to know one day Rin’s father will be there for her. He wants to know Misaki will survive and know one day Emiko will be able to step in the pool without flinching. He wants to know Kiyoshi will believe in himself, and know one day Fumiko will run free. He wants to know he’s enough, and he wants to know Makoto will get the life Korosensei deserved.

But he doesn’t know. And as a teacher, that’s the most terrifying possibility of all.

“I think we should head to bed,” Gakushuu says. “It’s a tad early, but I think we’ve both had an incredibly long day.”
Nagisa hesitates, but nods. “I… Think I’d like that.”

Gakushuu stands, takes Nagisa’s hand, and pulls him to his feet.

They head upstairs and tiptoe into bed, careful not to disturb the already slumbering Kayano. Nagisa slides in next to her, and Gakushuu slides in next to him. Nagisa scoots closer to Kayano, and Gakushuu wraps an arm around his back.

“Night,” he whispers.


And in the dark of the night, Nagisa is left alone with his thoughts. But listening to the gentle way the once grief-stricken Kayano snores… Feeling the once untouchable Gakushuu’s tenseness fade as he dozes off into slumber… And listening to the once selfish Karma silently make his way into the room… He must wonder if sometimes all Korosensei could do was try and believe, too.

It’s a sort of reassuring notion. And as Karma slides into bed, Nagisa tries to remind himself of Gakushuu’s words.

...He turned out pretty alright, didn’t he?

Somewhere in the city, Makoto dozes off on a lonely futon. Miles from him Fumiko lies alone in her massive room, and Kiyoshi stares up at his ceiling, wondering. But they think of each other. And they think of Nagisa. And perhaps, they’re alright, too.

In due time, sleep takes Nagisa as well.

Chapter End Notes

Remember how a few chapters ago I apologized for it feeling a little bleak? [Nervous laughter] I’d like to extend that apology here. This one is a real BUMMER. Things will cheer up a bit soon, but there’s some darker themes I definitely felt the need to delve into here with where the story’s been heading. Needless to say the idea of abuse and recovery from abuse is a big, BIG thing in this story, and in between Gakushuu’s intense trauma-based worries last chapter and Fumiko and Makoto’s godawful parents, things have been pretty much building up to this.

As fucked as it was, I actually had a lot of fun coming up with how the class was struggling. I don’t remember if I’ve shared this fact before, but they’re actually all other OCs of mine from various stories. And taking, say, a random DND character (Like Rin is an expy of) and adapting her individual insecurities to smth that actually works in a normal ass setting is SURREAL.

I’d comment on the Hisakawas and Makoto’s father, but feel I hardly need to. I think the writing speaks for itself. They SUCK.

Had fun writing Irina and Karasuma. I’ve had Irina inviting herself into Nagisa’s classroom with a triumphant “What’s up, Cumsluts!?” ever since I first conceptualized this fic, and I’m… Strangely relieved to finally have that dumb joke on paper. I also enjoyed showcasing the drastic difference between them and many other parents.
showcased in this chapter with their genuine care. But I also had fun showcasing how sometimes care isn't enough, and they're flawed parents in their own right, too.

Had fun raking Gakuho through the mud. Needless to say, I don't respect him. He's a weird character, and I had a weird time writing him, namely because his characterization in canon is so... Inconsistent. His "redemption" arc in canon is half assed and feels extremely shallow. That said I ultimately settled on a characterization portraying him as someone genuinely trying to do better, but that not being enough to make it up to the people he hurt. He has this pathetic sort of regret to him, but I hope that doesn't sympathize him too much. Because my goal is NOT to make you sympathize with him. There's this deep sort of lonely ache he feels with his situation, but he's brought it all upon himself. So his sad divorced dad energies are just karma.

Also about time I popped the reveal that the quartet has considered having a kid for a WHILE now. This is actually something that weighs on Nagisa and to a lesser extent Gakushuu a LOT, so expect to see it come up again in the future.

Sorry this chapter wasn't super Makoto/plot focused, but he got his fair share of spotlight over the past three. This was a sort of transition chapter between the last arc and the next one, which will be the last of trimester one! This fic will actually be covering all three trimesters of the school year, and this first one has VERY MUCH felt introductory to me. (90k words of introduction... What's this Genfic slowburn nonsense?) We're just getting started, so Makoto and his respective... Situation springing from Korosensei will come up a LOT in the future. That said, however, the next arc is not his. It's a Fumiko arc, so get buckled down and prepared. It's gonna be fun, intense, and just a little bit upsetting.

I'm not sure if the next chapter will be up next week or the week after because I'm not exactly sure if I want to split the next arc into one chapter or two yet. So don't count on a next week upload, but don't count the possibility out yet! We'll just have to see.

Some songs that helped me write this chapter were Better Than Before from Next To Normal, Be More Chill Part 1 from... duh, Be More Chill (A great theme song for the Hisakawas if you ask me), 1,000 Ships by Rachel Platten (It just has a fun Irisuma energy to me), Runs In The Family by Amanda Palmer, Sorry About Your Parents by Icon For Hire, and Turning Out by AJR.

I hope you enjoyed the chapter! Let me know what you thought, 'cause I'll make sure to have the next one ready as soon as possible! o/
Days pass and Nagisa works on freeing his mind from the stress of Parent-Teacher meetings. The school year begins to inch towards the end of the first trimester, and Makoto is freed from his probation.

He returns to assassination, and he returns to it with more vigor than ever. He’d already been enthusiastic about the ‘senseless violence’ of his PE classes, but now he’s enthralled. He laughs, and he grins, and he schemes. Each ploy to knock Nagisa down more intense than the last. And each day after school as he chips away at his worksheets, with the big fat yearbook sitting on the table between them, he excitedly recalls an E-Class kid pulling a similar stunt.

“Do you remember the time Hara slashed me like that!?” He makes a slicing motion with his hands. “Woosh!”

Sometimes he recalls stuff even Nagisa doesn’t remember. He’d forgotten that once Hazama had accidentally(?) smacked Terasaka in the back of the head with an anti-sensei bullet. And about that time that Rio and Maehara had tried to sneak into Karasuma’s car during lunch break and hop on board for a free ride to WcDonalds. No sooner than they had tried to open the vehicle when Kataoka caught them and dragged them back to class by their ears.

His recollection of events can be better than Nagisa’s, sometimes. Nagisa will be telling a story when he’ll interject and correct him on a chain of events.

Makoto doesn’t just remember the past. He lives in it.

Nagisa will catch him staring off into space before quickly shaking his head. He says it’s nothing, but each time he has something more to share. He’ll crack a grin and share a new anecdote or ask a new question as the pieces begin to finally fit together for him.

But as Makoto thrives, Nagisa worries.

Because another student of his seems to be doing significantly less well.

Fumiko seems more withdrawn now than ever. She watches the rest of the class spar with Nagisa, her knees pulled up to her chin and her fingers steepled. She stares intensely at the ground, careful to not betray a single glimmer of hope in her eyes. But Nagisa sees through it in an instant. There’s this forlornness to her gaze.

One day, Makoto asks Nagisa if she’s lonely.

And Nagisa has to wonder, too.

Kiyoshi offers to sit out with her. But Nagisa shoots that idea down in an instant. Kiyoshi’s really found himself in strategizing for assassination. He’s excellent at coming up with plans, even if he’s shy to share them. When he puts his head together with Makoto and acts, PE is a great place for him to find some confidence. Nagisa would hate to take that away from him.

And so he takes this upon himself.
He’s having the kids face off against each other for the second or third time this year when he finds himself alone with Fumiko. As much as they can learn from trying to best him, they can learn just as much from each other. He’s watched them closely before, and trusts them enough to, like, not crack each other’s heads open, so he decides to hang out in the safe-haven of the science room as he watches them as opposed to hovering right near them. He tells them to stay close to the building and says he simply wants to see what they can accomplish without him being a distraction. But the reality of the situation is he just wants to keep Fumiko company.

While typically she sits outside on the doorstep, she’s decided to remain indoors with him today. It’s sweltering hot, so he gets it. The last thing she needs to do is have a heat stroke over something she’s not even participating in.

Speaking of-

He cracks the window down and shouts.

“Make sure to drink your water, everyone!”

“We will!” a chorus of annoyed voices replies.

“What happened to not being a distraction!? Leave us alone, old man!” Hachirou grumbles, not even bothering to look Nagisa’s way. His eyes are too trained on Rosey, who he’s diligently trying to pelt with a NERF gun. (Yes, he’d downgraded them to NERF from BB for their PVP experience. He can handle being impaled by pieces of plastic, the literal children cannot.)

Nagisa gives an exhausted chuckle as he closes the window. He faintly hears Makoto shout something along the lines of “Hey! Be nice!” Hachirou’s way as he scrambles after Kiyoshi.

He’s set them up in pairs. Their goal is to ‘kill’ their opponent as many times as possible during the allotted time period. He’s sure eventually he’ll let them have a free-for-all, but that day is not today.

He’d initially hesitated to set Kiyoshi and Makoto up as opponents considering the whole anxious child vs literal reincarnation of a serial killer thing, but he’d quickly realized Kiyoshi’s a lot stronger than he lets on. His dad taught him all sorts of self-defense maneuvers when he was younger, and all it takes is Makoto grabbing him the wrong way once for Makoto to end up flipped over onto the ground.

He yanks the window open again.

“Remember to be gentle, Kiyoshi!” he chides.

“A-Ah! Sorry!” Kiyoshi says, scrambling to help a cackling Makoto to his feet.

“Nice one!”

“Go away, Shiota-sensei!” Hachirou repeats, even more irritated than before.

“Oh, okay, I’m sorry!” he says, slamming the window shut. He turns Fumiko’s way with a cheeky smile. “I can see I’m clearly not wanted out there.”

She gives an apathetic shrug.

And that’s how things always are when it comes to Fumiko. At least, when it’s him talking. She has found her place in his classroom. He knows that for certain. She gossips with Riko before class
starts and was content enough with having Kanon as her partner for her most recent English assignment. Then, each day after school she excitedly meets up with Makoto and Kiyoshi and discusses what they’re going to do after Makoto finishes up his lessons.

It’s more than that she tolerates the two of them. She genuinely seems to enjoy being around them, and that’s a relief considering how worried Nagisa had been about her making friends at the start of the year.

But… He hasn’t managed to get through to her the same way. Not yet. Not like Makoto has.

...Not like Korosensei can.

She makes it very clear that she doesn’t trust him. The moment he draws near her posture turns tense. Her words are cold and her eyes are skeptical. She clams up, falls silent, and sends a glare his way.

He can’t exactly blame her. He’s met her parents, after all. It’s no wonder she doesn’t trust adults. But he wants to show her that he’s different. Because while Makoto and Kiyoshi are great, they’re still just kids. They can’t help with her situation.

“Hot out today, isn’t it?” he says, taking a swig of water. “It almost feels kind of nice to stay in here where it’s air-conditioned.”

Fumiko gives another shrug, but her gaze never once drifts from the window.

Nagisa frowns. “...Listen, Fumiko,” he says. “I’ve been thinking. Are you sure you don’t want to participate?”

Now that rips her gaze away from the window. She stares at him with wide eyes. “Of- Of course I am!” she snaps, huffing and awkwardly averting her gaze.

...She doesn’t dare look out the window again. Instead, she keeps her eyes firmly fixed on the floor, a firm frown planted on her face.

“...‘m not interested in such barbaric nonsense.”

Nagisa knows that’s not true. The way she seems to curl up in on herself, pulling her legs close to her chair… He knows that look clear as day. She’s just scared. Of what her parents would think if they found out. Of what they’d do to her.

The thought makes him feel a little ill.

It’s not that she just stops looking out the window. She’s careful to avoid it. She looks everywhere but. As if she’s afraid if Nagisa catches her daring to hope he’ll chew her out, too. And so she deliberately averts her gaze. Her eyes drifting from the floor, to the science beakers at the back. Up towards the ceiling, past her unnervingly steady hands, and towards the snake in the corner of the room.

She peers at Mary for one precarious moment, then quickly averts her gaze from her as well.

“I’ve had her longer than I’ve run this school, y’know.”

Fumiko’s head raises, just barely. “What?”

“Mary. The snake. I got her right after I got out of high school.”
Fumiko looks his way. She’s quiet, but she speaks. “...Really?”

“Yep!”

She had been his first independent decision once he’d been free of his mom. At the time he’d lived in an apartment alone seeing as how Gakushuu and Karma were still living with their parents. It had gotten a bit lonely and he’d decided to get a pet. He’d never had one growing up. Initially, he’d leaned towards something more stereotypical like a cat or even a rabbit, but when he’d laid his eyes on the snake in the animal shelter he’d decided in an instant she was too strange to pass up.

They were misfits, she and he. Maybe a little bit scary. Maybe a little bit offputting. And maybe a bit lonely.

Karma had just about had a heart attack when he heard what Nagisa’d decided on.

“I am never coming over to your apartment!”

(A hard promise to keep considering the fact that they were literally dating and also teenagers. Needless to say, Karma sucked it up sooner rather than later.)

“I’ve had her for…” Nagisa quietly counts on his fingers, feeling awfully embarrassed considering he’s supposed to be the educator here. “...Eleven years, now.”

Fumiko blinks, clearly intimidated by the fact that the snake is almost as old as she is. “And the school’s only been open three, correct?”

“Mmm,” Nagisa replies. “Before that, I taught at another school for four or five years, but I wasn’t allowed to take Mary into class there. Something-something ‘They didn’t want to worry about a pest problem.’”

A bullshit notion considering Paradise already had a pretty bad mice issue and, y’know, the fact that Mary could have taken care of that!

Fumiko snorts. “So the moment you got free reign you just decided to turn your personal school into a zoo?”

Nagisa pouts but doesn’t complain. He’s just glad to have her talking at all. “Hey! It’s not that much,” he refutes. “Just Mary, Korokohai, and the ladies.”

“Th… The ladies?”

“Er- The rats. I’m talking about the rats.”

He’d nearly forgotten that most people were not aware of the fact that he, Karma and Kayano had taken to calling them ‘the ladies,’ ‘the lasses,’ or any similarly pretentious high-standing title as an inside joke. Needless to say, Gakushuu firmly refuses to participate.

Fumiko’s lip curls with disgust. “Ew.”

“I, for one, think they’re lovely. They’re actually very clean animals, believe it or not. They clean themselves several times a day.”

Fumiko seems no less unimpressed. “Still ew,” she decidedly comments.

“Let’s agree to disagree,” he says, not in the mood to argue with a literal child. “I actually didn’t intend to get so many animals in here. The girls were supposed to be the only class pets. But then
we got Korokohai as a gift from a friend of mine, and Karma demanded Mary finally get out of the house.”

Fumiko snorts. “Why am I not surprised Akabane-san is afraid of reptiles?”

“You’re not?” Nagisa asks.

“Of course not!” Fumiko huffs. “They’re simply mere animals.”

“You wanna try holding her, then?”

Fumiko does a double-take. “What?!”

“She’s super gentle,” he reassures. “Loves to cuddle. I let kids hold her all the time. But no-one this year has really voiced interest yet.” He smiles. “You wanna be the first?”

Fumiko hesitates.

It’s not that he’s trying to call her out on her bluff. Namely because he doesn’t even believe it’s a bluff. He saw the way she was looking at Mary. She’s not scared of her. She’s impressed by her. He wants to give her an experience she can call her own, and there’s nothing Fumiko likes if not “first.”

“I…” Fumiko starts, but quickly drifts off.

“You don’t have to if you don’t want to,” he reassures. “But you told me you didn’t want to participate in Assassination because your parents asked you not to, right?” ‘Demanded you not to at the risk of verbal abuse’ sounds a little too harsh for his taste. “They didn’t say anything about the snake, though, did they?”

“No…” Fumiko admits. “They didn’t know about the snake.”

“And they don’t need to.”

Fumiko’s mouth falls open. She gives Nagisa a skeptical look. She glances out the window, then back his way.

Still frowning, she says, so quietly, as if she’s hoping he won’t hear her: “I’d like that.”

Nagisa smiles and stands. “Alright, then!” he says, making his way over to Mary’s terrarium. “You can tell me if you want her off anytime,” he reassures, gently picking Mary up. He returns to Fumiko’s side and carefully places Mary’s head across her shoulders. Fumiko reaches to cradle her massive lower half in her arms, eyes wide and mouth agape.

Mary quickly settles down on Fumiko, her tongue curiously flicking in and out.

“I think she likes you!” Nagisa says.

Fumiko blinks. “...Really?”

“Yeah! Look at how calm she is,” he says. “She must feel really comfortable around you.”

It’s an embellishment. Mary is the chilliest snake he knows. (And the only snake he knows, for that matter.) She’s comfortable around most anyone. That said, however, she’s made herself at home on Fumiko, and there’s no harm in pointing that out.
Fumiko cracks the tiniest smile. “...Neat,” she admits, carefully pulling the snake closer to her.

“You’re good with animals,” Nagisa says. “Have you ever had a pet?”

Fumiko’s quiet. “No, not particularly,” she admits. “I don’t like animals,” she pauses. “All they do is excrete and whine and bite. Plus, it simply strikes me as the sign of a deeply insecure person to need an animal’s mindless love to reassure them.”

Nagisa snorts. “Gee! Thanks!”

Fumiko jolts and shakes her head. “Oh! Not you Shiota-sensei. I mean, like, dog people.”

“I’ll make sure to pass that one onto Kiyoshi.”

Fumiko gives him a startled look. But any sign of apprehension quickly fades. “I’ll tell Kiyoshi that my damn self.”

“Please do not, actually,” Nagisa has to beg. The kid has enough self-esteem issues as is.

Fumiko snorts but doesn’t reply, shuffling closer to her chair with a meticulous precision. She looks Nagisa’s way. “Will she mind if I sit down?” she asks.

“No at all. Just be careful,” he replies.

Fumiko cautiously maneuvers into her chair, mindful not to bump Mary against the desk. She keeps her cradled in her arms, even as she scoots herself in. And then gives her a firm pat on the back just for good measure.

“I didn’t know Kiyoshi had a dog,” she admits.

“You didn’t?” Nagisa asks, raising an eyebrow. Taro’s practically his support blanket. If he’s remembering correctly, Kiyoshi’s had him since he was, like, three. He’s surprised the Samoyed hasn’t come up.

“Kiyoshi doesn’t talk about himself a lot.”

Ah.

“Well, that’s where you can step in. Kiyoshi is... Very shy.”

“I’d noted that much. I’m not daft, Shiota-sensei.”

“Of course not!” Nagisa reassures. “But he’s been like this all his life. And I think it would mean a lot to him if you asked him about his experiences or thoughts on something sometime. He has a bad habit of letting himself get talked over.”

Fumiko blinks, but sternly nods. “Of course. I’ll keep that in mind,” she says, continuing to pet the snake. “…She doesn’t feel like I expected her to,” she comments.

“What were you thinking?” Nagisa curiously asks.

“Slimy or something.”

“Nah. That’s a common misconception. Though a lot of snakes like to swim, they’re not amphibians.”
“She doesn’t bite, either.”

“Course not,” Nagisa says, giving Mary a firm pat of his own. “She’s my gentle giant. Never bitten a soul.” The closest she’s gotten is rearing up at Karma, but who hasn’t reared up at Karma before?

It’s about now that Mary gives a massive yawn. Fumiko jolts, pulling away, just a little.

“W-What is she doing?” she asks.

“Oh, she’s just tired,” Nagisa snarks. Fumiko gives him a skeptical look, and he decides to cut the crap. “Nah, I’m just kidding. When snakes yawn they’re actually just getting a reading on their environment. Chemical reactions and such.”

Fumiko’s posture relaxes. “Oh,” she says. “…Cool.” Her smile widens, and she contentedly strokes the snake’s head.

Nagisa can’t help but feel relieved. She finally, finally seems comfortable around him. Who knew all it would take is Mary feeling comfortable around her? It feels nice to see Fumiko grin after everything he’s seen. And as stilted as their conversation is, at least it’s a conversation.

But he can’t help but feel like he’s forgetting something.

“I heard you’ve been letting Makoto co-”

THE OTHER STUDENTS!

He hasn’t been watching them for ten minutes now! He’d gotten completely distracted with the whole snake thing!

He scrambles to the window in a panic, tearing it down and thrusting his head outside.

What he finds is far from disaster.

The kids have kept themselves mostly under wraps. Haruhi and Aina appear to have gotten into a little bit of a fight, but Makoto stands between them, desperately trying to play the mediator.

...And succeeding.

Nagisa watches him slowly tear the two of them apart and calm them down. (With some help from Kiyoshi, of course.) He listens to both sides of the argument, then settles the score and sends them on their way.

Nagisa doesn’t even realize he’s staring until Fumiko impatiently taps his shoulder.

“Ah, sorry…” he says. “I… Realized I hadn’t been watching them.”

“I had noticed,” Fumiko says. “But I wouldn’t worry if I were you. They’re not toddlers. They can take care of themselves. No need to be overbearing.”

Nagisa slowly nods. “Of… Course,” he says, pulling down the window. And Fumiko’s right. He watches Makoto return to his spar with Kiyoshi. And spots him sport a wicked grin as he starts to rough him up. But just when things seem to maybe be going a little too far and he trips Kiyoshi just to get a hit in on him, he helps him back to his feet and gives him an excited slap on the back.

Nagisa can’t hear what he’s saying, but it’s hard to imagine it’s anything but pointers on his assassination techniques.
...It really does seem just like the old times

*Wait - Speaking of Makoto*

“So what were you saying? About Makoto?” Nagisa asks.

Fumiko’s quiet for a moment, her forehead scrunching as she attempts to remember. “Oh, yeah-” She says. “Is it true you’re letting him stay over at your place?”

Nagisa nods. “I take it he’s been bragging about it?” he asks with a chuckle. “We’ve been letting him stay over after school after some stuff came up. Don’t worry. He’s not, like, inviting himself in.”

Fumiko’s quiet.

“...You know,” Nagisa admits. “If you’d ever want to come over, you’re always welcome.”

Fumiko frowns. Deeply. “I’d hate to be a bother,” she says, clasping her hands tight.

“Fumiko, you’d never be a bother,” he reassures, placing a hand on her shoulder. But she quickly pulls away, giving him an icy glance.

“I don’t have the time-” she says. “I’m a very busy woman.”

*So he’s heard.*

“Well, if you’re ever free, I’m sure my wife and husband would be delighted to meet you.” Barring Karma, who’d already heatedly debated economics with her.

Fumiko gives a stilted nod, but no response.

The room returns to an awkward silence, and he suddenly feels he’s taken a thousand steps back. He hadn’t even said much! But talking to Fumiko is like walking on eggshells. One wrong move and she’s back to hiding inside her shell. It’s almost like the snake conversation had never happened at a-

Wait! Where’s the snake!?

For the second time in the past three consecutive minutes, Nagisa sends a panicked glance over his shoulder and does a fucking U-Turn. This time Fumiko stops him and grabs him by the sleeve of his shirt before he can make a mad dash across the room.

“I returned her to her terrarium,” she explains, pointing across the room. And indeed, a quick lookover of her tank confirms that. Nagisa nods, returns to his spot, and tries to shake the embarrassment of being stopped in his tracks by a thirteen-year-old girl.

She’s returned to staring out the window. She doesn’t seem to notice it, but step by step she inches closer, til’ she’s practically pressing her hands against the glass. She watches Makoto spar, too.

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“Impressive, isn’t it?” Nagisa asks.

“They look like they’re having a good time,” Fumiko simply comments.

She doesn’t seem to notice her lip quiver, either.

“Listen. Fumiko. Are you sure you don’t want to partic-”
“Of course I am,” she interrupts, tearing her gaze away from the glass. She steps back once, then twice, clenching her fist and blinking fast. “I don’t want part in your dumb game or to be invited to your stupid house. Holding a snake is cool and all, but I’m not stupid. I don’t need your handouts or your pity. I’m sorry I’m so dumb and obvious and needy about how much I want to live like they do, but I can’t. So just. Stop.”

It’s Nagisa’s turn to step back. He frowns, falls silent, and sends her a sympathetic glance. “...Fumiko...” he says quietly. “You are not dumb, obvious, or needy.” His gut instinct is telling him to place a hand on her shoulder, but he quickly decides against it. She clearly doesn’t like to be touched. He doesn’t know where to begin to unravel all that, but... “You just want to spend time with your friends. There’s nothing wrong with that,” is a decent place to start.

“I’m not entitled to that. I’m not even supposed to be friends with people like them in the first place,” Fumiko grumbles, avoiding his gaze and staring at the floor.

‘People like them’

“...What’s wrong with Kiyoshi and Makoto?”

Fumiko flinches and shakes her head. “No, no...” she says. “I don’t know. I don’t know what’s wrong with me,” she whispers, voice cracking.

Nagisa frowns. Walks across the room and pats a chair. “Fumiko, I think you should sit down.”

“...What about the cl-”

“You told me yourself. They’ll be fine.” She’s what he needs to worry about right now.

Fumiko hesitates, but slowly approaches. She pulls herself into her seat and gives him a wounded look.

He slides in next to her. “...Fumiko, I’m sorry if it seems like I’m patronizing you. But I’m not trying to give you handouts. I’m genuinely worried about you,” he admits. “I know it’s hard for a teacher to seem genuine. I know there’s no reason for me to be involved in your life. And I know it’s easy to believe I don’t really care. That I’m just... Just trying to feel like a hero. Trying to... Help the troubled, needy kids and go to bed feeling good about myself at night. I know. More than anything.”

It’s part of the reason he and his classmates had never respected Yukimura-sensei. Certain teachers come across with a saccharine politeness, and it’s easy to believe that means they’re simply running on a script. How could a stranger care about their lives so much when they couldn’t even care about their own? In a world where all they’d ever been afforded was pity or scorn, it felt fake. It felt stilted. And Korosensei had felt the same until he’d met them on the battlefield.

That’s what Nagisa is trying to capture when it comes to his own students... Meet them on a ground where they’re complete equals. But Fumiko isn’t privy to that right...

“But I’d never lie to you about that. I care.”

“Why?” Fumiko groans.

“Because I didn’t grow up with a very happy family, either,” Nagisa admits. “And... I know what you’re feeling. When... When you live like that, it’s hard to believe anyone would ever go out of their way to protect you. But I don’t pity you, Fumiko. I respect you. And I want to help you. Because that’s what Korosensei did for me. And with the power of hindsight, I know I needed
“...I needed that a lot.”

Fumiko’s quiet. “Mmmm…” she admits, anxiously fiddling with her hands.

“There is nothing wrong with you, Fumiko. I want you to know that. I met your parents on Friday. And… They wanted to hear a lot of bad things about you.”

“I bet you had a lot of bad things to say,” she snaps, pulling her legs up by her chest.

“No, I didn’t. You want honesty? I’ll give you honesty. At first, yeah, I was intimidated to have you in my class. You were antisocial, rude, and a bully. You snarked me on the first day and the voice in the back of my mind went ‘what am I going to do about her?’”

Fumiko’s lip twitches. “Exactly.”

“But that was months ago. I hadn’t gotten to know you. Since then you’ve become a bright, wonderful person. You might not give yourself credit for it, but you have a big heart. I don’t care what your parents think. You’re a delight to have in class. I want you to be here. I want you to be happy. And I don’t have any reason to lie to you. I want to be here for you. And not just because it’s my job.”

Fumiko turns her head away, quickly rubbing at her eyes.

“Your parents… They seemed like they wanted a reason to be mad at you. And… That’s not okay. I’m not sure if anyone has ever said this to you: But that’s not okay.”

Fumiko gives another apathetic shrug, staunchly refusing to look his way. Takes a deep breath in and wipes at her face once more.

“...They just have my best interests in mind. They want me to grow up into someone respectable…”

“Am I not respectable?”

“Pardon?”

“Your parents didn’t seem awfully fond of me. I’m not living a life they exactly approve of.” And… He’s not living a life his parents would exactly approve of, either. “...But I’d still say I’m pretty cool. Wouldn’t you?”

Fumiko gives a silent shrug.

“Oh, gee. Thanks. I must be real lame.”

“You know what I mean,” Fumiko mumbles. “...It’s just, you’re not me. And… I just want to make them happy.”

“Which is… Important,” Nagisa admits. “That’s very noble of you. But making you happy should always come first. I want to help you remember that. Because that’s what I needed to remember when I was your age.”

“Mmm…”

“Listen. Thank you for opening up to me Fumiko. I promise I’m not looking down on you. And I’ll try to be more considerate of you feeling that way in the future. Alright?”

“...Alright.” She pauses. She still looks like she’s trying to make herself so, so small. She hesitantly
looks his way, eyes watery, and mumbles something he can’t make out.

“...What?”

She blinks, steels herself, and repeats just barely above a whisper “...Shiota-sensei, you won’t tell my parents we had this conversation, right?”

“Of- Of course not!” Nagisa sputters. After everything he just said, he would never sell her out like that. He can’t exactly call her fears unfounded, though. He gets it. He knows what that’s like. When you live like she does, everything feels like a trap. Like each moment of trust - Each moment you dare to show an ounce of vulnerability - You’re lured into getting in trouble. Being punished for being open. Being punished for daring to feel. Because that’s what his mom did to him, and that’s what her parents do to her.

...It’s hard to trust saccharinely sweet people for more reasons than one.

But he’s not luring her into a trap. Not all kindness has a starving wolf looming behind. He knows that now. He’s learned, with time. She hasn’t, though. And he knows what it’s like to be in her shoes.

“I won’t say anything to them,” he reassures. “Your secret’s safe with me.” He pauses. “I… Know it’s hard to believe, but I don’t want to see you hurt.”

“Promise?”

“Promise.”

Fumiko gives another tiny nod. Her eyes drift back to the window, and she pulls her legs close to her body. “…Can I admit one more thing?”

“Of course,” Nagisa says.

“I think I… Don’t want to participate,” she murmurs. “Everyone looks like they’re having so much fun. I want to be a part of that. I want to know what that feels like.”

Nagisa’s quiet. Because this will certainly be a difficult situation to figure out. The hardest problems don’t have easy solutions, and he’s going to need to try everything he can.

“Alright!” he declares, holding a hand out. “We’ll find a way to work things out, then. No matter what.”

He can’t help but crack a grin. As a teacher, the difficult questions are sometimes the most important of all.

And with his own grin a familiar and equally as ecstatic one pierces his mind. When it comes to... Hard questions like these, oftentimes Nagisa finds himself circling back around to one inquiry time and time again. The most simple, and most complicated question of all:

“What would Korosensei do?”

He reflects on coming to his Sensei with the bribe his mom had handed him. Asking Korosensei what to do... Meeting his eyes... And arranging a meeting with his mother.

"...First... I will try to get through to them one more time. I’ll schedule a meeting with your parents.”
“Absolutely not,” Fumiko interrupts, shoulders tense.

Okay. Okay. Maybe he’d worded that wrong!

“I just want to try to talk to them one more time. Together. And only about assassination.” Because… If he doesn’t try, he’ll never forgive himself. He’s following in Korosensei’s footsteps, after all. And… He has to believe it’s worth a shot to improve her home life too. He doesn’t want her to find a safe haven here, only to return to torment each night. That’s not protecting her! That’s the easy way out. “I won’t breathe a word of any of this to them. I promised, remember?”

Fumiko frowns.

“This will be my idea,” Nagisa continues. “You don’t have to take my side. In fact, I don’t want you to. Please don’t make yourself feel unsafe for my sake. It’ll all be me, the defiant teacher. Let it be me they’re mad at, but let me talk to them. Just one more time.”

“...And if it doesn’t work?” Fumiko pauses. “Because it won’t. I know them.”

“Then we’ll find another way. I promise.”

Hell, an idea or ten is already concocting in his brain…

Finally, Fumiko gives a tiny nod. Reaches out, and gives his hand a firm shake. “Fine,” she admits. “I’m well aware you won’t take no for an answer. And although I’m most certain they’ll prove you wrong, I… Would like to see you try.”

Nagisa smiles. “It’s a deal, then. Let’s meet up for brunch over the weekend. I can try to get through to them. If I can’t, then we’ll work on finding a more sneaky workaround. And until then, you and me can chat during PE. ‘Kay?”

“...’kay.”

“And for the record? I’d love to see you prove me wrong.” Nagisa pauses. “About - Uh - Your opinion. I mean - I’d love to validate your opinion. Not confirm that your parents suck. It sucks that your parents suck. I just want you to know that your opinion is value- Shit! I worded that poorly.”

Fumiko snorts. “It’s fine. I’ve come to expect that of you at this point.”

“Hey!”

Fumiko gives a wicked grin and turns her back. “It’s a plan, though I fear how you plan to make it go off without a hitch seeing as how you can barely gather your words in the first place.” She smugly chides. “In the meantime, however, it’s probably best you call your class in, Mister Teacher. PE ended ten minutes ago.”

Shit!

Nagisa hurries to his feet, checking his watch and scrambling over to the window once more. “Ah! Sorry! I should really deal with that!”

Fumiko snorts. “It’s fine. I’m the one giving you pointers,” She snarks. “...Thanks for talking, Shiota-sensei.”

“Don’t thank me yet,” Nagisa replies. “Thank me when I manage to help. Because until then, my
word is as good as nothing.”

“I’m not sure I’d-” Fumiko shakes her head. “Okay. Whatever you say.”

Nagisa pulls down the window and peeks his head outside. “Time to come in everyone!” He shouts. “Put your knives away and tally your kill counts!” He instructs, completely oblivious to how fucking insane that sentence is to say to middle schoolers.

There’s some brief complaining, but one by one the class begins to herd themselves inside. Nagisa and Fumiko return to the main classroom, sending one last thankful glance at Mary as they pass by.

As the class returns, Fumiko slowly drifts from Nagisa’s side. She returns to her friends, regrouping as they excitedly explain which stunts they pulled today. She nods and grins as Nagisa can only imagine she anticipates getting to join them before she even knows it.

He heads to his desk and begins to grab his papers for their next lesson. Holds a finger up and thanks them for his patience as he shuffles through math worksheets. The class chitter-chatters as school returns to normal.

And just barely, he swears he overhears Fumiko ask Kiyoshi about his dog.

Nagisa gives a content smile.

...She’s on the right track.

That Saturday he wakes up bright and early. Over the week he discusses with the Hisakawas about the idea of meeting up to further discuss Fumiko’s progress, and they reluctantly agree. They decide to meet up at 10, which in Nagisa’s opinion is far too early to even be considered ‘brunch,’ but decides to let it slide seeing as how he’s asking enough of these people as is.

As such, he gets up at seven. He eats a small breakfast, but decides to hold off for the most part to save his appetite for the meetup. He sees Karma and Gakushuu out of the house, kisses their cheek at the door, and prepares to do the same for Kayano until she gets the abrupt call that her shoot has been canceled. Something about her co-star feeling unwell.

He showers, combs his hair, and gets dressed. He briefly considers leaving the tie home today, but quickly decides against it. It may be a tattered hand me down, but it gives him strength. He needs to remember why he’s doing this in the first place.

He tidies himself up in front of the mirror and goes over what he’s going to say. Repeats it once, then repeats it once more. Shifts his tone just barely, then decides to scrap the whole thing. Should he be passive or aggressive? He certainly doesn’t want to come off as too accusatory regarding their parenting, but he can’t let himself get walked all over, either. Should he use a big vocabulary or keep it simple? Should he begin his argument with talk of assassination or talk of self-esteem? Is it even an argument? Well, no. It’s not an argument. It FEELS like an argument, but he doesn’t want it to be an argument. If it feels like an argument to the Hisakawas, he’s already lost.

 Needless to say, he’s been overthinking it all night.

…
...Well, all week.

Can you blame him, though!? A whole lot is resting on his shoulders over this. And if he screws it up, Fumiko could take the fall! In fact, he’s quite tempted to cancel on the spot and call the whole thing off right this moment, except he can’t because it’s already 9AM and also he made an anxious child agree to this meeting in the first place so if he backs down now it would be a stab to the back.

Christ, this is hard.

He’s not even sure if Fumiko will *be* there. He’d requested she come because he’d been curious to see how her parents act around her, but he’s very quickly starting to wonder if that was a bad call, too. He really should have thought this through more.

He thinks, having thought this through for a week.

And, as such, he finds himself shell-shocked in front of the mirror, conversing with himself like some sort of bad improv-actor. He’s thought about what to say, and he’s mulled over every possible angle he could take to convince them of his point. But what if it’s not enough? Maybe he should have just lied to them.

God, no! He’s a teacher, he really needs to set a better precedent!

How on earth had he managed to appear so confident about this idea in front of Fumiko? Well, it had *sounded* like a good idea, but now that it’s approaching it seems… Bad. This is bad. ‘But don’t call it *bad*, Nagisa! You’re just doing what Korosensei would do.’ he duly reminds himself. That’s where he’d gotten inspiration for this whole contrived meeting, right? Now he’s gotta wonder if Korosensei ever rehearsed talking to batshit parents in front of the mirror.

‘*Sorry, Nagisa!*’ says the Korosensei in his mind’s eye, rapidly pacing back and forth at a speed faster than fathomable. ‘*I’m just terrified of your psycho mom and need to find a way to talk her down so she doesn’t beat your ass after I talk to her! Fun stuff!*’ as he flips through note cards or whatever.

...Admittedly, he snorts at the thought.

‘No, no’ he reminds himself. Korosensei respected his mom. He wouldn’t have called her a *psycho*.

And he respects the Hisakawas! He just… Doesn’t… Like… Them…

He shakes his head, deciding he’s moved onto completely irrelevant nonsense and needs to get out of his own head before he up and misses the ‘brunch’ entirely. He straightens his tie one more time for good measure and peeks his head into the living room.


“Absolutely not,” he admits, giving a half-cheeky half-nervous smile as he takes a seat next to her. “These people are going to be a piece of work.”

“So I’ve heard,” Kayano replies, frowning. “You’re gonna do great, though. You’ve just gotta stay focused.”

“Step one failed,” Nagisa jokes in response. Admittedly he’s being a tad (Okay. A lot) self-deprecating, but seeing Kayano chuckle in response makes him feel a bit better. When it comes to… Situations like this, it’s hard not to feel teamed up against. But he’s never fighting alone. He
needs to remember th-

...Wait. Actually...

“You wanna come with?” he asks. “You’re - Uh - Better at gathering your thoughts than I am, and I... Really don’t want to do this alone. Half convinced I’m gonna snap and punch these people out if I go about this wrong.”

“Like you could punch someone out,” Kayano sneers, rolling her eyes. “Sure, though. I sorta wanna see this for myself, and the last thing I need you doing is trying to punch out someone you most definitely are not capable of punching out.”

“Gee, thanks.” Nagisa sarcastically replies. “Actually, thanks, too, though. I really appreciate that-”

“No prob. I’m gonna need some time to get ready though. Is that fine?”

“Yeah. That’s fine. We’ve got time.”

“Maybe we can grab ice cream on the way back,” Kayano says, standing. “It’d be a nice surprise for the others.”

“Pretty sure it’d be melted by the time they got home.”

“We have a fridge for a reason, smartass.”

“When Gakushuu’s willing to accept refrozen ice cream, give me a call, because hell has, uh - Also frozen over. Refrozen over.”

“And Karma?”

“Pretty sure Karma would eat a Hot Pocket he found in the garbage can.”

Kayano chuckles. “Fine, then. It can be our little treat. Just for us.”

“Sounds good to me,” Nagisa admits. “God knows I’m gonna need a destresser after this, and if we get ice cream for the other two we’re never gonna hear the end of Gakushuu’s ‘I really shouldn’t be doing this.’ ‘I’m getting fat, you know.’”

“Like hell he is. His metabolism is inhuman.”

“I know, right!? He’s insane!”

With their little plan tossed together, Nagisa feels marginally better. Kayano runs into the bedroom and switches out of her decidedly unprofessional and glaringly novelty ‘kitten with a flamethrower’ pajamas, then they’re out of the house by 9:30.

They arrive at the restaurant just before ten. And find themselves in awe of the place. When the Hisakawas had suggested the meetup location Nagisa had been hesitant to argue with them seeing how much he was asking of them as is. But stepping into the restaurant, he can’t help but exchange a baffled stare with Kayano.

A nigh-romantic overhead lighting illuminates the restaurant. Each carefully crafted wooden table already has chalices and silverware precisely organized sat in front of each stylish leather seat. A massive mirror hangs over a crackling fireplace, and intricate bookshelves line the walls.
This is a fucking breakfast place! It’s the equivalent of a WAFFLE HOUSE. Why does it feel like he’s entering the fucking Smithsonian!?

A waiter asks them if they have a reservation (Reservation!? This may as well be an IHop!) and they confirm they’re meeting up with the Hisakawas. They’re led over to a massive table near the back, where the Hisakawas have already been seated. And in between them sits the one and only Fumiko, a deeply uncomfortable look on her face.

She perks up, however, upon seeing them. Nagisa gives her a tiny wave and a reassuring smile as he slides into his seat.

The Hisakawas are staring. It takes him a moment to even realize why.

“Ah- Sorry,” he says as Kayano takes a seat next to him. “Hope you don’t mind me inviting my wife. Her schedule cleared up last minute today, and I figured ‘the more the merrier!’”

Okay, so it’s less ‘the more the merrier,’ and more ‘you people scare the shit out of me and I thought she’d make an excellent security blanket,’ alongside a dash of ‘I’m getting the vibe you really don’t respect me and thought maybe if I brought my celebrity wife you’d briefly consider my Totally Heterosexual Monogamous Rich People Opinions and stop abusing your daughter.’

He doesn’t say that. The more the merrier works.

“Of course not,” Mr. Hisakawa says.

Kayano holds a hand out. “I’m Akari. Akari Yukimura,” she says with a smile. “You can call me Kayan-”

“We know you,” Mrs. Hisakawa interrupts. “Mase Haruana, yes?”

Kayano nods, awkwardly withdrawing her hand. “That would be me, yes.”

Fumiko hasn’t spoken. Until now she’s been staring down at the table, not daring to look Nagisa’s way. Upon Kayano’s introduction, she briefly looks up and sends a nervous glance, but says nothing else.

Kayano gives her an awkward smile. “And it’s wonderful to meet you as well, Miss Fumiko.”

Fumiko gives a stilted, almost-rehearsed nod. “You too,” she says quietly. She still refuses to make direct eye contact, sending one nervous glance her father’s way, then another towards her mother.

If they notice, they certainly don’t show it. They continue with their faux routine, exchanging further formalities with Nagisa and Kayano before ever-so-fancifully ordering their meals. They go about as normal, pretending their daughter isn’t having an anxiety attack stuck in between them.

Nagisa and Kayano order their own meals, glaringly incapable of pretending nothing is wrong. He notices the disapproving way the Hisakawas stare at his nervous smile. And although Kayano, known actress, is much more adept at hiding her distaste, he catches her nervous tics such as scratching at the back of her neck.

When the waiter brings the menu over, Nagisa comes to the acute realization that literally everything here has an exorbitant price. He briefly considers losing his mind over just how much money he’s wasting on a fucking pancake, but tries to remind himself that his wife is working on a blockbuster film about a hobo god and his husband is Bill Gates’ biggest rival. He can splurge once in a while and probably still be fine.
He and Kayano decide to split a plate of pancakes. The last thing they need is to appear greedy in front of these people. Plus, the platter is massive, and it’s pretty evident they both have their ice cream plan in mind for after this.

“Syrup and whipped cream,” Kayano decides. “Lots of syrup and whipped cream.”

He’s not nearly as big on sweets as she is, but seeing as how she’d decided to accompany him to confront these fucking sociopaths he’ll let her treat herself.

He nods. “As much syrup and whipped cream as you can put on it.”

To say what the Hisakawas order is extravagant is an understatement. He quickly loses track of what belongs to who, but in between them there’s a platter of fried egg, an omelette, a full ass ham, thirteen pieces of bacon, half of a waffle, a bowl of cantaloupe, and a plate of french toast.

Before Nagisa knows it their meals are ready, and watching the waiter pile plate after plate onto the Hisakawas’ side of the table is… A sight to behold.

It’s as they begin to hesitantly dig into their own meals that he reminds them what they’re actually here to discuss.

“So. Let’s talk about Fumiko’s progress,” he says, cutting the pancake in half and sliding it towards Kayano’s side of the plate.

Fumiko avoids eye contact again. Where she’d started to dare to look Kayano and Nagisa’s way, she quickly shies back. Keeping her hands close to her lap, she shuffles uncomfortably and gulps.

Nagisa feels a knot in his own stomach. This was a bad, bad idea. What was he thinking!?

“About time,” Mr. Hisakawa says. “I thought you’d never breach the subject. In fact, I was beginning to lose my patience.” He frowns. “But what about it? I’m still perplexed as to why you’ve called us to have this meeting. Especially after so recently we took time out of our busy schedules to meet up with you in class. You said you had no concerns about our girl, yes? So what bothers you now. Don’t tell me you lied to save face.”

Nagisa slowly blinks. Places his fork on his plate, and sends an aside glance to Kayano. She’s managed to keep that collected smile, but Nagisa has an acute feeling she wants to ‘light some bitches up.’ He looks back towards the Hisakawas, and tries to gather what words to say in response to such a weighty allegation, especially considering he hardly values their time seeing as how the Karasumas had managed to make time in between ‘defending the fucking country’ and ‘desperately attempting to revitalize their sex lives.’

“Of… Of course not,” he finally says, following in Kayano’s stead and keeping his tone perfectly calm. “I just wish to… Further discuss possibilities as to where we’re heading with Fumiko’s education. We hadn’t managed to find much time to discuss on Friday because of your busy schedules. And I sincerely apologize for that. But I still want to get a more concrete plan worked out, seeing as how you’ve barred her participation in certain activities. Since you’ve picked the time and place, I hope this will be a more acceptable avenue for discussion for you two.”

Mr. Hisakawa slowly nods. “Of course, of course,” he says. But he must be able to tell where Nagisa is heading from a mile away, because he quickly clarifies. “But if you further intend to discuss the concept of our daughter participating in your ‘assassination,’ I’m afraid to inform you that will remain a ‘no.’ I feel we’ve made ourselves quite clear in our decision, and we don’t intend to budge. I sincerely hope you don’t intend to further push the subject.”
Nagisa bites his lip. It feels like he’s playing four-dimensional chess with all microaggressions he’s navigating. “I implore you to just hear me out, Mr. Hisakawa. If I can’t sell you on it after this, I’ll drop it. And that’s a promise. But I need you to keep in mind that you’re isolating your daughter from important activities that are impacting how she does in this school.”

“So she’s performing unsatisfactorily?”

“E-Excuse me?”

“If her performance isn’t adequate…”

Fumiko flinches.

“No! No! That isn’t it at all!” Nagisa shouts. If he’d had any composure before, he’s quickly lost it. He’s gripping the table so tight his hands shake. “Your daughter is… Your daughter is… Wonderful. She hasn’t done anything wrong,” he reassures. “I’m just… I don’t know. But it’s not that she’s fallen behind. So do not worry about her progress. I simply… Worry she’s missing out on a valuable experience.”

“And while I appreciate your concern,” Mr. Hisakawa says in a tone that implies he absolutely does not. “I must remind you that Fumiko is my daughter. The last thing you need to do here is overstep boundaries. I know what’s best for her. Fumiko has had plenty of valuable experiences, and we very well know why we picked your establishment for her education. It was for your exemplary rate of turning around troubled children like her. Not for your crude, violent, and quite frankly ludicrous extracurricular activities. That is a decision we made signing up for your program, and it’s one we intend to have you respect. If you’re not capable of that, I’m afraid we’ll have to pull our daughter fro-”

“N-No!” Nagisa shouts again. Half the restaurant is staring at him, but sheer terror fills his gut. “I assure you there’s no need for that. And I apologize for coming off as overbearing. Your daughter thrives in my school’s environment, and I’d hate to take that away from her.”

Fumiko doesn’t just thrive. Fumiko’s finally found herself. The way Fumiko laughs around Kiyoshi and Makoto is something he’d never foreseen of her at the start of the year. She’s found a place where she feels at least relatively safe... Where she can make friends... Where she can take a risk and hold a snake... And where she can take a leap of faith and ask Nagisa to stand up for her. ...A task Nagisa’s failed in.

“And I’m sure that’s true,” Mr. Hisakawa says, notably unimpressed. “But the last thing we need to do while she’s thriving as such is… Encourage her in those ways. Fumiko… She…” He pauses. “When you give her an inch, she runs a mile. She’s already incredibly unruly compared to her sisters. You see how being encouraged to attack her teacher could further skew her development, yes?”

“Of… Course,” Nagisa says, having to use all of his restraint to keep himself from explaining that he’s not necessarily encouraging them to attack him. Something tells him that wouldn’t exactly help his case.

“And I can hardly see why you’re so caught up on the idea. Needless to say, Fumiko has no interest in participating in your PE classes, anyways. And she’s told us as such.” He turns Fumiko’s way, and in a tone that just barely masks a threat says “Right, dear?”

“...Y… Yeah.”
Fumiko stares at the floor.

“It’s… Crude. It’s barbaric. And it’s ridiculous,” she recites, her voice tiny, but stern. She refuses to look Nagisa’s way.

Her parents may not notice it, but Nagisa can get a reading on her in an instant. Where she’d seemed shy and nervous before, now she seems ashamed. And Nagisa has a feeling as to why. The way she scoots further away from him… And the stiff way she cuts her toast… She thinks he’s disappointed in her.

And he’s not, dammit! All she’d done was protect herself. And he’d specifically instructed her to prioritize that. But he knows how it feels to have that voice screaming in the back of your head. ‘Hypocrite.’ ‘Liar.’ ‘Traitor.’ And how nothing can make it shut up.

...He’d been wrong to put her in this situation in the first place.

His own hand feels stiff as takes a bite of his pancake. Objectively, it’s delicious. Just the right sort of sweet and fluffy. The syrup is suburb, and even the whipped cream is top-notch. All things considered, he should love it. But with the somber atmosphere of the room, it just feels dry.

What had he been thinking?

...He’d just been trying to follow Korosensei’s example. When his mom had first become an obstacle to him achieving his own autonomy, Korosensei had simply wanted to talk. And talk they had.

But talking hadn’t exactly worked. The first time Korosensei had tried to calmly reason with her, she’d grabbed Nagisa by his hair and pulled him close. Screamed in his face so violently spittle flared at his cheek. She’d called Korosensei a bad influence, and threatened to remove him entirely.

The second talk had ‘worked,’ he supposes. For one beautiful moment, he’d gotten through to his mother. And she’d allowed him to remain in the E-Class.

But the second talk had also taken place at 3am in the morning after being roofied by his own mother and subsequently tossed a goddamn torch. Sure, he’d managed to talk some sense into his mom, but there were probably some steps that could have been taken there before ‘light up the school’ and ‘stun clap a professional assassin.’

And... That beautiful moment was simply that. A moment. Spring phased into summer... Korosensei’s light faded from betwixt his student’s fingers... And Nagisa’s newfound peace fizzled out just as he’d expected.

Even if he can manage to talk some sense into Fumiko’s parents, who is he to say it will be any different?

The sheer panic he felt as his mother leaned across the desk and shrieked in Korosensei’s face. How could he forget just how horrible it felt to be in that position? How it had been him, sitting so stiffly, not all that long ago.

More than anything - All he wants to do is reach out to Fumiko and tell her it will be okay. But with Mr. and Mrs. Hisakawa seated at each side, they feel an immeasurable distance away. And so he flounders - Reaching at nothing… Staring at her with apologetic eyes, and hoping that’s enough to not be misconstrued as pity.

They eat in silence.
“Tutoring, then,” Kayano says.

“Huh?” Nagisa asks, slowly raising his head.

“We’ve already dis-”

It’s Kayano’s turn to cut them off. “I’m… Well aware you’ve already discussed the possibility of tutoring with my husband here. He and I talk about these sorts of things,” she explains. “The idea was turned down because Fumiko’s schedule is relatively filled, yes? But hear me out here. Nagisa wishes to further see Fumiko engage herself with her class, and you wish to see her improve in her studies. I think this would be a good place to meet in the middle, if you could possibly look over Fumiko’s schedule and see if she has any days free.”

Mrs. Hisakawa skeptically raises an eyebrow. “I’m just not sure we’d see much benefit from this,” she admits. “Fumiko’s grades have remained rather stagnant as is.”

Nagisa blinks. He… Hadn’t expected this! One minute he’s sulking over the idea of intergenerational trauma, the next his wife is volunteering him to tutor a troubled child without him having any say in the matter. Not that he’d turn this opportunity down! This is just what he’s been looking for! Sure, it had been a mistake to make Fumiko come here, but he sees the way her head perks up at the possibility. Maybe it’s not too late to have some good come out of this after all.

Fleeting or not, a beautiful moment is a beautiful moment. Some good can be found in each horrible situation, and as her teacher, it’s his job to curate that good where the Hisakawas won’t.

“Untrue,” he quickly disagrees. “Fumiko’s grades in Language and Math have raised from D-Averages to C-Averages. And while that may not seem impressive to you, it’s incredible progress for a single trimester. I haven’t been able to dedicate as much attention as I’d have liked to Fumiko due to being occupied with all 24 students. But if I could manage to spend time with her one on one, I guarantee we could work on her grades. You did say you’d chosen my school because of its track record, yes? Then you must know I have a stellar reputation. I can do what you’re asking of me, but I’m going to need your cooperation.”

Mr. Hisakawa pauses. Frowns deeply, and pulls out his phone. He stares at it carefully. “And her behavior?”

“What will you workshop her behavior as well? If you may forgive my unprofessionalism, Shiota-sensei, you have a bit of a track record of turning around delinquents as well. Before you opened your own school, you worked at Paradise, correct?”

“Er- Yes.”

What is this man on about!? If Fumiko is a delinquent, then Nagisa is a fucking terrorist.

“You are… The crux of a success story,” Mr. Hisakawa admits. “Turning children around from poor futures to bright ones. That was the second reason we considered your establishment. Because Fumiko does not know how to behave herself. But as of today, I have not seen any particular improvement in her behavior. If we agree to hand our child over to you for hours every week, will we begin to see some change?” He pauses. “What I’m asking, Shiota-sensei, is: ‘Are you capable of disciplining her?’”

“Of- Of course,” he replies before even fully processing what he’s saying. Fumiko flinches. And all Nagisa can do is send her another apologetic glare.
They’re going to need to have a long talk first thing on Monday. Because the person he wants her to think he is and the person he wants her parents to think he is are very quickly becoming apparent as different people.

“...Very well. If you prove yourself capable of ‘shaping her up’ and scolding the girl, we will… Consider it. A… Temporary agreement, if you will. If we see progress, we will continue to allow you to tutor our daughter.”

Nagisa perks up. “Thank you,” he says quietly, trying to avoid the horrified look Fumiko gives him. Shit, man. This is literally the best situation possible for her other than possibly her parents dying in some freak accident, but without her in on the details it just feels awful.

“What days would I be able to keep her?” he asks.

Mr. Hisakawa stares at his phone. Whispers something to Mrs. Hisakawa and mumbles ‘what about her flower arrangements?’ They heatedly (And silently) discuss it over for a few minutes, before returning their attention to Nagisa.

“Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Fridays. Does until 8 work for you?”

Nagisa’s mouth falls open. “Yes, until 8 works for me!” he exclaims. That is way more than he expected them to give him, so he’ll take it. Time to pull a Fumiko and run a mile where given an inch.

“Excellent, excellent,” Mr. Hisakawa says. “In that case, we only have one more inquiry before we agree to your proposition.”

Mrs. Hisakawa nods. “You… Mentioned another student in tutoring, yes? Will Fumiko be tutored alongside him? If so… This… Is a child who will be a good influence on her, right? What is he like?”

Nagisa blinks, before slowly speaking.

“Makoto is…” He pauses. What can he possibly say? He knows Makoto is the sort of person the Hisakawas would look down on in an instant. And so does Fumiko. But even being as two-faced as he has been this morning, he can’t bring himself to lie about him. Not after everything Makoto - Everything Korosensei - did for him.

“Makoto is a wonderful person,” he settles on. “He’s… Kind, he’s thoughtful, and he’s a quick learner. Makoto has… So much boundless love in his heart. And I think he… Really cares about your daughter. So, yes, I think he will be a good influence on her.” He pauses. “Well, I know he will.”

Fumiko’s staring at him with an indecipherable look. The Hisakawas, contrarily, seem significantly less impressed.

“And so he’s not… A problem child?” Mrs. Hisakawa whispers.


And as inane as it sounds, he means it.

“Very well, then.” Mr. Hisakawa says, extending his hand. “We shall create this temporary arrangement. You tutor our daughter and show us real, hard, progress. Whether or not you can sincerely impress us is unknown, but you shall have my… Sincerest gratitudes if you turn Fumiko
Nagisa firmly takes his hand, but never once takes his eyes off of Fumiko.

It’s not Mr. Hisakawa’s gratitude he wants, after all.

“It’s a deal, sir.”

The moment he’s released from the handshake, all Nagisa wants to do is wipe his hand on his shirt. But something tells him that’ll sorta disrupt the whole air of ‘shaky agreement’ they’ve found, so he manages to hold off.

The rest of the meal goes by uneventfully. More than anything, Nagisa finds himself lost inside his own mind. Had he seriously succeeded in achieving something? Or, well - Kayano had. He has to thank her later. And speaking of later, he hopes Fumiko won’t worry too much. She knows he wouldn’t hurt her, right? Right?

The atmosphere around her is just too tense. She keeps to herself. Keeps quiet. Barely eats. Once, she attempts to stealthily dip her french toast into her milk, but Mrs. Hisakawa quickly bats down her hand and reminds her to behave herself.

Soon after, Nagisa excuses himself. Says he thinks it’s time for him and Kayano to be on their way. ‘The day’s still young. We have much more to do.’

The reality is he can’t bear to keep Fumiko here a single moment more. Now that he and the Hisakawas have reached some kind of agreement, there’s no point in prolonging her discomfort. It had been wrong of him to put her in this situation, even if some good had come out of it. And now that they’ve found that good it’s time to take it and run with it before she starts hyperventilating.

“Already?” The Hisakawas ask. “You’ve hardly finished! At least let the waiters box your meal. These breakfasts are awfully expensive, after all.”

Oh, Nagisa is well aware! He’s still pissed about blowing 9,000 yen on a fucking pancake!

Kayano’s sending their outrageous meal a wistful glance. But the moment she meets Nagisa’s eyes and catches his desperation, she shakes her head and tears her gaze away. “Oh, no, I think we’ll be fine,” she says. “We really gotta get going.” She glances at her phone, and always a master of improv says “Emergency shoot came up. You know how it is. Actress things.”

“Of course, of course,” the Hisakawas say, finally relenting. Nagisa and Kayano quickly grab their stuff, then rise to their feet.

“Thank you for meeting me here today,” Nagisa says.

“You’re welcome,” Mr. Hisakawa replies.

“It was wonderful getting to meet you,” Kayano says, quickly leaning down. “You too, Fumiko. I hope I can be seeing you again in the future sometime!”


“You have no idea how much that means to hear,” Kayano says with a grin

“Yeah. See you on Monday, Fumiko,” Nagisa says, giving her a wave. And with that, he’s gone.
He and Kayano make their exit from the restaurant.

The moment they’re out of there a tension is released. Like... Nagisa sets one foot out of that place, and he realizes he hadn't been breathing that entire time. He turns to Kayano and throws his hands in the air

“Okay, I’m not crazy, right!? I’m not the only one who hated those people, right!??” he asks.

“You are not the only person who hated those people,” Kayano agrees.

“Okay, okay, okay. I am so glad. I kept worrying maybe I was just being the judgemental one there,” he rambles as he walks. “But I just kept seeing the way Fumiko looked at them and thought ‘this can’t possibly be just me. These people suck.’”

“No shit these people suck!”

Nagisa lets out a sigh of relief. Needless to say, after a tense 45 minutes of feigned politeness, being able to tear these people apart feels like total catharsis. The whole time there’d been this voice in the back of his head like ‘Kayano’s NOT gonna agree with you on this. She’s being WAY too polite.’

No, dipshit! She’s just a professional actress! Of course she agrees with you!

“We should get going,” Kayano admits. “The last thing we need is for those people to walk out on us shit-talking them.” She makes a sharp turn to the right and waves for Nagisa to follow. “Ice cream place’s this way.”

Nagisa nods and follows. The catharsis is short-lasting, however, as he remembers Fumiko is still in there with her family.

“I think I went about this wrong,” he comments as they walk. “I… Don’t know what I thought would happen, but it wasn’t that.”

“Hey,” Kayano reassures. “It wasn’t all bad.”

“But I’ve been in this career way too long to think that would just work out. I… Think I betrayed Fumiko’s trust.”

After so long of desperately trying to obtain any shred of it, that stings. He doesn’t want things to go back to how they were before, or god forbid, worse. What had he been thinking?

...About Korosensei. That’s what. And he nearly says it. But he doesn’t. Because… This isn’t his fault. Korosensei hadn’t done anything wrong. He had managed to make things work out, no matter how ridiculous the notion. It’s Nagisa who had screwed up in believing he could set out to accomplish the same miracles that man had.

He settles on, “If it weren’t for you, I don’t think any good would have come out of that.” He pauses. “...Thanks for that. That was quick thinking..”

“No prob,” Kayano says. “But don’t beat yourself up over that, either. There’s a reason you brought me. Hell, that was your idea. So… Think of it as a co-accomplishment. I was just the face.”

“You’re always the face.”
“Yep! But no need to thank me for all the hard work,” Kayano jokes. “Just repay me in the ice cream. Off your paycheck this time.”

“Can do,” Nagisa says with a smile.

“You don’t actually mind tutoring her, right?” Kayano asks. “Like, I know you brought it up to them before, but I know we hadn’t really talked about that. The idea just sort of sprung up, and I had to say something.”

“Of course not!” Nagisa replies. “I’m telling you Kayano: You saved my ass.” Fumiko’s ass, too. But somehow it feels both a little too bleak and a little too optimistic at the same time to say that. “Not sure I’ll only be tutoring her though,” he admits. “I… Think I might let her come over sometimes. With Makoto. Eight is way later than we go, but I didn’t wanna say anything. No use looking a gift horse in the mouth, right? Maybe I can just… Let her come over to our house sometimes. So she can be a normal kid.”

Kayano nods. “Sounds like a plan to me. She seems like a sweet girl.”

“And you’re not just saying that ‘cause she’s your fan?”

“Of course not!” Kayano says through a snicker. ‘If you’re gonna have two kids rooming in the house, though, you’re gonna have to have a chat with Gakushuu. You know how he is.’

“Are you kidding me?” Nagisa replies. “She uses words like ‘trepidation.’ He’ll love her. They’ll be two peas in a pod.”

Plus, as much as Gakushuu isn’t fond of middle schoolers, he knows it’s for a good cause. Something tells Nagisa the moment he breathes a word of Fumiko’s home situation Gakushuu will be begging to house her.

...He has a good heart.

They make another turn.

“So, what are you gonna do about assassination?” Kayano asks as they walk.

“Huh?”

“You’re not just giving up on assassination, are you?”

Nagisa shakes his head and quickly clears his thoughts. “Of course not!” he replies. “I promised her this was… Only the first option we’d try. After how poorly that went, I think I owe it to her to come up with a better solution.”

It’s… Hard to be the adult in this situation. And the adult not even in control, no less. When he was a kid doing things his parents never would have approved of, it had been fun and daring. Hell, it had been freeing. In a life where he’d never had control, it had not only been the first time he was unequivocally told he was good at something, but the first time when there had been no rules. He so, so desperately wants Fumiko to experience that, too.

But as the adult, encouraging stretching the limits and making decisions for yourself is dangerous. Because it’s subsequently encouraging the risk of the word getting out and a child getting harmed. He’s the responsible one. Their protector. And… He wants them to live their best lives, which are ideally full of all sorts of varying, truly unique opportunities. Because that’s important. But keeping them safe should always come first.
...Which... Leads to a conundrum. He has to let her participate, but no doubt in secret. And how exactly can he workshop that one out?

It had been easier for him and his classmates. To hide bruises, scrapes, rifles and blades. Not only had they had the government backing them up on the whole 'keeping this a federal secret' thing, but seeing as how they were in the E-Class in the first place, their parents had barely even paid attention to them. Best case scenario their parents were too busy to notice their kid cut themself on a tree branch trying to impale their octopus teacher, worst case scenario they didn’t notice a nasty bruise their child had gotten after tumbling down the hill because they were pretty used to giving their kids bruises themselves.

...But things are different with helicopter parents like the Hisakawas. These aren’t E-Class parents. They’re some grade-A assholes, and in more ways than one. If they get even the slightest notion that Fumiko’s behaving in a way they don’t approve of, they’re gonna spring.

Which leaves him in a dangerous predicament. Caught between having lied to Fumiko about being able to find a way to incorporate her and risking putting her in grave danger. Now that’s a terrifying thought.

“I dunno. I’m gonna need time to think about it,” he admits. “Anyway, where’s the ice cream place? We’ve been walking a while.”

“It’s the one down by Aisukurimu Street,” Kayano says. “Bit of a walk, but it’s the best place in town.” She must catch Nagisa’s pout, because she shrugs. “If you wanna halve the distance we could always parkour it,” She jokes.

And. Nagisa. Stops.

It’s been a good fifteen years since he and Kayano have been allowed to ‘parkour’ anything outside of her film sets. But brief joke or not, she’s just given him a brilliant idea.

“Kayano. I have it.”

She quickly slows her pace. “You do?”

“But first I gotta ask...” Nagisa specifies. “How do you feel about helping me lie to adults?”

It’s Kayano’s turn to stop in her tracks. She smirks, turns around, and taps the back of her neck. “Do I even need to answer that?”

“Great,” Nagisa says, returning her grin. “In that case, after ice cream, how about we dig around in our old school stuff? Because I think I just found a solution.”

Chapter End Notes

Chapter 12! Ahaha sorry this one is a little later than my updates usually are. Today has been a BUSY day. Stayed up way too late last night watching a friend stream Your Turn To Die (No spoilers or I'll boil you! We're not finished >:( ) and then had to wake up WAY too early today to get my retainer fitted. Fun stuff. But the chapter's finally here now! I know I say this every time, but I did NOT think we'd get this far.
Welcome to the start of Fumiko's mini arc! I have... A lot of feelings about her, and I hope they've come across in the text. She deserves the opportunities that others have, but that's harder for some people. Writing Nagisa trying to navigate conversations with her parents is both super fun and super exhausting, and I feel I've showcased well how they've shaped her worldview.

I had fun disclosing Mary "backstory." She's a good snake. Doesn't do much, but I love her. Fun fact: She's named after the character from Kagerou Project! (Fun series! I love it! But I don't recommend it at all) Not in-universe though lmao. The only anime for Nagisa is Sonic Ninja.

I HAD to include Kayano. I didn't want Nagisa to face this alone, and I figured with her job she'd be the one most likely to be free. I had lots of fun writing their interactions! It's really clear they're just comfortable around each other (All of the quartet is!) and it makes me very happy.

And of course Nagisa's failed attempt at reasoning some with Fumiko's parents and only putting Fumiko through more discomfort. I've talked a bit in the past about how this fic continues the themes of Assclass and one thing I've definitely made sure to touch on is my own qualms with how Assclass handles abuse narratives. Not everything can be handled by a simple talk, and Nagisa should have known better. He'd just got too caught up in the past with everything going on lately. But the good news is he won't make that mistake again. And he seems to have found SOME sort of solution.

What is it? 'Fraid I can't say! You'll just have to see next chapter!

Next chapter will probably be another 2 week wait. It's technically already ready but the one after it has a pretty big chance of being a long one and I like having the buffer to rely on. Hope you don't mind the wait! In the meantime while you wait you can get your daily dose of Adventures In Solitude here!

https://ais-fic.tumblr.com/

I finally made a blog to compile all the content I have for it. Here you can find every chapter to date, art I've done, character profiles and ask memes. You can even send in questions if you'd like! I hope it suffices for now. :3c

Some songs that helped me write this chapter were To Break In A Glove from Dear Evan Hansen, The Outsider by Marina and the Diamonds, Are You Satisfied by Marina as well, and The Love Club by Lorde.

I'll have the next chapter up as soon as possible! As always let me know what you thought, and I hope you enjoyed it! o7
Fumiko’s not sure what to expect from Nagisa on Monday.

Sunday had gone… Poorly. Even ignoring the awkward breakfast (And Nagisa’s barely disguised abject horror at seeing her family,) her parents are immediately over her like a flock of vultures.

“You’ll behave yourself for him, won’t you?”

“Yes, Mother.”

“Now don’t you go complaining about this arrangement. It’s for your own good.”

“I won’t, Father.”

“He’s going to set you straight, you know.”

‘Like hell, he will.’

She bites her tongue and holds back the retort.

“I know, Father...”

Nagisa’s staring at the door when she makes her way into class. He bolts to his feet, awkwardly shuffling over and pulling her aside. “Uh. Do you mind if we chat?” he asks, giving her an antsy glance.

“Of… Course not,” she replies, turning her head towards Kiyoshi. “You can seat yourself in the meantime. This shall only take a minute.”

“O- Oh. Okay,” He says, scrambling over to his desk and giving her a tiny wave. “Try to be back soon!”

...Lord, he looks so awkward, sitting there all alone in a sea of empty desks. For a moment, Fumiko even reconsiders how early they’ve been getting to class, but subsequently remembers as mind-numbingly boring as homeroom is, it’s better than getting chewed out by her family.

Nagisa nods and heads into the hallway. He leads her towards the teachers’ lounge. He almost even reaches to place a hand on her shoulder, but quickly reconsiders.

...Good. She doesn’t like being touched.

He sits down behind that massive oak desk, then motions for her to take a seat across from him. She makes herself comfortable, before crossing her hands over her lap and meeting his eyes.

“So… Sunday,” he says, steepling his own fingers. He sharply inhales and gives an aside glance.

“Sunday,” she repeats, wishing he’d just get to the point.

“Listen, Fumiko. I’m not sure what I expected to happen there, but that was not it.”
No shit.

“Of course,” she replies with a frown.

“I… Felt the need to talk to your parents before making any further decisions, but that was wrong of me. I’d… Met them before, and should have been well aware I was putting you in an uncomfortable situation. I put the comfort of the familiar over your safety, and I should have thought things through more before coming to a decision like that. I… Forgot what it was like to be in your shoes, and that was dangerous. I’m sorry. Nothing… Bad happened after our meeting, right?”

Fumiko blinks. Slowly. Once, then twice. “P… Pardon?”

“Your… Your parents didn’t hurt you, ri-”

“No, no! Of course not-!” Fumiko interrupts, shaking herself from her shell-shock. “My parents… Didn’t lay a finger on me.” Nor have they ever. They’re not real bad parents. Not like Makoto’s. They’re just… Scary. And scary can't hurt someone.

“I’m just…” She pauses. “Rather taken aback by the rest of your statement.”

Nagisa blinks. “…Oh.”

...Now that she reflects on it, she thinks she hasn't heard an adult say sorry once in her entire life.

It takes all her willpower to hold back tears. She bites her lip. Hard. Something has to be seriously wrong for her to even CARE this much. So what if they've never apologized? That makes Nagisa the odd one out here. So what if they've never apologized? It's because they're right. And she's wrong. She doesn't need their fucking pity.

...Or his. If she cries in front of him again she thinks she'll never forgive herself.

“I.. Mean it,” he says, his voice quiet. “Hell, I spent all last night thinking about it,” he admits. “I’m… sorry if you’ve never heard that before, Fumiko. But that makes it all the more my job to not screw things up for you. I won’t do it again, okay?”

...She thinks her lip is going to bleed.

“Of… Of course.” She straightens herself. She props her shoulders and takes a deep breath. “To your credit, Shiota-sensei, it… Wasn’t all bad. Is it true you plan to tutor me? Or had that statement been another spur of the minute poor decision?”

He’s staring at her, frazzled and wounded.

W- Whoops.

“Er… I mean is this a plan you intend to stick by? I completely understand if I’m not worth your time-”

“You are one hundred percent worth my time, Fumiko,” Nagisa says, leaning forward. “I would be delighted to tutor you.”

The way he says it is so fake, so stilted. The way her parents talk about her in front of particularly noteworthy people. Her mother pinching her cheek and calling her wonderful all the while begging her to just sit down and behave.
And she’s tried! She’s trying. She doesn’t know what’s wrong with her.

She shuffles uncomfortably.

“I mean that, Fumiko. You a-”

“And I know you do,” she interrupts, irritation prickling in her tone. “That doesn’t make it any easier. To believe that..”

Believe what? That anyone could possibly care about her? She is not saying that in front of him. Not on her goddamn life.

“...To believe that this is really a part of your job. This seems... Excessive, Shiota-sensei. Superfluous, even.”

Nagisa’s silent. “Perhaps... I am going way beyond what’s expected of me. But this is what I expect of myself as a teacher, regardless of whether or not the rest of the world holds me to that standard. My... Own teacher taught me just how much that sort of thing could mean. And it’s my job to carry on his legacy.”

“...Korosensei?”

“Yeah,” Nagisa says, giving a sad smile. “Korosensei.”

Suddenly it feels like there’s an octopus in the room. But that does remind her.

“Shiota-sensei?” she asks. “...I... Couldn’t help but note the way you talked about Makoto to my parents. The... Things you said about him.”

“...Yes?”

“Is... Is that how you talk about me when I’m not around? Me and... The other students? You go on and on about how delightful I am, but would you have the audacity to praise me in front of another individual?”

...Or is Makoto an exception? An outlier? She so desperately wants to believe that genuine sort of fondness can be applied to her... But it's hard not to doubt. Even beyond potential delusions that Makoto is... Something more than he first appears, he's just so much kinder and grander than she could ever be.

...That stings to admit.

Nagisa frowns. Deeply. “Fumiko, I gush about you and the others as much as I physically can,” he says slowly. “Just ask my spouses. I’m sure they’re half-sick of it! Everything I’ve said to you, I’d say to anyone. Hell, have said to anyone who will listen!” He pauses. “My class is... My class is my pride and joy, you included. Everything I’ve said to you is the truth. Because... I don’t see the point in lying to my students. So I mean it. And I’ll have you know I damn well tried to praise you as much as I possibly could during parent-teacher meetings, too. I’m... Sorry if they didn’t pass that onto you. And I’m sorry if I didn’t praise you enough over brunch... While you were there to hear it. I’d just been... Scared. Scared of them taking it out on you.”

There it is again. That ‘sorry.’

‘Taking it out on you’ he says. Taking it out on her? Praise is all her parents have ever wanted of her. Demanded of her. And yet... She still can’t bring herself to believe he’s incorrect. They would
lash out at her for it. The wrong sort of praise for the wrong sorts of things, they'd say. Then they’d turn, yell, and blame Nagisa for her ‘narcissistic delusions.’

...Will they never be happy with anything she does?

“I’m taking it I won’t be participating in assassination?” she finally asks. If there’s any topic she’s been avoiding, it was that one. But it’s time to cut the crap. Who is she kidding? Of course she won’t be. There’s no use in pretending. Nagisa won't fight the current. Not after seeing what her parents were capable of.

There’s this sick twisted knot in her gut. All she wants is to be like them.

...Like who? Does she even know!? Like her parents, prim, proper, and successful? Or like her friends, who ride free and happy? Like Shiota-sensei, trying his best to formulate praise across the table? Or like someone she doesn’t even know? Does it even really matter? Because she can’t live up to any of these things. Not. A single. One. There’s something seriously wrong with her, and she doesn’t know why she tries.

Nagisa looks at her sternly. “Fumiko, I promised you I’d find a way to help you participate in assassination. I’m not giving up on you that easily.” He stands and reaches for a large bag on the floor next to him. “Let’s go over the plan.”

Fumiko’s heart skips a beat. “The plan?” she sputters. “But my parents said-”

“This isn’t their decision to make,” he says, hauling the bag up onto the desk. “This is where… I need to ask you to make an important decision. And I completely understand if the answer is no. I won’t be mad, or disappointed, or angry. I just want you to have this option. Because if I don’t give you a chance, I don’t think I’ll ever forgive myself.” He pauses, takes a deep breath, and gives her a nervous smirk. “Are you willing to lie to your parents?”

If Fumiko hadn’t been baffled before, she is now. “Eh!??”

“Not about anything important,” Nagisa quickly specifies. “Only about assassination. I can find a way to have you participate without getting caught. But I… Know at this point we’re not going to get their permission. So… Are… You really okay with doing this without their approval?”

Fumiko’s quiet. She balls her fist and thinks. More than anything she wants to say yes.

So she takes a deep breath, steels her resolve, and does.

“...And this isn’t a trap? ...You won’t tell them?”

“Oh my life: I won’t tell them.”

“I’m in.”

Fumiko is sick of being excluded. And maybe she can’t trust Nagisa. But she wants to. Because at least he has the guts to say sorry. No-one else has ever given her enough credit to do that. The least she owes to herself is the opportunity to try.

“Alright,” Nagisa says, nodding. “And… If you ever change your mind, fear getting caught, or don’t feel safe participating in assassination, you can back out at any time. I promise.” He unzips the bag, and pulls out… A roll of fabric? “As for now, here’s our magnum opus.”

He lays it out across the desk. And upon closer inspection it quickly becomes apparent as clothes.
“This is… Something of mine from back in the day. From when I was an assassin myself. When things got riskier and riskier trying to assassinate Korosensei, the governm-

Fumiko interrupts. “Got worried about you hurting yourselves and gave you these, right?” she asks. Nagisa nods. “You’ve heard of these?”

Damn right she’s heard of these! She’s not just staring at a solution to her problem. She’s staring at a piece of history.

Nagisa smirks. “It’s reenforced with bulletproof metal. Shockproof, too. You won’t get hurt or bruised in this thing. My biggest worry about allowing you to participate was you getting caught by your parents. But with this baby you will not get caught. You won’t need to worry about tearing or otherwise damaging those fancy clothes of yours. And you certainly won’t need to worry about being injured.” He picks it up in his hands, walks to her side, and puts it up to her. “I know it’s sort of heavy, and I know it’s not exactly high-fashion; but I hope you can accept it.”

Fumiko slowly blinks. She reaches out to run her fingers across it, then takes it in her shaky hands. Heavy is right. Even to the touch it feels more like armor than an outfit. Because it is. And he’s not exactly wrong about it being a little more than unfashionable. It’s the ugliest thing she’s ever seen.

But...

“Are you kidding me!?” she exclaims, grinning. “I love it it! Is… Is it authentic!?”

She hadn’t been pulling Kiyoshi’s leg when she told him she’d had a bit of an obsession with the moon incident a few years back. It’s… Weird at best, and humiliating at worst, but as someone who thrives at history, it’s damn well fascinating. Beyond the octopus - And even beyond the ravaged moon - The idea of something so deeply capable of changing the face of history itself occurring only years before she was born has always engrossed her. It was an acute psychological observation of how people react when faced with the prospect of the end of the world. The topic of a thousand ethical debates. A mystery for the science world and a permanent addition to the history textbooks.

It was world-shaking. It was life-changing. And it’s in her hands.

“Yep,” Nagisa replies, his own grin widening. “I told you: It’s mine. It might be a little big for you, bu-” He drifts off, stares, and chokes back laughter. “Oh my god! That’s the first time I’ve ever gotten to say that to anyone! It’s too big for you!”

“A tad big or not, I think I’ll survive.” Fumiko replies. She tries to dial back her own grin to a casual smile, but keeps feeling a tug at the corners of her lips.

Real! Moon! Incident! Gear! From when Korosensei was alive!

It takes all her self restraint to keep herself from bouncing from foot to foot.

Her excitement can only last so long, however. Because wonderful or not, Nagisa’s gift still raises one big question.

Fumiko’s thrilled fidgeting slows to a stop as she finally meets Nagisa’s eyes. “Why… Why are you giving me this?” she asks, voice quiet. It’s hard not to stare at the tie around his neck. The way he’d talked about Korosensei… And the way he talks about Makoto. Even as an outsider, it’s not
hard to see just how dearly he treasures his childhood memories. “This must be really important to you.”

Nagisa nods. “Of course. But you’re important to me, too. Remember?”

Fumiko stares.

“It’s my job to look out for you. This has served its purpose for me. So let’s put it to some good use, okay? All yours now. No strings attached.” He smiles and tilts his head. “It’s what my sensei would want.”

His smile seems… So genuine. So Kind. So proud. He holds the gear out towards her, as if saying ‘you’re safe now.’

And finally, she feels she is.

Before she can even process what she’s doing, she wraps him in a massive hug. Squeezes him tight and blinks back tears.

“T-Thank you, Shiota-sensei...”

Nagisa stiffens, stares, and slowly smiles. He eases into her sudden embrace and gently ruffles her hair.

“Hey. No need to thank me. I told you: I’m just doing my job.”

...Maybe she can trust for now.

She hardly even realizes just how right she’s squeezing him until he lets out a quiet ‘ack!’

“Okay, okay. Loosen up.” he reminds her. “You’re not trying to assassinate me yet. Don’t want me breaking my ribs now, do you? Then you’d have to wait even longer.”

Fumiko quickly pulls away. She opens her mouth to apologize, but closes it just as quickly. No. No apologies. Not to Nagisa.

“Eh. No promises,” she says with a smirk. “Could always be trying to get an illegitimate upper hand.”

“Aaaaaahhh, I see. Already learning from Makoto?” Nagisa inquires, patting her shoulder. “Shit - Which reminds me. I haven’t even told you the full extent of ‘tutoring’ yet, have I?”

“Pardon?”

"I know you're busy... You said it yourself. You're occupied with doing a lot of important stuff. But now that you have time booked for tutoring: I just want you to know you can come over to my place whenever you want. Makoto and I have typically been finishing up tutoring by five or six. But your parents gave me permission to keep you until eight. Makoto's been stopping by my place after he finishes up his work, so if you ever want a reason to see my place... Now you have an excuse. You don't gotta if you don't wanna, but I figured it could be fun to get to know Kayano better, argue with Karma some more, and spend some time with Makoto."

Fumiko blinks. It’s… An odd concept. He's right. She's busy. She has things to do. And she doesn’t exactly have anything to gain by spending her evenings at Nagisa's house. She’s sure it’s a subpar home at best... Nothing compared to her usual standard of living.
But... She likes the idea of getting to spend some time with Nagisa’s family. And... There’s this little voice in the back of her gut telling her ‘anything is better than going home.’

“I’d love that.”

“Great. It’s a plan, then. I’ll let everyone know to expect you Tuesday.”

Fumiko’s lip quivers. And this time, she thinks she’s finally going to cry in the good way. A… All of this… *For her.* Multi-millionaire heritage or not, she’s never felt this spoiled in her life.

“I’ll be looking forward to it.”

Nagisa nods. Then sends a quick glance towards the clock and realizes the time. She’s starting to notice a trend with this guy. “Aw, crap. I should really get in and start homeroom soon-” he admits.

*Klutzy moron…*

“Of course,” Fumiko says, nodding.

“Thank you for hearing me out, Fumiko.”

*He’s thanking her!? He’s thanking her!*

He hands over the PE Gear to her and smiles. “You wanna try it on now or wait until-”

“Are you kidding me!?” Fumiko interrupts. “Now! I *gotta* see how this thing fits.”

“Alright. Go and get changed, then,” he says, gesturing for her to get on her way. “I’ll wait until you’re back to start homeroom. Try not to brag to your classmates too much about it, okay? It’d suck if they get jealous. Something tells me Karasuma will have my head if I tell him I need a new order of these because the others are jealous.”

"Of course," she says with a scoff. "Don't worry about me. I'll behave." She gives him a smile, then turns towards the door, PE Gear in hand. "...Thank you Shiota-sensei. I promise I'll make good use of this."

And before he can thank her, she's gone. She hurries out of his office and down the halls. Somehow she feels like if she's in that room another moment she'll burst. But... In the best way.

For the third time today, she blinks back tears. And finally, she lets them flow.

The impossible is in her hands - And with it, it feels like the whole world is as well.

Fumiko takes to assassination quickly. At first Nagisa’s admittedly worried about how she’ll fit into the dynamic of things. It’s not like she’s ever done anything like this before, after all. But Makoto and Kiyoshi quickly help her feel at home.

Assassination teams have bumped up to groups of three by now, and just in time, because she completes their little trio well. Where Kiyoshi’s a follower and Makoto’s an improviser, Fumiko is borderline *cunning*— and Nagisa just barely manages to stop her from backstabbing him on her second day of assassination.

He swivels around and blocks her blow with his arm. She stumbles backwards and almost falls, but he quickly grabs her hand. When she sees the look on his face she seems almost sheepish or ashamed— but when he congratulates her on the fantastic attempt her spirits quickly lighten.
Makoto and Kiyoshi rush to her side, Makoto boasting about how cool she looked, and Kiyoshi apologizing for being an insufficient distraction.

She shrugs and says it’s fine. They’ll get him next time. And there’s this grin on her face that leaves Nagisa with no doubt she means it.

There’s this… Side to Fumiko he’s never seen before that really shines during Assassination. At first, it hardly shows… Like a nervous puppy barely peeking its head out from behind a street corner. But as she tries again each day… It slowly steps into view. And then, without warning, it *lunuges*: A Fumiko he never thought he’d see.

A Fumiko who soars across the field and draws her blade through the air. A Fumiko who stumbles and falls to the ground, but rushes to her feet and returns to her onslaught without a moment of hesitation. A Fumiko who runs proudly, her scarf fluttering behind her. And a Fumiko who laughs louder and louder each time she conspires with friends.

...A month ago, a Fumiko who let herself laugh at all was unthinkable.

As promised, she stops by Nagisa’s home on the allotted days. And at first, she’s quite unimpressed. She loudly comments on the ‘garden variety’ nature of their home. But Makoto gently punches her shoulder, calls her a snob, and gives her a tour of the place. It takes her a second, but surely, her tune starts to shift.

The house may be mundane, but the people inside are anything but.

She bickers with Karma, and he bickers right back. Makoto jumps in between, begging his friends to get along-- but all it takes is one precisely aimed insult from Karma to get him in on the bitchfit, too. One evening he suggests they spar with paper towel rolls and Nagisa has to shoot that idea down before a hurricane of middle schoolers and an adult who may as well behave like one destroys his living room.

Gakushuu takes to her well. Nagisa has an acute feeling he sees himself in her just a little too much. But he’s kind. And they get along swimmingly. In fact, he’s pretty sure he’s never seen Gakushuu take to one of his students this well in his entire life. He’ll be working on a lesson plan when he overhears them discussing something like stocks with all the passion of a thousand suns and wonders just what kind of thirteen-year-old he’s welcomed into his home.

Fumiko hadn’t been lying when she said she was a fan of Kayano’s work. They make a habit of movie nights on Fridays, and Kayano quickly takes a shine to getting to show off her best works. Makoto’s favorite ends up being a sappy flick about long lost lovers, and Fumiko ends up having a penchant for a particularly exciting action film where Kayano gets to put a man in a chokehold. Kayano admits it’s nice to have her around. She’d gotten lonely being the only girl in the house for so long.

More and more often Kiyoshi ends up stopping by. He’s in no need of Nagisa’s tutoring, but tends to peek his head in once they’re finished up. Nagisa has no complaints. He’s a polite boy, and practically family, at that! He’d stopped visiting as much as he’d grown older, and it’s nice to have him around again. So when Makoto starts giving him a call the moment they’re free, Nagisa doesn’t bother to stop him.

Which for the record, - Yeah - Nagisa bit the bullet and bought Makoto a phone. Turns out he hadn’t had one before. The idea of not being able to get in contact with him, especially considering his unstable home situation left a poor taste in Nagisa’s mouth, so he’d decided to gift him one. It’s a sparkly piece of technology fresh off the press from Gakushuu’s company, and Makoto takes to it
like a fish takes to water. Before anyone can say ‘octopus’ he has a bit of a Neko Atsume 3 addiction.

And speaking of ‘nekos,’ Nagisa finally meets the infamous Miss Nao. True to Kiyoshi’s word: She’s horrific. Nagisa’s seen hell in quite a few times and quite a few ways. He’s even looked in the face of death. But nothing he’s ever faced has sounded quite like Missus Nao.

When he first hears the deathly caterwauls of the soulless feline one Monday afternoon he thinks the fire alarm has gone off. His second guess, immediately after hearing Makoto’s enthusiastic shouting is that he’s welcomed some sort of feral animal into their home.

...And feral isn’t entirely wrong. But Miss Nao isn’t the raccoon or opossum Nagisa is expecting. In fact, he can hardly parse what she even is when he first spots her writhing in Makoto’s arms.

Kayano stumbles over herself in a panic trying to persuade him to get her out of there. Begging in a shrill tone “Koro - Er! Makoro- Fuck! Makoto! Put the cat back outside!”

Karma scoffs, seemingly unbothered by the hissing time bomb that had been dragged into their house kicking and screaming. “Makoro? Seriously?” He chides. He pauses, bringing his hand to his chin. “...Y’know… That actually makes a pretty good nickname.”

Makoto throws a hand in the air, careful to cradle his not-so-fragile companion with the other. Yelling in frustration, he shouts “God damn it!” To which the cat only shrieks along. “I spend all month trying to think of some cool nickname for you to get you back for ‘Korosensei,’ and you beat me to it! That is not fair!”

And so maybe there’s finally something that even Makoto can’t revenge.

It ends up being both a curse and a blessing that Gakushuu had been out shopping for groceries at the time seeing as how on one hand he probably would have had a stroke seeing the objectively abhorrent Miss Nao set foot in their home, but on the other… A fifth hand sure would have been a lot of help in trying to catch her after Makoto dropped her in his petty frustration.

It takes an hour to lure the cat out from under the couch and longer to get her back in Makoto’s arms.

With time to dwell on it he holds Miss Nao proudly and grins. “Makoro…” he muses, stroking his cheek. “…I like it. You can call me that sometime, Kayano. But only if I get to nickname you back!”

“I’d like to see you try.”

He still hasn’t come up with one by the time Fumiko stops by on Tuesday and Nagisa finds himself grateful for that. He’s not exactly sure how he’d explain away literally any of this to her. His relief can only last so long however, as Makoto soon lets it slip that Thursday that she and Kiyoshi already know.

“They do!?” Nagisa sputters.

“Duh!” Makoto replies. “I mean, they don’t count, right? You told me not to tell any of the E-Class ‘cuz it was too complex. But they’re different. They’re just my normal friends. My best friends! So I had to tell them! Otherwise what sort of best friend would I be? Don’t worry! They won’t tattle. Fumiko’s no snitch, and Kiyoshi couldn’t gossip if his life depended on it. I put my money on the right guys.”
Nagisa’s… Hesitant. The last thing he needs is Makoto’s newfound friends judging him, Kiyoshi saying something to his parents, or god forbid: Fumiko and Kiyoshi asking him what *he* thinks.

Because yes, he thinks Makoto is Korosensei! He *knows* Makoto is Korosensei! But no, he does not want to announce it in front of the entire class.

...He supposes there’s nothing he can do about it now. All Makoto had done was tell them the truth. And he has a point with the whole ‘best friends’ thing. If he’d had any sort of earth-shattered revelations about himself back in the day he’d have told Kayano, Karma, and Sugino in an heartbeat. That's what trust is. And having someone your age to hear you out is important when developing opinions on these sorts of things. He doesn’t like it, but there’s nothing to be done about Fumiko and Kiyoshi being let in on their little secret.

Thankfully, they don’t bring it up to him, and he doesn’t bring it up to them. Quite frankly, this is something that doesn’t even really involve them in the first place, so he leaves them be. And when he catches Makoto excitedly recounting his exploits to his friends in a way that makes him seem much cooler than he really was, he decides to let him brag.

Korosensei deserves a bit of a bragging right. And it’s too late to force the cat back in the bag now.

The cat doesn't disappear.

...The real cat, that is. Not the Korosensei secret.

Fumiko and Kiyoshi seem familiar with the menace. And although Kiyoshi dances around, delicately avoiding meeting her fierce feline gaze, Fumiko gives her her space in a distinctly different way. She does not pet, or even approach Miss Nao. But she approaches her in a way that *exudes* respect. And Miss Nao respects her back.

Gakushuu, on the other hand, is far less than subtle about his distaste for the cat. And he demands Makoto get her out of his perfectly pedigreed house. One quick Google search about the dangers of outdoor cats later they decide there’s no way in hell they’re sending her back out onto the streets, and even briefly consider homing her with Kiyoshi. But that ends up being a fat ‘no,’ considering he knows for a fact that that grimalkin demon will bully his precious Taro past his breaking point.

When worst comes to worst and even a quick interest check in the E-Class group chat isn’t enough to rehome her, (You *know* it’s bad when even Kurahashi won’t touch the thing) Gakushuu hesitantly relents.

“Fine. We’ll watch over her for now. *Temporarily.* But you need to bathe the thing. She is *covered* in fleas.”

And so that’s how the whole family ends up crouching down on the slick bathroom floor with two cackling preteens behind them as they try to contain all the wrath of a feline wronged. It takes all of their efforts just to get her to hold still, but a whole lot of blood and tears later and they manage to give her a bath and a haircut. By the time they're done, she looks like an entirely different cat.

...Still not an *attractive* cat... (The overbite, cross eyes, and the unfathomable malice speak for themselves), but a cat that at the very least appears to be *alive*.

“What was it you told me at the beginning of the year?” Karma asks Nagisa, drying the cat with a massive fluffy towel.

“Huh?”
“Something something ‘we’re a pet free household until July?”’

Nagisa sheepishly shrugs his shoulders. “... Eh... Isn’t... Late June close enough?”

“You’re on thin-fucking-ice.”

But all it takes is one look at Karma’s smitten face to tell he’s already in love with their temporary roommate. Coming as a surprise to no-one, seeing as how they’re both demons from hell.

In time, they grow used to her. And Nagisa even swears he catches Gakushuu petting her on the couch out of the corner of his eye once in a blue moon.

Nagisa whittles away at keeping his promise to Makoto. He’s still not exactly sure how to get him in contact with people like the ever-busy Takebayashi or the overseas Rio, but he does what he can and begins with small steps. He invites Sugino over to chat on a lazy Saturday afternoon and reminisces over a cold drink. Oh, but it just happens to be a ‘coincidence’ when one of his students shows up and gets to meet the baseball star. They hit it off, and Makoto’s gushing over his technique in no time. Before they know it they’re spending that lazy Saturday tossing a baseball around in the backyard.

Sometimes, he doesn’t even need to try. The class ends up catching Kurahashi giving a tour one day while they’re outside practicing speed math. And another particularly sweltering afternoon Okano peeks her head into the classroom and asks for a place to cool off. Ends up inviting her whole team in for a particularly inefficient English lesson. But a set of super-talented acrobatic performers or not, there’s only one person amongst them Makoto’s interested in chatting with

For how poor he’d been keeping the secret with his friends, Makoto is surprisingly adept at keeping his lips zipped around his former students. He bounces from toe to toe and excitedly waves them over. He hides none of his pride, rambling about their accomplishments and gushing about how cool they are, but if you squint that’s just the rambling of a mere fanboy. He never once lets things slip while they’re around to hear. Though the moment they’re out of earshot he’s already talking Nagisa’s ear off about how great it had been to see them again.

It’s a quiet Thursday evening when Ritsu peeks her head in to check up on Nagisa. But she finds herself with a bit more than a simple ‘how have things been?’ on her hands when Nagisa informs her he’s sorta put the pieces together about their little conspiracy theory. All it takes is getting Nagisa’s confirmation and a single moment of hearing Ritsu's voice for Makoto to try and wrench the phone out of Nagisa’s hands.

“A- Ah! Be careful!”

“I will!” he says with all the reckless disregard of the preteen he is. He holds the phone up too close to his face, waving excitedly.

“Ritsu! You know!?”

“I know,” she admits, giving a shy nod of her own.

He hugs the phone against his chest and jumps up and down. “It’s awesome to see you again!” he shouts. “I missed you! I missed you! I missed you!”

The reunion is so sweet it just about brings tears to Nagisa’s eyes. But heartwarming or not Nagisa does beg Ritsu to pop into one of the family computers in the lounge before Makoto ends up shattering his phone out of pure joy.
Needless to say, Makoto ends up hugging the computer, too.

Nagisa catches Kiyoshi and Fumiko exchanging a perturbed glance as they watch him on the couch. But Makoto hardly seems faltered by their confusion, motioning back and forth from the computer to the couch.

“Ritsu, this is my friends! Fumiko and Kiyoshi, this Ritsu! She’s apeshit!”

“A… Apeshit?” Kiyoshi murmurs in disbelief. Even Ritsu stifles a giggle.

“Well she is an artillery unit,” Fumiko interjects.

“W- Well, I knew that,” Kiyoshi sputters. “It’s just that Ritsu’s the least apeshit person I kno-”

Makoto gasps softly. “You know!?"

“Of course I know,” Fumiko huffs. “It’s just basic knowledge. After all, not only is she a key figure in the moon incident, but the first AI advanced to her stage. She’s a pinnacle of robotics development.”

“Really?” Makoto says, cheekily sticking out his tongue.

“Yes, really!” Kiyoshi tacks on. “I’m surprised you don’t know this.”

“Oh! I know!” Makoto says. “I was just gonna say… I’m sorta the one responsible for pushing her AI to that level.”

“You’re what!?”

“No you’re not!”

Nagisa makes sure to peek out of the room before they can ask him any further questions. But an hour later he still hears them conversing with Ritsu. Fumiko gushing over how cool she is as the first of her kind, Makoto gushing over how cool she is as a person, and Kiyoshi insisting she’s really not that cool considering she loves bad music and the concept of yoga pants.

The days continue to fly by. Fumiko’s grades crawl up from C minuses to C pluses. And Makoto’s creep up into passing. It’s Nagisa’s idea when they reinforce their core strengths by teaching each other. And both Fumiko and Makoto thrive when she starts giving a hand in tutoring him in History. He’s happy to return the favor, and continues to help her hone her technique in PE class.

When he has time, Kiyoshi’s willing to lend a hand, too. He loves feeling smart and loves helping his friends, so it’s a win-win combo. It’s not all bland education however, and Nagisa catches him both demonstrating the pop-rocks effect to them and teaching Makoto English swears (Much to Fumiko’s abject horror.)

“You know! For education!” he says with a sheepish grin.

Yeah, let’s go with that.

At the very least he’s considerate enough to do the whole Diet Coke explosion thing outside where it won’t ruin Nagisa’s carpet.

All three do well on first trimester finals. And Nagisa can’t help but beam with joy when he looks over their grades. And as their grades improve, so does their friendship.
Fumiko pulls him aside one day, averting her gaze and staring at the floor. She lets him know that Makoto’s birthday is coming up, and bashfully asks if he can help her make a cake. Her face flushes red with embarrassment, but she admits she’s never baked before.

“Er… Your spouses can distract him, and we can bake it in the meantime. It only feels right to return the formality after he made something for me.”

“Sounds great,” Nagisa replies. Admittedly he’s never really baked much either before, so this cake is probably going to end up looking a little unprofessional. But something tells him Makoto won’t care. As long as it tastes good, they’re in the clear.

They write the plan down and circle June 19th on the calendar with a big red marker. Nagisa can’t help but glance towards it each morning, an unwavering feeling in his gut. He gets the stuff for the cake in preparation and finds himself so excited he nearly forgets his own birthday comes soon after. But how could he not!? This is fantastic! No…! This is beyond fantastic!

The countdown to June 19th continues, and Nagisa can’t help but notice with an amused irony that it seems a lot less foreboding than the count to Makoto’s previous birthday.

And with improvements in friendship comes improvements in teamwork.

It’s three days before the end of the first trimester when they get the killing blow. Kiyoshi serves as a distraction and Makoto strikes at his leg. He loses track of Fumiko and all it takes is one stumble on his part for her to draw the blade against his throat. Before he can even process what happened, Makoto’s whooping and hollering.

“You did it!”

The class gathers around, excitedly chittering. Fumiko takes a step back, eyes wide. Her mouth opens, then closes, then opens again. “I’m s-“ She pauses. “I… I did it?”

“You did it!” Makoto repeats, slapping her back as hard as he can. She hisses in pain, but grins a shy grin back.

“I… I did it… I did it!” She gets caught in the pure ecstasy for only a moment. Quickly, she turns to Nagisa, awkwardly fiddling with her hands. “I did do it, right? I’d hate to celebrate over nothing.”

Nagisa reaches up to touch his throat. Then slowly nods. “Yeah. You did it, Fumiko. Good job.”

She stares at him, then pumps her tiny fists in the air and laughs. “You hear that, world!? First authentic kill of the year!”

“H-Hey!” Makoto interjects. “I killed him day one.”

“She specified authentic, dumbass,” Kiyoshi replies. “You did technically break a few rules.”

Makoto glowers. “Did not!”

“Did too!” Fumiko chides, sticking her tongue out and stifling another laugh.

It’s… A far cry from the Fumiko he’d seen at the beginning of the year. To see her laugh, and not care who watches is… A relief. Goofing around with her friends and elbowing Maoto’s side, she finally looks like a kid. And first stepping into this, Nagisa had no clue if he’d be able to hear her laugh at all.
...This is why he loves his job.

The failures sting, but when he succeeds, it means more than anything. And seeing Fumiko pump her fists in the air, he doesn’t think he’d trade that for the world.

At least until he sees Kiyoshi bonk Makoto on the head. Okay! Okay! Okay! Time to interrupt before they get into an actual fistfight.

Nagisa steps forward. “So, Fumiko, what would you like as reward for your accomplishment? I doubt you wanna skip, but correct me if I’m wrong. Do you wanna take the extra credit, or something else?”

“Give my grades a bump in math,” Fumiko says without a moment of doubt. She smiles, readjusts her scarf, and snickers again. “Let’s chalk it up to the tutoring.”

Nagisa smiles too. “Fine by me.”

And with the second assassination of the year in the bag, Nagisa can’t help but feel maybe he’s finally getting this figured out.

Before he knows it, summer’s arrived. School lets out for the month, and he carefully transports the class pets back home. Vacation draws closer and closer, as does Makoto’s birthday. The kids continue to pop their heads in, devouring popsicles to drown out the summer heat. And he swears he hears Fumiko laugh more and more.

Nagisa can't help but laugh as well.

Chapter End Notes

Woot, woot! Chapter 13!

And with it, Fumiko's little arc comes to an end, alongside trimester one! I hope you enjoyed the story so far, and I hope you're enthusiastic to see where it goes in the future! After this chapter will be a bit of a segway chapter (And an ADORABLE one at that,) and then we'll get into the swing of trimester 2! I have a LOT of fun things planned for it, so I hope you're as excited about the future as Nagisa is!

I had a LOT of fun writing Fumiko in this chapter, and getting to show off a more dorky side of her. Because she IS dorky and enthusiastic and likes to have fun when she gets the chance. That's why this is so monumental for her. I've talked about this a bit in the past, but Fumiko's self esteem is incredibly up and down. She's a deeply insecure narcissist. So the moment someone compliments her she's outwardly like "Of COURSE I'm the best," but internally things are more complicated. And they're EVEN MORE complicated with adults. But Nagisa trusting her with something important to him felt like a big first step.

I hope ya'll are happy w the solution Nagisa came up with! It's a lil tidbit I've been planning since VERY early in the fic. And pretty clever, at that. Did any of you guess it ahead of time? :0

I had tons of fun writing the lil montage of fun things! There were a lot of small things
I wanted to touch on, but didn't want to dedicate entire scenes to, so this was my solution! I think my favorite of the bunch has to be the Ritsu reunion and everything to do with Miss Nao!

Sorry that this was a bit of a shorter chapter, but I wanted to build up a backlog! Good news is for the next few weeks there should be weekly chapters! So look forward to that.

Some songs that helped me write this chapter were What You Know by Two Door Cinema Club, King of Anything by Sara Bareillies, The Life I Never Led from Sister Act, and Life Is Rosy by Jess Penner!

Since we've reached the end of the first trimester, however, there's something I'd like to do! A **popularity poll!** I'm curious to see which characters from AIS are your favorites, so please tell me, either on Tumblr, Discord or through a comment! I'll tally the results in two weeks (So in two chapters) and share! I'll even do a lil drawing for it. My only request is that if you choose a canon character, have it be for something I added to them. (So less "Nagisa is my favorite anyway," more "I like how you've explored this aspect of him.") It's something a lot of manga does, and I thought it would be fun to try, so I can't wait to see how the results turn out!

Thank you for reading, and make sure to let me know what you think! Remember, the next chapter should be up in a week, so I hope to see you soon! o7
It’s evident Nagisa doesn’t know how to bake the moment he steps into the kitchen.

He’s pretty good at cooking. Certainly not as much as Karma, Gakushuu, or god forbid the gourmet Kayano, but he knows what he’s doing. When it comes to making something sweet, or something that looks edible, however, he just about turns into a newborn deer - Shaky legs and all.

It’s the day before Makoto’s birthday, and it’s time to finally put their cake plan into action.

“I probably should have asked Yukimura-san for help with this instead,” Fumiko notes, watching Nagisa pore over a recipe he found online. “Have you ever even done this before?”

“Never alone,” he admits. “Usually Kayano or Gakushuu is spearheading the thing.” They have a bit of a thing going where they make cakes for each other every birthday. And Karma and Gakushuu get extravagant with them. At this point he wouldn’t be surprised if they have a secret bet going on to see who can create the most intricate and stunning cake. But seeing as how baking requires some semblance of grace... More often than not the clumsy Nagisa is regulated to stirring the batter.

But they can’t help him. Not today! At least, not with the cake. They’ve been informed of the secret mission, and are in the lounge with Makoto, distracting him with a particularly bowdlerized game of Cards Against Humanity.

...Which, for the record, had been Karma’s idea, not his. He’d complained the entire time as Nagisa combed the deck and removed every NSFW card.

“Come on, Nagisa, he has the soul of a grownass man! Let him have some fun!”

“Korosensei or not I am not letting one of my middle schoolers see the ‘Pacman guzzling cum’ card. Plus, Kiyoshi’s gonna be there.”

“Pah! Are you kidding me? Kiyoshi probably hears more about guzzling cum from his mother every single day than he possibly could fr-”

It’s at about this point Nagisa slapped his hand over Karma’s mouth and glowered. “I’m not budging, Karma.”

Sooner or later, Karma relented. But not before licking Nagisa’s hand.

...Bastard.

“Eh,” Nagisa says. “We don’t need them. I’m sure we can do something great, just the two of us.”

Fumiko snorts. “This is going to end up horribly,” she comments. “We’re lucky Makoto doesn’t have standards.”

You know, how you talk about your best friend!

“Hey, hey. Don’t throw in the towel yet,” Nagisa says. “We haven’t even started.”
“Then we better. We don’t have all day.”

“Okay, okay!” Nagisa scrolls down the page and past some anecdote about the author’s dead father... Which is perfectly heart wrenching and all. He gets it. But he also just wants to bake a goddamn birthday cake. “Alright! So first we gotta preheat the oven!” he says, stumbling over to the oven and turning the heat up to 350 degrees. “And then next we’ll need…” He pauses. “Okay. There’s a lot of stuff here. If I read it off can you grab the stuff from the pantry? Or maybe I should grab i-”

Fumiko’s already in the pantry. “On it.”

“Alright. We need flour, sugar, cocoa, baking soda, baking powder, and salt.” He pauses once more. “Oh shit. I’m gonna need to go find the salt.”

“You say that like you hid it,” Fumiko comments, struggling to haul the bag of flour onto the countertop.

Nagisa helps her lift it and sighs. “I did.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Er - Well, Kayano and I did,” Nagisa admits. “Karma and Gakushuu have a bit of an ongoing spat where they dump salt in each others’ coffee. Which is great and hilarious and not at all immature but they were also wasting literally all of our salt so we had to seal it away.” He catches Fumiko’s horrified look and shakes his head. “Don’t worry. I remember where we put it.”

“That’s not what I’m judging you for,” Fumiko sighs as she places the baking soda on the counter.

Nagisa crouches and digs through one of the ground-level cabinets. It’s their latest hiding spot after stashing it behind the cereal fell through. He and Kayano had snickered coming up with the idea. ‘The tall bastards will never see it coming.’

...Nagisa’s thankful if he has to suffer through the vices of being the size of a literal middle schooler he has someone to share in the pain.

After a bit more digging through bowls and pans, he finds the salt. He retrieves it with a smile and turns to Fumiko. “Alright. Now we just gotta mix this stuff... I think. Ah. Shit. Probably should have grabbed a mixing bowl while I was down there.” He crouches down once more and nabs a bowl. “I can mix it.” Trusted student or not he doesn’t want her losing a finger to the mixer. And he’s pretty used to being regulated to the mixer, anyway. “If I start mixing this stuff can you look for some more ingredients?”

“Of course,” Fumiko says with a nod.

“We need… Uh…” Shit. It’s been like a whole minute since he’s touched his phone, now he’s gotta go through the process of unlocking it and scrolling down past the dead father anecdote all over again. Okay. Okay. “Eggs, buttermilk, oil, warm water, and vanilla. The eggs should be in the fridge.”

Fumiko gets to work, as does Nagisa. He pours the instructed amount of their current ingredients together before sliding the bowl into the mixer and letting them whir together.

In the meantime, he decides to go grab a spoon for beating the dough. He crouches down again and tries to ignore the shrieking noise of the mixer.
“God, that’s loud,” Fumiko complains, reaching a hand to cover an ear.

“Really?” Nagisa asks. “Is your mixer at home better or have you just never baked before?”

“Both,” Fumiko admits. “Usually our maids just cook for us.”

Nagisa slams his head on the cabinet. “Your maids!?”

Fumiko snorts. “Indeed,” she says with a smug grin. She seems decidedly proud of this, placing the oil down on the table with a skip in her step. “Don’t tell me that’s a foreign concept, Shiota-sensei.”

“Of… Of course not,” Nagisa replies. Quite frankly, he’s not sure what he’d expected considering the whole ‘her parents' go-to restaurant is a hellhole where a pancake costs 9,000 yen’ thing. Of course she has maids! “That’s just wild to imagine,” he says as he shuts off the mixer.

“It’s ‘wild’ to experience. Saves a girl time, though.” She opens the fridge and carefully shuffles through his things. “Where are the eggs? I don’t see th-”

“Behind the milk,” a cool and collected voice pipes up. “Right next to the jam. You can’t miss it.”

Nagisa jolts.

“Karma! What are you doing here!?”

His husband leans on the doorway, a shit-eating grin on his face. “Eh. Just decided I’d peek my head in and see how you two culinary newbies were doing.”

“I’m not a newbie,” Nagisa reminds him.

“Right. You’re just bad.”

Nagisa pouts and sticks his tongue out. “Aren’t you supposed to be distracting Makoto?”

“And I am! The rest are on it. I’ll be right back in a sec,” he reassures. “If you want the full truth of the story… I just had to take a bathroom break. Can you fault a guy for that, Nagisa? Am I not allowed to pee now?”

Fumiko’s face scrunches with disgust. “Can you please make him leave?”

“I’m afraid to inform you the bathroom is across the hall,” Nagisa snarks. “Now listen to the little lady and scram.”

“Oh, I know. I’ve already pissed,” Karma says, as if literally anyone wants to hear about that. “I was on my way back when I couldn’t help but overhear something…” He clasps his fingers and leans forward with a wicked grin. “By any chance did you two mention my salt?”

“Our salt, Karma. Our salt that you’re wasting.”

Karma snickers. “I know, I know. I just had to stop by and see where you were stashing it. The cabinet, huh? Smart. Us tallasses never would have thought to check down there.”

Nagisa can’t keep the annoyed facade up for much longer. It’s his turn to chuckle. “Believe it or not, that was our exact reasoning.”

“Clever! Gonna have to find a clever-er place now, though. I’ve seen through your deceit. So
unless you want me to get the upper hand against our dear Gakushuu—"

“I want you to stop tossing our salt down the drain.”

“So unless you want me to get the upper hand against our dear Gakushuu, I’m afraid you’re going to need to find a new hiding spot.”

“Yeah, yeah. I will,” Nagisa replies, rolling his eyes. “In the meantime, while you’re here do you want to make some use of yourself and give us a hand?”

Karma cracks his knuckles. “I thought you would never ask!” he replies. “Makoto’s my tea—” He cuts that one off when he receives a weird look from Fumiko. “Pal, too. Gotta give at least some effort.”

Fumiko shakes her head and shoves the newfound eggs into his hands. “Okay, then. Shiota-sensei’s right. Get to it and make yourself useful.”

Karma nods, tries to crack his knuckles again but can’t because that’s not physically possible and settles on opening the carton. He takes an egg in his hand and cracks it on the side of the bowl.

“Aaaahh… Satisfying. Feels just like cracking open the skulls of my enemies,” he comments.

Fumiko does a double take.

“For the record, he’s never actually ‘cracked open the skulls of his enemies,’” Nagisa clarifies. “He’s just… Like this.”

“I figured as much.”

“And you love me for it…” Karma says, draping an arm over Nagisa’s shoulder. “I’m the spice of life~”

“Perhaps,” Nagisa admits, rolling his eyes.

“For the record, if you two get gushy right now I will vomit,” Fumiko says.

“Okay, okay, okay!” Karma says. “I’ll get to it and hurry up. No PDA in my own household. I am but a simple servant of the cake gods.”

“You know that’s not what I’m saying—”

Karma ignores her, humming and commenting on ‘enemy one,’ ‘enemy two,’ and ‘enemy three’ as he cracks the remaining eggs.

“Will you quit trying to get a rise out of her?” Nagisa groans.

“The day the Akabane menace gets a rise out of me is the day hell freezes over.”

‘…The Akabane menace?’

Well! Nagisa’s glad to see Fumiko is taking to their family well! Because he genuinely would not be surprised if that phrase had come out of all of their mouths at one point! Learning to deal with the Red Bastard is just a rite of passage.

Karma overdramatically pouts. “I can see I’m not wanted—”
“Or that you can’t have fun here.”

“I can see that I’m not wanted. I’ll be on my way.” He whirls around and gives a curt wave over his shoulders. “Gotta get back to Apples To Apples. Intense stuff!”

“I thought it was Cards Against Humanity?”

“At this point it may as well not be!”

“Have fun!” Nagisa says. “I’ll make sure to let Makoto know you gave us a hand.”

“I know you will, babe,” Karma says, blowing him a kiss as if just to piss Fumiko off, then making his grand exit.

Before they know it they hear him cackling in the lounge with the others. So ‘Apples To Apples-ized’ or not, Cards Against Humanity must still be pretty fun.

“Is he always like that?” Fumiko asks as she pours the buttermilk into the bowl.


“I don’t get how you can deal with him.”

“Eh. He’s right. It’s just part of his charm.” Nagisa pauses. “Plus, Karma might be rude, but he’s one of the most reliable guys I’ve ever known. We’ve been close since I was, like, thirteen, and he was way worse back then. Karma… Loves to be irritating, but he knows not when to cross a line. If he ever legitimately gets to you, let him know. I know that seems like a bad idea, but trust me when I say he’ll stop. He’s a good guy.”

Karma had just about had an aneurysm the first time he realized it was wrong to cross certain lines. And Nagisa gets it. He lived in a bit of a self-absorbed bubble. But that whole genuine ‘lol you mad?’ shtick had sort of fallen apart when Rio of all people had finally chewed him out over a topic starting with ‘N’ and ending with ‘agisa’s gender’

“Duly noted.”

They finish adding the remaining ingredients. Nagisa grabs a mixing spoon and turns to Fumiko. “You wanna stir the cake?” he asks.

He figures she’s never had the opportunity before, so he may as well put it out there.

She frowns, but nods and shrugs. “I don’t see why not,” she says, taking the spoon from his hand. Diligently, she begins to stir the batter. “...Did you ever bake anything like this? Back then, I mean. With-” she pauses. “With The E-Class?”

“Yeah, sometimes. Once in a blue moon people tried to bake Korosensei food, then poison it. Appeal to his sweet tooth, you know? It didn’t work, though. He had a great nose.”

“Noses, technically.”

Nagisa blinks. “You know your stuff.”

“I’m somewhat of a history buff,” Fumiko brags. “I’d be a fool to not educate myself on these sorts of matters.”

Nagisa smiles. It’s… Nice to think that kids nowadays are still thinking about his teacher, even
without his influence Plus… It’s a weird sort of ironic heartwarming to think she’d managed to
unknowingly become best friends with such an important figure.

“Oh! We baked a giant pudding, too.”

“Yeah. Yukimura-san told me about that one,” Fumiko says. “Sounds… Marvelous. I wish you’d
gotten pictures.”

“Nope. I’m afraid the only place it could remain was in our hearts.”

“And your stomachs.”

“And in our stomachs.”

By now the batter’s looking relatively smooth.

“I think it’s good to go,” Nagisa says. “You wanna lick the spoon clean before we get this thing in
the oven?”

“Pardon?”

“Do you want to lick the batter?” It’s another one of those things he figures she’s never done
before. And what is life without the childhood joy of eating stuff you definitely should not eat?

As if reading his mind, Fumiko frowns. “That sounds like a really good way to get salmonella,”
she comments.

And if stored at the correct temperatures has pretty much no chance to grow. I wouldn’t let you do
something I thought was dangerous.”

Fumiko blinks. “My parents always said-” But quickly shakes her head. “...You know what? I’ll try
it. If I get Salmonella then at the very least that’s my decision.”

A touching notion about autonomy but also completely wrong considering Nagisa is 98% sure she
on’t get Salmonella in the first place.

Fumiko takes the spoon and gives it a lick. After a moment of dramatic silence, she lowers the
spoon and shrugs. “It was okay.”

...Okay, so clearly this wasn’t as enlightening for her as this was for him.

“Fair,” he says, taking the spoon from her and tossing it in the sink. “In that case, you want to pour
this? I’m thinking of trying to layer it, but I’m… Not actually super sure how to? So maybe that’s
not a great id-”

“Sounds like someone needs a hand,” a familiar voice chides.

Nagisa jolts. He whirls around and meets eyes with Gakushuu. When had he gotten here!? Is… Is
this what it feels like when he sneaks up on people!?

Fucking hell! No wonder Karma hated him in middle school!

Nagisa displays none of this openly. He quickly calms himself and nods. “That would be great,” He
pauses. “...Though, on second thought, are you here to help with the cake, or did you just get word
of the salt?”
Gakushuu rolls his eyes. “Is that what you really think this is about?” he asks, walking over to the counter. “Needless to say Karma did brag about his discovery, but-” Gakushuu clarifies in a tone that is, fittingly enough, rather salty. “That’s not the reason I’m here. I’m beyond his childish games. I just figured you could use some assistance.”

“Finally,” Fumiko says. “Someone who knows what they’re doing.”

Gakushuu smirks. And with all the smugness of a man who’s had everything come easily to his tall self reaches up to open an overhead cabinet. “You’re going to need dowel rods if you want to make a tier cake. Thankfully I’ve picked some up.”

“You are seriously prepared for everything,” Nagisa notes. “What on earth did you have these for? Karma’s birthday?”

“Let’s go with that,” Gakushuu says, bringing the ‘dowel rods’ over to the counter. “As for now, just bake the two tiers separately. Make the upper tiers have a smaller diameter unless you want structural instability. If you want to make a cake taller than six inches-”

“I’m gonna stop you there,” Nagisa interrupts. “This is like… My first time doing this. I’m not going any taller than that. Don’t worry. I think I’m just going to do a two-tier cake.”

“I’d figured as much,” Gakushuu responds. “In that case that definitely simplifies things. All you should need to do is bake them separately. Once they’re finished cooling measure the diameter of the top tier and mark it on the lower tier. Insert the dowel rods along this diameter and insert them. With the supports in place it should be easy enough to stabilize and place the upper tier on top.”

Will it, though? This is all rocket science to poor Nagisa.

Thankfully for him, his partner in crime seems to have gotten a hang of what Gakushuu’s saying. “I… Think I get it,” Fumiko says. “I only have one question. What do we do if the rods are too long?”

“Oh. You cut them,” Gakushuu instructs. “Additionally if you’re worried about frosting sticking to the incorrect layer I’d recommend sprinkling some sugar alongside the diameter before you place the top tier. That should solve any issues.”

Nagisa stares. Why does it feel like his husband is a fucking Wikihow article sometimes!?! Nonetheless, he nods and tries to file that advice in his brain. “Thank you. I’ll… Keep that in mind.”

Gakushuu helps them find sufficiently differently sized pans and pour the batter. They load the cakes into the oven and begin the slow wait to watch them bake. Gakushuu stays for a minute longer, sharing some further Cake Secrets, but before they know it he must be on his way.

“I can’t leave Karma unsupervised for too long. Lord knows he’ll drive Akari insane.”

Nagisa gives him a thanks and a kiss on the way out. Fumiko doesn’t complain this time. Something-something “Unlike Akabane, I respect Asano-san.”

He leaves the kitchen with a proud stride to his step. There’s nothing he loves more than being the one in ‘the know’ about something, so getting to explain the obscure rules behind cake-tiering for ten minutes straight is pretty much the man’s pipe dream.

“I’m surprised he didn’t care about the salt,” Fumiko comments.
“Oh. He definitely did. He just can’t admit it because that’s letting Karma win.”

Which is… Strange and sort of bad. But at the very least what he’s competing with Karma over is inane nonsense, not something that can actually hurt either of them.

(Of course not! The only thing they’re hurting is the family’s collective grocery bill.)

Fumiko snorts, then falls silent. She takes a seat at the table and anxiously waits for the cake to finish. Nagisa slides out a chair and takes a seat next to her. She’s staring at the table.

“You know, if you want you can go in there and play with the rest of them while we wait for this to finish,” he offers. “I can watch the cake and grab you when it’s done. I’d hate for you to be bored.”

“Absolutely not,” Fumiko says, shaking her head. “To be frank, the game you described sounds repulsive. I have no interest.”


Fumiko nods, then falls silent. She sends a glance over towards the oven, before quietly speaking up. “Do you think he’ll like it?”

Nagisa blinks. “Of course he will, Fumiko,” he reassures. “Makoto’s going to be… Really happy we thought of him. And I’ll make sure to let him know this was your idea. This is gonna be his best birthday ever.”

Maybe even better than the one they’d shared all those years ago. Which is… Impossible to imagine. The emotion they’d felt surrounding their teacher and singing in memory of his birth had been insurmountable. But it had been interrupted - Torn from them - As so many things had been.

...Korosensei’s second-ever birthday.

And now, Makoto’s thirteenth. Nagisa doesn’t dare say it aloud, but something tells him this is the first time anyone has celebrated Makoto’s birthday, either.

Fumiko gives a tiny smile. “I hope so. When Makoto surprised me for my birthday… It…” she pauses. “Well, I don’t think anyone had ever thought about me like that before. It meant a lot. So… I hope this can mean as much.” She fiddles with the scarf around her neck. “It’s funny. At the start of the year, I’d never have thought I’d be baking a cake for him. I hated him.”

“Well, I’m sure the best gift of all for him will be knowing that you don’t anymore.”

Fumiko’s smile widens. “Well, I don’t know about that,” she sheepishly admits. “He has a sweet tooth. Something tells me he’ll be most enraptured by the cake.”

“Then don’t worry about that, either. He’ll love it.”

Slowly but surely the minutes pass. And before they know it the oven beeps. The cake is ready.

Nagisa searches for his pair of color-coded oven mitts, but when he can’t find them settles on borrowing Kayano’s green ones. He carefully extracts the pans from the oven. An amazing aroma immediately wafts across the room. So newbie cake or not, they must not have screwed up too badly, because his mouth is already watering.

A bit of fumbling around and some help from Fumiko later he manages to get the cake onto… That
plastic thing you display cakes on (On second thought, he’s not exactly sure what that’s called, either. Curses! If only Gakushuu were still here. He would know.) With some more help from Fumiko understanding what the hell a ‘dowel rod’ is, they manage to get the top tier successfully onto the lower tier of the cake without too much issue.

Which means… It’s time to decorate it.

Oh man. Nagisa didn’t think he’d get this far.

“Okay! It’s time to make this thing look nice,” he instructs as he tries to remember which cabinet they keep the frosting in. “I’m not exactly an artist, so I’m not sure how this is going to turn out, but-”

“I wouldn’t worry about that.”

And for the third time today Nagisa’s shoulders just about pop out of their sockets. He jolts and whirls around to face Kayano.

“How do you guys keep doing this!?”

Kayano snorts. “I dunno. For the record, while I wouldn’t put it beyond Karma or Gakushuu, I wasn’t trying to sneak up on you. Guess cake-baking is just taking your full focus, huh?”

“Damn right,” Nagisa replies. “This is hard.”

“Just to put it out there,” Fumiko says. “I heard her coming from a mile away. I don’t know what’s wrong with you, Shiota-sensei.”

Gee, thanks.

“But after putting together that those two snuck in to give you a hand, I couldn’t resist. I can’t let the boys have all the fun, after all.” Kayano struts over to the counter with a smile. “Mind if I lend a hand? I’m pretty good at this, I’ll have you know.”

Oh. He knows. Kayano has amassed a pretty impressive portfolio of grand creations over the years. He supposes it only comes with the territory of being both a star and the possessor of a particularly passionate sweet tooth. And while perhaps a weaker person would admit they’d peaked at ‘building-sized pudding,’ Kayano has continued to create everything from individually shaped and carefully handmade cookies to downright adorable puppy-themed cupcakes she mailed to Karasuma for his 40th birthday.

Putting together something that will impress Makoto will be a cinch

“You know I have no complaints,” Nagisa says, turning to Fumiko. “You cool with Kayano lending a hand?”

Fumiko quickly nods. “I don’t mind at all.”

“In that case what are you thinking design-wise?” Kayano says. “I already have a few ideas if y-”

“Er… Mind if I help, too?”

Good news: Nagisa doesn’t just about have a heart attack this time because the person who snuck into the room has all the intimidating energy of a baby lamb. Bad news: The whole ‘secret’ aspect of their ‘secret cake’ project is really starting to fall apart seeing as how now Kiyoshi is in on it too.
He must notice everyone staring at him, because he takes a step to duck behind the doorway. “I just noticed Yukimura-san and everyone else leaving. I know we’re supposed to be acting as a distraction, but I didn’t want to be left out.” He anxiously steepls his fingers. “Akabane-san has Makoto very distracted, so I hope you’ll let me give a hand, too.” He meets Nagisa’s eyes, a stern gaze in his own. “Makoto has been... Very nice to me, too, over these past few months. So please let me do something to thank him!”

There’s no question about it. Nagisa’s not going to turn him down. He nods and waves Kiyoshi over. “Happy to have you.”

Fumiko nods. “Let’s make this the best cake ever.”

Kayano knows where the frosting cabinet is like it’s the back of her hand. Before Kiyoshi can even finish scooting his chair in it seems like they have every color of the rainbow ready at their disposal. She turns to Fumiko, seeing as how this was her idea first and foremost, and asks her if she has any idea for the theme.

She thinks it over for a minute. “Well... He’s been very into Korosensei lately.”

Nagisa doesn’t even need to meet Kayano’s eyes to know her grin is as wide as his.

A solid half-hour and way too much licked frosting later, and they’ve put together something pretty damn impressive. With Fumiko and Kiyoshi’s enthusiasm, Kayano’s skill, and Nagisa’s... Whatever it is he can offer, they have just the right skills to create something that all of them can be proud of.

The lower tier, as if illuminating the top is decorated with a pattern of the moon’s surface, raised craters and all. But the true piece de resistance is the top tier of the cake, decorated with Korosensei’s familiar face. A near-perfect replica, it’s almost uncanny just how on-point it is.

Dare he say... It leaves Rio’s store-bought cake in the fucking dirt!

It takes literally all of his self-restraint to resist snapping a picture of it and sending it her way. As delighted as he’d be to brag, she had been on a bit of a time limit when she’d acquired the store-bought cake, not to mention it would take way too much explaining to help her possibly fathom why he was baking a Korosensei cake in the middle of June.

This accomplishment will have to remain between the four of them. At least for now.

Fumiko’s excitedly shuffling. Even Kiyoshi seems genuinely content. Kayano wipes her brow and lets herself sit down.

“I think we’re done,” she says.

“I think so, too,” Nagisa admits.

“This is going to blow Makoto’s socks off,” Kiyoshi declares.

Nagisa genuinely cannot wait to show this off to Makoto tomorrow. It’s going to make his day. He’s... Glad so many people were able to step forward and think of Makoto.

“The rest of you can get going,” he admits. “I’ll grab the...” He glances at where the cake sits. “Thing... And hide the cake. It’d be suspicious if you were gone too much longer.”

Kayano, with no tolerance for bullshit, isn’t letting that slide. Because promises to stash the cake
away or not, there’s no way in hell she didn’t just notice him address what the cake sits on as ‘the thing.’

“The thing?” she inquires with a smirk.

*Oh god. Oh fuck.*

“What… The cake is on. I don’t remember the word, okay?”

Kayano can’t help but giggle. “The stand. The word you’re looking for is the stand.”

Nagisa’s face flushes. And Fumiko shoots him a truly disappointed look.

“I cannot believe this man is my educator.”

“C-Can you blame me!?” Nagisa sputters. “Earlier Gakushuu was using words like ‘dowel rod!’ Do you blame me for thinking it would be something needlessly complex and out there!?”

“Whatsoever you say, Nagisa,” Kayano replies with another chuckle. “Either way, we’ll help you hide ‘the thing.’ I don’t entirely trust you to find it a good hiding spot seeing as how I heard Smartass and Smartasser got word of the salt.”

Nagisa’s shoulders sink. “Sure did. We’re gonna need to find a new place to stash that away, too.”

Kayano nods. "Personally, I was thinking we could find a box of empty baking soda and toss it in there."

“Kayano! You genius!”

Kayano grins. “Oh, I know. Something tells me they won’t be able to tell the difference, and if one of them legitimately *licks a thing of baking soda trying to find the salt, I think they’ve earned the right to be as dumb as they want at that point.*”

Nagisa nods. “It’s a plan.”

“You two can keep a secret, right?” Kayano says, turning to Fumiko and Kiyoshi.

“Of course,” Fumiko says. “My lips are zipped.”

“The day I tell Karma any confidential information is the day Hell freezes over,” Kiyoshi confirms.

“In that case… I think our secret’s safe with you,” Kayano confirms.

And with their much more important secret prepared as well, they’re ready for tomorrow.

Nagisa’s antsy all throughout the next day. When Makoto peeks his head into the classroom that morning Nagisa makes sure to wish him a happy birthday, but is careful to keep the real surprise for later. He’s beaming the whole day. And it’s not hard to tell he’s in an even better mood than usual. The moment he slides into his seat he's whispering excitedly to his friends that he's now thirteen.

By the time tutoring’s rolled around, Nagisa can’t help but wonder what the others are doing right now. Surely, they’re getting prepared. He’d left Karma, Kayano and Gakushuu in charge of getting ready. Hell, by now Kiyoshi’s probably at the spot, too. He’d sent his parents a message and informed them he’d be staying over at Nagisa’s place for the day. The pieces have fallen into
A quick math and language lesson later, and Nagisa suggests packing up early for the day. “We’ve gone over some awfully difficult topics today, after all.”

Fumiko, in on their little scheme, quickly nods and agrees. Makoto, none-the-wiser, and always an advocate for cutting a math lesson short, says that sounds like a plan.

They pack up their things, Makoto grabbing his bags, and Fumiko carefully folding her scarf and PE gear before storing them in her desk. Nagisa slings his ratty binder under his arm and they’re on their way.

There’s this almost giddy feeling as they walk. They chat about mundane things, but Fumiko’s eyes keep flickering towards Nagisa. He glances towards Makoto, then back towards her and gives her a reassuring wink. It’s been a long time since he’s been able to keep a secret that feels good.

Before they know it, they’re home. Nagisa unlocks the door and motions the kids in. Fumiko quickly steps into the house, but Makoto hesitates, squinting at the darkened doorway.

...The windows are drawn, and the lights in the house are off.

Nagisa places a hand on his shoulder and guides him into the living room. He asks what’s going on, and Nagisa reassures him it’ll all make sense in a minute. Fumiko, who’s trailing ahead of them, pauses and turns to snidely ask if he’s afraid of the dark.

“Of- Of course not!” he refutes. “I’m just confused.”

It’s only then he notices the faint glow coming from the kitchen. He takes one step forward, then another.

He must make out the silhouettes, because he bursts into a run.

The moment he steps foot into the room, they’re prepared. A familiar chorus of voices breaks out into song. And Nagisa and Fumiko hurry to join them.

“Happy birthday to you
Happy birthday to you
Happy birthday dear Makoto
Happy birthday to you.”

By the time they reach Makoto’s side the song has pretty much ended. But they’d made sure to join in on the chorus from behind. Makoto stands stiff, his eyes transfixed on the beautiful glow illuminating from the center of the table.

‘It’s… Breathtaking,’ Nagisa notes.

Thirteen candles. For thirteen years of life. Thirteen years of Makoto Himura. Thirteen years of one of the kindest and most thoughtful people he’s had the pleasure of meeting. Thirteen years of Korosensei’s second chance, and thirteen years that Nagisa hadn’t even been aware.

In that way, it’s almost sad. Thirteen years lost. But… It’s selfish to think of it that way. Because they haven’t been lost. They were thirteen years spent building the boy who stands in front of him. Shaping his world and his experiences. Thirteen years of good and bad times… Thirteen years
leading up to this moment… And thirteen years that seem to say “Here’s to thirteen more.”

Makoto doesn’t move. He stands shock-still, his mouth agape. And Nagisa can’t help but wonder if he’s lost in another moment, too. That eve on the mountain, and the end of an era…

But then he catches a glint of tears in the candlelight, streaming down Makoto’s face… Senses a different sort of relief… And something tells him this belongs entirely to ‘now.’

Finally, Makoto finds his words.

“...I... I...” he sputters. “Thank you!”

He reaches up to wipe at his eyes and he holds back a laugh. It’s a bittersweet, delighted thing. He stares at the cake and says thank you. Once. Then twice. Then a third time. Nagisa stares too, and has to wonder… Has no-one ever done this for him before? Has no-one ever looked at Makoto and thought ‘he deserves this moment?’ It makes him indignant. And it makes him sad. And it makes him feel weirdly honored, too.

...Because as mad as he is it’s come to this, he’s thankful to be the one who can finally tell Makoto he’s deserved this all along.

“Thank you!” He says it again and again. Slowly his shock fades and he bounces from foot to foot. He turns his head, quickly meets the eyes of everyone in the room, and thanks them as loud as he can.

“Don’t thank us yet,” Karma says. It’s only now that Nagisa processes he’s sitting on the table. He reaches towards his pocket, his wicked grin almost haunting in the candlelight. “We still need to party, after all!”

The moment he says ‘party’ a familiarly loud pop echoes through the room. And this time it’s not just Nagisa who jolts.

The whole room stands shock-still. Then Makoto slams his hands on the table and shouts.

“You bought me a gun!?” he declares, half-ecstatic, half-bewildered.

Karma wheezes in response. “No! No!” he says, struggling to catch his breath through his laughter. “I didn’t buy you a gun!” he clarifies. He motions towards Gakushuu and asks him to flick on the light, to which Gakushuu obliged. And now bathed in light, Karma waves something bright and colorful in front of his face. He retrieves another from his pocket and pulls it back with another obnoxious pop and a flash of confetti.

...Oh. A party popper. For once in their lives that makes more sense than a shotgun.

“Where did you even get those?” Gakushuu asks.

“eBay,” Karma matter of factly answers, before turning to Makoto. “You wanna screw around with them? I got a whole box full.”

“The cake-” Kayano interjects, her voice dripping with a desperation that says ‘I don’t want to go deaf at age 30.’ “Let’s focus on the cake first.”

That redirects Makoto’s attention. His eyes drift back over to the cake and his jaw drops. It had been hard to make out in the dim light, but now Korosensei’s face shines clear as day. Makoto glances at it, then at Nagisa, then back at the cake.
“It… it has…” He mumbles. He gives Nagisa a stunned look. “Did you make this!?”

Nagisa smiles. “Everyone did.”

“I cracked the eggs,” Karma makes sure to add on.

“It was Fumiko’s idea, though,” Nagisa admits.

Fumiko had been insistent on Makoto knowing her role in planning the party. But now that the moment’s come, she seems almost bashful. She averts her gaze and scoffs. “It was only the right thing to do.”

That bashfulness doesn’t stop Makoto for a minute. He whirls around to face her and picks her up in a hug. “Thank you so much, Fumiko!”

She lets out a tiny squeak. Struggling to wiggle out of his grip, but failing and accepting she’s just gonna have to deal with his embrace for now. Slowly her shy frown melts into a satisfied smile. “Don’t thank me too much,” she huffs. “It was simply… A thanks for you commemorating my own birthday.”

Makoto giggles. “I guess you’re right! Now we’re even!” He places Fumiko down and balls his fists. “Now I just gotta do even better next year! No eating part of your cake! Not after you made such a wonderful one for me!”

“You say that like I’m not intending to try at least a slice of this.”

Karma cocks an eyebrow. “Unless you don’t intend to share, Makoto.”

“N-No!” Makoto sputters, his face flushing red. “Y- You can have all the cake you want! I’d hate to be greedy on my birthday! But before we dig in…”

He rushes to hug everyone in the room, giving each a quick ‘thanks’ as he squeezes them as tight as he can. Kiyoshi lets out a pathetic wheeze and Kayano picks Makoto up in a hug before he can get the chance to even attempt to lift her, but a few quick hugs later and he’s ready. He skids to a stop in front of the cake, bouncing up and down as he demands a piece.

“You’re that excited to slice open Sensei’s face?” Karma asks.

“Yeah! Yeah! Yeah! It’s practically my job to get Sensei’s face sliced open!” Makoto grins and makes grabby hands in Karma’s direction. “Let me cut the cake! Let me cut the cake!”

“If you’re so insistent…” Karma says, reaching for the drawer. But Kayano beats him to it. She grabs a knife and slides it his way. Gakushuu begins to gather plates in the meantime.

Nagisa takes a seat, as does Fumiko. Makoto excitedly sits down and pushes his chair in over and over until his chest is pressed right up against the table. Karma finally gets down from the table and takes a seat. Gakushuu finishes passing out the plates and takes his spot next to Kayano.

Makoto brandishes the knife and cuts himself a massive slice. Nagisa asks him if he’s sure he can eat all that as he hauls it onto his plate, but he nods with conviction.

“This is nothing!” he says. “Hell, I’ll probably go for seconds!”

He passes the knife towards Fumiko, who cuts herself a notably smaller piece. She passes it to Kayano and so on and so on. Finally, the blade comes to Nagisa, and as morbid as it is to slice apart
his Sensei’s face, he can’t help but laugh, either.

And to his surprise… It’s delicious. He’s not sure how he’d expected his efforts to turn out, but they’d been far from futile. Losing his cake-baking virginity hadn’t exactly gone as planned (For one, he’d ended up getting far more help than he’d anticipated…) but he supposes they really have made a good cake for a good kid.

The festivities commence. They devour the cake and chat. Karma retrieves the shipment of party poppers and Makoto causes a ruckus. At least until Fumiko reaches across the table to slap one out of his hands.

“Hey! That’s no way to treat the birthday boy!” Makoto huffs.

“And that,” Fumiko says, motioning to the party popper now laying defeated on the table, “is no way to treat your hostess.”

Needless to say, Karma capitalizes on this opportunity and pops a good half-a-dozen more. But the one thing he hadn’t accounted for in his equation is that Fumiko is willing to lean across the table to smack him, too.

Ten minutes and forty party poppers into the party, Gakushuu confiscates the box. He says Karma can have them back when he “ Learns to fucking behave himself.”

“Don’t tell me that! They’re my gift to him. Are you really willing to steal from an innocent child?”

“Yes,” Gakushuu says without a second of hesitation. He turns to a pouting Makoto. “You can have them back the moment you’re exiting my house. No sooner, no later.”

Makoto shrugs. “I can work with that.” He pauses. “Oh! Oh! I’m gonna bring them to school!”

Nagisa’s head is spinning, but he doesn’t have the heart to turn his idea down. Steeling himself for his upcoming migraine, he smiles and says. “Well, you’re gonna have to wait til’ summer is over for that, but I’d love to see you try to utilize them in assassination.”

“I will! I will!”

“Oh boy…” Kiyoshi murmurs.

It takes him a hot minute, but Makoto finishes his massive slice of cake. He’s reaching for another when he freezes and bolts out of his chair.

“Oh! Oh! Oh! I can’t believe myself! I got so excited I almost forgot my own plans for today!” He darts over to where he placed his bag down by the doorway, crouches down, and unzips it. "This was pretty great... But you guys haven't been the only ones with plans!” He’s practically burying his head in the bag as he shuffles through everything, but soon enough he finds what he’s searching for.

He hops up onto his feet and holds out something towards Nagisa. It’s… A small plastic container. Nagisa reaches to take it and blinks.

“I didn’t realize you guys would be making a cake for me, so I guess this is a little redundant, but I hope you still like it! Happy early birthday!”

“W… What?”
He’d almost forgotten. It is his birthday tomorrow, isn’t it? He’d noted how funny it was their birthdays were so close the first time he’d looked over Makoto’s file. But of course he’d ended up going and forgetting about his own. He’s not exactly an exciting guy.

“I had to make sure to celebrate your birthday, too! I asked Karma and Kayano when it was! And when I learned how close it was to mine, I had to plan something. I knew you’d probably wanna spend your actual birthday with your family, so I decided on mine we could have a joint birthday party! Usually I wouldn’t wanna share, but since you’re my favorite teacher, I don’t mind!”

Nagisa stares. Slowly, he reaches to open the plastic container and finds a slice of cake inside. It’s equally as messy as his own, with uneven edges and messy blue frosting. Vanilla flavored, and just as massive as you’d expect a slice of cake from Makoto to be.

“That’s not all, either! Take a bite! Take a bite! I’ll get the rest.” Makoto kneels back on the floor and resumes digging through his bag.

Nagisa complies. It’s… Sweet.

“This is… This is fant-”

“Uhuhuh-” Makoto interjects. “Don’t thank me yet! I gotta get the rest!” He yanks something out of his bag and thrusts it towards Nagisa.

A brand new binder, powder blue and already filled to the brim with organizational tabs. Alongside it a six-pack of highlighters, all in obnoxiously bright colors.

“I wasn’t sure what to get you at first, but I decided since you were really passionate about your job I could get you something to help with it! I noticed your binder was really really beat up, so I figured you could use a new one! And I don’t know if you already have highlighters, but this is the best brand. So I hope you like them!”

It takes Nagisa a moment to find his words. He gulps. “…Makoto, you didn’t need to get me anything.”

Makoto gives him a curious look. “I know,” he says, squinting. “But I wanted to, silly!” He pauses, and quickly shakes his head. "I bought it all with my own money, so no stealing, if that's what you're worried about! I know it’s not a lot… But I hope you like it. Consider it fifteen birthday gifts in one!”

Hopes he likes it? Of course he likes it! To think Makoto’s thought about his own birthday more than him… He has to blink back tears. He carefully places the binder, the highlighters and the cake on the table, before standing and motioning to wrap Makoto in a hug.

Makoto beats him to it. Gives him a bear hug and refuses to let go. Suddenly Nagisa understands why Kiyoshi had wheezed earlier. But he can’t find it in himself to let go, even when Makoto’s cutting off his airflow.

“I love it, Makoto. Thank you so, so much.”

Makoto nods excitedly and finally lets go. He returns to his seat, kicking his feet in the air. “I knew you would!”

It takes all of Nagisa’s strength to resist bursting into tears right here and now. To take a moment that was meant entirely for him and reaching out to share… It’s the most familiar thing Makoto could have done.
“Geez. Now I almost feel bad I didn’t get you anything…” Kiyoshi sheepishly admits.

“No! Don’t worry about that, either!” Makoto huffs. “It can be from all of us!”

“No, no. Don’t listen to him, Kiyoshi,” Karma says. “If you really want, you can always send us a Paypal invoice at-”

Nagisa reaches a hand to cover his mouth. “Just thinking about me at all is enough,” he says. “Today’s Makoto’s birthday. So let’s celebrate him, okay? You can ignore Karma.”

“Yeah. Don’t worry,” Kiyoshi replies. “As a rule of thumb, I always ignore what Karma’s saying.”

“Good call,” Gakushuu comments.

“Great call,” Fumiko agrees.

Sick of being dragged while so vulnerable and speechless Karma licks Nagisa’s hand for the second time this week. He yanks it away in disgust, sending him an exhausted look. Karma stretches, gives a quick ‘gee, thanks, guys,’ then turns Nagisa’s way.

“If we’re celebrating Nagisa’s birthday already… Well… I hadn’t wanted to spoil this early, but you wanna see what we got?”

“You really don’t need t-”

“Yes yes yes!” Makoto shouts. “Show us! Show us!”

Karma grins and whips something out of his pocket. It takes Nagisa a moment to process it, but he quickly realizes they’re tickets. Tickets for the Sonic Ninja reboot.

“W-What!?” Nagisa sputters. “How!? The reboot’s not even out in America yet! How did you manage to find a local showing!?”

“Let’s just say… In between Kayano’s connections, Gakushuu’s influence, and my… Sonic Ninja expertise we managed to pull a few strings. It’s at six. What do you say? Wanna go be completely self-indulgent tomorrow?”

Nagisa practically melts. He grins, nods, and says “You know I do.”

Makoto’s bouncing in his seat. “You gotta tell me how it is! I hope it’s good!”

Karma flashes another ticket in the air. “I grabbed extra just in case. You wanna come with?”

Makoto pauses. He thinks it over, but shakes his head. “…I wouldn’t wanna ruin your sappy moment. It’s your birthday, after all.”

Nagisa frowns. “Makoto… You wouldn’t ruin anything. You were willing to take time out of your birthday to share with me. I’d be honored to take time out of mine and share with you. You’re always welcome to spend time with us.”

Makoto tries to keep a straight face, but his expression quickly melts into a grin as well. “…I’d like that.”

“It’s a plan, then.”

They try inviting Fumiko and Kiyoshi as well, but Fumiko’s understandably busy, and Kiyoshi
says his mom will be home so he wants to spend the night with her. After that, with their plan in place, the rest of the afternoon flies by. Against their better judgment, they end up devouring more than half of the cake, and everyone feels a little bit sick by the time evening rolls around.

“I guess that’s a no on dinner?”

“I guess that’s a no on dinner.”

Makoto helps Nagisa transport everything from his old binder to his new one. In the meantime Karma unearth the party poppers, much to everyone’s horror. Nagisa comes to the faint realization that he’s going to need to vacuum up all of this confetti sooner or later, but can’t bring himself to care.

They pop on a movie and chill on the couch. At least until Karma gets his hands on paper towel rolls and ends up finally sells everyone on his idea of starting an impromptu fencing tourney. So maybe they don’t exactly pay attention to the movie, but Nagisa does get to see Fumiko whip Karma with a paper towel roll, so he doesn’t have any complaints.

...Yeah. Things are good.

And with his birthday fast approaching… Surrounded by laughing family… His mind keeps drifting back to one thing:

His sensei is alive. And his sensei is the same. And that makes it the best early birthday of all.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter 14! Chapter 14!

Sorry this one's a bit late. I'm sick and my beta had to get surgery, so things have been crazy for the both of us lately. But it's finally here! This is another one I've been looking forward to, so I'm happy to get it out!

Mostly a fluffy chapter, but I know ya'll love yourselves some fluff, and what is a slice of life fic without some wholesome birthday based fluff, anyways?

This is probably the part where I should admit /I've/ never baked a cake. Many thanks to the numerous cake baking tutorials I found online, none of which (Thankfully) had actual anecdotes about dead fathers. I don't know what absolute wack ass recipe website Nagisa ended on, but here's the part where I promise the websites I used were incredibly helpful and did not dump their traumatic experiences on me.

If you need any proof of just how inexperienced at baking I am, the little stand joke came from personal experience as well. I barged into my server's Discord channel and was like "WHAT DO YOU CALL THAT THING YOU PUT A CAKE ON?" to which all of my friends were like "IT'S A FUCKING STAND, SACK?" Good times. Either way I decided to project some of my dumbassery on poor Nagisa.

I had a lot of fun with the actual little 'party,' even if I don't have a lot to say about it! It's a scene with a lot of heart, and I hope ya'll enjoyed it as much as I did! There's nothing I love more than seeing this lil ragtag found family have sweet moments
To be truthful I only actually listened to two songs while writing this chapter. Those being Happy Birthday To My Loose Acquaintance by Garfunkel and Oates, and... Cooking by The Book from Lazytown. Needless to say neither of those was actually particularly helpful for writing, but it sure was an experience! You haven't lived until you write, in half-dissociative state, at 3am in the morning, to the sound of Cooking by The Book. Because that's how I spend my time! Summer loving having a blast!

I dunno if the next chapter will be up in a week or two. I know I promised more quick updates for a lil bit, but like I said: Things have been CRAZY for me and my beta. So please be patient! Thank you! And hey: If it does end up taking two weeks that extends the POPULARITY POLL by a little bit! Reminder that that's still open and looking for votes! So far Fumiko has 5, Kiyoshi has 3, Kayano has 1, and Nagisa, Gakushuu, Karma, and Makoto have a whopping 0. So if you want to tip the scales, let me know who your favorite is!

Thank you for reading, and I hope you enjoyed! Make sure to let me know what you think, and I'll have the next chapter up as soon as possible! o7
Sports Festival Time

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Summer goes swimmingly. Needless to say, Nagisa continues to tutor Fumiko and Makoto throughout it, telling the Hisakawas that his services are year-round and saying absolutely nothing to the Himuras because he still can’t get in contact with them in the first place. He enjoys his impromptu birthday surprise, and two weeks later even joins his spouses for a quick trip to the beach. Yes... Summer is grand, but summer is over in the blink of an eye. And before anyone knows it, it’s time to return to school.

Nagisa thinks he might be the only person in the world excited for that. Of course he’d checked up on his students throughout the vacation, but he can't wait to get to see them again in person. He’s had all of those six weeks to brainstorm exactly what lessons he wants to tackle next, and by the tail end of summer, he’s almost anxious to get back.

Kayano helps him transport the animals back to the building and Nagisa makes sure to do a quick tidying up before September 3rd rolls around. He even tests the stability of the roof like he’s been meaning to and decides it seems sturdy enough. Maybe on some lazy day he’ll hold a study session up there. There’s nothing better than a change of pace.

And soon enough, the third is here. Admittedly it puts a bit of a nervous feeling in his gut, but it's nothing like what he’d felt before the school year began. He knows his kids by now. And he knows they like him. He thinks he knows how to do what’s best for them, and he’s excited to see them again. Admittedly he’d enjoyed the time off, but there’s nothing much that Nagisa loves more than his job. (Well, except his spouses, of course. But that’s a given.)

He walks into school with a hum, with his brand new binder slung under his shoulder. Admittedly it's much lighter and much more organized than his previous one. And he hopes to keep it that way. He paces for a bit and even reorganizes some things, but soon sits down and decides all he can do is wait for the students to arrive.

One by one they pour in. The ceremonious Haruhi Nozara, and after her, Rikuto, who apparently is only showing up early to discuss extra credit for the trimester that just ended.

Nagisa pinches the bridge of his nose.

“I’ll… See what I can do.”

Kaya Tomaya. Yoshito Akira. Rin Arakawa and the Hisoka twins. There’s this clear sort of exhaustion to them all. And he gets it. Summer vacation just ended, after all. No matter how cool your school is, no-one is excited to go back at first. But he hopes he can wipe the unenthused expressions from their faces sooner rather than later.

Kiyoshi rolls in at exactly 8 O’Clock, and with him Fumiko. They’re already engrossed in some sort of conversation, and although Kiyoshi interrupts to give Nagisa a quick hello, they’re soon back to their thing. It’s a far cry from the Kiyoshi who had shown up two hours early and completely alone at the start of the year.

...He’s making good progress.

And as the minutes pass, the rest of the students arrive. Soon it seems everyone has clocked in.
Well… Except for one person, of course.

Don’t tell him Makoto is going to be late on the first day of the trimester again.

It makes him worry. He knows Makoto’s wildly fluctuating schedule is likely due to his wildly fluctuating homelife. He’d seen Makoto doing just fine yesterday, but he knows things can change in the blink of an eye when it comes to situations like that. He hopes everything is alright…

He’s nervously eyeing the clock as it ticks down to 8:30 when the door bursts open.

Makoto makes his entrance, a skip in his step. Says something about how he’d be sorry for being late, except he’s not. He pumps his fist in the air proudly, then takes his seat in front of Kiyoshi. He nods firmly, as if giving Nagisa permission to start the day.

A-Ah!? Since when had he needed permission!?

Nonetheless, Makoto is right. He’s technically not late, and it’s not as if Nagisa would get on him even if he were. With the whole class gathered, it’s finally time to begin the second trimester.

He welcomes them back to the school and asks them about their summers. Before they get down to the nitty gritty boring stuff, he’s delighted to hear how they’ve been. Chiharu ended up getting a summer job and Kazuki had done some public service work at his sister’s behest. Rosey had gone skydiving, a phrase in and of itself that practically gives Nagisa a heart attack, and Makoto brags about having the best birthday ever.

Once he’s given them all some time to share (More time than he’d like to admit) the school day begins for real. They discuss who will be the class representatives for this trimester and settle on Riko and Komoshi. They very briefly review some old concepts, before Nagisa asks them if they want to participate in what he knows they’re really here for.

“First assassination of the trimester?”

A cheer echoes throughout the room.

Maybe summer’s end isn’t as boring as the kids thought it was.

Slowly but surely things settle back into a routine. A week passes by, and then another. But never one to let things grow stale, Nagisa knows the ushering in of the second trimester means it’s time for a yearly event. And as mid-September creeps up on them, that means it’s time for the sports festival to begin.

He gives the announcement a week before: Explaining to the kids in homeroom what he’s devised. The Capture The Flag meets Paintball meets Cops and Robbers concept, that is. It’s no pole toppling competition, but it sure is… Something, alright. By the time he’s done every kid in the class is staring at him like he’s out of his goddamn mind.

“Capture The Flag… Meets… Paintball… Meets Cops and Robbers… Tourney style?” Yoshito says, utter disbelief in his voice.

“Oh, not all at once!” Nagisa says. “At least… Not immediately.” He pauses. “We’ll be starting with the individual games. And slowly but surely we’ll integrate them until we have an… Ideally fully functional game of our own. I’ll be keeping track of your victories as the competition and various games continue, alongside assassination attempts and competitions. All in all this week will be greatly action-focused. And while yes, of course, you’ll still be working, PE periods will be
extended. I figured you could all use some fresh air after being stuffed up in a building for so long immediately after summer's end.”

Minki’s hand shoots in the air.

“Yes, Minki?”

“Do we have to still work?”

“Yes, Minki.”

“Why?”

“Because this is a school, Minki.”

She pouts but shrugs. “Fair.”

“Where was I?” Nagisa says. “Oh right: At the end of the week whoever has the most ‘points’ will face off against each other in one final game of Capture The Robbers Paintball, where they’ll rally and lead their classmates. Whoever ends up leading their team to success will be crowned the victor.”

It’s Rikuto’s turn to raise a hand. “Crowned? That’s all?” He rolls his eyes. “Lameeee.”

Nagisa stares. Since when has an honest competition against their peers not been enough to motivate kids!? 

“I’ll also get the winner a bowl of candy,” he improvises.

That changes Rikuto’s tone in an instant. Kids who seemed hesitant before are on board now, excitedly whispering to their friends. And even those who had already been psyched for the event are now more on their A-Game than ever. Is that really all it took?

Oh. Right. They’re twelve. Of course that’s all it took.

“Well now I’ve gotta win,” Makoto brags.

Fumiko rolls her eyes at him. Then, ever diligent, raises her hand.

“Yes, Fumiko?”

“That’s not tourney-style.”

“Pardon?”

“That’s, by definition, not tourney-style. Tourney-style would involve eliminations, but those aren’t a part of the process you’ve described. Your game falls under the category of point style.”

Nagisa’s face flushes as he quickly realizes she’s right. Oh man… He’d just been trying to toss big words together to sound impressive, hadn’t he? Er - Not that ‘tourney’ is a particularly big word, but it sounds cooler than ‘point’!

“You’re correct,” he admits. “Point style it is.”

Fumiko smirks. “Much better.”
Makoto’s hand shoots in the air. He doesn’t even wait for Nagisa to call his name. “I have an idea!” he pipes up. “If we’re going to be competing against and scheming against each other, we should try to keep some…” He pauses. “A… Anonymity.” He stumbles over the word once or twice, but finally manages to pronounce it correctly. “We need a secret way to communicate with our teammates.”

It takes Nagisa a moment to get what he’s going on about. But slowly it dawns on him, and as if reading his mind, Makoto grins.

“What do you think about code names?”

“I think that sounds wonderful.”

He opens submissions for code names throughout the week. And as the days lead up to the competition, students come to suggest nicknames for their friends and acquaintances alike. The Friday before the week of the competition the kid draw their code names and stare.

“Who named me ‘Closet Furry!’?” Hachirou hisses.

“Long Lost Member of The Black Parade?” Yoshito repeats. “…Real funny, guys.”

“Sk8er boy!?” Rikuto demands. “Who’s responsible for this!?”

“Lesbian Icon!? Well, I’m not sure I’d call myself an icon…” Kiku says with a blush.

“Thing Two!? Where’s Thing O-” Emiko’s gaze meets Kazuki’s and falls. “…Of course.”

Makoto’s little trio sits gathered round the back of the class, in utter disbelief as they go over their own newly-acquired code names.

“Why did you think this was a good idea, Makoto?” Fumiko groans.

“I thought they’d come up with something funny!”

“Is this funny to you!?” Fumiko asks, shoving her slip of paper in his face. “Token Woman! Who even came up with that!?”

Kiyoshi shies back and Fumiko’s head whips around.

“Was this you!?”

“I just think it’s weird that friend groups are always organized like this!” Kiyoshi squeals. “Think about it! With Shiota-sensei’s friend group from back in the day, too! Why’s there only ever one girl!? It feels like a badly written manga!” He covers his face and trembles. “I didn’t think he’d actually draw my nickname…!” he murmurs, voice full of shame. “I’m sorry, Fumiko…”

“I wouldn’t sweat it,” Makoto admits. “It’s all in good fun, right? Plus, it can’t be much worse than the one you got.”

Kiyoshi hangs his head. “Who thought it was okay to call me White Bread…?”

Matsuya, for the record, Nagisa has no doubt that one’s from Matsuya. And it’s far from the worst name Kiyoshi could have obtained. Among the many, many, many submissions for him, Nagisa had had to discard most of them. The ‘Quivering Pussy’ from Kazuki had been far too mean spirited and a little too lewd to put a middle schooler through. The “Irina and Karasuma Finally Did The Dirty,” From Makoto isn’t a name in the first place. And various jokes about his
heterochromia such as “Hetty” or “Black and Blue” seemed anything from blatantly misleading about his romantic orientation to a desperate cry for help.

White Bread will have to do.

“What did you get, Makoto?” Fumiko finally asks.

He grins. “Only the coolest code name ever!”

“I sincerely doubt that.”

He holds his slip of paper out proudly. “Take a gander, then!”

Both Fumiko and Kiyoshi do a double-take.

“Prince of the WHAT?” Fumiko murmurs.

“That is utterly gibberish,” Kiyoshi adds on.

“Prince of The Fateful Eternal Wind!” Makoto huffs. “It’s cool and it makes loads of sense!”

“Who even submitted that?” Fumiko asks.

Makoto gives a lazy shrug. “Hell if I know.”

Okay. So maybe Nagisa had cheated a little and submitted one or two himself. But can you blame him!? Regardless of his friends’ teasing, Makoto carries the name with pride. Nagisa’s not sure if he recognizes it as a nickname of his own creation, but he appreciates it nonetheless. It’s just so weird and ridiculous and a little narcissistic and… Him.

It’s funny. Back when Korosensei had asked for a name like that they’d scoffed at him. It had been annoying and inane and a little pathetic. Just like Korosensei himself. He’d been a desperately obnoxious person, with goofy energies so irritating he was almost impossible to take seriously. But after losing him… It was hard not to realize even the most obnoxious parts of him were something they missed. It wasn’t just about the perfect teacher, who always knew what to do. It was about the small moments, and the annoying ones, too. It’s hard not to miss all of someone, even their perceived flaws.

...So… With the need for ‘missing’ over and done with, Nagisa figures he deserves to be a prince this time around.

Also it’d be a little low brow to nickname the thirteen-year-old boy “Octopus of the Idiotic Perverted Chicken.”

‘Eternal’ seems pretty damn right at this point, anyways.

Finally, the much-anticipated week rolls around. Nagisa gathers the students and divides them into teams for their first game of Cops and Robbers. But before they can begin, being the sappy bastard he is, there are a few words he needs to say.

“Okay!” He begins with a clap. “Welcome to our own little sports festival! I hope you’re as excited for this as I am, and that you all have a good time. Because that’s what this is about. The games you are about to participate in aren’t necessarily about winning. The last thing I want you thinking is that your worth should depend on arbitrary abilities to accomplish certain things when the world
we live in is so vast. What this is truly about is pushing yourself to your limits. As long as you fight as hard as you can, it doesn’t matter to me who takes home the ‘victory.’ I know you’re all capable of amazing things, and I hope this is an opportunity for you to not only work with your classmates, but unearth new skills you never realized you’d had before. I hope you all have a wonderful time, and may the…”

Nagisa pauses.

“May the fairest player win.”

Kiyoshi isn’t sure what he’d expected when Nagisa had mentioned a sports festival, but this wasn’t it.

Here’s the thing. He’s… Not… Super… Athletic. Sometimes it feels like he should be considering his dad is built like a brick shithouse, but he’s most certainly not. The best he can accomplish is managing to throw someone if he grabs them just right, but that’s not exactly allowed in Cops and Robbers.

At least… Not if you’re a cop. Is that allowed if you’re a robber? It sounds sufficiently illegal.

Huh… Cops and Robbers where the Robbers can break the rules. Now that sounds like a fucking nightmare! Here’s to hoping Nagisa never comes up with THAT one.

Fumiko’s standing next to him, but her eyes are trained on the woods. She’s surprisingly diligent about this sort of thing. But it’s nice to have her by his side, even if he’s a tad bummed their teammates had relegated them to guards due to their absolutely abysmal stamina.

Nagisa had said next round if they wanted they could take more offensive positions, but Kiyoshi instantly felt his gut cramp at the idea of having to run and turned his offer down.

Plus! It’s not like they have nothing to do. A fair number of their competitors have already been caught. ‘Long Lost Member of The Black Parade’ anxiously paces around the perimeter of the jail, and ‘Carl's Jr.’ is flopped down on the ground, seemingly already having given up on the concept of ‘exercising.’

A shifting noise comes from the woods. Kiyoshi’s head turns, but he quickly realizes it’s fellow cop “The All-Seeing Alchemist” bringing “Pikachuphobe” into custody.

...Fucking hell. He hates these names. Just call them Rin and Misaki, for Pete’s sake!

Fumiko helps Rin usher Misaki into jail. Rin gives a quick thanks, then rushes back into the forest.

Misaki pouts and sticks her tongue out, but stays put. She doesn’t seem too particularly bothered by her newfound imprisonment. Kiyoshi gets it. As much as loss stings, her lungs must sting even more from attempting to evade her classmates. This is a welcome opportunity to catch her breath.

Another rustle comes from the woods... And then they fall silent. Fumiko and Kiyoshi exchange a hesitant glance, wondering if it’s simply their ears playing tricks on them. Then something - Or someone - Darts out of the underbrush.

Kiyoshi hardly even processes what he’s doing. But before he can stop himself he’s barrelling towards the perpetrator. And in an instant, they’re on the ground.

He freezes, panting for breath, before locking eyes with the poor kid he’s tackled. He has to hold
back a laugh.

“Makoto!?”

Makoto doesn’t even try to stifle his own laugh. “Kiyoshi!?” he asks through snickers. “I didn’t know you were so strong!”

“Me neither!”

Fumiko’s approaching quick. “What was that?” she asks.

“I don’t know!” Kiyoshi sputters with embarrassment, quickly releasing his pin on Makoto. He starts to stand, but Makoto grabs his wrist with a stern frown.

“What are you doing?!” he asks.

“What are you doing?!” Kiyoshi squeals, attempting to rip his hand away.

“Put me in jail, moron! Don’t let me escape so easily!”

Oh. OH!

He’d been so caught up in the euphoria (And mild horror) of besting his friend that he’d forgotten they were actually in the middle of a game. He hauls Makoto to his feet and shoves him into the ‘jail.’

“There we go,” Makoto says. “Good job.”

“Eh. It’s whatever.”

“Don’t engage with the criminals, Kiyoshi,” Fumiko reminds him with a smirk.

“Oh, wait. Of course,” Kiyoshi says, slowly returning his own.

“Hey! Wait! What!? Don’t ignore me!” Makoto demands.

“I better see you display that same kind of gutsiness next time someone else tries to free the prisoners,” Fumiko says, ignoring him.

“You just think I looked funny tackling people,” Kiyoshi replies.

“Maybe so.”

“GUYS!”

The rest of the PE period seems to fly by. And by the end of it, just barely, the Cops take home the victory, giving one point to each member. Kiyoshi can’t help but feel he hadn’t helped much, but when his teammates slap his back and tell him ‘good job,’ he has to reconsider.

Okay! So maybe Makoto’s not good with game- games, but he’s good at assassination! He swears! Hell! He’s not good! He’s great!

Something seems to overtake his body the moment he steps onto the battlefield. Acutely aware of his heart pounding, he can hear the every breath of his opponent... Can analyze the way they move and pinpoint their weaknesses... Like the very blood running through his veins, the battlefield is
laid out so clearly before him.

How could it not? He had been the teacher of the assassination classroom, after all.

He’d honed their skills perfectly. And it seems with every memory he’s honing his own.

So for the love of God! Why is Nagisa so hard to even get a hit on!?

In a weird way, he should be proud. The way Nagisa sidesteps his every movement seems to imply he’d succeeded in some way. That he’d turned Nagisa into a truly impressive adult who knows how to protect himself. And he is proud! He swears! But now is not the time for pride, because all he wants to do is kick Nagisa’s ass!

It’s not that he has a competitive streak, either! Sure, Makoto really, really, really, really, really wants to win the sports festival, but he’s not gonna be down in the dumps if he doesn’t. What he really wants is that candy! And how can he know whoever wins will share!? He’s gotta try, or his sweet tooth will never forgive him!

He’d already been on the losing side of the Cops and Robbers game. And now that it’s come to one on one assassination attempts against Nagisa he needs to be on his A-game if he wants to stand a chance.

He clutches the blade and makes a blow. It’s well-aimed. In any other world, it would feel precise. But Nagisa blocks it with his elbow, quickly taking a step back.

Makoto makes another attempt. But this time he misses entirely, the blade just barely whooshing past Nagisa’s ribcage. And by the time he tries to turn the blade to drive it into Nagisa’s chest, it’s too late. Nagisa sidesteps and stays just barely out of range. With each precise step Makoto takes forward, he takes an equally precise step back. This is way harder than it has any right to be. Assassination is hardly about one on one battle. It’s about the element of surprise! It’s about appearing non-threatening and defying expectations. But with Nagisa, he doesn’t have that luxury.

It’s no fair! Nagisa already knows all the cool shit he can do!

“One minute left,” Riko says, stopwatch in hand.

Bluh! The five-minute rule sucks, too. He gets it. If Nagisa faced all his students for hours on end, he’d have no time to teach. There’s so many of them! But Makoto had let his students try to assassinate him all day! During the Sports Festival Nagisa should do that, too!

Which given a single moment of thought is ridiculous to ask of him! But gah! Makoto is no good with pressure!

“C’mon. You can do it,” Nagisa says, voice dripping with sincerity.

Come on, Makoto! He’s seen what you can do! So show him something worthwhile!

He darts in for a strike, but Nagisa dodges it with ease. There’s this total calm to him. Like he’s seen it all before. And he has. But it’s something more than that. Nagisa can stay composed in even the most tense of moments. Like it’s built into his very core. And somehow, Makoto has to wonder if that’s an asset, too.

...No. He doesn’t have to wonder. He knows,
In an instant, he’s in another world. It’s the dead of night, bright spotlights shining overhead. Nagisa stands on a rooftop, body stiff as he faces someone MUCH larger than he is.

Makoto can’t move. It’s as if he’s rooted in one spot. And for a moment, he forgets 'Makoto' entirely: Genuine terror rising in his gut.

Not now! Not when - Don’t you get it!? If you’re hurt now, I can’t protect you! Just like-

...Just like what?

He doesn’t know. Even as panic claws at his gut, he doesn’t know. And still, he doesn’t let it show. He masks his fear behind a smile. And if Nagisa feels the same fear, he doesn’t let it show, either.

He takes one step forward… Then another, the same calm plastered on his face. And Makoto sees shellshock dawn across his opponent’s expression.

Nagisa smiles and he takes a deep breath.

What is he doing!?

Then, he claps.

The noise rings out across the night, piercing Makoto’s ears. That’s all it takes. Nagisa’s opponent stops in his tracks, sheer terror in his trembling lip.

“Makoto! Are you okay?”

Finally, Nagisa’s voice pierces the haze. And Makoto returns to the world he knows. Nagisa’s staring at him, genuine worry in his eyes.

And Makoto wonders… Wonders just what he’d accomplished.

He doesn’t think it through. He doesn’t need to. He claps his hands together. The world seems to vibrate, and Nagisa freezes in place.

It’s his opportunity! Hardly aware of what he’d even harnessed, Makoto rushes forward. He draws his blade back and he-

“Time’s up.”

Makoto’s heart sinks... And his strike falls to the wayside. Slowly, Nagisa returns to his senses, and he meets Makoto’s eyes.

Suddenly, Makoto feels weirdly ashamed. Like he’d seen something he wasn’t supposed to. He opens his mouth to apologize, but Nagisa speaks first.

“That was incredible!” he says. “A real stun clap.”

...So that’s what it was.

Nagisa continues, beaming with pride. “I didn’t know you knew what that was!”

Quickly, Makoto’s confidence returns. “Yep!” He says with a grin. “I guess you could say I’m a natural.” And someone with a cosmically unfair advantage, but that’s beyond the point.

“That was a close call. Good work out there, Makoto. I can’t wait to see how you utilize that in the
future.” He pauses. “Though I’ll be prepared next time.”

Of course he will. Pooie!

Makoto sits down. Admittedly he’s a little disappointed he’d failed, but he still feels ecstatic at having figured that out. Nagisa’s right. He has a feeling this will be of use in the future.

His classmates gather around, demanding to know what that was! And as Makoto brags, watching Fumiko step forward to face Nagisa next, his heartbeat quickly returns to normal.

He even manages to shake it off. The feeling of terror and grief that had risen in his gut. Because even if it had scared him then, he’s sure it’s nothing now.

There’s a first for everything, but experiencing Capture The Flag for the first time at age 13 is just sad.

It’s not a new realization. There’s always been this acute awareness in the back of Fumiko’s mind that she hadn’t gotten to experience what other kids her age had. But up until very recently, that had felt like a good thing. She’d been above such childish activities. And she had been for a very long time.

But ever since stepping foot in Nagisa’s classroom… A desperate feeling had devoured her life. Something she hadn’t felt since she was very, very young. A desire to try everything. And it was with Nagisa’s offer that she’d received the opportunity to do so.

...So here she is! First game of Capture The Flag at age 13! A little bit embarrassing, but a little bit exciting, too!

She’s ducking behind a tree, hiding out and listening carefully for any hint of footsteps. At first, she’d planned to remain on the defensive, but her teammates had insisted she’d make a good offensive player. Something-something her small stature would help her go unnoticed. Admittedly, she’s a tad sour over being called small at all, but she’d figured the Capture The Flag connoisseurs knew what they were doing. For once in her life, it’s best for her to just take someone else’s orders.

It’s funny. She can’t help but think a few months ago she’d have stuck her nose up at the concept. Being ‘bossed around’ by her classmates at all. She’s the one who should be giving orders. But things are different now. Slowly but surely they’ve come to feel like equals. And suddenly she doesn’t mind a bunch of bratty twelve-year-olds telling her to rush out into the forest and hide under a tree. Because suddenly that’s not gross or demeaning. It’s cool!

She waits one more moment, just in case, then darts to the next tree. Presses her back to the bark and listens. She hears shouting in the distance. Had someone else playing it sneaky been caught, or is it simply the unbridled chaos of a wild goose chase?

“Sounds like Strahd Apologist and The Giant Rat Who Makes All of The Rules got tagged, huh?”

Fumiko jolts. She whirls around, and tenses, ready to bolt at any moment.

But quickly she realizes who it is, and Makoto peeks his head out from behind a tree. A blue bandana is tied around his neck, the same as hers.

...Oh. Yeah. He’s on her team.

“Keep it down!” she hisses, crouching. “How on earth could you tell who got tagged? They’re
Makoto gives a lazy shrug. “I dunno. It was just easy to make out. Strahd Apologist’s scream is super distinct, and The Giant Rat Who Makes All of The Rules has a bit of a lisp.”

Literally all of the gears in Fumiko’s head have to churn for her to make sense of who he’s talking about. She really hates this code name thing. That’s… Riko and Chiharu, right? No. The other way around. Chiharu and Riko.

...Now that he says it, she thinks he’s right. Which is ridiculous. They’re way too far away to make out clearly. But she figures it’s not worth spending too much thought on. Makoto may as well be superhuman with the bullshit he regularly pulls off and trying to deduce how he comes to literally any conclusion ever is just a waste of their precious game time.

“What are you doing here?” she finally whispers. “I thought you headed west?”

“I did originally,” Makoto admits. “But I saw Sk8r Boy and Kiku’s Delivery Service chasing The All-Seeing Alchemist. I didn’t want to get caught up with her, so I figured I’d turn this way. I spotted you and decided to follow after.” He pauses, then salutes. “Hope you don’t mind me tailing you for a bit, Token Woman!”

Fumiko blinks. “First of all: Stop calling me that,” she says. “Second of all, no. I don’t mind. Although I’m not sure that’s the best idea. I really don’t know what I’m doing here.”

“Awww! Come on! Don’t say that,” Makoto replies. “I mean, you’re sneaking around all stealthy-like. It’s better than my plan.”

“What is?”

“Usually charging at them kicking and screaming.”

“Okay. Yeah. Don’t do that.” Fumiko replies. “But I’ve never really played this game before. So… Like… Don’t pass me off as some expert.”

Makoto shrugs. “If it makes you feel any better, I don’t think most of us have played before. I don’t think Nagisa would have explained the rules otherwise. So if you think you suck at this, you’re in good company.” He smiles. “Personally it’s been a long time since I’ve done anything like this. That’s why I’m all ‘running and screaming seems like a good plan!’”

“Okay. Again: Don’t do that,” Fumiko says. “But I suppose you have a point. Now that you mention it, everyone has seemed a tad… Novice.”

“You say that like anyone isn’t novice. Do professional Capture The Flag players exist?”

“I sincerely wouldn’t doubt it,” Fumiko replies. “There’s professional everything. I’ve participated in both professional polo and flower arranging myself.”

“Both at once!” Makoto sputters. ”H-How do you get the flowers up on the hor-?”

“No! Not both at once!” Fumiko hisses. “But that’s besides the point. We should be going.”


“I’d reckon it’s a little too late for that,”

Fumiko’s gaze shoots upwards, and she meets eyes with Minki, who sits cross-legged up on a tree.
Both she and Makoto freeze, but their opponent is right: It’s far too late. She leaps down from the branch, barreling straight at Makoto.

“FUMIKO! RUN!”

He doesn’t need to say that twice. She bolts. What was she thinking!? Of course someone had overheard them! It’s not like Makoto knows how to keep his voice down!

There’s no time for sneaking now. Fumiko runs as fast as she can, desperately trying to escape the scrambling of footsteps behind her. A last-ditch effort is all she has! It seems she’s going to have to go in kicking and screaming herself if she wants to stand a chance of stealing that flag!

She bursts out of the underbrush, to the abject horror of the Red team. Their eyes are on her in an instant, but she feverishly tries to ignore their fiery stares and break through their defenses. She shuts her eyes, clenches her fists, and charges.

...Needless to say, she’s caught. Minki tags her from behind, practically toppling her over with the forcefulness. She near-stumbles, but Minki’s careful to grab her hand.

“Woah there! Don’t go concussing yourself!” she says, panting.

Fumiko struggles to catch her breath herself. She turns to exchange a glance with Minki, who has to hold back a giggle.

“That was crazy!” she says. “I didn’t know you could run so fast!”

“Me neither,” Fumiko admits. “I guess I just… Got really into it.” She has to stifle a laugh herself. Only now does she realize just how the Red team defense is staring at her. Kiyoshi in particular looks like his eyes are about to pop out of his skull. “I guess you got me, though. Okay, then. Lock me away. I suppose I’ll have to believe in what the rest of my team can do.”

Once more, it’s close. And ultimately Red takes the victory. But still, Fumiko can’t find herself feeling too bummed. Sure, maybe they’d ultimately taken home a loss… But…

Not half bad for her first game of Capture The Flag.

The further they get into the week, the faster it seems to fly by. At least, for Nagisa.

Each morning his class excitedly steps into class, already prepared for the competition of the day. They compete all morning, return to the classroom for the afternoon, then finish up the day with one more game or tournament. Admittedly at first they always seem disappointed to return to class, but he sees them display an unbridled enthusiasm he’s rarely ever seen from some of them before. Truly, they take the sports festival in stride: Grasping the bull by its horns and facing the week with everything they have.

As the class gets into the routine of the sports festival, however, things don’t just get faster: They get closer and closer, too.

When it comes to facing off against their peers in the first round of ‘Classmate Assassinations,’ Chiharu, Makoto, and in a surprising turn of events Kiyoshi end up taking home a bulk of the points. It’s a close call, but Chiharu’s large stature and stamina, Kiyoshi’s basic self-defense techniques, and Makoto’s having a blatantly unfair advantage due to being a murderoctopus in a past life end up coming in handy.
Paintball’s divided into two teams. Red and Blue, of course. (Nagisa’s quickly realized that’s his default. Perhaps he should come up with something more clever such as ‘Tea versus Coffee’ or even simply ‘Green vs Yellow’ considering it’s bound to grow cliched by this point, but he can’t bring himself to budge. It’s a classic. With a legacy of timeless associations such as ‘Kill versus Save,’ ‘That one game that was like Overwatch before Overwatch,’ or ‘Charizard versus Blastoise’ behind it, nothing can quite outmatch his go-to team names.)

Makoto’s hand shoots in the air the moment Nagisa discloses the rules. He asks if they’ll be allowed to use melee weapons in paintball, perhaps utilizing a paintbrush or a knife dipped in paint?

“Oh! Oh! Oh!” Kiku exclaims, waving her own hand around. “What about paint buckets!? We could totally use paint buckets!”

“Well that sounds deli-”

“Splatoon,” Kiyoshi interrupts.

“Excuse me?”

“We’ve just reinvented Splatoon.”

Well… Shit. He’s not wrong.

Ultimately they decide to forgo alternative weapons, namely because Nagisa doesn’t have any of them ready, not because of the Splatoon thing. In fact, he just decides to mark that as a goal for a future Sports Festival.

“Make Splatoon real.”

By the end of the day, Blue team ends up taking home the points. Fumiko and Makoto high-five so hard it leaves a mark, and Emiko offers to help Nagisa clean up the forest, but he declines. He’s sure it’ll be fine.

...It is absolutely not fine. He has to spend hours hosing down the trees. But such is the job of both a teacher and an entrepreneur with dreams of ‘Splatoon Real?’

By the time he’s done, he decides ‘Splatoon Real,’ would be a fucking nightmare, and decides to put that one on the backburner for now.

When it comes to assassinating him as teams, only one group takes home a victory. Although with the newfound power of the stun clap, Makoto’s group puts up a damned good fight, it’s ultimately Chiharu, Rosey, and Hachirou who manage to pull off the third assassination of the year. That’s two points for each.

At the halfway point of the week, he begins to phase the games into each other. Increasingly complicated and increasingly delightful games of Capture The Flag with Paintball, or competitions of Cops and Robbers with assassination worked in. The points continue to climb, with teams changing every time. Everyone fights their hardest. And by the time they’ve made their way to the final game of ‘Cops and Robbers meets Paintball meets Capture the Flag, NOT-tourney style,’ it seems they’re going to have one of two winners.

...Chiharu or Kiyoshi.

It takes Nagisa aback at first, too. He wonders if he’d done the math correctly, but after adding it
up again, he’s sure. The highest-scoring, with 12 points each, are Chiharu and Kiyoshi.

It’s weird. He’d expected someone like the stubborn Yoshito or the brash Makoto to take the lead. And yet he’s met with two of the meekest students in his class having shot for the stars. But as surprising as it is, it feels good, too.

His job really is one surprise after another.

He lets the class know on Thursday afternoon. Says that the two of them will be picking teams of their own Friday morning and facing off against each other in one final competition. He wishes them both the best of luck, says he believes they can do great things, and that he can’t wait to see what they accomplish.

Chiharu and Kiyoshi both stare at him like he’s grown a second head. Kiyoshi asks him if he’s sure he’s not wrong, and Nagisa confirms it. Nonetheless, they shake on it, and Chirharu, with a toothy grin, reassures Kiyoshi he’s sure it’ll be a wonderful final round.

“Just don’t hold back, okay?”

Kiyoshi nervously takes his massive hand. “I won’t.”

They begin Friday. First thing in the morning they pick teams. Nagisa trusts his kids not to leave anyone feeling left out or pick the ‘least skilled’ kid last. They’re better than that. And true to their intuition, they go for their friends: Kiyoshi picking Makoto and Fumiko first, and Chiharu picking his usual group before going for anything they feel would give them the ‘obvious advantage.’

From thereon out teams are decided rather unceremoniously. And with Kiyoshi deciding to take up the mantle of team Red, and Chiharu team Blue, it’s time for the final event of their sports festival to begin.

“Good luck to the both of you. And of course to your teams as well. This is as much a test of your leadership as a test of your skill, and how this turns out will depend entirely on your ability to work together. So believe in them and lead them well. You have twenty minutes to discuss a plan with your team and another five to get in position. May the fairest player win.”

Kiyoshi couldn’t have seen this coming even if someone had explicitly told him what was up ahead.

It’s not that he doesn’t understand he’d been doing well… But… Tied for first place? It’s incomprehensible. Surely Nagisa had made a mistake. There’s no other way he can fathom it. Makoto and Fumiko had been doing way better than him. It’s some sort of fluke. He’d only been lucky enough to be placed on the consistently winning teams, that’s all. It’s not like he’d done anything special…

It’s funny. He can’t congratulate himself. Not even for something as minor as this.

He knows it’s something that literally doesn’t matter. It’s a fun thing Nagisa concocted. It’s not like making it to the finals of the middle school Sports Festival is gonna be the crowning achievement on his resume. (At least, he certainly fucking hopes not.) So why can’t he let himself have this? “You did something sorta cool! Good for you!”

He… Doesn’t know. It just feels like there’s this voice in the back of his head saying “You don’t deserve even this.”
Maybe it’s about the pressure. Is he really supposed to lead a bunch of people in one final game? Jesus, he can hardly even wrap his mind around ‘Capture The Robbers Paintball’ or whatever in the first place. Yeah. That’s gotta be it. He’s really not the leader type. That’s way more up Makoto’s alley.

Of course, ‘Leader type’ isn’t really Chiharu’s shtick, either. Kiyoshi doesn’t know him super well, but he’s observed him enough to get the gist of his position on the social totem pole. He’s a follower, too. More often than not he follows Hachirou and Rosey around like a lost puppy. He’s agreeable, he’s adorable, and he’s sensitive.

...In the good way! That’s not an insult! He swears!

...Can you be sensitive in the good way? If there’s a sensitive in the good way, Kiyoshi’s not it.

And that’s where he stops himself. He hates when he gets this way. In reality, there’s no difference between him and Chiharu. They’re objectively both relatively agreeable and kind people. He likes Chiharu well enough. So when he parses it logically, he should be able to apply that same sort of praise to himself.

And... He’s working on it. At least, he thinks he is. But it’s hard. It’s really hard. Reminding himself “You’re a likable person, Kiyoshi.”

Yeah. You’re a likable person, Kiyoshi. You’re a likable person, Kiyoshi. Think about it! Your friends like you! You’re a li-

“So what’s the plan, White Bread?”

Kiyoshi jolts. God! He hates that nickname. And the only person stubborn enough to keep using it...

He whirls around to meet Makoto, sighing and placing his hands in his pockets.

“I dunno...” he admits. He’d told the rest of the team that he’d need a few minutes to gather himself and think of a plan before walking off. Makoto must have seen right through that, because he’d sure as hell followed.

“C’mon... I’m sure you’ve got something,” Makoto presses. “You’re always coming up with something. Don’t tell me you’re scared.”

“Of course I’m scared, Makoto,” Kiyoshi admits, resting against a tree. “I’m not sure if you’ve picked up on this one yet: But I am always scared, Makoto. It’s. Like. My default setting.”

Makoto frowns. “Okay. Yeah. I noticed. But that doesn’t mean you can’t come up with a good plan.”

“I dunno,” Kiyoshi repeats, giving a lazy shrug. “Plans are way more your sorta thing. Can’t... You just do this? Please”

Makoto huffs, placing his hands on his hips. “Absolutely not! Nagisa trusted you with this, you know.”

“That doesn’t necessarily mean I’m capable of it.”

“Then make yourself capable! You’ll never know if you’ll never try. Put that big brain of yours to work and come up with something,” He huffs, almost sounding like a disappointed parent in the
way he scolds him. It’s funny. When Makoto takes a tone like that, he almost sounds like Nagisa.

*Or does Nagisa sound like…-*?

Kiyoshi shakes his head and banishes the thought. Makoto’s really managed to normalize the idea that he’s in some way connected to Korosensei. But Kiyoshi needs to remind himself that’s not reality. When Makoto puts on that stubborn face and gives encouragement after encouragement, he’s taking after Nagisa, not the other way around.

“You really oughtta give yourself more credit, Kiyoshi,” Makoto says, leaning on the tree next to him. “You’re, like, *super* smart. And I think you’re someone who has trouble believing that. Someone who has trouble believing pretty much any good thing I say about you, but I mean it. You’re smart. Remember? You tutored me in math.”

“That was super basic stuff.”

“Still knew more than me,” Makoto says. “That’s gotta count for something. So give it a try? Pretty please?”

“I just don’t know where to begin.”

“Then let me offer you a starting point.”

Kiyoshi perks up. “Please do.”

“But only if you promise to try. You gotta shoot for the moon! Even if you miss-”

“*Yeah, yeah, I’ll land among the stars.* Don’t quote that to me. You sound like one of those shitty motivational posters.”

“I *am* on those shitty motivational posters.”

Okay. Yeah. That one earns a chuckle from even Kiyoshi. He gives Makoto a hesitant smile. “Alright. I’ll try. Just… Give me an idea.”

Makoto smiles back. “Can do.” He stretches and yawns, before speaking up. “You’re observant, Kiyoshi. You see the best in people. And the worst in them, too. You overthink everything—”

“Gee, thanks!”

“You do! You overthink everything, so you’re prepared for every possible situation. Use that to your advantage. You’ve thought about every possible way your classmates can hurt you. So put that to some good use and think about how you can make them hurt each other.”

“It sounds really morbid when you word it that way-”

“It is morbid! It’s life or death out here. And we’re depending on you. So do your best, okay?”

Kiyoshi pauses, but nods. “…Will do.”

Makoto punches his shoulder and grins. “I knew you would. So let’s go.”

Kiyoshi hesitates a moment more, then steps away from the tree. They begin the trek back towards the rest of the group. Admittedly he’s still not sure this will go well, but Makoto’s right. He *does* tend to overthink his classmates. Maybe… He can analyze their abilities, too. It’s worth a shot.
“You’re really good at this. You know that, right?” he says as he steps over a branch. “Always finding the right thing to say.”

“You’ll get it figured out too, eventually. It comes with life experience,” Makoto says with a shrug.

“Oh. Like you’re sooo much more experienced than I am.”

“I am! I’ve seen all sorts of things! And all sorts of leaders. It prepares you for things. The sports festival way back when was real different, you know.”

“How so?” Kiyoshi decides there’s no harm in entertaining him. Not after Makoto’d followed him to make sure he was okay.

“Well, for one, the stakes were way higher. Usually the E-Class didn’t participate in stuff like that. At least not in the way that they really tried. Because they weren’t given an equal playing ground. I’d probably have pushed them to try their best anyways, but things got real serious a week or two before the festival began. One of my students got caught having a part-time job, and Asano was all like ‘If you don’t beat me in the upcoming pole toppling competition I’m gonna tell the WHOLE SCHOOL. Then you’ll get in troubleeee. You’ll get kicked out of school and your whole family’s gonna STARVE because YOU couldn’t support them.’”

“Waitwaitwait,” Kiyoshi interjects. “I’m sorry to interrupt - But I’m just. I’m just confused. The principal, right? I need to clarify. You’re talking about the principal Asano, right?”

Makoto cheerfully shakes his head. “Nope! Our Asano.”

Kiyoshi sputters and skids to a stop. He holds a finger up and takes a deep breath. “Sorry. I just - I need a moment to process... That.”

Sure, the Asano he’s always known has been a little bit of a douchebag, but, in, like, the fun and charming ‘grumpy uncle,’ way! Not in the ‘actively wants your family to starve’ way.

“Are you sure you’ve got this right?”

“Yup!” Makoto keeps walking. He motions for Kiyoshi to follow. And he does. Admittedly he still feels like his whole world has been rocked, but he needs to remind himself Makoto is probably pulling this out of his ass. It’s nothing worth losing his head over right before the big game.

“Anyways,” Makoto says. If he’s picking up on Kiyoshi’s bewilderment, he’s sure not acknowledging it. “At first my kid was like ‘Oh! Shit! What am I gonna do!? And he was really scared of inconveniencing his classmates. Yeah. You heard me right. Inconveniencing his classmates! When his whole education and livelihood were on the line, he was still scared of being a bother to them.”

“This is a really bleak story, Makoto. And a lot more serious than my situatio-”

“Shh! Shh! Just hear me out!” Makoto presses a finger to his lips. “Of course his classmates were like ‘That’s bullshit! We’ll support you until the end! Lead us, Isogai!’”

“ISOGAI!!?”

Kiyoshi inhales sharply. Again. Is… Is Makoto sure he’s got the right guy? Isogai and Asano are… Like… ‘Meet up over the summer and grill hotdogs together while catching up on the families’ sort of friends. Not the - And once again - He needs to stress this: ‘I actively want you and your entire family to die’ sort of friends.
“Yeah! Isogai! Black hair, golden eyes, real friendly demeanor? About…” Makoto squints, deep in thought. “About this tall?” He says, holding his hand high above his head. “Though on second thought he might be taller now. You know what I mean, though!”

‘D… Do I?’ Kiyoshi asks himself. Because he’s pretty sure he does not.

“Er - Yeah,” he says, just hoping to get to the point.

“Okay. So yeah. Isogai’s usually this real chill guy. Super agreeable. But now all his important stuff is on the line! So he’s like… ‘What do I do?’ And he studied real hard. And practiced as hard as he could, and he stepped forward and took charge of the class for the pole toppling competition. And he rocked at it. Because here’s the thing: Isogai was someone with a super big heart. Sure, he was friendly and agreeable and pure ikeman material, but that didn’t make him any less of a leader! It made him a better one! He used that heart to rally and lead his team!” Makoto grins, turning his head towards Kiyoshi.

“Which is… Great, I guess. But why are you telling me this?”

Makoto pauses. “I dunno. It just felt relevant.” He stops. “And not just, like… In the sports festival way. Sure, you might not be the rallying type like Isogai, but that’s okay. He took something that was a very normal part of him - His heart - And used it to his advantage. So you don’t need to be like him. I just think… You should try that, too. Think about what makes you you, and make that the very best part of you.” He laughs. “That’s the cool thing about this world. There’s all sorts of different people with all sorts of different skillsets. The Isogais and the Asanos and the Kiyoshis. And none of them are better than each other. As long as you know how to make use of your skillsets, then you’ll be prepared for anything you could possibly face.”

Huh…

It’s… An intriguing thought.

“You know,” he says. “You really sound like Nagisa when you say things like that.”

Makoto blinks. It’s his turn to look utterly surprised. His mouth opens, then closes. And he turns Kiyoshi’s way. “You really think so?” He asks, to which Kiyoshi gives a curt nod. And quickly his surprised expression shifts into a massive grin. “Thanks!”

“Yeah. No problem.”

By now they’re fast approaching the rest of the team. Admittedly Kiyoshi’s still not sure what he’s going to do… But…

He thinks he has some sort of idea.


Kiyoshi nods, takes a deep breath, and steps out of the underbrush.

“I’m ready,” he says, and every head turns his way. He looks out over his group and quickly begins to formulate a plan in his head.

Okay, okay, okay. He thinks he has something going here...

“Aina! You have a good eye, right!?” He shouts.
She quickly nods.

“Hideout in the trees around the flag! You’re small, so they’ll have trouble seeing you. And you’ll easily be able to snipe them from the canopies. You’ve got a good head on your shoulders. You’ll serve as an excellent defense.”

Aina blinks, but nods. Then, without a complaint, scrambles to scale a nearby tree.

“Komoshi! Terumi! You have a lot of stamina! Guard the prisons. No-one’s going to be able to overpower you. Kazuki, you—”

“Use the nicknames!” Makoto interrupts. “You’re supposed to be using the nicknames, Kiyoshi!” he badgers.

Kiyoshi frowns, inhales, and shouts.

“ABSOLUTELY NOT!” And without another wasted breath he turns to Kazuki. “Kazuki, you’re agile. And you love to mess with people. Serve as a scout and a distraction. If you can, weasel your way in between their defenses. Just don’t make a fool of yourself. Now isn’t the time for jokes.”

Kazuki huffs and does a mock salute. “Okay, okay. Whatever you say, Captain White Bread.”

“Minki, Haruhi, Kiku. You’ll serve as our preliminary attack force. Your skills are well balanced. If you strike at just the right time, you can break through. Just wait for my cue.”

The girls nod. Kiku even salutes. “Can do!”

It all seems to come easy from there. Makoto’s right. Kiyoshi knows exactly what his classmates are capable of. How could he not!? He’s spent all year comparing himself to them! Making them out to be his opponents! But he’s never considered what he could do with them on his side!

“Emiko! Rin and Riko are going to put us at a tactical disadvantage! See if you can take them out as soon as possible! Ryoka! See if you can sneak around and free prisoners! They’ll likely have Matsuya and Rosey on the defensive. And while they’re quick, they’re not observant. If you’re careful, you can avoid them entirely!”

He can see it perfectly in his mind. The map of the battlefield. And where his classmates fit perfectly. Somehow this is less scary than actually playing the sports! This isn’t paintball! Not yet! Right now it’s a game of chess!

“Fumiko, lead the charge. You’re not just fast. You’re cunning and brave. You know when to back out of a situation, but also when to give it your all. I’m trusting you with this. You can take the flag.” He turns Makoto’s way. “Makoto, stay back here. If anyone gets within range of the flag, use that clap thing you figured out on Tuesday! We can stop them in their tracks!”

Fumiko nods. Makoto bounces up and down.

“Of course!”

Yes. Yes! It’s all coming together!

“And I’ll stay back with Makoto. We’ll guard the flag while Komoshi and Terumi take care of the prison. If we do this just right... We... I...” He has to hold back a laugh. “I think we have this in the bag!”
Quickly, everyone gets into position. Kiyoshi prepares himself and waits for Nagisa’s cue.

He hears the whistle pierce the forest, and then the game begins for real.

Everything from there is pretty much a blur. A delightful, anxiety-inducing blur. Kiyoshi fights harder than he thinks he’s ever fought. And keeping a careful eye on his team, he manages to reign them in with a tactical preciseness. He makes split-second decisions, and shoots down his opponents like his life depends on it.

“Aina! Flank them! Komoshi! Re-enforce your stance! Kazuki! Watch out! You’re being tailed!”

It’s exhilarating and terrifying and exhausting. By the time they’re approaching the end of the game he can hardly catch his breath. His head is spinning, but his team is winning. They’ve managed to get Rin and Riko within their prison, and with those two threats out of the way, things have been a cinch from there. Slowly but surely they’ve managed to take in more of the Blue Team’s players, and they’re closing in on their flag. It’s not long now.

“I… I think we might really do this!”

Makoto nods enthusiastically. Terumi gives him a thumbs up.

Finally, he can relax. Things are in the bag now. All he has to do is wait. His perfect plan had played out as anticipated. He can hardly believe it! They’re going to win!

He can’t let his guard down yet, though. There’s something rustling through the underbrush. His head shoots around, but it’s too late. Chiharu bursts from the forest, paintball gun in hand and as he makes a dash towards their flag.

Anxiety shreds at Kiyoshi’s gut. And as Chiharu takes aim, he screams the only thing he can possibly think of.

“Makoto! Now!”

There’s not a moment’s hesitation. A clap echoes throughout the forest. But it’s too late. Chiharu’s pulled the trigger, and a massive splotch of blue mars Makoto’s side. Chiharu freezes up, eyes wide and hand wavering. Kiyoshi vaguely processes it’s his time to strike, head ringing. But he can’t will himself to take a step forward.

His heart is pounding in his ears. He tries to reach for his gun, but it’s no use. He’s been caught up in the misfire.

...No. it’s more than that. More than a simple miscalculation. Something worse than anxiety claws at his gut.

Sheer. Terror. Like nothing he’s ever felt before.

Makoto laughs in defeat, dramatically stumbling back. “Aw! Guess you got me!” He says, cheekily sticking his tongue out. “But it seems like I got you, too! Get him, Kiyoshi!”

Kiyoshi doesn’t move.

“Kiyoshi?”

Kiyoshi can’t move.

Makoto looms over him, wearing that same grin as always. Bright and bold and boring. Not the
tedious sort of boring, no - Like a hole drilled straight through his gut.

And suddenly he has to wonder just what makes Makoto capable of something like that.

Makoto takes a step forward, and that’s what breaks the spell. Kiyoshi stumbles backwards, practically tripping over himself to get away. He hits his head on a branch and collapses to the ground.

“Kiyoshi! Are you ok-” Makoto jolts and ducks. “Watch out!”

But it’s too late for that, either. Kiyoshi faintly processes the splattering of wet paint against his chest. And as if suddenly thrust back into his senses, his breathing returns to normal.

He meets Makoto’s eyes and frowns.

“Woah! Sorry!” Makoto says. “I didn’t realize that would freak you out so much.”

“Me… Me neither,” Kiyoshi admits.

“It’s off to jail, you two,” Chiharu says with a friendly grin. He’s slung their flag over his shoulder. Kiyoshi squints and wonders what the hell happened to Terumi and Komoshi, but a quick glance to his right settles that as well. They’d been ambushed.

...Chiharu had outmaneuvered them.

“Good strategy,” Chiharu admits. “But I’m ‘fraid I’ll need to be taking this. Hope you don’t mind too much!” And with that, he’s gone.

“You heard the man,” Makoto says, pointing. “Blue Team’s jail is over there. I can’t believe we messed that up.” He laughs. “I guess you win some, you lose some. But I still can’t believe things got out of our control so quickly. I hope we can rely on the rest of our team to stop their evil scheme.”

“Seems… A little too late for that,” Kiyoshi admits, his breathing returning to normal.

“Aw! Don’t discount them yet. You know what they’re capable of, so put some faith in that.” He holds a hand out. “Need some help getting up? You took a pretty bad tumble there.”

Kiyoshi pauses. Staring at Makoto’s hand, he can’t help but faintly process he’d been afraid of Makoto for a moment.

...What a ridiculous notion.

He takes his hand, and Makoto helps haul him to his feet. With that they begin the long trek towards the prison, Kiyoshi avoiding Makoto’s gaze.

“Listen. I’m sorry I was such a wimp back there,”

“You weren’t a wimp.”

“Yes. I was. I totally froze up.” He scratches the back of his neck. “We’re going to lose because of me. Because I screwed up. I should have been braver.”

“…You were scared.”

“Of what, though?”
“I don’t know. Why don’t you tell me?”

...You?

No! Forget that! Now is not the time for this, Kiyoshi.

“I just... Don’t like being surprised. I was already so tense, and it was just... Too much. It’s like you... Pierced straight through my head. And... And suddenly everyone was relying on me, and I couldn’t move, and that just made me more scared.”

“Then that settles it. That’s what you were afraid of.”

Kiyoshi frowns.

“I guess...”

“No-one’s gonna be mad at you, Kiyoshi. This is a team effort. We’re all fighting our hardest. And so did you. So don’t beat yourself up.” Makoto pauses. “Plus, it’s not like anyone saw.”

“...And you won’t tell them?”

“Of course not.”

Kiyoshi awkwardly smiles as he steps into prison. “Thanks, Makoto.”

“No biggie.”

“And one more thing?”

“Yeah?”

“I know I’m the one who asked you. But please never do that around me ever again.”

Makoto chuckles. “...Can do.”

In the end, Kiyoshi’s right. Blue team takes home the victory. Chiharu sprints the red team’s flag back to his base, and although Fumiko puts up a damned good fight in attempting to stop him, it’s not enough.

...Yeah. It was a close game - But closeness doesn’t matter in the final tally. Kiyoshi lost.

He doesn’t even know why it bothers him so much. This wasn’t particularly important to him. And... It’s not like his teammates seem particularly mad at him in the aftermath. They admit defeat, say they’d tried their hardest, and shake Blue team’s hands on a job well done.

He supposes... He’d just wanted something he could be proud of himself for.

Ultimately, the candy plan ends up falling through, too. Nagisa had caved and bought enough candy for the whole class. Something-something “He doesn’t want them forming any superiority complexes.” But Kiyoshi’s pretty sure the reality of the situation is he’d just have felt bad denying a single one of them the reward. “Not after they’d tried so hard.”

...Had they?

Kiyoshi doesn’t know. At least, he doesn’t know if he had. But Chiharu doesn’t seem to mind
either way. He says he’s happy to share, and he’d have felt pretty bad hogging it all anyways. They’re good.

...Just as long as he gets dibs on the gummy worms, that is.

Nagisa laughs and agrees. “Sounds like a plan.”

It had been too late for a lesson by the time they got everything sorted out, so Nagisa had just popped on a movie and told them to relax for the rest of the day. Enjoy their candy and chill as a reward for a job well done.

Kiyoshi antsily gnaws on a lollipop, only paying half attention to the movie. He feels bad after all the effort Nagisa’d gone to, but he just can’t focus. Today’s been… Weird.

“Congrats on second place,” a voice says as Makoto slides into the seat in front of him. His arms are full of candy.

Kiyoshi squints and silently prays for him to watch his footing. He looks like he’s going to drop his sugary hoard at the slightest misstep, and Kiyoshi cannot handle the thought. “That’s not really something worth congratulating me on, but thanks anyways.”

“Awww! Don’t say that,” Makoto says, placing his stash on the table and tearing open a box of nerds. “Give yourself some credit. You don’t get a chance like this a lot.”

A chance to what? Screw up? In front of everyone?

‘No, not everyone.’ Kiyoshi reminds himself. Makoto had promised not to tell anyone what had happened. That… Their loss had been pretty much all due to Kiyoshi’s screwup. It’s just between the two of them.

...Somehow that feels worse, actually.

Gah! He doesn’t want Makoto to judge him!

He knows objectively he probably won’t. In the reality of the situation, Makoto’s just not that sort of person. Kiyoshi’s told himself that a million times. But it’s hard not to imagine Makoto being more judgemental than he initially let on. Kiyoshi himself can be pretty judgemental at times, after all. So if the class loser is secretly psychoanalyzing his classmate’s flaws, who is he to say that the happy-go-lucky Makoto doesn’t have a hidden side as well?

...Something dark, and dangerous, and worse than anything he could possibly ever imagine.

Maybe that’s it, too. It wasn’t that he’d just screwed up. It’s that he’d screwed up because he’d frozen in fear. Around Makoto. The puppy dog of a student! What was he thinking? And… Why can’t he shake the thought?

Makoto frowns, noting Kiyoshi’s lack of a response. He turns away from his candy hoard (Of course turning back one more time to delicately pat it and make sure the mountain of Twix and Twizzlers doesn’t topple) and meets Kiyoshi’s eyes. “You did good. You did really good. You were so cool out there!”

“Does cool really mean anything when I still lost?” Kiyoshi asks. “I… Can’t help but feel I let everyone down. What if they’re mad at me?”

‘What if you’re mad at me?’
The words he doesn’t dare speak.

“No way, man,” Makoto says, kicking his feet up on his desk. It takes all of his precision to avoid kicking over his candy. And only now does Kiyoshi realize he’s got a Pixie Stick in his mouth like a particularly goofy cigarette. “I know it’s hard, but give yourself credit for once. Remember what I said? That brain of yours is your biggest asset. So use it and look around. Does our team look mad at you?”

Kiyoshi’s eyes drift around the room. Haruhi and her clique chat contently, passing a Kit-Kat amongst each other. Kiku smirks, gives Terumi a wild look, and takes a whole-ass bite out of it. No snapping, no sharing, no nothing. Aina’s already chewing her out, but Ryoka sighs and gets up to grab another bar.

Emiko’s completely tuckered out. She’s fallen asleep at her desk. It’s hard to see in the dim lighting of the classroom, but upon closer inspection her brother’s let her use his jacket as a pillow. He pops Starbursts, occasionally sending a fond glance her way.

Komoshi and Minki are fully focused on the movie, an equally as massive pile of candy on Komoshi’s desk. Minki sits on his lap, using him as a pillow in his own right as she reaches for a thing of Pop Rocks.

Fumiko stands at Nagisa’s desk, her eyes occasionally flickering towards the projector. Nagisa had given her permission to try out a bit of everything, seeing as how she’d never really gotten the chance to eat candy before. She curiously takes a bite of Laffy Taffy, gives it an inquisitive look, then puts it aside and moves onto something else.

...Her ‘normal people manners’ are still a work in progress.

“No. I guess not,” Kiyoshi finally admits. “I guess they don’t look mad at me at all.”

“Of course not!” Makoto replies. “I’m not sure if you get this by now or not, dummy, but they had the time of their life out there. They don’t give a shit whether they won or not. None of that stuff really matters. It’s like Nagisa said: as long as they tried their best and pushed themselves to their limits they were bound to discover something new about themselves.”

That helps Kiyoshi crack a smile.

“Hey, Makoto? Can I ask you a question?”

“‘Course,” Makoto says, looking up from pouring Skittles in his mouth. He holds up a finger. “Jusht let me finish chewing firshht. Mouth’s full.”

“Okay,” Kiyoshi says, trying to ignore his blatant disgust.

Finally, Makoto finishes up. “Okay. What is it?” he asks.

“That… Guy you mentioned earlier. Isogai. You… Never actually finished the story. Did he win? Against Asano-san?” Kiyoshi pauses. “Or did he screw it up, too?”

Makoto pauses. Frowns deeply, then shrugs. “Does it really matter?” he asks. “But for the record, no. He whooped Asano’s butt. He didn’t ‘screw it up.’ At least… Not that time. Isogai had plenty of failures throughout the course of his school year. And I’m sure he’s had plenty more throughout the course of his life. But… That’s okay. And it’s okay that you couldn’t win this one. You’re not Isogai, now, are you? So you don’t need to do what he did. I just told you the story ‘cause I thought it would cheer you up. Sorry if it didn’t work.”
“No, no - It worked,” Kiyoshi says. “Maybe a little too well. Everything you said about me back there… It got me so hyped up. So when I lost it felt like I came crashing down.” He pauses. “Did… Did you mean all of that? About me being observant and thoughtful?”

“Of course!” Makoto says. “Swear on my life. So don’t beat yourself up too much, okay?” He passes a Tootsie-pop back over his shoulder and holds it out towards Kiyoshi. “Hitting the ground really hurts, but I know you can get back up again. You’re one of the best. So please don’t be afraid to try again in the future just because you couldn’t do it this time. I’d hate to see that. This is just the beginning of the things you can do.”

Kiyoshi hesitates, before taking the Tootsie-pop. Suddenly he’s thankful for the dim lighting, because he thinks if Makoto saw him tear up over that he’d just about have an aneurysm.

“When you hesitate, there’s one thing you must remember in this life, Kiyoshi Karasuma,” Makoto says, putting on his best ‘old and wisened’ voice. “The master has failed more times than the novice had even tried.”

“Are you doing the motivational poster thing again?”

“Yeah. What do you think?”

“I think you need to get a new hobby before I really hit you,” Kiyoshi says with a scoff. “…Thanks, though, Makoto. It… Means a lot.”

“No need to thank me,” Makoto replies. His eyes drift towards his desk, and he lets out a low ‘hmmm.’ “Or maybe there is! If your old pal’s words mean so much to you, can you do me a favor and grab me some Skittles? Looks like I’m fresh out.”

Kiyoshi sighs, but relents. Sure, Makoto might be a terrifying dumbass who can down three packs of skittles in five minutes, but he’s his terrifying dumbass. “Can do.”

He makes his way over to Nagisa’s desk, passing Fumiko on the way. Nagisa’s eyes drift towards him as he reaches for a bag of Skittles and he hesitates.

“Sorry,” he says. “Just grabbing some Skittles for Makoto. Hope you don’t mind.”

Nagisa gives him an amused smile. “I bought these for you all. I don’t mind one bit.”

“Oh. Right.” Kiyoshi awkwardly laughs and grabs the bag of Skittles. He reaches for one more just for good measure.

Nagisa’s giving him a peculiar look. He bites his lip, but then finally speaks, his voice low. “You look exhausted,” he admits. “You feeling okay?”

“Oh--? Yeah,” Kiyoshi replies, awkwardly scratching at his shoulder. “I just am exhausted. But that’s - Uh - Pretty much perpetual with me, so don’t worry.” He gives Nagisa a tired smile. “It’s just been a longggg day.”

“Sure has,” Nagisa agrees. “You did good out there, though. Really good.”

“So I’ve heard,” Kiyoshi says.

“I’m really proud of you. I know that wasn’t exactly within your comfort zone, so I’m very thankful you were willing to push through it. Thank you for trying your best for me, Kiyoshi.”
“You really think I did my best?”

“Well, I’m not exactly sure that’s something I can answer. That’s for you to know. But…” Nagisa brings his fingers to his chin. “I do know what I saw. I think you fought very hard. And I think you had a lot more fun out there than you expected you would.”

Kiyoshi still remembers what it felt like to be winning. The manic rush and the glee of being on top of the plan. Sure… It had all fallen apart. Most of his plans do. But it had felt pretty good at the time.

...If he looks deep enough, maybe it still does.

“Yeah. I think so too,” Kiyoshi agrees with a nod.

Nagisa nods back and falls silent. Kiyoshi hesitates, then grabs a third bag of Skittles for extra good measure.

“Wait,” Nagisa says. “I’ll drop it after this, but are you sure there’s not something on your mind? You look bothered.”

Kiyoshi doesn’t feel bothered. At least - He doesn’t think so. Okay. Well, no. That’s a fat lie. He feels plenty bothered. But he also doesn’t think he should feel bothered, which is pretty much the default for him as well.

“I dunno,” he admits with a shrug.

“Well… If you ever want to talk about it, I’m here,” Nagisa says with a welcoming smile.

“Thanks, Shiota-sensei,” Kiyoshi says as he turns back towards the desks. But he hesitates mid-step, and looks back Nagisa’s way.

He still remembers what else he’d felt earlier. And his mouth opens, then closes... With the question he doesn’t dare ask on his tongue.

‘Shiota-sensei... Have you ever been afraid of someone you know you should trust?’

He shakes his head and shakes the sense of dread with it. Blinks slowly and decides to ask about something else for his own sake.

“Listen. I - Uh… Heard a rumor earlier. Is it really true Asano-san and Isogai-san faced off against each other back in the day?”

Nagisa looks shocked. Like it takes him a moment to process what Kiyoshi’s even asking about, but recognition soon settles on his face. “Oh, yeah. They did, actually,” he says. “School sports festival. Now that was a wild day. Got to hear Karma speak broken English and met Gakushuu’s jacked American friends. Good times.”

“His what now?”

“The man got around. Still does. He has connections with all sorts of people. He’s just charismatic like that. Name a field and Gakushuu’s probably got at least half a dozen friends in it.”

“That doesn’t sound - That’s - What?” Kiyoshi asks, squinting. But he quickly shakes his head. “Okay. Nevermind. That’s besides the point. I was just… Surprised to hear about something like that. Those two look like they get along so well.”
“They do,” Nagisa says with a shrug. “Like I said: Gakushuu’s a connections man. He’s always working on his relationships. Even if they weren’t so polished at first.” He pauses. “I guess that’s really none of my business, though. It’s pretty personal. Ask him sometime if you’re curious.” He lowers his voice and grins “Don’t tell anyone: But he loves to talk about himself.”

“You don’t need to tell me that! I know he does!”

Kiyoshi’s never been as close to “Uncle Gakushuu” as much as the other members of Nagisa’s family, but he’s been around enough to know there’s nothing more the man enjoys than a well-told story about himself. His own name is practically his Kryptonite.

Nagisa chuckles. “Fair enough,” he says. “I’m surprised you heard about the sports festival, to be honest. I’d pretty much forgotten myself. Did your parents tell you a story by any chance?”

“Oh… No, actually,” Kiyoshi admits. He’s heard plenty of weird stuff about the E-Class. From his mother’s uncouth nickname to the time she got them all captured by a literal serial killer. But the extremely normal in comparison sports festival had passed him by.

Nagisa raises an eyebrow.

“Let’s just say I… Heard about it through a friend of a friend.”

Recognition settles in Nagisa’s eyes once more, and he gives Kiyoshi an all-too-knowing smile. “Ah…” he says, before motioning for Kiyoshi to be on his way. “You might want to get going. I think our friend is hungry.”

Only now does Kiyoshi notice Makoto staring him down like a pack of rabid wolves. He jolts and scrambles to grab a fourth pack of Skittles, then hurries on his way. “Thank you, Shiota-sensei!” He shouts over his shoulder. “It was nice talking to you!”

“You too, Kiyoshi. Any time.”

Kiyoshi returns to his desk, handing over the small fortune of Skittles to Makoto. Fumiko’s returned to her seat by now as well, and gives him a curious look as she fiddles with a piece of chocolate.

“Thanks!” Makoto says as Kiyoshi slides into his seat. No hesitation, he tears into a packet of Skittles with his teeth, nearly spilling them all over his desk.

Kiyoshi just about has a heart attack. He already feels bad enough having robbed the entire class of Skittles! He thinks he’d just about die of shame if Makoto went and wasted them all!

He decides to deliberately ignore Makoto’s infuriating demeanor, if only for the sake of his own heart-rate, and turns Fumiko’s way. “You did well out there,” he says. “I didn’t know you could run that fast!”

“Me neither, for the record,” Fumiko admits. “But regardless, you did admirably as well. You made a much better leader than I’d first anticipated.”

Kiyoshi shies back, but gives a nervous smile. It’s not exactly flattering, but it’s still more than he’d expected from Fumiko, so he’ll take it.

“See?” Makoto huffs. “Fumiko agrees with me! You did awesome! So no more of that ‘second place’ bullcrap. Be nicer to yourself. Go home and brag to your parents or whatever!”
Kiyoshi can’t help but laugh at that one. “Can’t speak for my dad, but I’m PRETTY sure my mom would call me a loser and tell me to do better next time.”

Makoto gasps indignantly. “She would NOT!” he hisses.

“Yes she would!” Kiyoshi argues. “Just! Jokingly!”

What if his mom if not hilarious but harmful?

That does remind him, though.

“By the way,” he says. “My mom and dad should be home next Tuesday. So if you two want to come over after school…” He nervously knits at his hands. They’ve been waiting a long time for this, so he hopes it won’t end up being a disappointment. “I’d. Uh. Be down.”

“Finally!” Makoto says, pumping his fist in the air. “Are you kidding me!? Of course I want to! I’ve been waiting months for this!”

“I’ll have to pour over my schedule,” Fumiko admits. “But as long as I get Shiota-sensei’s permission to miss tutoring for a day…” Fumiko smiles with all the assuredness of a girl who’s quickly becoming a natural-born liar. “I’d quite like that as well.”

“It’s a plan, then,” Kiyoshi says. “I… Hope you’ll have a good time.”

“Don’t overthink it. You know we will.” Makoto holds out a reassuring hand and smiles. “I already can’t wait.”

Kiyoshi meets his eyes. And even in the dark, they sparkle with anticipation. Pure unadulterated joy. Kiyoshi’s not sure what he’d seen in those eyes earlier… Something dark and malicious, or something that was simply a trick of his anxiety-riddled brain, but he knows one thing for certain.

...No. Makoto’s not mad at him.

And so feeling somewhat like a seventeenth-century aristocrat inviting a vampire into his home, Kiyoshi smiles, tilts his head, and says.

“I can’t wait to see you there.”

Before they know it they’re back to shenanigans as usual. Makoto indoctrinates them into the idea of arranging Skittles into combinations and then naming the “flavors.” The highlight of the entire bizarre experience ends up being when Makoto bunches lines of yellow and green Skittles together before subsequently naming the flavor “Fuck you” and implying it’s some sort of joke about looking down on people.

...Oh. A Korosensei joke. Of course it’s a Korosensei joke.

Fumiko decides hoarding all the purple ones is a much better idea, to which Makoto loudly refutes that’s not a flavor combination at all. That’s monotony! That’s madness! But snickering, he makes no attempt to stop her from snatching the purple ones straight off his desk.

By the end of the day, Kiyoshi’s laughing too. And it’s almost enough to make him forget entirely about what he’d felt during the tournament earlier.

...Almost.

But leading an anxiety-riddled life like Kiyoshi’s, ‘almost-victories’ and ‘almost-forgetting’ will
After such a wait... It's here!

Sorry about the delay everyone. Like I said last chapter: With medical issues things have been CRAZY. Good news now is that my medical scare turned out to be nothing serious, and my beta's... [Squints at Discord] ass hurty surgery is clearing up nicely. At least the next two chapters should be out on a weekly basis!

Glad to finally get back into some plot-y stuff with this chapter. Don't get me wrong, the past two were adorable, but VERY slice of life. Admittedly this whole fic is very slice of life, but it seems we're finally on the track to seeing some more genuine character development!

First and foremost namely Makoto's acquisition of the stun clap, and the memories that entails! I'm not the only one who's overthought how anxious Korosensei must have been during the Island Arc, right? He managed to keep up that cheery facade, but his one unconditional promise from the very beginning had been to protect those students. To the point where he'd been ready to "stitch them back together" just like he did with Kayano. But in his Ultimate Defense form like that, he LITERALLY WASN'T capable of gathering their blood and organs. That had to be pretty scary, I bet. He easily could have lost Nagisa or another student there, and there would have been nothing he could do about it. It had to have brought thoughts of another loss of his to mind.

Luckily for Makoto, however, it seems he still doesn't remember someone who's name starts with an A and ends with a guri Yukimura. For now, at least. Who knows what will arise from his memories in time?

I had TONS of fun with codenames. While most of them are dumb OC gags, (I.E Chiharu being based on my Curse of Strahd character who wants to solve things peacefully (lol) or Minako having a little bit of a penchant for My Chemical Romance) I feel the main three's are pretty self explanatory. Fumiko IS the token woman (Fun fact: Token Woman was actually her early development name before I named her), Kiyoshi is half white and also bland, and Makoto's is lifted directly from the dumb name Korosensei wanted to give himself when they used code names way back when.

But I suppose I should be discussing the real hero of this chapter: Kiyoshi!! It's been a while since we've seen a lot from him, so I decided to finally throw him a bone and let him have a near-victory. We're coming up on a mini Kiyoshi arc, so I hope you enjoy this start to it!

I had fun delving into how his anxieties and overthinking can be used to his own good if he turns them around in his mind. And of course the implication that said anxieties don't always make him an innocent baby, and can make him sort of judgmental or dickish at times. He puts words in peoples' mouths expecting them to hate him, and while that's a perfectly valid worry it makes him display VERY little faith in the people around him. Good news is he's working on it, because he DOESN'T want to
come across as dickish. At all.

With him I'm also doing an exploration of just how weird and even scary it must be to see the things Makoto remembers and does in person. Kiyoshi's just a normal kid, and a scaredy cat, at that. So I thought it'd be fun to have him react to his 13 year old classmate using a goddamn REALASS ASSASSINATION TECHNIQUE like "WHAT THE FUCK. WHAT THE FUCK." Not to parallel the Karma arc, but... [Parallels the Karma arc] (Which, needless to say, those two WILL talk about this eventually. How could I possibly pass that up?)

Hands down the talk abt Asano and Isogai is my favorite gag this chapter. I was losing my mind writing it. I also really liked the Skittles thing. It's another one of those dumb gags that's totally recreated from my own childhood memories.

Some songs that helped me write this chapter were Sports Go Sports by Garfunkel and Oates, Bet On it and Getch'a Head In The Game from High School Musical, Work This Body by Walk The Moon, Underdog by Imagine Dragons, and Loser by Garfunkel and Oates.

But I know what you've all really been waiting for! The results of the popularity contest! And here they are!

https://ais-fic.tumblr.com/post/187332514393/popularity-poll-results

I'll be hosting another one after second trimester, so if you didn't manage to get your vote in now, you can always vote then!

All in all I hope you enjoyed the chapter, and make sure to let me know what you think! The next one will be up in a week, so I hope to see you then! o7
There’s this feeling in Kiyoshi’s gut that only grows stronger as the week inches towards Tuesday.

Er - Well - Feelings. There’s a lot of things Kiyoshi’s feeling. But that simply sounds less eloquent than a single feeling so he supposes it. Okay. No. That’s beside the point.

Kiyoshi feels many things as the promised date draws closer.

Of course, initially, there’s a sense of apprehension. That familiar dread he’s grown all too used to. That voice in the back of his head that tells Kiyoshi he’s making a big mistake. That his friends will hate his house, judge his interests, and berate his dog. That comes as no surprise to Kiyoshi.

What does come as a surprise to Kiyoshi is the anticipation.

At first, it’s hard to notice. Shadowed by the dread. But as Tuesday draws nearer and nearer it seems to grow ever stronger. Yes. He’s certain:

He’s excited, too.

Over the months it’s become slightly easier to push away the anxiety. Of course, it remains, but he’s getting better at telling himself that none of that is true. Reasoning it out.

‘They wouldn’t be so excited to come over in the first place if they didn’t like you, Kiyoshi.’

‘Everything will go just fine.’

‘You’ll have a good time! They’ll get to meet your parents, and you can show them your room.’

And believe it or not, the reassurances work.

It’s a tactic Kiyoshi’s utilized all of his life. So it’s not like this is anything new to him. He was diagnosed with a General Anxiety Disorder when he was seven, for Pete’s sake. So it’s not like he’s not used to telling himself his fears are irrational bullshit... But he can’t help but feel it’s legitimately easier to believe himself this time.

Fumiko meets him outside his home Monday morning, and Makoto greets him the moment he steps into class. Over the days, the weird anxiety about what had happened with Makoto Friday afternoon even starts to fade. Kiyoshi can’t shake it entirely, but for the most part...? Things return to as they should be. They goof around during P.E, gossip during lunch, and at the end of the day, Makoto says he’s excited for tomorrow.

...It’s them. It has to be them. Their enthusiasm. That has to be what’s making it easier. ‘You’ve found yourself people you can just... Click with,’ he reassures himself, and finally, he can let himself feel excited, too.

Tuesday morning he has the jitters. And they only grow more intense as the day flies by. He doesn’t think he’s ever felt this excited and terrified all at once before in his entire life. Which is, like, totally an exaggeration because everything’s sort of end-all for him, but it’s a nice notion.

At the end of the day, they pack up their stuff. Fumiko and Makoto have already given Nagisa a
heads up on the plan, and he’s happy to oblige.

“As long as ditching your schoolwork to hang out at Kiyoshi’s place doesn’t become a regular thing, you two are good. Have a fun time!”

And with that, they’re off. They begin the momentous journey towards Kiyoshi’s house, chatting the entire way.

“Your house looks relatively big from the outside. Is it equally as impressive on the inside?”

“I don’t know what qualifies as impressive to you, to be quite frank.”

Fumiko snorts. “Fair enough.”

“I am so excited to meet your parents! We gotta catch up! Then I gotta tell them what a cool son they have!”

“I am literally begging you not to do either of those things,” Kiyoshi says, to which Makoto overdramatically huffs. That never once deters the skip in his step, however, and he hops from foot to foot with an unbridled enthusiasm.

“Which - Uh, reminds me,” Kiyoshi says. “As a note, my dad might not be home til’ like... Six. Depends on how busy he is with work. He will be there, though. I just, like, figured you could visit before he comes home since I don’t want you to have to wait until six. That would be weird. What would we even do? And he could be back before six anyways, so that’d be really weird. Anyways, yeah. He’ll be home. You just might not see him right away.”

“Works for me!” Makoto says, half-patting, half-slapping his back. “Your dad can wait, anyways. The real thing I’m excited about is hanging out with you!”

Which is… a relief to hear. Kiyoshi’s had a niggling fear that the only reason Makoto is invested in this is because of his parents. After all, he is the son of Tadaomi and Irina Karasuma, after all. He’s been having to remind himself that’s ridiculous. Makoto approached him before he even knew about his parents. The fact that he’s the son of the coworkers of the guy Makoto believes he’s the reincarnation of (a mouthful of a phrase) is just a mere coincidence.

...Right?

“Thanks, Makoto,” Kiyoshi says with a smile. “I’m really not that exciting, but I appreciate it anyway.”

Before they know it they’ve arrived. Kiyoshi digs around in his pocket for his housekey and unlocks the door.

“As a note,” he says as he steps in and motions for them to follow. “Be careful. Taro gets excited easily and if you’re not careful he might tackle y-”

As if on cue, a stampede of footsteps echoes down the house. Claws scratching at the hardwood floor and making ditzy turns across the carpet, a fluffy white menace comes shooting into the room. Kiyoshi opens his mouth to tell him to heel, when Makoto practically lunges at the dog.

They meet in the middle. Taro, mid-attempt to meet Kiyoshi, shoots into Makoto, who engulfs him in a massive hug.

“W-What are you doi-”
“You never told me your dog was so cute, Kiyoshi!” Makoto wails, burying his face in Taro’s fur. “And so soft! What a good boy! Isn’t he?!” he asks, his voice devolving into baby talk. “Yes you are! Yes you are!”

Taro, being the chillest dog on the planet, just sort of accepts that this is his life now and contentedly stares at Kiyoshi from across the room, his tongue lolling out of his mouth.

“Oh. Right,” Kiyoshi replies, having to hold back a nervous laugh. “Taro’s the best. Sorry if I forgot to mention the fact that he drips with charisma.” He must have been too busy telling stories about his dog extorting him for toast to mention he actually has a cute face.

“And so well behaved!” Makoto comments, vigorously petting Taro’s back. “Can I take him home? Pretty please!? I think he loves me!”

“I’m sorry, but gonna have to say no to that one. Taro loves everyone, but he’s my boy.” He crouches down by Taro, giving him a scratch behind the ears. He motions for Fumiko to follow, but Makoto sneezes before she gets the chance.

Kiyoshi jolts. “W-What was that!?”

“He just sneezed, imbeci-” Regardless of whether or not Kiyoshi actually qualifies as an imbecile, Fumiko doesn’t get the chance to finish.

Makoto sneezes again. And loud. *Fumiko* treats it like it’s no big deal, but Kiyoshi swears he sounds like a goddamn horse.

“Are… Are you okay?” Kiyoshi asks.

“I… Think I’m allergic to dogs!” Makoto declares. Despite his newfound discovery, however, he makes no move to pull himself away from Taro, and in fact only buries his face in his fur further.

“I… Think you are going to give yourself anaphylactic shock!” Fumiko comments.

“Aw! No way!” Makoto huffs. “I’m not sure if you’ve gotten this yet, but I’m *invincible.*”

Considering Kiyoshi saw him run into a closed doorway just this morning, he sincerely doubts that, but he decides to let Makoto believe. “Whatever you say, Makoto,” he says. “Just. Uh. Let me know if you need anything? We have Benadryl upstairs.”

Finally, Fumiko makes her way over to Taro. She stares him down awkwardly, never once reaching to pet him.

“Hello… Taro-san.”

She looks decidedly unimpressed. Kiyoshi gets it. She’s told him she’s not a huge fan of dogs before, so it’s not like this is something unexpected. That said, Taro, being Taro, decides her distaste towards him being alive makes her his new favorite being on the planet. He stands, knocking Makoto off of him, and begins to tail Fumiko, to which she steps back with an upset look.

“He’s… Uh… He’s approaching me,” she murmurs. “Make him stop.”

A familiar voice intervenes before Kiyoshi can even speak up.

“Get over here,” it snaps, to which Taro obeys. His attention sufficiently torn from Fumiko, he trots over to the kitchen doorway, in which Kiyoshi’s mom stands.
“Sorry about that,” she says, Taro standing by her heels. “He’s a disobedient little shit.”

Kiyoshi can’t help but feel a bit embarrassed. Is she seriously shit-talking the dog before even introducing herself? He half expects Makoto to jump to Taro’s defense, but his attention has already been torn as well. He stares at Kiyoshi’s mom, his mouth agape, and a starstruck look in his eyes that seems to imply it’s ludicrous for her to introduce herself in the first place.

Nonetheless, Fumiko looks equally as annoyed as Kiyoshi feels, so he decides to speak up before his mom makes a further fool of herself.

“All right, all right. I was getting to it. I just needed to reprimand the basta—”

“Irina Jelavic!”

It seems Makoto’s finally found his words. This close to vibrating like a vacuum or perhaps a particularly unruly chihuahua, he quickly leaps to his feet.

Kiyoshi’s mom seems relatively amused by his enthusiasm, however, so Kiyoshi tries not to worry too much. Of course she’d eat up the attention. She loves feeling like the B-list celebrity she is.

“Karasuma, actually,” she corrects. “You’ve heard of me?”

“Good going calling a woman by her maiden name,” Fumiko comments, having taken a seat on the couch. Taro motions to follow her, but Irina grabs him by his collar.

“Oh! Oh! Of course! Irina… Karasuma,” Makoto says. And as if finally putting two pieces of a puzzle together, his jaw drops. “Irina Karasuma! That’s *adorable!*” he squeals. “It’s so fitting for you!"

There’s an… Immeasurable excitement in his eyes. And even as Kiyoshi’s mom takes to the attention, he can’t help but feel disoriented. She holds her hand out to greet his friends, but the cogs in his brain are turning at a hundred miles a minute.

His mom is plenty cool. He’ll be the first to admit that. (Despite some of the shit he rightfully gives her.) But the familiarity Makoto looks at her with is something else entirely. Is it… Is it *really* possible for someone to fake that much enthusiasm?

This is starting to become more of a mystery with each day. And Kiyoshi can’t help but wonder if Fumiko is as baffled by this as he is. The way Makoto acts around certain people… And the things he knows… Is it simply a facade, or something more? Either way, it’s starting to give Kiyoshi the heebie-jeebies.

He forces himself to shrug that feeling off. Now is not the time to be thinking about any of this. It’s a topic much more aptly suited for lying awake at night if you ask him. For now, he needs to, like, intervene and herd his friends to his room before his mom, like, offers to show them his baby pictures.

“If you guys want I can show you my room next. Unless you wanna chat with my lame mom more?” The sarcasm bubbles in his tone.
His mom softly gasps. “Your lame… Your lame **mother!?**” she asks, a faux offense in her voice. “I see how it is. Are you that desperate to get them away from me that quickly?.”

“Yep,” Kiyoshi says without a moment’s hesitation. “You’re embarrassing me.”

His mom gasps louder. “...Embarrassing you?” she jokes. “And after everything I do for you.”

“Kiyoshi Karasuma!” Makoto declares, gently thwacking him over the head. “That is no way to talk to your mom!”

Why does it feel like Makoto is taking his respect for his mother more seriously than his **mom is!?**

“Okay, okay,” Kiyoshi admits, rubbing at the back of his head. “I’m sorry. But I meant it. Can I show them my room?”

Finally, his mom’s overdramatic pout fades. She smiles and nods. “Yeah, I’ll scram,” she says. “You wouldn’t want your lame mom embarrassing you in front of your friends too much.” She motions to Taro. “You want the menace, or should I keep him?”

Makoto’s looking at the dog with a quivering lip. He reaches out to grab at him, but Kiyoshi beats him to an answer. “I… Think it’s better if you keep him,” he says. He’d caught the way Fumiko was sending him an antsy gaze. She’s clearly not comfortable around the dog... And what kind of friend would he be if he didn’t step in?

“Okay. Seems I’ve been regulated to babysitting duty again,” his mom replies, leaning down to meet Taro’s eyes. “It’s just you and me, dog. So you better behave.”

“I’m sure he will, Mom,” Kiyoshi reassures, carefully maneuvering past her. He motions for his friends to follow. “Let’s get going.”

Irina waves at them as they pass by. “It was nice getting to meet you, even if only for a fuckin’ second. You antisocial kids nowadays…”

Kiyoshi rolls his eyes. He doesn’t bother to debate with her that kids have always been ‘fuckin antisocial.’ She knows that. Kids today and kids fifteen years ago share nothing if not one thing: **An instinctual desire to get away from Irina Karasuma as soon as humanly possible.**

“It was nice to... ‘Meet you' too!” Makoto says, a giddy tone in his voice that seems to imply a joke that no-one else is in on.

...**Fuckin weirdo.**

Either way, Kiyoshi takes them up to his room. He’d made sure to thoroughly clean it and hide any particularly embarrassing things Monday afternoon, so he hopes it will be satisfactory. He turns the doorknob and invites them in.

“It’s… Not anything super special,” he admits. “But I hope you like i-”

Makoto’s already elbowing his way past him. “Enough of the dramatic introduction!” he says. “Let me see! Let me see!”

Quickly Kiyoshi scrambles out of the way. “Okay!” he relents. “Just don’t dig around too much or mess anything up! I finally have this place clean for once!”

Makoto murmurs a quick agreement and rushes into the room. And Fumiko follows, in much less
of a rush. Makoto’s head whips around as he takes the room in, but one thing catches his attention more than any other: The fish tank in the corner of the room.

He rushes over to it, pressing his hands to the glass. “You didn’t tell us you had fish, Kiyoshi!” he says, carefully eyeing them up. “They’re so cute!”

Cute is the last thing he’d use to describe his goldfish, but he supposes he’s not going to rain on Makoto’s parade. “Yeah,” he says. “I must have forgot. I got them a few years back at a carnival.” He walks over to Makoto’s side, motioning for him to take a step back. It takes a moment, but Makoto obliges. And quickly, Kiyoshi begins pointing at the fish. “That’s Eenie… That’s Meeny, and that’s Mo.”

Fumiko cocks an eyebrow as she makes her way over to the fish tank. “And where exactly is Miny?” She asks.

Kiyoshi gives an awkward laugh. Raining on parade time. “Eenie ate Miny three months into having them,”

“Oh no!” Makoto gasps. “How could he!? That was supposed to be his friend!”

“I’ve quickly discovered fish are relentless opportunists. They had babies a few months back, you know.”

“Where are the babies!?” Makoto whimpers.

“They ate them too.”

“Oh no!” Makoto covers his mouth with his hands, staring at the fish tank in abject horror. “These are some evil-ass fish!”

Fumiko sighs and gives the fish one last curious look, before stepping away from the fish tank. “This is why I hate animals,” she says. “They have no decency.”

“Aw! C’mon! Now don’t say that!” Makoto refutes. “It’s not like they know any better!” He crouches by the fish tank, gently tapping his finger on the glass. “You didn’t know you were eating your brother, now did you? No, you didn’t!”

“Please don’t tap the fish tank,” Kiyoshi reminds him. And as such, after a careful few moments of scolding the fish, Makoto steps back and moves onto the next thing. It’s only now he takes an in-depth look around Kiyoshi’s room. But from the way his mouth makes a perfect ‘O,’ it’s not hard to conclude he’s somewhat impressed.

Kiyoshi doesn’t really get it. His room is a little lame, too, if anything. With bright yellow walls, and all sorts of nerdy posters hung above his headboard, it’s… Dorky, at best. The bed Taro never uses sits by the doorway, and a variety of books, toys, and other knickknacks Kiyoshi forgets why he bought in the first place are scattered across the top of his drawer. A hand-drawn height marker is scrawled by the doorway, on one side of it a well-worn bookcase and on the other, a desk covered in various rocks, a shitty telescope, and a DIY chemistry kit.

It’s Fumiko who takes the lead this time. She struts over to his bookcase and curiously pulls out a novel.

“I hope you don’t mind me peeking,” she says. “I’m curious to see if you have any literary classics.”
Her expression quickly shifts into one of disdain as she realizes the book she’s pulled out is indeed not a literary classic, but rather the first volume of Warrior cats. Thoroughly unimpressed, she tucks it back into the bookcase and continues to observe.

“Well, I’m not sure about too many literary classics. We’ve got some Dazai and some Charles Dickens, alongside some Norman Mailer. If you look closely you might find a Tachihara anthology or two, but I think that’s about it. My taste is. Uh. Mostly manga or anything to do with animals.”

“I… See…” Fumiko comments, thumbing through his impressive collection of Warrior Cats.
“Corny romance novels, too, from the look of it,” she snarks, looking up from a book aptly titled ‘You One And Only Top Star★.’

Kiyoshi’s face flushes pink. “W-What can I say!? I’m my mother’s son!” he admits, sheepishly staring at his feet. “And I’ll have you know You One and Only is a wonderful read! Much more sweet than you’d expect!”

Fumiko gives him an amused look before sliding the book back into the bookshelf. “Whatever you say, Kiyoshi.”

By now Makoto’s joined them. He curiously pursues the books as well. It seems Fullmetal Alchemist has quickly got his attention.

“This looks cool!”

“That’s because it is,” Kiyoshi brags. “It’s about these two brothers who end up committing the ultimate atrocity trying to bring their mother back from the dead and lose their bodies in the process. They then set out to make things right, making various fri-”

“Who’s this guy?” Makoto interrupts, having pulled out one of Kiyoshi’s special edition volumes. He points to a well-dressed man snapping on the cover. “Can he shoot fire out of his hands!? That’s so cool!”

“Oh. That’s Roy Mustang. He’s a loser and he sucks.”

Makoto gives him a blank look. “Oh.”

And Kiyoshi cracks a smile. “I’m just kidding, Roy’s the best. He actually sorta reminds me of my dad. If he were like… Fun and debauche-y instead of having a stick up his ass all the ti-” Kiyoshi pauses, his jaw dropping. Wait! Is Roy Mustang just a fusion of his parents!? What the shit!? No wonder he’s one of his favorites! Only behind the softhearted Alphonse and the terrifying Pride, though, of course. Either way, he decides not to share his new assessment about his parents with his friends because it would mean jack shit to someone who’s never read Fullmetal Alchemist, much like this joke.

“He’s a good guy. He’s made some mistakes, but he’s a good guy,” he settles on instead. “He is a goofy loser though. His powers don’t work in the rain.”

“Mine neither, buddy,” Makoto says reassuringly to the man on the cover, before sliding it back in with the other books. Deciding he’s seen his fair share of handsome anime men, (In Kiyoshi’s humble opinion, not nearly enough handsome anime men) he steps away from the bookcase and turns his attention to the next thing.

Fumiko, seemingly unsatisfied with the fact that Kiyoshi doesn’t have ten volumes of Sylvia Plath or whatever the fuck, does the same.
“Is that Taro’s bed?” Makoto asks, crouching down by the door. Before Kiyoshi can answer, he presses it to his face and takes a sniff. “It definitely smells like him!”

“Yeah. It’s his bed. But if you’re really allergic you might want to stop sniffing it before—”

“A-CHOO!”

Andddd there it is.

“Yeah. Taro sheds like a bitch.” If that hadn’t already been made clear from the copious amounts of dog hair that coat every inch of his room.

“A cute bitch, though!”

Fumiko, on the other hand, has turned her attention to his dairy, tossed haphazardly across his desk. She raises an eyebrow as she looks its way.

“You keep your diary padlocked?” She asks.

“It’s a recent development, but yes.”

“You might be the only person I know crazy enough to do that,” she says. “Though, on second thought you might also be the only person I know crazy enough to keep a diary at all.”

“Gee, thanks…” Kiyoshi replies, not sure whether to feel flattered or insulted. Maybe it’s just the paranoid side of him thinking, but somehow Fumiko seems even grumpier today than usual.

“Hey! Kiyoshi! You didn’t tell me you had a Nintendo Verse!”

While Kiyoshi hadn’t been looking, Makoto had made his way across the room. He kneels in front of his TV, eye level with the bright white console. There’s an ecstatic look on his face.

“Oh. Yeah. I got it last Christmas. Guess I forgot to mention it. I don’t use it nearly as much as I should…” Kiyoshi admits.

“Well now we’ve gotta give it a try! Pretty please!?”

“I wouldn’t be opposed, but I’m not sure—”

“I’m not too keen on the idea. I’ve heard video games are brain rot.” Fumiko pipes up.

“Are not!” Makoto huff. “How about you try them? For me…?” he begs.

Fumiko hesitates. “Well… I suppose it depends on what games you have,” she says to Kiyoshi. “If there’s anything I think I’d like… I’ll consider it.”

“Let me go and check,” Kiyoshi says. He makes his way over to his desk and opens the drawer, before proceeding to retrieve his Nintendo Verse games. He shuffles through them in his hands.


“Pokemon Let’s Go Zorua!?” Makoto asks. “Oh! We’ve gotta play! Pretty please!?” He turns to Fumiko, fingers clasped. “I’ve never gotten to play Pokemon before! But I really want to!”
“Well… I do like Pokemon…” Fumiko admits. “And Zorua is very cute…” She meets Makoto’s eyes, and finally melts with acceptance. “...Yes. I think I’d like to play some Pokemon as well.”

This isn’t exactly how he’d expected the afternoon to go, but Kiyoshi doesn’t have any complaints. It’s been way too long since he’s picked up a Pokemon game. He instructs his friends to make themselves comfortable, and pops the cartridge into the console. He grabs the controllers, tosses them on the bed, and makes himself comfortable in a cocoon of pillows.

When he hears the word ‘Pokemon’ he doesn’t exactly tend to think of co-op, but thankfully the Verse has a newfound focus on multiplayer and cooperative games, thus the ‘universe’ based title. Let’s Go Zorua is the first Pokemon game to feature up to four players with different teams, and it is - Dare he say - A fucking delight.

...He just… Hadn’t really had anyone to play it with before.

Quickly enough they get into the groove of the game. Fumiko’s a quick learner, and Makoto already has a basic enough understanding of the mechanics from watching the anime. (Well. As much as you can get a basic understanding of the mechanics from watching the Pokemon anime.) They obtain their starters (After a quick debate on who’s going to get to keep the Zorua and who’ll have to start with something from one of the early routes. Game Freak had been generous with letting there be up to four players at all. But they’re not handing out four Zoruas. What do they look like!? A fucking charity company?) and set off on their journey.

They decide to race to see who can beat the first gym most quickly. Admittedly it’s not much of a competition because the console still doesn’t have a split-screen mode and they’re pretty much tethered together, but if their school has taught them anything by now it’s that the spirit of competition is the best way to spice up a friendship. Makoto ends up winning by a longshot, begging the others to let him give it a try way before he’s finished grinding, and simply hoping it’ll turn out for the best.

It does turn out for the best. With a few lucky critical hits and some outright ludicrous misses, he ends up beating the gym with his team of ragtag level 9s. He beams and says it’s all because he believed in his Pokemon. 'They knew! He swears!' Spoken like a true Pokemon anime watcher.

Which is absolute bullshit, because Kiyoshi believes in his Pokemon plenty, and he’s the last one able to beat the gym at level 14!

All in all, they have a good time. They spend a solid fifteen minutes roasting Ghetsis’s getup, and Makoto lets out an audible gasp the moment he first sees a Purrloin. They’re halfway to the second gym by the time they decide to take a break, and completely enamored.

Afterwards, they decide to break into Kiyoshi’s manga collection. Although it turns out only Fumiko really has the attention span for that. Makoto quickly gets bored, springing to his feet and declaring that he’s going to crawl under Kiyoshi’s bed.

"Let's not look under my bed!"

Kiyoshi, meek as he is, is still a teenage boy with teenage boy secrets. And there's certain things he’d rather not have his friends discover. Thankfully, Makoto doesn’t even try to argue for once, seeing as how this is the most vitriolic he’s ever seen Kiyoshi.

...And over poorly hidden, hand-me-down dirty magazines of all things.

Instead, he settles on fiddling around with Kiyoshi’s ‘geek corner,’ asking him if they can use the
chemistry kit to light something on fire (Absolutely fucking not) and using the dollar store telescope as a pair of makeshift binoculars. He leans back over the chair and stares at his friends.

“You look ridiculous,” Fumiko comments.

“I feel ridiculous. I can’t see shit!” Makoto declares. “How are you supposed to see space with this thing?”

“You’ve not,” Kiyoshi admits. “It’s a sham deliberately meant to mislead you, and buying it was an awful decision on my part.”

Makoto gives the chair a spin. “Fair enough,” he responds, still tilting his head back over the edge.

Kiyoshi stands and stops the chair with his foot.

“Hey! What was that for?”

“Because you’re practically begging for death with how you’re using that chair. So get out, stop trying to topple it, and spare yourself a concussion before you end up crashing through my floor.”

Makoto pouts, but complies. Soon enough he’s forgotten what he was sour about in the first place, and he’s cracking joke after joke as he leans over Fumiko’s shoulder and makes unwanted and uncontextualized assumptions about the manga characters she’s currently looking at. Surprisingly enough some of his witticisms are completely on point, and even Kiyoshi finds himself cracking up a little.

It’s only now he begins to realize his anxiety has faded entirely. He’d spent so long overthinking how this visit was going to go, but somehow now that they’re in the middle of it, it’s much less intimidating. He supposes that’s how most things go with him, but it’s nice to think that even in one of the places he feels most vulnerable (Having all of his interests displayed? Good god… That’s the epitome of embracing the terrifying ordeal of being known) he can begin to have fun with his friends. He knows he’s been thinking this more and more, but it’s nice to think he can let himself really trust these people.

That would be… A first. A first for his entire life. And as sad as that is, it’s a pretty relieving thought, too.

Something… Still feels off, though. Even as they goof around, he can’t help but feel a melancholy mood emitting from Fumiko. Maybe it’s just his anxiety talking, but it leaves a bad taste in his mouth. He’d sensed it from the moment she’d entered his house, but it only seems to grow worse and worse by the minute. He’s no fool. The way she carries herself… Her posture… And the quieter-than-usual way she speaks… Something is wrong.

The minute Makoto leaves the room to take a bathroom break, Kiyoshi turns her way and places a hand on her shoulder. “Are you feeling okay? You seem… Tense,” he admits. “You don’t need to talk if you don’t want to, but if something’s bothering you-”

“Nothing’s wrong,” Fumiko quickly reassures. A little too quickly. “Sorry if I seem a bit off. I’ve just had…” She pauses. “…A long day. I’ve just had a long day. But it’s nothing to worry about.”

“Okay. If you say so.”

He sincerely doubts that, but he also knows there’s nothing worse than someone demanding you tell them what’s wrong when you’re already in a bad mood. As the afternoon goes on the odd mood never fades, but Fumiko does seem to have a genuinely good time and chucks a pillow
straight at Makoto’s face, so Kiyoshi tries to shrug it off and reassures himself that it’s probably not anything too serious.

It’s about six that Kiyoshi’s mom finally calls them down for dinner. It’s a tad earlier than his usual time, but he’d requested she make dinner a little early to account for Fumiko’s schedule. Kiyoshi hops off the bed and motions for his friends to come with.

“We can play more Pokemon later. But for now it’s time to eat. My dad should be home by now, too.”

Now that sends Makoto sprinting. Before Kiyoshi can even protest, he’s out of the room and scrambling down the stairs.

Fumiko and Kiyoshi wash their hands in the upstairs bathroom, forcing Kiyoshi to internally ask himself the worst possible question of all that is “Oh my God… Did Makoto even wash his hands?” before they make their way downstairs and into the kitchen.

Sure enough, Kiyoshi’s dad is home. And it seems he’s just arrived, seeing as how Makoto’s managed to take a seat before him. Kiyoshi’s mom waves him over and says he’s just on time. As he walks over to join them at the table she leans in to give him a quick peck on the cheek, before much-less-affectionately and much more characteristically reminding him that it’s his turn to do the ‘boring shit’ and make dinner next time they’re both home.

He shrugs and says he will, before sliding into his seat. Quickly, Fumiko and Kiyoshi follow. Makoto’s already taken his usual spot on the left-hand side of his mother, who sits at the head of the table (Because… Of course she does), but Kiyoshi supposes he doesn’t mind much. He takes the second seat over on the right-hand side, next to his father. Admittedly it’s not the norm, but it does put him in a perfect position to be directly across from his friends, because Fumiko slides in right next to Makoto.

Irina passes everyone their plate. “You damn kids better be grateful,” she says. “I went all out with this. So you better thank Kiyoshi’s super cool mom.”

The words she says would be objectively horrible coming out of a sterner parent’s mouth. But there’s an aura of harmlessness to Irina that one wouldn’t expect from a woman who, you know, used to kill people for a living. So even if Fumiko shoots him a confused, perhaps fearful, glance the moment his mom first speaks up, it quickly fades the moment said mom cracks a wicked grin.

And as the confusion fades, Fumiko’s face simply seems to ask an unimpressed ‘What sort of adult is this?’

‘My mom, ladies and gentlemen,’ Kiyoshi tries to nonverbally project back.

“Thank you, Kiyoshi’s super cool mom!” Makoto says, already digging into his meal. “Or should I say Bitch-sensei?”

Irina’s teeth grit. “Aw, come on!” she cries, throwing her hands in the air. “Kiyoshi Karasuma! Did you really have to share that nickname with him!? Are you trying to humiliate your poor defenseless mother!?”

Kiyoshi doesn’t bother to look up from his meal. “Don’t blame me,” he chides. “I didn’t teach him. You should be taking this up with Shiota-sensei.”

Irina’s jaw drops. And her knuckles whiten as she grabs the table. “He wouldn’t!” she hisses in an accusatory tone that, contradictorily enough, seems to imply she believes he indeed would.
“I’m pretty sure he would,” Kiyoshi responds with a laugh.

Irina turns to Makoto. “You! Kid-!”

“It’s Makoto-”

“Yeah, whatever,” Irina says dismissively. “Who taught you that!?"

Makoto grins. “It’s a secret!” he says, making a ‘zipped lips’ motion across his mouth. “Nagisa said I can’t tell anyone, not even you, sooooo... Sorry!”

“Nagisa sai-” Irina shakes her head in disbelief. “Well that makes it pretty damn obvious! That fucking brat! When I get my hands on him-!”

‘Pretty damn obvious,’ huh? Is it though…? Something tells Kiyoshi Nagisa’s gossip isn’t the secret Makoto’s talking about. He just… Knows this like he knows everything else. Like he knew about the sports festival… Like he knew about the stun clap… Like he knew what to expect from Kiyoshi’s parents from the moment he first heard of them… And like he knew to approach their son specifically.

...No. Don’t think about that.

Either way, Kiyoshi supposes he’s thankful for Makoto keeping this ‘secret.’ He hardly believes Makoto’s claim himself. He’s pretty sure if Makoto declared he was ‘the second coming of Korosensei,’ like some kind of religious madman five minutes into dinner, the disorienting and confused screaming at the table would be even louder than usual...

“Nooooo! Don’t hurt him!”

“Hurt him!? Hurt him!? When I get my hands on him, I’m going to make him regret being alive!”

...Which is saying a lot.

As Makoto and his mom shout over each other, his dad curiously eyes his friends. Although visibly unamused at the two loons’ bickering, he gives Fumiko a nod of encouragement.

“Oh. I guess I haven’t introduced them,” Kiyoshi realizes. Raising his voice he stares down his mom and Makoto. “Okay. Shut up, you two.” And out of mere surprise or not, like a pack of well-trained dogs they obey. “Dad? These are my friends. Guys? This is my dad.”

Fumiko nods quietly. “I’m Fumiko. Fumiko Hisakawa,” she says, holding out a stiff hand. “It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

Karasuma blinks at the overly formal young woman, but takes her hand nonetheless. “You too.”

“And I’m Makoto! You may have heard of me,” Makoto says, beaming.

“Yes. I’ve heard a bit,” Karasuma admits. “Kiyoshi’s talked about you both. I’ve heard you’re very good friends to him.”

“Well, duh!” Makoto huffs. “He’s a good friend to us! Why wouldn’t we return the favor?”

Now that makes Kiyoshi’s cheeks flush. He stares down at his dinner, trying to pretend he wasn’t just complimented.

This is usually the part where his mom would reach across the table and pinch his cheeks, but
thankfully his dad sits in the way this time. “Awww! Our little boy a good friend! Seems teaching him some fucking manners worked out better than I’d thought. He’s a people person, just like his mom!”

Fumiko shoots Kiyoshi another concerned glance. He shrugs in response. He’s not particularly bothered by his mom’s words. She’s probably the only person on the planet who doesn’t bother him with that sort of nonsense. It’s just how they talk to each other.

“Teaching me some fucking manners’ would seem to imply you have any fucking manners yourself, mom.:

...And it’s not like he can’t fire his own shots.

Now that one earns a ‘snrk’ from even his father. Fumiko shoots him another astonished look. His mom softly gasps, covering her heart with her hand. “Okay! So maybe your dad took care of most of the ‘manners’ thing, but I taught you people skills! I’m the reason why you’re a casanova.”

“Please never describe me making friends as ‘being a casanova,’ ever again.”

Mom grins cheekily. “No promises.”

Kiyoshi sighs and pinches the bridge of his nose. “Okay. But you’re going to make my friends think you’re weird.”

“Your friends are gonna think I’m weird either way with such a little gossip constantly talking to them,” Irina snarks.

Kiyoshi can’t help but feel this is another one of those ‘on the brink of getting his cheek pinched’ moments. “Touche.”

As that conversation slows to a natural halt (Much to Kiyoshi’s relief, considering his mom did just address him as a casanova in front of his friends,) Mom asks Dad about work. “How was your day? Did anything interesting go down?”

“Not particularly,” Dad responds. “It was nothing out of the ordinary. Thankfully as of late things have proceeded without issue.”

“For you,” Mom whines. “Thank shit your day was normal. Because mine was wild! Kawamoto was up my ass all day telling me what to do with the Ukraine mission. Like I’m not sure who put you on the planet, but unless you’re the woman who dragged her ass out there all the way to the Middle East to deal with that conundrum, you don’t tell me what to fucking do when I get to ‘Ukraine.’”

“You’re going to Ukraine?” Kiyoshi sputters.

Irina shrugs. “It’s only a possibility,” she admits. “We’re keeping an eye on them, but for all I care it could turn out to be nothing.” She must catch Kiyoshi’s worried glance, because she shakes her head. “If I end up having to deal with it, it won’t be for a few months. Plus, y’know: Your mom’s invincible. So don’t worry about it for now.”

A weighty thing to ask. Kiyoshi’s not sure if his mom knows how his brain works, but he certainly does. He doesn’t do ‘for now.’ Future nonissue or not, he’s going to have that on his mind for the next four months. And there goes his sleep! Not that it’s anything he’s not used to, considering his mom and dad both have embarked on dangerous missions regularly ever since he was five.
...Doesn’t make it any easier, though.

He tries to shake the feeling of anxiety off his shoulders. He knows it won’t work, but he attempts to reassure himself with Mom’s words. ‘It could turn out to be nothing.’ Except it also could. And his Mom could die. And he’s just supposed to not think about that.

...Whatever. ‘They’re doing important work,’ he reminds himself. He knows his anxieties can be irrational, so the best he can do is ignore the gnawing feeling in his gut.

“The Ukraine mission won’t end up being an issue. I’m sure of that,” Karasuma reassures.

“And that’s what I keep trying to tell Kawamoto! But the man doesn’t know when to back down!” The way she says her coworker’s name drips with such vitriol Kiyoshi almost feels bad for the poor guy.

“I was saying that to reassure our son, not so you could slack off on your work. I’ve been wrong before, so do your best just in case. Kawamoto’s a perfectly diligent man. I’m sure he only has our best interests in mind. Please attempt to take this seriously, unless you’d prefer a transfer?”

“Nooooooooooo,” Mom overdramatically whines. “Kawamoto may be a narcissistic ho, but at least we’re doing something. I don’t think I could stand another ounce of boredom.” She meets Dad’s unamused gaze and pouts. “What? He is a narcissistic ho, okay!?”

Dad pinches the bridge of his nose. “He’s narcissistic, I’ll give you that much,” he finally admits. “But he does good work. Nonetheless…” He pauses and sighs. “If he continues to genuinely bother you, just let me know and I’ll give him a talking to.”

Now that satisfies Mom. She leans across the table, slinks her arms around him, and wraps him in a hug. “Thank you, honey!” she exclaims, before giving him a quick kiss on the forehead.

It’s a subtle thing to notice, but Dad melts. His cheeks just barely flushing, and the tiniest smile forming at the corners of his mouth, he nods in acknowledgment. “Don’t mention it.”

As quickly as it had appeared, though, his gooey center vanishes. Something-something he can’t be caught vulnerable at all, much less in front of Kiyoshi’s prepubescent friends. (Much too late for that, however, seeing as how Makoto is already gushing over how sweet of a couple they make.) He turns his head to Kiyoshi and decides to nudge the conversation towards him. “And how has school been? Any kids bothering you?”

“No, no- Of course not,” Kiyoshi reassures, before pausing. “Well… Except Makoto.”

Makoto gasps softly, and shakes his head with indignance. “That’s no way to talk about your best friend!” He declares, as if who Kiyoshi’s best friend is is a decision he has the authority to make. “As for your son, Karasuma,” he says, turning his way. “He’s been doing super good! He’s very smart! And he just keeps getting smarter! He’s observant! And he gets along with lots of people!”

First of all, no, he doesn’t. Second of all, why does it feel like he’s suddenly at a parent-teacher meeting!?

“No, no- Of course not,” Kiyoshi reassures, before pausing. “Well… Except Makoto.”

Makoto gasps softly, and shakes his head with indignance. “That’s no way to talk about your best friend!” He declares, as if who Kiyoshi’s best friend is is a decision he has the authority to make. “As for your son, Karasuma,” he says, turning his way. “He’s been doing super good! He’s very smart! And he just keeps getting smarter! He’s observant! And he gets along with lots of people!”

First of all, no, he doesn’t. Second of all, why does it feel like he’s suddenly at a parent-teacher meeting!?

“Well… Sounds like a good report,” Karasuma comments after a long, long moment. Something tells Kiyoshi he’s having trouble processing being addressed without an honorific by a seventh-grader.

“More than! He’s been helping me with tutoring and everything!” Makoto proudly grins. “Not to mention he did awesome at the sports festival the other day. Right, Fumiko?”
“Mmmm,” Fumiko absentmindedly agrees. She’s staring at her plate.

“Sports festival?” Irina inquires.

“Yeah! You didn’t hear?” Makoto replies. “Nagisa hosted a big event! And Kiyoshi ended up coming in second place! He led a whole team in Capture the Robbers Paintball! It was really close! He did really good. Only reason our team didn’t win was ‘cause I ended up going too far.”

Now that’s the first time Kiyoshi’s heard it described as that. What had happened wasn’t Makoto’s fault. He’d just… Ended up getting spooked over something stupid. He’d never want Makoto taking the blame for that. But with his parents’ eyes trained on him, he just doesn’t have the guts to speak up. Not when he sees…

...Is it? No. It can't be...-

Karasuma gives him a firm pat on the shoulder and a smile. “Good job.”

...Pride?

“I’m surprised you didn’t tell your parents,” Makoto comments. “Like, come on! Even after I told you you should? Why didn’t you brag to them!?”

“I dunno,” Kiyoshi halfheartedly admits. “It just didn’t feel important.”

“But it is important!” Makoto replies. “Super important! Right, Karasuma?”

Karasuma takes a moment to mull that over, before nodding. “It’s important,” he agrees. “It sounds like you fought very hard.”

“Y… Yeah, I guess,” Kiyoshi agrees.

He can’t help but notice the way Dad keeps glancing towards the ground. At first he thinks it’s some sign of insincerity, and that it physically pains his father to praise him, but then he hears the tapping of tiny claws on the hardwood floor, and it clicks.

“Dad, are you feedi-”

“Don’t feed the bastard,” Mom must have noticed it at the same time as him, because she shoots Dad a playfully irritated look.

For a split second, Dad looks almost sheepish at being caught. But that bashful expression quickly fades as he deadpans “I’ll feed the bastard all I damn want.”

Now that gets Fumiko looking up from her plate. She glances back and forth between Kiyoshi’s Mom and Dad, mouth agape as if she just fully processed what they were saying. “T… The bastard?” she sputters.

“Oh, yeah,” Kiyoshi clarifies. “They’re talking about him.” He points to where Taro sits patiently under the table, his tail thumping against a chair leg. “We like to call him insulting names. It’s a bit of an inside joke.”

“Oh,” Fumiko says, and slowly her head lowers. She returns to staring at her plate, distinctly avoiding looking Kiyoshi’s way.

...Or… His parents’ way.
She’s been acting weird all dinner. Her posture’s tense, and she just looks… Sad. Kiyoshi doesn’t know how to describe it. The way her fingers clutch the table… And the way she bites down on her lip… There’s something heartbreaking about it. And he can’t help but worry, even as the rest of his family continues to joke.

It all reaches a tipping point when his Mom makes some joke. Kiyoshi doesn’t even catch wind of it, but afterwards, she pulls his dad in to give her a kiss with a goofy grin.

Fumiko bolts to her feet and quickly excuses herself. Mumbling something about needing to use the bathroom she hurries towards the hallway and disappears.

No-one else seems to notice. Mom’s too busy gushing over Dad, and Dad’s too busy being gushed over. And Makoto’s still starstruck with the two of them, excitedly cracking a joke about something Kiyoshi inevitably won’t get. Kiyoshi’s half tempted to speak up - Say he thinks something is wrong. But a ball of dread quickly forms in his gut. No. That wouldn’t be right. That feels like… Airing her sadness to the public somehow.

Before Kiyoshi can even process what he’s doing, he’s on his feet as well. He murmurs a quick “I’ll be right back,” before hurrying after Fumiko. He knows it’s ridiculous and that she’s probably fine. He’s overthinking this. But he just can’t rid himself of the sickening feeling in his stomach.

The way she’d looked at him, eyes just barely watering. Could his anxiety really fabricate that? Kiyoshi… Doesn’t know. But not a single person had budged, even as it felt to him that Fumiko was crying for help. Screaming - Shrieking for anyone to please notice, but to no avail as the world turned a blind eye.

...Kiyoshi’s probably projecting a little. But it’s a familiar feeling. And even if he’s wrong, he’d rather be safe than sorry... Than let her feel that way for even a moment.

...No-one deserves to drown alone. Much less one of his best friends.

He feels a strange sense of relief as he checks the bathroom and finds it empty. If nothing had been wrong and he’d simply ended up following the poor girl to the bathroom he’d probably have died from embarrassment. But that relief is quickly replaced with dread. If she hadn’t been telling the truth, then where is sh-

His train of thought skids to a halt as he hears a noise down the hall. It’s faint… Soft… But distinctly the sound of ragged breath. His steps hurry as he makes his way towards the sound. And the feeling of dread in his gut only worsens as he turns the corner and lays his eyes on Fumiko.

She sits on the ground, back against the wall. With her legs curled up against her chest and her hands clutched tight around her knees. At first Kiyoshi hardly processes what he’s seeing, but as he catches the quiver of her shoulders, he comes to a horrifying realization.

...Fumiko’s weeping.

Chapter End Notes

Yesterday someone asked me if this was going to be a stressful chapter, and I told them truthfully: "This is going to be a mostly chill chapter."
Mostly.

GAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA. Sorry about this, everyone. Originally I was going to have the visit to Kiyoshi's house be one chapter, but it ended up being like 17k words, which I just couldn't upload in good conscious. (Both because that would be inane to ask you to read, and because if I'm trying to churn out WEEKLY CHAPTERS, 17k is NOT an ideal chapter size). So I split it into two halves! And... Well... What do you know? That just ended up leaving us on a bit of a cliffhanger. :3c

This is another one of those chapters I've had visualized since VERY early in the fic's development, and I'm very excited to have reached it! Cliffhangers aside I had TONS of fun writing Makoto interact with the Karasumas, describing Kiyoshi's room, and writing over-dinner dialogue.

I made sure to try to display the Karasumas as dysfunctional but loving. They definitely have lots and lots of issues (And those issues ARE messing up their kid,) but they love each other, and I hope that shows!

Some songs that helped write this chapter were The House by Air Traffic Controller and Family by Mother Mother. Yeah. That's it. Not a very exciting chapter musically FGDHSJHDJSLK. Either way, though, they're excellent songs: So give them a listen!

The next chapter will be up in a week, so let me know what you thought in the meantime, and I'll see you then! o7
Kiyoshi’s not sure what to do when he finds Fumiko weeping in his hallway.

Softly hiccuping into her knees, she sits curled up on the floor. With her back to the wall and her face buried in her knees, she doesn’t look his way... She doesn’t even notice... And all Kiyoshi can do is freeze up.

...Suddenly it feels like he’s walked in on some horribly intimate moment. That he’s seen something he was never supposed to. Something Fumiko never would have wanted him to see. Panic gripping at his heart, he takes a step back.

He… he should go. Before she notices. This isn’t right. He needs to go.

One step backward, then another. And he freezes once more. No. No. It can’t be right to leave her like this. Not when she’s so clearly hurting. He… he needs to help! Isn’t that why he’d followed her in the first place!? But how is he supposed to fix this!? He’s no good with these sorts of things! He doesn’t even know what’s upsetting her!

‘I… I should get Makoto,’ he thinks. ‘Makoto would know what to do. Makoto is better with people.’ But he can’t will his feet to move. No... That’s not right, either. If… If he hadn’t been supposed to see this, daring to breathe a word of it to anyone else just feels cruel.

But what… What does that leave? He can’t - He’s not supposed to - He’s never - Shit! Why hadn’t he seen this coming!? He thinks he feels ill.

Oh my God… Oh my God… Oh my God… W. What is he suppo-

Fumiko’s gaze shoots up. And suddenly it’s locked on him. Her head jerks in shock and her eyes widen as she quickly reaches up to wipe them. Taking a deep breath, she composes herself and feigns a look of surprise.


Is… Is everything okay!? Is everything okay!? That’s what he should be asking her! She can keep up that tough facade all she wants, but Kiyoshi sees right through it. With shaking hands and watery eyes, it’s clearly taking all her strength just to keep herself from bursting into tears right here and now.

Kiyoshi gulps, awkwardly rubbing at his shoulder. “...Y... Yeah. Everything’s fine,” he says. “I just got worried about you. You ran off really abruptly. Is something wrong?”

Fumiko’s mouth opens, then closes. Staring intently at Kiyoshi, she balls her hand into a fist and blinks hard. “…N… No… Everything’s… Everything’s…” But she can’t even finish her sentence. Her words trail off... The breathless hiccups return, and tears drizzle down her cheeks. She averts her gaze from Kiyoshi, nails digging into her palms as she weeps and mumbles “Goddamn it… Goddamn it…” under her breath.

Kiyoshi hurries over. He can’t just stand by. Though the moment he’s by her side, he freezes up. His hands left hanging awkwardly by his side as he hopelessly tries to reassure her. “W… W- What happened? What’s wrong? Did- Did something my mom say upset you?”
Fumiko only cries harder, desperately wiping as her eyes she shakes her head and mumbles rebuttals “No… No… That’s not it.”


“No… No!” Fumiko shouts, choking up. “It’s not you! It’s none of you…!” she sobs. “I… It’s just… It’s just me… It’s stupid…”

“I’m sure it’s no--”

“Yes it is!” Fumiko cries, burying her face in her hands. Weeping turning into sobs, she shakes like a leaf as she curls up even further into her knees “It’s… It’s stupid… It’s petty… Y… You wouldn’t get it!”

Kiyoshi hesitates, but crouches. Lowering himself to her level, he sits by her side and places a firm hand on her shoulder. She jolts, but makes no effort to pull away.

“F… Fumiko… I spend every day of my life dwelling on things I think are stupid, and petty, and ridiculous. And it is suffocating. I don’t want you to feel like that. So… So please… Talk to me. I won’t think it’s stupid. If it upsets you this much… I’ll know it’s anything but.”

Fumiko hesitates, taking a shaky gulp. And she motions to shake her head. But as Kiyoshi gently squeezes her shoulder and whispers “You can trust me. I promise,” she struggles to catch her breath and blink back the tears.

“Your family just… Your family just seems… Like they… Like they…” She can’t will herself to finish. Looking away from Kiyoshi, she lets out another weak sob.

“…Like they what?”

“Like they love each other!”

Before Kiyoshi can even fully process what she’d said, Fumiko reels back. Scooting away from Kiyoshi, as if in shame, she shudders and shuts her eyes tight. “N… Not that that’s a bad thing. It’s n- I’m glad your fam-” She cuts herself off and hisses in sharply through her teeth. “It’s a good thing. I know that… It just… Makes me… Gah! I don’t even know! I told you: It’s ridiculous!”

Kiyoshi slowly takes his hand from Fumiko’s shoulder. And squinting softly, he gives her a concerned gaze.

His… His family loves one another?

“Does your family… Not?”

Fumiko’s lip trembles at the notion. She gasps in, then out, as if trying to wrap her head around the thought. And then, bringing her hand to cover her mouth, she lets out a low whimper and nods. “T… They hate each other!” she moans. “They hate each other and my sisters and me…”

Kiyoshi reaches out a hand to place on her knee. “I… I’m sure they don’t-”

“Yes! They do!” Fumiko bawls, batting it away. “I told you you wouldn’t get it! Your life’s perfect! But nothing I do will ever be good enough for them! I try… So… So … hard, Kiyoshi. Why isn’t it enough!?” Before he can open his mouth to respond, she’srambling more. “I… Is it
me? Am I just broken? D… Do I deserve this?"

“N- No! I’m sure you don’t deserve this!” Kiyoshi refutes, his head spinning. He… He doesn’t know what to do! He’s never seen Fumiko like this! He… He doesn’t even know entirely what she’s talking about! W… Where can he even begin?

“T… Then why? Why the hell do they treat me this way!?” Fumiko’s staring at him with piercing eyes, her gaze tearful and her breaths ragged.

“I… I... I dunno--” Kiyoshi sputters. He almost asks what they’ve been doing, but quickly thinks better of it. If she’s so upset already, he has a feeling asking her how exactly her parents mistreat her will probably only make it worse. But if not that - Then what? Kiyoshi’s heart is pounding in his chest, and he thinks he’s halfway to crying himself.

‘No…’ He reminds himself. ‘Not… Not now.’ Fumiko needs him. He forces himself to take a deep breath… And then counts to ten. Trying his best to keep his head on his shoulders, he asks himself what he’d like if he were feeling that way, reaches out to clasp her hand, and gives it a gentle squeeze.

“I… Don’t know, Fumiko. But you don’t deserve it. I can promise that much,” he reassures. And trying to still the quiver in his voice, he stands “I… I’ll be right back, okay? I’m gonna grab tissues. Try to catch your breath in the meantime. Just… Breath in, count to three, and breathe out. Do you think you can do that for me?”

Fumiko hesitates. “Y… You won’t tell anyone else, right?”

“No,” Kiyoshi says. “Of course not.”

Finally, Fumiko gives a tiny nod. “…’lright. I’ll try.” And rubbing at her eyes, she desperately attempts to catch her breath.

Kiyoshi watches her for one moment more, murmuring a quick “Okay. Just stay right here... Please,” before whirling around and making his way towards his bedroom.

There, he’s quick to grab a box - No, two boxes of tissues. And cradling them in his arms, he’s equally as quick to make his way back towards Fumiko. He… Still doesn’t really know what he’s doing, but reminding himself of methods people like his parents or Shiota-sensei have used to reassure him in the past, he returns to Fumiko’s spot in the hallway and crouches down to hand her the tissues.

She takes them, mumbling a quick thanks as she blows her nose. Carefully tossing tissue after tissue to the side, she wipes at her eyes and attempts to stifle her sobs.

“I… I’m sorry I- I’m sorry I-” she breathlessly whimpers, stumbling over her own words.

“No… No, it’s okay,” Kiyoshi reassures. “Take your time.”

“…I’m sorry I ended up acting out in your home like this. There it is again: Fumiko ruins what was supposed to be a fun time for everyone. W… Why am I not surprised? A… And over something so ridiculous no less-!

“It’s not ridiculous…”

“It is. It really is,” Fumiko sighs. “None of this has ever bothered me before. I don’t know what’s wrong with me for it to suddenly be an issue now…”
Kiyoshi doesn’t have an explanation either. But it is not stupid. He’ll stand by that much. He’s had… Plenty of pointless freakouts in his day. And this isn’t even comparable to them. This isn’t like Kiyoshi being scared of the concept of never making friends. This is Fumiko legitimately terrified of her own family. And he doesn’t know what to say to possibly explain away that.

So… Kiyoshi does what Kiyoshi does best. All he can do. He listens.

“I… Don’t know, either. But… I can try to help, okay? Just… Just let it all out.”

Fumiko stares at him, sniffling in deeply, before giving another pathetic nod and sobbing into her hands.

As she incoherently murmurs and weeps, he stays by her side. And telling her that none of this is dumb, he hands her tissue after tissue. She wipes at her eyes with the back of her hand, and he places a gentle palm on her shoulder. When she leans into his comforting embrace, he does the least he can do and wraps his arms around her. He holds her tight and promises it’ll be okay.

...He knows it’s not true. He’s been the one held sobbing before, and he’s heard the same empty reassurances. But knowing at least some of the immeasurable ache in Fumiko’s chest, he finally wants to believe what he’s heard a thousand times before:

“...It’ll be okay.”

He helps her through the breathing exercises he knows so well… Holds her hand and tells her to count to ten… Instructs her to focus on her senses… And with each deep breath helps shaky gasps fade into soft shivers. He knows deep down he’s doing nothing to chip away at the true issues eating at her heart, but it’s enough to ease her anxiety for now. Slowly but surely, her sobs recede into gentle tears.

“I… Just… Always thought my family wanted what’s best for me,” Fumiko murmurs, reaching for another tissue. “And… I thought they were right about that. About everything. Because… I mean - They made me better than everyone. My… My heritage… My upbringing… It was supposed to make me mature. Respected… Perfect. But now that I know that that’s not true… T… That I’m not better than anyone… It feels like everything is falling apart.”

For a moment, she looks ready to start sobbing again. But Kiyoshi squeezes her hand and reminds her to breathe. Shuddering, she inhales… Then exhales.

“I just… Don’t get why this is happening now. I thought it was making me better. But… Now I know it’s not. I’m going through this for nothing. It’s… Not making me stronger. It’s just making me sad. You have no idea how much that hurts.”

Kiyoshi frowns deeply.

“...Yeah. I don’t.”

“I was trying not to let it bother me. Because… I guess things are getting better for me. Shiota-sensei is going so out of his way to try and give me the best chances possible. Why can’t I just be thankful for that? I know I don’t really deserve all his effort, so it just feels… Ungrateful for that to still not be enough for me. And yet… Even so, I just couldn’t handle it. I want what you have, Kiyoshi. You just seem… So lucky. And I know that’s an ungrateful notion, too. I know it’s not true, but…”

“...But…?”
Fumiko takes another deep breath. “...Seeing your parents joke with each other from across the table... Their inside jokes and the way your mom leaned over so ridiculously to kiss your dad... Is... Is that what family is?”

Now that’s a loaded question. And not one Kiyoshi’s sure he knows the answer to, either. There’s... A lot of different sorts of families out there. And he’s seen his fair share. From the stilted, dysfunctional, and caring grips of his own family, to the open and high-spirited energy of Shiota-sensei’s.

All of his parents’ students... All of his ‘aunts’ and ‘uncles,’ they live wildly different lives. From the three children nuclear family tree that the Chiba-Hayamis have grown... To Nakamura-san and Okuda-san’s long-distance relationship... To Fuwa-san simply returning home each evening to an affectionate cat. Is it... Possible to define family so easily? Kiyoshi sincerely doubts it. And even yet, mulling over the concept in his mind, one similarity pops up time and time again:

Love. Genuine love. Romantic, familial, or platonic. A desire to be around someone and a desire to support them. And perhaps that does not always manifest itself in inside jokes or unnecessary smarm, but he can’t help but shake the feeling that Fumiko had actually hit the nail on the head.

...Family is the ability to be comfortable around each other. And she hasn’t been afforded that luxury.

“I... I think so,” he finally answers. “I mean... I think it varies... But I think family does come down to the little things.”

Fumiko nods, but looks away. And quietly, she whispers “I fantasize about it all the time, you know. What it would be like if my parents were proud of me. If... If me and my sisters loved each other. It’s all I have. I’ll lay awake at night and think about it while I try to fall asleep. What... It’d be like to love each other. And even then, I don’t think I ever really grasped that.”

“...Grasped what?”

“T... Those little things. Up until very recently, I didn’t know families did that. I... I didn’t know they made fun of the dog or had sword fights with paper towel rolls! I thought that family was just... Being perfect. And that’s why we could still be one. But it’s more than that. You all... Make each other laugh. And even when you’re yelling at each other... Even when you’re insulting each other... It’s coming from a heartfelt place. Even with so much time and energy I’ve dedicated to the thought of having what you have... I’ve never considered that. How messed up is that?”

Kiyoshi anxiously runs his fingers through his hair. ‘Very,’ is the answer. ‘Very messed up.’ But he doesn’t dare suggest it. Somehow... That feels... That feels like just suggesting she’s even more broken. A... And that’s not true! She... She deserves to live a normal life. She deserves to live a happy life. But how can he even begin to articulate that when the things she’s saying are so miserable they seem to carve an empty hole in his gut?

...We’ll be your family, then.” He blurts it out before he can even think it through. And although some instinctive part of him regrets it, embarrassment clawing at his gut, a defiant indignance rises to his chest. For once in his life, he doesn’t care how it sounds! Seeing... Seeing his friend so upset... It’s enough to make his fist clench!

Fumiko’s staring at him, her jaw agape. And before she gets the chance to stop him, it’s Kiyoshi’s turn to ramble.
“My… My family isn’t perfect, either. A-And I’m not trying to garner your pity! This is about you! But it’s true! My dad is never around, and if he is, my mom sure isn’t. I mean - You heard them talking about Ukraine earlier. It’s like that all the time. They’re always busy planning something or working overtime or going off on ‘missions.’ And it terrifies me! I… I lie awake at night, too. And I stare at the ceiling… And I think… ‘What’s going to happen to me?’ Because… They’re all I have. And… I need them. And… I don’t know what I’d do without them.”

“Or! Well, they were all I had!” he specifies. “But now… Now things are different. Because I have you guys. And while… While I don’t think I’ll ever not be stressed about my parents, I feel better around you. C… Confident, even! Like… I have a reason to not think about it.” It’s the first time in a long time he’s had the chance to speak of his fears aloud. And although some part of him wants to curl up and hide - Screams at him he’s making this about him, another part of him knows this for certain:

He hasn’t always had the luxury of being comfortable around his family, either.

“I guess… I guess what I’m trying to say is… I’ve missed out on a lot of the normal family stuff, too. Going on weeklong vacations or seeing movies with my whole family premier day… It’s stuff we’re too busy to do. A lot of things are. And I think in some ways I’ve lived my whole life in fear I’d never get those chances. But… But things can be different now. Because I have you. And things can be different for you. Because you have me. And… I know I can’t replace your family. I know you could never replace mine. But… It’s nice to think we could fill a little bit of that gap: Just the three of us.”

Fumiko’s silent. She stares at him, an indecipherable look in her eyes, and looks just about ready to burst into tears again.

And just as quickly as it had dissipated, Kiyoshi’s fear returns. Quickly, he backpedals. “I- I mean- I know that sounds stupid… I just meant it like…”

Fumiko interrupts, “No. It’s not stupid.”

“…It’s not?”

“No. I think… I think it’s sweet.”

And for what feels like the first time this evening, Fumiko cracks a tiny smile.

“And maybe I can, too.’

‘If… If you’d like that, I mean-”

“And I’d love that.”

And before Kiyoshi even gets a chance to seal the deal, Fumiko’s arms are around him in another hug. She squeezes him tight, as if saying ‘...Thanks. I needed that.’

What he doesn’t have the guts to say, however, is that he needed this too. And as such, the coward he is, he simply wraps his own arms around her and squeezes back.
“It’s a deal, then,” he says. “Just the three of us against the world.” He pauses. “Er- Well, maybe not against the world! We have Shiota-sensei and the rest on our side. And of course I still love my parents, but-! The three of us a team! A… And we can insult the dog! And pull off stupid schemes together! A… And we won’t have to worry about ever being alone… Because… We’ll have each other.”

At this point, Kiyoshi’s not even so sure who exactly he’s trying to reassure. But Fumiko quivers ever so slightly as she pulls away, and gives him a vulnerable look.

“…Promise? That… That you’re not lying about all this… That you mean it. From the bottom of your heart.”

...And he does.

“I promise.”

Some tension finally seems to fade from the air. And although Fumiko’s still not looking too great, she finally finds it in her to stand. “I… Think I’m ready to go back.”

Kiyoshi nods, getting to his feet. “Alright. Follow me. I’ll help you wash your face first. Since - Uh - I’m taking it you don’t want anyone to know you were crying?”

Fumiko nods back. And she follows his lead to the bathroom. It’s here that Kiyoshi finds himself passing on another well-known routine of his. In the same way he’d helped her count down until she could breathe, he instructs her to splash her face, wipe at her eyes with a damp rag, and dab water on her wrists.

“...You’re like an expert at this,” Fumiko comments.

“Yeah. I’ve long since mastered the art of crying alone in my room,” Kiyoshi jokes. “So don’t you worry. No-one will find out about this. Not even Makoto.”

...At least, he hopes not. Because something tells him she cares more about Makoto’s opinion of her than his dumb parents’. So… Here’s to keeping his fingers crossed they’ll mask the tears well. There’s no way to know for sure, though. Because on one hand… Makoto is pretty damn intuitive with emotions. But on the other hand, it’s not like he’s ever accused Kiyoshi of holing himself up and crying in secret.

Plus, you know. He’s plenty distracted with Kiyoshi’s parents.

“To be honest, I don’t think he’d actually make fun of me,” Fumiko admits, wiping at her eyes with a rag. “Or… Well, I know he wouldn’t actually make fun of me. He’s… Had it hard, too. So I suppose this is just more of a me thing. I… Feel like it’s a crime to be caught ‘vulnerable.’”

Kiyoshi frowns. “...Yeah. I get that.”

“But… I think he gets that, too,” Fumiko admits. “He doesn’t let himself be sad either. One time he came to me in the middle of the night, and, well…” She pauses and shakes her head. “I suppose it’s not my place to disclose, but it is unfair of me to presume he wouldn’t get it. Thank you for mentioning him earlier. When it came to our…” She hesitates. “Our family. I think he’s a lot more like us than he’d first let on. So… He needs that, too.”

...Like us? And what does that mean? A deeply insecure and miserable person who’s afraid to open up? Now that’s just a depressing thought, to imagine applying to Makoto or to himself.
It’s not the first time he’s heard Fumiko bring it up, though. And he can’t help but agree. Even behind Makoto’s positive demeanor, there’s… Something more. And it’s not just something dark. It’s something sad, too.

That had been the driving factor behind why Fumiko thought Makoto had picked up the Korosensei thing in the first place. And although details about Makoto’s life have continued to paint a sad story… Something still doesn’t add up.

“Fumiko? Can I ask you something?”

Fumiko looks up from the sink. “Yeah. Anything.”

“Do you think Makoto is actually really connected to Korosensei?”

Fumiko’s quiet. She brings her hand to her chin and stares at the floor, as if deep in thought.

“I… I know it’s stupid to even humor it! Because- It’s impossible! B-But something’s genuinely weird, Fumiko! The stuff he does… The things he knows… I can’t help but think that there’s genuinely something… Something…-”

“Something special about him?”

“Yeah,” Kiyoshi says. “That there’s something special about him.”

The room falls silent.

“I… Don’t know,” Fumiko finally admits. “You’re right: Makoto knows all sorts of things he has no way of knowing. It’s peculiar at best and unnerving at worst,” she says, wringing the towel. “I expected this to be something he’d lose interest in quickly, but it hasn’t turned out that way. Not only that, but Shiota-sensei and the rest seem to believe him unequivocally, which leaves me feeling… Conflicted.”

“How so?”

“Shiota-sensei is someone who strikes me as a person that would do anything for his students. He’s… Already done so much for me. So I suppose this could simply be an extension of that part of his nature. And yet… I have a hard time believing even Shiota-sensei would be able to fake that genuineness over something so… Personal to him. I mean… I’ve read up on this stuff. Korosensei saved those kids’ lives. They had to be heartbroken when they lost him.”

“They were,” Kiyoshi confirms. “And… Shiota-sensei took it harder than anyone.” He’s heard the stories from his parents. Nagisa had been a shell of himself for a while there. “I mean, he is the one who had to…”

God. He doesn’t have the guts to say it.

“Yeah,” Fumiko simply says, turning her head away as if not wanting to dwell on the thought of her beloved teacher being forced to commit manslaughter by the Japanese government. “Not to mention I’m not sure Makoto is even capable of doing the deep dive research that would be necessary for this sort of ruse. He doesn’t exactly have the attention span.”

Kiyoshi blinks. “So you believe him?”

“Well, I don’t know about that,” Fumiko replies. “It’s… A wild thought. But I must admit I’ve considered it. Because it’s… A nice thought, too.” She gives an awkward chuckle and averts her
gaze. “That someone so important would choose us of all people to be friends with.”

*Is that how she sees it? And yet... All this time... Kiyoshi hasn’t been able to shake the feeling that...-

“Well... I... I’m not so certain about that,” Kiyoshi admits, knitting his hands. “I’ve been... Worrying. What if... What if Makoto didn’t choose me? With all of this coming to light... What if he only became friends with me because of my parents? I mean, he knew my last name... What if... If he just wanted to get close to them... And... He doesn’t actually care about me?”

Fumiko’s quiet. And then it’s her turn to place a hand on his shoulder.

“...Then what reason would he have to be friends with me?”

“H-Huh?”

“Even if Makoto did have some ulterior motive in regards to you, which, for the record, he does not, he would have no reason to have befriended me. He wouldn't have gone out of the way to give me the time of day if he was really the sort of person who decided who he cared about based on things like that.”

She... Has a point. Kinda. She was sorta an antisocial and cruel problem kid, which was sorta Korosensei’s bread and butter, but that’s an objectively horrible thing to say to your best friend who just had a mental break, *and* mostly beside the point.

“I mean... I guess you’re right... But... I dunno.” Kiyoshi shrugs and sighs. “You’re just, like... Cool and funny and smart. And... You’re so strong. Who wouldn’t want to be friends with you?”

“And you’re *not* cool or funny or smart or strong?” Fumiko inquires.

“I mean... Not really,” Kiyoshi admits, to which Fumiko gives him a stern look. He bites his lip and shrugs once more. “I’ve just always thought of myself as a very ordinary person. Even in comparison to my parents. And I guess that’s just sorta passed on to everyone I meet. No matter who they are, I can’t help but think ‘You’re so much better than me.’ And... I’m working on shaking it. Sometimes I feel really good. During the sports festival, I almost let myself forget it. But it’s like... Always there, lurking in the back of my mind: ‘They’re going to realize how useless and annoying you are eventually. And then they’ll ditch you.’”

“That’s a shit way to think about yourself.”

Kiyoshi jolts. He... Hadn’t expected such a tongue-in-cheek way of putting it from Fumiko.

“...Yeah. It is.”

Finally, Fumiko’s looking a bit better. It’s almost like she’d never been crying at all. “Kiyoshi...” She says. “Do you... Do this a lot?”

“Do what?”

“Cry, then go in the bathroom and hide it.”

Kiyoshi’s quiet.

“I mean... Yeah, I guess.”

It’s an under exaggeration. He’s always been a crybaby. Sometimes it feels like he’s been crying
constantly ever since he came out of the womb. It’s one of those things that comes with being so sensitive. And hiding it just ended up feeling natural in response. He hadn’t wanted to add more stress to his parents’ already hectic lives, and as for everyone else around him, the last thing he’d needed was to give them more ammunition as to why dislike him.

...Damn. That is a shit way to think about yourself.

Fumiko frowns. “Well… Don’t you dare hide it around me. Not anymore. If you’re sad, just let me know. Because from now on, we don’t hide things. At least… Not things like that,” she says, voice wavering. “You shouldn’t have to cry alone, either. Because you’re just as special as Makoto. You may not be him, and you may not be Korosensei, but you don’t need to be. You’re you. And I don’t think anyone else could have calmed me down like you did back there. So from now on you let me know if anything is ever bothering you…”

“Oh… Everything ever bothers me,” Kiyoshi admits.

“Then you’re going to tell me,” Fumiko sternly says. But face softening, she smiles and says “…So I can comfort you next time. Seeing as how you people have gone so out of your way to treat me with kindness, it’s… Only obligatory I return the favor.”

And slowly but surely, Kiyoshi smiles back. “…Alright. I’ll tell you. So you can help.”

“Good,” Fumiko says. “Because I’m starting to get the impression that that’s just what family does.”

That… Had really meant a lot to her, huh? It had been a spur of the moment declaration, but… It makes Kiyoshi feel good… That his words had had so much power… And that he’s capable of being someone so important to Fumiko. Something tells him she needs that. And he could use some makeshift ‘family,’ too.

“…Yeah. I think so too,” he agrees. And giving her a heartfelt smile, they make their way back into the dining room.

Every head in the room perks up as they return. Makoto leans forward across the table, shouting a loud “There you are! What happened!?"

Kiyoshi gives a shrug as he returns to the table. “Long story,” he replies, desperately hoping no-one is making the assumption they were, like, making out in the bathroom. Namely because, first of all, he is gay and second of all that would just be plain weird to do to a crying woman. He is really not the casanova his mother seems to believe he i-

“Did’ja hotbox the bathroom?”

Now that derails Kiyoshi’s train of thought.

“D-Did I what!?” Kiyoshi sputters.

“Did’ja hotbox the bathroom?” Makoto says. “Y’know, like… Wee-”

“I-I know what weed is!” Kiyoshi snaps in response. “No! I didn’t- We didn’t hotbox the bathroom! What is wrong with you!?”

Good news, everyone! His friends and family don’t think he’s straight! Bad news, everyone! They do think he’s a goddamn pothead!
Makoto’s cracking up. Even as Fumiko’s face flushes an embarrassing red, he cackles into his hands.


“Like one of us!” Makoto declares. And although it’s plenty sweet considering all of what just went down, Kiyoshi is pretty sure none of them have ever *looked* at a marijuana in their goddamn lives.

“You have never done weed in your life, Makoto,” Kiyoshi says.

“Hey! Not saying I have! But I’m saying we all *do* look like lowlives. Cool, sexy, lowlives.”

Fumiko gives him an exhausted look. “Gee, thanks.”

It’s upon this that Mom stands. And as she motions to make her way towards the hallway, Kiyoshi’s jaw drops.

“W-What are you *doing!*?” he asks, bolting to his feet. “For the last time, we didn’t hotbox the bathroom! You don’t need to *check!*”

“What’s it look like I’m doing?” Mom says, flipping her hair. “I’m going to hotbox the bathroom if you’re too pussy to. That’s a fantastic idea.”

Dad stands, shooting to grab her hand. “You are not,” he says. “As an official employee of the government, I am not letting you *hotbox our bathroom.*”

Mom groans dramatically, but Kiyoshi catches the way her lips upturn the moment Dad clasps her hand. And exaggeratedly wiping her brow, she moans “Oh, come on! You know I’m just fucking with them! Let me have some fun!”

“Absolutely not. If you’re someone who considers selling Junior High children on the fact that you do marijuana ‘fun,’ I think I need to reconsider my life choices.” After a short pause and a glance at Mom’s pout, he quickly tacks on “Joking, of course. Love you. But I am still not letting you ‘hotbox’ the bathroom.”

Mom grumbles, calling him a “wet blanket,” under her breath. But nonetheless, with her ruse exposed, she returns to her seat alongside dad, holding his hand beneath the table.

As dinner returns to some sort of normal, Kiyoshi swears he catches the upturn of Fumiko’s lips as well. And when Makoto cracks some dumb joke, she finally lets herself bowl over with laughter.

...Because she finally knows that’s her laughter to share as well.

Happy times can only last so long, however. Soon enough, 7:30 rolls around, and that means it’s time for Fumiko to head home. Quite frankly Kiyoshi wishes she could stay longer, but he knows enough about her home situation now to know that’s simply not possible. As such, he simply ushers her to the doorway, gives her a smile, and tells her he’ll see her tomorrow.

She stops in the hallway, pauses for a single moment, and wraps him in a hug before she goes. She whispers a soft, “Thank you,” and squeezes him so tight he thinks his eyes might just pop out of his skull, before nodding, and agreeing she’ll see him tomorrow. Blinking fast for the second time today, she tells Kiyoshi’s parents it was wonderful to meet them, says goodbye to Makoto, and
makes her way out the door.

Kiyoshi watches her go. And before he even knows it, she’s left his line of sight entirely: Off to return to the harrowing home that had made her so stressed in the first place.

It makes him feel a little sick. Makes him feel a little helpless, too. But he tries to dwell on how relieved Fumiko had looked when he’d promised he’d be there for her. There’s only so much he can do… But he hopes it’s at least enough to ease a little bit of her pain.

It’s sad. He’d never realized how much she was hurting. But… He hopes now that some things are out in the open, they’ll be able to be there for each other. Maybe things will finally be different.

...At least… For him and Fumiko. Things are still weird with Makoto.

He knows it’s most likely paranoia, or even something to do with what had happened last Friday, but… The way Makoto gushes over his parents still leaves an uncomfortable feeling in his gut. One even Fumiko’s words can’t do much to relieve.

And… It’s not even just about how Makoto might perceive him. Makoto makes his mom laugh! Makoto makes his dad talk! Kiyoshi can hardly do that, and he’s their son! If he can manage to get through to them… Manage to lower his guard around them… Well, then, he really must have some supernatural explanation-- Because Kiyoshi can’t begin to fathom it otherwise.

If Makoto senses his doubts, however, he surely doesn’t let Kiyoshi know. In fact: it’s Makoto’s idea to stay the night. He begs Kiyoshi to let him have a slumber party. And although things are still… Weird, Kiyoshi’s not exactly opposed to the idea. It’s a fun way to spend a Tuesday night, and his parents are just relieved to see he’s finally close enough to someone to want to have a slumber party.

They head up to his room soon after Fumiko’s departure. Taro follows in their footsteps, much to Makoto’s delight. Kiyoshi pops on a movie (Pokemon: The First Movie, for the record) and the two of them munch on some popcorn. By the end of it Makoto’s tearing up over Mewtwo’s heartbreaking plight, but a few tissues passed his way quickly solves the issue.

(God! Kiyoshi’s just become the tissue dispenser boy, hasn’t he!?)

Afterwards, they brush their teeth and get in their pajamas. Neither of which Makoto technically has. But Kiyoshi has an extra toothbrush and an oversized pair of PJs to share, so all’s good.

When it comes time for them to actually try and get some sleep, Makoto offers to sleep on the floor if they “have an extra futon or anything.” An idea which Kiyoshi quickly rejects. To be honest, his queen size bed is a little lonely most of the time, and with such a massive mattress he’d feel pretty shitty making one of his only friends sleep on the goddamn floor.

Makoto comfortable snuggles into bed. That is: After trying to curl up at the foot of the bed like a dog, but he insists that was a joke. (Plus: Taro’s more than a little miffed at someone trying to take his spot.)They discuss whether or not they want to go to sleep yet, and after a little bit of debate, they decide they can afford to stay up a bit longer. Although Kiyoshi reaches to flick the lights off, Makoto decides to mess around with the Nintendo Verse more, and Kiyoshi reads a book by the dim light of the tv.

He knows it’s a bad idea to stay up any later than they already have on a school night, but his Mom’s said he “needs to do irresponsible things more often,” so he supposes this is his chance.

They make small talk as they wind down. Talk about school… About the movie… About
Kiyoshi’s parents.

To be honest, he’s not really reading. He’s thinking, more than anything. About today. About Fumiko. About his family. About Makoto... And about Korosensei.

He can’t get his mind off of earlier. He knows the claim he’d made about Makoto was cruel. Fumiko’s right. He’s... Just not that sort of person. And even still, watching Makoto’s face illuminated by the flickering light of the TV screen... There’s some sort of feeling Kiyoshi can’t shake.

“...Makoto? Can I ask you something?”

Makoto gives a shrug, not looking up from his controller. “Go right ahead.”

“Like... Something important,” Kiyoshi adds on.

Now that catches Makoto’s attention. He pauses his game and turns his head Kiyoshi’s way.

“...Yeah. Of course. What is it?”

Kiyoshi hesitates.

“So... You’re... Really Korosensei, right?”

“Yeah,” Makoto says. There’s not a moment of hesitation. He answers the question like he knows it as well as anything else about himself.

...Kiyoshi’s quiet.

“I mean, I guess I don’t have any way to prove it to you if you don’t believe me,” Makoto says. “But I know who I am. And so does Nagisa. And I guess to me ‘proving’ it to anyone else doesn’t matter. It’s just a fact.” He gives a shrug and sends his glance back towards his controller. He’s itching to get back to the game. “Is that all?”

“No. I was... Actually wondering something about that. The Korosensei thing.”

“Then hit me with it,” Makoto says, looking enthused. “I can answer any questions you’ve got about the guy. Wanna know about the time we hijacked a baseball game?”

“The time you wh-? No!” Kiyoshi says, shaking his head. “No. I don’t want to know about the time you hijacked a baseball game.”

“A shame. It’s a good story,” Makoto says, sticking his tongue out. “What is it, then?”

Kiyoshi takes a deep breath. Can... Can he really say this? He hesitates for one moment more, before finally speaking up.

“...Makoto, are you only friends with me because of my parents?”

He can’t bring himself to look at Makoto. Instead, staring at his shaking hands, he lets the silence sink in.

“What?” Makoto asks, whipping around to face Kiyoshi. “Why would I-?”

“Because you’re Korosensei!” Kiyoshi interrupts, voice strained. It’s hard not to make out the shock and disappointment in Makoto’s tone. But flopping down, he covers his face with his pillow and groans. “Listen, Makoto. I... Know I’m nothing special. A-And don’t try to reassure me about
that! It's true. I'm just… Average. All this time I’ve been wondering why someone like you would dedicate so much time to someone like me. But… I think I finally get it.”

“Kiyoshi-”

“Let me finish. You heard my last name, didn’t you, Makoto? On… On the first day of school. Knowing… What you did, you reasoned out who my parents were. My… Parents you were close to. A- And so you decided to deal with me for the chance to see them again, didn’t you? I… I saw the way you were interacting with them!” Kiyoshi’s voice cracks. “Like… Like old friends. Like… Someone important.” And blinking back tears, Kiyoshi lets out a frustrated groan. “…Is that the only reason you decided to start hanging out with me?”

He knows it’s a harsh question to pose. But it’s one that had come out in one instantaneous, cathartic stream of thought. The possibility has been weighing on him ever since Makoto brought up the Korosensei concept in the first place, and it has only seemed to grow more and more suffocating with time. It had been… Too easy. And too suspicious, too. For everything to just line up like that.

Makoto’s at a total loss for words, struggling to find any way to refute it. But Kiyoshi sees the desperation in his eyes.

…He should have known from the beginning that good things don’t just ‘happen’ to Kiyoshi Karasuma.

Finally, Makoto manages to speak up. Hushed and wounded: “…Is that really how I made you feel?”

All Kiyoshi can find it in himself to respond with is a halfhearted nod.

Makoto scoots closer. Tossing the Verse controller to the side, he brings himself towards Kiyoshi. And reaching out a hand, he says. “Okay, first of all… Look at me. Take that pillow off your face.”

Kiyoshi hesitates, but eventually places it to the side. He wouldn’t be the first person who’d made themselves vulnerable and got caught crying tonight. Makoto pats the seat next to him, as if imploring Kiyoshi to sit up.

…Kiyoshi can’t. Not yet.

Makoto’s looking at him in a way he doesn’t ever think he’s seen Makoto look before. Eyebrows creased and mouth drawn back into a frown-- He’s staring at Kiyoshi with concern in his eyes. When he seems to realize he won’t be getting Kiyoshi to be sitting up, he simply scoots even closer and speaks softly.

“…Second of all: Of course not, Kiyoshi! I… I don’t even know what would make you think that.” He pauses. “Or… Well, I sorta do. But I promise that’s not it.” And placing a hand on Kiyoshi’s shoulder, he says, “Don’t get me wrong. I was super excited to see your parents. I missed them. A lot. But I didn’t plan this! If you want the truth, Kiyoshi, I didn’t know anything about Korosensei when I first met you.”

“W… What?”

Now that’s new information. If… If he hadn’t known, then-

“I mean… I guess I’d had a few weird dreams by that point, but I didn’t start putting any of this
together until months into the school year. I didn’t know who ‘Irina’ or ‘Karasuma’ was! I was still trying to put together who I was. It was only later that everything started to make sense and I figured out how lucky I was!”

‘...How lucky he was.’ Kiyoshi hates the way he says it. Like… Like his parents are the real reward from their relationship. Like they’ve always been. For everyone he feels like he’s known in his entire life.

Maybe… He’d just known subconsciously. Even before he knew who or what he was, he knew what he needed to do, and who he needed to connect with to get there.

“Then why, Makoto? Why on earth did you become friends with me?” He gives a bitter, wounded, sigh. “…And why on earth are you still friends with me?”

“What do you mean, ‘why did I become friends with you?’”

“What I mean is that I’m a narcissistic coward who overthinks everything and everyone, and there’s literally no reason you should care about me this much.”

Makoto shoots him a baffled look. “Okay. You are not a narcissist. We wouldn’t be having this conversation if you were a narcissist. But you want to know the real reason I’m friends with you, Kiyoshi?”

“...Yeah. I do. Because otherwise, I think a little part of me will always believe I don’t deserve it.”

“This… Might seem a little insulting, but to tell the truth: I thought you seemed lonely.”

Oh shit. HE’S the problem child.

“Nagisa told everyone to find a partner for the group project. And I didn’t have any friends yet, either. So I just… Watched. And everyone looked around. The Hisoka twins instantly made eye contact. Riko reached over and tapped Fumiko’s shoulder. Even the shier kids, like Chiharu, waited until they spotted someone else looking a little nervous, then walked their way with a smile. But not you. You just… Sat there. Staring at your desk like ‘I don’t want to put anyone through the burden of knowing me.’ It made me sad. So I decided… Instantly! ‘That’s the one! I wanna be his friend’”

Kiyoshi feels a little ready to choke up. Had his insecurities come across so loudly? And even still… The idea that Makoto would look at him hurting like that and decide ‘No. That’s not true. I want to know you...’

...His heart is aching.

“B-But don’t get me wrong! I’m not your friend out of pity. The more I got to know you, the more I got to like you, Kiyoshi. You’re genuinely funny. And smart. And kind. And I wish you’d be nicer to yourself, because… I think you’re the coolest.”

He’d already been blinking back tears before, but that’s the tide that breaks the dam. Tears trickling down his cheeks, Kiyoshi wipes at his eyes. And looking Makoto’s way, he gives a halfhearted smile.

“...You really think so?”

“Yeah. I do.”
Finally, he finds it in himself to sit up. Bringing himself to his knees, he scoots closer to Makoto.

“It’s funny. Fumiko told me the same thing earlier.” He pauses. “Er, something similar at least,” he quickly corrects. “I guess… I just have trouble believing things like that. And I know that’s not fair. Being around me… Caring about me… You don’t deserve to have your every move psychoanalyzed like that… Considered ingenuine. What a way to repay you for dealing with me. It’s not fair to you, and it’s not fair to me.”

“Dealing with me,” Makoto repeats. “Cut the crap. Cut that out, first of all.”

“...Yeah. Sorry. I’ll try,” Kiyoshi responds. “...What… A heartless way to treat the people who care about me.”

“And a heartless way to treat yourself.”

“...Yeah.”

“I didn’t realize the Korosensei thing would upset you so much,” Makoto admits. “You wanna know the real reason why I shared it with you guys? Because I thought you’d think it’s cool! Well… That, and because I trusted you. Nagisa told me not to tell anyone. And… I get that... But it was kinda lonely, too. And you guys were different! You weren’t my students or- Or my coworker- Or, well your parents! You were my friends! It didn’t matter if you believed me or not, because it wasn’t like I was spitting on the…” He pauses “On the pain I put you through.”

Kiyoshi raises an eyebrow. “…The pain you put them through? Is… Is that really how you feel about everyone else?”

“I dunno, man,” Makoto admits. “When I first told Nagisa the truth, he just cried and cried. And some part of me didn’t get it. Like… ‘I’m right here!’ But… Another part of me… Something smarter… Couldn’t help but think ‘I really messed you up, didn’t I?'”

He knits at his hands. And for a moment, Kiyoshi thinks he catches Makoto frown. But it’s gone as quickly as it appeared.

“But that’s besides the point,” Makoto says. “This is about you. I guess what I’m trying to say is I wouldn’t have told you if I thought it’d upset you! That wasn’t my intent at all! I just wanted to share part of myself with you!”

“I know- I know,” Kiyoshi says. “...This isn’t your fault. It’s mine. I just overthink everything.”

“Well, I mean: I clearly didn't get my point across right if it was bothering you so much…”

“Everything bothers me: Makoto. You know that. And while I think part of that is just my anxiety, I think another part of it is just… Me. I can’t peg it all on something wrong with me, can I? That feels… Irresponsible. Maybe I’m just…” He pauses. “Maybe I just don't want to try.”

“I don’t think so,” Makoto responds. “I mean, you can’t really help it, can you? You’re sick.” He pauses. “Not that you’re sick-sick! You’re sick. Like cool.”

Kiyoshi snorts.

“No, I know I’m not cool-”

Makoto punches his shoulder. “You are cool! You’re cool because you want to get better. And… You can. At least, I want you to. I want you to be someone who can be happy with yourself.
Because you deserve it."

“...And because you have a bit of a track record with getting at-risk kids to finally have some self-confidence?”

Makoto cracks a goofy smile. “That too.”

...It's contagious. Kiyoshi can’t help but crack a smile, either.

“I’m glad we got this cleared up,” Makoto says. “Before it could start to bother you any more. You might not know it, but I’m not always the most perceptive guy, either. I’d been so caught up in the excitement of seeing those two again, I hadn’t been willing to realize I was being sort of a dick to you. And I’m sorry for that.”

“You don’t need to apologize…”

“But I should!” Makoto refutes. “I want to. So here it is: I’m sorry for making you feel bad, Kiyoshi. And as full disclosure: Yes, your parents are important to me: But you are too. And completely separately. Coincidentally. Weirdly, even. But I like you for you. And the day I prioritize your dorky stick-in-the-mud parents above you is the day I give you full permission to punch me in the face.”

“I don’t want to punch you in the face.”

“But I’d deserve it!” Makoto huffs, throwing his hands in the air. “Theoretically, that is. Because I won’t do that. That’d be stupid. You’re my pal.”

“I’m your pal?” Kiyoshi repeats.

“Yeah! You are! And I care about you! So don’t let me be a dummy anymore.”

Kiyoshi ‘snrks,’ but admittedly the weight on his chest is beginning to let up. Fumiko’s right… What had he been thinking? Makoto’s not some sort of manipulative sleazebag who uses people to his own gain! He’s a moron who uses words like ‘pal’ and ‘dummy’ unironically. He couldn’t tell a lie if his life depended on it.

...At least, Kiyoshi hopes so.

He can’t help but remember the way Makoto’s smile faltered earlier. When he talked about Nagisa and the rest.

Maybe he’s been worrying about the wrong person here.

“I won’t,” Kiyoshi reassures. “Just as long as you don’t let me be a dummy, either. Let me know next time I’m overthinking it.”

“Of course. Just as long as you let me know next time you’re bothered.”

“Yeah. I will.” And Kiyoshi pauses. “...You do the same, though, Makoto.”

“Huh?”

“Next time something’s upsetting you, I don’t want you to face it alone, either. You can’t be happy all of the time. And you can’t expect yourself to be. So… Next time something like Shiota-sensei’s reaction is eating at you, you can tell me. I want you to. You don’t need to keep up this weird facade all the time.”
“It’s not a facade…” Makoto argues.

“Well, this weird standard,” Kiyoshi corrects. “...Earlier, something happened with Fumiko. And it made me realize: Sometimes the only thing the three of us are gonna have is each other. So… I wanna be there for you guys. As much as you’ve been there for me. Because… We’re like family. Let me do that much, at least.”

Finally, Makoto nods. “I’ll… Keep that in mind,” he says. “...’Cause I wanna be honest with one another from now on, too. No more hidden insecurities. Just Makoto, Kiyoshi, and Fumiko against the world.” He pauses. “Er- Maybe not against the world. The world is good. I... Think it’s a really bad idea to think of it as anything but. But... The three of us watching each other’s backs, at least.”

The world’s good, huh? It’s funny. That’s supposed to be one of those things that just goes without saying. But the reality of the situation is a lot more nuanced than that. People are... Scary. And people are cruel. Is it really possible to not turn your back on a society where you’re terrified everyone is out to hurt you?

Kiyoshi… Still doesn’t know. But that’s besides the point. Because if there’s anyone who won’t hurt him, he finally knows it’s these two.

He wants to let himself have this.

“...Yeah. I want to have your back, too,” he says, reaching for tissues. He dabs at his eyes and sighs. “Thank you for talking to me. That was really getting to me. But... I feel a lot better now.” And he means it.

“Hey. No problem. I actually feel a lot better now, too.”

And that comes as a relief. It’s funny… To think that Makoto also has worries that eat at him. But now that Kiyoshi knows just what he’s dealing with, he damn well intends to try his best to help.

“We should probably get some sleep,” he admits. “It’s pretty late.”

Er- Well - It’s eleven. So not that late. But for two teachers’ pets, that’s practically a goddamn death sentence.

Makoto gives a tiny nod. “Yeah,” he says. “I’m kinda bored of games, anyways.”

Kiyoshi stands to shelve his book. And as he makes his way across the room Makoto leans over to turn off the Verse. Then, slipping into bed, it seems they’re finally ready to sleep.

“...Night, Makoto.”

“Night, Kiyoshi.”

Well, if only it were that easy. Kiyoshi is sort of a chronic insomniac who takes two hours to fall asleep at best. He’s half tempted to grab his phone and send a text Fumiko’s way telling her everything had turned out alright, but he doesn’t want to keep Makoto up. He decides he’ll just wait until morning. Instead, he turns over, and tries his best to get some shuteye.

“Wait. One more thing-” he says. And there goes that whole ‘getting some shuteye’ thing.

Makoto cracks open an eyelid. “What is it?”

“I just wanted to say sorry if I wake you up in the middle of the night. I have a lot of trouble
sleeping So if I like have to get out of bed to pee and wake you up I’m sorry. I’ll try to be quiet but I just wanted to say something in advance because—"


“Or I might- Like? Kick? Sometimes I have really bad nightmares. So I’m sorry if I - Kick you in the face.”

“You won’t.”

“Oh. I will—”

“I can handle it,” Makoto says in a voice that seems to imply he’s taking this as a challenge.

“And that’s not even getting started on- Like- Sleep paralysis? If you wake up and see me staring at the ceiling in sheer terror, don’t worry about that either. I just can’t move! At all! But don’t worry because it’ll be over in a minute or two.”

“What the shit?” Makoto asks.

“I know, right?”

“I didn’t even know that was a thing—”

“Me neither. Until I got it for the first time when I was four! Fun stuff,” Kiyoshi snarks.

To be honest, he’d thought he was having a stroke or something. (What four year old is even supposed to know the word ‘stroke!’?) He’d had a panic attack in his parents’ bed and cried on his bewildered mom for an hour straight afterwards.

“How does that even happen?”

“Something to do with waking up the wrong way. You get stuck in between being awake and being asleep. Your body doesn’t process it’s awake so you can’t move, but you sure as hell are conscious. And that’s not even mentioning the nightmare hell demons! Because yes, you will hallucinate seeing as how you’re half asleep.”

“That- That- That shouldn’t be allowed!” Makoto sputters.

“Yeah! It shouldn’t! But the human body is a horrible vessel and constantly doing things that it shouldn’t solely to torment its inhabitant.”

He hardly even realizes he’s raised his voice until Taro shoots him an exhausted look. Oh, right. It is nearly midnight. He supposes he’d just been so caught up in the euphoria of ranting about the dumb shit his sleep-deprived and anxious body regularly puts him through he’d forgotten other people were trying to sleep.

“Good news is,” he says, lowering his voice, “It’s become a lot less common as I’ve gotten older. I just figured I’d give you a heads up. Y’know- Just in case.”

“Yeah,” Makoto says, yawning. But despite his tired demeanor, he seems in no mood to sleep now. He scoots closer to Kiyoshi, eyes wide as he whispers another question. “What’s the scariest thing you’ve ever seen?”

“What?”
“You said you see like… Nightmare demons while it happens. What’s the spookiest?”

Kiyoshi gives a lazy shrug. “Oh, I don’t know,” he says. To be truthful, he does. But the last thing he wants to be remembering, much less telling Makoto about, is his worst sleep paralysis demon. He’s trying to go to sleep, for Pete’s sake. He doesn’t need to be describing a hunched over and emancipated figure bleeding from its eye sockets or whatever the hell. That’s just freaky. “Like I said, it’s been a while.”

“Weirdest, then.”

“Eh?”

“What’s the weirdest thing you’ve seen?” Makoto asks, his voice a whisper. “It doesn’t gotta be scary. I mean, you see all sorts of super weird, funny stuff in dreams. If you’re half-dreaming, half-awake, you gotta see something weird at least once in a while, right?”

Kiyoshi thinks it over for maybe half a second. And face flushing red, he turns over. “Let’s talk about the scariest, actually—” he says, voice cracking.

“W-WHAT!?! I thought you said you didn’t remember!”

“I do now!” Kiyoshi lies through his teeth. “And it’s much more interesting than the weirdest.”

“Hey! No!” Makoto replies. “Now you’ve got me curious! You gotta tell me what the weirdest thing was!”

“Uh- No. Nope. No way in hell.” Kiyoshi huffs, reaching to cover his face with his hands.

“Awww! Come on! Pretty please!? What happened to telling each other everything!?”

“That was, about, like, things that were legitimately bothering us. Not about the dumb shit I was scared of when I was five.”

“Well now this is legitimately bothering me! It’s gonna eat at me forever if you don’t tell me! C’mom! Just spit it out!”

“Absolutely not!” Kiyoshi repeats. “It’s really not anything that interesting.”

“Then you can share it!” Makoto insists

“No!”

“Please!?”

“No!”

“Please!?”

“No!”

“Please!?”

Kiyoshi lets out a low sigh. Something tells him that the stubborn Makoto isn’t going to let up no matter what he says. And Taro’s staring at him with a pleading expression. He may as well bite the bullet if he wants to let the dog, or himself, for that matter, get any sleep.
“...Okay. But you have to promise not to make fun of me.”

“I promise,” Makoto quickly swears as he leans in in anticipation. “You can tell me anything.”

Kiyoshi takes a deep breath.

“...It was you.”

Now that takes Makoto by surprise. He jolts and jerks away from Kiyoshi. “W-What does that mean!?” He yells. “H-How recently was this!? Am I really scary!?”

“Not you-you, dumbass!” Kiyoshi hisses, slapping a hand over Makoto’s mouth. Taro looks just about ready to cry. “Korosensei!”

“Oh,” Makoto replies, his shoulders lowering. But before a moment can even pass, he’s back to his shouting. “Wait! What does that mean!? I wasn’t scary, was I!!?”

“To a five-year-old… Yes! You were!” Kiyoshi refutes, feeling his own face flush red with embarrassment. Still, he’s not even nearly as humiliated as he’d expected to feel admitting this. If anything, he’s feeling a brunt of the embarrassment secondhand through Makoto acting like a doofus.

“How did you even see me!?”

“My parents showed me a picture of you!” Kiyoshi says, grimacing. “Thought it’d be some cute fun thing! ‘Meet the guy who got us to fuck and conceive you!’ Something tells me they hadn’t picked up on the whole ‘generalized anxiety disorder’ thing yet, because I had nightmares for weeks!”

Makoto pauses. “Wait. Your parents kept pictures of me? That’s so cute!” he gushes, bringing his palms to cup his cheeks. Though quickly, his wounded expression returns. “But that doesn’t matter! The important thing here is that you think I’m a horrific monster who, like, eats babies!”

“Hey! No! What!? When did I say that!? Kiyoshi sputters. “You don’t eat- I never said you eat babies!”

“You implied it!”

“Now you’re just putting words in my mouth!”

“And after I tried so hard to appear non-threatening and appealing to children!” Makoto wails

“That was your idea of nonthreatening!?”

“That was my idea of adorable!”

“To middle schoolers, maybe! To a literal toddler, however, you looked like a goddamn serial killer! You gotta admit you at least had a bit of a slasher smile!”

“No! No! I was delightful!” Makoto shrieks.

“If that’s your idea of delightful, I don’t want to know what your idea of scary is!”

“My best friend thinking I’m nightmare material! Now that’s scary!”

“Hey! I never said - Now I don’t - Only when I was five!” Kiyoshi sputters.
Things continue like that for a while. And they only wind down when Taro finally gets sick of their shit and decides to sit on Kiyoshi’s chest.

“See? Taro agrees with me,” Makoto brags. “He thinks I’m adorable.”

“First of all,” Kiyoshi says. “I never said you aren’t adorable, I said Korosensei wasn’t. Second of all: I think the only thing Taro agrees with is the fact that we need to get some goddamn sleep.”

“Fair enough,” Makoto admits, giving the dog a firm pat. “I still think he agrees with me, though.”

Kiyoshi gently pushes Taro off of him, sandwiching him in between the two of them. Taro doesn’t seem to mind, however; Letting out a contented chuff as Makoto wraps an arm around him.

“Agree to disagree?” Kiyoshi finally asks, coming to the acute realization that if he spends all night hysterically arguing with Makoto over where Korosensei lies on the uncanny valley scale, he’s going to feel like horseshit in the morning.

Makoto huffs, but nods. “Agree to disagree,” he says.

Kiyoshi rolls over once more. And shutting his eyes, he begins to drift off to sleep.

“...It’s funny,” Makoto admits.

“...Eh?” Kiyoshi groggily responds.

“How the tables have turned,” Makoto muses. “When you were little, you were scared of me. But now? I’m gonna protect you from all the nightmares.”

Kiyoshi yawns. “I’m not sure if you can do that Makoto.”

“Oh yes I am,” Makoto argues. “Ain’t nothing gonna dare to scare my best friend while I’m here with him. I’ll kick those sleep paralysis demons’ asses.”

“...They’re not real demons, Makoto,” Kiyoshi admits with a chuckle.

“I know that. But that won’t stop me,” Makoto says with a smirk.

“Even if they’re you?”

Makoto snorts. “I know they won’t be.”

...And somehow, Kiyoshi knows that by now, too.

“Alright. Thanks, Makoto,” he says, pulling the covers up over himself. He knows there's no talking this wackjob out of it.

“No prob.”

“...Night.”

“Night, Kiyoshi.”

And true to Makoto’s word, Kiyoshi doesn’t have a single nightmare that night.

In the morning, when he wakes up the gentle sound of Makoto's snoring, a smile comes to his face. And just the two of them, with the sunlight filtering in through Kiyoshi's window, Kiyoshi has to
wonder...

Maybe Makoto had protected him after all.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter 17 and Family Time part 2, ya'll! Sorry about the wait ahaha. But I hope you see why I decided to split it now. A LOT happened in this second half, and it'd have been one massive-ass chapter if I kept it in one piece.

This was an INSANELY emotional chapter, but thankfully it seemed to have a pretty peaceful and even cathartic resolution to both of its main issues, so I'm thankful for that.

If you haven't found out by now, a big theme in my stories is found family. It's something I wish Assclass itself had explored more considering just how bad the bio families of its characters are, and it's something I'm having a lot of fun exploring now. 'Family' is something the Moonrise quartet found in each other after insanely stressful childhoods, and it seems to be something the Newtime trio has found in each other during their own insanely stressful childhoods. Hopefully that's a good sign for their futures.

As a note this IS where I'm gonna have to step in and please ask you to not ship Fumiko/Kiyoshi. I can't really stop you from shipping Makoto/Fumiko and Makoto/Kiyoshi considering they both certainly have had their Moments, but as a note Kiyoshi's gay. So let's Not. Additionally, it's important to me that the idea of 'found family' isn't always romantic, and that insanely intimate things like hugging and comforting someone while they're upset can be a purely platonic thing. It's the sort of kindness no-one would have a second thought about bestowing towards their friends in real life, but in fiction its a sort of lens that's always perceived as purely romantic, and just this once I'd like to step out of that box.

Speaking of box, the hotboxing the bathroom bit is a joke I've had planned for months, and again I am SO glad to finally have it on paper. Why does it seem like most of these 'jokes I came up with way before I even started writing AIS' tidbits are about shit Irina says? I guess she's too funny for her own good.

And, of course, the reveal that Kiyoshi and Fumiko, to a lesser extent, finally believe Makoto on the whole 'Korosensei' thing. They've spent so long on the fence about it, but it seems his anecdotes have finally swayed them. And set off Kiyoshi's anxiety, but that's a given with how Kiyoshi Is.

I really enjoyed writing the scene w Kiyoshi and Makoto finally having a conversation confronting those anxieties, and I hope you enjoyed it too! Alongside w the additional silliness afterwards.

Some songs that helped me write this chapter were Look At Me from Violet, Small Hands by Radical Face, Who Are You Really by Mikky Ekko, and The Best of Friends from The Fox And The Hound.

The next chapter should be another two week wait. Sorry about that ya'll. It's a big
one, and NOT one I can split in two. But it's an emotional roller coaster, and I hope you're excited! Tbh from now on please expect two week waits as the norm and one week waits as the surprise treat, because these chapters keep getting longer and longer, and if I write any faster I'd risk burning out.

I hope you enjoyed! And make sure to let me know what you thought! See you soon! o/
Makoto gets the gist of the family thing pretty quickly.

To be honest, it’s cute. It’s nice to think that he, Fumiko, and Kiyoshi have each others’ backs. He’s learned pretty quickly that neither of them are exactly content with their home situations... And if ‘found family’ is just a step above ‘best friends,’ that’s a step he’s willing to take.

Hell, they’ve all sorta become family in his eyes. Not just those two. Nagisa and Karma and Kayano. Even Gakushuu. Miss Nao and Taro, too!

...Well, they’ve always been. At least... the first three.

It’s weird to think he didn’t have much of a ‘real’ family back then. When he was Korosensei. He still can’t remember much of what happened to his parents-- but he knows deep down in his gut he’d been alone. That’s why the E-Class had meant so much to him, right? He’d been the first to come to them and say, “You don’t need to be alone anymore. You’re one of us now,” and they’d gladly returned the favor for him. Been his first and only family.

(Were they his first family? He can’t seem to shake it. The thought of a boy whose face he can’t make out. But as soon as he reaches for it, it vanishes. Buried with the other things he just can’t remember. A woman’s shriek and a vengeful, bloodshot eye...)

But things are a little different now. He has a blood family. And while that doesn’t exactly stop him in his tracks of considering everyone else a part of his motley crew, it does leave him wondering.

He has a dad. He has a mom. And while that doesn’t make him need Nagisa or the rest any less, he wishes they would be a part of his life, too. He wishes his dad didn’t come home half catatonic, and he wishes his mom hadn’t left when he was three. It’s never something that’s really bothered him before, seeing as how he tries not to let anything bother him, but the more perfect things seem, the more unjust it seems to settle in his gut.

...He wants to make things right with them. Or at least... Dad. He doesn’t know where he’d begin to find Mom.

‘Cause even as happy as he is now, he’s always been the more the merrier type of guy. Sure, things are scary, but he’s never really TRIED to amend them before. Especially not with the knowledge he has now. The wisdom of Korosensei’s years. He’s fixed broken families before...: Father and son reuniting under the dim light of the moon, and mothers promising to let their boys go by torchlight.

...The happy endings people like Itona and Nagisa attained.
Things have never been right with dad. But he’s never tried before. Surely there has to be something he can do.

He just has to figure out where to begin.

He brings the idea up to Kiyoshi. Says he’s going to try to break through his dad’s cynical exterior. Things have been rough up until now, but it’s not like they’ve ever had a heart to heart.

“I don’t think it could be that easy, Makoto…” he voices, giving him an aside glance.

“Well have you ever had a heart to heart with your family about how you’re feeling?” Makoto asks.

“No…” Kiyoshi admits, looking somewhat ashamed.

To be honest, Makoto thinks he should. He thinks Kiyoshi’s family would get it more than any other. And Kiyoshi is more articulate than he’d give himself credit for. He’d managed to voice his feelings to Makoto after all, hadn’t he? But he also knows these sorts of things are hard for Kiyoshi. And as such, he simply vows to give him the confidence to approach them through his own success.

“Fumiko, too.”

“Don’t say that to her,” Kiyoshi begs.

“Why?”

“Trust me when I say her family is the worst.”

...The worst. He gets that much, at least. The terror Fumiko had shown of her parents when he’d climbed into her window still sticks with him. And even yet… can it truly be impossible for one to find, at the very least, closure with their parents? It’s not like anyone sets out to just do evil things… To hurt the ones they’d supposed to protect. It has to be a fluke. A mistake. Something to be set right. Some sense to be knocked into them. That’s all.

And as such, he begins to orchestrate a plan in his mind. Something to say. Something to do.

What had Nagisa done? What about Itona? Hazama and Kimura? It’s far away now. And yet… Makoto knows they’d found some sort of peace, right? They had to have. To be where they are today… And still… Makoto doesn’t know where to begin to ask.

As such, he’ll tackle this one alone. Like he always has. And that’s okay! He’s a role-model! And he’s going to do this right. By the time he’s done chatting with his dad, they’ll be as close as two peas and a pod.

What should he say?

“Dad, I know you’ve very stressed having to take care of me and all, but I really wish we talked more.”

“I’m not sure if you know, but because of how I was raised I lashed out and stole things for a bit. I don’t want to make those mistakes ever again. So please: work with me.”

“Pops, when you yell at me, it really reminds me of my teacher’s mean mother, and that makes me sad. As for why I know about my teacher’s mean mother, that’s a long story, and it’s one I’d love
...Bluh. Maybe he should just follow his heart and say whatever he feels in the moment. But is Kiyoshi right? Can it really be that simple? If so… Why hasn’t he fixed things until now? And what will they be like after he does?

Either way, it seems he has a long process in front of him. But he knows deep in his heart it’ll all be worth it in the end.

Ring-ring! Ring-ring! Ring-ring!

Nagisa just about jumps out of his skin every time he gets a phone call. Hard not to, when he’s half-expecting it to be his husband’s abusive father every time. By now he and Gakushuu have fully formulated a plan of what they’re going to say when Nagisa finally cuts Gakuho off, but it’s still a pretty dreadful experience just having to sit there and anticipate his final call.

And Nagisa knows it can only be bothering Gakushuu even more than it’s bothering him. He can see the way Gakushuu’s jaw clenches each time Nagisa’s phone rings. And he can’t exactly blame him for the stress. This is a huge final step for Gakushuu. As much as it’s a declaration of freedom, it’s also the decision to let go of his father forever. And Nagisa can’t help but imagine that’s all sorts of cathartic and petrifying all at once.

Nonetheless, as the phone rings, Nagisa holds a finger up. And standing to step away from the dinner table and his family, he murmurs a quick “Let me take this.” Then, giving Gakushuu a look as if saying ‘I’m sure it’s not him, but I’ll get you if it is,’ he steps out of the room.

He makes his way into the living room and carefully sits down. Giving his phone a good look, he quickly realizes his fears were unfounded and it is indeed not the infamous Gakuho. In fact: The caller ID on his screen is a familiar one, but the opposite of a name that would invoke dread.

“Sakura!” he says, answering the phone. “Long time no see! Er- Hear, I guess. Long time no hear.”

There’s a chuckle from the other side. “Hey, Nagisa.”

“You know- Because we’re not. Talking in person.”

“Yeah. I get it,” Sakura replies, deadpan. “I hear you’re the same awkward loser as ever.”

It’s Nagisa’s turn to give an awkward chuckle. “Yeah, pretty much,” he says, making himself comfortable on the couch. He crosses his leg over his knee. “Listen: I can’t talk too much. Having dinner with the family and all. But how have you been?”

“The shit? Why are you eating so late? Sounds like your schedule’s gone to hell.”

Nagisa sends a glance towards the clock. Huh. On second thought, he does suppose 8 o’clock, at night is a pretty ungodly time to be eating dinner. But on second-second thought (Third thought? Probably third thought) it’s less ‘dinner’ and more ‘second dinner.’

Oddly enough, they’ve taken to pretty much having two dinners a night, seeing as how they need to make sure to get something on the kids’ stomachs. (Makoto’s, especially.) But as delightful as the kids are, they have sorta been butting into their ‘family time.’ There are certain things they just can’t discuss with them around like ‘intergenerational trauma’ or ‘their sex lives.’ And as such, after feeding the kids at 6 or so, once they’ve ushered them home, they’ve started simply communing in the kitchen more than anything to keep a hold on that personal family time. Half the
time they don’t even eat, but sometimes there’s no better time to catch up on your day than dinner.

...Even fake dinner.

“Yeah. Sorta,” Nagisa admits. “Long story. Things have been crazy with the students.”

He can practically imagine Sakura rolling her eyes over the phone. “You are a mess,” she says, huffing. “I’ve been good, though,” she admits. “Work’s been well. Pretty sure I’m close to convincing the boss to give me a raise.”

“Remember what I told you: Be assertive. But not too assertive. Just be confident.” To be truthful Nagisa is the least qualified person to be giving her advice on this considering he’s literally self-employed. But hey! He worked under Paradise’s administration long enough to get the gist of things... He thinks.

“Will do,” Sakura says.

“What about that boy you’ve been seeing? How are things with that?”

Sakura lets out a low groan. “Ugh. Don’t even mention it. Now that was a disaster I think I’d much rather forget. The last thing I need to be focusing on right now is boys anyways considering my taste in them is fucken horrible.”

Stings a little considering he now knows she had a crush on him back when she was an Elementary Schooler, but that’s beside the point.

“Yeah. No need to rush it. You should focus on your work for now. Sorry to hear about the breakup though.”

“Pah. It doesn’t matter. He was a clown.”

Nagisa can’t help but smile. She’s as resilient as ever.

Crazy to think she’s already a working woman. With a job. And a boss. And ex-boyfriends. It feels like just yesterday she was a little girl afraid of being bullied. But now? She doesn’t take shit from anyone. She’s 27, for fuck’s sake!

Good lord... Twenty-seven. The very thought gives him a headache. How had she gotten so old so fast? For a minute, he can even almost understand how poor Makoto must feel.

‘Jesus fucking Christ!’ The little Korosensei in his head exclaims, breaking character with its newfound profanity. ‘Nagisa!? Thirty!? That's not possible!’

It’s okay, Imaginary Korosensei. Nagisa can’t process it either.

“But enough with the small talk bullshit. I called to ask about you,” Sakura admits. “I know we’ve been Snapchattting a little, but I’ve meant to ask how the year’s been. How are the kids? Any other students smashed your TV in?”

“No, Sakura. No other students have smashed my TV in.”

“Damn shame. That Konishi kid was the best.” Sakura snorts. “I get it if you don’t have much time to chat now, though. If you need to be getting back to dinner, you could always call me later.”

“That would be nice,” Nagisa admits. “I’ll probably have some time on the walk to work tomorrow. Does 7 AM sound good to you?”
“Oh hell no,” Sakura replies. “I am not getting up at 7 AM, even to talk to my dork tutor.”

“Fair enough. In that case, I’ll try to call you sometime after school. At like… Five at the latest.”

“Works for me,” Sakura says. “See you then.”

“Yeah,” Nagisa says. “See you then.”

Nagisa waits for Sakura to hang up, then carefully pockets his phone. He stands and makes his way back into the kitchen.

Gakushuu gives him a look. “It wasn’t him, I take it?” he asks.

“Nah,” Nagisa says, patting his pocket. “Just Sakura. She wanted to catch up, but I told her now’s not really the time.”

Karma snorts. “More like you were afraid she’d roast you and needed a chance to put together your retorts if you ever wanted to survive the onslaught.”

“You do realize you’re inadvertently backing him up, right?” Kayano asks.

All Gakushuu gives her in response is a wry smile. But as quickly as some shred of amusement shows on his face, it fades. And he looks Nagisa’s way once more.

“I can’t believe he hasn’t called you yet,” he admits. “And to think the man has been so obsessed with getting in contact with you up until this point.”

Even Karma’s goofy smirk wanes. Nagisa has a feeling he’d even attempted to start the roast conversation in the first place to distract from the real elephant in the room.

“Forget about him,” he says. “The bastard isn’t worth your time. Maybe he’s finally just realized he doesn’t deserve to stand in the presence of someone as powerful as Nagisa.”

Gakushuu’s lip twitches. “It’s almost like he knows what’s coming.”

Nagisa sighs. To be truthful, Nagisa thinks he does. He could call Gakuho many, many derogatory things, but ‘stupid’ is not among those. He’s observant. Scarily so. There’s no way in hell he hasn’t noticed the way their conversations grow more and more stilted with each call. Nagisa has done his best to hide his distaste, but he’s only human. By now Gakuho has to know he hates him. And surely as a father, even a shitty one, he has to know the end is coming.

...Selfish asshole. He’s making this harder on Gakushuu than it needs to be.

And it’s not like Nagisa can just call him himself and say ‘Stop calling us. I’m never talking to you again.’ That’s just weird. That will make him seem like the instigator. And to be honest, he thinks Gakuho knows that, too.

“He’ll cave in eventually,” Nagisa says. “Just give it time. And in the meantime, enjoy your Gakuho-free life. Soon you won’t need to worry about him ever again.”
“Mmm,” is all Gakushuu says in response.

Nagisa’s eyes drift back down to his dinner. And he supposes there’s nothing much he can do for now. All he and Gakushuu can do both is wait. And while there’s almost nothing worse than that, what choice do they have? All they can do is attempt to support each other in the meantime while they wait to rip this band-aid off.

The band-aid that Gakuho doesn’t even dare to touch.

And still, each time Nagisa’s phone rings, his heart breaks. Because he watches Gakushuu’s heart jump out of his chest.

The more she sees the light of something better, the more Fumiko just wants to up and run away. She knows it’s a silly idea, and so she doesn’t even humor it. But still, she can’t shake it. Not from the very back of her mind.

Kiyoshi was right. She doesn’t need them. Not really. Everything she couldn’t experience with her ‘family’ - everything they haven’t put in the effort of wanting to experience with her - she can experience with someone else. Her friends become living proof of that. Slowly but surely as she attempts to define ‘family’ in her mind, she reaffirms that it not only relies on the little things, but that those are something she has obtained with them. From playing rounds of vulgar card games curled up on the floor, to comforting each other during their lowest lows... Surely that’s what ‘caring about’ someone is.

And the more she comes to that realization, the more it leaves a bitter taste in her mouth. If it’s so easy for people who she’d only met a few months ago to give her so much love, why has it been too much of an effort to receive the same care from the people she’s known all her life?

...It makes her sad, of course. But now that she knows she at least has someone backing her, it makes her angrier than anything. She’s sick of it. She’s sick of living this way. She loves the way she feels around her friends. She loves the things she gets to experience around Nagisa’s family. And having to return to her suffocating home each night after finally being able to breathe feels like having the bars of a cell door slammed on her face.

She knows it’s possible. To leave. Nagisa had done it, right? Gakushuu, too. Even Karma and Kayano she hasn’t heard much about the families of. Surely there has to be some sort of connecting factor there.

And even so, she’s afraid of breaching the topic to them. Afraid of being called ungrateful. She knows it’s an impossible notion... They’ve been so endlessly supportive of her up to this point. But... It’s ridiculous to ask for their help with that. They’re already done so, so much for her. Asking for anything more would seem thankless at best. They’ve done all in their power to give her the family she’s needed. Now it seems it’s up to her to escape the one she hasn’t.

It’s a scary notion. Living on her own. Or at least... Away from them. Would Nagisa take her in-? No! Don’t ask that of him. And even if he would, it would be a world of a difference. She’s lived her entire life with riches - with maids. The idea of departing from all that is inane. But if she’s willing to let go the way they treat her, she must be ready to let go of that, too.

...She’s not ready. Not yet.

And in some ways, she loathes herself for that. She wants to be like them. She wants to make her decisions now. But she can’t. Not yet.
She leans into study, instead. Researches what it will take to be on her own. She is no empty-headed girl. As kind as the people around her can be, dreams don’t simply come true through sheer will. She must take some responsibility into her own hands. She researches custody laws in Japan. She begins to save money where she can. And one lazy afternoon she asks Nagisa to teach her how to wash her own dishes for the first time in her life.

..It’s not nearly as hard as she thought it would be.

She steels herself to ask them about their stories. Nagisa’s family. Not yet. But soon. She may need it in the coming years.

...The coming years!? When has she ever thought about her future like this before!?

She’s never had reason to. It had been set in stone. To grow up exactly as instructed. But they had shaken that foundation. And now she wishes to become anything but. She cannot - will not - grow up another branch on the family tree... As empty as her mother and as heartless as her father.

Grand plans or not, she doesn’t want to be just a Hisakawa. She never has. She just hadn’t had the push to realize it until now.

She wants to be like a Shiota. Like A Yukimura. Like a Karasuma or a Himura.

...She wants to be a Fumiko, whatever that entails.

It’s not all hard work, though. The harder she pushes herself, the more they stand by her side... The more she can lean into her friendships - Into the family she’s found. And with each morning Kiyoshi asks her if she’s okay… Each time Makoto makes her laugh… She treasures it more and more. It’s a feeling she wants to live in.

By daylight, they harass poor Miss Nao. And by night, when her sister and father make passive-aggressive comments at each other over the dinner table, she can simply slip away. Excuse herself and ascend up to her room… Only to bury her face in her phone and find reassurance in their words.

[10/15/2030 8:45 PM:] [Makoro ]: Guys! Guys!

[10/15/2030 8:45 PM:] [Makoro ]: I managed to get a pigeon to SIT ON MY HAND TODAY. I almost caught him, too!

[10/15/2030 8:46 PM:] [Makoro ]: So close to another pet…

[10/15/2030 8:47 PM:] [Kiyoshi]: Where would you even KEEP a pigeon?

[10/15/2030 8:47 PM:] [Makoro ]: Nagisa’s place! Duh.

[10/15/2030 8:47 PM:] [Kiyoshi]: I don’t think he’d let y


[10/15/2030 8:49 PM:] [Makoro ]: Yeah. You’d be right about that one.

Fumiko snorts and rolls her eyes. Yeah. Even the dumb shit is reassuring. A far cry from the outside world. And when her actual house is so loveless, she finds a home in the way she laughs.

It feels like day and night. The person she pretends to be at home, and the person she’s becoming.
She’s faker than ever at ‘home.’ She’d heard the way her parents had threatened to pull her out of Constellate if she hadn’t made progress. And so she does. She grits her teeth, straightens her back, and pretends to be their perfect little girl.

...She can’t risk losing this. Not now.

She kills it off, the enthusiasm she feels, the minute she walks in the door. And it’s suffocating. It’s lonely. It’s tough. But it’s always there waiting for her the next day when she tucks her scarf around her neck in homeroom.

She screams with laughter when Makoto ends up stabbing her in P.E., and somehow even the act seems worth it.

Because one day she knows it will be worth it. With time… With effort… And with companionship, she can find it: True freedom. Until that day she’ll always have the three of them. And the thought of that future is enough to help her move forward with grace.

Usually, it’s Nagisa who wakes the others up. Not the other way around.

It’s four-something in the morning, and he’s half asleap when he hears a shuffling sound. The bed creaks as someone steps out, and footsteps descend down the stairs.

At first, he assumes it’s just one of his spouses taking a trip to the bathroom, and his eyes flutter shut. But remembering that not only is their bathroom upstairs, but also that Gakushuu’s been going through quite a bit of emotional turmoil lately, he sits up and groggily looks around.

It takes him a moment to get his bearings, but by the dim light of their nightlight and a soft familiar snoring, he quickly realizes Gakushuu is sound asleep. Karma’s tangled up next to him, an arm slung over his chest. Which only seems to leave one person missing.

...Kayano?

Nagisa groggily rubs at his eyes, craning his head in her direction. And surely enough, her spot is unoccupied, an indent left in the bed where she’d been only moments before. Figuring she could simply be running downstairs to grab a drink, however, Nagisa rolls over and waits.

He trains his eyes on the digital clock that sits on his bedside table. Watching the numbers blink to their rhythm, he fends off a familiar sleepiness.

A minute passes. And then five. By the time the clock reaches ten, he’s already out of bed. He slides into his octopus slippers and makes his way down the stairs, flicking on the lights as he reaches the bottom.

Kayano looks up at him with surprise. She’s taken seat at the dinner table, a steaming mug of hot cocoa sitting in front of her.

“Nagisa?” she asks.

“Ah. Sorry-” he says, making his way towards her. “I just got worried. You know how it is.”

Kayano frowns. “I hope I didn’t wake you up.”

Nagisa shakes his head. “Nah,” he says. And it’s only half a lie. “I’d been having trouble sleeping anyways, and when I noticed you’d been gone so long, I figured I better check up on you.”
Now that cracks a tiny smile from Kayano. “Thanks, I guess.”

Her voice is quiet. Nagisa can’t help but note a weird sense of melancholy in the room.

“Mind if I pour a cup?” he asks. “I figure I’m already not gonna get back to sleep tonight. May as well treat myself.” A beat. “And, y’know, get a head start on the sugar rush I’m gonna need to make it through the day.”

Kayano snorts. “Go right ahead. There should still be some left,” she says. “I could use some company, anyways.”

Nagisa quickly pours himself a mug. And sliding in next to Kayano, he asks “What are you doing up this late? You’re not usually the night owl type.”

Kayano gives a defeated shrug, staring down into her cup. “Just… Thinking,” she says.

The slightest turn of her lip. Her eyes flicker his way, then back to her mug.

It’s funny. Nagisa knows that look. The one he’s had on his own face a million times before. That ‘thinking’ look. That overthinking look. That worrying look.

...Not such a good actor after all, is she?

“Wanna talk about it?” he asks.

It feels like only a few months ago he’d been on the other side of this table. And that’s because he had. Even then, despite his condemnations of ‘You’ll think it’s crazy,’ Kayano had pressed through his stubborn exterior. He may not know exactly what’s on her mind, but he’s happy to return the favor.

“Yeah. I guess,” Kayano says. “If I can even find a way to word it.”

“Take your time,” Nagisa says, taking a sip of his cocoa. It’s still searing hot.

“A little bleak, too.”

“When have our lives been anything but?”

Kayano gives a bittersweet smile as she stares into her mug. “...Yeah. That’s it,” she says, lifting it to take her own sip. “I think it’s just… Things have been so perfect lately.”

Nagisa raises an eyebrow, but doesn’t object. “Yeah. Things have been nice,” he simply agrees.

“Makoto… Fumiko… Even Kiyoshi,” Kayano says. “All of it has been so nice. I’ll just sit there... And I’ll listen to them run throughout the house, laughing at the top of their lungs. It makes me so happy.” She pauses. “And I mean... You’ve had students stay here before. And they were wonderful. Miyako… Konishi… They were wonderful kids. But this is different.”

Yeah. Nagisa gets it. Life had been good before. But never perfect. Not quite.

“Yeah. I don’t think anyone else could have filled the hole that Sensei left.”

Sometimes, he sits awake at night, too. And he wonders if that’s a hole that even Makoto can’t fill.

“It’s crazy,” Kayano says. “I still can’t believe that he’s back. Sometimes I forget- For just a moment- And then it all comes rushing back to me. Hits me again. And I feel so, so relieved.”
“I don’t think it’s a relief that will ever fade,” Nagisa admits. Not after fifteen years of grief. Never.

“...I still blame myself for it sometimes, you know,” Kayano admits. “Wondering… ‘If I hadn’t spent all my time wrapped up in vengeance, could I have saved him?’ Or… At the very least, could I have made things easier on everyone else?”

Nagisa sighs and reaches for her hand. “I get it,” he says. “I still blame myself too. Every day.”

Sitting there. Worrying… Wondering… Knowing that there’s no avoiding it. Knowing that one day, Makoto will surely remember he’s a murderer.

...Knowing that he’d killed the only adult who had ever been proud of him.

He knows that guilt isn’t what Korosensei would have wanted. Isn’t what Makoto would want. And yet, with each passing day… It seems to grow heavier. It’s depressing… That word that Korosensei had stood for: “Assassination,” loses it’s fun allure more with every passing year.

...Murder. That’s all it is. The government, his teachers… They’d tried to put a fun, childlike spin on it… Make it appealing to a bunch of Chuunibyou children who’d been saddled with that responsibility. But Nagisa knows better now. It’s murder.

Sometimes, he still doesn’t know why he romanticizes it. Turns it into a game for his kids. He knows they’re not in any real danger. It’s not like they’d ever have to hurt him. But it makes his heart still. And even so - Even despite that - It’s too complicated. He can’t hate it. He can’t resent it. And he could never resent what he’d been through. It’s a feeling he just can’t shake. The strength that very word gives him… ‘Kill.’ … It brings him back to the strongest point in his life.

To be truthful, he doesn’t know whether he runs P.E the way he does for his kids or for himself. But, either way, it’s pretty sad he peaked in middle school.

Finally, he shakes his head. Shakes himself out of his thoughts.

“...But there’s no use in blaming ourselves now,” he says. “It’s not like we can change it. And besides… He’s here now, isn’t he? And he’s happy. The last thing we need to be worrying about is…” He pauses.

All the ways they screwed him over?

“Things beyond our control,” he decides on instead.

Kayano gives a tiny nod. “I suppose,” she says, stirring her hot cocoa. “...It just… Feels a little perfect, doesn’t it?”

Nagisa raises an eyebrow.

“Forgive me if this sounds pessimistic,” Kayano says, her voice quiet. “But… I don’t think life’s felt this certain for me in a long time. I don’t think I’ve ever had it so clearly laid out for me that the future would be ‘good,’ since… Well… Since that month in middle school. When we really thought we’d save Korosensei. I still think about it all the time.”

Yeah. Nagisa does, too. It’s funny. Even the things Kayano blames herself for… The things that had made it ever-harder to lose Korosensei… They’d allowed the class that one beautiful month.

“But… We didn’t,” Kayano says. “We couldn’t. We couldn’t save him. We never even had a
chance. It was ripped away from us.” Her voice quivers. “What if… What if this is, too?”

Nagisa reaches a hand out to place it on her shoulder. “Kayano…-

“Sometimes it feels like half my life is just the things I want being dangled in front of me, then ripped away. Happiness… Right… There,” Kayano murmurs. “Which I know is ridiculous to even humor!” she frustratedly admits, shoulders lowering. “It’s… It’s senseless to feel that way at best, and ungrateful to feel that way at worst. I’m surrounded by people who love me more than anything. People I love back. I have a job I’m passionate about! And my teacher’s back from the dead, for Christ’s sake! Is that not enough for me? Why can’t I just be happy?” She sounds close to tears.

...Nagisa thinks he has the answer, but he doesn’t dare voice it.

Instead, he simply squeezes her shoulder, and reaches his other hand out to take hers. Giving her a consoling look, he sighs and says “...I wish it was that easy to be happy.”

“Your job scares me sometimes,” Kayano admits. “I’m always so, so scared for those kids. Scared that one day something bad is going to happen. They just… Come from such terrible situations. Worse than ours were, sometimes. They need you. And… I’m so glad you help them. But it eats at me: What if, god forbid, something terrible happens to one of them one day? To Kiyoshi? To Fumiko? To Makoto? I don’t think I could take it.”

To be truthful, Nagisa doesn’t think he could, either. He thinks about it. A lot. Living his life with the always-present terror of uncertainty looming behind him. That one day… he won’t be able to help. That they’ll slip through his fingers. That despite all his efforts, their parents will snap, or their futures will go unsalvaged, or - he can’t even bring himself to think about it - one of those kids hurts themselves.

...But there’s nothing he can do to stave off the worry. It’s simply an inevitable weight of his job. There’s nothing he can do to rid himself of the sick, twisted fear in his gut. All he can do is vow to work his hardest, and pray that that’s somehow enough to prevent the worst outcomes possible.

“I… Couldn’t, either,” is all he can find it in himself to say. His voice feels hoarse. He can’t - won’t - think about it.

*I can’t lose him. Not again.*

He doesn’t think he could take losing even one other goddamn person at this point.

“And Gakushuu,” Kayano says. “God… Gakushuu. You have no idea how much it’s killing me to see him so stressed. I know it seems like we don’t get along sometimes, but shit, man… That’s my husband’s husband. That’s my family. I don’t want his father causing even more trouble for us than he already has. Gakushuu’s been through enough. We’ve been through enough. I don’t want to see him lash out.”

“...Me neither,” Nagisa admits, sighing out through his nose. “I’ve been losing sleep over the whole ordeal.” Finally, he lets go of Kayano’s shoulder, taking another hesitant sip of cocoa. “I just keep trying to tell myself that it’ll all be over soon. I.. Want to think that once we take this final step, he’ll never bother us again.”

“...How can you be so certain he won’t?”

Looking at Kayano again, she just seems… Exhausted. Thoroughly, utterly exhausted.
I can’t be,” he admits, feeling that same exhaustion in his bones.

How could he? Not after three years of calls from exhausted burner phones, and the time his mother showed up on his apartment’s doorstep in a manic state… Begging to ‘just have her child back.’

Sometimes he thinks the only reason he’d managed to get his mom to leave him alone is that by now she’s inevitably moved on to some other obsession.

Kayano gives a weary laugh. It’s a bitter, sardonic thing. “I’m so scared it’s all going to start falling apart. It feels like it does every single time I start to be in a place where I’m really happy about myself. I’m worried. For Makoto… For Fumiko… For Kiyoshi… For Gakushuu… For you! And… About other stuff, too.”

“…Wanna talk about it?”

“It’s selfish.”

“No. It’s not.”

He already knows her mind is on her sister. Knows her too well to guess anything else. But the moment grief becomes something considered selfish is the day this is a world he no longer wants to live in.

Kayano hesitates.

“…We can talk about anything. Remember? So please… Open up to me.”

Kayano runs her hands through her hair. And twirling that green streak of hers around her finger, she finally admits: “I’m scared for myself.”

Before Nagisa can even speak, she takes a sharp breath inward. “Most of all - I’m worried that absolutely nothing is going to go wrong. That… Things really will be perfect. That Gakushuu will solve his issues with ease, nothing will happen to Makoto, and we can keep living this way. That I can have the life I’ve always wanted, and that I still won’t be happy.”

“I’m so… So scared I won’t just let myself have this. Because even all these years later, all I want is my big sister back. Now more than ever.” There’s a quiver to her voice, “…And you know what’s the worst part? Sometimes… At night when I’m lying awake… Or during the day when I hear him laugh… Some horrible part of me can’t help but wonder ‘Why him?’”

She stares down at the table, hands shaking, and tears swelling in her eyes. “‘Why Sensei? Why… Not… Her? What did he do to deserve this? He still got her killed after all’” She takes another sharp breath, choking back a bitter sob. “After everything he did for me. How could I? He’s just a little boy… How can I think that about him? How selfish can I be? A… Am I some sort of monster, Nagisa? I thought I was over being that kind of person…”

Nagisa falls silent. Watching Kayano weep in the dim light, he scoots his chair closer and reaches in to hug. Shuddering with sobs, Kayano leans into his embrace and buries her face in his shoulder.

What can… What can he even say?

Taking a deep breath in… Then out, he tries his best to compose his words. “…You’re not that sort of person, Kayano,” he says, pulling her closer. “…And… You’re certainly not a monster. You never expected to have to deal with this. Just when you were getting better, you were forced to
confront all of these possibilities. I get it. It’s not fair. Even if Makoto is a miracle, it’s really not fair.”

Kayano shakes her head, choking back another sob.

“I don’t blame you for being bitter. I don’t blame you for thinking ‘what if?’ You’re just… Missing someone you really loved. And I know Makoto wouldn’t hold that against you-”

“Bullshit! He’d be heartbroken!”

“And he doesn’t need to know. This is you hurting. What happens inside of your heart is none of his concern. The… The things you think of when you’re alone don’t define who you are. If… If they did, I would have become a serial murderer a long time ago, you know.”

“Mmm…” Kayano says, but can’t find it in herself to say much more. Instead, she simply settles on a “…I just miss her. You’re right. I thought I was finally over it. I was finally where she’d have wanted me to be. But every day I see him having the time of his life with us all I can think about is her. Why? All I want is for her to have that, too. Is that too much to ask?”

“No. It’s not,” Nagisa firmly says. “Not… at all.” He gives a deep sigh. “But… Who’s to say she’s not? I know it’s little reassurance, but… Maybe she’s out there. And maybe she’s finally living the life she deserved… Happy… And safe… And carefree. And the only thing she’s missing is her little sister, who she’s just waiting to find her…”

He’s not sure he believes it himself, but fuck, man… What else can he say? ‘Your sister’s gone forever?’ ‘In some warped version of heaven, Korosensei abandoned one of the only people he’d ever loved?’ No. He refuses to. He refuses to even consider it.

Kayano lets out another bitter sob. “You think I haven’t considered it?” she asks. “Thought about it every night? Reached out my hand and hoped? But… What if I never see her again? What if every day he reminds me of her? And what if… She’s really gone?” She clutches at Nagisa’s back. “…I won’t let myself believe. I can’t take it. I can’t afford to have that ripped away from me, too…”

Nagisa thinks he feels his heart shatter. And finally, truly at a loss for words, all he can do is softly rock Kayano back and forth.

“...I’m sorry.”

“...It hurts so much-”

“I’m so, so sorry.”

“I’m sorry for dumping this on you-”

“Don’t apologize.”

“I know this is coming out of nowhere-”

“...You just bottled it up.”

‘It’s okay.’ He wants to say. ‘It’s okay. It’s okay. It’s okay.’ But it’s not okay. Her sister - Her fucking surrogate mother - is dead. She has been for sixteen years now. Kayano has had her out of her life longer now than she’d ever gotten the chance to have her in. That’s awful. And nothing… No amount of ‘its okays’ he can say could ever fix that.
“I’m here for you,” he settles on, instead. “I love you… And I’m here for you.”

...Sometimes, when everything hurts, that’s all you can say.

And holding Kayano tight… Running his fingers through her hair and letting her sob into his shoulder… He hopes she knows he means that. More than anything.

In due time, her sobbing eases. As these things always do. And although he knows he’d done little to cease it, he continues to hold her tight.

“...I… Know it can’t fix anything. But you’ll always have me. And you’ll always have us. Things will never be perfect. God, I wish they could. But… We’ll always have each other. I’m sure… Horrible, horrible things await us in our future. Because you’re right. Things can’t just continue this way. That’s not how life works. But we’ll have each other through it. This time… we won’t make the same mistakes. And I know no-one - Nothing - can ever replace your sister… But…” He leans back and wipes a tear from Kayano’s eye. “...I hope it’s enough to help you even a little.”

Kayano lets out another laugh… Heartbroken, but less bitter than before. “...You have no idea how much you’ve already helped me, Nagisa…” she says, her voice quiet. “Throughout… My entire life.”

“Then let me help you once more.”

Kayano cracks the tiniest, saddest smile. And rubbing at her eyes she says “…Yeah. I think I’d like that.”

Slowly but surely, her breathing returns to normal. And sitting in silence, she pulls herself away from Nagisa.

“...I’m sorry about how sudden this was,” she says, shakily reaching out for her cocoa.

“It’s fine,” Nagisa says, helping her steady her hands. “I get it. I really do.”

She carefully brings the mug to her lips. “...I love you too. And… I am happy. With everyone. With you. I’m sorry if I made it sound like I wasn’t.”

“No. I get it,” Nagisa repeats. “Happiness is… Just one of those complex things.”

One minute you can be on cloud nine, joking with your spouses of six years about just how much you love them. And then the next you can be a puddle of misery on the floor, drowning in your own grief.

The good news is… Those sorts of happiness and sadness don’t always exclude each other. Maybe even if you’re not happy about some aspect of your life… Another part of it can do something, no matter how small, to fill the gap.

“Mmm,” Kayano says, taking another sip of her cocoa. “...Would you mind grabbing me some marshmallows for this? Usually I wouldn’t overindulge, but-”

Nagisa’s already on his feet. “Can do,” he says, hurrying to grab the marshmallows. And pouring not one, not two - But three into Kayano’s hot chocolate, he simply smiles and says. “I think you deserve to treat yourself tonight.”

Kayano gives him another halfhearted smile. And as he sits back down next to her, she leans carefully on his shoulder.
“Love you,” she says.

“Love you too,” he responds, watching her shoulders rise up and down.

She takes another sip of her cocoa. “Much better,” she says, savoring the taste. “It’s funny… I never used to like this stuff, y’know. Sweet things. Which is… Like, crazy to imagine now. But I was always more of a sour girl.” She pauses, staring down into her mug. “...It was only after my tentacles that I came to really appreciate these things.”


Yeah. It is funny. There’s a lot of things he hadn’t learned to appreciate until after finding out about her tentacles, either.

She’s still got the scars... On the back of her neck, barely noticeable. The burns around her back and shoulders.

Weird to think that their teacher is not only living on through Makoto, but that his literal DNA is living on through her and Itona. Giving her a sweet tooth, and making her insecure about her bust size.

*Good grief.*

They sit in silence for one moment more, nursing their cocoa. But finally, Kayano suggests they return to bed.

“...I know it’s a little too late now, but I think the best thing we can do is try to get some sleep.”

Nagisa nods. “Yeah. I think so too.”

Kayano reaches to start putting the hot chocolate stuff away, but Nagisa stops her, placing a hand on her shoulder.

“Don’t worry about that,” he says. And cracking a grin... “How about we just make Karma deal with it in the morning?”

Kayano grins back. “...Yeah. Sounds good.”

With that, he ushers her back up to bed. And as they crawl in, he wraps his arms around her. Listens to her breathe. Pulls her close and simply prays that his embrace is enough to drown out her pain for now.

...Because to be truthful, sometimes he thinks they’re both still stuck during that month in middle school.

---

‘*Today’s the day*’ Makoto tells himself.

He’d quickly come to the realization that there’s no perfect time to talk with his dad. With his work and all, his schedule is... Tumultuous at best. More often than not he leaves for work when Makoto is at school, and only returns late in the night. Which doesn’t exactly bode well for Makoto, who’s been trying to keep a pretty regular sleep schedule for school.

Not that that’s a real issue. He gets it, obviously. Of course he gets it! His dad works. A lot. And he loves him for it...
...Even if he returns exhausted and angry every night.

‘Which isn’t an issue, either,’ he reminds himself, ‘just another thing to talk about.’ And that’s why he will. Tonight.

‘If there is no perfect day, then I’ll make today the perfect day’ He decides that Friday afternoon. He’s spent all week trying to plan what he wants to say to his dad and when he’s gonna say it. But ultimately, it’s felt pretty useless. He knows how these sorts of things go. Seen them a dozen times before. You can’t plan out a heartfelt conversation… It needs to come from deep inside of you!

And he knows there’s a will burning deep inside of him… To make things right with his father and let him in on the wonderful life he’s begun to lead. He can’t spend his entire life running from or avoiding him. That’s just not right. And although things have never been great with his father before, it’s not like Makoto has ever tried, either. That changes tonight.

Sitting on the couch and waiting, he kicks his feet. It’s almost twelve-at-night now. His dad should be home any moment. To be truthful, he’s a little anxious, but as he always does, he quickly shakes his head and subdues that feeling. ‘No use in overthinking it’ he reminds himself. ‘It’ll be fine. You’re Korosensei, right? You’ve helped a BUNCH of kids talk to their parents.’

‘…Now it’s your turn.’

Oh man. He likes the sound of that.

He can’t wait to tell dad about everything. Well... Not everything. Not… Like the Korosensei stuff. Not yet. They gotta take baby steps, right? But he wants to tell him all about his friends! And all the fun things they do! The more he thinks about it, the more he realizes just how little he’s told his dad about his life lately. And he’s resolved to change that.

...Surely it must be lonely to have your own son shut himself away like that.

(The silver-haired boy, indecipherable expression, sears into mind once more. But Makoto quickly shakes his head. Now’s not the time.)

With a shudder, the door begins to unlatch. And Makoto’s instantly shaken out of his introspective thoughts. He bolts to his feet and watches the door with a wary expression.

His dad enters the house, posture downtrodden as he slumps over to the couch. And tossing himself down with a thud, he doesn’t even seem to notice Makoto.

“You’re home!” Makoto says with a smile and a wave.

“Mmm,” Dad says, eyes already shut.

...He reeks of alcohol and sadness.

Makoto doesn’t dare take a seat on the couch next to him. Instead, he simply steps closer, trying to quell the unease in his gut.

“I was actually wondering… Can we talk?”

Dad’s eyes slowly drift open. And he stares at Makoto in surprise, as if processing that he’s actually there for the first time. Groggily, he groans and asks “Ain’t you supposed to be asleep?”

“Oh! Yeah! Usually!” Makoto says, antsily bouncing from toe to toe. “But I stayed up because I
had some things I needed to discuss with you! I hope that’s okay.”

Dad lets out another groan. “Gah…Can’t we deal with this in the morning?”

“Not really,” Makoto admits, knitting at his hands. “You don’t get up till pretty late, and I made some plans with friends-”

“Damn right I get up pretty late,” Dad grumbles, stifling a yawn. “I work my ass off all day. And I really don’t have time to deal with this. Listen: Just cancel your little thing with your little friends and we can talk about whatever it is this time tomorrow.”

Makoto frowns.

‘Whatever it is this time?’

What… What does that mean? This feels like the first time in his life he’s stepped forward to tell his dad how he feels. He’s never bothered him before-

...Right?

He feels that prick of anxiety run down his spine. But like a part he’s rehearsed a hundred times, his grin stays unfaltering.

“It’ll only take a few minutes-”

“I really don’t have the time.” There’s a dangerous edge to Dad’s voice.

It’s funny. He’d never been scared of Dad before any of this Korosensei stuff. They’d mostly just… Kept to themselves. Dad did his thing, and Makoto did his. It was each man for their own. But it’s not like he’d ever worried about Dad hurting him.

...Not until he remembered Nagisa’s mom.

The way she’d reached out to grab him, and clutched him tight by his hair. Shaking him back and forth violently as she could, and shrieking in a voice filled with rage.

That same rage seems to bubble up under Dad’s tone now.

But Korosensei had kept his smile then. And Makoto will keep his now.

Nagisa had… Found peace with his mom after all, right? That’s… What had inspired Makoto to try this. All he has to do is keep that same cool, kind demeanor. Everything will just be fine.

“Just drop it,” Dad growls.

...

“...No.”

“No?”

“No. This is important to me,” Makoto says, fist clenched tight. “I want to get through to you, so please! Let m-”

“FOR CHRIST’S SAKE! WHAT IS IT MAKOTO!”
Makoto reels back. Eyes wide and hand stiff, he feels himself freeze up.

Dad’s eyes are completely aflame.

“...Y… You mean… We can talk about it?” Makoto asks, voice quiet.

“Yeah, yeah. Just get it over with.” Dad growls, his hands shaking with impatience as he sits up.

“Well…” Makoto says, straightening himself up. He takes a deep breath and returns to a more neutral expression. Then, fiddling with his hands by his side, he calmly speaks up. “I just wanted to talk about… This,” he says, motioning to his father’s irritable posture. “I don’t want our conversations to be like this anymore. It feels like every conversation we have ends up this bad, and I don’t want to keep living that w-”

“‘This bad?’” Dad interrupts, scoffing. “And now are you gonna let me in on what exactly the hell that’s supposed to mean?”

“I- I dunno!” Makoto sputters. “Scary and angry!”

“Scary and angry?” Dad grumbles. “You think I’m scary!?!”

“I- I didn’t say you were scary!”

“Then what the hell is!?”

“When you act this way!” Makoto shouts, voice close to cracking.

Dad stares. And then, stumbling to his feet, he asks “When I act this way?”

“Yes!”

“Act like what!?” Dad demands, taking another step forward. “Stressed!? Angry!? And after everything I do for you. I toss my fuckin’ life away for you, and you’re gonna blame me for being snappy?”

Makoto backs up, careful to avoid letting his dad get too close. “I’m not blaming you for anything!”

“Well it certainly sounds like you’re unhappy with your father,” Dad says, close enough that Makoto can smell the wretched scent of his breath.

“No!” He shouts. “I’m not unhappy with you! Just let me talk! Please!”

Dad pauses, as if mulling it over, then snorts. And with a dismissive eye roll, he tosses himself back on the couch. “Whatever you say, boss. What do you want to bitch about this time? How are you gonna frame it as a ‘concern’?”

Makoto gulps. But reminding himself that this is simply a roadblock he needs to cross… The darkest before the dawn… He composes his words.

“I… It’s not that I dislike you, Dad! It’s the opposite,” he says, firmly. “I realized I never get to spend time with you. I want us to have happy interactions. So… So we can be a real family! So I can be closer to you…” He forces himself to take a step forward. “...I want to put in effort too! I want to fix things! So please… Let me thank you. Let me be a part of your life! I want to tell you about everything.”
Dad’s quiet. And then, slapping his forehead, he bursts into laughter. “You think I’ve got time for that!?” He asks, voice quivering with disbelief. “A real family” He repeats, voice mocking. “I’m not sure you got the memo, kid, but this is a real family. And this is the best you’re gonna get. I’m sorry I don’t have the time to sit down and listen to whatever useless horseshit you did today, but I’m afraid to inform you that I’m out here working two shifts a day to support your lazy ass.”

...L… Lazy?

“But… But I never thought—”

“Yeah. You don’t think. You’re stupid. You’re useless. Always have been. Any other parent would be lucky enough to end up with a kid who at least knows how to pull his own weight, but not me!” Dad rambles. “I never asked for this. Never asked to have to throw my life away because your waste of a mother decided you weren’t her responsibility and dumped you on me. But I’ve tried my damn best. Am I not allowed to be a little mad!?”

“I never said that!” Makoto quickly replies. “I… I mean… I’d be mad, too…” He admits, feeling his heart sink. “But… Can’t I… Can’t I at least repay you?” He gulps. “Even a little bit?”

“Repay me,” Dad says. “He wants to REPAY ME.” Just barely stifling another laugh, he stares Makoto down with piercing eyes. “Kid, you’ve already screwed my life up beyond repair. There’s no ‘repaying’ you could possibly do now.”

“...I'm sorry,” Makoto whispers.

“What was that? Speak up?” Dad demands.

“I’m sorry!” Makoto shouts. “I… I never asked to be born! I didn’t realize I was stressing you out so much—”

“Yeah. I never asked for you to be born, either,” Dad replies. “I never even wanted kids. You know what? But here I am stuck with you. And you come to me at twelve in the night having the AUDACITY to tell me how to spend MY little freetime!? While you do what!? Prance around with your little friends instead of actually supporting us?”

...D… Does Dad think he hasn’t tried!? It’s not like he’s old enough to get a job. But he’s pulled his own weight… Swiped from store shelves in a desperate attempt to not blow more of Dad’s money.

(To stave off the hunger of there being no food at home in the first place.)

“Like you don’t already make me miserable enough, Makoto. I spend all day doing monotonous work and thinking about how happy I could have been if it weren’t for you. And you want me to come home, again, at twelve-at-night just to listen to you prattle your head off about whatever childish shit you’re caught up on today?”

“I just thought… I just thought you’d like that…”

“Well you were wrong! So drop it. Get the fuck to sleep, and shut the hell up before I need to think about this one moment more. It’s depressing, Makoto. All I want to do is sleep. Is that too goddamn much to ask?”

“N… No…” Makoto mumbles. “I just… Wanted to fix things. I… I don’t wanna make you miserable. I can do anything. I swear… Please… Just tell me how to be good. Just tell me how I can make you happy…”
Dad rolls his eyes, and leans back on the couch. “Go to sleep, Makoto.”

“Please. Tell me what I can do for you-” Makoto begs.

“Shut up. That’s all you can do for me,” Dad says, voice shuddering with exhaustion.

Makoto blinks back tears. “...There has to be something. Anything. I’ll do it. Just tell me-”

“Go to bed-”

“I’m begging you…”

And in an instant, dad shoots up. He grabs Makoto’s wrist and yanks him close. Breath hot on his cheek, he growls. “It’s no fucking use. Kid, you’ve already broken things beyond repair. Now shut the fuck up and go to sleep before I really get angry.”

Makoto searches for words, but finds nothing, even as Dad slowly lets go of him and returns to his seat.

Dad doesn’t say another word. But finger pointing towards Makoto’s futon, his instruction is obvious.

’S <i>Shut up about it, and never bother me again.’</i>

Makoto’s mouth opens, then closes. And as he steps forwards the futon, he sends one last hesitant glance over his shoulder… Searches for what to say… What to do… One last heartfelt display to get through to his father.

...What Nagisa would have said. What Itona could have done. What the silver-haired boy haunting his every waking moment should have tried…

Nothing. Makoto finds nothing. There’s not a single thing they could have said or done.

Shoulders lowering, he crawls into his futon. No longer able to hold back his tears, he desperately wipes at his eyes. Hiccuping and whimpering, he curls up in a ball. And against every part of him telling him not to, he looks at his dad once more… Wondering if he’ll even react to his tears.

Deep down, he already knows what he’s going to see.

...Dad’s fast asleep.

Makoto doesn’t dare stand to grab tissues. The last thing he needs to do right now is wake him. Makoto’s put him through enough as is.

Shutting his eyes tight and desperately trying to sleep, the silver-haired boy is clearer in his mind than ever. He’s older now… A wiry teen, with bags under his eyes, and a sickly-looking tint to his skin.

Hands in his pockets, he stares at Makoto with a bitter, pitying expression. And then, cracking a smirk, his face seems to say.

“Nothing you said or did was ever gonna make him proud of you.”

And try as he might, Makoto just can’t shake the silver-haired boy and his know-it-all gaze from his mind. He turns over once, then twice, in a desperate attempt to cry himself to sleep. But with thoughts of disappointed dads, terror by torchlight, and the faintest smell of dying petunias
haunting his every thought, it’s no use.

There’s no escaping it. All he can do is stare into the boy’s eyes and wonder.

...What sort of horrible, desperate or naive person was Korosensei to have to have wanted to believe that even people like Hiromi Shiota or Masuto Himura deserved or even wanted a second chance?

Nagisa gets the call at 11 AM on a Saturday afternoon.

He’s busy grading papers when it happens. He’s about halfway through Rin’s essay on the ethical implications of immorality (Long story) when his phone begins to buzz. And in an instant, the Sonic Ninja theme song blares throughout his living room. He scrambles to grab his phone, bringing it up to his ear and preparing to say hi to Sakura or whoever else it is this time.

“Hello,” the voice on the other end of the line says, and Nagisa feels his blood run cold.

Here’s the thing. He’s spent the last two months waiting for Gakuho to be on the other end of that phone. But now that he’s actually here, it doesn’t feel real. Could this really be it? The final confrontation coming to him on now of all days, as he grades papers on a lazy Saturday afternoon?

...His mouth feels dry.

“Hey, Gakuho.”

“I hope this isn’t a bad time to call,” Gakuho says. “I’ve been meaning to get in contact with you again for the past few weeks. Things have just been busy with school. You know how it is.”

“...Yeah,” Nagisa says. “Yeah. I know.”

And shaking his head, he stands. He carefully pockets Rin’s essay in his binder, and pushes it to the side.

“Now’s... Not a bad time at all, actually,” he admits. “There’s - Uh... Something I’ve been meaning to talk with you about. But can you give me a second? I have someone on the other line. I’ll get back to you as soon as possible. This should only take a few minutes.”

“Of course,” Gakuho says. “See you then.”

Nagisa scrambles to hang up his phone. But with his shaky hands, Gakuho beats him to it. And staring down at his cell phone, he’s half tempted to just block Gakuho then and there.

He quickly banishes the thought. As satisfying as it is to think about leaving Gakuho with as few answers as Gakuho had left Gakushuu, Nagisa’s just not that sort of person. Plus, he’d promised to deal with this by Gakushuu’s side. There’s no easy way out now.

He takes a deep breath and makes his way in towards the lounge.

Last he’d checked, Gakushuu was busy compiling some work spreadsheets on one of their high-end computers. And although he’d seemed pretty busy, something tells Nagisa he’ll be willing to put it aside for a moment for this.

Sure enough, Gakushuu’s in the lounge. And staring intently at the computer, he hardly even notices Nagisa walk in. He doesn’t turn his way until Nagisa taps on his shoulder with a quiet “Hey.”
Gakushuu turns his head. And a slightly impatient look on his face, he asks “What is it?”

...His gaze falls the moment his eyes land on the phone.

“...Oh,” he says, quietly.

Nagisa nods.

“...He called?”

Nagisa nods again.

Gakushuu falls silent.

“...Don’t worry. I haven’t told him yet,” Nagisa says. “I know you wanted to be there. I said I’d call him back.”

“Oh,” Gakushuu says again.

“I mean- If you want to,” Nagisa reassures.

Gakushuu’s gaze hardens. “I want to,” he says, more to himself than anything.

“Of course,” Nagisa replies. And he places a gentle hand on his shoulder. “Let’s go somewhere where we can sit down. Something tells me this is going to be a heavy conversation.”

“...Yeah. Me too,” Gakushuu simply agrees.

Gakushuu stands from the desk chair and they head up towards the bedroom. Thankfully they shouldn’t be bothering Kayano or Karma considering those two ran out to grab groceries while Nagisa and Gakushuu did their ‘big boy work.’

...Ha. If only they could have known what those two would actually be dealing with.

Nagisa sits down on the foot of the bed, motioning for Gakushuu to take a seat next to him. Gakushuu obliges, leaning in close and staring at Nagisa’s phone.

His gaze somehow seems hawkish.

“...Are you ready?” Nagisa asks.

“I don’t know,” Gakushuu admits. “Which... Is inane. Because I’m supposed to be the one with all the answers. But... I don’t know.”

“We can wait, if you want-”

“No,” Gakushuu says firmly. “I’ve made you wait long enough. So... Let’s just get this over with.”

Nagisa stares at the phone. And then, after one long moment of hesitation, presses the call button, puts it on speaker, and brings it to his ear.

Gakuho picks up in an instant. It almost feels like he’s been waiting by the phone this entire time.

“Hi,” Nagisa says.

“Hello,” Gakuho replies.
“I’m sorry about that,” Nagisa says. He’s not, but he feels obligated to say it anyway. “I just had something to deal with.”

‘I had to grab your son. The son you traumatized? Remember? That one?’

“It’s just fine,” Gakuho reassures. “Now what was it you wanted to talk with me about?”

*Your son. It’s about your son, goddamn it!*

“It’s… Well…” Nagisa’s voice is quiet.

Gakuho must not hear him, because he speaks right up over him. “If it’s about midterms, I’m happy to inform you that my students passed with flying colors. And as for y-?”

“It’s not about midterms,” Nagisa interrupts.

Gakuho must finally pick up on the hostility in his voice, because there’s a long moment of silence before he responds.

“Well…” He says slowly. “What is it, then? No use in beating around the bush. If you have a topic you wish to breach with me, now would be the time.”

It’s strange, but Nagisa thinks he hears a quiver in Gakuho’s voice, too. Just barely… Ever so slight. Like he knows what’s coming, and has for a very long time now.

...What was that about beating around the bush?

He glances up towards Gakushuu, as if asking for permission. Lips drawn back into a frown, there’s a look on his face that’s heartbroken and indignant all at once. And still, he doesn’t hesitate. He meets Nagisa’s eyes and gives a firm nod.

“It’s… About this,” Nagisa admits.

“Pardon?”

“We can’t keep doing this, Gakuho.”

Gakuho’s silent for a long moment. Before speaking up with a quiet “Forgive me, but I’m afraid I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Calling me,” Nagisa says. “Making small talk with me like this. It’s weird. I know you don’t respect me that much as an educator, Gakuho. I know you don’t do this to other people in our circles. I know what this is really about.”

He can practically imagine the way Gakuho pinches the bridge of his nose on the other end of the line.

“I’ll have you know I respect your methods as an educator deepl-”

“No. You don’t.”

The silence is suffocating.

“…Enlighten me, then,” Gakuho says, his tone strained. “What exactly is this about?”

“Gakushuu.”
The moment the word escapes his lips, he can feel an electric tension take hold of the conversation. A gasp, however slight, on the other end of the phone... Gakushuu’s tight-clenched fist... And Gakuho’s struggle for words.

“...I was not aware you perceived it as-”

“We’re not doing this, either,” Nagisa says.

‘Perceived it as!?’ Perceived it as what!? He knows what this is! He is not going to be told how he should feel about this situation when it’s so important to Gakushuu. And he is not going to humor even a moment of Gakuho’s familiar mind games.

“I know you think you’re so transparent, but you’re not. I may have been one of your E-Class kids at one point, but that does not mean I’m stupid, like you seem to think it does. I’ve noticed you’ve called me more ever since Gakushuu cut you off. And I’m sick of it. I’m sick of being used, and Gakushuu’s sick of having to hear about it.”

Gakuho’s voice is quiet. “...You’ve talked to him about it?” he asks, hope dripping from his words.

Nagisa sends another glance Gakushuu’s way. He’s biting his lip. Hard. All he can do is sigh and reach for his hand, squeezing it tight as if to say.

‘It’ll all be over soon.’

Gakushuu’s reluctant gaze seems to reply ‘That’s what I’m afraid of.’

“Yeah. I have,” Nagisa says. “Because I tell him about what’s going on in my life. I’m his husband. It’s my job to tell him about his narcissistic monster of a father trying to stalk him. Not that I think you’d particularly get that much, seeing as how I don’t think you’ve ever once openly talked with the people you care about in your entire life.”

Gakuho’s silence speaks for itself. And even Nagisa finds himself blinking in surprise. Did... He really just say that? He knows he’s been mad at Gakuho, but even then he has to think he went a little far. As annoyed as he is with Gakuho for bringing so much stress to his family, by now he just wants to get this over with. And making things personal is probably the worst way to do that.

The funniest thing - Or maybe just the saddest - is that he doesn’t even try to refute it. Not really. Gakuho doesn’t speak up over Nagisa, deny that he’s a monster, or leap to defend himself. He sits and takes it. That’s the worst part of all.

“...You think I haven’t tried?” he finally says, voice quivering. “I have dedicated the past fifteen years of my life to trying to fix things. But Gakushuu has never once shown interest in making me a part of his life.”

Trying to fix things!? Is that what he calls trying to fix things!? Years of the same perfectionist complex hidden behind nicer words!? Nights spent listening to his son sob in his room, and not knowing what to do!? Not trying!? All the times he slipped and smacked him ‘just once’ in a moment of rage!? The consistent criticism of his choice of friends!? The 1984-level attempt at control over his life, job choice and company!? The desperation to claim his successes as his own, and daring to play the wounded father the moment his son cuts him off!?

Having the audacity to say - To realize ‘Gakushuu has no interest in making me a part of his life,’ and then daring to call Nagisa anyways!?

If that’s better, Nagisa doesn’t want to know what worse is.
“And so I’m your last resort,” Nagisa says.

“No. That’s no-”

“Yes. It is. That’s all it is. And I’m putting a stop to it.” Nagisa interrupts. “This ends today. No more of this weird small talk where you beat around the bush that is the fact that you hurt Gakushuu. No more trying to make up for it for your own sake, not his. It’s not fair to him, and it’s not fair to me-”

“What about me?” Gakuho asks. “Please-! You must consider what it feels like to be in my shoes!”

*You put yourself in them! You have no-one to blame but yourself!*

“Gakuho, I’ve spent the past three years considering your feelings. More than you’ve had any right for me to. I can’t do this anymore. For my own sake. And for yours too. I’m hanging up, and I’m blocking your number.”

“No!”

“Yes. Goodbye, Gakuho.”

“Let me talk to him! One last time! Please-!” he desperately shrieks.

“No.”

“At least tell me where I went wrong!” Gakuho begs, voice close to tears. “What didn’t I do!? *Where wasn’t I good enough!?*”

And in an instant, the phone is snatched from Nagisa’s hand.

“You wanna know where you weren’t good enough!? Gakushuu asks, trembling with anger. “Because I’ll tell you where you went wrong.”

“Gakus-?”

“No. This isn’t some happy reunion for you,” Gakushuu snarls. “This is your comeuppance. So you sit right there and you fucking take it.

Nagisa jolts. And reaching for the phone with a frown, he says “I’m really not sure this is a good ide-”

“I’m not going to budge on this,” Gakushuu says, yanking the phone away. “No matter what you say. Not this time.”

Nagisa falls silent, then falls back. He brings his hands to his side and sighs. He knows Gakushuu is just going to make himself feel like shit, but if this is really the sort of closure he wants, it’s not Nagisa’s place to take that from him.

“You hear that, old man?” Gakushuu snaps. “I’ll give you what you want. And nothing can stop me. So you wanna know where you screwed up?”

Gakuho’s quiet for a long moment. And then, letting out a heavy breath, he declares, “I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

Gakushuu’s expression twists into a grimace. But clutching the phone so tight his knuckles pale, he speaks up in a low growl. “Yeah. Yeah,” he says. “You can pretend to be the rational one here. I’m
overreacting like I always do.”

“I would never accuse you of-” Gakuho begins to speak.

“Yes. You would,” Gakushuu snaps. “Because you’re so calm, and you’re so perfect. But I see through that in an instant. You are a narcissistic, depressed piece of shit, who takes it out on everyone around you. What!?! Because you’ve had it hard!! Because you’ve lost so much!!?”

Nagisa blinks, jaw agape. Is he talking about what he thinks he’s talking about?

“You think you’re the only person in the world who doesn’t deserve to suffer. Who doesn’t deserve to work for what they have.”

“I’ve pushed myself every bit as hard as I’ve pushed you. Don’t you dare accuse me of anything else when I’ve fought to get where I am. Fought to be the best father I could to you.”

Gakushuu chokes back a laugh. “The best father you could to me!?” he asks, smacking his forehead. “You treated me like garbage!”

“To prepare you for the world!”

“The world that’s treated me so much better than you ever did!?”

“I couldn’t risk losing you!” Gakuho shouts, voice strained. “You were my world. Do you think I could send you out there unprepared? Let ingrates tear you apart!?”

“I was your world?” Gakushuu snarls, stifling another laugh. “What!?! Because I was your replacement goldfish!?! You never gave a shit about me. I was just everything you wish you could have fixed with Ikeda.”

“That is not true!” Gakuho cries. “You were my son! You are my son! Just because I’d learned from my losses doesn’t mean you were ever anything less to me-”

“I was your goddamn second chance. You deluding yourself into believing you could fix things. But guess what? You couldn’t. You didn’t protect the either of us.”

“I know I didn’t!”

“You convinced yourself you were, but you wanna know all that you taught me? How to hurt people. You didn’t teach me how to protect myself from wanting to die. All you did was teach me how to make other people want to kill themselves! How fucked up is that!?”

“I know it was flawed-”

“Flawed!?! It was awful! And don’t pretend you’re not still obsessed with it: Your little caste system. You would never consider that you were wrong. You wanna know why? Because you convince yourself you’re always right. Because you know if you’re wrong that makes you one of them. And in your flawed system, anyone who screws up deserves to die.”

“They do not-”

“Yes. They do. And you know what’s the funniest part about all that? What you never considered? You know if you met him today, you would shove your dumb, inattentive, precious student into some dumb kids program and tell him he’s worthless.”

“I WOULD NOT!”
“Yes. You would. Face it.” Gakushuu snarls. “Hell, as much as he screwed up my entire life, I
can’t even blame him for any of his decisions. I would have killed myself to get away from you
too! Oh wait! I tried! That was your fault, too, wasn’t it?!”

Gakuho inhales sharply. And Nagisa feels his heart stop inside his chest. He still remembers it
clearly: The day Gakushuu had tried to kill himself back in his first year of high school. It had been
the moment he'd first realized two fundamental things about Gakushuu:

That he, too, had a family beyond repair. And that despite his tough outward demeanor, he needed
someone by his side as well.

But bringing that up now!?

“...Perhaps it was,” Gakuho says, voice close to tears. “And I have tried my damndest to take
accountability for that. I have tried to be a better father to you. Will you at least give me credit for
that much?”

“Yeah… No,” Gakushuu replies. “How hard you try doesn’t matter, remember? Still a failing
grade! A F-Minus! You flunked the test!”

Gakuho’s voice trembles. “You always do this. You always say what you know will hurt me most.
What is wrong with you!?”

“I dunno! Why don’t you tell me!? What’s the answer I’ve been looking for all these years!? You’re the one who made me this way! So tell me! How did you break me!?”

“You are not broken.”

“Certainly damn feels like it! Some nights I still wake up crying! Guess I’m catching up
considering that you had me convinced through all of my teenage years that if I showed any
vulnerability it was weakness! Sometimes, I still think it is! I’m pissed at myself for even letting
myself get so worked up talking to you!”

“I never intended to do this to you.”

“Well you certainly did! Good job!”

“All I wanted to do was turn you into a functional adult. Someone the world wouldn’t walk all
over.”

“What!? So you could walk all over me exclusively!?”

“I never-”

“Yes. You did. You just wanted a little Gakuho 2.0, and when I couldn’t be that, you hated me.”

“I do not hate you!”

“Well guess what!?! I hate you back! And that is never going to change.”

“You are all I have left! After everything I’ve lost! Ikeda! Your mother! My-”

“Oh, spare me the sob story. You have no-one to blame but yourself for all the people that have left
you. And now you’re gonna let me goddamn go, too. Nothing you say is going to change that. And
nothing you say is going to give you some nice little closure. You fucked me up beyond repair, and
I want you to lay awake thinking about that for the rest of your life until you join your little prat in
death and he inevitably rejects you too.”

Even Nagisa’s jaw drops. This can’t be happening!

“...You really do just love to see me suffer, don’t you?” Gakuho whispers.

“Yeah. I guess it’s just the result of the equally narcissistic, selfish man who you raised. Who you made this way because you hated him. And who will never, ever forgive you.”

“I didn’t hate you!”

“Yes! You did!”

“Everything I ever did, I did for you! I loved you!”

Nagisa can’t take it a moment more. He lunges for the phone and slams his finger on the ‘end call’ button. Tearing the phone away from Gakushuu with ragged breaths and wide eyes, all he’s left to do is stare.

...Gakushuu doesn’t stare back.

He’s looking blankly at his hands, a deep frown on his face. Only now does he seem to notice how hard he’s been breathing. And blinking back tears, he says in an irritated voice. “You didn’t need to take it, you know.”

Nagisa places a firm hand on his shoulder. “...I think I did.”

Gakushuu pulls away, looking wounded. “I… I could have handled it,” he says, fist clenched. “I… I could have handled him. Anything he could have said. I know I could.” Brave words, but from the way he shuts his eyes and grits his teeth, it’s pretty clear it’s taking all of his efforts to avoid bursting into tears right here and now.

“I know you could,” Nagisa says. And he doesn’t. Because he couldn’t have handled that in Gakushuu’s shoes. But he says it, anyways. “That doesn’t mean you should have had to go through that. I saw how upset you were getting.”

“I’m not upset!” Gakushuu groans.

Nagisa gives him an unimpressed look.

“...Okay,” he admits, disgust on his face. “I’m a little upset. Is that what you wanted to hear? He got to me?”

“Of course not,” Nagisa says softly. “Never. But you have to understand how worrying it is seeing you like that.”

“Seeing me like w-?” Gakushuu begins, but quickly relents. Shoulders lowering, he sighs. “...Okay. No. I know,” he admits.

Nagisa gives a tiny nod.


“Angry?” Nagisa asks.
“Livid,” Gakushuu corrects, a dead look in his eyes.

‘Hurt, too,’ Nagisa imagines. But he doesn’t dare say it. Gakushuu was right about one thing: His father had carved an aversion to vulnerability into his very soul. And although they’re working on it every day, something tells him that’s not what Gakushuu wants to hear right now.

Instead, he simply looks down at his phone and starts to block Gakuho’s number. He may as well before the rotten old man calls again and earns another panic attack from Gakushuu.

‘Panic attack.’ Christ. It feels miserable when he puts it that way.

He knows Gakushuu went a little far.

...

Okay - A lot far. But he can’t exactly blame him, either. He knows himself what kind of crushing weight that sort of relationship with your parents forces you to carry. And although he can’t exactly praise Gakushuu for, say, guilt-tripping his father over the death of some kid from 25 years ago, he gets where he’s coming from. That had simply been an outburst following years of frustration at his father’s actions.

...And not the first one. There’s a reason Nagisa and the others had begun making actions to tear Gakushuu away from his father. They hated seeing that side of him. And Nagisa knows deep down that Gakushuu doesn’t like the sort of miserable, bitter person he becomes when facing that demon, either.

“It wasn’t going to fix things,” Nagisa simply says. This is the part where he wants to chide ‘I told you so,’ but would never. “Talking to him, I mean. It’s not like anything he could say would fix what he did to you.”

“I don’t want him to fix it,” Gakushuu says. “He couldn’t if he fucking tried.” He pauses for a long moment, uncurling his fist. “I think… All I wanted was for him to feel bad,” he admits, sighing out through his nose. “And I know that’s petty, but is that too much to ask? I don’t want to hear his ‘I’m doing better’ shtick. I’m goddamn sick of it. I just want him to admit to being the bastard he was to me. I just wanted to win. Why couldn’t he let me have that?”

Nagisa sighs, too. But he’s afraid he doesn’t have an answer.

“He’s not supposed to care. He never cared. So why couldn’t he just act like it? Do you know how frustrating it is? Just having to sit there and listen to him whine about how sad he is? About how much he doesn’t deserve it? It makes me feel defenseless. Like a piece of shit. Like I’m the bad guy here.”

“You’re not,” Nagisa says firmly. “You just… Lashed out.” He looks away. “And… While that wasn’t exactly called for, I can’t fault you, either. And the good news is… We’re never going to have to deal with that again.”

Gakushuu blinks, curling and uncurling his hand. “I’m still processing it,” he admits. “That… It’s the end. That that was the end. What sort of victory was that?”

“It wasn’t,” Nagisa says. “He was never going to let you win. But hey… That’s okay, right? Remember? We know that’s not what matters.”

“Mmm.”
“From now on, you’re never going to have to deal with him again. And… I’m sorry for putting you through that for so long. But you’ll never need to feel this way again.”

He knows that’s not true, either. That Gakushuu will a hundred times more. In the bitter midst of untangling his trauma, and on the nights when he lays awake… Realizing the things he said to keep his father awake at night had only been rebounded towards him. And all the same… They’ve already come so far. There’s no stopping now.

“Don’t apologize,” Gakushuu says, rubbing his temples. “...He’s manipulative. I know.”

“Which is why I should have blocked his ass the first time he called me.”

He knows why he hadn’t. That belief that had been ingrained in him because of his Sensei. For his Sensei. The murderous mess of a mentor and angel of death for thousands. Surely, if he deserved a second chance, anyone did. Anyone could redeem themselves. Anyone could become good.

...Turns out it’s taken him fifteen years to learn that ‘good’ isn’t always enough to make it up to the people you’ve hurt.

“I’m not mad at you,” Gakushuu says.

“I know.”

“I know you hate it when I raise my voice.”

“It was a personal thing. I get it.”

Gakushuu sighs. But hands finally relaxing, he turns Nagisa’s way. “Thank you for… Ending that,” he admits. “I think all it did was make me feel inadequate.”

“No need to thank me,” Nagisa reassures. “It’s my job to look out for you.”

“...No matter what?”

Nagisa nods. “No matter what.”

Finally, Gakushuu relents. He leans into Nagisa’s embrace, burying his face in his shoulder and whining. Even as tears begin to stream down his face, he doesn’t dare pull away.

Something tells Nagisa he doesn’t want to be seen. Not like that. And usually, Nagisa would refute that. But he thinks he’ll let him hide. Just this once.

Because he knows there’s nothing he can do to mend Gakushuu’s hurt. Not right now. Perhaps not ever. That’s okay. Gakushuu needs to find that within himself. And until then, all Nagisa can do is hold him until the storm has passed.

Just like Gakushuu had done for him all those years ago.

'Until he can’t hurt you anymore.'

It’s later that day when Makoto comes in looking like he’s seen a ghost.

It’s been a few hours since the confrontation with Gakuho, and Gakushuu’s in his room trying to cool off. The dumbass duo that is Karma and Kayano have since returned, ice cream and chili peppers (“You know. For emergencies.”) in tow. Nagisa’s finishing up helping them carry the
groceries inside when Makoto peeks his head into their doorway. Knitting at his hands and with bags under his eyes, he looks like he hadn’t slept at all last night.

That’s enough to make Nagisa drop his groceries in an instant. He places them down by the kitchen table, before heading Makoto’s way. Karma shoots him a confused glance, but the moment Kayano elbows him and directs his attention towards Makoto his tune quickly changes. Near simultaneously, they make their way towards the living room.

“Hey, bud,” Kayano says.

“You look like shit,” Karma decidedly-less-helpfully comments.

Even so, where that would usually earn an amused smirk from Makoto, he simply shrugs. And looking up at the three of them with desperate eyes, he asks “Can I talk to Nagisa?”

“Of course,” Nagisa says quietly.

“Just the two of us,” Makoto specifies. “It’s… Uh… Personal,” he admits, sheepishly staring at the floor.

Kayano gives a firm nod. And whereas Karma would usually make some drawn-out joke about how he sees he’s not wanted, for once he reads the room and gives Makoto a thumbs up. Nagisa nods, too, before taking Makoto’s hand and guiding him into the lounge where they can have some privacy.

He gets up onto the couch, motioning for Makoto to take a seat next to him. Makoto hops up, still not speaking as he stares at his feet.

...It’s not like him.

“...So? What did you want to tal-”

“It’s about your family,” Makoto interjects quickly. And for a moment, he even makes eye contact with Nagisa, before inevitably tearing it away. “...Your… Uh…” He pauses. “I don’t want to say ‘real’ family, but you know what I mean. Your dad and your…” He hesitates once more.

“...My mom?”

“Yeah. I wanna talk about your mom,” Makoto says. “And I know that might be painful, so tell me if I should stop, but-”


There’s another long moment of silence.

“So… You didn’t get along, right?” Makoto asks, voice quiet. “She… Didn’t treat you very nice?”

Nagisa sighs. He had a feeling this was coming, but it’s kind of depressing that Makoto’s even thinking about these sorts of things. Everything that happened between him and his biological family has been locked away for a very long time now. And his teacher or not, Makoto's just a kid. It's not his job to worry about this.

“No,” Nagisa admits, pressing his hand to his tie. There’s no use in lying about it. “We didn’t get along.”

“And… It wasn’t just little things, right?” Makoto asks. “She’d… Hurt you, right?”
“Yeah. Really bad,” Nagisa answers, his own gaze falling to the floor. And when Makoto doesn’t speak up in response; Simply shoots him a horrified look, Nagisa supposes there’s something left for him to say. “I didn’t realize you’d remembered that kind of stuff.”

Makoto gives a defeated shrug. “It didn't bother me, really,” he admits. “I mean - Don’t get me wrong. I was really sad anything bad happened to you. But it wasn’t upsetting. Because… I knew how it ended.”

“How it ended?” Nagisa asks.

“At least… I thought I did,” Makoto whispers. “You… Making everything right with your mom! Standing up to her that night at the campus, and protecting her, too. You were so, so cool. The way she finally seemed to realize who you were… What you were capable of… And that she’d let you grow on your own.”

He frowns deeply as he clasps his fingers. “Or… Or the way I talked to your mom and dad. How I told them about how the divorce was affecting you. I was so certain I’d finally fixed things. That your family was going to go back to normal. But… The more I thought about it… I realized you haven’t mentioned them once since I came back. The family we worked so hard to fix…”

It’s funny. All those years ago, on graduation day, he’d thought the same. That in one final gift, Korosensei had managed to mend the one thing Nagisa thought unmendable. But with time… With scream-fights… And with heartbreak… Nagisa had been forced to realize there were some things even Korosensei couldn’t fix.

“Where are they?” Makoto asks, close to tears. “Please don’t tell me it fell apart again.”

“...There was nothing you could do,” Nagisa says, reaching out to place a hand on Makoto’s shoulder. “My mom was…” He pauses. “She was the sort of person who had extreme ups and downs. And… Everything you did for me was enough to put her up into an upswing for a little while. But when you live like she does… Those sort of things can’t last forever. Eventually, she realized she was still unhappy with her life. And so she went back to taking it out on Dad and I.”

“B-But what about closure!??” Makoto asks, voice growing increasingly desperate. “W-What about finding peace with her? H… How are you ever supposed to be okay with what happened if… if she wouldn’t even try to change it!? What are you even supposed to do?!”

“...I left.”

Makoto’s eyes grow wide and watery. “...You what?”

“I left. When I couldn’t take it anymore… When I realized my mom was never going to like me for who I was, and when I realized my dad was always going to enable her, I packed my things and I left. I found a support system outside of them. And… With their help, I’d like to think I made a new family.”

“J… Just like that?” Makoto asks, voice quivering. “But… But what about your mom? Your dad? How could you know if they were going to be okay?”

“I didn’t know,” Nagisa admits. “But I’ll tell you what I did know: What I finally realized: ...I was just a kid. And I never asked for any of that. It wasn’t my job to shoulder any of their burdens. And I knew if I kept living that way, I’d grow up into a bitter, unsatisfied adult just like them, with dreams I never got the chance to fulfill. I couldn’t risk that. Not after how much blood and tears had been put into giving me a future at all by people like you.”
Makoto’s silent. Sniffling softly, he stares at his hands.

“...Makoto. Do you mind if I ask you a question, too?”

“No,” Makoto responds, not looking Nagisa’s way.

“Your… Dad isn’t very nice to you either, is he?”

Makoto jolts. It’s clear he hadn’t expected that question. He’s silent, for a long moment, before shaking his head. “No. He’s not,” he admits. “B… But that doesn’t mean he’s a bad guy! He tries really hard t-”

“I’m not saying he is,” Nagisa interjects, squeezing his shoulder. “I would never ask you to tell me your dad is a bad person...You don’t need to explain anything. Not if you don’t want to. And I would never ever ask you to abandon your dad if you felt he needed you. But Makoto: I do want to remind you right here and now that no matter what you do… No matter how long in the future, you’ll always have people who support you. If one day you decide you can’t handle what goes on home anymore, you’ll always have a home with us.”

Makoto shoots out towards Nagisa, wrapping his arms around him. Burying his face in his chest and quivering, he mumbles a quick “Thank you. I don’t think I’ve ever had that before.”

Nodding, Nagisa simply jostles his hair. “...It’s the least I can do. You gave me the home I needed those years ago, after all.”

Makoto lets out a little laugh. “Yeah… I guess you’re right.”

It’s a long few minutes before he finally pulls away. But finally, wiping at his eyes, he looks up at Nagisa. “...Thank you for answering my question truthfully,” he says. “I think a lot of other adults would have sugar-coated it, but…” He pauses. “You told me exactly what I needed to hear.”

Now that brings a smile to Nagisa’s face. He stares down at Makoto fondly. “Happy to help.”

And with that, he stands. He stretches and motions for Makoto to follow. “We should probably get heading back in. I bet the others are worried about y-”

“Wait,” Makoto says, voice resolved. He doesn’t stand. “...Before we go… Can I ask you one more question?”


Makoto lets out a tiny sigh of relief. And refusing to look Nagisa’s way, he simply asks in a hushed voice. “Did… Korosensei ever fail anyone like that?”

“Excuse me?”

“Like… Your parents did. Or Asano-kun’s. It seems like…” He pauses. “It seems like a lot of people were relying on me. Did I ever mess that up?”

Nagisa frowns. And staring down at Makoto, he thinks.

'Now that’s a heavy question.'

He thinks about the well-intentioned, but misguided advice he’d received on that fateful night. And even so… He could never hold it against Korosensei.
Korosensei… Teacher; Monster; Savior; Hero. Father and harbinger. Killer of thousands, and a scared little boy in a war-torn world.

Looking at Makoto’s shameful frown, he thinks he catches sight of that scared little boy shining through right now.

With all he’s been… All he’s done… And all he’s become… Somehow Nagisa doesn’t feel right placing a label on any of his actions.

He reaches out for Makoto’s hand and shakes his head.

“Makoto, everyone fails sometime or another. You and me included. That’s just a part of life… A part of learning. I’m sure you’ve made your mistakes. But even so… Someone messing up doesn’t make them bad. It doesn’t make you bad. Messing up just leaves the people around you free to react. And as long as you never fault them for that… Try to understand where they’re coming from… I think you’re already on the way to making up for any mistakes you’ve made.”

“...Already on the way to making up for it,” Makoto repeats, voice soft. Finally, he stands. “…Huh. I guess that’s fair.”

“Though I must ask… Why are you thinking about that?” Nagisa inquires. “You’re not remembering anything that’s bothering you, are you?”

“Nah,” Makoto says, taking his hand. “Nothing that can keep me down.”

Nagisa’s not one hundred percent sure about that, but he decides not to press for now. He trusts Makoto to come forward about anything that’s upsetting him when he’s ready.

He helps pull Makoto up onto his feet. “You wanna get back in with the others?” he asks. “Don’t hold me to this, but I think I heard the door open. Kiyoshi or Fumiko might have stopped by while we were having our little heart to heart.”

Quickly, Makoto perks up. And he nods. “I’d like that,” he says.

And guiding him back into the living room, Nagisa swears he catches a glimpse of a happier, safer boy, too.

…A boy who no longer wants to worry about his regrets.

Nagisa’s in the other room with Makoto when Fumiko steps in.

Kayano and Karma are more or less just making small talk. Kayano’s caved in to self-indulgence and cracked open one of the many cups of pudding they bought at the grocery store, and Karma’s lounging across the couch as they chat. They’re discussing something completely mundane when the door creaks open and Fumiko enters.

To be brutally honest, the first thing that Kayano notices about Fumiko is that she looks exhausted. The second thing she notices about Fumiko, however, is that she looks resolute.

“Hey,” Kayano says, waving her over. “Sorry if you’re looking for Nagisa and Makoto. They’re a bit busy with something right now, but-”

“No,” Fumiko interjects, shaking her head. “I was actually looking for you.” She sends a glance Karma’s way. “The both of you. Asano-san too, if possible.”
“I’m afraid he’s pretty occupied,” Karma admits. “Some stuff went down earlier today. But we’re happy to help-”

“As am I.”

Kayano jolts. And every eye in the room drifts to where the aforementioned Asano stands in the doorway.

“Gakushuu!” Karma says, grinning.

“Hello,” he says.

Kayano frowns. “I thought you were-”

“Yes. I was,” Gakushuu confirms. “But that’s besides the point now. I heard the two of you had arrived and came in to help you unload the car.” He pauses. “Seems I’m a little bit too late for that, but if Fumiko’s in need of assistance, I’m here to hear her out.”

Fumiko’s expression lifts. And quickly, she struts her way over to the three of them.

“…So all three of you will give me a hand?” she asks.

“Depends,” Karma says with an inquisitive rub of his chin. “What are you asking of us?”

Fumiko shoots him a glare.

“Joking, of course,” he says. “Mostly, at least. You’re still gonna have to let us in on your little plan, though.”

Fumiko rolls her eyes. “Little plan…” She repeats dismissively. “It’s much more than that. But nonetheless I will give you the honor of hearing me out.”

Kayano and Gakushuu exchange an amused glance. Now there’s the Fumiko they know and love.

“Yukimura-san… Akabane-san… Asano-san, the three of you have two of the most respectable people I’ve ever met amongst your midst,” she begins, cheekily sticking her tongue out at Karma. “And while I respect Shiota-sensei’s professionalism and kindness, he’s rather smothering. What I am about to ask you for assistance with is not something I wish for you to do for me. I simply come to the three of you to ask for advice. Because from the clues I have gathered, I’ve come to the conclusion you have all been in my shoes at one point or another.”

Karma cocks an eyebrow. Asano shoots him an incredulous glance. But it’s Kayano who finally steps forward.

“Of course,” she says. “What is it?”

And looking more resolute than ever, Fumiko meets her eyes.

“I’d like your help in finding a way to break away from my parents.”

Kayano stares. And Karma's mouth forms into an 'o.' But crazy as it sounds, Kayano thinks she finally sees some sort of light return to Gakushuu's eyes.

"We’d be more than happy to help."
I meant it when I said this chapter was LONG, ahaahaha. So sorry about the wait, but I hope you enjoyed the extra long chapter! I don't think we've had one this long since chapter 11.

Sorry again that this one was a little bleak, but I hope you enjoyed it nonetheless! I'd say this chapter is somewhat of a segway from the previous arc focusing on "family," and the upcoming arc focusing on "accountability," both for things you've done on purpose and things you've done on accident. I feel like I meshed the two pretty well and I'm happy with how it came out.

Sorry about dragging Makoto through the dirt like that. But again, this is a scene I've wanted to do from the start. Something I've always processed as one of Korosensei's biggest flaws is his ability to believe anyone can be redeemed through a simple heart to heart, even child abusers like Gakuho and Hiromi. This has carried on to Makoto, and sadly given him a bit of a dose of reality. I can't help but wonder if that aspect of Korosensei's characterization comes from a desperation to believe he himself can be redeemed after mistreating 2.0., and so I represented that here too. 2.0 will be coming up a lot in the next few chapters, so be excited for Discussion Of Boy.

And discussion of Aguri, of course. Here she is coming up again. It seems Makoto still doesn't remember her, but Kayano's never going to forget. I had a LOT of fun writing the discussion between her and Nagisa, and while I'm not sure it 100% meshes with the themes of the rest of the chapter, I needed to put it around this point in the story. Needless to say, expect her to keep coming up, too.

The Asanos section was heartwrenching to write. But there it comes up again: That idea of accountability and what redemption really means or earns you. Gakuho is genuinely a better person, but that'll never erase the hurt he did to his son. It's like Nagisa reinforces at the end of the chapter: At best all you can do is leave the people around you to react to how you treat them. It's not Gakushuu's job to forgive Gakuho, both because Gakushuu was just a victim, and because he still views his father through a toxic lense regardless of how his dad actually acts.

And of course: Fumiko. If there's any light found in this chapter its in her life. It seems she's finally taking some sort of control of it.

Some songs that helped me write this chapter were Familiar from Steven Universe, I Miss You by Kimya Dawson, Sisters by Radical Face, You Were Loved by Fein, Lion's Teeth by The Mountain Goats, Get Out And Stay Out from 9 to 5, and Father by The Front Bottoms,

I don't know if the next chapter will be up in 1 week or 2, so look forward to that either way. When it's out will be a surprise! :D

Special thanks to my friend Melody for proofreading the bit with Makoto and his dad. It was a little to uncomfortable for my beta to read (100% understandably,) and she offered to do it in a spiffy. I really appreciate it!

As always, let me know what you thought, and I hope to see you again soon! o7
On the educational side of Nagisa’s life, things seem bright.

The atmosphere at home is still a little weird. There’s no way it couldn’t be after all that went down. And while Gakushuu returns to his usual cool demeanor, Nagisa has a feeling it’ll still be a little while before he feels truly normal. That’s okay, though. Because the three of them are resolved to help him out in the meantime.

It’s in the little things. The way Karma flops down on the couch next to him and slings his arm around his shoulder... The soft reassurances from Nagisa that everything will be okay; that he knows from experience… And the times after dinner that Kayano slides him the self-indulgent desserts he knows he wants but is too haughty to admit to.

Which isn't to say she doesn't have her problems, either. Nagisa senses them… late at night, when he catches her lying awake and staring at the ceiling. He searches for something to say… something to do. And when nothing comes, he simply wraps his arms around her and holds her tight.

“...Everything will be okay.”

It’s at times like those that he tries to reflect on Korosensei, his grief, and his beautiful reunion with Makoto.

He’d like to think those reassurances come from experience, too. That one day she'll come home to her.

At school there’s significantly less demons for him to fight. His students are thriving. And sure enough, their second-trimester Midterms come back looking bright. They’re making breakthroughs in subjects he’d worried they’d never understand, and getting better at assassination every day.

Needless to say, Makoto and co. are doing wonderfully, too. While Makoto still seems somewhat bothered by his conversation with Nagisa, he’s back to himself in no-time. And he even nearly pulls off another successful ‘assassination’ one lazy PE period.

Fumiko is becoming more ‘herself’ every day, and last Nagisa’s heard, his spouses are helping her out with some secret project. He’s not sure the details, nor does he find it his place to dig seeing as how he trusts them on whatever it is, but her smile seems to grow more and more confident with each passing day.

Even Kiyoshi… Shy, meek Kiyoshi seems closer with his group than ever. Nagisa begins to see him initiate conversations with them on his own, watches him gleefully share inside jokes as if he’s no longer living in fear of being shunned.

Life is good.

At least until Yoshito has a mental break.

To be truthful, Nagisa had stopped worrying about Yoshito a long time ago. Although he’d seemed fairly reclusive at the start of the year, he’d since taken to Emiko and Minako like a fish to water.
With that standoffish, independent demeanor of his, Nagisa had mostly given him his space. And he’d seemed content with that. Nagisa had liked to think they’d found an understanding. So that’s why it’s so surprising when Yoshito bolts out of class in the middle of English with a frustrated scream.

Beads of sweat dripping down his forehead, Nagisa quickly stands and excuses himself. As usual, he puts Riko and Komoshi as the class representatives in charge and says he’ll be back in one moment.

He finds Yoshito in the teacher’s lounge, hiding out and scratching at the hardwood floor until his nails are close to bleeding. When Nagisa asks him what’s wrong, he simply receives an irritated response.

“Yeah. Of course you wouldn’t know.”

It takes a solid three minutes of coaxing to get anything out of him. And by the time he does, Nagisa feels his heart snap. Tears spilling down his face, Yoshito admits rumors about his “psychotic sister” had been spread throughout his neighborhood, and even into the school. Subsequently, some neighborhood kids had started picking on him on his way to school, and giving him trouble making it here.

Finally, he’d snapped when Rosey, in the seat behind him, had made a lighthearted joke about him ‘going crazy,’ too. He admits he knows she hadn’t meant anything by it, but it had been the last straw. He’d felt ‘really close to punching her,’ when he’d gotten up, stormed out of the room, and ‘decided to hurt himself instead.’

Yoshito holds up his mangled nails, grimacing.

Nagisa admits that while he’s proud of him for taking himself out of the situation before it escalated into a fight, neither he, nor anyone else here would ever want to see Yoshito hurt himself. He takes him by the hand and offers him band-aids, reassuring him that if Yoshito ever feels frustrated in the future, he should know he can always come to Nagisa to talk.

Yoshito’s nose wrinkles with disgust.

“For someone who goes on about all that shit so often, you really are preformative,” he says. “If you cared as much as you pretended to, you would have noticed earlier.”

Before Nagisa can interject, Yoshito stands, wiping at his pant leg with a bandaged hand. “Not that you really care, do you? Not if we’re not one of your real favorite students.”

Alongside telling him he’ll find a way to deal with his bullies, Nagisa reassures him that he doesn’t have any favorite students. That he loves each and every one of them, and that if Yoshito is perceiving it that way it’s something he’d be willing to work through. The last thing he wants to be seen as is someone uncaring. Even so, Yoshito quickly brushes his attempts at reassurance off, and says that all he wants is to get back to the classroom.

Try as he might, ultimately all Nagisa can do is oblige. The last thing he’d want to do is keep Yoshito here when he’s frustrated enough as is. He offers a hand as he leads Yoshito back into the classroom.

Yoshito doesn’t take it.

The rest of the day seems to go by in a haze. And even when Makoto gives Nagisa a hug on the way out of the school, he barely processes it.
Because on one hand, he’d like to tell himself that’s simply not right… That the rejection Yoshito is facing in other aspects of his life is simply bleeding through to his perception of Nagisa. And even so… Nagisa refuses to be the teacher who dismisses his students’ concerns so swiftly. Regardless of whether or not it’s true, Yoshito feels that way, and that’s unacceptable.

...To be truthful, his concerns aren’t entirely unfounded.

It’s not that Nagisa had done it deliberately. But looking back on it… Yoshito had been regularly showing up to class late for the past two weeks. And although Nagisa had simply handwaved it as an aspect of the apathetic student not taking class overly seriously, it’s now revealed itself to be something much more dire. He should have asked Yoshito before jumping to conclusions, because the situation he’s found himself in is one he’d promised he’d never let himself befall to:

Not seeing his student.

His head still spinning as he enters his home, he has to wonder just who else he’s letting have their issues fly under the radar. Emiko’s trauma… She’s never opened up about it. Rin’s father… Is their situation getting any better? Misaki… How is she doing in light of her recovery?

They’re things he doesn’t want to push. If they don’t want to share, they’re under no obligation to. But even so… is someone desperately crying for help?

Someone he can’t hear? Drowned out under the sound of the ‘Korosensei’ conspiracy he’s gotten himself so wrapped up in?

No… No. He wouldn’t pick favorites. He’s simply… Lost track of his priorities. He’ll fix it. He swears.

None of his spouses are home yet. Heart aching, he goes straight to bed.

His head hits the pillow. And with eyes shut tight, he promises himself he’ll do everything in his power to prevent himself from making the same mistakes again.

“The Messing up just leaves the people around you free to react. And as long as you never fault them for that… Try to understand where they’re coming from… I think you’re already on the way to making up for any mistakes you’ve made.”

Try as he might, Makoto just can’t get his mind off of Nagisa’s words

He’d… Made an awful lot of mistakes, hadn’t he? The more he dwells on it, the more he comes to that conclusion. Up until very recently, he’d lived in a world where Korosensei was perfect. But now… When he tries to focus on that nameless little boy’s face, all he can process is the sensation of slamming him into a wall.

“Do better,” he hisses, voice low and unfamiliar. The boy quivers, flowers wilting in hand.

The moment he turns, he swears he feels a glare on the back of his neck.

The weirdest thing is… He’s never remembered this boy until now. He… Wasn’t in any of his memories of the E-Class, right?

‘No,’ he decides. It certainly doesn’t feel like it. Why, then?

“You need to train harder,” he says, not giving the boy a second glance.
“I’m doing my best.” His tone is meek, but Makoto can’t help but detect some kind of indignance buried under the surface.

If Korosensei hears it too, he certainly doesn’t say anything.

What are they training for, anyways? Sometimes Makoto swears he catches the glint of a blade in the boy’s hand. And his heart skips a beat.

...Had… Korosensei had someone trying to kill him before the E-Class?

It’s certainly something Makoto hasn’t heard of. Not even from Fumiko or Nagisa. And they’re… Like… His biggest fans! But it’s the only option he can fathom. If he stayed with the E-Class until the very end, then this had to have fallen before. A secret killer… the first attempt.

But then… Where did… Where did he go?

Every time Makoto sees him, he swears his resentment grows. During Assassination, when Nagisa blocks his blade just right… The boy scoffs and glares. Listening to his father snore at night… He sits, curled up in the same fearful position. And out in the school’s garden, watching hyacinth and basil bloom, he swears he catches the boy weep.

The next time he sees him, however, he carries himself with confidence.

Spotlights: Bewildering and bright. They illuminate the boy’s face, his smile almost skeletal. He’s hardly a boy anymore, now. All grown up; heart filled with hate.

Authorities. That’s what it is. Surrounding them on every side.

‘This was supposed to be an easy target! No! Why are they here!?’

He whirls around to face the boy, reaching out to grab him by the collar.

‘It’s you! Wasn’t it!? I knew I never should have trusted you! I did everything right, and you had the audacity to-”

His arm falters before he can grab at the boy. Knees feeling weak, he can’t bring himself to take another step.

‘No. No. It’s all over.’

He thinks he’s going to cry.

‘Look at what you’ve done! And after I took you in from nothing!’

The boy simply smiles. And turning back around to re-enter the building, he pinches at his forehead and pulls up.

As if it’s second nature, he effortlessly pulls the skin up and off over his brow. His flesh and viscera as clear as day, and glistening in the bright light. He blinks, unphased, as if he’d simply removed a mask. And then, taking a step back into the building, he only has one declaration for Korosensei:

“It’s funny. You never saw what I really looked like, did you?”

It’s a taunt and accusation all in one.
Even as he disappears into the dark of the building, Korosensei can’t will himself to move. Though whether it’s out of a sheer terror, or an apathy towards whatever the boy does next is unclear. Hands trembling, he forces himself to turn back towards the authorities.

Even now, he maintains a calm smile. He’ll… Work through this, too. He tells himself. He always has. And even so, Makoto feels terror rise in his gut.

‘This can’t be how it ends,’ Korosensei reassures himself.

‘This has to be how it ends,’ Makoto decides.

None of it’s right! Who was that boy!? Who are these people! Where’s his superpowers! Where’s Nagisa!? This isn’t how he died, is it!?

...His hands.

Why does he have hands?

He forces himself to stare at them. And quiver as they may, human they are.

‘No. No. It can’t be.’

Makoto swears he feels his knees buckle as he’s thrust back into the world of the waking.

He bolts up, heart pounding in his chest. He looks around the room and comes to the realization that he’s simply at home. The TV blares, just barely audible, and his father snores across the room.

...Ah.

‘So it was… Just a bad dream,’ he tries to tell himself. But that doesn’t stick for a second. No. Maybe to him - Maybe to Makoto - But after everything he’d seen, he has an inkling that in reality, it’s anything but.

Before he can even begin to ask himself what any of that meant, he stumbles to his feet. He thinks more than anything right now he just needs a drink. In the dim light, he tiptoes over to the kitchen and grabs himself a glass of water. He brings it to shaky lips, praying it’ll do something to ease the unease in his chest.

A moment passes. And then two. When he still hears a ringing in his ears, he decides it hadn’t worked.

Even so, he doesn’t let go of the glass. Staggering over to a chair, he sits, and stares at his reflection, distorted by the water.

He frowns. All this time, he’d thought he’d found himself through Korosensei. Found that he was something… Good. Something better than ‘Makoto’ could ever be.

But now, all he can find it in himself to ask is ‘who were you really?’

Because despite spotting his clearly human hands with his own two eyes... Remembering the pain he’d inflicted with them leaves him with the feeling that somehow Korosensei had been even less human than he’d previously thought.

“Dude. You alive?”
Nagisa comes to with a groan. Blinking groggily, he rolls over and buries his face in his pillow.

An impatient hand taps at his shoulder firmly. And an amused voice pipes up with “Yeah. No. You’ve been sleeping for four hours. Time to get up, big boy.”

Four hours? What is that supposed to mean? There’s no way he’s been napping for four hours. He’d recognize that voice anywhere. Karma’s just… Messing with him, right?

He rolls over again, letting out a stubborn groan. “This isn’t funny, Karma.”

“Isn’t funny?” Karma asks. “What are you talking about?” A pause. “I hope you realize I will pick you up and shake you awake if need be.”

“No, you wouldn’t…” Nagisa mumbles, pulling the pillow further over his face.

He then feels a pair of icy fingers slide under his arms. With a heave, Karma makes the motion to lift him out of bed.

That wakes him up in an instant.

“Okay! Okay! I’m awake!” he declares, eyes shooting open. He flails and tears himself out of Karma’s grasp, shooting him a nasty glare as he begins to process his surroundings.

“About time, sleepyhead.”

Nagisa simply gives him an annoyed look, before glancing towards the clock. Sure enough: Karma hadn’t been shitting him. It really is 6 in the evening. He sits up, rubbing at his eyes and shaking his head in disbelief.

“...I can’t believe I slept that long.”

To be truthful it’s not that long of a time, but it is sorta the point where ‘nap’ crosses over into ‘depression nap,’ and Nagisa hardly sleeps after school anyway unless something is seriously wrong.

...Oh jeez. Something had happened, hadn’t it? Nagisa had almost forgot.

“Me neither,” Karma admits, plopping down on the bed. He scratches at the back of his shoulder. “The others and I were beginning to get worried. Thought you’d had a stroke or something. Makoto was just about ready to volunteer to wake you up, but Kayano put a stop to that. Something-something he’d ‘jump on the bed and then he’d really give you a stroke.” He snorts. “So I suppose the Nagisa-check-up-ing got entrusted to me, which really isn’t much better for your feeble little heart, but here we are.”

Christ. Nagisa had forgotten Makoto was over. Like - Of course he is, he’s over pretty much every day, but he must have been pretty damn worried to see Nagisa just disappear like that. At the very least, Nagisa should have given him a heads up that he wasn’t feeling too hot. But in the moment he’d just forgot.

It makes him feel bad. He’s supposed to be a teacher who’s open with his students. And that means not disappearing, locking himself in his room, and taking a depression nap for four and a half hours on a Thursday afternoon. That’s just unprofessional.

...He is really not as good at this as he’d like to think sometimes.
“Thanks,” he finally says. “Even if I’m still mad you tried to pick me up like a ragdoll.”

“Aw! Come on! That’s just our thing! As hubbies!”

Calling each other ‘dude’ and picking each other up like a sack of potatoes? Nagsia can practically feel himself swoon. Real romantic.

“Please never say that again,” he murmurs, rubbing at his temple.

“Say what?” Karma says, feigning ignorance.

“Hubbies.”

“What!” Karma says. “I, for one, think it’s an adorable term.”

He must finally catch up on Nagisa’s irritation, however, because he runs out of jokes when he meets his eyes. “So I’m taking it you weren’t just tired?” he asks.

“No,” Nagisa admits.

“Did something happen at school?”

“A little more than ‘something.’ A kid had a total breakdown,” Nagisa admits.

Karma raises an eyebrow, frowning. “What do you mean?”

“I dunno, man,” Nagisa murmurs, running his fingers through his hair. “Some kids in his neighborhood had been picking on him, and it was really stressing him out. I hardly even got the chance to ask what they were doing. Good god - They could be hitting him. And I didn’t even notice. This has been going on at least two weeks, and I’m only just now finding out.”

Karma blinks. “Well… Hey. At least you know now. You’ll figure something ou-”

“He hates me now.”

“Scuse me?”

“He hates me,” Nagisa repeats. “...He wasn’t mad at the kids for picking on him, Karma. He was mad at me for not picking up on it. At the beginning of the year I told him - Told everyone - that they could come to me with anything. But in his moment of need… When he was crying for help… I’d been too busy to see.”

Karma’s quiet for a long moment. “He seriously told you he hates you?”

“Yes,” Nagisa replies.

Karma stares, the little cogs in his brain turning as he attempts to formulate a response. But right now, Nagisa doesn’t exactly want to hear it. Hear reason. He knows what he feels, and knows it’s not reasonable. So instead, he speaks up before Karma can get the chance.

“You have… No idea how much I resent myself for that. More than anything, I just want to be there for them. It’s my job, Karma. The promise I made to them when I took them in. If I can’t do that…” Nagisa bites his lip. “Well, then I’m scared.” He sighs. “The other night, Kayano brought up the fact that my job freaks her out sometimes. That she’s scared one day something horrible is going to happen to my students and that there will be nothing I can do about it. She finally put it into words for me. I’m scared.
“...Today in the teachers' lounge, watching Yoshito freak out, I was scared I was going to lose him. And that it wouldn’t be because of something beyond my control. That it would be because of me. I can’t handle the idea of that kind of failure. Not ever. Because... In letting him suffer alone, that means I’ve failed to uphold the values I promised to protect as a teacher.” Another long pause. “Means I’m failing to uphold everything Korosensei stood for.”

Karma places a firm hand on Nagisa’s shoulder.

“Don’t say that.”

“It’s true!”

“No. It’s not,” Karma repeats. “You work yourself to the bone. You work yourself harder than even Korosensei ever did. Just because you shat the bed this time doesn’t mean you’re some sort of child-hating maniac.” He shrugs. “You know. Like most teachers we’ve met are? So, like, the bar is underground and you’re already doing great.”

Nagisa sighs out through his nose. “You’re not making me feel better, Karma.”

Karma wilts. “Sorry,” he admits. “I’m - Uh - Not actually that great at this comforting stuff. But you know I hate it when you talk about yourself that way.”

“I know...” Nagisa replies. “But... This time is different.”

“How?” Karma asks. “Is it really, or are you just looking for another excuse to take this out on yourself?”

“I mean, for one, he didn’t even just say he hated me. He told me himself this was my fault. Hell, he accused me of paying more attention to certain students than others. I don’t want to believe that’s true. I’m trying so hard to be diligent. To help each and every one of them how they need it. But...”

He can’t help but think about how not exactly all of his students have been gifted a birthday cake. *Shit, man...* Maybe he is playing favorites.

“Maybe I am screwing this up.”

Karma’s grip on his shoulder tightens. “You’re gonna hate me for saying this, but just because the kid says it doesn’t mean it’s true. Yes, he’s hurting. And yes, he’s angry. But that doesn’t mean it’s really your fault. You seem to forget this sometimes with how much of a papa hen you are to them, but kids can be vindictive little shits. For all we care, he’s just trying so hard to be diligent. To help each and every one of them how they need it. But...”

He can’t help but think about how not exactly all of his students have been gifted a birthday cake.

*Shit, man...* Maybe he is playing favorites.

“Maybe I am intending to,” Nagisa replies. “No matter what he says... What he does, I’m not giving up on him. But what if he’s right? What if I’m not enough? And what if this is something even I can’t fix? I get what you’re saying, Karma, I really do. But ‘vindictive’ or not, it’s my job as a teacher not to dismiss their concerns like that. I don’t care why they’re lashing out. I care that they’re hurting at all. And the day I can’t notice and begin to fix the source of that... Or, god forbid, the day I’m the cause of their hurt, is the day I no longer deserve my title.”

“...That won’t happen,” Karma says. “I know you’re stressed right now, but that’s not what
“I have to be,” Nagisa insists. “If I’m not hard on myself, I’ll never be able to protect them.” His hands fall to his sides. “I… Can’t allow that. I just can’t. I need to stand up for them. Because I already feel like I’m not doing enough. Hundreds of students apply to my school every three years. And if I can’t stand up for even 24 of them, what do I have my title for? I want to be able to enroll more of them. I don’t want to leave anyone out in the cold. But to do that, I need to do better.”

“What you need to do is hire more teachers,” Karma says. "Get a student-teacher to help you take care of these things, and then work on finding more real teachers so you can expand the enrollment size. We’ve been telling you this-”

Nagisa scowls. He’s heard it a hundred times before. And all of his spouses agree on it. So, he, like… Gets it. But at the same time… After growing up surrounded by teachers like Gakuho and Takaoka, how is he supposed to go out on a limb and trust like that? Hand over a position in his dream school - Hand over his vulnerable students - To people he doesn’t know? What if they hurt them too?

“You know why I can’t do that, Karma. You said it yourself, Karma. Most teachers are ‘child hating maniacs.’”

“That was hyperbole.”

“Was it, though?”

Karma sighs.

“I just don’t feel comfortable putting already at-risk students in a situation like that. I’m… The only person I can trust with this,” Nagisa says, avoiding looking Karma’s way.

“What are you going to do, then?”

“About what?” Nagisa asks. “There are so, so many issues with how I’m running things.”

‘With yourself,’ the voice inside his head adds on. But even Nagisa’s smart enough to not voice that one in front of Karma.

“Let’s start simple. Yoshito. What are you going to do about Yoshito?”

“...I don’t know yet,” Nagisa admits. Staring up at the ceiling and watching the fan spin round, he swears he feels his head spin, too. “... Should really get that figured out.” And in an instant, he’s on his feet. He takes a step towards the doorway, mumbling “Enough of being self-pitying. I need to get that worked out. Not to mention I’m behind on grading.”

Karma grabs his hand. Shaking his head, he says. “No. I’m not letting you do that.” He tugs at his hand with a frown. “I want you to think about this for, like, ten seconds. You’re on the brink of an anxiety attack. You haven’t even eaten dinner yet. And you need to give yourself a break. Your students will understand if you return their essays a day later. Even if they wouldn’t, I’m not letting you work in this condition. You look just about ready to pass out.”

Nagisa feels just about ready to pass out. Rather pathetic, considering he just slept for four hours. He tugs back at his hand.

“Let go, Karma,” he begs.
“No,” Karma says simply.

“...Please,” He says, a twinge of irritation in his voice. “I’ll be fine.”

“No. You won’t,” Karma says. “And while I know you’re obsessed with pushing yourself, you won’t be any good to your kids burnt out, much less dead. You can’t keep working yourself like this. You’re going to have a goddamn heart attack.”

Nagisa stops in his tracks… Bites down on his lip. But with another tug from Karma’s hand, he finally relents and sits back down on the bed.

“...There we go,” Karma says, placing a hand on his back.

Nagisa sighs. “I’ll rest a minute. Will that make you happy?”

“Mildly,” Karma says. “If you really wanna make me happy, though, you’re gonna have to have a nice therapy session with your husband, actually eat your dinner, and get a good night's sleep for once in your life.”

Nagisa rubs at his eyes, frowning. He hates how stubborn Karma can be sometimes. He knows that Karma’s only worried, and while he’s relieved their butting-heads has gone from topics like ‘should we commit premeditated murder?’ to ‘please practice basic self-care,’ he wishes Karma would get just how important this is to him.

He’s not pushing himself for no reason! He’s not doing this because he hates himself or something. He’s pushing himself because they need him. And in a life or death situation like this, he can’t afford to rest.

He flops down on the bed, sprawling out with exhaustion. He stares up at the ceiling.

“...Sometimes I wish I had his powers,” he admits, watching the fan go in circles.

Karma gives him a peculiar stare. But Nagisa pays it no mind.

“Sensei could do anything,” he muses, a bittersweet smile tugging at the corner of his lips. “And he did. All for us. Remember the time he built us a pool?” He gives a sad laugh. “Or the time he showed up to your house in the middle of the night to help you study for midterms? No ordinary teacher could do those things. Not even if they tried.” Slowly, his smile fades. “But Sensei was different. He was… There for all of us. He never let one of our issues fall through the cracks. There were... What? 28 of us by the end of the year? And he still had time to take care of each and every one of us.”

“The man had superpowers, Nagisa.”

“Exactly,” Nagisa says, melancholy to his voice. “Sometimes, I wish I did, too. I know… What he went through was hell. I know his life was hell. But I’d go through it all in a moment if it would let me protect those kids.”

If it would let him live up to Korosensei.

Karma shrugs. “I think we all wish we could have superpowers sometimes,” he admits. “Would certainly make my job a lot easier too. What’s that, Ryoma-san? You don’t like my policies? Guess it’s time to dropkick you at supersonic speeds.”

That earns a snort from Nagisa. “I’m pretty sure that’s murder, Karma.”
“Oh, what about it?” Karma dismissively says. “Considering both that we spent a solid year specifically learning how to kill people and the fact that politicians can get away with literally anything, I’m pretty sure the ‘legality’ or ‘morality’ of this situation goes out the goddamn window.”

Nagisa rolls his eyes, but sends Karma an amused glance.

Karma returns a smile that seems to say ‘checkmate. I did it. I made you laugh.’ But proud as he may be, he quickly returns to a stern expression.

“But need I remind you these superpowers in particular were not only insanely painful to acquire - And I’m talking, like, the dude described vomiting blood on the floor painful, - but were also the reason he was murdered, and were invented by a now-dead sociopath in the first place. I’d call that about a lost cause.”

...And… Nagisa knows that. He knows about what Korosensei had been through. It haunts him at night... Thinking of the pain and loss he’d endured. sometimes Nagisa’s left to wonder... If Korosensei had known… If Korosensei had somehow had a choice... Would he really have been willing to go through with all of that just for the chance to nurture them? What if…

...What if even they weren’t worth it?

That’s… Not the Sensei he knew, right? Just a product of his nightmarish imagination? Even so, it’s a concept that haunts him. And part of the reason he’d promised himself that he’d do absolutely anything for his students. Face anything. Become anyone. Suffer through each and every burden.

Even if more often than not his burdens are just his spouses telling him to ‘take care of himself” instead of ‘working until he passes out from literal exhaustion.’

Pah.

None of which is to mention the ‘pioneer’ (And he uses that term insanely loosely) of antimatter - The dreaded Yanagisawa. If Karma is right about anything, it’s that. The discovery of Korosensei’s life-altering superpowers… The same ones that had changed the E-Class’s lives and salvaged their futures had been no more than the result of a narcissistic, delusional madman doing whatever the hell he wanted to another human being. It’s… sickening to think that the only reason some of them could be here today is because Korosensei went through that.

Even following the final confrontation, and Yanagisawa’s subsequent paralysis, there had never appeared to be a shred of warmth in that man’s cold, withered heart. Kayano had visited him once or twice, begging for answers - Some sort of reasoning for what he’d dared to put her, her sister, and her sensei through. But up until the very end, he’d never handed them over. Never given her the satisfaction.

And on the day he finally died, it’s a little sad to admit... But it feels the E-Class had rejoiced.

Karma must notice Nagisa lost in thought. He gives his shoulder a gentle shake. “You gotta admit that I’m right, don’t you? That it’s all a little messed up?”

“Yeah,” Nagisa says. “It’s all a lot messed up. But it’s nice to imagine sometimes. If… there hadn’t been all the hurt… Hadn’t been all the cruelty… And if people had understood Korosensei, what we could have done with powers like those in a better world.”

Karma’s quiet for a moment as he mulls that one over. “I suppose,” he muses, rubbing his chin.
“There’s nothing wrong with a little bit of daydreaming.” He pauses. “But even so, it gets sorta funky when you really think about it. Like… What are we talking about here in this cruelty-free, full-organic, ‘we the people can utilize Korosensei’s god powers’ utopia? What are the mechanics?”

“Excuse me?”

“In your dream world, does, like, everyone have superpowers? ‘Cause when everyone’s super, no-one is. And in that scenario, you couldn’t… Like… Use superspeed to nurture kids because they’d be using their own superspeed to, like, trade Pokemon cards and put a hole in your ceiling. But if everyone doesn’t have superpowers, what does that seem to imply? Do they get them when they turn eighteen? Or do only certain people get the octopowers?” Nagisa can practically hear the little gears in his brain turning as he tosses himself further into the ridiculous theoreticals of such a world. “Because the latter scenario seems to imply some sort of dystopian, eugenics-motivated, superpower-bestowing fascist government, which I’m not sure lines up with the whole escapist fantasy thing—”

“What are you even talking about!?” Nagisa finally interjects with a laugh. Wheezing with disbelief, he asks “Did you just quote Incredibles at me?”

“Well, shit,” Karma says, stretching. “You caught me. As for what I’m talking about, however, I’m simply using logical fallacies to poke holes in your fantasies.”

“Thanks, Karma,” Nagisa says dryly.

“Aww! Come on. I made you laugh.”

Nagisa simply huffs.

“And in all seriousness, I don’t like you comparing yourself like that, even just in theory,” Karma says. “You’re never going to be able to do those things. So… cut it out. Stop judging yourself. You know that’s not what Sensei would have wanted.” He pauses. “You know that’s not what he’d even want now.”

“I know-” Nagisa says.

“And you keep saying that, but you still don’t give yourself any credit. You just push and push yourself until you can’t anymore. In a world where superpowers really did exist, I don’t like to think you’d put yourself through literal mental and physical hell just to be a ‘better teacher’ and live up to a dead man who was already beyond proud of you. And in a world where superpowers just don’t, I hate to see you working you all-too-human self to the brink. If you keep this up, one of these days you won’t have anything left. And what will you be able to do for your students then?”

Nagisa sighs and sits up. “I wish I knew,” he admits. “Sometimes I feel like I’m constantly stuck between a rock and a hard place. I can’t stop. I know that I work myself hard. But I’d rather end up passing out from exhaustion than let anything happen to those kids. Everything I do… How hard I work… It’s my duty. I knew that when I signed up for this.”

“And I know you did. But don’t forget to take care of yourself, either. You already do so much for those little shits. I have never seen a teacher act like you. Not even Korosensei. You invite students into your house! You give them a place to stay! You lay awake at night trying to think of how to fix their issues. You organized an entire sports festival single-handedly and keep a live octopus in their classroom. Those kids are having the time of their lives.”
“...And what if that’s not enough?”

“Oh my god, Nagisa. It’s enough. You are going *above and beyond.*”

“What if I’m not giving them the skills to prepare for afterwards? When they’re at home? When they don’t have me? Sometime in the future, when they graduate. What if they still need help then?”

“Then you’ll give it to them,” Karma says simply. “You always have, haven’t you?”

He sighs. “You give the world for these kids. And if that’s not enough for you, then you’re a moron. Sure… You might not be doing exactly what Korosensei did. But… Do you have to?” He frowns. "You know, he screwed up in some ways too.”

Nagisa grimaces and shakes his head. “I know. But even so… I just wish…

He stares down at his hands and searches for an answer.

‘I just wish I felt like I was good enough.’

Karma huffs. “Okay. I see what’s happening. We’re going in circles.” He stands. “I actually hate it when you say those things about yourself. It makes me mad, man. But I see there’s nothing I can do here. Soooo…” He reaches for the bedside drawer and carefully pulls something out. Giving Nagisa an unimpressed look, he says “I think you need to take another look through this.” And places Korosensei’s self-help book on his lap.

Nagisa meets his eyes.

“You wanna know why? Because you hold yourself so up to the caliber of Korosensei’s teaching. Those days were some of the best of your life. But as obsessed as you are with what he taught you, you’re awfully inclined to forget it. Maybe he can remind you what I can’t.” He turns on his heels and sends Nagisa one last glance. “I think you two need a moment. So give that a read over, okay?”

And with that, he’s gone. He walks out of the room, and gently closes the door as he goes.

Nagisa stares down at the book in his lap. And running his hand over his tie, he supposes he’s left with no choice.

Maybe there really is something he’d forgotten.

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The more Makoto thinks about being human, the less human he feels.

It’s funny. Up until recently, he’d never really thought about where Korosensei came from.

Like, yeah, he’d known that he definitely hadn’t been an alien, but otherwise, Korosensei’s past hadn’t mattered! What mattered had been his time with the E-Class!

At least… That’s what had felt important to Makoto. It’s what everyone talked about when they mentioned Korosensei. And it was most of what he’d remembered, too. So he guesses he’d just sort of conceptualized Korosensei as popping into existence on that ramshackle campus despite knowing that probably wasn’t the case.

Now he knows that *definitely* wasn’t the case.

If he tries - If he really focuses, he can sometimes make his face out. The man Korosensei was
before. Staring into the mirror or passing by a window, hands in his pockets. He doesn’t look anything like Korosensei. Which is fair enough, considering neither does he, but it’s still not what he’d expected. If anything - the man looks cool, with those calm dark eyes and collected stride. Carefully kept black hair, and a long brown coat trailing behind him.

...He’s the sort of guy Makoto would like to grow up to look like.

Just like Korosensei, however, he’s worlds away from the rather mundane Makoto. Sure, he’s just a guy, but he’s got an aura of coolness to him. Less wide eyes. Less goofy posture. Less…

Well, Makoto stares into those dark empty eyes and figures there’s a lot less of everything.

Try as he may to discover the truth behind this man, though, there are still things Makoto can’t piece together. How did he become Korosensei? And what on earth had he done for a living beforehand?

He knows he hadn’t been a teacher. Cool as that sounds, Makoto’s certain his year in the E-Class had been his only year in the educational field. That’s... Why it had meant so much to him. And so what had this guy done to end up where he had? There’s no way he likes kids.

That much makes itself exceedingly clear. Every time Makoto sees the silver-haired boy, he finds himself more and more impatient with him. Twisting his arm and whispering curses in his face.

They travel. A lot. Whatever Korosensei did must not have been stable. They don’t take plane, or even car. They sneak onto boats and hitch rides on trains, remaining under the radar at all times. They pay for hotels with cash, careful not to leave a paper trail. Or even better - They simply squat in abandoned apartments.

Despite how much of the world Korosensei sees, it never once seems bright.

There’s a sense of bleakness to his life Makoto’s never felt before.

One morning, the boy comes in with a fistful of flowers. Colorful and vibrant. He holds them out with a hopeful grin, and says, “For you.”

Something about the color only makes Korosensei angry. He knocks them out of the boy’s hand, and says hobbies like that are no more than a waste of time.

The boy stares at the ground, eyes watery as he looks down at the flowers. Korosensei steps on them, and Makoto stares too.

That’s the first time he thinks “Maybe I kinda sucked.”

It’s funny, how little he cared for his ‘kid.’

...Okay. It’s not funny. It’s the exact opposite, actually. It’s just sad. But it’s ironic, at the very least. That Korosensei had nothing but apathy in his heart for this scared little boy, and yet it’s Makoto who finds himself dwelling on him as he sits outside of Nagisa’s bedroom door and worries about another ‘child’ of his.

...Just what had happened to make him a person who cares so much?

Karma and the rest had admitted it’s not usual for Nagisa to isolate himself like that unless something is really wrong. And it terrifies him. He can’t quite make it out behind the thick walls, but Makoto swears he hears a quiver in Nagisa’s voice on the other end of that doorway.
He hopes Karma will come out soon. Hopes Karma will reassure him everything’s okay. Hopes Karma will tell him that Nagisa’s fine, and that there’s nothing to worry about.

...Hopes Karma will tell him he’s not the reason Nagisa’s upset.

He knows it’s probably about what happened with Yoshito earlier. But even so, he catches Nagisa whisper the word “Korosensei” amidst his pain, and feels his heart shatter.

...How many people had he hurt?

No. He hadn’t hurt Nagisa, had he? Except… When he died. And when he screwed up helping him with his mom.

Oh jeez… How many mistakes could he possibly have made?

He wants to remember. He knows it’ll just make him feel bad, but he feels obligated to. He wants to know who he really was: The good, the bad, and the ugly. After all… Guilty-feeling or not, he deserves to know about himself. And more importantly, he figures he can’t begin to make up for all the ways he messed up until he knows who he’s apologizing to and what for.

Try as he might, however, there’s a gap. He focuses as hard as he can, scrunching his forehead and gritting his teeth as he tries to put together how exactly someone could go from that guy to Korosensei. It’s not even just the shift in appearance or powers. It’s personality, too. When he enters the world of the human Korosensei, he feels like he becomes another person entirely.

Is it… Possible this had been a separate past life?

No. He quickly shakes his head. Something just feels wrong about that notion. He knows this is the same guy. He just doesn’t know how. Not yet.

It’s another ten minutes before Karma exits Nagisa’s room. Looking exhausted, he carefully shuts the door behind him.

Makoto hops to his feet. Staring up at Karma hopefully, he asks “Is everything okay?”

Karma shrugs. “He’s just being hard on himself. The usual.”

Makoto reaches for the door handle. “Maybe I should talk to him,” he says.

Karma thinks that over for a long moment. “...Maybe you should,” he admits, reaching for Makoto’s hand. “But maybe he’ll also just make you feel bad. This really isn’t your job to deal with.”

Feeling indignance rise in his gut, and seeing Korosensei’s face clearly in his mind, Makoto’s half tempted to mutter ‘It actually sort of is.’

...He doesn’t. He catches the uncharacteristic weariness in Karma’s eyes, and decides that maybe there are some things even he can’t fix.

(Some things he doesn’t want to screw up any more than he already has.)

He follows Karma down the hall. “At least let me know what he’s sad about,” he says. “Maybe I can talk to him about it tomorrow at school.”

Karma sighs. “It’s ridiculous. You’re gonna be mad when you hear it.”
“Come on. Just shoot.”

“He wishes he had powers like you did.”


“Wish I knew. Something-something ‘I’m not doing enough for my class even though I’m already working myself to the bone for them.’”

Makoto frowns, mulling that over. Nagisa wants his powers?

As funny as it is to imagine Nagisa clipping through the walls at a little less than light speed, Makoto’s never really thought Nagisa ever would have needed that kind of stuff. Sure, maybe he can’t regrow his severed limbs, but he also doesn’t have a class actively trying to chop off said aforementioned limbs. Those aren’t exactly necessary in this situation.

To be honest, he’d already kinda thought Nagisa was doing way cooler than he ever did, even with powers. The hell sorta standard is he holding himself up to?

Is… Is he really comparing himself to him? No… No. Makoto doesn’t want to think about it

Makoto can’t fault him entirely. Because, sure, yeah, he’s always sorta wanted Korosensei’s superpowers, too. How could he not? Those belonged to him! But the more he thinks about it, the more he comes to the conclusion that his powers had been ultimately sort of useless.

Sure, he’d had super speed and super healing. But he sure hadn’t had super people skills. After all, superpowered or not, he’d still failed a lot of people. Looking back on the ways he’d messed up bigtime on trying to help Nagisa fix things with his mom… Or with a hole in his heart giving him the sinking feeling he’d never made it up to his ‘son…’ Makoto decides there’s a lot of things even Korosensei couldn’t do.

In the weirdest way, that’s almost reassuring. Sometimes (Or… Well… A lot of the time) Makoto feels useless, too. Even if he’s sure he’ll always feel a little dwarfed by the unreachable figure that is Korosensei, it’s nice to think they were equally as capable of screwing the pooch.

“Well… I think he’s doing good enough,” Makoto says, sticking close to Karma. “And I don’t think those powers would help him much anyways.”


Makoto nods. “I’ll tell him, then,” he says with a determined look. “Because… he’s the best teacher I’ve ever had.”

He sees a flash of a face in his mind. But as always, it’s gone before he can even wrap his mind around it. Even so, he feels a warmth in his gut.

Something tells him the best teachers he’s had have never been anything more than just ‘human.’

“Enough of that, though,” Karma says. “He needs his space. And it’s nothing you should really be worrying about. Wanna do something? I know your little friends aren’t here today so you’re probably all sorts of bored, but Karma’s still around, and he’s down for a game of Mario Kart or whatever if you want.”

Makoto meets his grin. “You’re on.”
“Who knows. If we’re lucky, maybe we can even coax Gakushuu into playing.”

Makoto follows after with a skip in his step. And settling down on the couch, Verse controller in hand, he returns to some kind of calm; Gets his mind off the silver-haired boy and allows himself to relax just this once.

When he ends up managing to lap Karma, he comes to the shocked realization that somehow that’s something even the elusive Korosensei hadn’t managed to do.

If… Nagisa’s able to do things Korosensei couldn’t and even do them well, maybe so can Makoto. And in more important ways than just Mario Kart shenanigans.

He’ll do what Korosensei couldn’t. He’ll fix things. He’ll give Nagisa a hand, and he’ll find the silver-haired boy. Wherever he is now… Whoever he’s become, Makoto will track him down. And finally, he’ll apologize to him.

He knows the boy might not be thrilled to hear it. Or that he may not even believe him, but Makoto’s ready to respect whatever response he receives. And for a moment, that even makes him feel better.

But remembering holding a blade to the boy’s throat… Remembering drawing that same blade through flesh, Makoto’s left to wonder.

Are there some things even an apology can’t fix?

Nagisa’s well-acquainted with Korosensei’s self-help book.

Being the last thing Korosensei had left him, Nagisa’s clung to it somewhat like a security blanket. Filled with all manner of jokes and advice, it had been all Nagisa had had left of Korosensei up until very recently…

He must have read through it a hundred times now. It seems when nothing else can comfort him, it’s there without fail. And even so, staring down at the worn book, he’s left to wonder if it can really help him now.

It’s not like there’s anything in it he hasn’t read before.

Sighing and running his hand over the cover, he flips open the book. He sincerely doubts there’s much it can do, but somehow he feels like he’ll be letting down Korosensei and Karma both if he doesn’t at least give it a shot.

The first page he opens to features a picture of Korosensei’s smiling face. Even worn with time, edges frayed and colors faded, it’s easy to make out the photo of him wrapping his tentacles around Karma and Itona with a goofy expression.

Karma’s got somewhat of a genuinely peeved look on his face, elbowing at Korosensei with a fierceness only the fifteen-year-old Karma could have had. Itona, on the other hand, has long since ceased struggling, sitting limp like a sack of potatoes or perhaps a particularly apathetic cat in Korosensei’s grasp.

“During your time as a teacher, you may notice certain students struggling to resist your outstretched tentacle. Do not fear, however! And never scorn said students. Perhaps they are just going through a bit of extra difficulty in their lives, and that means they need you more than ever. Don’t give up on them, for when you finally manage to get through to their hearts, you’ll find a
He’s placed an octopus-shaped sticker on the page next to his words, alongside a “100%” stamp. Crafty, overdramatic asshole.

Issue is Nagisa already *knows* all that. He *knows* not to give up on his students. It’s *himself* he’s worried about. And he’s not sure anything anyone, even Korosensei, could say could help with that.

After all, if he’d met them as kids today, he’s not sure *he’d* be able to make it through through to Karma and Itona like Korosensei had managed to.

He sends a sad glance towards the photo, before flipping to another page.

This time he finds a picture of Korosensei and Kayano. He’d visited her in the hospital after the incident, eight 24-packs of pudding in tow. It must be taken at the exact moment she noticed him, because her expression is completely taken aback.

Nagisa seems to vaguely recall this incident. Something-something immediately after a nurse had told Korosensei “I’m not sure this is a healthy choice for the patient” and “Sir, you need to leave immediately.”

“She’d been lit on fire, not had a heart attack! Let her have some pudding! Pretty please!?”

“SIR. YOU NEED TO GO.”

Another photo, lower on the page. Kayano’s covering her mouth with her arm now, unable to hide her giggle. Boxes of pudding spilled everywhere, Korosensei looks absolutely mortified.

“* Unexpected things are bound to happen in your career as a teacher. Scary things, as well. (Not the moment depicted, for clarification, but I don’t have pictures of Kayano with her tentacles. :-(( This will have to suffice.) And although at first these moments may make you doubt yourself or you may not know what to do, this is an important step in your journey. Being a teacher is just as much as about learning as it is about helping others learn. Answers cannot always come easily in life, and I am sure you’ll come out of it for the better having figured them out the hard way. “

There’s a sticky note hastily slapped on underneath. “* Even if sometimes that means you end up getting evicted from the hospital because a nurse chased you with a broom. “

Korosensei had doodled his own distraught face next to the sentence, somehow looking equally as mortified as the real thing.

For a moment, Nagisa smiles. And he laughs, too, running his hand along the photos. But quickly, even that fades.

Yeah, yeah… He gets it. The most important questions never have simple answers. But does he really have time to try and figure things out when his kids’ wellbeing could be on the line? He gets where Korosensei is coming from, he really does. But even so… It feels like Korosensei would have figured out what to do ages ago.

He wishes he could come to him for advice. Sensei always knew what to say. Sensei always knew what to do. But things are different now. *Fuck, man.* He’s just a little kid. This is supposed to be his happy second chance. His stress-free reward. Nagisa can’t come to him looking for answers. It’s *his* turn to give Korosensei answers. But how is he supposed to do that if he hasn’t even gotten things figured out for himself?
...Just briefly, Nagisa wonders if it’s possible to still miss something that’s right there by your side.

When he catches his laugh fade into a cry, his heart sinks. Although he doesn’t even notice until he catches his tears landing on the pages. Hurriedly, he wipes at his eyes, not wanting to damage his treasure. And a sinking feeling in his chest, he admits to himself he’s been beating around the bush. He knows which of sensei's words he really needs to hear.

...Even if they make him cry every time.

As if he’s done it a thousand times, Nagisa carefully flips to a page near the back of the book. It’s well-worn and creased, with a dog-eared corner. A faded photo depicts Korosensei and he on the beach, Korosensei’s hand resting carefully on his shoulder. They’re watching the sunset as some of his classmates goof around in the ocean. Nagisa still remembers the way Maehara had screeched when he stepped on a crab soon after.

...The school vacation.

That, too, had been one of the most unsure times of his life.

Beyond ill classmates and revenge-minded army men, he’d met and faced down against more assassins than he’d ever even anticipated to meet in his entire lifetime At the end of the day, they’d made their retreat, betraying Takaoka, hopping into their little plane, and telling the kids they were sure they’d be seeing them again sometime in the future.

Nagisa had thought so, too.

It had been the first time he’d really wondered if that’s who he wanted to become.

He’d almost been certain. Decided that was all he was good at. That he was meant to walk life with a blade in his hand. But not with Korosensei. Not watching the sunset. His teachers’ face had seemed to say ‘You’re destined for so much more.’

“I am sure over the course of your teacherhood, you will no doubt one day compare yourself to me,” Korosensei carefully writes. “Such things are inevitable both in teaching and in life. I know I compared myself to Yukimura-sensei up until the very end. Strived to follow the example of the one who had molded me. And while this is only natural, it is also where I must tell you:

Do not!

Do. Not. Compare yourself to me. For I know one day you will excel in ways that are all your own. You do not give yourself enough credit for being one of the most observant, kind hearted, and brave individuals I’ve ever had the honor of knowing. And I am beyond certain that not only will you be able to live up to my legacy, but that you will far transcend it.

Like the rocket you and Karma boarded to try and save my life, I trust the 28 of you to soar further than I ever could have. And I believe with all my heart that you will accomplish things I couldn’t have even thought of. More than anything, I wish I could be there to see it. Because I know you’ll make me proud.

You will never be me. But I implore you to never resent that! For you don’t need to be. The world doesn’t need a second Korosensei. But what the world does need is the first Nagisa. And that’s beautiful in and of itself.

I’m sure you’ll figure things out.”
At the bottom of the page, he’d doodled a makeshift rocket ship. It’s soaring through poorly drawn moons and uneven stars.

Similarly uneven tears spill down Nagisa’s face.

He’s not sure how long he cries, whimpering softly as he holds the book to his chest. And he’s not sure how he feels, even as he slowly pries it away from him and returns the book to his drawer.

He rubs his eyes and runs his hand over his tie one final time. Then, standing, he reaches for his phone, and tells himself he knows what to do.

“Yoshito?” He says the moment he’s sent to voicemail. “I know you’re mad, but can you please call me back as soon as possible? I have a plan, and I’m here to help. I’m sorry if I wasn’t before.” He pauses. “Thanks again... Nagisa.”

Hand shaking, he lowers the phone. And hanging it up, he sends a wayside glance towards his bedside drawer, praying that Korosensei's is right.

...Praying that 'Nagisa' is enough.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter 19 time, ya'll!

This is crazy to say, but I'd say we're reaching about the halfway point of the fic. Maybe a little bit OVER that. I NEVER thought I'd get that far, and I'd like to sincerely thank you all for helping me to this point.

Haha sorry about another pretty heavy chapter. Though at this point I guess you should just expect those. Sometimes I feel like writing this fic is Russian Roulette because you're either gonna get Karma quoting The Incredibles, or Nagisa beating the everloving shit out of himself because a student of his had a massive panic attack.

I think I talked a little bit about last chapter being somewhat of a bridge from the themes of 'family,' and 'accountability.' So I suppose now we've fully entered the territory of 'accountability.' It's. A big thing in this fic, and it's fun to explore in different ways ranging anywhere from 'Haha! I messed up Once!' like Nagisa, to Makoto's "Oh god, I think I seriously emotionally abused this kid in a past life."

I REALLY enjoyed getting to write some of the self-help book. "You'll be the first Nagisa" is another one of those phrases I've envisioned since VERY early on in this project, and I'm happy to have gotten to write it, as tearjerking as it is.

Some songs that helped me write this chapter were The Weight of Living by Bastille, In The Bedroom Down The Hall from Dear Evan Hansen, Bird Song by Florence and The Machine, and Caving In by Kimya Dawson.

The next chapter should be up next week, so look forward to that! All I can say is that it's... Certainly another fun one.
It’s a week later when Makoto’s situation goes from bad to worse.

It’s the middle of the night and he’s still working on a way to find peace with himself over the whole unnamed boy thing when it happens. He’s spent the past week reflecting on it and refining his plan to apologize to him. It’s beginning to all come together, except for the first, main, and only issue in this scenario: That he has no idea where the boy is now. Is… he still alive? Or is he out there in a new life? Like him?

Makoto quickly shakes his head. No. He’s alive. He has to be. Makoto… Just doesn’t know what happened to him after he turned him in. That’s all.

If… he had died, that would mean there’s no guarantee he’s even out there anymore, after all.

(Suddenly, Makoto feels horribly alone. And for one singular moment, he wonders if he’s the only person like himself in the entire world.)

He doesn’t let himself dwell on that, however. He’s got more than enough on his mind already as is. Instead, he simply rolls over in his futon and attempts to drift off to sleep.

Like he seems to more and more lately, he finds himself immersed in Korosensei’s world.

The first thing he does is glance down at his hands. And sure enough, they’re human. The same delicate, precise, and graceful fingers he’s found himself well acquainted with as of late.

It feels he’s entering the world of the happy Korosensei less and less. Each and every night he prays he won’t find himself in this particular room in his house of memories. But his words must fall on deaf ears, because here he is again.

The boy is sitting by his side, quivering gently with excitement. He stares up at Korosensei with wide eyes. He can’t be older than seven or eight here.

“Are you really going to show me?” he asks, almost breathless.

“Of course I’m going to show you,” Korosensei says, unphased. His voice is wholly impersonal and as smooth as butter. “What sort of apprentice of mine would you make if you never learned the art?”

‘...The art?’ Makoto wonders.

Korosensei doesn’t answer Makoto’s question. He never does. Instead, he simply stands, and with that same cool composure, he reaches into his pocket.

He retrieves a blade. Perhaps the sharpest Makoto’s ever seen.

He runs his finger down the dull end of the knife. And smiling, he turns to the boy.

“Remember to watch me closely,” he says. Content with his observation, he then pockets the blade and begins to make his way towards a large and fanciful building. “And remember to look inconspicuous. That is the first rule of a truly effective assassination. To not only appear, but
become a part of the scenery. As far as anyone around us is to be aware, we are simply an average father and son paying the Court of Cassation a little visit.”

The boy nods attentively. And Makoto swears he sees his eyes light up at the word ‘son.’

Korosensei doesn’t see a thing.

“As soon as we’re in the building, be quiet. No asking questions. Keep your distance, and watch what I do. I’m already risking a lot taking you in, so you better make this worth it for me.”

The boy nods intently, a determined pout forming on his face. “I’m gonna learn how to do everything you do! So don’t you worry!”

“I’m sure you will,” Korosensei says with a smile. “And remember, if you mess this up for me…” He pats his pocket and stares the boy down. “You’re next.”

There's a flash of pure terror in the boy's expression. But before Makoto can fully even process it, it's gone.

He's starting to get a horrible feeling about this.

“Of… Of course,” he says. “I’ll do my best. So… S-Show me how it’s done! Please, show me your talents, Mister Reaper!”

“Quiet down, will you?” Korosensei says. And with that, he enters the building.

Staring, fascinated, at the way the door jingles, the boy pauses, before skipping in after Korosensei.

Korosensei instructs for him to stick close for now. When they get closer to the target, he can start to trail behind by like fifteen feet.

The boy nods and gives Korosensei another determined look. Korosensei reaches for his hand and takes it, much to the boy’s surprise. Although any elatement he finds quickly fades as Korosensei begins to weave through crowds of people. Ah. So that’s simply a part of the act as well.

‘The act to accomplish what?’ Makoto wonders. ‘T... Target?’ Something tells him this isn’t the same sort of fun target that the students at the E-Class tackled.

The boy skips along. And Korosensei walks in that same rehearsed way. Anxiety rising in his gut, Makoto begins to realize he’s the only one here who’s not on board with this situation.

‘I’d like to wake up now!’ he decides, heart thumping in his chest. But it’s far too late now. He’s lost in the recesses of his own mind.

Finally, Korosensei spots the face he must have been looking for. Down some hallway and amongst some group of well-dressed men. All it takes is a single glance, and Korosensei’s eyes are locked on the man. He doesn’t bother to lean down as he whispers to the boy. “Keep a distance. And remember the escape routes. If you’re not out there by the time I am, I’m leaving without you.”

“Of course,” the boy whispers, as if that’s the most logical thing in the world. And Korosensei does not sneak, but instead saunters towards the well-dressed man.

No intent… Not a thought dares to pass. Even as he reaches to grab the blade, Korosensei’s heart
and mind both find themselves completely empty. No malice. No plan. He's just a man on a stroll.

For one desperate moment, perhaps Makoto manages to convince himself that Korosensei has no ill-will as well.

He only processes what really happened when he sees a flash of red.

And in an instant, Korosensei is on his way. The men begin to panic, shouting and scrambling over each other, but Korosensei pays them no mind. Before Makoto can even blink, the knife has returned to his pocket. And he turns the corner, ducking out from their line of sight.

...They hadn’t even seen him coming. And as he speedwalks, weaving down back hallways and through empty rooms, their cries quickly fade.

He had become a part of the background in order to go undetected. And as punishment for not daring to pick up on it, they’d lost one of their own. Then, before they could even fully process what happened to them, they’d already become the background noise in his life.

Korosensei sends an uninterested glance down towards his shirt. But noting he’d managed to avoid getting any blood on it, he gives a satisfied smile and continues on his way.

Before there’s even an announcement of the emergency situation, he’s out a window and gone.

He struts down the unfamiliar streets. And although Makoto has a feeling he knows them just as little as he does, he never once slows down. Even in a city that is more or less a stranger to him, he’s already calculated his each and every move like his life depends on it.

Remembering the blade in Korosensei’s pocket, and the burn of bright spotlights, Makoto has a sinking feeling it does.

It’s a few minutes before the boy manages to catch up with Korosensei. He and Makoto both think he’s just about managed to ditch him when he waddles up behind them. Panting, he gives Korosensei a grin. And not daring to point out how Korosensei had nearly left him behind, he shouts. “That was awesome!”

He reaches out to take Korosensei’s hand, but quickly hesitates. Pulling his hand back, he instead stares up at the man with a starstruck look in his eyes. “You just... Like! Woosh! And he... He!” He pauses. “I mean- Just like dad! You’re so good at this!”

...Makoto thinks he’s going to be sick.

Korosensei shrugs. “Lower your voice, will you?” he says. He doesn’t bother to slow down to keep up with the panting boy. “It was nothing. All a part of the job.” And he must mean that at the very least. Because Makoto hears no pride in his voice. Feels no pride in his chest. He doesn’t even enjoy what he does. It has simply become another part of the routine in a truly sickening life.

...There’s nothing inside of this man.

More than anything, Makoto wants to cry. He wants to scream into the sky and ask why this is happening to him. But he can’t. Not trapped in this man’s psyche. Korosensei wouldn’t cry. Not ever.

“A certain colleague of mine failed to take out another target a town over. We can still make it by the end of the day if you’d like to see another successful assassination.” He poses it as an offer, but something tells Makoto he’s going to go with or without the boy.
The boy doesn’t even need a moment to think it over. He pumps his little hands in the air with a passion. “I’d love that! We gotta take out more of the bad men!”

Korosensei gives him a wry smile at the insinuation. And knowing that there is no such thing as a good man in the first place, he gives him a loveless pat on the head. In the same way you would to an animal you only keep around because it's somewhat amusing.

The boy doesn’t bother to ask what this man or the next had done to deserve their fate. Instead, he gleefully trails after Korosensei. There’s an ecstatic look on his face and a gleeful skip to his step. ...Because... Korosensei's going to protect him! Supposed to tell him the truth! He believes that unconditionally.

Makoto knows that for certain when he hears what the boy says next.

“Hey, Reaper?”

“Mmm?” Korosensei replies, eyes still scanning the city.

“...When I grow up, I wanna be just like you.”

The moment Makoto awakes, he weeps.

It’s obvious something is bothering Makoto.

Nagisa likes to think he’s intuitive with his students’ emotions. And perhaps he’s wrong about that seeing as how he’d managed to let Yoshito slip through the cracks, But he’s trying. And Makoto is somewhat of an open book. So when he walks into class one morning looking like he’s seen a ghost, Nagisa is a little more than concerned.

Of course, he doesn’t wanna get on his ass either. If he’s just having a bad day, he’s just having a bad day. Nagisa doesn’t want to force anything out of him. And so when Makoto responds to his ‘Are you feeling okay, buddy?’ with a ‘Yeah. I’m just tired.’ he decides to drop it for now.

What matters is that Makoto knows he’s there for him. And more than anything he wants to be certain it’s Makoto of all people that already knows that.

And so, when he comes into school the next day, wearing an equally exhausted expression, Nagisa gives him an extra-wide smile and a reminder that he can always talk to him.

“...Yeah. I know.” Makoto says, returning him a tired smile.

To be honest, this is the worst time for this. Nagisa’s attention is divided enough as is. His class is all sorts of stressed over the results of second-trimester midterms, and that’s not even getting started on the Yoshito incident.

Nagisa's since offered to start walking him to school. And although at first Yoshito had been more than a little skeptical, his tune quickly shifted the moment Nagisa’s throat-poke technique drove the bullies off.

He hasn't dared to voice his skepticisms after that.

“You’re actually pretty cool,” he admitted a few days ago

“...I try my best,” Nagisa had replied.
And even so, he can’t quite shake the ‘favoritism’ comment.

He… Doesn’t play favorites, *does he?*

Feeling his worry for Makoto grow and grow, he’s left to wonder.

But the result of favoritism or not, Nagisa draws the line when he notices Makoto feeling this way for over a week. And his worries go from worries to outright concern when Makoto hands over his rubber blade one PE period.

“I… Think I want to sit out,” he admits, all enthusiasm gone from his tone. “This isn’t-” He pauses, shaking his head. “I don’t think I want to do this anymore.”

He looks so, *so* tired.

At a complete loss for words, all Nagisa can do is give him permission to sit out.

Fumiko and Kiyoshi try their best to have fun, but Nagisa catches the way they nervously glance towards their best friend hanging on the sidelines.

He pulls them aside and asks them if they have any idea what’s going on. Fumiko gives a shrug, saying she’s worried. And Kiyoshi waits for Nagisa to crouch down beside his desk, before whispering that he thinks it has something to do with Korosensei.

“He. Uh… Asked me if I knew anything about what Korosensei did before he was a teacher. If my parents told me anything.” He pauses, lowering his voice. “…Korosensei… Hurt people, right?”


“Of course. He seemed really stressed,” Kiyoshisays. “Please make sure he’ll be okay, Shiota-sensei.”

“…I’ll do my best.”

That afternoon he pulls Makoto aside as well. It’s a Wednesday, so Fumiko doesn’t have tutoring. And that means it’s just the two of them. Nagisa decides it's now or never. And that if he doesn’t at least try to get to the bottom of what’s bothering the insanely stubborn Makoto, he won’t be able to sleep at all tonight.

Makoto’s packing up his things to get headed to Nagisa’s house when Nagisa taps him on the shoulder. Makoto shoots him a confused look.

“Hey. Mind giving me a minute before we head out?” Nagisa asks. “I think there’s something we should talk about.”

Nagisa almost swears he catches a *bitter* look in Makoto's eyes, but in an instant, he’s back to his usual happy self.

“What is it?” he asks with a grin.

... *His usual happy facade.*

Nagisa won’t allow it. Not today, not ever. Perhaps he failed to spot what hid behind that unfaltering grin all those years ago, but never again.

“I think you know.”
It feels like forever since Makoto has been in this situation. Forced to talk to Nagisa. Forced to talk about his feelings. And he fucking hates it.

So what if he’s a killer? So what if he’s just as bad as his dad and Nagisa’s mom and the rest of them? So what if he hates himself for it?

He put himself into this situation, right? By... Believing that being Korosensei made him something good. By believing that anything having to do with Makoto Himura could be good in the first place.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he says, putting back on his practiced smile. It’s not fake, is it? Not if he genuinely redirects himself to happy thoughts. Not if he’s just trying to protect Nagisa. Not if he just doesn’t want Nagisa to know.

...Does that make him a liar, anyways? Hiding it? What he'd done? Does it even matter? What if... What if Nagisa already knows?

The very thought sends panic shooting up his spine.

“Please don’t lie to me,” Nagisa says. “I promised to be there for you, remember?”

“I know,” Makoto huffs. And he means it. More than anything. He made that same promise all those years ago. He can’t put this on his student! On one of the only pieces left of his former life! On an already troubled man and on his idol.

...What if it makes Nagisa hate him?

It seems impossible to fathom. Nagisa looks up to him so, so much. And even so… It’s already managed to make Makoto lose faith in himself, hasn’t it?

The more he dreams of ‘The Reaper...’ His cruel endeavors and his starry-eyed apprentice, the less he finds himself able to enjoy reflecting on his time as Korosensei. He’s instead left wondering what he did to deserve such wonderful times when he was such an awful man.

In certain memories... Staring down at his tentacles, or up at the shattered moon, he wonders if Korosensei wondered the same.

“But it’s nothing. I swear,” he says. “I’d let you know if something was bothering me. So let’s just get going, okay?” He picks up his books and marches towards the door.

He doesn’t want to think about it. Not in front of Nagisa. But trying to hide it or not, he feels Nagisa’s firm gaze on the back of his neck.

“No,” Nagisa says. “I know that’s not true, Makoto.”

“It is.”

“I don’t want to force you Makoto, but it’s clear you’re losing sleep. I’m worried about you.”

...That’s the last thing Makoto wants to hear.

“I don’t want you to be.”

“I know.”
“Please just drop it.”

“I can’t,” Nagisa says, standing up. He approaches the doorway and places a hand on Makoto’s shoulder. “...You know you mean a lot to me. You’re my student. You’re my sensei. If anything happened to you because I didn’t step in, I’d never forgive myself.”

Makoto wants that even less.

He reaches out towards the doorknob.

Nagisa stops his hand midway.

“...Please don’t hide yourself away from me,” he says. “Not you of all people.” His voice is trembling.

Makoto’s hand lowers to his side. “...You wouldn’t get it,” he says.

“You don’t know that.”

“...You can’t fix it.”

“You don’t know that, either,” Nagisa says. “I helped you out with your home situation, didn’t I?”

Makoto bites his lip.

“Let me help you with this, too.”

He sounds so, so desperate.

What is he so scared of losing? Why is it Makoto is worth this effort? He can’t respect him. Not that much. He won’t. Not once he knows the truth.

“...You’ll hate me.”

Nagisa squeezes his shoulder. “Makoto, I could never,” he says. “As your teacher, of course... I can’t let you get away with just anything. It’s my job to put you on the right track. But even then... You could do anything, and I’d never hate you. I’d just remind you of where you belong. So let me know what’s going on.”

...Where he belongs is in the dirt.

He’s scared. Scared of Nagisa’s reaction and scared of himself. But what can he do? He can’t just run away.

“...Promise.”

“What?”

“Promise me you won’t hate me,” Makoto says, his voice wavering. It takes all his effort to blink back tears.

He can’t lose this. The people he has left. He’s lost amongst his family, and he’s lost his apprentice. The idea of having to let go of another person... Scaring them away with the truth of who he is... He simply can’t bear it.

He can’t lose them. Not Kiyoshi. Not Fumiko. Not Kayano, Karma or Gakushuu. And, please, not

Makoto takes a deep breath and tries his best to still his nerves. Then, taking Nagisa’s hand, he allows himself to be led back over to his desk. He carefully sits down and stares at his hands, still staunchly refusing to look up at Nagisa even as he takes a seat across from him.

“Alright,” Nagisa says in a voice all too friendly. “You can let me know. So what’s on your mind?”

“I…” Makoto pauses. And then gathering all his bravery, he brings himself to meet Nagisa’s eyes and says “I want to know what sort of person was Korosensei really like.”

Now of all the confessions Nagisa had expected, it wasn’t that one.

He’d expected something about Makoto’s homelife again, to be completely truthful. Or perhaps the confession that he’d started stealing again. Not an inquiry about the past life that had seemed to have brought them both so much peace.

Even so, when Makoto looks up at him with desperate, watery eyes, Nagisa knows this is just as important to him as any of those other topics could have been.

‘What was Korosensei like?’ It’s a loaded question. He was a complicated man with a complicated story. But looking inside himself, Nagisa knows Korosensei had never been anything other than a complete hero to him.

“Korosensei was… Very possibly the kindest person I’ve ever known,” he says. “He was kind, and thoughtful, and a perfectionist to a fault. Goofy, and dramatic, and loveable. He always put others before himself. And he always knew what to do. He was loving, and brave, and... he would have done anything for us.” He stares down at Makoto. “You would have done anything for us. There’s a reason why I still look up to you.”

Makoto doesn’t crack a smile. He merely gives Nagisa a serious look. “That’s nice, but… I already know all about that Korosensei,” he says. “The Korosensei everyone seems to believe in. But what I want to know is the truth.”

“...The truth?”

“What was Korosensei really like? When he wasn’t pretending?”

...Nagisa’s silent.

Makoto’s averts his gaze. Fiddling with his hands, he softly asks “…He wasn’t really like that, was he? The person you keep saying he was.” … “The person you keep saying I was.” He rubs at his eyes. “…He was… A bad, bad man.”

Nagisa feels his heart stop in his chest.

“...You remembered,” he says quietly. "Didn’t you?”

That’s when Makoto’s eyes widen.

*He knew!*
How long!?! How at all!!? Why!?! Why would Korosensei dare share that with the people he wanted to care about him!??

...If… He actually cared about their perception of them at all.

He’s starting to feel like he’s losing sight of Korosensei. Who he is and what he wanted. Right now, all he knows is what Makoto wants. And Makoto cares about Nagisa’s opinion of him more than anything. He supposes he’s relieved that means Nagisa doesn’t hate him if he has the audacity to talk about him so fondly in spite of those things, but even then … This stings.

“...You knew?” he asks, voice shaky. He faintly realizes he didn’t answer Nagisa’s question, but he doesn’t particularly care. “...Why didn’t you tell me!?”

Nagisa sighs. “...I was scared of what would happen. I thought… Maybe if I didn’t, you’d never need to remember those things. I thought I could protect you.”

“S… So you left me to remember those things on my own!?” Makoto cries, tears welling in his eyes. “T… Those were my memories! That was my life! People died, Nagisa! I deserved to know! How could you just let me blindly believe I was a hero when I’d done those things!?”

Nagisa blinks. “I… Well- I just-” he sputters.

“You what!?! Wanted me to believe lies about myself!?”

Nagisa stands. “Woah, woah!” he says, pushing out his chair. “I never lied to you. Everything I told you about Korosensei was the truth-”

“You said I was a good guy! A hero! How could you honestly mean that when I’d hurt so many people!?”

“Makoto-”

“I was a monster, Nagisa! What kind of good guy kills people!? Hurts kids!?”

Makoto stands, too. But he thinks he’s going to collapse any minute. His heart is pounding in his ears and his head is spinning. What’s wrong with him!?! Why is he even here!?

“You always tried your best to fix things-”

“You can’t fix things! Not things like that!” Makoto shouts. “Everyone! They were so scared of me!” Finally, the tears spill. “How could I do that!? How could I think that was acceptable!?”

“It’s the way you grew up-”

“No! That’s no excuse! No-one should grow up like that!” Makoto argues. “If… If you think that’s acceptable… To treat people that way… To be treated that way… Maybe you really should hate me, Nagisa.”

At a complete loss for words, Nagisa simply stares at him with his own watery eyes.

Nagisa’s head is spinning.

He hadn’t expected that to escalate so fast. Not even slightly. But looking at the quivering, crying, and angry Makoto, he comes to the realization that he must have been bottling these feelings in for a long time. No wonder he exploded.
His fist is balled and shaking. He meets Nagisa’s eyes, as if demanding answers. And Nagisa has to take a moment to think this over

...Because it’s clear his current approach isn’t working.

“Sit down,” he says. “I can… Explain everything. But I can’t do it while you’re upset. I’m… sorry I hid things from you. And… I’m sorry you remembered what you did. But you don’t need to face this alone. So please… don’t say those things about yourself. You need to know that hurts me, too.”

“...I deserve it.”

“No. You don’t. I mean it when I say you’ve never been anything but good to me,” Nagisa reaffirms. “I know you might not believe it… But… How would you feel if I said those things about myself?”

Makoto’s quiet a long moment. He doesn’t answer, but finally, he sits. And lip quivering, he says. “Fine. I want to know the truth.”

Nagisa sits across from him. Gently scooting in his chair, he speaks up in a soft voice. “...I’ll admit. Everything you’ve remembered is true. About Korosensei hurting people.”

“About me killing people.”

“About… you killing people,” he confirms.

And Makoto looks like he’s been punched in the gut.

Makoto almost doesn’t want to hear this. But it’s too late to turn back now. These are his memories. He deserves to know. And this is his weight to carry. The story of the people he hurt.

“Korosensei… Grew up in a place very far away from here,” Nagisa says. “A place where he couldn’t feel safe. He was born in the midst of a horrible war. And even as a kid younger than you, he was surrounded by acts of violence. Terrorism… Death… Assassination. He never knew his parents, so he had to learn to fend for himself quickly. In a world where violence was all around him, the only way he could do that was commit atrocities himself.”

Makoto’s brow furrows. It’s depressing, the way Nagisa words it. Imagining growing up in a world like that… Knowing deep down what it’s like to grow up in a world like that… In any other situation, he’d feel bad for Korosensei. If he were anyone else. But he can’t forgive himself for that. The rest of the world, maybe, but not him.

“...And… This was before he was an octopus, right?” Makoto asks. “He… wasn’t always an octopus, was he?”

“No,” Nagisa confirms. “Korosensei was a human.”

Makoto’s lip quivers. Somehow the idea of a monster doing monstrous things seems easier to stomach. But… a real person? He’s just a person. Does that mean he can make the same mistakes?

*Does that mean, as Korosensei, he’s already destined to?*

“...Back then, went by The Reaper. He… didn’t have a real name. As he got better and better at killing in self-defense, he realized he could make a living off of the technique. Off of assassination.
And so he did. It was messed up, yes. But it was also all he’d ever known. How could he think ill of it when the world around him had normalized it?

The human heart inside of him! That had to have said something! It had to have!

Makoto knows it hadn’t. Knows he hadn’t felt bad. But he wants to believe that means there’s something broken in him. Not that someone - anyone - can just grow up with views that skewed.

“M… Mmm…” he quietly agrees.

“As his skills grew, The Reaper began to make a name for himself as one of the most terrifying assassins of all time. Despite his young age, he seemed to understand death like no-one else. Because… he was surrounded by it. And even as he gathered the resources to escape his wartorn world, he continued to carry a cloud of death with him everywhere he went. He committed assassination all across the globe. Struck fear into the hearts of many. And killed thousands.”


He takes a shaky gulp and tries his best to blink back tears.

“And so… you’re right, Makoto. I’m sorry I wasn’t completely honest with you, but I won’t sugarcoat it now. You deserve to know, especially if it’s bothering you. There was a time when Korosensei killed. There was a time when Korosensei was an atrocious person. And there was a time when he hurt people beyond repair.”

Makoto can’t hold back the heartache one minute longer. Slamming his palms on the desk, he stares up at Nagisa with tears trailing down his cheeks.

“But Korosensei wanted to become those things. And so he did. One fateful evening, Korosensei looked up at the moon in the night sky and decided ‘never again.’ He decided exactly who he
wanted to become, and with all the goodness that had been hiding in his heart up until that very moment, he put the final year of his life into becoming that person. Korosensei was good. And he was good because he wanted to be. That will never not be inspirational to me, Makoto. And I’d take that over someone born a hero any day.”

The tears only begin to pour harder. Through shaky breaths, Makoto knows every word Nagisa speaks is true. And yet, it hurts. It hurts more than anything he thinks he’s ever experienced before.

“How do you know?” he murmurs through sobs. “How do you know he was really that person? That it wasn't an act? That he actually felt bad? That he actually loved you guys?”

...That he was capable of loving at all.

“...How do I know he loved us?” Nagisa muses. He frowns, for a moment. And then, a contemplative look on his face, he reaches out to place his hand over Makoto’s heart. “Because Korosensei dedicated his last year to us. Because Korosensei was willing to die for us. And because... you love us, don’t you?”

Breaths rising and falling, Makoto focuses on the sensation of Nagisa’s palm pressed up against his chest.

The relief that had surged through him when Karma first joked with him like nothing had changed between the two of them at all... The abject horror he’d felt when Kayano had gotten the chance to nickname him before he’d gotten to nickname her... Tossing baseballs around in the backyard with Sugino, and how he’d shot like a bullet towards Kurahashi to wrap her in a hug the moment he saw her on campus.

...Being here with the one and only Nagisa.

“Yeah,” he finally says. “...More than anything.”

Korosensei can be almost anything. He can be bad and he can be evil and he can be cruel. Nothing about him seems certain anymore. But Nagisa’s right. If one thing about him is definite, it’s that Korosensei loved his students with his whole heart. Because he can still feel it now. That love in his watery eyes, in the rise and fall of his chest, and in the slow thumping of his heartbeat. Resonating through every inch of his being.

His pride and joy.

Which only leaves one thing for Makoto to wonder.

...Maybe Korosensei had felt bad. Even if he hadn’t known it as The Reaper. Staring across the desk at Nagisa, knowing Korosensei had managed to pass that same unending love for his class onto him... He can't help but shake the feeling that perhaps the guilt in his chest is Korosensei's to share as well.

It breaks Nagisa’s heart to see Makoto this way.

Heartbroken, self-loathing and depressed over the man who Nagisa respected more than anything. He hadn’t been lying, earlier. He truly believes Korosensei had saved his life. And so, to watch him tear Makoto apart from the inside is unimaginable. It makes Nagisa feel helpless. And with a dry taste in his mouth, it makes him wonder if Korosensei had felt the same way.
Looking into Makoto’s tear filled, distraught eyes, he can’t find a thing to refute it.

*Of course Korosensei had felt that way. How could he not!?*

Nagisa’s spent the past fifteen years drowning in the guilt of ending one life. How had Korosensei been expected to - *How should a thirteen-year-old boy* be expected to shoulder the weight of ending thousands?

Slowly, he slides his palm from Makoto’s chest up to his shoulder. And gripping him as tightly - as reassuringly as he can possibly muster, he says. “Then you’re good. If you loved us, you’re good. You’re good, Makoto. I know there are things that must haunt you, but please never doubt the sincerity of what you did for us. We’d never have wanted you to feel this way.”

“I know,” Makoto says in a tiny voice. “I know. But knowing something and believing in something… Those are two different things, aren’t they?”

Nagisa’s quiet.

“...Yeah. I think so,” he finally admits.

Makoto stares at his desk again. And blinking slowly, he says “...I used to feel like I was totally in synch with Korosensei. Like… We agreed on everything. Like I’d really found some buried part of myself. But the more I learn about him... The more I learn about his past, the less I feel like I understand him. Even when I’m inside his head, I don’t know who I’m supposed to be.”

“I…” Nagisa pauses, taking a moment to mull over his words. “...Don’t think Korosensei necessarily knew who he was supposed to be most of the time, either. I don’t think Korosensei knew who he’d been as the Reaper, or who he was after-- Or what he really wanted.” ... “And if I’m being completely truthful, I don’t think The Reaper did, either.”

“No,” Makoto says, wiping at his cheeks. “Maybe that’s why he ended up that way.”

Slowly, Nagisa removes his hand from Makoto’s shoulder.

“...Nagisa? Can I ask you a question?”

“Anything.”

“...Was assassination the only thing I was good at?”

“Of course not,” Nagisa quickly interjects, to which Makoto shakes his head.

“Let me finish,” he says. “Please.”

Nagisa stops in his tracks. “Of course. Sorry.”

“...Even once you say I turned over a new leaf, it seems like something I never let go of. The… Assassination Classroom. I know in some ways it happened because people like Karasuma needed you to kill me, but at the same time, I wonder… was I doing something that was bad for you? Teaching you to *kill*? That’s not a teacher’s job, is it?”

*Oh, Makoto...*

Nagisa places his hand on the desk, covering Makoto’s. “...You have the wrong idea,” he says.
“You didn’t teach us to kill, Makoto. Never even once. You taught us how to protect ourselves… You taught us how to ‘assassinate…’ And you taught us how to end your life. But do you want to know the real most important thing you taught us?”

Makoto nods slowly. And in a wavering voice he says “...Yeah. I do.”

“You taught us the value of life. Why killing was such a powerful thing, and why we couldn’t use our strengths for evil. Everything you put us through… in teaching us to love you, you taught us that death was something that should never be taken lightly... You taught us that behind every ‘monster’ could be hiding a friend. You told us you were teaching us to kill, but do you want to know what you really taught us, Makoto?”

“...What?”

“To live and let live.”

Makoto shuts his eyes tight and sniffs as he fights back another round of tears. And then, grabbing at Nagisa’s hand, he says “I think I get it.”

“You wanna know something, Makoto? I actually briefly considered becoming an assassin.”

Makoto’s eyes shoot open. “You what!?”

“Yeah. You heard me right,” Nagisa says. “I wanted my whole life to feel like what I felt in the Assassination Classroom. But when I told you what I wanted to become, you helped me realize you envisioned a much brighter future for me. Brighter than anything you’d ever envisioned for yourself. You helped me learn I didn’t want to kill. You helped me learn I wanted to nurture - to teach. You saved me from a dangerous future. And there’s one important thing I learned from that experience.”

“...What was it?”

“What it was like to be in the Reaper’s shoes. In your class, I received the first praise I’d ever gotten in my life. I was finally told I was good at something. And that something was assassination. I thought it was the only thing I could ever do, because it was the only thing I felt capable of doing.” He squeezes Makoto’s hand. “You were never ‘only good’ at assassination, Makoto. That’s just what you believed of yourself. That’s why you used the familiarity of it as a safety crutch, even when it wasn’t the intent behind your lessons.”

...That’s why Nagisa still continues the blood-soaked tradition in his classroom today, despite its evil roots. Because Korosensei himself was never evil. And because regardless of what assassination had put them through, assassination was also ‘home.’

Makoto wipes at his eyes, and finally steadying his breaths, he nods firmly. “I think I get it.”

Nagisa smiles. “Good.” And drawing his hand back, he says, “And so you want to know what Korosensei was really like, Makoto? My complete and honest opinion? No more lies?”

Makoto nods again. “I’d like that.”

“Korosensei was the best person I knew. Korosensei made endless mistakes throughout his life, but everyone does. The important distinction is that Korosensei was willing to try and make up for his mistakes. And he did. He succeeded. Despite being flawed - Despite being human - Korosensei was always kind. And not as some inherent part of his nature. Not because of who he was born as. As a deliberate decision. He reminds me of who I want to be every day. He was the best teacher a
boy could have asked for.”

Makoto looks ready to cry again. But this time, Nagisa’d like to think it’s for a different reason.

“...I’m glad I could become that kind of person to you,” he says. And then, he stands. “...Nagisa, can you tell me everything in the future? Not just about who Korosensei was before or who he killed. Things like… His apprentice, too. Or why he decided to become a better person like he did?”

“Of course,” Nagisa stands. “...Why don’t you hear me out: In a few weeks, I was planning on running you guys through a unit on what happened to the moon. I wasn’t sure how much I should tell you about, but how about I give you the whole story? No half-truths, nothing left out. The real story of Korosensei.”

He’s vaguely aware his spouses won’t be happy with this decision, but for once he’s willing to stand by it. Makoto’s made it clear he’s going to remember the bad aspects of his life with or without Nagisa’s influence. Nagisa wants to be there to hold his hand through that.

“...I’d love that.” Makoto says. “I wanna know everything.”

“Then it’s a plan. I’ll teach you who you really were.” And standing, too, he says. “I hope you’ll realize that’s a person even better than you’d ever have thought before.”

Makoto wipes at his eyes once more. But giving Nagisa a smile, he nods. “...Yeah. It’s a plan.” He makes his way towards the door. “I think I’m just gonna go home,” he admits. “It’s been a long day. Thank you for helping me, Nagisa.”

“No worries,” Nagisa says. “It’s all in the job description.”

'You taught me that.'

As Makoto reaches for the doorknob, however, he pauses. “Wait. One more thing,” he says.

“What is it?”

“...Earlier, you said Korosensei was the best teacher a boy could have asked for, yeah?”

“Yeah,” Nagisa says. “He was.”

“No,” Makoto says. “That’s not true.”

Nagisa bites his lip. “...Makoto. Don’t degrade yourself like th-”

“You are.”

“...What?”

“You’re the best teacher a boy could ask for. Not Korosensei.” He pauses, shooting Nagisa a tired, but sincere smile. “Even if he makes a pretty apt second place.”

Nagisa stares. “Oh. I…” He blinks slowly, running his hand over his tie. “...Thank you, Makoto. That means a lot.”

“No prob,” Makoto says. “I thought you deserved to know that.”

And without another word, he turns the doorknob and makes his exit.
The moment he’s gone, Nagisa can’t fight it one more second. Cradling his tie in his hands, he stares down at the crescent moon, torn as it is, and bursts into tears.

*Because that’s all he’s ever wanted to hear.*

The walk home is weird for Makoto.

He comes to the faint realization in the back of his mind that he hadn’t asked Nagisa about everything he’d meant to. He’d been planning to confront him and ask what had happened to his apprentice, but he supposes in the heat of the moment he’d forgotten entirely.

‘It’s okay,’ he tells himself. ‘Nagisa’s going to tell you everything soon. Even that.’

He meets the boy’s gaze in his mind, and he shudders.

...He can only hope the story has a happy ending.

He knows deep down it doesn’t. Maybe that’s part of why he hadn’t asked Nagisa. He hadn’t been ready. Not yet. But even so, it’s nice to hope.

‘Just for now,’ the boy reminds him.

‘That’s okay,’ Makoto whispers under his breath.

His conversation with Nagisa had already been plenty painful. Having it confirmed he’d done horrible things... And being told he deserved the chance to be happy anyways... It’s a burning hot coal in his soul. And to be truthful, he’s not sure which of Nagisa’s words had stung more: The ones confirming his worst fears, or the ones reassuring him despite it all.

He knows worse things are likely to come. This is just the start of Korosensei’s story. And this is just the beginning of the truths behind his life. The lives he’d ended... How he’d become what he had... The untimely ending of his life, and the fate of his apprentice all lurk unanswered in the back of Makoto’s mind. And something deep inside of himself tells them *none* of them are stories with happy endings.

‘That’s okay, too.’

Because at least he finally fucking *has* answers. At least he finally isn’t facing this alone. Nagisa’s by his side. And Nagisa will *always* support him, regardless of what he’d done.

‘That’s what a teacher does.’

Makoto’s still anxious. And Makoto’s still scared. But for the first time in a long time, he finally feels at peace

He finally knows he can still put good into the world. And that even when he confronts those horrible answers, he’ll be able to face them with bravery.

Because that’s the person his teacher believes he can be. And if he’s being optimistic... The person his teacher has already seen him become once before.

He’s ready to face the things he’d done and the things he’d been through. He’s even ready to face the boy he’d failed.

In his mind, he meets the boy’s angry gaze. And he doesn’t shy back. Not this time.
Instead, he simply reaches a hand out and says “I’ll find a way to make things right soon.”

The moment Nagisa gets home, he calls a family meeting.

“Where’s Makoto?” Karma asks when he sees him walk in the door unaccompanied.

“Is he okay?” Kayano adds on.

“Did something happen?” Gakushuu sits on the couch, inquisitively raising an eyebrow and shooting Nagisa a worried glance.

“That’s… What we need to talk about.”

Every face in the room pales. They’ve heard him talk about how Makoto’s been off for about a week now. They’ve seen it themselves. But to have confirmation is a new terror in and of itself.

Nagisa anxiously scratches at his collar.

“He’s okay,” he says. “At least… I think he should be. But he confronted me about some really personal stuff to do with Korosensei today.”

Kayano excuses herself for a moment to grab a glass of water. When she’s returned, it seems she’s decided to grab one for the all of them.

Nagisa takes it in his hand, mumbling a quick thanks and something about how he needed that.

He takes his seat on the couch next to Gakushuu, and Kayano takes hers by his side. Karma perches on the lounge chair with an expression that seems to say ‘Just spill the beans, already!’

“...So… Like you guys know, I’ve been sorta worried about Makoto,” he says. “But things really started to concern me today when he said he didn’t wanna participate in assassination anymore.”

“He what?” Kayano asks.

“But he was so insistent on it!” Karma comments. “I mean, even the whole the assassination teacher thing aside, he got on your ass when you prohibited him for a while after he stabbed me.”

“Yeah. It wasn’t like him,” Nagisa says. “And his friends were worried about him, too. That was the last straw. So I pulled him aside after tutoring and asked him to tell me what was going on.”

“And…?” Gakushuu says.

Nagisa pinches the bridge of his nose. “...He remembered the assassinations.”

“What!” Gakushuu hisses.

“Like, us trying to kill him?” Kayano specifies. “Or-?”

“No. Killing people as The Reaper.”

Kayano covers her mouth with her hands and murmurs “...Oh god.”

Gakushuu’s brow furrows as he stares down at his knees. And shutting his eyes tight, he grits his teeth. Hard.

“I didn’t tell him anything. I swear” Nagisa says.
“I know,” Gakushuu replies. “You don’t need to explain that to me. You wouldn’t put him through that. That’s not the Korosensei you wanted to remember, either.” It’s a moment before he reassures, “I trust you.”

Even so, he looks ready to bite through his own jaw.

“W-What are you going to do? I mean, how did he react?” Kayano asks.

“Is he beating himself up over it?” Karma asks.

“...C… Could he be on the track to remembering everything?” Kayano quickly adds on.

Nagisa’s head is spinning. ‘One thing at a time, guys.’

“I don’t know what else he remembers or is going to remember yet,” he says, voice low. “Yes, he’s beating himself up over it. He cried on me for a half-hour and told me he thought he was a horrible person.”

Kayano gives him a horrified look. Karma shakes his head and Gakushuu rubs at his temple.

“I don’t know what I’m going to do yet. I don’t even know how much I got through to him. I explained the extent of Korosensei’s redemption, and I think he sort of started to get it, but I doubt overcoming something like that can be as easy as one conversation. He was mad I hadn’t told him earlier, too.”

“You were trying to protect him-” Gakushuu groans.

“I know,” Nagisa says. “...But those were his memories. And it seems he was going to find his way back to them eventually either way. That’s why…” He pauses.

“That’s why' what?” Gakushuu asks.

“I’m going to tell him the rest.”

Gakushuu stares through him. Karma and Kayano exchange a concerned glance. And Nagisa balls his fist.

The silence is electric.

“Nagisa,” Gakushuu finally says, voice firm and desperate.

“I know,” Nagisa says, reaching out to place a hand on his arm. “...But what else am I supposed to do?”

Gakushuu sighs out deeply through his nose. “I don’t know,” he says. “I don’t know.”

“I can’t let him face this alone,” Nagisa explains. “Not again. It’s clear he’s going to remember regardless of what I do. And so… I want to tell him this story through the lens that Korosensei was a hero. That he was a flawed but good person. I don’t want him to have to see this through the self-loathing lens Korosensei viewed himself through. I promised him I was going to tell him the truth from now on, and so I’m not budging. I’m sorry, but I’m not going to change my mind about this.”

Gakushuu doesn’t respond. He simply gives a halfhearted nod, before shaking his head and staring down at his knees.

He’s quivering. Nagisa pats him once, then twice, equally at a loss for words. He can’t blame him
for feeling helpless. It’s clear he hates that this is happening to a defenseless kid. Nagisa hates it, too. They all do.

It just feels so, so out of their control.

That’s why Nagisa has to take control of some aspect of it, right…? He can’t leave this one up to the world. Up to Makoto’s subconscious. Not when they’ve both been so ungentle with him in the past.

“Everything?” Kayano says, voice quiet.

“Everything. He deserves to know.”

Kayano bites her lip. “…And what if he blames himself for that, too?”

“Then that’s a bandaid we need to rip off now,” Nagisa says. “He’s going to find out sooner or later. I’d rather tell him now that she never blamed him for what happened than let him jump to guilty conclusions on his own later.”

Kayano’s eyes water, and she shuts them tight, like she’d never expected someone to put her exact concerns into words.

“…Yeah,” she says, voice shaking. “She never blamed him.” She inhales deeply, and musters a halfhearted smile. “…Tell him, okay? You’re right. I don’t want him to think it was his fault.” She gives a weak laugh. “I never want him to feel the way I felt back then.”

“I will,” Nagisa reassures. And giving her his best attempt at a reassuring smile, he says “…I’ll let him know that was one of the best years of her life.”

Kayano nods firmly.

“Seems you’re pretty deadset on this,” Karma comments, peering at him from across the living room. “In that case, I’m here to back you up. This whole thing isn’t exactly leaving a good taste in my mouth either, but what else can you do? I trust you with Korosensei related affairs. Spill the beans. I’ll help you with the emotional support.” He pauses. “God knows he’s gonna need it. Never let it show back then, but all that serial-murderer scientific-experiment stuff freaked the everloving shit out of me as a kid. I can’t imagine what he’s going through right now.”

“Me neither,” Nagisa admits. “…But… Thank you. I’m sure he’ll really appreciate that.”

He doesn’t need to say, ‘I will too.’ Because meeting Karma’s gaze with a thankful look, he’s certain he already knows.

Nagisa looks Gakushuu’s way. Beads of sweat are trickling down his forehead. “...Gakushuu, will you be mad at me if I go through with this? I know I told you I wouldn’t let him in on any more of this than I needed to. But I think we’re getting to that point.”

Gakushuu steeples his fingers. And peeling his eyes open, he glances Nagisa’s way. “...This isn’t something you should need to come to me for permission for,” he admits. “Yes, this makes me uncomfortable. But I know you respect that, and I know you’re considering me in this situation. Which… I appreciate. But… by God, if you think this is the right decision, then don’t let me stop you. What I asked you to do is put that boy’s well-being before anything else. And that includes my own.

“As long as you’re looking out for him… Preventing him from entering a situation where he feels
like there’s someone or something he needs to be, then I could never be mad at you. Do what you think is right.” He pauses. “Just… Please. Be gentle with him.”

Squeezing Gakushuu’s shoulder, Nagisa promises he will.

But even as he and his spouses agree it’s a plan, he’s left wondering if there is any gentle way to explain something like that.

Explaining loss - Explaining violence - Explaining torture to a kid.

It makes him feel a little sick. And a little helpless, too. But there’s no going back now. He’s made his decision. He’s made his promise to Makoto. And there’s only one possible future he can see going forward.

That’s letting him know the truth in the kindest way he can.

It’s something he spends his whole evening reflecting on... The best way to tell the story, and the best way to frame his savior. The best way to explain a life of misery and departure without forever tainting his hero in said hero’s own mind.

Even as he slips into bed… Into pajamas and out of his crescent heirloom, he wonders...

Stares out the window in his bedroom, and up at the night sky...


Because when he squints, he can still catch the cracks trailing across the moon’s surface.

...They seem smaller every day. Harder and harder to notice with the untrained eye. Fading, just like Korosensei’s black and white legacy.

For the world, at least. Because Nagisa still cares enough to spot them. And as long as he does, he’s sure at least someone else out there will remember what happened.

Remember what shattered the moon…

Now all he can do is pray that that same force won't shatter Makoto as well.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter 20! It's beginning to look like this fic might seriously reach 40 chapters or at least 35 eventually and that has me both dead inside and excited.

Sorry for another sorta dark/dreary chapter, but I hope some catharsis could be found in this one as well. It was a very emotion driven chapter, and I'm happy that Makoto finally told Nagisa what he was going through.

With Nagisa telling Makoto and the rest of the class the full story of Korosensei, an arc I've dubbed 'The Moon Unit' is coming up. It's going to be EXTREMELY fun. Though whether or not Makoto can actually handle it is yet to be seen. Either way, it will involve a LOT of plot stuff, so I hope you're excited!
Next chapter will also be up in a week! And one day after my birthday! I have like three chapters ahead of the published ready, and it feels awesome to be so on schedule. Hopefully the chapter after THAT can also go up just a week after that, but no promises.

Some songs that helped me write this chapter were The Guide To Success from Things To Ruin, Murder, Murder! From Jekyll and Hyde, King by Lauren Aquilina, and Heirloom by Sleeping At Last.

I hope you enjoyed the chapter! And see you next week! o/
Nagisa decides there’s no better time than the present and schedules the moon unit for next week.

The Friday before he pulls Makoto aside in homeroom and asks him if this is what he really wants.

“...Are you trying to get me to back out now?” Makoto asks, voice hurt.

“No,” Nagisa says. “I just want to warn you that Korosensei went through some really serious stuff... Some of which you haven’t even begun to remember yet. Are you sure you can handle it?”

Makoto’s silent for a moment, before nodding. “Are you kidding me?” he says, stifling a laugh. “Of course I can handle it. I’m Korosensei. I’ve waited all my life for this.”

Staring up at him with those big hopeful eyes, Nagisa doesn’t have the heart to say no. To tell him he’s scared of scarring him. Not when he knows Makoto will hate him forever if he hides anything else from him.

...For a brief moment, he wonders if that’s what he cares about most: himself, and he feels sick to his stomach. But he quickly shakes the feeling.

Makoto wouldn’t push it if this wasn’t clearly important to him, too. He’s not putting his own needs above Makoto’s. He’s helping him come to understand something hurtful in the most gentle way he can.

...At least, he thinks so.

He spends the whole weekend drawing up lesson plans.

When he tells the kids Monday what they’re going over, they fucking riot. They haven’t done anything quite this interesting and intensive since the Sports Festival, and it’s clear as day they’re excited to be let in on the intricacies of such a world-shattering mystery. When he breaks the news that he’s found a way to incorporate the ‘moon unit’ into every subject, and that they’ll be taking a break from their normal studies for a week, they practically lose their goddamn minds.

“History, maybe, but what does Korosensei have to do with science!?” Haruhi snarks.

He can’t wait for the look on their faces when he reveals how Manami Okuda and Kotaro Takebayashi first developed their universal blood type.

“He’s... Like... Super related to science, dumbfuck!” Minako shouts. “But, like, what about art?”

Nagisa gently reminds Minako to use kind words with his friends, before making up some excuse about Korosensei having a fascinating, artistic and easily-drawable face.

“All right?” Haruhi snarks, as if she’s found a trump card.

Ohhhh boy does Nagisa have a story to tell her.

All in due time, however. They have a full week to dissect who exactly Korosensei was, and how exactly he changed the world. He’s sure by the end they’ll understand how he changed every
subject of Nagisa’s world, too.

“And you’re going to go into everything?” Rin asks.

“Everything,” Nagisa confirms, meeting Makoto’s eyes.

“I dunno. That sounds… Classified,” Rin admits. “Is this legal?”

Nagisa gives a sheepish shrug. “Mostly. There’s some legal ramifications I’m technically skirting around, but with how much the media leaked, the gag order is more or less inoperational by now. As long as no-one, like, directly reports me to the government, I’ll be fine.”

“You hear that?” Rikuto sneers, leaning over to elbow Kiyoshi. “No tattling on Shiota-sensei to mommy and daddy.”

Kiyoshi’s embarrassment only lasts for a split second, soon replaced by exasperation. He huffs and scoots his chair away from Rikuto. “Are you kidding me? My mom’s already leaked more ‘classified information’ to me than Shiota-sensei could even dream to.”

Makoto laughs at his joke, but the ever studious Fumiko is already on track. Scarf snug around her throat, she leans forward over her desk with a look in her eyes that says ‘tell me everything.’

Nagisa’s happy to oblige.

Tapping his hand on the board, he calls for everyone’s attention. And when all eyes are on him, he smiles wide and speaks.

“I hope you’re all ready to learn the story of the kindest man I have ever met.”

He swears he sees Makoto grin.

...Maybe this won’t go as badly as he’d worried.

“Was he sexy, though?”

Scratch that. This is going fucking awful.

“P-pardon?”

The question comes up halfway through first period. Nagisa’s going over the basics of who Korosensei was: his powers and his personality, when Matsuya’s hand shoots in the air and he dares breach the forbidden question.

“Was he sexy?”

“...M… Matsuya, I’m not discussi-”

“All the official photos of him are, like, candid shots. Blurry government photos. But you knew the guy, right? You’ve gotta have pictures. Show em off. ‘Cause I gotta know if Korosensei was hot.”

“There are photos in a few slides, Matsuya. But we are not debating whether or not Korosensei was ‘hot.’”

“Wait. The man brings up a good point,” Kazuki interrupts with a huff. “It is your job as an
educator to foster our questions, no? Matsuya’s got a perfectly valid concern. He’s right. Every photo we’ve seen of Korosensei up until now, artists’ depictions aside, have been shitty. We haven’t been able to come to our own conclusions on whether or not he was sexy.

“As a teacher, isn’t it your job to help us learn? To help us come to said conclusions? In depriving us of clear pics of your potentially-sexy teacher, you’re stifling our learning opportunities.”

“I’ll - I’ll show you photos!” Nagisa hisses. “Just stop calling him sexy!”

Kazuki gives him a wry smile.

“Please!”

“Sexy octopus!” Ryoko declares, slamming her fist on the table.

“Ryoko, that’s inappropriate-”

“Sexy octopus!” she continues to chant.

“Show us the sexy octopus!” Matsuya joins in, joining in on the chorus of pounding fists.

‘That is my father figure you are talking about!’ Nagisa internally notes, mind wracked with distress.

“Unless you want to be just like the government, hiding the real secrets from the public!? Let us see him!” Kiku declares.

“For education!” Kazuki snarks.

“For procreation!” Ryoko ever-so helpfully adds on.

Nagisa covers his face with abject horror. For fuck’s sake, guys! Poor Makoto is right the-

“Sexy octopus! Sexy octopus!”

Makoto’s joined in.

With a deep sigh, Nagisa relents. Tapping his Powerpoint clicker two times, he brings them to the slide with pictures of Korosensei… Pictures taken directly from his sentimental yearbook, mind you. Spirit broken, he then proceeds to make his way over towards his desk chair, sit down, and cover his face with his hands.

Instantly, the class explodes into debate. Ryoko cries “sexy octopus” one more time for good measure, and Rosey hisses in through her teeth.

“...I was sorta team sexy,” she says. “But now that I’m seeing him for real, he’s a little wack looking.”

“Are you kidding me?” Kazuki says. “He’s a total hottie.”

Emiko groans at her brother’s comment. “You’re literally only saying this to make me mad, aren’t you?”

“No! No!” Kazuki replies. “I mean it! Just look at him!”

“He looks like he’d offer to help me do my homework and then fall asleep on the couch watching
reruns of old sitcoms at 8PM! That is the opposite of sexy,” Hachirou growls.

“Some people are into that,” Matsuya reminds him.

“Well, you better be into getting your ass beat, because I’m this close to pummeling the shit out of you.”

Reluctantly, Nagisa uncovers his eyes. As much as he hates the basis of this entire fucking conversation, his job as a teacher still stands and he can’t even chance letting Hachirou ‘pummel the shit’ out of Matsuya for real.

Thankfully for him and for Matsuya’s kneecaps, Hachirou doesn’t make a motion to actually stand.

“Can I be honest?” Komoshi asks.

“Of course, Komoshi! This is an avenue for open discussion. You should ALWAYS feel free to voice your opinions,” Kazuki instructs, arms open in an inviting posture. “We’ll be honored to hear your take on the matter.”

“...He’s kinda scary looking.”

“On second thought your opinion is shit and you should have decided to keep your trap shut.”

“Kazuki,” Nagisa reminds him. He doesn’t exactly appreciate his Cool Dad being called scary, either, but this conversation is enough of a trash fire as is and the last thing he needs is it becoming an actual argument. “Please don’t say things like that to your classmates. Please don’t hurt someone’s feelings over... This.”

“Over this intellectual avenue of discussion?” Kiku asks.

“Sure. Over this intellectual avenue of discussion,” Nagisa replies, feeling his heart shrivel up and die.

It’s five minutes later that they’ve formed the opposing factions that are ‘Team Hot’ and ‘Team Not,’ leaving Nagisa to wonder what the absolute hell is wrong with kids today. The last thing he’d ever want to sound like is some sort of embittered Baby Boomer considering he’s as Gen-Z as they get, but back in HIS day they had class civil wars over whether or not to commit actual murder, not over whether or not his surrogate father was ‘bootylicious.’

Education was a mistake, actually. Forget that whole heartwarming conversation he had with Makoto half a week ago. He should have become an assassin. This field is a cesspit and children are demons.

“So you’re team hot?” Riko demands, leaning over her desk and towards Misaki’s.

“I guess I’m team hot,” Misaki relents.

Nagisa catches Makoto pump his fist in victory.

...Well, at least someone’s having a good time.

Matsuya slams his palm on the table. “That only leaves two unaligned! Chiharu, where do you stand!?!” he demands, pointing.

“I really don’t want to partake in this conversation!” Chiharu yelps, his tail metaphorically in between his legs.
“Fumiko, then!” Matsuya cries. “You’re the deciding vote! You’ve been awfully quiet! Tell us what you think!”

Makoto leans over towards her, whispering excitedly. Kiyoshi covers his face and shakes his head, begging her to be the force of reason here.

“I’m so tired,” he mumbles. “Please, Fumiko. Please.”

Fumiko’s expression is indecipherable. Completely unphased as her classmates pound their fists on the desks around her, she listens to them chant “HOT OR NOT!?” as if savoring the attention. And then, with every eye on her, she says completely straight-faced.

“He’s a little hot.”

A cheer overtakes the room. Makoto bursts into a fit of giggles, and soon Fumiko’s straight face fades as well. Laughing so hard she wheezes, she bowls over and wipes half-embarrassed, half-amused tears from her eyes.

“What!?” she snickers, giggling at Kiyoshi’s legitimately offended stare. “He is! Just a little!”

“WILL YOU PEOPLE STOP CALLING MY SLEEP PARALYSIS DEMON HOT!?” Kiyoshi wails.

Nagisa never thought he’d ever relate to Kiyoshi’s debilitating and literally constant distress as much as he does right now.

“I think we broke Shiota-sensei,” Terumi finally says, pointing a finger.

“Can you blame him?” Haurhi hisses. “You’re all degenerates and need to go to fucking prison.”

“Do you mean fucking priso-?”

Nagisa doesn’t allow Kazuki to finish that sentence. Bolting to his feet, he snatches the clicker and goes back to the previous slide.

“Oh! We’re going back to the lesson!” he says. There’s a time and place for everything, but sex-ed is a completely different lesson, and not one for today!

It takes a literal half-hour to calm the class down and get them to stop shouting not-so-safe-for-work comments. But despite the withering, life-draining and downright rancid vibes his students have decided to bestow upon him today, Makoto seems on cloud nine the entire time.

...Well, at least he’s having fun with these lessons instead of beating himself up further. It’s a degenerate, indiscriminate victory that spits upon everything Nagisa loves, but a victory nonetheless.

He’ll take it.

The rest of the day goes smoothly. He explains the basics of Korosensei’s powers, his physical weaknesses, and the mechanics behind his Mach 20 speed. He even gets to share an anecdote of the time Korosensei took he and Karma on a Mach 20 ride to see the Sonic Ninja film overseas. Makoto’s eyes sparkle, and he scribbles notes the entire time.

By the end of the day, he’s in an excellent mood. And the rest of the class seems fully engaged, plus fascinated to find out what comes next. Nagisa knows things are only bound to grow a little
darker with each day, but even so, he thinks he feels a bit better about how this is going to go.

Because it seems like Makoto’s having the time of his life. And he trusts Makoto’s friends and peers to make the rest of the week as enjoyable for him as today had been.

“Which brings us to Korosensei’s life before he became Korosensei. Now that we know who Korosensei was, it’s important for us to know who he’d been before that. And that is The Reaper.”

Makoto has this hardened look on his face Kiyoshi’s not sure he likes.

“Believe it or not, before Korosensei was Korosensei, he was an average human. In fact, just about as average as they come. But does anyone know what he happened to do with this averageness he had?”

Fumiko’s hand shoots in the air.

“Fumiko?”

“He was an assassin, yes?”

That earns a nod from Nagisa. “Yes, actually. And how did you come to that conclusion?”

“Well, if you backwards logic it, it only makes sense,” she huffs. “He was the teacher of the assassination classroom, no? It’d be inane for him to teach a subject he had no expertise in. And that only leaves one deduction: That he had been well-versed in assassination himself.” She pauses. “Not to mention, ‘The Reaper,’ is a pretty telling title.”

“Good work!” Nagisa says. “Now that took my class almost the whole year to figure out,” he admits with a chuckle. “Sometimes we weren’t the brightest kids.”

He taps the board, bringing it forward to a slide featuring information on the elusive Reaper. And Kiyoshi is taken aback by what he sees.

He knew Korosensei had killed people. That was bound to come up once or twice during family chitchat considering so had his mom, but he’d never known just how many people Korosensei had killed.

It’s weird enough to know that his parents’ dead coworker who’s secretly his best friend has killed people. But knowing his exact fucking kill count is... It’s... He doesn’t want to think about that!

Nevertheless, there it is in front of him:

“The enigmatic Reaper was uncontestedly the most feared killer of the 21st century. With a death count of over a thousand, his technique was unmatched.”

...Of the 21st century!? That’s an extremely bold claim to make considering the century isn’t even over yet!

And even so, he can’t shake the feeling that that’s somehow unconditionally the truth. How many people is a thousand? Is that even physically possible!? His mom had described kills that took weeks to plan! Months, even!

As Nagisa takes things back a minute and begins to describe what it would have been like for an orphaned child to grow up in a wartorn world, Kiyoshi can hardly bring himself to focus. The little
cogs in his brain turning at a mile a minute, he’s he wonders just how intelligent and calculating someone would have to be to have managed to kill that many people.

...How cruel?

For one horrified moment, he wonders if his fear of Makoto hadn’t been completely unfounded.

That day in the forest, and the way Makoto had stunned him with one simple motion of his hands...

In another world, could that moment of stillness have spelled his demise?

“He quickly found himself proficient with both blades and firearms. Although his kills initially began in an attempt to protect himself, they quickly shifted their focus to earning him money. And when he’d found even *that* couldn’t sate him, he began to simply assassinate people he believed to be corrupt or that other assassins had failed to ‘finish off.’”

The class chitters excitedly, posing theories on how someone so goddamn brutal could have found a change of heart and became the perfect teacher. Hand high in the air, Kiku excitedly inquires about his ‘most grisly murder.’

“I don’t know,” Nagisa admits. “Those weren’t details he was inclined to share with us.”

It’s easy enough to imagine, however, if you let your mind wander like Kiyoshi does. Torn throats and split stomachs. The barrel of a gun pressed to a head, and the ensuing, ear-shredding *bang.*

Makoto’s expression is indecipherable. His fist clenches and unclenches. He takes deep breaths. And like he’s been preparing his whole life for this lesson, he simply stares forward blankly.

Fumiko doesn’t seem to sense it... The danger in the air. She diligently scrawls her notes, an excited glimmer in her eyes as if she’s being let in on something she was never supposed to know. Kiyoshi feels it, too.

But where it fascinates Fumiko, it petrifies him.

Makoto wouldn’t... *Makoto wouldn’t hurt them, right?*

Makoto glances back his way. For just one moment. And Kiyoshi’s heart *jumps out of its chest.*

Pure, unfiltered terror running through his veins.

“Did he, like... work with anyone?” Rin inquires. “I’m sorry to seem skeptical, but I just can’t believe someone could accomplish all of that on their own before the age of 35.”

“For the most part, no. The Reaper didn’t even make *contact* with other assassins. Most of them outright doubted he existed. There was a single exception to this rule, however. And that would be a boy from Bordeaux, France.”

Kiyoshi swears he catches Makoto’s hand tremble.

“Although technically the exact identity of this boy has never been confirmed, it is known for certain that sometime around 2002, The Reaper picked up an apprentice. After the assassination of an affluent and allegedly corrupt political leader, the never-before-seen Reaper was caught red-handed by his son. Instead of being horrified or angry, however, the boy was fascinated by The Reaper’s technique, and begged for him to take him with him.”
“Impressed by the boy’s keen eye and enthusiasm, The Reaper obliged. He snatched up the boy and took him under his wing as an apprentice. Although, again, nothing has been confirmed, this lines up with the unsolved assassination of French political figure Claude Auclair and the disappearance of his son, Damien Jean Auclair”

Makoto softly wheezes.

“So… he had like a son?” Kaya asks curiously. “A… son that he stole?”

“Hardly,” Nagisa admits. “Reaper and the boy’s relationship was never anything other than professional. Cold, even. It was a dynamic of solely apprentice and master exclusively, at least... In The Reaper’s eyes. With allegations of abuse against both his wife and son pointed at Auclair when he died, it is completely possible Damien searched for a father figure in The Reaper. One he never found. And that would certainly explain what steered his next actions.”

Fumiko raises an eyebrow. “What did he do?”

“He turned The Reaper in.”

Makoto bites his lip. Hard.

“At somewhere between ages 17 and 20, after at least ten years of being in The Reaper’s Custody, Damien handed the Reaper over to police. He alerted them of their location during a particularly intricate assassination, and by the time he and The Reaper managed to make their exit, the authorities were already waiting outside. In exchange for the information, the authorities allowed Damien to walk free, and finally apprehended the notorious Reaper.”

Rikuto raises a hand. “Why haven’t we heard about this?” He asks. “Managing to arrest the biggest serial killer on the planet sounds like a pretty big deal.”

“It was top secret,” Nagisa says. “Up until now, authorities themselves hardly even believed The Reaper really existed. They feared a mass panic if the news broke out to the public, and as such simply apprehended The Reaper silently. They planned to execute him without breathing a single word of it.”

“That is not what happened, however. Before they could even begin to start the process of killing The Reaper, they were contacted by a man with an interesting preposition: An up-and-coming wealthy scientist with powerful connections. Connections too powerful, in fact. Because where in any just world his request of ‘Give me someone who will not be missed to experiment on. In return, I’ll give you money and a new future for humanity’ would have been turned down on the spot for its innate cruelty, the government obliged.”

“Without a second thought, they handed the newly apprehended Reaper over to said scientist: a man known as Kotaro Yanagisawa. But even then, thrown into a world of medical malpractice and human experimentation, The Reaper’s plans to escape never once faltered. It’s in this cruel lab that the second phase of the soon-to-become Korosensei’s life began. Because through torment and heartache, it just so happened that that lab would be the same place he’d meet someone who would change his worldview forever.”

With that, Nagisa claps and closes the Powerpoint. “All things we’ll be getting into tomorrow, however, because it’s just about time for lunch. I wouldn’t want to be getting into such heavy-handed topics with you all on an empty stomach.”

“Aw! Come on! We don’t mind!” Rosey cries.
“Booooo!” Kiku agrees. “Don’t go and leave us on a cliffhanger!”

“Sorry, guys. Considering Korosensei’s life was pretty much a constant series of cliffhangers, we’re gonna need to have a cutoff point somewhere unless you want to be here until 12AM.”

“I wouldn’t particularly mind,” Rin snarks.

“Okay, okay. Whatever you say, jokester,” Nagisa replies. “But I have a family to get home to, and while I could talk about Korosensei all day, I’m pretty sure they’d be mad if I ended up coming home at 1AM with the excuse of ‘I was infodumping about our dead teacher.’”

He jokes it off, but Kiyoshi has a feeling there’s another reason Nagisa’s only giving them so much information a day. And his suspicions are more or less confirmed when he spots Nagisa shoot Makoto a worried glance.

...There’s only so much Korosensei can take, after all.

He’s trying to spoon-feed them the story of a tattered life in bite-sized, gentle pieces. Because surely anything more would send the recipient over keeling.

But watching the way Makoto’s lip quivers, Kiyoshi’s left to wonder if even this much is too much for the sensitive boy.

And eyes wandering, he’s sure Nagisa wonders, too.

As everyone gathers their things for lunch, Makoto stands. It’s a nice day outside and Nagisa’s offered to let them sit on the grass. People are beginning to flood out the doorway when his hand shoots in the air.


Nagisa turns around from where he’d been reaching to grab his own lunch box. And every eye in the room stares at them as he acknowledges Makoto.

“Of course,” he says. “What is it?”

“...The boy. Damien. His apprentice. What happened to him? After he turned The Reaper in?”

Nagisa blinks slowly. And giving Makoto a pitying look, he says “...He went on to become the second Reaper. Stealing The Reaper’s identity and shedding his own skin... Quite literally, he aimed to become just like his mentor. Pushing himself to his limit, he dedicated every aspect of himself to becoming the ultimate assassin.”

“...And where is he now?”

It takes Nagisa a long moment to respond. But finally, no longer able to meet Makoto’s eyes, he turns his head and murmurs “He’s since passed as well.”

With that, everyone returns to the hustle-and-bustle of life. Chiharu daintily retrieves his lunch from his desk, and Ryoka slaps Terumi on the back as they make their way out of the building. The school day goes on as usual.

But not for Makoto. Not for Nagisa. And not for Kiyoshi, either.

Because he catches it: The heartbreak in Makoto’s eyes.
Looking half-ready to faint, Makoto stares at the wall. Hand trembling ever so slightly, he bites his lip and blinks back tears.

And ashamed as he is to admit it, Kiyoshi almost swears he feels something akin to relief.

Because at least there’s something in Makoto’s eyes at all. Something other than the same emptiness Nagisa had described in The Reaper.

...As awful of a friend as it makes him, the emptiness Kiyoshi fears.

Kiyoshi crosses his fingers and hopes lunch will cheer Makoto up. The boy thinks with his stomach, after all. But even as he and Fumiko exchange snark sitting on the Fall grass, the look in Makoto’s eyes never once fades.

During PE, things go the same as usual. At least… What’s become the usual as of late. Makoto asks to sit out, claiming that he doesn’t feel well. Giving him a resigned, worried look, Nagisa simply nods and obliges. Kiyoshi supposes he should be thankful for that as well, watching Makoto gingerly place his knife on the ground, but he just can’t find it in his heart to.

...Not when Makoto looks so goddamn ashamed.

The moment Nagisa begins to explain what they’re doing today, and that he’s teaching the rest of the class how to stun clap, Kiyoshi swiftly makes his decision. He murmurs something about the technique giving him the heebie-jeebies, and admits that he’d like to sit out as well. He’s been meaning to check up on Makoto anyway.

Fumiko motions to follow, a concerned furrow to her brow, but Kiyoshi reassures her she doesn’t need to do that. It’s pretty evident that she’s the only one in their little group who's actually enjoying this lesson. It’s… like… her field of expertise. He’d hate to take that away from her. And as such, he promises he’ll take care of Makoto.

“Just enjoy yourself, okay?” he says, lowering her hand. “I’ll make sure everything’s alright.”

“...Okay,” she relents “I trust you with this.”

As he turns and makes his way to meet Makoto, Kiyoshi wonders if he even trusts himself with this.

Is it wrong that deep down he’d rather see this Makoto than the one that Nagisa had described? Does that make him a bad friend?

It’s not that he wants Makoto to be sad! He’d take happy Makoto, too. He just… Just…

...Doesn’t want Makoto to hurt him?

It’s a ridiculous notion. Makoto’s the sort of person who tiptoes around ant holes and places spiders under cups to let them back outside. He loves pretty flowers and has fully admitted he isn’t capable of picking a favorite season because he likes them all so much. He wouldn’t hurt another person if his life depended on it!

But… Nagisa had made it clear The Reaper would have. And Kiyoshi has to wonder… Is this another fabricated notion of his anxieties, or is he right to be wary just this once?

...Wary? Wary of what!? His best friend? Who’d comforted him crying in his bedroom a month
ago? Who’d approached him when *no-one* thought he was worth it and decided to be his companion?

Maybe that’s another reason he feels obligated to approach Makoto. To talk to him and… Like… Cheer him up or whatever. Because maybe that’d mean he’s not as much of a shitty friend as he feels like right now. Or at least maybe it could sorta ease some of his fears.

Makoto doesn’t even seem to notice him approaching. When Kiyoshi takes a seat next to him on the doorstep he jolts.

“Hey,” Kiyoshi says. “Thought I’d sit out too. I’m not too particularly into this assassination stuff.”

Makoto watches their classmates clap their hands across the field.

“…Yeah. Me neither,” he admits.

Kiyoshi sighs. “Listen. Uh… I’m not gonna beat around the bush. You feeling okay?” he asks.

Makoto shrugs. “As okay as I can be,” he says. “Try not to worry, okay?”

“Again: You’re forgetting that worry is… Like… All I do,” Kiyoshi jokes.

That earns a snort from Makoto.

“This… Is… Like, a really heavy lesson topic, though,” Kiyoshi continues. “Are you really sure you’re okay with this? I know Shiota-sensei wants to teach everyone about Korosensei’s legacy, but…”

Makoto quickly shakes his head. “No. He didn’t do anything wrong,” he reassures. “I asked for these lessons.”

Kiyoshi stares. “...What?”

“I asked for him to do this,” Makoto says. “...I…” He stares down at his hands “I… Started remembering stuff on my own. About hurting people. It scared me. It still does. But I want to know about everything I did. No more secrets. Everything out in the open.” He sighs. “I like to think that way I can finally start to make up for some of it.”

Kiyoshi frowns. Somehow that sounds even sadder coming from Makoto’s mouth. It’s not that he particularly thinks differently of the situation, but…

“Didn’t you already make up for some of it? As Korosensei?” he asks.

Makoto shrugs his shoulder. “Even I don’t think he ever thought it was enough.”

...It’s weird to think about Korosensei having regrets. Having anxieties just like everyone else on the planet.

But there he sits, shoulders slumped, and Kiyoshi has no doubts.

Kiyoshi reaches out to place a hand on his shoulder. Terrified or not, he thinks Makoto needs that.

“I’m… Uh… Sorry to hear about your son.”

Makoto shakes his head again. “He wasn’t my son.”
'Because you didn’t want him to be, or because you don’t think you deserved him?’ Kiyoshi wonders. Eleven years is a long, long time.

“I’m sorry about your apprentice.”

“Me too,” Makoto says.

The tension in the air is palpable. Silently staring across the field, Makoto shuts his eyes and breathes out through his nose.

“...I didn’t know he had a name until now.”

“Pardon?”

“Damien. I didn’t know that was his name. Up until now in my head, he’s just always been ‘the boy,’ ‘the apprentice,’ ‘the student.’”

“...Oh.” Kiyoshi says.

“He… Wasn’t some nameless orphan. Not like I was. He had a family, a future. And I took that from him, Kiyoshi. I didn’t even have the kindness to address him as a person. The minute he came under my wing, he simply became ‘Hey. You.’ His name was Damien Jean Auclair, and I took that from him.”

Makoto looks ready to cry.

And against his better judgement, Kiyoshi scoots closer.

“I’m… sure it would mean something to him that you care now.”

“Mmmm…” Makoto says.

He scratches anxiously at the back of his hand.

“You don’t need to do this, you know,” Kiyoshi says.

“Huh?”

“Like… Punish yourself. I know you asked Shiota-sensei for this, but I’m sure it’s not too late to sit out of the lessons if you think they’re going to make you keep feeling this way.”

Makoto shakes his head. “No. I told you: I signed up for this,” he says. “If Nagisa doesn’t tell me now, I’ll remember all on my own. And let me tell you: remembering slashing someone's throat open on your own is the loneliest feeling in the world.”

...It takes all of Kiyoshi’s effort to resist shuddering.

“Well… You’re not alone,” he says. “You know that, right?”

“Yeah,” Makoto says. “I’m lucky to have you guys.”

“We’re lucky to have you, too.”

Makoto sends him a wistful glance. “...I like to think you two are my reminder that it won’t be this bad forever. That… this’ll be just like ripping a band-aid off. Once I know everything Korosensei went through, then I can go back to being my usual happy self.” He pauses. “Try not to worry
about me too much, okay? Think of this as just…” He mulls it over. “Think of this as just the
darkest before the dawn. Before you know it, everything will be back to normal.”

And despite it all, Makoto cocks his head and gives him one of those wide, bittersweet smiles.

...Kiyoshi doesn’t smile back.

“You don’t have to be happy all of the time, Makoto,” he says.

Makoto doesn’t have some reassuring response to that.

Instead, they simply sit in silence, Makoto scratching at the back of his hand, and Kiyoshi wishing
he had some way to know what sort of person his self-declared best friend truly wants to be.

Finally, Makoto speaks. “...Thanks for coming to check up on me,” he says. “You didn’t have to do
that, y’know. Sit out.”

Kiyoshi shrugs. “I wanted to,” he admits. “I was worried about you. And I’ve told you, anyways: I
don’t like that stun clap stuff.”

Makoto squints. “...Is that what they’re doing?” he asks, bringing his hand up to his brow. He leans
forward and peers.

“Mmmm,” Kiyoshi responds, laying his hands on his lap.

Once he’s confirmed his suspicions, Makoto sits back with a sigh. His gaze having drifted to his
classmates, he stares out at the wide, open field.

“I don’t know how he manages to make this stuff fun,” he admits. “Assassination.”

Kiyoshi frowns. “Shiota-sensei, you mean?”

“Yeah,” Makoto says. “...Dunno how I managed to make it fun, either.” He knits at his hands. “I
guess I did what I had to... Since... They had to hurt me. But...” He drifts off, looking back
Kiyoshi’s way. “...Do you think I messed them up?”

“Huh?”

“Nagisa. And the rest of the students, too. You’ve grown up around them, haven’t you? Do you
think I left any of them more hurt than I found them?”

Kiyoshi blinks. Now that’s a loaded question.

...Will Makoto think he’s lying if he answers ‘no?’ Because he doesn’t. He doesn’t think
Korosensei did that. He doesn’t have a ‘back then’ to compare the E-Class to. Not like Makoto
does. But despite all their struggles... They seem relatively well adjusted to him.

“Nah,” he says. “...I think... This is just part of carrying on your legacy,” he admits, gesturing
towards the field.

“...My legacy of what?” Makoto asks, voice soft. “Hurting people isn’t what I want to be
remembered for.”

Kiyoshi sighs, shoulders falling. “I don’t think ‘hurting people’ is ever what Nagisa saw this aspect
of your life as,” he says. “If I’m being honest, I don’t even think he sees ‘assassination’ and ‘the
assassination classroom’ as the same thing.”
“...Then what’s the difference?” Makoto asks. “Who’s being hurt?”

Kiyoshi shakes his head. “...I don’t know, Makoto. I don’t know,” he admits. “I’m not sure I’ll ever understand Korosensei... But... I do think he managed to turn something scary into something fun for a bunch of people who needed that more than anything. I think they’ll always treasure those memories.”

...He almost says 'I'm sorry you can't treasure them anymore, either.

Not quite. But almost.

“Mmm,” Makoto says. “I’m not sure I’ll ever understand him, either.”

They sit in silence once more. And as the autumn breeze flits through the air, a leaf lands between them.

“Kiyoshi? Can I ask you a question?” Makoto asks. “Like... A personal question?”

“Yeah,” Kiyoshi answers. “Anything.”

“Okay. But you gotta promise to answer me honestly. You won’t hurt my feelings unless you lie to me. At your place... You said we gotta be honest with each other from now on. For our own sake. So please... Tell me the truth.”

Kiyoshi’s lips press. Eyes drifting towards the ground, he asks. “...What is it?”

“Are you scared of me, Kiyoshi?”

And Kiyoshi freezes. Heart pounding in his chest, he keeps his eyes fixed firmly towards the ground. He opens his mouth to speak, but no words come out.

“I’m not stupid,” Makoto says. “I mean... I guess I sort of am. I’m not good with any of that academic stuff. Not like I was back then. But... I’m good with people. I’m good with how they feel. And I saw how you reacted to me back during the Sports Festival. The way you kept glancing towards me during Nagisa’s lesson. Do you think I’m scary?”

Kiyoshi fidgets uncomfortably. God! What is he supposed to say!? The longer he stays silent, the more suspicious his answer becomes! But he can’t just say ‘yes!’ He doesn’t care what Makoto says. That sort of answer will destroy him. And he can’t say ‘no,’ either! Makoto will be able to tell that he’s lying! His panicked reaction already says enough! Makoto’s backed him into a corner here!

“I mean, sorta!” he says. “But I’m not - Like - Scared of you,” he insists. “I mean, I don’t wanna be. And I’m not scared of Korosensei, either! At least... I don’t think so. I’m just scared of what he did. There’s gotta be a difference, right? Being scared of a person and being scared of what they’re capable of? A-A-At least, I’d like to think so!” he rambles. “...W... Which none of is a concern, anyways! You shouldn’t take my answer to heart, anyways. I’m scared of everything. You didn’t do anything wrong. I’m just... I dunno! I overthink!”

Makoto watches him curiously, staring at him with sympathetic eyes as he waits for him to finish his ramble. And when Kiyoshi's finally managed to find his words, he simply bows his head, clasps his fingers, and says:

“I see.”
...The look on his face is indecipherable.

And. Kiyoshi. Hates it. He *hates* not being able to know. He *hates* not being able to read people like Makoto can. And he *hates* that he knows he couldn’t deal with a person like himself in a million years. If… If someone told him they were scared of him, he thinks it would *break him*!

He bites his tongue so hard he thinks it’s going to bleed. Makoto doesn’t look angry. He doesn’t even look hurt. He simply blinks slowly as he takes in what Kiyoshi’s said.

And before he can even think it through, Kiyoshi snaps “...I just get scared when you do *this!*”

And now *that* earns a reaction from Makoto. Looking stunned, he asks “Do what?”

“I dunno… Pretend that nothing bothers you. It makes me feel like I don’t know you. That I’m not getting to meet the real you in the same way I’m opening up the real myself to you. It makes me feel *vulnerable*. It makes me feel like you could do anything you wanted to me. I *hate* the idea of a Korosensei who was like that all the time in one point of his life. You said we promised we'd be honest with each other, right? But that includes you, too! I want you to stop hiding how you feel!”

Makoto’s shoulders slump.

“...Oh,” he says.

“Mmmm…” Kiyoshi responds.

“I… Think it’s ‘cause of my dad,” Makoto admits. “It feels weird and bad to blame my dad entirely, so I guess it’s not just him... But…” He shakes his head. “Maybe it’s my life entirely. Things have never come easy to me. At least not until recently. Not until you guys. And it… I dunno. It taught me how to force myself to be happy.”

“...Huh?”

“When I’m upset… I just… Don’t think about it. I force myself to have positive thoughts. I distract myself,” he says. “...I don’t think I’m, like… Trying to hide myself from you. And I don’t think I’m pretending to be someone I’m not. I’m just… Not letting myself feel it, either.” He pauses. “...I dunno if that makes any sense, but-”

Kiyoshi shakes his head. “No. It makes a lot of sense,” he admits. “...That can’t possibly be healthy, though.”

...It’s funny. Sometimes when he looks at the emotionally distant Makoto… The Makoto who doesn’t let himself feel for fear of screwing up, he swears he catches a glimpse of his *father* of all people.

He doesn’t want another aspect of his life to turn apathetic.

“I know,” Makoto replies, knitting at his hands. “...The Reaper’s forcing me to think about that.”

“...He did it too?” Kiyoshi asks.

“I mean, not in the same way. The Reaper didn’t let himself be *happy*, either,” Makoto reasons. “Because… The most effective way for him to live his life was to feel nothing. And it scares me. Feeling what he felt. Even for a moment, in my dreams. Because he *really did feel nothing*. Is my happiness as fake as that?”
“I don’t know,” Kiyoshi admits. “I don’t know.”

“I’m starting to get why he ended up the way he did. You heard the way Nagisa talked about where he grew up. He had it way worse than me. He had to let himself not care. To protect himself. And… In not caring about himself, I guess he started to let himself not care about other people, too.”

Makoto sighs. “I don’t wanna be like him. Ever. I think I care about other people a lot - Well… I know I care about other people a lot, but I don’t wanna risk ever losing that. You and Fumiko are important to me. I don’t wanna end up hurting you guys like…” He pauses. “…Like the people Korosensei cared about.”

“…You wouldn’t… Right?”

“Huh?”

“You. Right now. Not Reaper… Not Korosensei… Not who you’re scared you might be in ten years… You wouldn’t hurt us, right?” Kiyoshi asks. “I… Know that’s a dumb question with an obvious answer, but I need to know: You wouldn’t hurt me, right?”

Makoto blinks. But shaking his head, he firmly pats Kiyoshi on the back. “No. I wouldn’t hurt you,” he says. “Not if my life depended on it.”

“You’re good, then,” Kiyoshi says with a shaky break. “I think… Whoever you're going to become… You’ll be good. And then… Neither of us will have to be afraid.”

Makoto gives him a tired smile. But just this once, Kiyoshi can detect the sincerity behind it. “I think I’d like that.”

“I meant what I said during our sleepover,” Kiyoshi says. “That you can be open with me. About how you feel. About when you’re scared. About when you don’t like yourself. Fumiko, too. ‘Cause… While I know what you’re most worried about is that one day you won’t care for others… I hope one day I can meet the Makoto who cares about himself just as much as he cares about everyone else. A Makoto who’s willing to let himself open up to me.”

Makoto scoots closer. “…I’ll do everything in my power to let you meet him.”

“Good,” Kiyoshi says. “Cause that’s the Makoto I won’t be scared of. Not even a little.”

And watching their classmates play; Shouting and laughing at the top of their lungs across the field… Makoto leans on Kiyoshi’s shoulder.

Looking completely exhausted, with the weight of something incomprehensible on his shoulders… Kiyoshi doesn’t flinch back from him. He wouldn’t dare. Instead, he’ll simply sits perfectly still, and tries his best to offer his support.

In a world where Makoto is more scared of Korosensei than he could ever be, he thinks he wants to help him carry that weight.

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...Maybe… Makoto’s finally becoming able to handle it.

He’s still not sure if he likes the Reaper. He’s still not even sure if he likes Korosensei. But reflecting on Kiyoshi’s words… Nagisa’s, too, he’s starting to think maybe he’ll finally be able to move on from suffocating in that pit of self doubt. He’s… Come to terms with what he did. And
he’s starting to think it’s not too late for him.

...That this isn’t just his chance to fix things for everyone else, but for himself, too.

As such, he walks into class on Wednesday with his head held high.

Kiyoshi and Fumiko arrive soon after, walking in tandem. Kiyoshi makes a beeline for his desk and asks him in a hushed voice how he’s doing.

Makoto shrugs, and says he thinks he’ll be okay.

“I mean it this time.”

Kiyoshi gives him a relieved smile.

“I’m happy to hear it.”

Nagisa pulls him aside before homeroom begins. Warns him that things are going to get somewhat intense today.

“I’m not sure how much you know about what Korosensei went through at the lab, but it was some pretty messed up stuff,” he admits.

“I can handle it,” Makoto says.

After all, he’s seen the worst of Korosensei’s actions. And whatever he’s possibly been through can’t possibly be any worse than the things he’s done.

“Allright,” Nagisa says hesitantly. “Just… Let me know if you need a break at any time.”

“Can do,” Makoto says. And pulling Nagisa in tight for a hug, he promises he’ll be alright.

He has to be. He couldn’t bear to put Nagisa through even one more ounce of suffering.

Whatever’s about to come… He asked for it. He won’t back out. And he won’t make Nagisa feel bad for a decision that he made.

...The explanation begins simply enough.

Nagisa asks where he’d been when they left off yesterday. Rosey raises her hand and tells him they’d been at the part where Korosensei got arrested.

“Then he went into human experimentation or something you said, right?”

Nagisa nods. “Yes. After The Reaper was apprehended, a plethora of underground deals ended up leaving him in the hands of Kotaro Yanagisawa, an unhinged scientist with some not-so-legal ideals under his belt.”

A flash of a face in his mind. Makoto swears he’d seen it yesterday, too. But it’s clearer this time. Unruly green hair and a fresh-pressed lab coat. It doesn't match his otherwise smug, manic expression. Empty grey eyes, and a sideways sneer.

Makoto shudders.

“Yeah. So… Hey. I’ve been meaning to ask about that,” Haruhi says. “You herded us off to lunch real quick after that came up yesterday, but the more I think about that the less sense it makes. Are
you telling me that the government - the paragon of enforcing legality - not only heard this man and his unauthorized ideas out, but obliged to his request for a death row inmate who ‘would not be missed’ without a single second thought? And not even just that. They gave this unhinged maniac the most dangerous serial murderer on the planet? Weren’t they worried about him escaping?"

Nagisa opens his mouth to speak. But before he can get the chance to reply, Kiku hops to her feet. “...Hey! That’s right!” she says. “That makes no sense! What happened!?"

“Kiyoshi! You should know, right?” Riko asks. “Your parents work for the government! What the heck happened there?”

Kiyoshi looks rather like a deer in the headlights. “I- I don’t know!” he cries. “They haven’t told me! They weren’t even involved in that! T- The government isn’t some conglomerate hivemind! Remind me again why my air force father would be making diplomatic arrangements with this guy again!?"

“I don’t know! It made more sense when I thought about it! Your dad was involved with Korosensei. I thought maybe he’d-”

“Shiota-senseeeeeeiiii!”

Nagisa pinches the brow of his nose. “…I don’t claim to understand anything the government does. But I both heard the story from the man himself and met his captor. While I never got the exact details, I presume it had something to do with a large offering of money and the government’s desire to weaponize his experiments if successful. You’d be surprised just what even the people in charge of us would do and which rules they would bend if they felt they had something to gai-“

“...Maybe it’s like that mad cow thing!”

“Pardon?” Nagisa sputters.

“Hey. Yeah. Uh- I’m interested in Shiota-sensei instilling anti-authoritarian distrust of our own government in us and all,” Aina says “But I’m more interested in understanding what the fuck Minki just said.”

Minki’s chest puffs up, although it’s left unclear on whether she’s genuinely proud of her discovery or simply enjoying the experience of saying something that absolutely no-one around her can comprehend.

“So - Uh... Like don’t quote me on this, but back in the nineties they had a TON of, like, super sick cows in England that no-one wanted anything to do with. And it just so happened to be that these guys in, like... Thailanad or Cambodia or something had a bunch of land mines they also wanted nothing to do with. So they were like ‘Hey! Send over your rabid cows, and we can just have them step on the landmines, and then neither of us will have our problem anymore.’ It’s willdddd.

Nagisa sputters. “I... What... Okay. That’s incredibly fascinating, Minki. But I’m not sure what that has to do with Korosensei. I think we’re getting a little off topi-“

“You’re saying they wanted him to kill him!?"

“Could you blame them!? This guy showed up on their doorstep like ‘help me out with my human rights violation!’”
“Did they actually go through with that!?” Rosey wails. “The poor cows!”

“I’m sure most of you have been wondering where, when, and why The Reaper became Korosensei. Because as fascinating as assassination abilities are, they’re far from superhuman. As it turns out, the basis of Korosensei’s powers lies in these inhumane experiments.”

“Although before we get into the science of it: I must remind all of you that what went down here was cruel, unnecessary, and inhumane. We’ll be looking at it from purely a historical perspective, in the same way we’d look at any other tragic event. I expect you to treat this topic with respect, and not make light of the full scope of harm that occurred because of the following experiments.”

“As Nagisa manages to get the class’s attention back on track, he taps the blackboard with the back of his hand.

“I’m ready.’

He’s there again. Being rushed into the lab. Even restrained to the confines of that stretcher, he doesn’t feel a smidgeon of panic.

No. He hadn’t been the scared one there. Not even for a moment. The scientists, on the other hand…

They dared not speak his name above a hushed whisper.

If he struck such fear in their hearts...What is there for him to possibly be afraid of?

(...)It feels like there’s bugs crawling under his skin)

“How much do you all know about antimatter?” Nagisa asks.

And Fumiko raises her hand. Shifting lightly in her seat she says “It has something to do with particle physics, right?”

Nagisa nods. “Put most simply… And this is going to sound dumb, but antimatter is... Well. The
opposite of matter. Everything around you - Your clothes, your desk, you are made of matter. But somewhere far in the depths of space 'Antimatter,' made of particles with the opposite charge, is residually left over from the creation of our universe.”

“Why this is important, however, is the energy that antimatter produces. Despite being an incredibly rare substance to obtain, for years, both in theoreticals and literals, antimatter has been a subject of interest in scientific communities. For one reason and one reason only: Annihilation.”

A… Annihilation?

There's a sinking feeling in Makoto's gut as Nagisa pulls up a diagram on the powerpoint.

“You see, when antimatter comes in contact with matter, it creates a chain reaction. This is known as annihilation. Both the matter and antimatter are destroyed in the process. But this creates an incredible surge of energy. One greater than most of us can even begin to comprehend. Because of this, physicists have searched for years for a way to harness antimatter for things like fuel, medicine and space travel. But it’s been a tricky operation outside of simple science fiction, namely because of where antimatter is formed, and how it behaves.”

“Not only is it an incredibly rare substance, but as I said: When it comes in contact with any matter, it and the matter both are destroyed. It’s near impossible to store, and can take several hundred million dollars just to produce a gram of. Because of this, it’s not viable as an energy source. There’s too little gain for too much cost.”

“I think I get it,” Kiyoshi says, frowning. “...It's an impossibly potent material, but with no viable way to harness it.”

Makoto thinks he gets it too. And… That’s great and all. But what does that have to do with Korosensei?

“Exactly,” Nagisa says. “Many, many scientists have over the years tried to find a way to create and potentially store antimatter without the risk of it quite literally blowing up in their faces. And the most infamous of these experiments has been the inhumane and wildly dangerous Cell Replacement Experiments of 2013.”

“Again: I’m not sure how much of this I’m technically legally allowed to share, so consider this a gift of sorts for being in my class. You’re learning secrets the world as a whole may never know, so please treasure that knowledge, even in the face of it being knowledge of a forbidden, cruel and volatile procedure. Because who knows? You may never have gotten the chance to learn this otherwise.”

Makoto has a feeling he would have learned about this sooner or later, with or without Nagisa's help, but he supposes he appreciates Nagisa putting it into terms he can understand.

(Yanagisawa had never explained what he’d been doing to him, had he?)

(Thin, pristie needles. Something bright red. And the dim glow of flickering overhead lights.)

...Makoto’s fingers start to twitch.

“Like many scientists before him, Yanagisawa searched to harness the power of antimatter as well. You see, as a man working in pharmaceuticals, he’d found a way to continuously reproduce drugs such as Soliris and Cinryze through cell division. And he believed that if given the resources, he could replicate antimatter in the same exact fashion. There was only one problem with his thesis, however: and that was the aforementioned process of annihilation.”
“He could not clone antimatter through usual means, because there was no viable way for him to store it without risk of it coming into contact with matter. After all: If he managed to produce large amounts of antimatter only for it to be contaminated by matter, it could cause an explosion of literally catastrophic proportions.”

“That’s… Where…” Nagisa pauses, frowning. And shaking his head slowly, he says “...That’s where human experimentation came in. If he could not safely create antimatter in the outside world, Yanagisawa decided he would simply reproduce it in a body. Ready select cells that he believed would begin to duplicate antimatter in a human body, he made his proposition to the government and brought The Reaper into his custody. He decided he’d create antimatter inside of him.”

Twitch. Twitch. Twitch.

Makoto swears his whole hand is beginning to spasm.

“There’s still one issue there though, isn’t there?” Kiyoshi asks. “Humans are made of matter. Even I know that much. How on earth would producing antimatter in a person’s body be any different than producing it in out the open?” He crosses steeples fingers. “If anything, that sounds more dangerous.”

...Makoto’s skin prickles. Bright red flows through his veins.

“Good observation, Kiyoshi,” Nagisa says. “In any other situation, you’d be correct. But Yanagisawa wasn’t simply storing or creating antimatter inside of The Reaper. He was creating Antimatter out of The Reaper.”

_He WHAT!?_

Makoto’s head is starting to spin.

“You see, for every cell the antimatter touched, both were destroyed. But more antimatter cells were only made in their place. As The Reaper’s cells were slowly destroyed from the inside out, the destruction spread. And one by one the empty space where his molecules had been was replaced.”

_The man stands there, muttering his stern commands. And then, staring at Makoto with those empty malevolent eyes, he draws a needle to his skin._

“I’ve never heard of. . . . . A theoretical like that.”

Makoto watches Kiyoshi’s mouth move, but he only manages to make out half the words. _He can’t move. Why? Is he petrified out of pure terror, or still somewhere strapped to that operating table? Try as he may, he just can’t tear his arm away._

His classmates have a horrified look on their faces. They begin to murmur and question. Fumiko turns her head to stare at him. But Makoto doesn’t make eye contact.

...It feels like she’s staring through him.

_The needle pierces his skin, and Makoto feels red hot magma flow through his veins._

It takes all of his effort to resist keeling over. Just barely steadying himself on his desk with the back of his elbow, he glances around the room.
“There’s no way that . . . . I mean . . . . Sounds dangerous at best,” one of his classmates mutters.

“Extremely so,” Nagisa replies, as if it’s the most obvious deduction in the world.

Is it? Is it?

His fingers are locked in rigor mortis. Staring down at the back of his hand, maybe a foot above where he’d received the injection, he watches his joints twitch.

“And what would that do . . . . To a person’s body?” Another classmate murmurs, just barely discernible behind the ringing in his ears. “At that point . . . . Even human?”

Makoto swears he sees his skin bubble.


His flesh writhes under the surface. His fingers begin to snake out. Wiry, sinewy, and thrashing with a force so beyond his control.

It hurts. It hurts.

He places his other hand over the back of his hand, desperately trying to get it under control. Clutching tight and knuckles pal ing as he squeezes. But try as he might, his left hand only begins to writhe with the same intensity.

There’s nothing he can do.

...Nagisa’s still talking. But Makoto can’t make out his words. There’s burning hot embers in his chest. His lungs. His face and his fingers. Tearing him apart from the inside out.

“Intense fits of pain . . . . Vomiting blood . . . . Temporary organ failure and loss of conscious control over his body.”

It spreads up his arm. His veins bulge and burn. He swears he even feels the hair lift on the back of his neck.

“Tentacles.”

An injection and then another. It never once lets up. Without a single shred of doubt, Yanagisawa shows his ugly face every day. Sometimes more. With each puncture left in Makoto’s(?) skin, the pain becomes more and more impossible to bear.

One day an overpowering urge to vomit overcomes him. He attempts to heave up his tattered organs, but only finds himself choking on his own blood. He suffocates on the taste of salt and iron, hacking for his life as he attempts to get something up from where he lays flat on the operating table.

Yanagisawa laughs. He fucking laughs. And after another moment of watching Makoto flounder helplessly, he undoes the neck restraint and wretches his head to the side.

Makoto desperately spits on blood on the floor.

Yanagisawa simply gives him another amused smirk and returns him to his restraints. Hands in his pockets, he murmurs something about how he can’t risk his guinea pig dying just yet.

‘Just yet.’
Makoto HATES the sound of that.

“. . . . . Inhabitable conditions,” Nagisa continues. “. . . . . Was only kept unrestrained for several hours a day. . . . . If it hadn’t been for the antimatter . . . . Severe muscle atrophy . . . . Kept alive by IV . . . . .”


Makoto’s not sure he comprehends it himself.

“How long was he . . . . ?” another classmate asks. “How long did they . . . . . Keep him alive like that?”

“A year,” Nagisa says, voice quiet. “They kept him alive in those conditions . . . . For a year.”

A year. A year of the red hot pain and that insufferable face. A year of staring up at flickering lights. A year of wondering where he’d slipped up - What he’d done wrong to have been sold out like that. And a year of barely clinging to his fucking sanity.

A year of telling himself it would all be worth it.

It bubbles up beneath the surface of his mind, just as his flesh bubbles beneath his paper-thin skin. The conviction that this somehow would all end up for the better.

Is that the Korosensei of the future talking, or simply The Reaper’s hubris?

‘Imagine,’ he thinks, watching his arm writhe indiscriminately in front of him. ‘What you’ll be able to do when you harness these powers.’

Makoto sees red. And for once in his life, he can’t tell if it’s his own blood or someone else’s.

Feet pace quickly. The analysis of heartless scientists and the scratching of pen against paper. The light above flickers again. And again. And again.

How hadn’t he lost his goddamn mind!?


There’s a thumping behind Makoto’s eyes, and he clenches his fist tight. No. There hadn’t been anyone else, had there? Another person he’d managed to hurt? No. No! He refuses to believe it.

“. . . . . Aguri Yukimura . . . . “

Dread rises in Makoto’s gut. Instant regret, and something sticky caught between his fingers.

Who the fuck else had he hurt!?

“. . . . . A previous teacher . . . . At Kunugigaoka . . . . Ninth grade teacher by day and . . . . Lab assistant by night. Engaged to . . . . .” Makoto’s ears are ringing. He can’t make it out. Engaged to who? Engaged to who!?

(He hears a shriek)
“Searching for . . . . A rock.”

A hand pressed to the glass. And golden eyes meet his.

*How can a person look so cheerful and desperate all at once!?*

Nagisa continues to speak. But Makoto can’t make out another word. Clutching his desk as tightly as he can, he shakes his head and growls under his breath.

“Stop looking at me like that!”

*Those kind eyes are too much for him.*

No-one hears. At least he doesn’t think so. Makoto’s not sure if he’d even spoken aloud at all. The classroom continues to bustle around him, hands raised and questions asked. Nagisa points to the blackboard, and as a light flickers uncertainly overhead, his peers continue to learn with or without him.

*No. No.*

Don’t worry about him. Makoto forces a smile and stares Nagisa’s way. He has to hide it. Just like he had then. Hide the searing pain from the awful Yanagisawa and the all-too-empathetic Aguri. They can’t see. They can’t see. *He can’t see.* He’ll never learn if he dares to slip up now-

...And so, he grins.

His veins burn and his head pounds and he grins. He chokes on his own blood, and he dares not meet her eyes and he grins. His skin is going to burst, and he smiles so widely he maybe convinces himself he’s going to be okay.

“. . . . The reason he became a teacher.”

Those eyes. That smile, and those soft reassurances. A laugh as light as air, and the way she covered her mouth with her hands when she giggled.

*Gone. Gone. It’s all gone.*

Nagisa’s mouth moves. But staring at him for what feels like hours, Makoto only manages to make out four words.

“. . . . One year to live.”

She smiles at him one last time, and his own smile disappearing, Makoto feels his skin explode.

*He can’t fucking take it!*

No! No! *He’s not ready to go yet! Not because of that bastard!* He’d never asked for this! *He hadn’t been the one to screw up!* He’d been *sold out!* *It should be the boy here!* *Not him!* *Dying!* *Dying!*

“It’s simple,” he swears he hears Yanagisawa whisper. “We’ll stop his heart.”

Not if Makoto - Not if Korosensei has anything to say about it.

Heart pounding in his chest, louder than anything he’s ever heard, his head wretches... And on his own this time. His flesh erupts from his skin, swirling around him like a goddamn hurricane.
Tentacles writhing. Legs fusing. Arms whiplike and eyes going dark. He’s petrified by and lavishes in the pain all at once.

It hurts so much he wants to scream. But when he opens his mouth and nothing dares to come out, he instead feels a manic rush as glass shatters in front of him.

‘Don’t you get it!?’ He thinks ‘It’s all going to be worth it! You’re not dying here!’

Alarms blare and shrieks echo down the halls. Body malformed and DNA desecrated, Makoto flies faster than he thinks he ever has before. Explosions of blood and viscera. Panicked, desperate screams. And veins on fire as Makoto lights the world on fire around him.

“I don’t want to die!” he hears someone sob.


Makoto fucking laughs as he shatters support beams and gouges out eyes.

For one fleeting moment, he revels in it. Perhaps finally understands what The Reaper had stood for. His own skin lacerated and the throats of the people around him the same, the smell of blood is overwhelming.

And for once, it doesn’t feel terrifying to Makoto. It feels euphoric.

You’re going to be free!

Every injection. Every tattered vein and on-fire limb. All going to be worth it. Because finally, The Reaper can do what he was born to d-

That’s when in a sea of screams, he hears hers.

Everything seems to stop.

Body writhing beyond his control... Stiff with panic, he attempts to whip around and reach out to her with malformed hands.

All he manages to catch is blood between his fingers.

And. She’s. Gone.

He doesn’t even think it through. He bolts to his feet and raises his hand. Mumbling something about how he needs to use the bathroom, he rushes out of the classroom he’s not sure exists.

He runs for his life. Runs from himself and from the overwhelming stench of death. But knees weak, the moment he’s outside he collapses.

And clutching at the grass… Skin writhing and heart shattered, he sobs nonetheless.

Because he knows he’ll never be able to outrun this.

Chapter End Notes
Wild chapter... Huh? Not every chapter can I say that I got to describe both 'Korosexy gate' and 'Makoto having a literal trauma induced panic attack' within the same 10k words, but here we are. I think we may have covered the full fucking spectrum of human emotion here. FHDJSHDJSK.

Sorry about the cliffhanger, but not really. Here's to hoping Makoto will be okay, but I guess you just won't know until next time I update. :3c

Taking it back a step, I both had fun with and /dreaded/ having to give details of 2.0's life. I'm somewhat of a stickler for canon details, so being given a character who has literally no canon name or nationality drove me FUCKING INSANE. That said I ultimately made him French. I dunno why, but he always gave me French vibes. Maybe because Reaper was like toting that little wine glass when he offed his father. Somehow that just feels French. Originally I was going to give him a more weird name, but when I spotted Damien on the baby names website I was using, it made me pause and remember that in common culture that name is associated with being the name of the son of the devil. With 2.0 being Reaper's not-son, I thought that was a fun little comparison to make.

In general I had to do a TON of stupid research for this chapter. Did you know that literally nothing Assassination Classroom teachers about antimatter is scientifically true? Which does NOT bode well for this dumb author when they're forced to write an overenthusiastic teacher giving an explanation of it! It took... SO much brainstorming to find a way to make the experimentation Reaper went through semi-realistic, and I hope it... At least passed off as believable. Thanks again to the Assassination Classroom wiki and the Simple Wikipedia pages on antimatter. They're my only hos.

Fun little anecdote from my 'study session:' A day or two after I wrote that section I wanted to make some Midnight Soup, as one does. But I quickly learned I have... Never made soup before, and had to have the friends I was in call with walk me through it. They all rightfully made fun of me for understanding rudimentary particle physics but NOT how to make microwavable soup. Fair enough, but that STINGS, man. OTL (My midnight soup turned out wonderful, for the record)

There's one thing I DIDN'T have to research, however, and that was the mad cow joke. Because THAT was pitched to me by my friend Flower. Thanks again to them for comparing Yanagisawa to cows coaxed into stepping on land mines, because that is LITERALLY the funniest thing I've ever heard. (And shout out to Hey Riddle Riddle: Where they originally heard the factoid from. It's an awesome podcast, and the sort of dynamic I can unironically see the Newtime Trio having when they're older)

Needless to say I had sooooo much fun describing the angst in this chapter. A LOT went down, and I loved picking at Makoto's psyche. The whole last section in particular is a bit I've been looking forward to for a long time, and I'm delighted to have finally been able to write it.

Some songs that helped me write this chapter were There, Right There! from Legally Blonde, In The Bedroom Down The Hall from Dear Evan Hansen (AGAIN), No Matter What from Steven Universe, and Zydrate Anatomy from REPO: The Genetic Opera.
To be truthful I dunno if the next update will be next week or the week after! Next chapter is a pretty short one, but the one after it is LONG. I suppose I could always upload next chapter in a week, then have a two week wait for the chapter after it, but I am NOT sure if next chapter is one I wanna give ya'll two weeks to simmer on, because it is INTENSE. I guess we'll just have to see haha.

As always, I hope you enjoyed the chapter! And let me know what you thought! Seeya soon! o/
When Makoto bolts out in a panic, Nagisa feels his heart stop.

Because he’d thought the lesson had been going well. He really had.

Makoto had seemed relatively calm throughout the whole thing. He’d fidgeted nervously, sure. But never once on his face had he shown the indication that he was about to panic.

(Or had he? Perhaps Nagisa had just missed the signs once more. A moment’s glance away... Enough to entirely miss a cry for help.)

The class is staring at the doorway, bewildered by the way Makoto had left. He’d made an excuse of it, sure. But... A flimsy one, at best. Suddenly looking ready to cry, he’d stormed out of the room before any of them could even begin to process it. Something tells Nagisa that’s a little more serious than having to use the bathroom.

It makes him freeze up, lost for what to do. He can’t just continue with the lesson, can he? He was doing this for Makoto. Even so, he’s terrified of making a scene if he follows after.

Would Makoto really want the attention now of all times? He’s the sort of person who hates to indicate that he’s struggling. If Nagisa pauses class for the second time this month to follow him, his classmates are going to know for certain that something’s wrong.

Yoshito stares at Nagisa blankly, as if saying ‘See? You will do anything for him.’

The question of ‘What about the rest of us?’ lingers in the air.

Nagisa sighs and shakes his head. He won’t be pressured. Not now of all times. He can’t afford it. He doesn’t care if the other students interpret it as favoritism. It’s not. It’s protecting Makoto like he would anyone else. He takes a deep breath, and accepts that Makoto may resent him a bit for the attention brought. But he can handle that if it means helping him when he most needs it.

...When he’s no doubt remembering things too heavy for any child - Any person - to bear.

Plus... Hey. Nagisa’s left with the nagging, empty suspicion that Makoto will hate him a little for helping him bring those memories to light either way.

...Ha ha.

He steps out from behind his desk, looking over the classroom. But when he opens his mouth to speak, Kiyoshi beats him to it.

“I... Uh... Need to use the bathroom too,” he awkwardly says, hurrying to his feet. “Do you... mind if I excuse myself?”

Nagisa stares. And Kiyoshi stares back with wide, pleading eyes.

Fumiko follows his lead. Standing, she says. “...Er. Me as well.”

Fiddling with her scarf, she sends a nervous glance towards the doorway.
...What they ask is more than obvious.

‘Please. Let us fix this.’

And Nagisa hesitates. Can he really trust them with this? This isn’t something for kids to handle. This is adult business, and the extremely dire sort, at that. Perhaps it’s better if he handles this himself. He knows that.

And even so, Kiyoshi and Fumiko make a silent plea. He can’t help but imagine the grief-stricken worry they feel right now is no different from his own.

Perhaps… just perhaps, they can get through to Makoto in a way even he can’t.

He’s… Sure Makoto loves and trusts him plenty. Just like he’d trusted Korosensei. But all those years ago, there had been some things only his friends his age had managed to get through to him on.

This could very well be one of those situations.

It makes his heart ache to admit it. But perhaps just this once ‘Nagisa’ won’t be good enough. He has an unruly class to watch over. And nothing much more he could say to Makoto than he’s already said a thousand times.

...He wants to be able to entrust this to them. To show Makoto that he doesn’t just have people from ‘back then’ supporting him, but brand new friends from ‘the now’ who have his back.

...That settles it.

“Very well,” he says. “You can go. Just… Be careful, okay?”

Fumiko and Kiyoshi don’t need to hear that twice. They scramble out of their seats and follow after Makoto.

The class remains silent. But quickly, Nagisa calls to their attention.

And hoping he hasn’t made some grave mistake, he speaks up in a shaky voice.

“How were we?”

Fumiko swears her heart shatters in her chest every time she sees Makoto look hopeless.

And it seems more and more often lately, he does.

...She hates every part of this.

Awkwardly following after Kiyoshi, there’s a stilted tenseness to the air.

“You didn’t need to do that,” he whispers. “Follow me, I mean. You genuinely seemed to be enjoying Shiota-sensei’s lesson. I… I could have taken care of this.”

She shakes her head. “The lesson doesn’t matter anymore. This is more important.”

Kiyoshi bites his lip, but nods in agreement. “...Yeah. It is.”
They hurry down the hallway. But Makoto’s nowhere in sight. The aged wooden floorboards creaking under Fumiko’s feet, she frowns.

...The more she thinks about it, the more certain she is there’s nothing she could possibly learn from Nagisa that she already couldn’t learn from the real Korosensei.

From...

“I don’t doubt it anymore,” she says. “Not even a little. He... He really is...”

“Yeah,” Kiyoshi says. “I mean... I guess I believed him for a while. But seeing him look so terrified... That might be the scaredest I’ve ever seen him.”

“I can’t imagine what he’s feeling right now,” Fumiko admits.

“Me neither,” Kiyoshi mumbles.

The way Nagisa had described it was... Horrifying. What Korosensei had gone through. She’d always figured it was some kind of secret government experiment, but not like that. Isolated... *Mistreated* for months on end.

Her heart can’t possibly fathom Makoto enduring that sort of loneliness.

“He could have gone anywhere,” Kiyoshi worriedly murmurs. “I didn’t see which way he went. Can you check outside?” he asks. “I’ll look in the teachers’ lounge. If he’s not there, we can patrol the forest.”

Fumiko nods. “Sounds good. Let... Let me know if you find him.”

“Of course,” Kiyoshi says. “And you too. If you see him, just call out for me.”

With that decided, they quickly split up. Kiyoshi turns towards the teachers’ lounge, and Fumiko makes her way across the long hallway that spans the school.

Every step feels heavy. But she wastes no time. She arrives at the door and briefly considers sticking her head out before deciding against it. If he’s out there, she doesn’t want to scare him away. Instead, she steps over towards one of the massive glass windows, and presses her face to the pane.

At first, she sees nothing. Simply the sway of dying Autumn trees and the worn dirt pathway snaking up towards the school. It’s only when she catches the faint sound of sobbing that she sees something at the bottom of her peripheral vision.

...Black hair.

Makoto has himself pressed up against the edge of the building. Softly quivering, he huddles, crouched, against the outside wall and weeps.

Stunned, all Fumiko can do is watch him for one moment. Out there across the glass, he looks so... *Defenseless*.

She quickly shakes herself from her stupor. She lowers her voice and shouts down the hallway.

“I found him. Come on.”

Kiyoshi hurries out of the teachers’ lounge and makes his way to her side. She points at the glass,
to which he simply squints.

“Huh? Where is h… Oh.”

His expression quickly falls.

“Let’s hurry,” Fumiko says, gently pushing open the door. She motions for Kiyoshi to follow her lead.

Makoto doesn't react, even as the door creaks. Instead, with a wild, panicked look on his face, he continues to keep staring off into space.

Fumiko and Kiyoshi quietly approach him, creeping into his line of sight, but he doesn’t seem to notice. Tears spilling down his cheeks, he wipes desperately at his eyes with one hand and scratches at his skin with the other.

...He looks close to bleeding.

They waste no time. Kiyoshi gets to his knees, meeting Makoto’s eyes. And when Makoto doesn’t dare return the contact, Fumiko follows, holding a gentle hand out.

“Makoto,” she says firmly. “It’s okay. We’re here.”

He just doesn’t hear them. Tearing at his skin, he rocks himself back and forth and whimpers.

“Makoto,” Kiyoshi repeats softly. “You need to stop. It’s over now. You're safe.”

He reaches out to grab for Makoto’s hand. But the moment he takes it to guide it away from his skin, Makoto tears his arm away with a sob.

Fumiko thinks she might feel the most helpless she’s ever been. And… she’s experienced a lot of helplessness in her life. From her parents and from situations she’s put herself into both. But nothing like this. Nothing like not being able to get through to him.

They may both be outside now, the all-too-gentle autumn breeze caressing their faces. But even now, by his side, it still feels like there’s a wall between them.

...What can she possibly do?

She wants to help. She needs to help. She hates feeling helpless. She hates feeling useless. And she hates leaving him to hurt alone. That’s her best friend, and he’s scared for his life! There has to be something she can do… To let him know she’s by his side… To make him see her… To reach out and touch him, even through that invisible wall.

Remembering the way Kiyoshi had held her when she’d wept the same in his home… The relief she’d felt... And the desperation she’d had in her heart to let Makoto know ‘I’m here for you’ ever since the day she first let him into her life.

...It overtakes her. And before she even knows what she’s doing, she has him engulfed in a hug.

One hand clinging desperately to his shoulder, and the other cupped to his cheek, she pulls him in tight. And with every aspect of her being, she tries to cry out:

‘Please. Let me in, too.’

Before she can even speak, however, Makoto whirls around. And she’s tossed from him with a
strength she didn’t even know he had.

She’s thrown to the ground beside him as he tears himself away. And staring at her with a complete and utter terror she doesn’t ever think she’s in him welling in his eyes, he shrieks at the top of his lungs:

“Stay away from me!”

Fumiko yelps in shock as she hits the dirt. And she swears she catches Kiyoshi yell, too. But the moment he opens his mouth to ask if she’s alright, Makoto rushes to her side, seemingly shocked out of his stupor.

“Fumiko!” he cries, reaching out for her. “A-Are you okay!? I… I didn’t mean to hurt you! I didn’t mean to hurt you! I didn’t want to hurt you!” he rambles near-incoherently. And in an instant, he’s sobbing again. One hand shakily covering his face and the other clutching Fumiko’s arm. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I’m so sorry-”

“Hey-! Hey! No! No-one’s hurt” Fumiko awkwardly reassures, pushing herself up onto her knees. “You just scared me,” she says. “I’m fine.”

In the back of her mind she’s acutely aware she may have stained her skirt, but that’s the least of her concerns right now. Even if… The reaction that could potentially earn from her parents is petrifying, Makoto needs her right now.

...He hadn’t meant to do it.

She repeats herself, voice lowering each time. “I’m fine,” she says, softer and softer.

But sobbing, unconsolable, Makoto stares through her and whispers “…I don’t wanna hurt anyone. Please. Make it stop. Make it stop-”

His voice is desperate. Quivering. And as he sobs into his hands, begging for release, his shoulders fall and rise with the weight of his breaths.

Kiyoshi hurries to his side. Careful not to place a hand on Makoto, he simply sits by him and reassures in a gentle tone. “No-one’s hurt. No-one’s hurt, Makoto. You’re not there. You’re here. With us. You aren’t going to hurt anyone, and no-one’s going to hurt you.” He scoots an inch closer. “We’re sorry we scared you. We won’t touch you again, okay? Please just hear us out. We’re here to help. We’re worried about you.”

Makoto shakes his head, lip quivering helplessly. “…It hurts. It hurts.” he whimpers. “I’m bad. I’m bad, and it hurts because I deserve it-”

“No. You don’t,” Kiyoshi firmly reassures. “You don’t deserve it. What happened to you in that place was unfair. Me and Fumiko were very upset having to hear about it.”

Fumiko nods. “…We’d never want you to go through something like that, Makoto. You’re our best friend. It really upset us when we saw you so panicked.”

“I’m sorry…” Makoto whimpers. “I… I didn’t mean to. I don’t wanna make you sad–” His voice cracks. “I don’t wanna hurt you. I’m sorry. I don’t know how to stop--”

Fumiko frowns. “Wait, no. There’s no need to apologize. We just want to help you, Makoto-”

“I don’t know if you can…” he breathlessly whimpers. “I’m bad… A… And I hurt everything
around me. Y… You’re not safe here, and you need to go, and that’s why it hurts.”

“We’re not going anywhere,” Fumiko says. And Makoto seems to tense. She wonders if she’d made a mistake, but quickly attempts to shake the unease off. “…Right, Kiyoshi? We’re here to stay?”

Kiyoshi nods slowly. “We’re here to stay.”

Makoto whimpers helplessly and presses himself up further against the wall.

“You’re not going to hurt us. And no-one’s going to hurt you,” Kiyoshi repeats. “You’re safe.”

“It burns…” Makoto whines, reaching out to scratch for his arm again.

“Hey. No,” Kiyoshi says, blocking his hand with his palm. “What burns? The antimatter?”

Makoto nods as he breathes in a deep sniffle. “…It hurt so bad. A… And I can feel it. I can feel it now. I can feel what it felt like for me… And it. It…” he doesn’t manage to finish his sentence. Instead, choked up, he incoherently sputters for words. “It… Bad… So bad.”

“I know, Makoto,” Kiyoshi says. “…I’m sure it must hurt a whole lot. But it’s not real, okay? You’re not in that lab. You’re not with that guy. You’re at Constellate, remember? And you’re far away from anyone who can do that to you.”

Makoto doesn’t respond.

“Can you repeat that for me?” Kiyoshi asks. “I think it’ll help.”

“I… I’m not there,” Makoto whispers. “I’m not with that guy. I’m… At Constellate. A… And… I’m far away from anyone who can… Who can…” his voice turns breathless again. “Do that… Do that to me-”

“You are. I promise,” Kiyoshi says.

How he manages to keep his voice so patient is beyond Fumiko. To be truthful, she doesn’t give Kiyoshi a lot of credit sometimes. But here, where she doesn’t even know where to begin he seems to have it so under control. For a guy who panics so easily, he sure is able to calm himself down when he thinks there’s something important on the line.

“Can you do something else for me, Makoto? Something else I think will really help?”

Makoto just whimpers.

“Please? I want to help you.”

“…I don’t deserve it,” Makoto whispers.

“Yes. You do. You’ve helped me so many times before. So please just let me help you, Makoto.”

“What do you want me to do?”

“I want you to listen to the birds.”

Makoto pauses, looking genuinely confused. “…What?”

“The birds. In the forest by the school. Do you hear them? All I want you to do is listen to them.
Let me know when you hear them.”

Makoto’s silent. Shuffling uncomfortably, with tears still streaming down his face, he reaches to scratch at his hand. But after a moment’s passed, he slowly nods.

“I… Hear them,” he says softly. “I… I hear the birds.”

“Okay. Good,” Kiyoshi replies. “There were no birds there, right? In the place where he hurt you?”

Makoto nods slowly. “There were no birds.”

“That’s right,” Kiyoshi says. “Now can you do something else for me? I want you to focus on the grass.”

“The grass?” Makoto asks.

“You’re sitting on the grass, right?” Kiyoshi asks. “I want you to focus on how it feels in between your fingers. Is it soft, or is it dry? Do you feel any dew? What about the dirt underneath?”

Carefully, Makoto flexes his palm. Eyes flickering to look at the ground, his mouth falls open.

“It’s… Dry,” he says. “I… Feel it. It’s dry.” He breathes in deeply. “There’s no dew. And the dirt is firm. Because… It’s Fall. And… and the grass is drying up.”

“That’s right,” Kiyoshi says. “You can feel the grass. And there wouldn’t have been any grass in the lab, right?”

Makoto gives a shaky nod. “…Yeah. There wouldn’t have been any grass in the lab.” He frowns. “It… It was blank. And white. And all steel.” His breath hastens. “It- It- It wasn’t like this. It was bad-”

“I know,” Kiyoshi reassures in a soothing voice. “But don’t think about the lab. You’re not there. Redirect your thoughts.”

Makoto nods once more.

“I want you to look at us, Makoto. Can you do that? Focus on our faces. Tell me what you see.”

Makoto’s watery eyes drift their way. First meeting Kiyoshi’s gaze, then turning to Fumiko. For a moment, it feels he’s staring through her, but as he takes a deep, shaky, breath, recognition seems to return to his eyes.

“You’re… You’re my friends,” he says. “And you’re worried about me. And… You’re here for me. You’re here for me.”

“That’s right,” Kiyoshi says. “We’re right here beside you. And we wouldn’t be if you were still in the lab, right? We weren’t there, were we?”

“No,” Makoto says. “You weren’t there.” And despite his tears, he gives a halfhearted giggle. “You weren’t born yet.”

“Yeah. We weren’t,” Kiyoshi reaffirms. “You’re safe. You’re right here with us.”

“I’m safe,” Makoto repeats. “I’m right here with you.”

Slowly but surely, he’s managing to catch his breath.
“That helps, doesn’t it?” Kiyoshi says. “Now I just want you to do that again, this time without my help. Can you please tell me five things you can hear, five things you can feel, and five things you can see. Just keep taking deep breaths and let me know. Take your time.”

Carefully, Makoto begins to describe his surroundings. The faint blow of the breeze, and the soft chitter of crickets coming from the forest. The way a leaf drifts down to land in his hair. For just one moment, he’s lost again: describing a flickering light or blank white walls. Fire in his veins. But just as soon as he does, he’s shaking his head.

“No,” he says. “That’s… Not real. I don’t see that. I see…” He looks up. “The clouds in the sky.”

“That’s right,” Kiyoshi says again and again. “That’s right.”

As Makoto carefully follows his instructions, Fumiko notes that he’s doing the exact same thing he’d done for her when she was panicked. Those anxiety calming tactics. For all his anxieties, Kiyoshi really is an emotionally intelligent person.

It’s funny. During the lesson yesterday, Nagisa had described The Reaper as having a way with words. And not in the poetic way. He was a master manipulator. One word, and he’d manage to get under your skin. Into your psyche. A truly scary person.

But watching Makoto cling to Kiyoshi’s every word, follow his every instruction… She wonders if a way with words always has to be a bad thing.

After all, it seems someone is putting The Reaper under their spell instead of the other way around for a change.

In due time, much like he had Fumiko’s, Kiyoshi manages to dry Makoto’s tears. And for just one moment, she wonders if he was right in saying that she hadn’t needed to follow him.

...It seems he’s got this under control after all.

(What if they don’t need her?)

She quickly shakes the thought.

“Do you feel better?” Kiyoshi asks softly.

“A little,” Makoto admits.

“...Do you still want to talk about it? Now that you’re calm?”

“I’d… like that,” Makoto replies.

“Okay then,” Kiyoshi says. “...Just let us know what’s bothering you. If it ever starts to get overwhelming, just repeat what I told you. But you’re safe with us. You can talk about it.”

Fumiko nods, tacking on her own pointless “We’re here for you.”

“I... Just...” Makoto pauses, thinking over his words. “...I really thought I was ready to learn about everything that happened to Korosensei. I told Nagisa to tell me everything. And... I was handling it well. At least... I think I was. Even the murderer stuff. But up until now... I didn’t know anything about how Korosensei became that way. It was really scary.”

“I can imagine,” Kiyoshi says.
“It’s like… I was back there. He described it, and I swore it was happening. That… That… I was that person again. And that there was nothing I could do to save myself.” He shuffles uncomfortably. “It hurt. Really really bad. Like… Nothing I’ve ever felt before.”

“The things Shiota-sensei described… Sounded awful,” Kiyoshi admits. “I’m sure it did really hurt.”

“Like… Like I was being destroyed from the inside out,” Makoto describes. “This horrible burning pain and… And my body not listening to me. Nagisa called them tentacles, I think… But…” He shakes his head. “They weren’t like my Korosensei tentacles. They were really grotesque. I felt like… I was being ripped apart. And that… Even though the bad man did that to me, it was still my fault it was happening. Because… I’d done the things to get myself arrested. And he didn’t tell my body to do that. It just did it. All on it’s own.”

“It wasn’t your fault,” Kiyoshi reassures. “No-one deserves to have that happen to them.”

“I hurt-”

“It doesn’t matter how many people you hurt, Makoto. That’s just cruel and usual. No-one, and I mean no-one, should have to go through that. Ever.”

Makoto gives a reluctant nod. “Mmm.”

There’s another moment of silence, before he speaks up in a quiet voice.

“Is it bad… That I think it’s going to happen again?”

“…The Antimatter stuff?”

“I dunno… Everything,” Makoto says. “I guess all of that… But… Me hurting people, too. ’m not sure what part in the story Nagisa got to before I left. But…” He shakes his head. “I hurt a lot of people. A lot of good people. I wouldn’t blame anyone for being mad at me. What if… What if that guy comes looking for me?”

Fumiko attempts to interject. “Makoto. He won’t-”

“But what if he does!? I know it’s stupid, but I’m so scared of ever feeling that way again. And… He loved doing that to me. He enjoyed hurting me. What if… He… He hunts me down? And he finds me? A… And he wants to know the truth about me, so he can make me pay?” His breaths quicken. “W… W… What if he’s right? What if I deserve it? What if I’m supposed to always feel that way because I enjoyed hurting people too-?”

He’s starting to cry again. Little trails of tears snaking down his cheeks. Clawing at the dirt, he clings tight to the grass.

“No,” Kiyoshi says. “You don’t deserve it, Makoto. No matter who you were, you don’t deserve that. You haven’t done anything now. That’s why…” He clenches his fist. “No matter what happens, no matter who comes for you… I promise I’ll protect you!”

Makoto stares.

“…What?”

“If… If that guy, or anyone else ever wants to lay a hand on you, I won’t let them. Even if I’m scared… Or worried… Or don’t know what to do, I’ll find a way to protect you. Because you’re
my friend. And I couldn’t bear to see anything happen to you. I’ll keep you safe.”

Makoto sniffs, eyes watery. “...You will?”

“I promise.”

For one beautiful moment, they sit in the comfort of one another. That’s when Fumiko bursts into laughter.

She doesn’t mean to. But covering her mouth with her hands, she just barely holds back a snicker.

“W-What!?” Kiyoshi sputters. “What’s so funny!? Do you think I can’t protect him!? I - I know I’m a bit of a wimp, but-!”

“No! It’s not that!” Fumiko reassures through another laugh. She feels awful laughing in the face of the fact that Makoto was just crying, but... “He’s dead, Kiyoshi!”

“M-Me!?” Makoto asks.

“No! Yanagisawa!” Fumiko says. “I’m not sure if you caught it, but Shiota-sensei was speaking about him in the past tense the entire time. He’s been dead for, like... What? 14 years? He can’t hurt you because he’s gone.” Giving one last giggle in response to Kiyoshi’s foolishness, she turns to Makoto.

“He’s right about one thing, though. You’re safe. He’s long gone. Everyone who was involved in that incident back then must be, by now. It’s okay. No-one can hurt you ever again.”

Makoto sniffs, but gives her a nod. She can only hope she’d reassured him, even a little.

“...Just my luck that the first guy I agreed to stand up to is a corpse,” Kiyoshi admits with a laugh. “’Cause that’s just about the only thing I could actually win a fight against.”

Makoto lets out a laugh at the notion as well. “Hey! Be nice to yourself, will you!?” he says with a goofy smile despite having to stifle another sniffle.

“Hey! He’s being plenty nice,” Fumiko says. “Think about it this way: When the zombie apocalypse comes and people start rising from the dead, Kiyoshi’s got you covered.”

“H-He! Well I never agreed to that!” Kiyoshi yelps. “That sounds nasty! A-And the zombie apocalypse is never going to happen, anyways!”

“You don’t sound so certain,” Fumiko jeers.

“That’s my fear of literally everything on this planet and also that really creepy zombie movie my mom let me watch when I was eight speaking over my ability to sound rational. Please ignore the braincell always focused on the worst case scenario behind the curtain.”

“Can d-”

“Am I a zombie?”

Fumiko and Kiyoshi both stare at Makoto.

“Damn me?” Kiyoshi asks.

“Am I a zombie?” Makoto blankly repeats.
“N-No?” Kiyoshi replies. “At least I don’t think you’d qualify a-”

“No! No! Like… Hear me out:” Makoto says. “I’m back from the dead… I at one point had regenerating superpowers… Everything hurts ever…”

“Dumb as a brick,” Fumiko ever-helpfully adds on.

“H-Hey! N- N- I mean- I guess!??” Makoto relents. “But that’s still very mean!”

Kiyoshi rubs his chin. “I mean… I still don’t think you’d qualify as a zombie. If anything you fall more under the criteria of a Christlike figure.”

“Excuse me!?” Fumiko wheezes. “You wanna repeat that, Kiyoshi!? A Christlike figure!?”

Kiyoshi’s face flushes pink. “I-I’m not saying - You get what I mean! - He just! The qualifications of his return from the dead share more similarities with those in Western theology than with, say, Church Creed.”

“…Church Creed?”

Kiyoshi pinches the bridge of his nose. “Pet Sematary refere-” but quickly shakes his head. “Whatever. I’m not sure why I expected you to get that one.”

Their giggles receding, the three of them fall quiet.

“I did mean that, though,” Kiyoshi admits. “Even if that guy’s gone… If there’s anyone else out there who ever wants to hurt you, I won’t let them. And… We won’t let you hurt yourself, either. If you’re scared you’re ever gonna make decisions that will let you become that person again… Then… Just let us know. We’ll be here for you. We’ll prevent that.”

Fumiko’s not sure when this turned into a ‘we’ thing, but she can’t find it in herself to disagree. Kiyoshi’s right. They’ll protect Makoto. The both of them.

It makes her feel good to think she’s needed. That Makoto needs her and not just Kiyoshi. After watching everything Kiyoshi just did for Makoto, she’s not entirely sure that’s the truth, but it’s nice to let herself pretend she’s a necessity for once.

“We promise.”

Finally, they manage to help Makoto back up. But as they pull him by the hand and onto his feet, he frowns, and mumbles if he can ask them for one more thing.


“...Please don’t get yourself hurt protecting me,” he says, voice soft. “I know you really care about me, and I appreciate that. But… If there really did come to be a situation where I was in danger, or where I was the danger… I don’t want to see you guys get hurt.” Biting his lip, he says, “I don’t think I could bear to lose you, either.”

And for just one moment, Fumiko swears she sees him staring through them again.

Just what on earth had happened to him?

Kiyoshi’s taken aback. But quickly, he nods. “Of course, Makoto. Don’t even worry about that. We’ll be safe.”
Makoto’s eyes flitter to Fumiko. “…And you too, Fumiko?”

“Mmmm,” she says. “We won’t do anything rash.”

Somehow, she’s not sure if she means it. And for the first time in her life she wonders if she’s finally found a set of people who she’d choose to protect over anyone.

*Choose to protect over herself.*

…If it came down to it, what would she do?

She hopes she never has to worry about it.

“Alright,” Makoto says. “I’m… Gonna hold you to that, okay? If... If you die, I'll kill you! I don’t want you to get hurt because of me. You’re my best friends. If you’re going to protect me, let me protect you, too.”

“Of course,” Fumiko says, and hopes she means it. “I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

They turn their heads back towards the school building. The elephant in the room (Or… More like ten elephants, for that matter) out of the way, that only leaves one thing for them to discuss.

“...Do you think you’re gonna be able to go back to class, Makoto?” Kiyoshi asks. “You got super stressed in there. If you think you’re gonna panic again, maybe it’s for the best you don’t-?”

Makoto shakes his head. “…I gotta go back,” he says. “It wouldn't be fair to Nagisa to make him tell this story twice. I’m sure it hurts his heart, too. It would be selfish of me to ask him to share it, only to back out. I told him I want to know the truth. And I do. It’s scary, but I’m not going to back down on that.”

“Are you sure?” Kiyoshi asks.

“Certain,” Makoto reassures. “I can’t run away from this. I mean… Where else would I even go? We can’t sit out here all day, guys.”

Fumiko mulls it over. “…We could always ‘skip.’”

Makoto gasps softly. “No way! I am not skipping school!” He shakes his head in disbelief. “When did you turn into a little delinquent!?”

Kiyoshi snorts. “Someone’s been spending too much time around Akabane-san.”

Fumiko rolls her eyes. “Don’t liken me to him,” she says. “I just thought it was an option worth putting out there. I wouldn’t particularly like it either… But… if you felt you needed it, I’m sure the both of us would be willing to break the rules for just one day.”

Makoto sniffs. “…That means a lot, guys,” he admits with a tiny smile. “But I stand by what I said. I wanna hear the rest of the story. If I go away now, I don’t think I’ll ever have the heart to ask Nagisa for the rest.” He takes a step towards the school building. “…I’m ready now. And I feel a lot safer now that I know I have you two by my side.”

“I’m… Honored to hear it,” Kiyoshi says, returning a smile of his own

Makoto walks up to the school building. But just before he reaches out for the door, he pauses. He turns his head back towards Fumiko.
“Wait. One more one-more-thing. Before I’m ready.”

Fumiko blinks. “What is it?”

And before she can even process what’s rushing at her, Makoto has her pulled into a hug.

She stiffens, letting out a tiny yelp.

“I’m sorry. About earlier,” he says. “...I shouldn’t have pushed you like that. Not when you were just trying to show you cared about me.”

Slowly Fumiko’s posture relaxes. She quietly shakes her head. “No. I’m sorry for touching you without your permission. That was unwarranted. I don’t know what came over me.”

“...It’s not like that,” Makoto reassures, giving her a squeeze. “It was just… A bad time. It reminded me of something that happened back there… And…” He pauses. “Well. It scared me. But you didn’t do anything wrong. In fact… Now that I’ve come to my senses: I’m actually sorta thrilled!” He lets out a tiny laugh. “I’ve been trying to get you to hug me all year!”

“You… Have?” she asks.

“I mean, yeah! Kiyoshi’s all sorts of gooey, but you’re more ‘withdrawn,’ and ‘don’t like to be touched.’ It makes me happy. To think you’d feel comfortable around me like that.”

That’s all it takes. Fumiko’s posture goes from relaxed to limp as she collapses into his hug. She wraps her arms around him and squeezes as tight as she can.

“...'m sorry it couldn’t have been under better circumstances.”

“Hey. It’s okay,” Makoto says. “At least we have now.”

It’s only after what feels like forever that Makoto finally pulls away from her. He turns to Kiyoshi and wraps him in a massive hug of his own, lifting him up into the air and shouting “C’mere! Big guy!”

But even as they head inside, Fumiko just can’t seem to get her mind off of it. Just… What had happened back there? What had Makoto been through that she still doesn’t know about?

Who had he hurt so badly that he’s so scared of hurting his own friends?

Even as they return to class, only to see Nagisa’s relieved expression, and even as they make it through the rest of the day… Holding Makoto’s hand under the table and beckoning him to rejoin them in PE… She still can’t shake it. What she’d seen in his eyes when he’d thrown her from him.

It haunts her. Because even the crying Makoto who’d crawled in her window one May evening had never quite looked like that.

_Completely. Utterly. Anguished._

The rest of the day continues as normal. Makoto manages to to make it through the lessons. And Nagisa assures them all it’s only going to get better from here.

“This is the part where Korosensei’s story gets happy,” He says. “The worst of the worst is over. It can only go up from here.”

...Just how low had his lowest low been? What part of the story had she missed while she’d been
out consoling Makoto?

What part of him can she still not reach out to? Not mend?

The thought follows her as she walks home. As she chats with Kiyoshi and as she makes her way in through the door. As she robotically greets her mother and acknowledges her father. As she eats dinner that night. As she brushes her teeth, and as she gets into bed. As she texts her friends goodnight, and rolls over on her pillow. Once, then twice.

...The gnawing feeling that she’s still somehow forgetting an important detail. That she still doesn’t fully understand Makoto. Not yet.

Not when she’d seen that part of him. That terrified, inconsolable person hiding deep within the boy who’d only been trying to get her to hug him all year.

It’s an itch she can’t scratch. Someone she thinks she’s never seen before. Never met. Never faced. The Makoto who cries out in desolation, and collapses to the ground, body heaving with his sobs.

The Makoto who had lost something so, so important.

...At least that’s what she thinks until she sees that same Makoto in her dreams.

Writhing. Bloodied. Taller now, and choking back a sob. He looks so… So different. With his skin torn and the way he looms above her. But she knows him. She’d know him anywhere. In any form. As any person.

...Know the way he’s reaching out for her.

Sobbing. Begging. Demanding her to tell him it’s anything except this.

It hurts. So bad. To feel the ache in her gut, and to see him look at her that way. That awful, petrified way as he crawls towards her on his knees, and slowly lifts her up to meet his eyes.

...Those eyes with the same horrified, anguished, and utterly broken look in them as he’d stared at her with earlier today.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter 22 is HERE, baybe! I decided to let this one only have a one week wait and let next chapter have a two week wait. Give you some time to simmer on this one.

And WHAT a chapter to simmer on.

Okay. Yeah. The cat’s out of the bag. There’s a plot twist I’ve been scheming since I very first conceptualized this fic, and it’s what was revealed at the very end of this chapter. It feels so, so satisfying to finally get to, and I hope you’re all a little stunned, too.

As for the actual meta behind this twist and all though I think I’m going to leave that for next chapter. We’ve still yet to see how Fumiko herself is going to react to this revelation, after all! :3c.
Taking a step back from… All of that, I had a ton of fun writing the rest of this chapter. Pepper ing it with foreshadowing and generally writing some of that good good hurt/comfort. After how much of a painfest last chapter was, it was nice to give Makoto some resolution and let him know that his friends are there for him.

Some songs that helped me write this chapter were Waste by Foster The People, Here Comes A Thought from Steven Universe, and Small Hands by Radical Face, which in particular really gets to me.

“If you need come build your home in me
And you know I won't complain
And I can't fix what was done to you
But I'll shield you from the rain
And if the walls they build become too high
Then step up on my back and climb
'Cause I never mind
No matter the day or time
I never mind”

...

Next chapter will be a two week wait, so try not to hate me TOO much for leaving you off on that reveal for a little bit! Let me know what you thought, and see you soon! o/
I have two things to say real quick before this chapter!

A) Hey. Quick trigger warning for a small description of verbal and physical domestic abuse in this chapter. You know how it is. This is Assclass. It was just revealed that Aguri is still around and has some uhhhhh maybe not so great things to remember. I am going to beat Yanagisawa to death with a rock.

B) The l-word gets a brief mention in this chapter. And no, NOT lesbians. (I would NOT be warning you if the word was lesbians. I am a fearless lesbian.) It's love. But as a note I would just like to reassure you not to fear, and that this is not going to turn into a shipping focused story or one where any characters are strangled by the red string of fate because of past lives. Characters are certainly unpacking complicated feelings, so please trust me to not just turn that into mushy mumbo-jumbo. (This is discussed more in the ending A/N, but I figured I'd mention it now as not to scare anyone away)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Hey. Can I ask you a kinda dumb question?”

She sits with her back to the wall. She can’t see him, but she knows he’s looking right at her.

“I don’t see why not.” His voice is thoughtful, and cool as ice. It’s funny how much he makes her think.

“What do you think I’d be like?”

“...Pardon?”

“In another world. Where I’m a different person.”

“Is this the same one where I’m stubborn and goofy?” He says it like he’s making fun of her. But even all the same, she can hear the smile in his voice.

“...Yeah. Sure,” she says. “...Maybe one where I grew up like you did.”

His voice grows serious. “You don’t want that.”

“I know. But just... Like... Theoretically.”

“Well... You’d have to learn to hide yourself,” he muses. “...In a world like that, you don’t get to be ‘smart and a little perverted.’ You very quickly adapt to-”

“Hey! You calling me perverted?”

She elbows the glass, and he yelps. She turns her head his way and spots him sporting a bewildered, almost like he thinks she’s actually mad at him. But when he hears her giggle, his
shoulders relax.

“N… No,” he mutters through his fingers with that bashfulness he seems to have more and more of as of late. “Of course not. I… Was simply repeating what you’d said about myself earlier. You seem to think we’re kindred spirits.”

She interlocks her fingers and hums, then turns her head away from him. “Maybe so,” she says. “But go on. I’m sorry for interrupting.”

“You… very quickly adapt to the cold around you. So I suppose you’d learn to be cold as well. Terrified of what could happen if you made one simple slip up. After all… It could mean the end of your livelihood. You’d be icy, and no-nonsense. A good actor. Perfect at everything you do. Haughty, and perhaps a tad scary. But even so…” He drifts off.

“…Hm?”

“I can’t see you changing that much. Even in a world like that, I like to think you’d still be you.”

“Me?” she asks.

“Well… Someone who never gives up on people. With a kind heart deep down. No matter what you’d go through, I just can’t see someone managing to take that from you.”

A smile tugs at the corner of her lips. “…Wow. You must think I’m really strong.”

“Don’t give yourself too much credit,” he grumbles.

“…Maybe in that world, I can open up to you. Like… You’ve opened up to me.”

“Again: I’m not sure I’d give you that much credit, lady. And besides. It’s nothing worth thinking about, anyways.”

“Huh? Why?”

“Because… You’ve got a long life ahead of you. There’s no need to think about who else you’d be. I quite like you the way you are.”

“…You do?”

He shrugs. “Enough.”

And despite herself, she catches herself grinning. Covering her face with her hands, she’s suddenly glad they sit back to back. She’d be in a world of humiliation if he caught the blush creeping up her cheeks.

It lingers on the tip of her tongue. What she’s wanted to say ever since she met the man.

Instead, she simply shakes her head and says,

“Well, whoever you’d be, I think I quite like who you are now as well.”

Fumiko turns over in her sleep.

“You need to stop getting attached to it.”
“I’m not attached to him.”

“Really? Because I was starting to get the impression that-”

“I’m just doing the job you assigned me,” she says calmly.

She hates the way he raises his voice at her. It reminds her of her parents.

...Her parents? Wait. No. What is she thinking about? Her parents never-

...Where is she?

The light is flickering overhead.

“Don’t you interrupt me, woman! You think you can do anything now because of him. But don’t you forget your place. If you keep this up I’m going to need to tell your father. Or I could always remove you from supervising the test subject entirely.”

“N-No! I’m sorry,” she says, feeling panic rise in her gut. She bows her head in the same way she has a thousand times before. “You’re right. I’m… I’m forgetting my priorities. But I swear I can handle this. Please. Give me one more chance.”

“Maybe I’ll consider it if you finally kick his dick out of your mouth. I knew you were a cheating slut, but this is a new low.”

“I’m - He’s not-” her voice falters. She doesn’t dare mention all the times she’s caught him with his hand on another woman’s ass. She’d learned the hard way he can do whatever he wants. “It’s not like that. He’s just a friend.”

“‘He’s just a friend’” he mockingly jeers, rolling his eyes. “I’m not blind, woman. I. Have. Eyes. But thanks for confirming you’re in over your head and you are attached to the subject. You know he’s going to kill you, right?”

“He’s not going to kill me!”

“Really? Because last I’d checked he’d killed thousands of peo-”

“This is differen-”

She doesn’t get to finish. He slaps his palm across her cheek. She lets out a yelp and stumbles back.

“I told you to stop interrupting me!” he snaps, face a grimace. “You think you’re sooo different. You think you’re sooo special. You think that you can talk to me however the hell you want. That you’re some life changing important figure to the serial killer. Who the hell do you think you are? Need I remind you that you’re literally just an ordinary, stupid, and unremarkable bitch?”

“N… No. Of course not. I… know,” she says.

“He’s not attached to you! So drop it, will you? Stop talking with him, and just get your goddamn job done!”

“...I… I’m trying. But I need to talk at least some to get a reading on his vitals-”

“Yeah. Sure. Because telling him about your dimwitted students is a part of the experiment. How
could I forget!?” he snaps. “You tell him about all sorts of pointless bullshit. Do you take me for some kind of idiot?”

“...They’re not dimwitted.”

He smacks her across the head. “Is that what I asked!? Answer me, woman!”

“N… No,” she says quietly. “You’re not an idiot.”

“That’s what I thought. Then stop treating me like one. And stop making small talk with the subject.”

“M… Mmmm.”

Both of them know she doesn’t mean it.

“I’ll be holding you to that. Now get in there and take care of the reports without sucking him off for once in your goddamn life. This is the last warning I’m giving you, Yukimura. One of these days he’s going to kill you. And you know what? I won’t even care. Because you’re asking for this. But if you don’t get your head out of your ass soon and take this seriously, you’re going to get hurt. And don’t come crying to me when you do. Because I won’t have shit to say to you.”

“I know,” she whispers. And reaching for the clipboard she’d dropped in the scuffle, she frowns. “I… I’ll handle this maturely. I can. I promise.” She steps towards the test chambers. “...I won’t get hurt.”

She knows neither of them believes that, either.

She reaches for the keypad and quickly enters the code. Then she makes her way into the observation room and meets the test subject’s eyes through the glass.

...Yanagisawa’s right about one thing. There’s no way to know he cares. But even so, looking into those empty eyes, he lounges back and asks her how school was.

At least he bothers to pretend. She’ll take nothing over anger any day.

And as her heartbeat relaxes... As she scrawls notes, and as The Reaper helps her grade worksheets from across the room, she tries to deny what she’s so certain of.

...That even if he is going to hurt her, she doesn’t think she’d mind dying by his hand.

Fumiko wakes up with a headache and a dry taste in her mouth. Just as soon, however, she shuts her eyes tight and forces herself back to sleep.

Something feels weird. Something feels wrong. She’s not ready to wake up yet. She still needs to...

She still needs to...

...It’s funny. He looks so much less intimidating than she’d first expected. She’d been told he was good at putting on an innocuous facade, but nothing like this.

He looks... So nonthreatening. So average. So small. So like...

Like who?
She knows she’s seen his face before. At least… She thinks so. No. That doesn’t make any sense. Why would she have met a serial killer? Even so, when he gives her an all too familiar wry smile across the glass, she feels her heart skip a beat.

“What are you looking at?” he asks, raising an eyebrow.

“I- Er! Nothing!” she sputters, covering her face with her hands.

“I know when I’m being observed,” he says, hands by his side. "Do you see something interesting? Pray tell.”

He sounds so different.

...From what? From who?

No. She knows she’s heard it before. The Reaper. That’s what they’re calling him. The Reaper. Hadn’t Shiota-sensei mentioned something ab-

What?

What is she - What?

“Well… I was wondering,” she says, seemingly entirely separated from her actual train of thought. And for a moment she wonders if she is this person, or simply an outside observer in someone else’s body. “...If I’m gonna be watching you, it would be nice to have something to call you. Are you sure you don’t have a name?”

“No. I was never given one. And I’ve never had a need for one. I see such formalities as pointless.”

“That’s still sorta inconvenient. I wanna get to know you! What am I supposed to call you by?”

The man gives an apathetic shrug.

“...How... ‘Bout I give you one?”

“Yeahhhhhh… No.”

“H-Hey! Why not!? I’m sure I could think of something nice!”

“If your fashion choices are anything to go by, your naming skills would be just as strange.”

She glances down insecurely at her clothes, noting the ugliest graphic tee she’s ever seen. Instead of gagging with revolt, however, she frowns and sputters “Is- Is there really something so wrong with my clothes!? I think they’re cute!”

“...If that’s what you call it.” he says with a chuckle. “Besides. The day I allow someone else to decide who I am is the day I’m no longer The Reaper.”

Where has she heard that name?

“...I suppose Reaper will have to do, then.”

“I suppose it will,” the man repeats.

“...It’s a bit scary… But… I guess it’s still nicer than not addressing you at all.”
“I don’t particularly mind a lack of politeness… But if it makes you happy…” The man strokes his chin. “Who am I to stop you?”

“Mr. Reaper it is, then! But if we’re gonna be friends, or at least know each other for the next while, you’ll probably need something to call me, too.”

“Not necessarily,” he says. “I don’t care much either way.”

“…You don’t care about much, do you?”

“I care about things that are important.”

The tone in his voice seems to imply she’s NOT.

**Why does that sting so badly?**

“…Well, I’ll become important, then! Just you wait!” She pumps her hands in the air, and she swears she catches the man laugh.

**She knows that laugh.**

“I’d love to see you try,” he gives her a wry smile. “Indulge me, then. What can I call you, Ms. Important?”

**Why does she know that laugh?**

“Aguri.”

**Where is she!?**

You can call me Aguri.”

**Who is she!?**

“A g u r i Y u k i m u r a. . .”

Fumiko awakes with a jolt.

There’s a dry taste in her mouth and a cold sweat dripping down her forehead. Heart pounding in her chest, she stares up at the ceiling.

**W… What had she just-?**

**What had she just seen?**

She shakes her head, pushing herself up onto her knees. She stumbles onto her feet and across the room. She doesn’t bother to flick on the light. Instead, she makes her way over to her mirror and shakily supports herself on the weight of the table. Nearly knocking over trophies and vases with her shaky hands, she stands petrified and stares at the girl blinking back at her in the dim reflection.

She’s not sure what she expects to see. But when she catches sight of purple locks and a tired young girl, she lets out a shaky sigh of relief. ‘I’m me.’ She thinks. ‘I’m me.’

‘…Right?’
Somehow, she’s not certain.

One hand clutching the table, she raises the other to gently examine her face.

She brushes her fingers across her cheek. Her chin and past her eyes. She watches the girl in the mirror follow her motions. And when she doesn’t spot the subtle mar of bruised skin… Doesn’t feel the sting of a blackened eye, she lets out a choked up, relieved gasp.

It had felt so… So real.

The terror in her gut and the fist drawn across her face. Complete and utter humiliation. Lost in another world, she’d been as helpless to escape the most twisted corners of her dreams as she had been to escape his wrath.

...And even so, the things that she’d seen… They hadn’t all been bad, had they? No. There’d been the other man. With his gentle eyes. His suave smile. And the amused way he’d chuckled at her each time she said something strange.

...That’s right.

That laugh.

She’d recognized that laugh.

Every day she hears it. Every day she’d heard it. And in a world of terror and humiliation, it makes her heart soar.

...

Staring at herself in the mirror, she almost wishes she’d been greeted with the sight of brown hair and golden eyes. Because something’s not right. Something’s not her. She’s not at home in her body, and something is horribly wrong.

What’s happening to her?

She asks it like she doesn’t already know. Like she hadn’t heard the name whispered in her ear. Spoken across the glass and in class this morning. Like she hadn’t seen the way Makoto tossed her from him, and like she can’t feel that same complete and utter panic piercing her gut tonight.

“Aguri,” the girl in her dream says. The girl in the mirror repeats. “Aguri Yukimura.”

She doesn’t even realize she’s said it aloud until she chokes on her own words and feels tears drip down her cheeks.

How had she forgotten all this time?

...Forgotten what? No. No. This is nothing. Nothing’s wrong. She’s just Fumiko. Fumiko Hisakawa. And she’s nothing special. She never has, and she never will be. She’s an ordinary, stupid, and unremarkable bitch.

Why is she crying more!?

She feels like she’d seen something she wasn’t supposed to. Something personal and ugly and wholly unique. Something she’d tried to lock away in the furthest recesses of her mind, and something she couldn’t dream up even in her wildest nightmares.
It had felt too real. Too painful. Too scary. And remembering that smile, too wonderful, too.

...No. Everything about that had been bad. She’d died! What’s wrong with her!?

‘What are you even talking about?’ she asks herself. ‘You didn’t die. That wasn’t you. You’re just making this up.’

For a moment, she swears she catches a glimpse of another girl in the mirror. And her skeptical look seems to say ‘Are you, though?’

“I am! I am!” Fumiko whispers, hands shaking as she clutches the table.

...It’s another few seconds before she realizes there’s no other girl in the mirror at all, and that the only person she’s talking to is herself.

She meets her own skeptical gaze before turning her head. She doesn’t want to look at it. Doesn’t want to hear it. Doesn’t want to consider it, and doesn’t want to acknowledge that person.

Fumiko… Aguri. Does it matter who she is? Either way, it hurts too much to meet her desolate eyes.

For a moment, she briefly considers flicking on the lights. Maybe in the glow of her nightlight, she’d be able to gather her thoughts. But she quickly decides against it when she remembers her parents are still here. Still stalking her house and her heart like that man who had tormented her.

...When she remembers somehow they’re even scarier to her than he ever could have been.

Instead, she stumbles back over to her bed and paws at her bedside table. It takes three tries before she manages to grab her phone. Clutching it tight in her hands, she stares blankly at the light of the screen.

It hurts her eyes. Her head is pounding and for a moment she genuinely can’t tell if it’s just the stress or a goddamn concussion. Even so, she can’t find it in herself to put the phone aside. Instead, she opens up her texts and stares at Makoto’s name in her contacts.

She wants to talk to him. More than anything, she wants to reach out. She wants to call and hear his voice. (Korosensei’s voice.) But she doesn’t dare. Not right now. Not with the risks. He’s fast asleep, free from her concerns. Free from the burdens of life and what he feels he’s to blame for. She’s not in her right mind, and there’s nothing she could tell him that she could possibly believe.

So instead, she merely attempts to send him a text.

‘I had the strangest dream,’ she starts, but quickly backpedals.

‘The way you tossed me away earlier... Is there still something bothering you? That we haven’t talked about?’

...She deletes that, too.

‘I hope you’re feeling better.’

No. Not right. And directed at herself, more than anything.

‘I love you.’

...
Absolutely fucking not.

Instead, she settles on ‘You’re my best friend. You know that, right?’

Before she can even reconsider it, she’s sent it. And staring at the message pop up on her screen, she wonders if she’d written the right thing.

He doesn’t respond. It’s the middle of the night, after all. But she has a feeling his answer would have to be something like ‘You too.’

...Why? Why does he care about her? He’s always fought so, so hard to make her happy. But what has she done to deserve it? Then or now? She’d been so cruel to him when she first met him. And yet he’d never budged. Why? In some sick recreation of what they’d already lived, a stubborn kindness attempting to get through to an icy heart…? Or had he already known the truth?

The truth behind what!? She’s not Aguri. She’s just… She’s just…

...Crying alone in her room.

Somewhere far, far away, and in a time she can’t reach, a woman does the same. And maybe Fumiko’s not so alone after all.

She can try to tell herself that this is all a bad dream. But the more she focuses on that familiar feeling, the more she’s certain it’s not. If anything, it’s starting to feel like her whole life has been the dream all along... And that she’s finally waking up.

‘To what?’ she has to wonder.

Nagisa had described Aguri Yukimura so fondly. As a pinnacle of kindness in a cold world. Kayano’s beloved sister, and the one who had changed Korosensei’s life. A person to strive to be. But as Nagisa had told her story… The person she’d been and the way that she’d died, Fumiko hadn’t been able to conceptualize her life as anything but sad.

Savior of the world. Cherished big sister. Friend to The Reaper. And a woman who died at age 25. Bruised and bloodied a hundred times before, she bled out on the cold ground. And letting out a shaky, relieved sigh, she smiled up at the man who was in some ways to blame.

‘Hey... At least I’m dying in a kinder way.’

And she hadn’t been making it up. Not to save his feelings. She’d meant it. Finally… Happily… She was just honored to go in a way that didn’t have to hurt so much.

Fumiko feels that same hurt in her gut. Bleeding out through her shirt and seeping into her covers. As she forces herself to put her phone aside, she turns over once… Then twice.

Just this afternoon, she’d thought she’d never understand what Makoto was going through, that panicked look in his eyes. But lying awake at 3 AM in the morning, it seems life is here to surprise her as it always has.

...Leaving her wondering if she can mend Makoto’s pain. If she’s been missing something all this time. And most importantly: If there’s been some sort of secret past hiding out in her heart as well.

It’s an answer she doesn’t want to consider.

Not because she doesn’t like Aguri. Not because she’s scared, or even because she’s worried she
might be wrong. That… In a sleep-deprived fervor, she’s making light of the thing that had torn Makoto’s heart in two.

No. She doesn’t want to think about it because she doesn’t want to lose that happiness a second time.

Sitting across from Korosensei, separated by the glass, Aguri hums happily. And despite her fiance… Despite authoritative fathers and long-lost mothers… She knows she’s going to be okay. She has people who love her. And no matter what it takes, she’s going to follow her dreams.

Less than a week later, Aguri bleeds to death. And she never becomes the teacher she wanted to be.

Staring up at the ceiling, Fumiko really… Truly wants to believe that she’s at the turning point of her life. That she’ll be able to make it away from her parents, and become a person who is fully defined as ‘her own.’

But feeling in ache in her chest and her gut… She’s left to wonder if she’ll bleed out before she gets the chance as well.

Needless to say, she doesn’t sleep that night.

“Hey Nagisa?”

“Yeah?”

“Can we talk about what I missed yesterday?”

When Makoto shows up at Nagisa’s desk before any other students even arrive, he lets out a sigh of relief.

Nagisa had been… worried about Makoto, even after he’d returned to class yesterday, proclaiming that he was fine now. He hadn’t seemed to want to talk about what had went down and it left this sore aching feeling in Nagisa’s heart. Like he’d done something wrong. Like he’d been the one who screwed up. And that Makoto was mad at him for bestowing the knowledge to him.

He knows that's a ridiculous notion. But *shit, man*… He had to have gone about that badly to earn such a freaked reaction from Makoto. He’s modest enough to admit that was a big mistake on his part.

“Of course,” he says. “I’m gonna need a recap of what you last heard, though.”

Makoto gives a tiny nod, pulling up a chair to be closer to Nagisa’s desk. He still has bags under his eyes, but he’s starting to look a lot better than he had a week ago. Nagisa’s hoping that’s a good sign.

“Well… Uh… I got the stuff about how Korosensei was a human experiment,” he says. “…Antimatter, right? It - Uh… All got put in his body.”


“And… I got who did it to him. That bad scientist guy. Kotaro Yanagisawa. But… Uh… That’s around when I started to lose focus.”

Nagisa frowns. “Did he scare you?”
Makoto’s expression seems to say ‘Of course he scared me!’ But he quickly shakes his head. “Not… Like… In particular. I guess the situation itself just sucked,” he admits. “Plus… He’s gone now, right? It’d be pretty silly to be scared of a guy who’s dead.”

“Yes. He’s gone,” Nagisa reassures. “He passed in 2017, after heart failure from full-body paralysis. He never got to hurt another person with the time he had left.”

Makoto lets out a tiny sigh of relief. “I know it’s not good to be relieved a person is dead… But…” He drifts off.

“I think it’s acceptable just this once.”

Makoto lets out a tiny “Mmm,” before quickly changing the topic. “Then… Uh… You got to that woman, and I think that’s when I really started freaking out,” he admits.

“Aguri?”

“…Yeah. Aguri.” Makoto stares at his feet. “I - Uh… Didn’t know about her until then. It really hurt to think there was another person I managed to screw over.”

Nagisa frowns. “You didn’t screw her over,” he says firmly.

“She is dead, though. Right? B… Because of me?”

Nagisa feels like he’s been stabbed in the gut. This is exactly what Kayano had been worried about.

“No. Not because of you. In fact… In some ways, it was the opposite,” Nagisa reaches out to place a hand on Makoto’s shoulder “Let me repeat the story. Just tell me if you start to lose sight of yourself again and I’ll pause. I really want you to hear this. And she would too.”

“Okay,” Makoto says. “…Okay.”

“…Aguri Yukimura was indeed someone who met you through the lab. While you were being experimented on, she was tasked with watching and observing you. This was supposed to remain a purely professional affair. She’d take your vitals, ask you about your condition, and leave. But Aguri just wasn’t that sort of person. Where the rest of the scientists in that laboratory saw a dangerous serial killer or a disposable guinea pig, Aguri saw a person. And a lonely person, at that.

“You see, in her own ways, Aguri had had a hard life, too. Her mother died when she was young, and in turn, she was tasked with raising her little sister.”


“Kayano,” Nagisa says. “Real name Akari Yukimura. Aguri was her elder sister.”

Makoto covers his mouth with his hands, shaking his head softly, but doesn’t dare speak another word.

“From the age of ten, she was expected to play both the role of mother and sister to Kayano. But this never once turned Aguri bitter. She remained optimistic and kind, loving her sister and everyone else around her with all she could. And even despite her struggles, never once giving up on her dream.”
“...You see… Aguri wanted to be a teacher. Just like you and me. Despite her stresses and pressure, Aguri realized she loved helping other people. She loved nurturing her sister, and she loved the feeling of getting to help her with her homework, or helping her solve a particularly difficult life problem. Because of this, in between raising Kayano she began to attend college classes at night, studying to become a teacher.

“As Kayano turned 13 and began to become able to fend for herself, Aguri obtained her degree and applied to work at Kunugigaoka. She was hired, passing the application with flying colors. And she finally set off to follow her dreams.”

“...Then how did she end up working in some dreary lab?” Makoto asks. “That doesn’t sound like a part of teaching.”

“Indeed. Just like it had always been to her, life decided to be cruel to Aguri. During her years at college, she happened to meet a man who was pursuing his master’s degree in pharmaceuticals. And a man who just happened to work under her father. A man who quickly became deeply jealous of her.”

Makoto blinks, face dawning in horror. “...Yanagisawa.”

Nagisa nods. “It was around this time that Yanagisawa was also making his first big scientific breakthrough. One that saved Yukimura Pharmaceuticals from bankruptcy. Yanagisawa gave them the edge to retake the Pharmaceutical industry, and rocket out of the red. In turn, Aguri’s relieved father told Yanagisawa he’d give him anything as thanks.”

“...Oh God,” Makoto whispers.

“Yanagisawa told him there was only one thing he wanted. And that was his daughter.”

Makoto bolts to his feet, slapping his hands on Nagisa’s desk. “But you can’t just do that, can you!? T-To your own daughter! Is that even legal!? That’s not fair!”

...He looks ready to cry.

“No. It’s not. But… People were never fair to Aguri. Yanagisawa threatened to leave the company and take his discoveries with him if her father didn’t comply. And it turns out ruthless businesship won out over fatherly love. Aguri’s hand was sold into marriage. And so, shortly after she first obtained her teaching degree, she became engaged to Kotaro Yanagisawa.”

“As you can imagine… he… Wasn’t good to her. Yanagisawa was a violently abusive person to his loved ones and his subordinates, both of which she ended up becoming. He pressured her and pressured her into working at his lab, demanding she quit her newfound teaching job. But Aguri refused to comply, and instead met him in the middle, taking shifts at the lab during the night.”

Makoto stares. “B… But she didn’t want to do that! She… She didn’t wanna…” He drifts off, murmuring under his breath “...Meet me.”

“...No, Makoto. She was lucky to meet you,” Nagisa says. “You’re right. She didn’t want to work at the lab. Not even a little. Aguri was good at chemistry, but this just wasn’t her kind of science. She hated the unethical things that they did there, and she hated the terrified atmosphere that surrounded her and her coworkers.

“But Aguri was always the sort of person to make the best of a bad situation, and that’s why she decided… When Yanagisawa bought a death row prisoner to experiment on, just like he’d bought her… That she’d find a way to get through to his heart. Because no matter how cruel… No matter
how empty the man who met her eyes from across the glass was, she recognized his loneliness all the same.”

“She began to talk to The Reaper. Began to talk to you. About her problems, and about mundane things, too. At first you didn’t respond much. In some ways, you just saw her as a stepping stone in coming up with a plan to escape. But as the months began to pass by, you found yourself looking forward to her visits. And you began to open up to her in return.”

“She got you. In a world where you’d managed to find a way to manipulate or lie to any other person, Aguri was the first to see through that. She looked past the fake kind exterior you put up to trick others, and searched for the legitimate kindness hiding underneath. It was hard to unearth… And I’m sure she struggled. But seeing as how you’d spent your entire life building up that disguise, to have her look past it… You were happy you couldn’t manipulate her. Because it meant you were finally being seen.”

Makoto stares up at Nagisa with watery eyes.

“And… I guess you saw her in the same way. Because she trusted you. She didn’t talk to you just because ‘she was making the best of a bad situation.’ Not anymore. She looked forward to talking to you. You were the highlight of her day! There were things she couldn’t tell anyone else. Things her father wouldn’t get. Her fiance wouldn’t understand. Things she couldn’t bear to put on her baby sister. But she could tell you. And that foundation of trust and honesty is why you became so important to each other.”

“More important than anything else. Before you even had your students… Before you had us, you had Aguri. And she changed your life. On March 13th, 2014, Aguri gave you a birthday. Even though you were born in a world that said you didn’t matter… That you were a killer and you’d inevitably die young, she knew you deserved to be celebrated, too. That… Your life could be, and already was something beautiful. Something worthy of commemoration.”

“She gave you your tie,” Nagisa says, reaching up to cover his chest with his palm. “...And in return, you reached out to hold her from across the glass.”

Makoto blinks, reaching up to cover his own heart with his hand. And eyes wide… Mouth agape in wonder… For just one moment, he seems to be back there, surrounded by that golden glow.

...That’s when his expression falls.

“But then everything went bad… didn’t it?”

“...Yeah. Everything went bad,” Nagisa admits.

And the golden glow that had cupped Aguri’s cheek… That had hugged Korosensei’s students one final time a whole March 13th later… Fades from Makoto’s eyes.

“Yanagisawa had similar, less stable experiments in the same vein as the ones he was performing on you. Experiments he was doing on rats. He believed there was a risk of his experiments backfiring, and as such he used them as test subjects to keep one or two steps ahead of the things he was doing to you, just in case. It… Turns out this was a good precaution, because on March 13th, one of the rats exploded.”

Makoto sputters. “Exploded!? Like? Into blood and guts, or-?”

“Like… A nuclear explosion. Everything around it was consumed in a horrific chain reaction. And because of this… The moon where the rat was kept was destroyed with it.”
Realization seems to dawn in Makoto’s eyes. “...Oh… Rats. I… I finally get it.”

...He doesn’t laugh.

“Yanagisawa believed the same thing would happen to you in roughly a year. To negate that possibility, he… He decided to…” Nagisa pauses. “...He decided to terminate you.”

Makoto’s face dawns with horror.

“Aguri warned you of the danger. And… You flipped out. You didn’t want to die. And so… With the powers you’d developed over the past year, you escaped. You destroyed the laboratory and ‘got your revenge’ for everything that had happened to you over the course of your stay there.”

Makoto shifts uncomfortably. “I… Hurt a lot of people, didn’t I?” he asks.

“The death toll was in the dozens,” Nagisa says. “...You... Weren’t necessarily in your right mind, howev-”


Nagisa sighs deeply. “No. It’s not,” he admits. “In a fit of rage, you killed dozens… Maybe hundreds of people just doing their job. But as you prepared to leave the lab for good… planning to do something awful… Aguri saw through to you one last time.”

Makoto wipes at his nose with the back of his hand. “...That’s when I killed her.”

Nagisa shakes his head. “That’s when Aguri made a decision. She knew you were about to do something you’d always regret. She knew you were about to kill thousands more if given the chance. But… She also knew you could be so much better than that. So steeling herself… Knowing her words wouldn’t be enough if they hadn’t been for the past year… She stepped forward to hug you. To embrace you in the same way you had embraced her. And she told you ‘Please don’t do this.’”

“Her motion set off a trap that Yanagisawa had placed to try and contain you. It pierced her lower abdomen, and she began to bleed out. But even on her deathbed… She told you she didn’t want you to blame yourself. That she didn’t want you to feel bad. Because you made her life happy. And that if she were going to die for anyone’s sake… Then you were the person who was worth it.”

“But I… But I…-” Makoto sputters. “I still put her in the line of-”

“...I know. And she knew, too. She didn’t mind. I think… More than anything, Aguri was happy she could finally rest. She wasn’t mad at you. And she wouldn’t want you to be mad at yourself now. All she asked of you in return was for you to look out for her class of junior high students in her place. A… Duty which you know by now you fulfilled perfectly.”

Makoto stares. “She… She was your teacher?”

“...Yeah. Before we met you, we had Yukimura-sensei.”

“You… you knew her,” Makoto whispers. “I’m sorry. You must have really missed her.”

“It’s okay,” Nagisa says. “To be truthful... We weren’t always the nicest to Yukimura-sensei.”

Makoto scoots his chair in, lip quivering. “...What was she like? W… What sort of teacher was she? Did I… Did I live up to her?”
“Aguri was…” Nagisa pauses. “Well, she was another one of the best people I ever knew. She was kind... And she was optimistic... And she was funny. And she was stubborn as hell, and never knew when to quit. She always tried to see the best in people, and wanted to believe that it wasn’t too late for anyone. But she wasn’t perfect, either.”

“She was just starting off as a teacher. She didn’t really know what she was doing yet. Her saccharine attitude didn’t always feel genuine to us students, so sometimes it felt like she was pitying us. She always talked more than she needed to, and of course her fashion sense was just a little bit worth scoffing at.”

Makoto’s brow furrows in confusion. But once more, realization seems to dawn on his face. And for the first time in this entire conversation… He laughs. Chuckling into his elbow, a smile just barely turns up at the corners of his lips.

“...She also liked to make people laugh, didn’t she?” he whispers.

“Yeah. She did,” Nagisa cracks a smile, too. “But never at her fashion. If you told her what she was wearing was strange, she’d cover her shirt with her hands and start shouting at you about how she thought it was perfectly normal. Designer, even.”

Makoto shakes his head with a fond smile. “...She would have loved what I looked like. I was goofy, right?” He sighs. “I wish she’d gotten to see it.”

“I think we all do,” Nagisa says. “Of course you lived up to her, Makoto. You went above and beyond. In places where even Aguri couldn’t manage to get through to us, you did.”

“...She wasn’t bad though, right?” Makoto asks. “At what she did?”

“No,” Nagisa says. “She just… Maybe wasn’t the best teacher for us. But she was the perfect teacher for you. And that’s what matters. I have a lot to thank her for. She was a truly wonderful person.”

“Not perfect though, right?”

“Not perfect, though,” Nagisa repeats. “Aguri always prioritized other people above herself. And while that’s the same trait that ended up making her a hero, I guess it’s also what caused her to have such a tumultuous life.”

Makoto nods. “...Yeah. I think you’re right,” he says. His gaze drifts off towards the floor, and he shuffles slightly. “I feel bad that I didn’t remember up until now. She was a good person. She deserves to be remembered.”

“It’s okay,” Nagisa reassures. “You remember now. That’s all she would say matters.”

Makoto shuffles more. “Do you think Kayano would mind if I talked to her sometime? If… this hurts this bad now, I bet she’s been really sad for a long time. Would it… Would it help her if I asked her about Aguri?”

“I think it would,” Nagisa admits. “Aguri… meant a lot to her. I think she’d really like it if you talked to her about her sometime.” He stretches. “She knew her a lot better than I did, anyways. She can tell you all about her. And who knows? Maybe… Maybe it’ll help the both of you move on.”

“It’s a plan, then.”
Nagisa sends a glance towards the clock. It’s nearing 7:30. Other students should be arriving any minute now. They don’t have long.

“I’m glad you felt comfortable asking me about all this, Makoto.”

“…Of course,” Makoto says. “Why wouldn’t I?”

“I’m just…” He pauses. “I’m just really worried I messed up with how I did the lesson. I tried to make it fun and educational, but I guess that didn’t work. I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay,” Makoto says. “…That was never gonna be fun for me. I’m glad everyone else could have a good time, at least.” He pauses. “…And I’m glad you told me the truth.”

“All right,” Nagisa says. “All right.” He sits up and begins to gather his things. “…I guess I should be getting ready for class, huh? Try not to worry too much, though, okay? The truth of the matter is… We’re coming up on some of Korosensei’s best memories now. You don’t have anything to fear anymore. I promise… His story starts to get happier from here.”

Makoto nods, standing and grabbing his own things. He begins to walk towards his desk, backpack slung over his shoulder, when he hesitates midstep and turns back Nagisa’s way.

“…Even after loss?” he asks.


But as Makoto returns to his seat… And as the other students flood into class, Nagisa stares down at his crescent tie.

…He wonders what burdens Korosensei had carried with him all his life. What burdens Makoto carries with him now. There’s an ache in his heart, even as he goes over Korosensei’s best memories… Because those have become the unreachable past he himself shoulders now.

That moment he’ll be able to reach again.

And even without his own past life, he’s back on that field, backlit by the glow of Korosensei fading between their fingers.

…Stuck wondering if there really is such a thing as happy endings after loss after all.

“…Makoto. Can I ask you a question?”

She whispers it. Like she’s scared of being caught.

“Yeah? Duh.”

He sits to the right of her, hyperfocused on his worksheet. Wiggling his pen back and forth, he bites his tongue and stares intensely down at the problems. It’s a far cry from how unfocused he’d seemed at the beginning of the year.

There’s this hesitation caught in the back of her gut, but she knows she has to say it soon. Kiyoshi’s gotten up to go to the bathroom, and she just can’t find it in herself to ask it in front of him. She’s… Scared he won’t believe her or something. Or that… He won’t get it. She loves him, but she’s not ready for him to catch a glimpse of this. Not yet.

(Experiment: She trusts him. She’d trust him with anything. But she also knows he's going to give her a much-
needed reality check. And she'd like to weigh all of her options first.)

“How did you know?”

Now that makes him stop writing. He pauses and looks her way, whispering back.

“Know what?”

“About… Korosensei,” she says. “Like… How did you figure that out? That you used to be him? When did it first come to you?”

Makoto mulls it over, fiddling with his pencil in his hands. “When did it first… Come to me?” He repeats, tilting his head. “I dunno, really. It’s always felt like a part of me. I’ve always had these like… Weird dreams. Or didn’t really know where I belonged. I just didn’t know what any of that meant until I came here.”

“...So it was attending this school.”

“Only sorta,” Makoto admits. “I think I always knew subconsciously. But that was like… What flicked the switch. Meeting Nagisa and seeing the building and stuff. It’s what made me realize ‘Hey! This is the place I’ve been seeing. The same people. That can’t be a coincidence, can it?’”

“I suppose not,” Fumiko replies, a set of her own unlikely coincidences swimming around in her head. Rainy days spent watching Mase Haruana’s films when she had nothing else, and the golden glow in her chest when Makoto had given her a birthday gift of his own.

Some internal part of her screaming ‘Is this what it feels like for the tables to turn?’

She shakes her head. She’s getting ahead of herself.

“What do you mean by subconsciously, though? Like… Okay… You know all this stuff you’re not supposed to know. That seals the deal. But… Before you knew any of that, what made you think you were somehow different from everyone else?”

Makoto cocks his head again. “Asking all the big questions today, huh?” he asks.

“I’m curious,” Fumiko replies.

“Fair enough,” he relents, bringing his hand up to stroke his chin. “I mean… They’re mostly things that only make sense in hindsight, I guess. But… Like, I’ve always been really scared of water. And I’ve always loved learning, even if I was never very good at it. I’ve got a big sweet tooth, and I’ve always really been interested in Korosensei, too! Maybe not in the same smart way you are… But I’d look at him and think… ‘I bet he was a really cool guy.’” He lets out a low chuckle, eyes practically glowing with mischief. “Turns out I was right!”

“...Narcissist,” Fumiko snidely whispers.

“H-Hey!” Makoto yelps. “I don’t mean it in that way! I just - I mean - I am pretty cool, aren’t I!”

“Yeah, yeah,” Fumiko relents, rolling her eyes. “You’re plenty cool.”

He’s got this flustered, wild look in his eyes. When she blinks, she swears she sees that same face in the back of her mind. Covering his mouth with his hands, and staring at her with the same petty embarrassment, even as an entirely different person.

“Maybe even the coolest person I know.”
“Aw! Come on! Don’t give Kiyoshi so little credit. Now he’s the coolest guy we both know.”

“I think we’ve gotten off-topic.”

“Yeah. Probably.”

“...Is it like you just came in here, and it all clicked? All the coincidences suddenly made sense?”

Makoto quickly shakes his head. “Nah. It’s more like... The pieces slowly started coming together after that. It’s not like I stepped into the building and suddenly knew everything. There’s still things I don’t know about Korosensei.”

“Oh course. Of course,” Fumiko says.

“It’s just when I started being able to put faces to names. To see where I was clearly. I never realized it before, but it’s funny just how much a place or a sentence can jog your memory.”

(A single action?

...Makoto tosses her aside, and she’s lost in a sea of her own memories.)

“Did it come easier? After the first memory? Did they like... Come faster?”

“I dunno about faster, but they started to make more sense. Especially after I realized I was definitely seeing memories that belonged to Korosensei. I could ask Nagisa for stories about him, then fill in the gaps myself. It was actually really cool.”

“I can imagine.”

‘Cool.’

...Is it?

Moments of terror interlaced with pain. Pierced guts and unseen tears. But even so, looking at Makoto’s glimmering eyes, she knows he at the very least believes it. That there was some sort of wonder to be found in the memories he’d explored. And hadn’t he been through much, much worse?

(She whispers a secret to Reaper, and feels like a schoolgirl at a slumber party. It’s funny. She never got invited to any of those when she was younger. But she supposes she can be a kid now. He gives her a wry smile and rolls his eyes, but it’s okay. He can pretend, but she knows her secret is safe with him.

In another time, her sister comes running to her, practically tripping over her own shoelaces. Clapping her tiny hands, she says that she did it. That she really acted in her first movie. They build a blanket fort and pop it on. And for just a moment, the two of them can relax.)

...No. That’s not all there is to life, is it? Pain. She’d like to believe there’s something ‘cool’ to be found in every moment. At least... If Makoto can think so.

But as soon as she’s decided that, her heart seems to wither. How can she really see those things, and decide those memories are hers to hold? Who is she kidding herself? She’s not... She’s not...

She’s not special like Makoto. She just wants to be.

“There’s still one thing I just don’t get,” she admits.
“What is it?” Makoto asks.

“How did you believe it?” she asks. “I mean… Not to sound dismissive, but that truly is out there. Coming to a conclusion like having been Korosensei in a past life… Didn’t that feel weird? How were you certain about it? How did you know that you weren’t just crazy, or making it up for attention?”

Makoto rests his cheek on his palm, mulling it over as he looks at Fumiko. “…I mean, yeah. Duh. Of course it felt weird. But so had my entire life. As ‘out there’ as it was, it was still the first thing that seemed to make any sense to me. I guess I always could have thought I was just trying to be special… But… That was a pretty crappy way to think about myself. So I thought ‘Why not let myself believe? What harm can it do?’ And from there it all just started to make more sense.”

“I know a lot of people will never believe me. But I think I knew for sure when I started learning about things that happened before anyone told me about them. There’s a lot of things you can chalk up to a Chuunibyou complex, but not that. At least… I don’t think so. When Nagisa was confirming that the things I’d seen had really happened, what else was I supposed to think?”

“I… Don’t know,” Fumiko admits.

“There was no other answer. At least not for me. But that’s not what really sealed the deal for me… The true reason I was certain. That was… Something a lot more simple.”

“How?”

“It was that feeling of love. Stepping into this classroom, and after a lifetime of not understanding who I was, finally, finally undeniably feeling like I was coming home.”

“…Coming home?” Fumiko repeats.

“Yeah,” Makoto says, a warm smile creeping up his face. “Coming home.”

“Sounds pretty nice,” Fumiko admits.

“Yeah. It was,” Makoto muses. “And sometimes, I still think I feel it every time I come here. Even despite the bad stuff… I know I’m where I belong.” He gazes fondly around the room, although quickly shakes himself from his dreamlike state. “That’s your answer, I guess. Or at least… The most I have. Why’re you asking, though? Do you not believe me?” he asks.

“No,” Fumiko quickly responds. “I was just… Wondering.”

“Fair enough,” Makoto quickly responds. “I was just… Wondering.”

‘Coming home,’ he says... And Fumiko wants it more than anything.

The comforting, rustic place the school has become for her. The feeling of warmth that had glowed in her chest when she’d first stepped into Nagisa’s home and met Kayano’s eyes. And the way her heartbeat steadies when she watches Makoto stick out his tongue and stare down at his paper, deep in focus.

...She’d like to think she’s already come home. But it’s pretty hard to decide what that means when she’s the girl who’s never had one in her entire life.

Because there’s more than one way to find a home. And it’s hard not to wonder if she’s finally returned to where she belongs, or if she’s only just now finding this warm place for the first time in
her existence.

Chapter End Notes

CHAPTER 23! And /WHAT/ a chapter! Sorry for the wait, everyone! But I hope it was worth said wait!

As I mentioned in the pre-chapter notes, no need to worry about this turning into a Koroagu fluff filled romp. I love the octopuskisser9000 ship as much as everyone else, but that's not what this story is about. Aguri reveal or not, this is still the same fic about found family, the ethics of reincarnation, guilt, identity and grief. The fact that Korosensei and Aguri were in love /will/ 100% come up again, but don't worry. That's not going to give Fumiko and Makoto a sudden irresistible urge to mash faces. Instead what will be discussed is the complex and confusing ways this affects their already existing dynamic and relationship. Because that's a lot more interesting!

Disclaimer 2: Don't ya'll worry: This doesn't mean Kiyoshi is going to fall out of relevancy, either. He may not have some secret special past life, but he's still my favorite boy. Don't worry about him becoming forgotten. Although he doesn't appear much in this chapter or the next admittedly, he's still a treasured member of the Newtime Trio's friendgroup and isn't about to be left behind. (He may FEAR he is going to be, however. Lol ;P)

I enjoyed writing Fumiko's initial reaction to All This. It's a lot to spring on her, and an awfully complex topic in general, but I hope I did it justice. I hope you'll enjoy where I continue to go with her exploring this newfound aspect of herself.

Sorry about the uhhhhhhhhhh descriptions of abuse. Writing Yanagisawa makes me feel physically ill, but I think an important thing to remember about Aguri's life is just how bad it could get sometimes, and that means looking into the dark nitty gritty of how the worst person in it treated her. Plot device or not, however, I am still going to beat Yanagisawa to death with a rock.

The next chapter will be up in a week. So don't worry about another long wait! It's another good one, so I hope you look forward to it!

Some songs that helped me write this chapter were Stuff We Did from Up, Feed Me from Little Shop of Horrors, In The Morning Sun from Pokemon Mystery Dungeon, The Tree On The Hill from The Lightning Thief, Long Way Home by Jukebox the Ghost, and Calendar Girl by Stars, which... Again... Is a little too fitting for me to not share a line or two from.

"If I am lost for a day, try to find me
But if I don't come back, then I won't look behind me
All of the things that I thought were so easy
Just got harder and harder each day

....

I dreamed I was dying, as I so often do
And when I awoke I was sure it was true
I ran to the window; threw my head to the sky
And said "Whoever is up there, please don't let me die"

But I can't live forever, I can't always be
One day I'll be sand on a beach by a sea
The pages keep turning, I'll mark off each day with a cross
And I'll laugh about all that we've lost

Calendar girl who is lost to the world, stay alive"

... :)

As I mentioned the next chapter will be up in one week, so I hope to see you then!
And remember to let me know what you thought o/
Makoto paces in circles in front of Kayano’s bedroom.

He’d been so certain about this plan this morning. But now that he’s actually enacting it in response to Nagisa’s brief explanation, it just feels weird. Is that a topic you can really just breach?

He’s starting to realize his life is a lot weirder than anyone else’s. Literally no-one else on the planet has to consider whether the social ramifications of talking to your teacher’s wife about her dead sister who you technically murdered.

He shakes his head.

‘No. Don’t say that. You didn’t kill her. She didn’t want you to think that.’

But even so, he feels her blood seep into his shirt, and he knows he’s at least partially to blame, ‘her rock’ or not.

He’s never cared about what was socially acceptable before. What’s happening to him? He knows what he needs to do. He just needs to barge in there and force it out. Otherwise he’ll overthink this. And if he’s learned anything from Kiyoshi, (Aside from the fact that Pop Rocks and Diet Coke are a goddamn awesome combination) it’s that he can’t let himself do that.

Aguri wouldn’t want him to. Kayano was… important to her, right? She deserves to know that he knows.

He catches the faint smell of smoke, and stiffens. But sooner than he can wave his hand in front of his face, it’s gone. And he’s left with nothing more than the memory of wrathful, smoldering eyes.

Nagisa said Korosensei’s story was going to get happier from here on out. After… Aguri died. But Makoto’s left to wonder just how happy it really could have been. He… He killed one of his students’ family members. Did Kayano hate him?

...Does Kayano hate him?

He briefly wonders if he should wait until the Moon Unit is over to talk to Kayano. But before he can come to a decision, the door cracks open and makes the decision for him.


He doesn’t let himself hesitate. It’s now or never. And so despite the anxieties blossoming in his gut, in a moment of brilliant word association, he blurts out “We need to talk, Akari.”

She gives him an indecipherable look, mouth falling open.

“And we really need to talk. So please just hear me out, and please don’t be mad at me.”

Her gaze instantly softens. And stepping aside, she motions him in. “...Let’s talk. I won’t be mad. I promise.”
Sincerely doubting that, he follows her into the bedroom and takes an awkward seat on her bed that is technically two beds shoved together because she is in a massive polyamorous relationship. He clasps his fingers nervously, and attempts to focus on the familiar atmosphere of the room, looking just about everywhere except at Kayano herself as she sits down next to him.

It’s only after a long moment silence that she seems to realize he’s not going to speak unless spoken to.

“...You remembered Aguri?” she quietly asks.

“Yeah,” he admits softly, staring intently at Nagisa’s bedside drawer. “I… Remembered the bad thing happening on my own. And then Nagisa told me the rest.”

‘The bad thing?’ What is WRONG with him? The murder. He got. Her. Killed. There’s no way to soften that. But he just can’t bring himself to word it truthfully in front of Kayano. If… If he doesn’t sugarcoat it, maybe she’ll finally see through his facade. And she’ll realize he’s as shitty as he’s always been.

Kayano lets out a sigh. It’s a low, strained thing. And then, slowly, she reaches out to place a hand on Makoto’s shoulder.

He jolts.

“I’m sorry-”

They say it at the same time.

Makoto freezes. “W… Why are you apologizing? I… I got her…”

...He doesn’t finish the sentence.

“No. You didn’t,” Kayano firmly responds. Squeezing his shoulder gently, she says “...I'm apologizing because I know that must really hurt to remember. I’m sorry.”

M… Must really hurt? For him? She’s the one who had to live through it!

“Y… You’re not mad? I thought you’d… I thought you’d…”

“No,” Kayano says. “I’m not mad. If anything, I’m just upset. I was hoping you’d never have to deal with that.”

“...Oh,” Makoto replies, shoulders lowering. “...I just thought-”

“No. Don’t worry about it,” Kayano repeats. “I already spent my time being angry. Now I understand what happened. I learned the truth a long time ago.”

“The… the truth?” Makoto asks.

“That you never meant for that to happen. The moment I learned you were hurting just as much as I was, I couldn’t find it in myself to be mad anymore.”

The scent of something burning has returned. She lashes at his skin, and he somehow only now comes to the realization that the something burning is her flesh. He’s scared for an entirely different reason now when she collapses into his arms, so small and so young.

...So fragile. Just like her sister.
She stands tall now. Or… At least, as tall as you can stand when you’ve only grown five inches since middle school. But she’s alive. And for the first time in his life, Makoto seems to realize that’s a blessing. In another world, they may not have been so lucky. And then he’d have even more blood on his hands.

“So… You were mad at me at some point? For… hurting her?”

“Yeah,” Kayano admits. “But that was a long time ago. That’s not what I’m worried about now.”

“No. I want to know.” It’s his responsibility.

“I’m sure Nagisa will tell you eventually.”

“From you. I want to know from you.”

Kayano sighs. “You always were stubborn,” she says. “But I guess I owe it to you, seeing as how you told me the truth all the way back then. How much do you already know?”

“Well… I know everything about Aguri. How I met her at the lab, and how we became friends. How she told me all about you and everyone else in The E-Class. About how her fiance wasn’t very nice to her… And how she really wanted to see the best in me. About how I escaped from that place, and about how she got… injured in the crossfire. Nagisa hasn’t gotten to talking about you yet, though. I think that’s tomorrow.”

Injured? Piece of shit. You’re a killer!

“Okay. I see,” Kayano says. “So… You wouldn’t know why I joined the class.”

“No. Is it… different from everyone else?”

He… Hadn’t really considered that possibility, before. Weren’t they all there because of grades or other similar perceived ‘misbehavior?’ That was… the principal that the school ran on. How could she have been an outlier from that?

“This is going to sound a little harsh… but I joined to kill you.”

Makoto does a literal double take. “In what world is that harsh!? That’s what you’re ashamed of?” He asks. “Everyone was in class to kill me! It was the assassination classroom! If you weren’t there to kill me, I’d argue you were sort of missing the point-”

“Okay. Okay. I worded that poorly,” Kayano admits. “Yes. Everyone was there to kill you. But my motivation was a bit different. While assassination was something fun… A learning experience for everyone else, it was a source of bitterness and heartbreak for me.”

Makoto squints. “...O...kay. I think I’m starting to get it,” he says. “You somehow heard that I was running the class, and wanting to avenge your sister you joined for the chance to ‘get me.’ Yeah?”

“Close,” Kayano admits. “But… A little more in depth than that. And a little more manipulative, too. You know how my legal name’s not Kayano?”

Makoto slowly nods. Huh. He’d never really thought about it, but that doesn’t add up, does it? If he knows she’s really Akari… Then why does he remember her introducing herself as Kayano at the start of the school year? It couldn’t have been a name her spouses came up with for her, considering she hadn’t known any of them when she’d first came into class.
That said, it’s not hard to put the pieces together. Not if he thinks. He frowns. “An alias, then. You didn’t want to go by the last name Yukimura, because you knew I’d recognize the name and like… start crying all over you.”

Kayano snorts. “Again: A little more intense than that. But you have the right idea. I went by Kaede Kayano because I didn’t want you to recognize me or pick up on my plan for revenge. I dyed my hair and pretended to be an entirely different person throughout the year, utilizing my acting abilities to bury ‘Akari’ completely. Pretending to have fun and participating in class assassination attempts, all the while secretly scheming an assassination of my own to catch you off guard with at the end of the year.”

Makoto’s nose wrinkles. “Something… With fire. And… you got really hurt.”

Kayano nods. “Before I even joined the E-Class, I implanted myself with tentacles. I kept them hidden over the course of the year, and slowly mastered using them as I planned to kill you with them. All the while I pretended to be an innocent young girl, who you’d never expect to spring that sort of sudden attempt on you.”

Makoto stares. “T-Tentacles?” he asks, eyes wide. “Oh my god... I didn’t… I didn’t… I… I knew Itona had- Bu… But you too? A whole year?”

Kayano awkwardly scratches at the back of her neck. “A little less, technically. But yeah.”

Makoto can visualize the way they blossom from her nape. The smoke swirling around them in a suffocating tornado. He coughs and sputters, begging her to just hear him out.

He can feel the writhing under his skin again. The torn flesh and the pounding headache. He’s spitting out blood onto the lab floor, and when he collapses to his knees, he knows for once it’s not because of the pain, but because Kayano had to share in it.

...At least until he reminds himself he’s not there. That he’s sitting on Kayano’s bed, and he hasn’t fallen to the ground.

Not yet.

“I… I’m so sorry,” he whispers. “...I… I should have noticed. I… I really let it go on that long? It must have hurt so badly~”

Kayano squeezes his shoulder, pulling him in closer to lean on her own. “...Don’t blame yourself,” she says. “I was a professional actor. I wouldn’t have expected you to see through that.” She gives a tired laugh. “I wouldn’t have wanted you to see through that. Besides, that was a very long time ago now. It doesn’t hurt anymore.”

Makoto doesn’t dare avoid eye contact a second longer. His eyes meet hers, and he desperately tries to keep his lip from quivering. “...That doesn’t mean it’s okay that it happened. How did you… how did you even get your hands on that stuff?”

“The lab,” Kayano admits. “I was… There when Aguri died. I saw what happened, and after you flew off I ran over to investigate the body. In the mess, I found tentacle cells. And unable to shake my plan for revenge, I soon injected myself with them.”

Makoto’s eyes instantly narrow. The lab? That means- “How… How did you do that without Ya-” He pauses. “Without your crappy brother-in-law finding out?”

Kayano sighs. “He found out, alright. He just didn’t care. Yanagisawa knew what I’d done. And he
allowed it. He knew I wasn’t going to change my mind. And hey, as long as that meant another weapon in his arsenal to defeat you, it was for the best.” She shakes her head. “Not that I ever cooperated with him, for the record,” she snaps. “I hated him up until the end. He was a piece of shit who made my sister miserable, and I was perfectly capable of taking care of my tentacles on my own.”

“He still should have tried to stop you!” Makoto says. “He… He had the tools. He had to know how bad that was for your body—”

“Again: he knew. He just didn’t care,” Kayano says. “…Listen: he couldn’t have stopped me even if he tried. I know that for certain. But yeah: You’re right: He should have tried. But he didn’t. Because he was the sort of person who never did anything unless he knew he’d succeed, or that it would directly benefit him.”

Makoto clenches his fist so tight it shakes. He doesn’t think he’s ever hated someone this much before. He tries not to hate people. E… Even if they’ve hurt him. But repeatedly hurting the people he loves is too much. More than anything he just wants to find this guy’s grave and… Like… Spit on it!

“That’s besides the point, however,” Kayano admits. “Let’s… Not dedicate another minute of thought to him. Not while we’re talking about our story. Not while we’re talking about Aguri.”

“…Agreed.”

“After nearly a year of hiding my tentacles, I revealed my plan and surprise attacked you. When I didn’t manage to assassinate you then, I revealed my true name and demanded you meet me at the field behind the school the next day. There I attempted to kill you with everything I had. To the point of lighting both myself and the field on fire. Just barely… due to some… Quick thinking from Nagisa, you guys managed to put a stop to me, and you remo—”

“Hey. Hey. Hey,” Makoto interjects. “You can’t just brush over that! What did Nagisa do?”

Kayano shuffles slightly. “It’s really not that important to the story,” she says. But he catches the way her voice quickens, and the ever-so-slight flush to her cheeks.

Well now he can’t just drop it! It’s gonna bother him forever if he doesn’t ask! Completely and deliberately ignoring the fact that Nagisa will probably tell him what happened tomorrow, Makoto pounds his fists on his lap and chants “Tell me! Tell me!”

He knows it’s immature and also, like… nosy as fuck, but he’s nothing if not a petty bitch, and hey… He has a feeling it’s a pretty funny story. They could use a laugh right now considering they’re chiefly discussing her dead sister.

Shaking her head and grumbling something about how maybe she had the right idea in trying to kill him, Kayano covers her face with her hands and softly admits “…He kissed me.”

“He kissed you!?” Makoto shouts. “While you were on fire!?”

“I wasn’t - I wasn’t literally on fire! I was just. Like. Burning myse- Whatever! Yes! He kissed me!”

Makoto squeals and cups his cheeks with his palms. “And that got you to stop!? That’s so cute! I love young love!”

She may have had her pyromaniac tentacles removed a long, long time ago, but with how red her
face is, Kayano may as well look to be on fire at this very moment.

“Y… Yeah. It was pretty… nice. It was pretty nice,” Kayano admits. “Anyways. It served as a good enough distraction, and you removed my tentacles afterwards. When I came to, you explained the true story behind how you met Aguri, and how you never meant to get her killed. I realized I had been the one in the wrong. And that the whole year, you had been hurting just as much as me.” Her blush quickly fades as she speaks. And a frown returns to her face as melancholy overtakes the room once more.

“…From there on out I came to care about you for real. Because where I’d risked my life to try and kill you, you risked your life to try and save mine. I learned that… You really cared about me and my family. And that we were… Actually pretty similar, in that self-sacrificing way.”

Makoto decides not to mention that Nagisa had described Aguri similarly. Something tells him that would just make Kayano sadder. It makes him plenty sad as is. To think of a family - Possibly a whole world - Full of people who’d be willing to stand up for anyone but themselves.

“So no. I don’t hate you, if that’s what you’re worried about. I stopped hating Korosensei a very long time ago. You were… A deeply important person to me, Sensei. And it wrecked me to have to lose you, too. It took some time, but I came around. You had that way of getting through to people.” She squeezes his shoulder and smiles sadly. “I’m not mad. I could never be mad. I’m happy you’re here.”

Makoto rests his head on her shoulder. “…I’m happy to be here, too.”

Slowly but surely, the smell of smoke is fading.

It feels like forever before Kayano says anything else.

“Is that all you wanted to talk about?” she asks. “The true story? And whether or not I was still upset?”

“Oh - No, actually,” Makoto admits. Thinking about it, that was like… The opposite of the reason he’d originally wanted to talk to Kayano. He’d just gotten so worried and felt so bad that he couldn’t think of anything else. But now that that’s out of the way… “…I actually wanted to see if there was anything I could do to comfort you.”

Kayano frowns. “Comfort me?”

“I mean… Yeah,” Makoto says. “Your sister’s dead. A… and I didn’t even know until like, two days ago. That must have really hurt. To have to miss her alone. Is… there anything I can do to ease it? Even a little?”

Kayano stares at him with these big sad eyes as her brow furrows. And slowly, she begins to shake her head.

“Oh, Makoto…” she says. “Aguri has… Been gone for a very long time. I’ve started to move on. It still hurts sometimes. Of course I miss her… But… I’ve had a life to live. I haven’t been able to let myself be sad forever. Because I know that’s not what she would have wanted for me. I’m doing so much better now. I appreciate you worrying about me… But it should be the other way around.” She meets Makoto’s eyes. “Is there anything I can do to comfort you?”

Makoto knits at his hands. “I don’t need- I mean, I don’t… Why would I need comforting?”

“You said it yourself. You didn’t know about this until very recently. I’ve had fifteen years to
move on. But you haven’t. If you miss her… If you blame yourself, then please… Let me help. Because I know all about what that feels like. I’m here for you.”

Makoto’s silent. He… somehow still doubts he deserves it. But remembering the way Aguri thought about herself… The way Kayano and even Korosensei thought about themselves, too, he decides he doesn’t want to be that person. If Kayano, who’s suffered the most because of him, has the kindness in her heart to look at him so fondly, even after all he’s done, then he won’t dare spit on it.

Because she’s right. It does hurt. And he wants help.

“I think… I think I’d like to hear more stories about her. And not just stuff about me, or when she died, or what it was like when she was sad. I wanna hear about when she was happy. And her proudest accomplishments. I want to know who she was. Maybe I can never bring her back… but…” He clasps his hands. “I’d like to keep her legacy alive.”

Makoto almost thinks he’s done something wrong when he catches Kayano wipe at the corner of her eye. But when she gives him a bittersweet smile and says “...I can do that,” he decides maybe he’d said the right thing after all.

‘...Is that enough?’ he wonders. There’s still so much more to say. So much more left to do. For his and Kayano’s sake, both.

“Can we also visit her grave sometime?” he asks, voice quieter. “I mean… I’m not sure if I’m allowed to… But…” He hesitates. “I think she’d like some flowers.”

Kayano seems surprised at first. But quickly, she nods. “...I think she’d like that, too.”

It’s not a week later that they set out.

“Do you think she’d prefer tulips or zinnias?”

Makoto supposes he could always go for the typical chrysanthemums, but somehow that seems underwhelming. He’s left her waiting for fifteen years after all, hasn’t he? And she was anything but typical. He… he has to pick something really special!

Kayano stands behind him, carefully eying shelf upon shelf of flowers. “I usually get her hyacinth, but I’m sure she’ll like whatever you pick out.”

Makoto squints, marching from aisle to aisle. He rubs his chin and nods. “I see,” he says. “Did she have a favorite color? That might help a little.”

Kayano gives a tiny laugh. “Oh. That changed all of the time,” she says. “Some pretty common ones were purple and green… But…” She pauses. “Around the time she passed, I think it was yellow.”

Makoto tries his best to ignore the pang of sadness in his gut. Now’s not the time for that. It’s time to… Remember her happily!

(Yellow. Of course it was yellow. Because of him, or the other way around? Had he been yellow for her? He still doesn’t know.)

“I wish I knew… Like… What any of these meant,” he admits. “Flowers have… like… all those super cool meanings, right? It’d be nice to pick out something sorta personal.”
Kayano steps forward, examining a bouquet of roses. “I know a few. Of course, roses are like… Romance. I think daisies are innocence?”

Makoto nods, stepping forward to examine some brightly colored pinkish flowers. That’s when he hears the familiar voice in his mind.

“Roses are typically associated with romance, y’know? But there’s actually way more meanings than that. That’s just red roses! White roses represent purity. Orange roses mean you’re enthusiastic! And yellow roses symbolize when you really really hate someone!”

Makoto takes a step back from where he’d begun to approach a bouquet of yellow roses. Yeah. Something tells him that’s not gonna cut it. He returns his gaze to the pinkish flowers.

“Hollyhock… Huh?” he asks.

“Hollyhock’s ambition. And sunflowers are warmth. I really like thyme, personally. It represents courage.”

Korosensei - Er… The Reaper, snorts. “I don’t see why you’re so invested in that crap,” he says. “It’s never going to help you with assassination.”

“I know,” Damien admits, staring shamefully at his bundle of marigolds. “But I still think it’s nice. Don’t you think it’s important to have more than one skillset?”

“Of course,” The Reaper says. “But trust me when I say that is not the sort you’ll be needing.”

“If you say so…”

Makoto feels another pang of shame. Surrounded by the somewhat sickening smell of flowers, he tries his best to make out Damien’s face.

He absentmindedly notes he should leave him flowers sometime, too. That is before he remembers Damien got stabbed through the heart at the school and disintegrated. People don’t make gravestones for failed serial killers who ended up turning into monsters and dying young.

‘…They should.’ Makoto decides. He deserves them, too. Snatching up a hollyhock or two and a bundle of thyme, he asks Kayano if he can buy flowers for… someone else, too.

Kayano shrugs. “I don’t see why not,” she says. “That’s very thoughtful of you.”

Makoto smiles, carefully handing over the flowers to Kayano, before turning back to the assortment of potential choices for Aguri.

“I still don’t get why you get so into this” The Reaper says another day, not looking up from where he loads his gun.

“You never know,” Damien says. “I think it’s good to have all of your bases covered.”

The Reaper rolls his eyes. “The basics are the basics for a reason. I just can’t see when this will ever come in handy.”

‘Today!’ Makoto decides. Today they’ll come in handy, so please keep talking, Damien!

He rattles off facts when he’s nervous. Lavender’s devotion, and morning glories are affection. Reaching out to brush his hand against a bouquet of amaryllis… “Pride…” He tries to ignore that same haughtiness in his chest.
'You’re wrong. You’re wrong. You don’t know what's important," he tries to cry out into the past.

...Damien was nervous a lot around him.

He learns about what he needs relatively quickly. A crimson rose means mourning, and zinnia represents thoughts of absent friends. Their meanings feel all too accurate when he peers at them from across the store. But he shakes his head nevertheless.

...Fitting, maybe… But happy, no. Aguri had a hard enough life as is. If he’s honoring her memory, he doesn’t want to dwell on his own sadness.

Purple hyacinth 'forgive me,' and astilbe 'I’ll be waiting for you.' It turns out a red carnation means ‘my heart aches.’

No, no… No. Those don’t speak for her. Who decided those were okay meanings for flowers, anyways? Flowers… With their bright cheery colors, and flowers who grow up through the cracks in concrete.

He’d like to get her something nice.

Daisies are innocence, and gardenias are purity. Peonies represent a happy life, and a yellow tulip says “There’s sunshine in your smile.”

He grabs a handful of each, and a single rosemary, just for good measure. He supposes that’s a tad bittersweet, too, but he’d like to think ‘remembrance’ can mean something happy.

...Even if it certainly doesn’t feel like it right now.

He turns to Kayano.

“That’s it?” she asks.

Makoto nods. “I think she’d like all of this.”

Kayano turns a tulip over in her hands “...Yellow, huh?” she asks… And she smiles. “Good choice.”

They check out in due time, arranging the flowers into one beautiful bouquet. And then, wasting no time, they leave the overwhelming flower shop.

Not before Makoto whispers a quick thanks, however. He’s not sure if Damien can hear him, but seeing as how he’d spent his entire life just wanting to be seen, he hopes he knows that his knowledge had come in handy.

Makoto asks Kayano to carry his flowers, while he takes care of Aguri’s.

“I know she’s your sister, but…”

“Hey. It’s okay,” Kayano says. “You picked these out. She’s already gotten plenty of flowers from me.”

They reminisce softly as they make their way across the city and towards the graveyard. They make one or two stops along the way, but Makoto hardly seems to notice.

There’s lots of funny stories about Aguri. Cheerful ones, too. Kayano was too young to remember it clearly, but once she tried to sneak home a stray kitten. Another time she tried to bake brownies
and just about burned the house down.

Makoto laughs.

‘Clumsy.’

The sun is setting over the trees by the time they arrive. Makoto hardly even realizes they’ve made it until Kayano stops him and says “We’re here.”

They weave through and past graves, careful to be respectful. And then, at a grave that looks no different from any other… They stop.

“Is it?” Makoto asks.

“This is it,” Kayano confirms.

It looks so… Small. So underwhelming. He thinks that’s unfair. She saved the whole wide world. She changed his life. She doesn’t deserve some tiny little grave. She deserves… She deserves…

She deserves to still be alive. Something tells him even the biggest grave in the whole wide world would still look underwhelming in comparison to what she deserves.

“So… Uh… What do I do?” Makoto asks.

“You’ve never visited a family member before?” Kayano responds.

“No,” Makoto admits. “Not really.”

She must sense his embarrassment, because Kayano steps forward. “That’s okay,” she says, kneeling beside the grave. “I’ll show you.”

Makoto kneels carefully beside her, making sure not to step on anything.

Kayano retrieves a bucket of water and a small dipper she’d stopped by to grab. Gently, she washes down Aguri’s grave, and motions for Makoto to help.

He swears he feels his hand shake as he takes the dipper from her. And it hasn’t stopped shaking any by the time he returns it.

“We should weed it, too,” Kayano says. “Before we place the flowers down. That shouldn’t take long, though.”

Indeed, it doesn’t.

This feels… Too easy. Too mundane. Like it doesn’t fix a thing.

Sitting there by Aguri’s grave, he wonders if her bones are really down there. If she’s staring up at him from below. Does she recognize him? Or… is he too different now? He… hopes she still likes him. He hopes she’s excited he stopped by.

(...He’d get it if she wasn’t)

“Okay,” Kayano says. “You can place the flowers down now. I grabbed some incense.”

Again: meticulously, they place them where they belong. Kayano lights the incense. And that’s that. Even after he adjusts the positioning of the flowers half a dozen times, it feels like he still
hasn’t done enough.

...How could he ever? After what he did to her? Everyone keeps saying she’s happy with the way she died, but he can’t possibly fathom how anyone could ever be okay with that.


“Well… Usually, this is where I pray,” Kayano says. “...Would you like a moment alone, or…?”


“Okay. Then go ahead. Just place your hands together, and say whatever you’d like.”

...Whatever he’d like? He’s… still not sure what he’d like. What he’d really like is his friend back, but it’s clear that’s not happening. It’s just the two of them alone. And she’s gone now. And he doesn’t know what to say, and he never has. But he has to try. Or else this will never mean anything.

He shuts his eyes and clasps his hands tight.

“Uh… Hi,” he says in a tiny voice. “I’m here to visit.” He pauses. “This is Korosensei, for the record. Or… Uh… Reaper. Or whatever you knew me by. I’m back now.” He frowns. “I miss you. I didn’t remember you until recently, and I’m really sorry for that… But I miss you. You really did a lot for me. I’m sorry I wasn’t very thankful.”

“You sound like a really good person, Aguri. I bet I was… really lucky to know you. And I wish I’d gotten the chance to know you now. Because… I care about you. And it makes me sad to think about you. But I know you wouldn’t want me to be sad. So that just kind of makes me feel bad, too.”

He shakes his head. This is getting depressing quick. That’s not what she’d want, either. “I… Uh… Picked out flowers for you. Happy ones, too!” he says. “I hope you like them. The daisies represent innocence. And the other pretty white ones are purity. The yellow ones mean… You had a really nice smile, and the rosemary means I’ll always remember you. The pink ones represent a happy life. Which… I hope you had. I hope you were happy with how things turned out.”

...He can’t imagine any way she could be.

“...I’m sorry if you’re not.”

He quickly sits up. No. He’s doing it again. Don’t… think about that. For her sake. “Nagisa’s a teacher now, did you know? Remember? The little guy we taught! He’s so good at it. And… and he’s really happy! He’s married to all these really nice people. K… Karma the troublemaker, and your little sister, and this really nice guy from the main campus. They’re sooo cute! I bet they’d make you gush.”

“We all miss you. I got to learn about you in class a few days ago. It seems like… You really changed the world for the better. A lot of people might not credit you for that, but I really think you saved a lot of people. Maybe everyone. I wish we could have saved you too.”

“I don’t really know why I’m here. Uh… alive I mean. And why you’re not. I don’t really know what I did to deserve it… So it should probably be you here with your little sister right now, not me. I’m sorry for that, too. I dunno if you can hear me right now. Or if you can see me or touch me, but... I really hope you know that’s true. That I wish you were here right now. More than
anything.”

...Even if it would mean he wouldn’t be.

“I miss you. I hope you’re happy wherever you are.”

He sits, silent, for a moment… Desperately searching for something else to say. And when he finds nothing, he reluctantly opens his eyes.

...He hopes that was enough.

He swears he catches Kayano wiping a tear out of the corner of her eye. But she’s quickly composed when he looks her way.

“Did I… do it right?” he asks.

“You did it perfectly,” she says.

“...She’d like it?”

“She’d love it,” she responds.

They sit there for another minute. And then they stand. Staring down at the flowers... Before turning away from Aguri and from everything that’s beautiful.

Kayano’s quiet as they make their way across the graveyard. But as they step out back onto the streets, she turns Makoto’s way.

“...I’m happy you’re here, for the record,” she says.

“Huh?” Makoto asks.

“I dunno if you… Worry that I resent you or that I think I don’t think you deserve to be here or something. But I don’t. I’m happy to see you.”

“...Even if you could be seeing her instead?”

Kayano sighs. “That’s not how life works, Makoto. There’s not some perfect balance. You’re... not here because she’s not. I’m sure... It has to be something more meaningful than that. So no. I wouldn’t rather have her here. You make me happy. And you make my family happy, too.”

Makoto quietly nods.

“You make me happy too, Akari.”

His footsteps sound thunderous in comparison to the soft chitter of cicadas in the evening air.

“Can we stop by again sometime?”

“Of course,” Kayano says. “I think Aguri would love that.”

Makoto stops. “...Can I ask you one more thing?”

“Of course,” Kayano repeats. “What is it?”

“You knew her best. Do you think I’d still be able to make her happy? Even now? If she... knew me? Or would she think I’m too different?”
Kayano shakes her head and ruffles Makoto’s hair. “Oh, Makoto,” she says with a bittersweet laugh “You're so thoughtful. Don’t even worry about it. You’d make her happier than ever.”

What is wrong with Makoto!?

Fumiko lets out a frustrated scream and covers her face with her pillow.

It’s been, like… an hour. He usually won’t get out of her face even if she wants him too. Why on earth isn’t he responding to her texts!? Most of the time she wouldn’t particularly mind, but god damn if she hasn’t been on edge lately.

Life is weird and crazy and bad and wrong when you’re quickly becoming convinced you’re somehow connected to your technically-not-dead best friend’s very-much-dead and also incredibly-different-from-you yearlong fling. She’d like some answers, thank you very much! And it’s pretty clear after ruminating on this for a solid week that she’s not going to get any on her own.

[11/2/2030 6:07 PM:] [Fumiko]: Hey. Can we talk?

Though it’s also very quickly becoming clear she’s not going to get any from Makoto, either, because that was almost a half-hour ago, and she still hasn’t heard a peep from him. It’s not like her message is marked at “Read at 6:09” or anything, either. Just blank. Does he seriously have his phone on mute for once on his life!?

(Well, if so, wonderful for him, actually, because she’s been begging him how to learn how to place his phone on vibrate for months now. But inconvenient time, Himura!)

It’s just… not like him. It’s weird and it’s silent and she’s become used to his presence. He’s nosy and he never shuts up, and despite herself, she’s grown fond of it. It’s hard not to worry. Did something happen?

It’s a Thursday, so it’s not like she can check up on him in person. She’s still having to pretend to be a “normal functioning person” in front of her parents, and that means staying in their watchful eye for half of the week. Turns out it’s hard work getting emancipation at age thirteen, even with help. And the whole ‘secretly’ thing isn’t helping her case, either.

She’s… not really good at this whole hard work thing. She wants to be. And she’s trying really hard. Kayano, Gakushuu, and Karma are helping her learn how to do the sorts of things she’ll need to be able to do when she lives on her own. But somehow that still doesn’t feel fast enough. She needs to get out of here soon. Before she grows up like her parents or gets caught in the midst of her scheme or…

“He’s a good man, Aguri,” Dad says.

“I’m sure he is.” Er. “I know he is. I’ve MET him. But…” She twiddles her fingers anxiously. “I dunno. Don’t you think I’m a little young to be getting married?”

“Nonsense. Plenty of people get married at your age.”

“I just want to find… like… the one, or whatever.”

Dad sighs deeply. “Listen. Please. Just try it. For me? If it doesn’t work out, it doesn’t work out. But the future of the company is resting on this. On you. Unless you want Akari’s work to have to carry the family from now on.”
There’s a jolt of panic in her gut. “Of- of course not,” she says, shaking her head. “I’ll do it.”

“Wonderful,” Dad says, patting her back. “I knew you were better than that. She’s just thirteen, after all.”

He leaves the room. And her eyes meet the mirror, and she wants to whisper that she’s just twenty-four. And she has her whole life ahead of her. And while she’s trying her best to look on the bright side of every situation she faces, it’s becoming harder each day.

...Fumiko shakes her own head and grimaces. No. It’s not like that. It’s not about -

Christ. She’s wanted to do this wayyyy before any of this. She wishes it would stop intruding where it doesn’t belong.

(Still... She’s only thirteen, too, isn’t she? Where are her bigger sisters protecting her?)

No. She can’t think about it. Won’t think about it. It’s not worth dwelling on. Not yet. Not before she gets the facts and before she talks to Makoto. If... It turns out this is all some sort of fabrication of her stressed psyche, she doesn’t want to spend time mourning a life she’s never lived. She has more important things on her hands than ‘arranged marriages’ and ‘deeply disturbed families following her at every turn.’

...Like her friend not responding to her texts! What the heck, Makoto!?

She wonders if Kiyoshi’s seen him. He doesn’t stop by Nagisa’s place every day, but it’s worth a shot.

[11/2/2030 6:42 PM:] [Fumiko]: Have you seen Makoto?

...Wait.

[11/2/2030 6:43 PM:] [Fumiko]: Oh. I’m sorry. That was an incredibly rude greeting.

[11/2/2030 6:43 PM:] [Fumiko]: How have you been today and also where on earth is Makoto?

He’s a sensitive, special boy. She’d feel bad if she didn’t at least try to make him feel a little included.

It’s not long before he replies. Someone is cordial, and that’s why he’s her best friend, even over a certain octopus.

(...A joke, obviously. The more she thinks about it, the more she thinks she loves them equally. She hopes they feel the same about her.)

[11/2/2030 6:44 PM:] [Kiyoshi]: Uhhh... I saw him earlier. But he headed out just a little while ago with Kayano.

[11/2/2030 6:45 PM:] [Kiyoshi]: My day was wonderful, btw c:

Fumiko squints. What on earth does that- What on earth does that mean?

[11/2/2030 6:45 PM:] [Fumiko]: ??????

[11/2/2030 6:45 PM:] [Kiyoshi]: The Makoto thing, or me having a good day?

[11/2/2030 6:46 PM:] [Fumiko]: I THINK YOU KNOW

[11/2/2030 6:46 PM:] [Kiyoshi]: Yeah. They left maybe… Forty-five minutes ago? He said they were going to the graveyard.

[11/2/2030 6:47 PM:] [Fumiko]: They were WHAT?

[11/2/2030 6:47 PM:] [Kiyoshi]: I don’t know! He said it was some Korosensei thing.

_Fumiko is starting to have a bad feeling about this._ Fingers shaking, she asks

[11/2/2030 6:47 PM:] [Fumiko]: Did he say who they were visiting?

[11/2/2030 6:48 PM:] [Kiyoshi]: Uhhh… No. Do you think it’s serious?


[11/2/2030 6:48 PM:] [Fumiko]: I have a weird feeling about this. I’m gonna text him just in case.


[11/2/2030 6:49 PM:] [Fumiko]:

[11/2/2030 6:49 PM:] [Fumiko]: Talk to you later.


[11/2/2030 6:48 PM:] [Kiyoshi]:

She sends him a quick purple heart back, before turning her attention to her texts with Makoto. Change of plans: If he was visiting her grave, they have MUCH more serious things to discu-

... _Oh! Shut up, Fumiko!_ It’s NOT your grave. How narcissistic can you be!? Get your head out of your ass and stop thinking about yourself for TEN SECONDS. He’s hurting, and he needs you.

...Either way, she thinks it’s a good idea they talk.

She starts to type a message, but he finally responds to hers about halfway through.


[11/2/2030 6:50 PM:] [Makoto]: I left my phone at home on accident.

[11/2/2030 6:50 PM:] [Fumiko]: You WHAT?

[11/2/2030 6:51 PM:] [Makoto]: I left my phone at home on accident.

“No. Not that. The graveyard thi—” Fumiko sighs, and quickly realizes her bewildered sputtering isn’t going to get through to Makoto halfway across the city.

[11/2/2030 6:52 PM:] [Fumiko]: Can I call you? We should talk.

He’s already notorious for hiding how he feels. It’s too hard to gauge his mood over text.
[11/2/2030 6:53 PM:] [Makoto]: Uhhhh… Sure. But aren’t you at home? How are you gonna deal with your parents?

[11/2/2030 6:54 PM:] [Fumiko]: Don’t even worry about it.

Even if they aren’t perfect, it turns out the life skills she’s learned over the past half a year may come in handy after all.

[11/2/2030 6:54 PM:] [Fumiko]: I’ll call you when I’m outside.

She attempts to pocket her phone, but quickly remembers that despite any ‘irrational hunches,’ she may secretly be someone else, in the reality of the situation she’s a spoiled, rich, and uptight little girl wearing a skirt. She doesn’t have fucking pockets. What rich girl’s clothes have pockets!? Those are ‘aesthetically rancid.’

She settles for sliding her phone in between her arm instead. Then, taking a deep breath, she pushes up the window and brushes her curtains aside. Heaving her body over the windowsill, she catches her foot on the paneling and quickly skitters down the side of the house.

She hops onto the ground with a thump. She takes a brief glance around, just to make sure no-one spotted her, then makes a mad dash across the estate. A skip to her step, she almost feels proud of herself for her mischievous little accomplishment. At least… until she remembers Makoto is having a less than enjoyable time right now.

She hurries up and crosses over to the lake on the east of the property. If there’s anywhere she knows she won’t be caught, it’s sitting out by the lake. After being reprimanded in childhood for both trying to jump in and attempting to pet the geese, she’s since realized it’s simply another aesthetic choice. No-one actually uses or visits the lake. Much less in early November. She’ll be fine.

Now that she thinks about it, it’s unbearably chilly out. And she shivers as she steps onto the dewy grass surrounding the lake. She wishes she’d had the foresight to grab a coat, but she supposes Makoto waits for no-one, and that she’ll survive. If worst comes to worst, she’ll just have to catch a cold.

Plopping down, she retrieves her phone. And after quickly lowering her volume, she opens up her contacts and dials Makoto.

It’s maybe ten seconds before he manages to pick up.

“Hey!” he says. “That was quick. So what are you doing about your parents?”

“I climbed out the window,” she says matter-of-factly. “For having such a large property, it turns out there’s some parts of it they never check. We’ll have privacy here.”

Makoto gives a little giggle. “Jeez. You gotta smuggle me into your house again sometime. Starting to sound like you’re becoming an expert of it.”

Fumiko’s nose wrinkles. “Absolutely not.”


“It’s fine,” Fumiko says, conveniently ignoring the fact that she was screaming into her pillow fifteen minutes ago. “That doesn’t matter anymore, anyways. I just wanted to talk about…” She pauses. “Insignificant things, I suppose. But now more important things have come to light. Is it
really true you went to a graveyard?"

“Mmmm,” Makoto says, some of the enthusiasm fading from his voice. “Me and Kayano. I remembered some stuff recently, and I decided it would be a good idea to visit an old friend.”

Fumiko’s quiet, feeling some of that same enthusiasm seep out of her. And heart aching, she turns her phone over anxiously in her hands.

“An old friend?”

“...Yeah,” Makoto says quickly. “So... Uh... Were you there when Nagisa taught about Aguri Yukimura? I know I freaked out like halfway through that lesson, but...”

“No,” Fumiko interjects. “I was there. At least... for most of it. She sounded... Really important to you.”

“Yeah,” Makoto says. “Yeah...” He sighs. “Anyways. I decided it would be a good idea to... Like... Visit her or whatever. After everything she did for me, it only felt right. So me and Kayano grabbed some flowers and cleaned her grave and all. It was nice... I guess... But...”

“But?”

“...Nevermind,” Makoto says. “I wouldn’t want to go all downer on you. Anyways. How have you been?”

Fumiko shakes her head. She knows he can’t see it, but... “Don’t do this, Makoto,” she says. “I don’t mind. I wanna be able to know how you’re doing, too. How was the graveyard?”

Makoto’s silent for a long minute.

“...Quiet,” he finally admits. “It was just really... quiet. Which I guess is what you’d expect from a graveyard, but it was kind of sad, too. She just wasn’t that sort of person.”

“She wasn’t?” Fumiko asks.

“Nah,” Makoto decides. “...She was just filled with so much love for everything. It messed me up to think that everything she was was supposed to be represented with one little stone. After everything she was... After everything she did... I can’t imagine her being happy like that. I guess I wanted closure over everything that happened. I mean... I got her killed and all. But I think I just feel weirder than before. Like... I finally get that she’s really gone. And I hate it. Because I wish I could have known her.”

Fumiko takes a deep breath. Glancing up from her phone and out towards the setting sun, she sighs. “You didn’t kill her, Makoto. You know that, right?”

“Everyone keeps saying that... But...” Makoto pauses. “I mean... Yeah. I guess. Maybe I didn’t stab her. But... I still let her die. I still let her want to die. I mean... That was it, wasn’t it? She framed it as some heroic thing, but I’m not the only one who got the subtext that it was suicide, right?”

Fumiko bites her lip. “No,” she admits. “I suppose not. I could see it.”

(Shes bleeding out onto the concrete. And shes warm in his arms. And shes so, so relieved.)

“Does that mean I wasn’t good enough? That I couldn’t give her a reason to live?” Makoto asks.
"It makes me think maybe… I was so, so close to saving her, and in hurting all those people, I made her finally give up."

"I think you’re overthinking it,” Fumiko admits. “She didn’t know that she was going to die. She just…”

"Didn’t care when she did,” Makoto finishes.

“Yeah. She just… didn’t care when she did,” Fumiko repeats. And that terrible, torn feeling is ripping through her gut once more. Incomprehensible pain. She wants to keel over and sob.

...She doesn’t.

She settles on, “It’s not your job to save other people, Makoto,” instead.

“She saved me,” Makoto says softly.

...And the both of them sit silent, wondering if that's really true.

Finally, Makoto speaks up once more, “...Okay. Yeah. I know,” he says. “I get what you’re saying. I’m sorry. It just feels like there’s a lot of people I’ve really failed. I’m so scared of losing anyone else.”

“You won’t,” Fumiko says. “You’re not going to lose anyone else. I promise.”

“Mmm,” Makoto says. “I guess you’re right. But I’m not sure protecting the people I know now or leaving some silly flowers on their graves will ever really make it up to the people I couldn’t protect. Y’know?”


She wishes she could hug him from across the phone. It’s a recurring feeling as of late. Wanting to hold him and tell him that everything will be okay. She’s not sure if that means something, too, or if she’s just getting more comfortable expressing herself around her friends, but it’s become something persistent.

She wants to let him know that she cares. She wants to let him know that it’s okay. She wants to let him know that it’s all over now. And she wants to let him that she could never hate him. But she’s never been good with words. Much less expressing such complex ideas through them. Ideas she’s not even certain she can believe. A hug is much, much simpler, and much more effective. But sitting here in the chilly autumn air and hearing Makoto’s voice crack across the phone, she supposes her words will have to do just this once.

“Besides, to me it sounds like… You don’t need to make it up to Aguri at all. Obviously I’m… No expert, and I can’t talk for anyone else you hurt, but… From what Nagisa said, I don’t think you hurt Aguri at all. In fact… I think it sounds like you made her really happy.”

“...You really think so?”

“Of course I thi-” Fumiko shakes her head. “Okay. No. Think about it this way. Obviously I… don’t know what was going on in Aguri’s head. But if I was living some dismal, depressing life… If I felt trapped, and some… Goofy, sunshiny dork walked into my life… If he gave me a reason to get up in the morning, and convinced me people still cared for me, and that it wasn’t too late for me, and encouraged me to step outside of my comfort zone…” It's slowly dawning on her that she’s talking about herself, not Aguri. But that’s okay, just this once. Maybe they felt one in the
Same. “Well… I’d be really happy.”

At first she thinks she’s gone too far. Projected too much. But when Makoto speaks up, and she can practically hear him smile from across the phone, she decides, maybe… Just maybe, she’d said the right thing.

“I’d be really happy, too.”

“Try not to focus on what makes you sad. Aguri sounds like… Well, she sounds like a person who didn’t want to make people sad. Who didn’t want to make you sad. She’d want you to make the most of what you have.”

“I know,” Makoto says. “That’s why I feel bad for feeling this way. But I don’t know how to make it stop. I don’t want to like… Hide it again. Kiyoshi doesn’t like when I do that. And besides… The reason me and Aguri bonded in the first place is because she could see right through that. I wouldn’t want to prevent myself from meeting anyone else just as wonderful because I don’t wanna try to be true to myself.”

...He pauses.

“Though maybe I already have.”

Fumiko thinks she’s going to cry.

Nope. Nope. Not in front of him. She’s not flattered her dumb friends see so much in her. No way. No way.

She wipes at her eyes stubbornly, and decides ‘Maybe way,’ when the back of her hand comes back moist.

“You’re too sweet,” she says softly, cracking a smile. “I guess I don’t have a lot of advice, because I’m not really good at talking about how I feel myself… But… I don’t think there’s anything wrong with letting yourself be sad for a little bit. Just… don’t feel guilty. Try to move on.”

“Yeah,” Makoto says. “...Try to move on.”

“I’m sorry,” Fumiko quickly adds on. “That probably sounded insensitive. I know you don’t just ‘move on’ from something like that, but-”

“No. No. I get it,” Makoto says. “It has to be possible. Kayano’s moved on, after all. It’s just… Hard to envision right now. My entire life as Korosensei, or… At least, what I had left of it, I missed her with everything I had. More than anything, raising her class, I just wished she could be there to see it. Wondered what she’d think.”

“I’m sure… she would have thought it was beautiful.”

How could she not?

“And then, when it came to the end of my life… I wasn’t scared. I’d spent all year preparing for it. To be killed by the people I loved most. Just like she taught me. And even with my heart aching, having to say goodbye to my wonderful students, I couldn’t stop thinking ‘At least we’ll finally be together again.’”

...It takes all of Fumiko’s self-restraint to resist blurting out, ‘Maybe you already are.’
“But now I’m here. And she’s not. And I don’t know why. And that hurts. More than anything.”

There’s a long moment of silence.

“Maybe… that’s my punishment. Maybe I’m here… because I deserve to be all alone.”

And Fumiko’s heart stops.

Because that’s all it takes to feel like she’s been pierced through the gut all over again.

Her hand trembles softly and tears well in her eyes as she shakes her head. “You’re not alone, Makoto. You’ll never be alone. I promise.”

Makoto replies in a quiet voice. “…You’re right. I’m sorry,” he admits. “I’m not thinking about what I do have. I can’t really be being punished if I have you guys by my side, can I?” He lets out a tired laugh. “…That’s no form of suffering. I guess what I’m really trying to say is… I’m not alone, but sometimes it still feels like I am. Like… Like…” He sighs. “Whatever. It probably sounds like I’m being insensitive again.”

“No. It doesn’t,” Fumiko says. “I get it. It must feel like…” She pauses. “Like you’re the only person in the world who knows what you’re going through.”

“Yeah,” Makoto says. “Like that.”

The sunset shimmers over the lake. And the faint glow of the moon is beginning to make itself seen in the sky.

“…Do you… Think that’s true?” he asks.

Fumiko frowns. “Think what?”

“That… I really am alone in this,” Makoto says. “…What if… There really is no-one else going through the same thing out there? Then what? Is it all just… gone?” His voice trembles and cracks. He sounds just about ready to cry.

And it breaks Fumiko’s heart. It breaks it for the hundredth time today and the thousandth time this week. She hates seeing the strongest - The kindest person she knows upset. And… she hates that it could be her fault. Because of… her bad decisions. Her ignorance and her rashness and her self-sacrifice. Because of her denial, and because of all the things she’s never known up until this moment.

She opens her mouth to speak, but when she does nothing comes out. Try as she may to will herself to tell him no, he’s not alone. No, she gets it, she can’t bring herself to. Because… She doesn’t get it. How could she ever? Makoto’s been suffering for months. She doesn’t know she’s Aguri. If she speaks up now, she’ll never be able to take that back.

...And if she’s wrong, then she’ll be getting his hopes up for nothing.

She won’t be the reason for the thousandth-and-one time his heart breaks.

(He’s sobbing, his tears dripping down his cheeks and landing on her bloodied shirt.)

(No. Never again. She’s already been responsible for his heartache each and every one of the thousand times before.)

“Fumiko,” Makoto repeats, voice quivering. “Am I the only person like me? You’re… you’re
smart. You’re reasonable. You’re good at these things. Please. Tell me. Do you think I’m the only person like myself out there?”

And knowing he’s not, Fumiko shakes her head.

“No,” she finally admits. “I don’t. And… I’m not just saying that to make you feel better. Nothing… happens in isolation. At least, I’d like to think so. The phrase ‘history repeats itself’ exists for a reason. No-one… experiences anything alone. I’m… sure you’re not the only person out there who was someone else a very long time ago.”

“I’m… sure you’re not the only person who’s hurting. I’m sure you’re not the only person who has things you regret. And I’m sure you’re not the only person who feels alone right now. I’m sure… There’s people like… People like Aguri out there. Right now. And they don’t know what to feel. But… one day they’re going to meet you. And everything will be okay. Because they won’t be alone anymore. And neither will you. And… that means they’ll finally be coming home.”

When Makoto’s silent on the other end of the line, and Fumiko’s heart stops in her chest, she once again wonders if she’d said the wrong thing.

That’s when she hears Makoto crying.

Gently hiccuping, he sputters for air and snifflies.

“I-” She sputters. “I mean, that’s just what I think. I could always be wrong. I-I’m really no expert on this stu-”

“No,” Makoto says. “Don’t apologize. I just…” He pauses. “...Think that’s a really nice thought.”

“...I think so too.” And watching the reflection of the moon in the lake, Fumiko’s eyes well with tears as well. Try as she may, something tells her she’s not going to be able to resist crying tonight.

And so she doesn’t fight it. Instead, she just lets herself cry with him. And softly, she whispers “Don’t even worry about it. I’m sure you’ll be together again soon.”

...She doesn’t need to see Makoto to know he’s smiling.

She’s not sure how long they cry for. She’s not even sure if Makoto knows she’s crying too. But as the stars flicker to life overhead, and the night comes alive, they manage to catch their breath.

“...You always know what to say,” Makoto admits. “...Thanks, Fumiko.”

“No need. It’s just what you do for a friend.”

“I’m really lucky to have what I have now. I know I probably made you feel a bit worthless… But… I wouldn’t trade you for the world… ‘kay?”


“Really?” Makoto asks.

“Really.”

Makoto gives a tiny laugh. “Happy to hear it.”

And Fumiko laughs back as she wipes at her eyes.
Finally, Makoto admits she should probably go. “I wouldn’t wanna bug you any longer,” he admits. “This was nice… But… It’s getting late. I don’t want you to get in trouble with your parents.”

“Are you sure?” Fumiko asks. “...I wanna make sure you’re okay. Before I hang up.”

“I’ll be fine,” Makoto says. “This was… More than enough. Thank you for checking up on me. But I’ll… Be okay. I promise.”

“Okay. I’ll be holding you to that.”

Makoto laughs again. “I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

“...See you tomorrow, Makoto.”

“See you too.”

And with that, she hangs up, wondering if she’d said enough. Staring down at her phone, then up at the moon, she sits on his words. Drowns in his tears and in his embrace. He’d said this was more than enough. But she knows that’s not the truth. Because she still doesn’t know what to do.

That… World she told him about. A world where Korosensei and Aguri can truly be together again. Is she the only one preventing that world from existing? Her… Her doubts? Her insecurities? Or… Are they right?

Is she a liar, or is she on the brink of something life-changing? For… The both of them.

She just doesn’t know.

...But there’s one thing she does know.

She can’t hesitate for one moment longer. She can’t let herself get caught up in ‘what-ifs’ or ‘what-if-nots.’ Because Makoto is hurting. And she is too. She needs to get to the bottom of this. Or she really will be the cause of his heartache no matter what she does.

Because if she’s wrong, then all of this will be for nothing. But if she’s right, she has an obligation to prove it. For Makoto’s sake, if not own.

She swipes up her phone once more. And she dials another all-too-familiar number.

Kiyoshi picks up on the other end of the phone, sounding groggy.

“You know… When you said you were going to ‘talk to me later,’ I didn’t realize you meant so soo-”

But now is no time for jokes.

“Kiyoshi, I need your help.”

There’s silence, as he seems to let that sink in. But he must catch the desperation in her voice, because cautiously, he replies.

“...With what?”

“It’s… complicated. And this is going to sound stupid. But please: just hear me out, Kiyoshi. You are the smartest, most dependable person I know. I’d… I’d trust you with anything. Because…
you're a realist. You know when to be skeptical, but you know when to have faith, too. I think… I think you could figure anything out. That's why… I need you to believe me. Just for one moment. You don’t have to believe what I’m about to tell you in the long run. In fact, I don’t want you to. If I’m wrong… I want you to tell me that! But I need you to consider something. For me. Please.”

“I…” Kiyoshi drifts off. “I’m not really sure what you’re saying, but I’m… uh… glad you have that much faith in me. I’d never think anything you said was stupid, Fumiko. What do you want to ask me about? I’ll consider it. I promise.”

Shutting her eyes, Fumiko takes a deep breath inward.

“I think I’m Aguri Yukimura.”

Chapter End Notes

Chapter 24! It's finally here! I know it hasn't actually been that long, but after nearly a straight week of playing Pokemon I'm in a goddamn daze and every day feels like a millennium.

This was a fun chapter to write! I'm glad I finally got to have Kayano and Makoto talk a little. And additionally I'm glad he finally got to remember her going feral. Fun fact: Very early on in the fic (I think... Chapter 9 or 10,) it's said that when Makoto first started remembering Korosensei stuff he noted that the shed was different but he didn't know why. Now he knows why! He's finally remembered it FUCKING COMBUSTED when Kayano went kamikaze.

All those flower meanings mentioned in the flowershop scene are true, for the record. Or at least according to rando flower websites I looked up. I actually wrote that scene a few weeks back and I remember it very distinctly because I woke up to write it the night the new Bojack Horseman episodes came out./ I'm not sure how many of you know this: But I LOVE Bojack Horseman. It's my goddamn crack. But I have a personal rule that I don't allow myself to watch Youtube or Netflix before I write for the day because I know I'll never get anything done if I don't. It was SO goddamn painful having to look up FUCKING FLOWER MEANINGS when I just wanted to watch Bobo The Sad Zebra. That said, there is a little reference thrown in there because of it. Hollyhocks are the first flower mentioned by Damien solely because I wanted to give a shout out to Bojack's best girl.

Overall this was a very... Tender chapter. In between Fumiko's conversation with Makoto, and the scene with Makoto at the graveyard, I weeped SEVERAL times while writing and proofreading this. This chapter made me insanely emotional, and I hope it got through to you all in that same sharp, painful way.

But hey! Despite all the pain: I DO have some good news. And that news is that Kiyoshi's FINALLY relevant. He's been on a bit of the backburner for the past two chapters, but I couldn't ignore my favorite baby boy for too much longer. Fumiko's coming to him to discuss her... Dilemma, and it seems she wants some advice, so expect lots of Kiyoshi over the next chapter or two.

Some songs that helped me write this chapter were Dead Mom from Beetlejuice (They don't write enough songs about dead sisters, so I had to improvise), The A Team by Ed
Sheeran, Above The Clouds of Pompeii by Bears Den, Woke Up new by The Mountain Goats, Strangers by Scratch 182, If I Could Tell her from Dear Evan Hansen, and Boats and Birds by Gregory and the Hawk.

I'll be updating in either a week or two weeks. I'm not certain yet. Either way, I hope to see you soon! Make sure to let me know what you thought, and I hope you enjoyed!
"...Okay. So let me get this straight. One more time, just to clarify. Last Wednesday after the incident with Makoto you had a fever dream you were Aguri Yukimura. And ever since then the flashbacks haven't stopped?"

"Well, it sounds unhinged when you put it like *that.*"

"It sounds unhinged no matter *how* you put it."

Kiyoshi must notice Fumiko's frown, because he shakes his head and sighs.

"It's not that I don't believe you."

"I know."

"I'm just... you get why I'm skeptical, right?"

"Seeing as how I've explicitly asked you to be skeptical, I'd be rather mad if you weren't."

"Well, I'm glad we're all on the same page here."

The chilly November wind nips at their skin. Seated on a bench outside of Constellate, Fumiko's relieved to have her scarf on hand today. It seems to be getting colder outside with each passing week-- and if she weren't discussing something so insanely important to her, there's no way in hell she'd be sitting out here discussing *anything* with Kiyoshi at this temperature. But she'd already told Makoto to go ahead and start to make his way towards Nagisa's place... that they'd 'catch up.' There's nothing much she can do to back out now.

Because if there's anything more suspicious than one secret conversation with Kiyoshi, it's multiple. She'd prefer to get this out of the way as soon as she can. And seeing as how Kiyoshi had insisted on discussing this in person as opposed to over the phone, here they are.

"I'm just not sure what you're asking of me here, Fumiko. I'm happy you confided in me, but what can I do?"

"I want you to help me figure out if I'm right about this or not."

"Am I really the best person for that?" Kiyoshi admits, shifting uncomfortably. "I'm sure Makoto would-"

"*Makoto can't know,*" Fumiko interrupts. "This is too important to him. Makoto is the most sensitive person we know, Kiyoshi. He visited m- her *grave* last Friday. Can you imagine how he'd react if I told him about this, and then it turned out I really *was* making all of this up? I'd break his heart. He'd never want to see me again."

"That's not true..." Kiyoshi mumbles.

"Okay. Perhaps not. But undeniably it would hurt him, yes?"

Kiyoshi's quiet for a long moment.
"...Okay. Yeah. Probably," he admits. "Shiota-sensei, the-

Fumiko interrupts once more. "No. Not Shiota-sensei. He'd believe me too quickly."

"Yukimura-san-

"Are you hearing yourself?" Fumiko asks. "If I tell Akari before I know anything for certain, I'm in the exact same situation as I'd be with Makoto... if not worse. You can list off anyone you want, but I'll always have the same answer. Makoto's too sensitive. It's too personal to Akari, and Shiota-sensei will believe anything. As for Asano-san and Akabane-san, Asano's too skeptical. He won't humor me for a moment. And Akabane-san is... well, Akabane-san! He'll be the opposite of helpful."

Kiyoshi opens his mouth to speak, raising a finger. But just as quickly, he lowers it. Brow furrowing in frustration, he quickly realizes she has a point.

"Kiyoshi... you aren't just the best person to help me with this. You are the only person who can help me with this. I'm depending on you. I know it's a lot to ask... but you're smart. Please. Help me figure out if I'm lying to myself here, or if I'm just in denial about something that could change my life forever."

Kiyoshi pinches the brow of his nose. "I mean... okay. I want to. If it's important to you, I want to. But how do you want me to do that, Fumiko? I'm not a mindreader."

Fumiko falls silent, fidgeting with her scarf. Admittedly, she doesn't have much of an idea, either. But...

"...I want you to listen to everything I've told you, and consider it from an unbiased position. Compare... what's happening to me to what happened to Makoto. Or at least... give me your verdict. I just want to know what you think. It doesn't have to be definitive. I just want... another opinion on this. Is that too much to ask?"

"No. Of course not, Fumiko. But I'm going to need more informa-"

"A- and don't be weird about it," Fumiko adds on "Don't... like... start seeing me as just Aguri. If I tell anyone else, it'll change how they see me forever. But you didn't know her. So... so if we decide I'm wrong, then you can just drop it and pretend this never happened."

Fumiko twiddles her fingers, giving Kiyoshi a desperate look.

"...Right?"

Kiyoshi stares back. "...Will you please let me talk?" he asks quietly.

And Fumiko's cheeks flush with embarrassment. "Of... of course," she says, gaze drifting downward. "My apologies. This is just... a strange time for me. I didn't mean to speak over you."

"...First of all: Yes, of course we can drop this, Fumiko. If it turns out... you don't think you're right about this, or it starts making you uncomfortable, I'll never bring it up again. I hope that goes without saying. Second of all: This isn't my decision to make. I'll help you, but I can't 'decide you're wrong.' I'll help you come to a conclusion on your own by compiling evidence to the best of my abilities. But third of all: I'll need more information before I can even begin to help you with that."

Fumiko's shoulders lower. "Okay," she says, choosing not to comment on the 'her decision' bit for now. "Fair enough. But what kind of information?"
Kiyoshi brings his hand to his chin. He'd seemed hesitant about this at first, but she can see the little cogs in his brain starting to turn.

"...Well... First of all, keep me updated on anything else you remember. Not just that, but how you remember it. Dreams. Nightmares. While you're awake. Are they like literal flashbacks, or more subtle hunches? Tell me about every sort. I'll talk to Makoto and see what it's been like for him. Then I can begin to make a comparison. Second of all, I'll see if any of your memories can be verified by fact. If you tell me something that Yukimura-san or Makoto tells me about separately, then that has to mean it really happened. Maybe I can... Maybe I can ask them about things, then quiz you on them! If this isn't real, there's no way you'll remember the same things they remember."

"Of course," Fumiko says. "That makes sense."

Her heart is beginning to race. They're... really coming up with a plan, aren't they!? He's right! With his help, she's finally on the right track!

"When do we begin?" she asks.

"Begin?" Kiyoshi asks. "Well... Uh... I guess this 'study,' has already started, but I can try to talk to Makoto and Yukimura-san soon. In the meantime, you just keep me updated. And then... how about in a week, we regroup for real, and compare our information? I'm not sure if we'll be able to make a real conclusion in that span of time, but if it doesn't work out we can always expand our study period. And if it does work... well, then we'll have our answer!" He pauses. "Or at least... Some inkling of it. I'm not sure it's very possible to definitively come to a conclusion on this sort of matter, but you know what I mean."

Fumiko laughs. "Yeah. I know what you mean."

A week... That's no time at all. No time to prepare. If she's right... Then in a week her life is going to change forever. Even so, it's just a little bit exciting, too! No more floundering around in the dark! She knows who she is.

Er... Will.

"I think that sounds perfect, Kiyoshi. Does that mean it's a plan?" she asks, leaning closer to him with a grin.

"...Indeed, I think that means it's a plan," Kiyoshi replies, shyly holding up a hand.

Fumiko smacks his palm with all the intensity of a girl in the midst of a scheme. And although initially he yanks his hand back with a hiss, he quickly bursts into laughter as well.

"Oh my God!" he comments. "You high five hard!"

"I'm excited!" Fumiko justifies, cheeks heating up with embarrassment. She usually tries not to 'lose control of herself' and 'behave outlandishly' like that... But she'll excuse it just this once.

After all, she is around a person she feels comfortable with.

"And if this all works out... If you're right, I mean, we have way more work to do. Or at least... Theorizing!" Kiyoshi says, eyes lighting up. "About... why you two would reincarnate. I was able to excuse it for Makoto, but if there's really two of you, then there has to be a cause. One anomaly is weird, but excusable. But two? That means there's a pattern. What if we're about to solve every theological debate ever?"
"I don't think we're *that* special," Fumiko says with another laugh. "But... I have been wondering, too. Why is this happening to us?" She shifts slightly. "And more importantly: Why is this happening to me *now*? Makoto said he had weird dreams his whole life."

"That's true," Kiyoshi admits. "...But... There's lots of possible explanations for that. Korosensei was a public figure, after all. You had no way to know who Aguri was up until very recently. Maybe that's the cause. Either that, or it's possible you were repressing it for one reason or another. Heck, maybe you've even been having dreams, but haven't had a way to rationalize them up until now: No familiar faces to place. There's... there's lots of options! I'm sure *some* part of you had to know on a subconscious level. I mean... You're Korosensei's biggest fan, after all. But something was preventing it from coming to light up until now."

...That's... A huge claim to make. If he's right... The... The thought makes her head spin. How much of her life has she been living influenced by, yet in ignorance of this?

He must catch her troubled expression, because he speaks up in a hurried tone. "*If* any of this is even true. I'm sorry. I'm probably overwhelming you. We... haven't even come to a conclusion yet. I am very much getting ahead of myself. My apologies."

Fumiko shakes her head. "No. It's okay. I appreciate it. I have... A ton of questions about all of this, too. It would be nice to have some more concrete answers. But you're right: one thing at a time." She cracks a tiny smile. "...You've come a long way, though. You know that?"

"H-Huh?" Kiyoshi asks.

"At the beginning of the year, you were hesitant to believe Makoto, even when I threatened you into it. But now you're so quick to help me out with the exact same thing. Ready to solve the mysteries of the universe, even." She snorts, but her smile doesn't fade. "I really appreciate it."

Kiyoshi's gaze drifts towards the ground as he places a hand on his arm. He awkwardly returns her smile. "I guess it's hard not to come around when you spend so much time facing the evidence head-on."

"Speaking of," Fumiko says. "We should probably get going. Makoto's gonna get worried if we take much longer."

Kiyoshi nods. "You're right. One more minute and I think he's going to become convinced we're scheming to take him down. Let's get out of here."

...Even so, he doesn't stand.

Fumiko decides to take the lead. She hops onto her feet, brushing off her skirt as she stands.

"One more thing, though," Kiyoshi says in a hurried voice. "Before we go. Before I can... Uh... Begin this study."

Fumiko pauses. "What is it?"

"...How do you feel about all of this, Fumiko?"

"Pardon?"

"This past life stuff."

"I told you. I feel... skeptical. That's why I asked for your help."
"But like... Aside from that," Kiyoshi says. "If you're right, and you don't need to be skeptical anymore, what are you going to feel? You've lived your entire life up until now as a completely different person. And I can't help but imagine you're disoriented. Is this... Really the road you want to go down? Are you... Happy about this whole Aguri thing? Because as exciting as this is, if it was troubling you, I wouldn't want to be responsible for extrapolating those worries."

Fumiko stares down at her shoes. It's a loaded question. How does she feel about this? She's not even sure. Kiyoshi's right. Aguri is a very different person than her. And she thinks she's a little scared. But it's a good feeling, too. Like... Something's finally clicked. Like she finally gets it.

Like Makoto said: 'Like she's finally coming home.'

"I think I'll be fine," She says. "...I'm not sure how I feel for certain... but..." She pauses. "It's nice to be a part of things. And I think me and Aguri are a bit more similar than we'd first appear. Try not to worry, okay? I'm sure... I'll get all of it figured out." She shakes her head. "Besides... even if this wasn't something I was exactly thrilled about, I think I'd want answers anyways. This has been... driving me insane. And there's no forgetting this now. Not for me. I want to get to the bottom of things. If not for me, then for Makoto."

"Okay," Kiyoshi says. "Just be... careful, okay?"

"I will."

"Well... Uh! With that out of the way, let's get going," Finally, he bolts to his feet. "By now Makoto's going to have reached Shiota-sensei's place without us."

Fumiko snorts. "I doubt it," she says, turning and making her way down the path. "I'd bet you actual money that he stopped at the bottom of the mountain to wait for us."

"Is that a legitimate bet?"

"Pardon?"

"Well if you're offering up real money to try and predict literally the least predictable person on the planet's actions, then I'm willing to take a ris-"

"Jeez! No! I'm not offering up real money," Fumiko refutes. "What sort of person do I strike you as? Someone who can just launder my parents' money?"

"You strike me as someone who just unironically used the term 'I'd bet you actual money.'" Kiyoshi retorts.

"Touche," Fumiko says, beginning the long trek down the mountain. "But for clarity's sake: No. I am not offering you money."

"Darn," Kiyoshi says. "And here I was thinking 'maybe I can stay relevant and interesting to these two by hoarding cash and, like... Investing in the stock market or whatever.'"

"Like you need to do anything to stay relevant," Fumiko replies.

"Hey. Hey. Just keeping my options open," Kiyoshi says. "...Seeing as how you two have these big secret identities now. And I'm just still... Kiyoshi."

...The conversation had started as a joke, and he still tries to frame it that way, but there's this undeniable melancholy to Kiyoshi's voice. He must have really been thinking about this.
Fumiko reaches out to place a hand on his shoulder. "Don't you even worry about it," she says. "...Kiyoshi is the only guy who could have helped me with this, remember? There's no-one else we'd ever want you to be."

"I know," Kiyoshi says, eyes drifting to the ground in a way that seems to imply he doesn't totally believe that.

But there's a time and place for everything. And seeing Makoto, sure enough, waiting for them at the bottom of the mountain, Fumiko decides she'll wait to press Kiyoshi on the issue. She doesn't know how to word how she feels about her whole Aguri situation right now, either, after all. Something tells her Kiyoshi will just need some time to process how he feels as the 'odd one out.'

Makoto meets their eyes and gives a massive wave. And in fact... When Fumiko feels her heart skip a beat, not sure what's going to change about her dynamic with him in the future, she's oddly relieved that Kiyoshi is just Kiyoshi.

Because Makoto is familiar. But Kiyoshi is familiar, too. Familiar to Fumiko.

And facing an uncertain future, it's good to know she has at least one thing that's going to remain the same, even if she doesn't.

"What was Yukimura-sensei like?"

Karma rubs his chin, and Kiyoshi shifts uncomfortably. To be honest, he feels really awkward doing this whole 'interview' thing... But he's a little excited, too. If it's important to Fumiko, that means it's important to him. And he'd meant what he'd said. About how this could change the world forever.

"Well... She was pretty funny."

...At least it could if literally anyone he was talking to was taking this seriously.

He'd probably made a massive mistake by approaching Karma first, but there's no going back now. Plus... he'd felt too shy to initially flag Kayano down. That's her dead sister, for Pete's sake! But Karma? He barely knew the woman!

"Funny? How exactly?"

"Oh. A lot of ways," Karma admits. "She never got our jokes, and she'd walk into class wearing these doofy oversized shirts with the worst patterns. Then when everyone laughed at her, she just didn't get that, either. She'd cover her face with her book and start shouting, asking what was so funny."

"Another joke she didn't get?"

Karma smiles. "Yeah. Pretty much."

"Got any examples? Of... those shirts, I mean."

Karma stretches and slicks back his hair. "Oh man. It's been... What? Sixteen years? It's hard to remember now," he muses. "I think there was one with a piece of raw meat on it? Another might have had a bootleg Digimon?"

"Raw meat. Raw meat. Okay," Kiyoshi repeats, trying his best not to sound utterly dumbfounded as he scrawls Karma's observations into a composition notebook.
Karma cocks an eyebrow, leaning over to investigate. In turn, Kiyoshi feels his face flush red when Karma snickers at the way he's written 'Bootleg Agumon?' and circled it in bright red ballpoint pen.

"What do you need these anecdotes for, anyways? Bit weird to be doing a study on a dead woman."

"I told you," Kiyoshi says. "Shiota-sensei has us doing a research project on a deceased historical figure. I know it's a bit obscure... But... She saved the world after all, didn't she? And she sounded really interesting after what we learned about her in the moon unit. Plus, I decided it would be a really nice surprise for Yukimura-san. To know that people still care about her sister."

He almost believes his own claim, giving Karma an innocent smile, before he remembers that he's lying through his teeth. Christ! When did he become so good at making stuff up!?

"Don't tell them though, yet," he quickly adds on. "Yukimura-san and Shiota-sensei, I mean. It's supposed to be a surprise." He feels a little bad about lying to Karma's face, but then he remembers Karma has multiple times held him by his feet upside down over the couch and feels significantly less bad. Plus... he's not really lying, is he? If they're right, he does have a surprise for Kayano and Nagisa! An even better one!

"Awww. Sweet," Karma admits. "Don't you worry. Your secret's safe with me. And I am great at making up lies, so no need to worry about me getting backed into a corner." He taps his chest with his fist and smirks.

Kiyoshi gives him a deadpan look, silently noting that this man has no idea how deep the tunnel of lies actually goes.

"I dunno if I'm really the best guy to interrogate about this, though," Karma admits. "I was actually suspended for most of Yukimura-sensei's time in our class."

Kiyoshi stares. "She... she was there for at least like a month, right? How do you get suspended for that long!?"

"Hit a teacher and broke a desk," Karma says in a matter-of-fact way that makes no effort to hide his pride.

"Of course," Kiyoshi says, knowing full well that despite the many, many, many lies being exchanged in this conversation, that anecdote is the full truth and nothing but the truth. "Of course," he repeats, trying to bleach his brain from that newfound fact he's learned about the adult he's regularly supervised by.

Karma grins. "Even threw a chair and used a fire extinguisher as a sword."

Kiyoshi's not sure he believes that, on the other hand, but he's suddenly terrified of living in a world where that is the truth! "Can we get back to Aguri?"

"Yeah, yeah," Karma relents. "So... Anyways... Yep. I'm mostly going on what the rest of the class has told me. I did get to meet her once or twice, though. She actually stopped by my place to check up on me during my suspension."

"Really?" Kiyoshi asks.

"Yeah," Karma says. "Usually Nagisa or something would just drop off my make-up work, but a few times she stopped by my house and delivered it. Offered to tutor me and tried to make small talk and everything. I'll be the first to admit I didn't really take her up on the offer, but in hindsight, I appreciate that she made the effort." He smiles.
"Awww..." Kiyoshi says, smiling back. "That's actually really sweet." Which most anecdotes involving Karma aren't!

"Yep," Karma says. "I didn't get to know her much, but she was a super cool person. She went way above and beyond for us considering what little shits we could be sometimes."

Kiyoshi catches that dark, amused smile on Karma's face and decides that's a rabbit hole he doesn't want to go down. As nice as the concept of Karma... like... gluing tape to Aguri's car is, he's had a nice day today and he'd much rather not have it ruined by more tales of Karma's debauchery. What he's learned from Karma will suffice for now.

He hops to his feet and makes his way towards the door.

"That's all?" Karma asks.

"Yeah," Kiyoshi responds. "Thanks for telling me everything, but I think now I'm going to interrogate someone who was actually there, thank you very much."

Karma must catch his smirk, because he laughs and says "Fair enough," before shooting a pair of finger guns at Kiyoshi. "Glad to see you be getting a little bit of snark, kid. See ya around?"

"Yeah. See you around."

And hearing Karma shout a quick "Good luck with your project," over his shoulder, Kiyoshi is on his way.

Being Aguri is... difficult.

Fumiko thinks she's lost her mind when she spots the tack on her chair

"W-Who did this!?' she cries, scooping it up in her hands with one swift motion. She looks it over and frowns deeply, her worst suspicions confirmed. Someone really had placed a tack on her seat. Who even does that!? This isn't some movie! "Someone could have been seriously hurt! What were you thinking?"

As where they hadn't been paying much attention before, the class bolts to their feet upon the phrase 'seriously hurt.' Eyes wide, they crowd around her desk.

"Who's seriously hurt?" says a bespectacled boy with an excitement in his voice Aguri's not sure she's fond of.

(What's his name? She knows his name. Why can't she-?)

"No-one's seriously hurt, Takebayashi." Takebayashi. That's it. Takebayashi. Takebayashi. Takebayashi. She clings to it, like she's scared of forgetting again. "But someone could have been-"

"I. Er. I don't mean to be disrespectful here, Yukimura-san," a blonde girl says, hand raised and a shit-eating-grin on her face that says 'I'm wholly intending to be disrespectful.' "But I think the purpose of this was for someone to be seriously hurt."

"Of course the purpose was for someone to be seriously hurt, dipshit!" a stocky boy shouts. "It's a goddamn tack. What did you expect?"

"Language, Terasaka-" Aguri reminds him, to his exasperated eye-roll. Then, she turns to the
blonde girl with her eyebrows furrowed. "...Nakamura," she says, frowning. "Did you do this?"

"Nah," Nakamura says, scoffing. "I'm not that big a jackass," she declares, as if Aguri hadn't just reminded Terasaka not to swear. "I've just seen enough pranks in my day to know what that is. As for your actual culprit, though, no clue."

Aguri's eyes scan the room. Sitting near the back of the room, a grinning boy nudges a gothy looking girl... Who pays him no mind. Another boy doesn't look up from his doodles, and a blond boy whispers to the nervous-looking kid who sits behind him.

Now that she spots it, a whole lot of them are looking anxious. The way a long-black-haired girl nervously stares at the floor, and how the girl a few seats from her mumbles something under her breath. A dark-haired boy stares at Aguri with concern, and a familiar, long-blue-haired boy refuses to meet her ey-

Wait. Is that Nagisa!?

He shuffles uncomfortably and fiddles with his ponytail. Even in the dim light of the classroom, he's unmistakable. The one and only. No fucking way! It is Nagisa. Smaller. And meeker. And less confident, but Nagisa nonetheless. Fumiko knows him. She'd know him anywhere! Even now. Even... lost in someone else's memories. That's the teacher who saved her. That's the man she knows so well. That's the boy who comes as a joint packag-

Wait. If Nagisa's here... Where's the rest of the menagerie?

Sure enough, as Aguri sends a quick, worried, glance towards the rest of the class, Fumiko doesn't spot them. Not a single one. Of course Gakushuu's not there. That makes sense. But... What about Akari?

'No,' Aguri decides. 'I never taught Akari.'

...Did she?

Karma. Where's Karma?

Aguri's eyes drift back to the razor-sharp tack, and Fumiko feels pure, unfiltered rage flow through her veins.

She swears to fucking god! If he did this--

But Aguri doesn't seem to notice. And taking one more look at the nervous students, she says "I'm sorry, you guys. I'm not mad."

Fumiko wants to choke in disbelief.

'Why are you apologizing!? Why are you apologizing!? You nearly just ate shit on a sharp object because Karma Akabane doesn't know how to behave! You are literally the LAST person who should be apologizing in this situation!'

"I shouldn't have made this an accusatory thing. Whoever did this: You're not going to get in trouble because you left a tack on my seat. I just want to know why you did it so we can talk it out. And if you had no part in this, you have no reason to worry. I'm not mad at you either," she laughs and gives a halfhearted grin. "I'm sorry."

...That's when Nakamura bursts into laughter.
"Are you apologizing for having a tack placed on your seat!!?"

Fumiko's heart explodes with righteous exasperation as she internally screams *THAT'S WHAT I'VE BEEN SAYING!*

But her righteous anger is never discovered, nor is the culprit. At least... not to Aguri's untrained eye. She never once even notes the empty seat in the back of the room as a potential part of this equation.

In due time, class returns to usual. It takes much, much herding from Aguri, but eventually she manages to get their minds off of the tack and the senseless violence as she attempts to coax them into working on their science projects. It's easy to tell they're hardly paying attention, and much more occupied with talking to each other than they are with working, but she'll take it for now.

It's later that day, when she finally stands to toss the tack out, that Nagisa finally speaks up. As she sweeps it into her hand, he looks away from his chattering peers, stands, makes his way over to her, and in a meek voice tells her to be careful.

"It's rusty."

Aguri pauses. And sure enough, taking a closer look at the tack, it is indeed covered in a thin layer of rust. She gawks at it with horror, scrambling to grab a tissue to carry it with, lest she accidentally poke herself.

"O-Oh-Oh my!" she sputters, eyes wide. "...Er! Thank you for letting me know!" she quickly adds on, before stumbling over to the trashcan and tossing it in. When she returns to her desk, Nagisa's shy blue eyes are still trained on her.

"How did you know about that?" she asks. And when he frowns, she quickly recoils back. "N-Not that I'm mad! Or even that I'm accusing you! I'm - Just - I'm just wondering!"

He blinks, seemingly unimpressed by the way she stumbles over her words. "A friend of mine did it," he says simply. "I'm not going to snitch on him... but I don't think it was right."

"Ah..." Aguri responds with a frown. "Well... that's okay!" She'd hate to guilt him for standing up for a friend.

(Fumiko, on the other hand, is ready to pummel this kid for not selling the Red Menace out, but that's besides the point.)

"I guess it's a good thing that you're willing to protect the people you care about." She pauses, giving an awkward laugh. "Even if they leave tacks on people's seats."

Nagisa gives a forced smile back and returns his own awkward laugh. "Yeah. The people I care about. Sure."

"I hope you don't mind me asking one thing, though," she says. "Again: You don't need to say anything if you don't want... but..." She pauses. "Can you at least tell me why he felt the need to do that? I'd... I'd like to know what sort of issues people have with me." She dramatically pumps her fist for emphasis. "Y'know! So I can work on them! I want to be the best teacher I can!"

Nagisa stares for a long moment again, before averting his gaze, thoroughly unimpressed. "To be honest, I don't think you're the issue," he admits. "He's just... going through a lot. He doesn't like teachers very much."
"Awww..." Aguri says, frowning. And with that in mind, alongside no culprit, she decides she'll simply just be the best teacher possible to all of them. If she can make it through to this guy... Maybe she can change his opinion of teachers entirely! And give him the help he needs!

"Well, I hope I can change his opinion on th-"

"He told me he'd like to kill one himself."

"Excuse me!?" Aguri sputters, horrified.

Nagisa gives a shrug. "I don't know. I don't really get it myself. He says weird stuff all the time, but..." He pauses, as if he's contemplating saying something, but quickly shakes his head. "Anyways. I'm going to get back to work. See you around."

And with that, before Aguri can even thank him again, he's gone. She watches his blue ponytail disappear between the heads of his peers as he rejoins Sugino on their project.

"Y-your friend won't get in trouble by the way!" she shouts, a moment too late. "Tell him that! Just! Ask him not to do it again, okay? Please!?"

...Nagisa doesn't respond.

Aguri sighs and flops back down on her seat. She's not sure what she's doing wrong... But she just can't seem to get through to them, no matter how hard she tries. Has she really done something to deserve this, or is this just the price that comes with helping those in need?

...She doesn't know. But she tries not to mind it. She's doing something kind. Even if she's not always perfect at it, she's putting some good into the world. She will get through to these kids, malicious tack-dispensers included. She swears it!

Fumiko already knows she won't. She dies in a month and a half. But she lets herself believe it for now. It's a nice thought. She even lets herself believe it when she comes into class the next day, and has no idea that the boy responsible for this in the first place is still in suspension.

Instead, she merely investigates her chair. And when there's decidedly no rusty tacks placed there, she takes a seat. Because that, at the very least, comes as a relief.

...Sure, half the class doesn't pay attention, and Terasaka falls asleep during her lecture. Karma doesn't show up, the bar is underground, and she's stressed out of her mind, but at the very least there's not another tack.

She'll get through to these kids if it's the death of her. After all, it can't be any more difficult than the heart she's already managed to worm her way into during the night.

"...Why are you asking me this again?"

Meeting Gakushuu's baffled expression, Kiyoshi quickly gets the impression he's made a piss poor decision.

For a guy who apparently now has the balls to snark Karma Akabane to his face, he sure isn't very good at staying true to his word.

'Interrogate someone who was actually there,' his ass! Gakushuu never MET the woman!

"I - Er... Just sort of assumed you'd have gotten the chance to meet her once or twice, I guess," he
admits. "You... you still did attend the same school."

Gakushuu snorts. "If you can even call it that," he says. "While we were living in air-conditioned
glory, she and her students remained holed up in the E-Class building, which I dared not even
approach. The most I ever saw her was once or twice at assemblies. And needless to say, I wasn't
exactly inclined to make small talk with her. I saw her as a mere cog in the machine, being a
servant and corralling her class of miscreants as the lowest of the low amongst our staff."

Kiyoshi blinks, aptly reminded that this man may as well have grown up in a fucking cult. What is
he even talking about? That said, he does find some reassurance in the way Gakushuu rolls his
eyes at his own statement. At least he knows he's spewing incomprehensible bullshit.

"Fair," he says. "So... you never talked. But you still saw her. Observed the enemy or whatever,
right? You're... a deeply intelligent person. I'm sure you mapped out at least some kind of
impression. What sort of person did she strike you as?"

Gakushuu brings his hand to his chin as he thinks it over. "Admittedly, this is the part where I'm
inclined to say 'plain.' From a distance, she struck me as an incredibly average person. But I
suppose that's rude to say, seeing as she's clearly fondly remembered."

Kiyoshi's lip twitches. "Seeing as how you just said it anyways, please do tell me about how plain
she seemed. What made her strike you as that? Any info helps."

Even... incredibly rude info that would make Fumiko break Gakushuu's ankles.

Gakushuu raises an eyebrow. "Of course," he says. "But I must ask before I go on: What is this for
again?"

Kiyoshi jolts, and before he can even think it through blurts out "Wikipedia article." Nervously
fidgeting, he murmurs a quick excuse about how he'd attempted to research her after Nagisa's
lesson and found nothing. He'd... er... decided to be the change he wanted to see in the world and
fix that.

It takes literally all of his effort to avoid smacking himself in the face out of sheer embarrassment.
Because that's not even the same lie he'd told Karma. What is wrong with him!? He knows he can't
out Fumiko, but holy hell! Tell a consistent story, you compulsive liar!

"Okay. So... that changes things," Gakushuu says. "First of all, don't describe the deceased woman
as plain on her Wikipedia article, because if I was responsible for that I'm most certain Akari
would throttle the both of us." He pauses. "Second of all... as for why I got that sort of impression...
Hm..." He rubs his chin. "Well... I'm not sure. I suppose she just did not seem to excel in any way."

"Excel?" Kiyoshi asks.

"As you can imagine... The standards at Kunugigaoka were extremely high. In that way, she just
never caught my attention in comparison to my own high-end teachers, or even the E-Class's later
Korosensei. While I'm sure she was a wonderful person looking over the legacy she's since left
behind, she never gave me any reason to pay attention to her when I was a youth." He pauses.
"Er... aside from her fashion sense. Admittedly that did cause a scene during one assembly."

Kiyoshi jolts. H-Her fashion sense!? Now Gakushuu's the second person to bring that up! How bad
could it possibly have been to warrant such a footnote? Kiyoshi swears to god... if all of this ends
up being true, he's never gonna let Fumiko live it down!

"You can't just say that and not explain," Kiyoshi says. "Share. I'm sure this will make a wonderful
anecdote. For my... Wikipedia article. That I'm writing."

"I'm not sure there's an apt way to verify this story in the eyes of the Wikipedia moderators, but I suppose I should share anyways. For historical accuracy."

Kiyoshi nods sagely. "For historical accuracy."

"There was... a time when very early in the year she showed up to an assembly wearing a shirt that said some incredibly lewd things in Russian. It turns out she was not aware of what said things were, but when my father spotted her in the audience he just about choked on his own spit. He smirks at the mental image. "As for the rest of us: incredibly intelligent, multilingual fourteen-year-old children, we lost our absolute minds and repeated the phrase 'tits on my balls' for a solid month afterwards."

Kiyoshi snorts. "Then I guess she wasn't quite as plain as you first assumed, huh? She wouldn't have been able to change your culture for so long if she were."

"I suppose not," Gakushuu admits. "But at the time I simply saw it as another humiliation to the E-Class's fragile reputation. Aside from that, I'm afraid I don't have too many other stories about her. She simply struck me as what she was on the outside: Average, enthusiastic, and not fluent in lewd Russian phrases."

"If wearing a shirt that says 'tits on my balls' is your idea of average, Asano-san, I'm not sure what I can possibly say to you."

"I live with Karma Akabane. I've seen far worse."

"Touche," Kiyoshi admits. "And that's all you know?" He briefly considers asking Gakushuu if he knows anything about his father's hiring process or why he chose Aguri, but he quickly decides against it. Gakuhou's clearly a sore spot for Gakushuu, and also he sucks. Instead, Kiyoshi settles on asking Gakushuu one final question.

"What about stories from the others? Yukimura-san and such? I'm sure they've talked about her."

"Indeed," Gakushuu says. "Of course they have. She was someone deeply important to their lives. I've heard a fair amount. But any of their stories would likely be better heard from them. They're the ones who knew the woman. I'm the one going by word of mouth. I was never particularly... a part of all of that in the way they were. The Korosenseis and the Aguris and such."

He frowns for a moment. And although it quickly fades, Kiyoshi spots it. And he gets it. He really does.

...He knows what it's like to feel like a bit of an outlier. Now, more than ever. He hates to admit it, but he's a little scared Fumiko and Makoto are going to leave him behind. If it feels this sucky to be the only normal person in a friend group filled with heroic reincarnates of life-changing people, it must feel even more sucky to have been left expressly out while a bunch of other children had their lives fixed by a magical octopus.

"That's okay," he says, hopping to his feet. "That's plenty of information. Thank you, Asano-san."

"Of course."

"...And... I know you weren't a part of all that, but I think it was nice to hear a perspective I wouldn't have gotten to otherwise. Try not to worry about it too much... Okay?"
Gakushuu blinks, seemingly surprised. And although Kiyoshi is well aware he's trying to reassure himself more than anything, he does catch Gakushuu give him a tiny smile.

"Of course not," he says. "And good luck with your Wikipedia article. I expect to be cited as a source."

That's all it takes to ruin their 'moment.' Face flushing pink, Kiyoshi lies through his teeth and swears he will. Then, with another quick thank you, he excuses himself from the room and slam the door behind him.

...Jesus Christ. At this rate he is gonna actually have to end up writing an essay on and making a Wikipedia article for this woman, isn't he? Damn him and his awful lying abilities!

Breathing in deeply and crossing his fingers he makes a silent prayer that once the truth is out about Fumiko (Er... If the truth comes out there about Fumiko) everyone will be able to forgive him for lying to them. Because he is absolutely not doing that.

Tearing his attention away from Gakushuu's haughty expectations and the horrific mental image of being yelled at by a Wikipedia moderator for getting something wrong, he looks around the house. After all, there's still three people he needs to talk to. And those three are where he's going to begin to get some real information.

Makoto... Nagisa... Kayano... Please don't let him down.

"...No air conditioning? Really?"

"No air conditioning. No allocated lunches. No cellular. They are expected to make the trip up the mountain every morning and back down every afternoon. They are not to be given breaks."

The formally dressed man says it so matter-of-factly. With his slicked-back brown hair and piercing gaze, he meets her eyes, holds a hand out, and smiles.

...It may just be the most empty smile she's ever seen. Considering this man is talking about fourteen-year-old children as if they're hardened criminals, Aguri is hesitant to believe any aspect of his kindness is genuine. Although she quickly shakes that notion. She tries to see the best in everyone, doesn't she? She's sure there's some rhyme or reason to his system.

('Rhyme or reason!?' Fumiko demands, wanting to claw out her own hair. HE'S ACTIVELY TRYING TO GIVE KIDS HEAT STROKE!!)

She takes his hand and shakes it firmly. But he must sense some sort of hesitation still lingering in her expression, because he continues on.

"I'm getting the impression you still don't quite understand the nature of our school, Yukimura-san. Am I merely being presumptuous, or is this true?"

"Er..." Aguri bites her lip and nods. "Admittedly, I'm still not sure I really get why you'd run it like this. B-but I'm not being judgmental!" She huffs. "If anything, I'm curious!"

And disgusted. Very disgusted. But she doesn't let that show.

"...Very well," Gakuho says. "Then let me put it in a way that may be easier to understand. You're a scientist, yes?"
"Sorta!" Aguri says. "It's... uh... complicated. I'm a pretty good chemist, though!"

"This is more along the lines of biology, but I must ask you: have you ever heard of the worker ant principal?"

Aguri cocks her head. "I'm afraid I can't say I have," she admits.

"You see... For years it has been thought a colony of ants is made up of all hard workers. Many cogs in a machine all working their hardest to keep the colony functioning. But in reality, this is not true. In fact, many ants seem to specialize in doing nothing at all. When put under intense observation, it was found that only 3% of ants work at all times. 72% only perform their duties about half the time, and the final 25% never work under average conditions. Instead, they simply slack off, and allow the other ants to do the work for them."

"As you can imagine... A society or culture where only 3% of the population is giving their best effort is catastrophic. And I am of the belief that the worker ant principle not only applies to ants themselves, but to we as people. Have you ever met someone you believe to be a leech on society, Yukimura-san?"

"Well... I'm not sure I'd say that. That feels... well, that feels awfully harsh."

"Of course, of course," Gakuho replies. "But surely you must agree with me that some people simply work harder than others, yes? You did take college classes while raising a child, yes? Surely you'd understand."

Aguri frowns. "I suppose."

"You and I are the hard-working ants. The very few in society." Gakuho motions to a nearby anthill. And sure enough, some of the ants simply seem to be bathing in the sun. Motionless, they stand, as their brethren pass them by, carrying crumbs much larger than themselves on their backs. "While the rest of society simply benefits off of our hard-working nature. Uses us. Abuses us."

"But I and scientists alike have found that this principle is not universal. It, too, is subject to change. And as most things do, it changes most through disaster. If something catastrophic is to occur to an ant colony, such as a bacterial infection of the eggs, or even an unruly child stepping on their hills, the attitude of the lazy ants quickly shifts. To prevent further disaster, up to 95% of the ants will begin to work to their limit."

"95%?" Aguri asks. "Why not 100%?"

"Even under such pressure, some ants simply will not crack. And in this same manner, some people simply will never try their hardest, even if given the chance. Innately and undeniably in nature, there are simply some people who drag us all down. But as all things in nature, there are certain benefits to this, too."

"Which are?"

"When said disaster strikes, the lazy ants are the first to suffer. The first to be... Disposed of, so to say. They serve as a buffer to protect the important parts of the population."

"I think I see what you're saying," Aguri says, crouching down by Gakuho to observe the anthill. "But I still have one issue with your thesis."

"Pray tell?"
"We have empathy. And we have different purposes. We don't live in a hunter-gatherer society anymore. And even when we did, are you aware that we were known for continuing to take care of our disabled and elderly even when they were no longer 'useful' to us? Our willingness to look past mere survival skills is what makes us human."

"Of course, of course," Gakuho says. "But I think you are misunderstanding my thesis. The lazy ants... they are not the elderly or the disabled in this situation. They are the ones refusing to help them. Those refusing to serve anyone but themselves."

"...Even so, I can't imagine it being that simple. People aren't ants."

"Exactly," Gakuho says. "And it is only because of that that my system can truly function. As people, children can understand the concept of consequence in a way that ants cannot."

"...Consequence?"

Aguri and Fumiko both shudder. The more they hear this man talk, the less they think they like him. A world revolving around useful people and useful people alone when usefulness itself is such an undefinable concept can't help but remind them of certain other people in their lives. ...Certain other people who would be quick to categorize them as useless, even if Gakuho himself may not see it that way.

"As I explained, disaster is the one thing that can increase an ant colony's workload to something truly impressive. But ants are, as you said: not people. They are not capable of conceptualizing disaster. But people... people are." He claps his hands. "Imagine if ants were able to be aware that their inactivity could bring disaster onto them. And imagine, further, if the lazy ants were able to understand that when disaster does, they will be the first to suffer for it."

"That is the system that my school utilizes. You would categorize this building as a disastrous fate, yes? You said it yourself: No air conditioning and so on and so on. Not only that, but there is a sort of social stigma that surrounds this 'E-Class.' Seeing as how the students here are responsible for their own fate if they allow their grades to fall below a certain threshold, their peers, in turn, are allowed to scorn them. They knew what was coming, and still did not improve. This makes them an acceptable target for mockery."

"As for how this benefits the rest of the school, it improves their work ethic in an attempt to avoid 'becoming' like the E-Class. They know if they make one simple mistake, they, too, could 'fall,' like the very peers they'd scorned. The peers they've learned to loathe with all their hearts. And as such, they fear loathing themselves. They know they will be no better than worthless unless they truly strive for excellence."

"I think I get what you're going for," Aguri says, to which Fumiko feels ready to throttle her. But standing, she shakes her head. "But I still can't agree with your system. I think... the best way to encourage people to try their hardest is to praise them for what they can do."

"Yes. You would think so," Gakuho admits, standing as well. "But you must also agree we live in a truly brutal world, Yukimura-san. That sort of 'participation trophy attitude' is what causes children to be both entitled and weak later in life. Without facing the storm, how can we ever expect them to face the real world?"

"I'm not sure. I don't have an answer to that. But..." She pauses. "...I think my biggest issue with your claim is that you're presuming they aren't already pushing themselves to their limit. I believe that 100% of people are capable of working at full force. What if they're truly fighting as hard as
they can, and that's still not enough for you? Isn't that a little unfair?"

Gakuho gives an apathetic shrug. "This world isn't fair, Yukimura-san. The sooner you learn that, the better. And the same goes for those kids."

Aguri frowns, not daring to meet his eyes. "...It just doesn't seem right to me."

"Then you don't want the job?" Gakuho asks, raising an eyebrow.

"I never said that," Aguri responds.

"My apologies. I just presumed you had other offers. You do have an impressive enough skill-set. I know not everyone can handle this institution."

"I can handle it," Aguri says, having to bite her tongue to avoid blurting out that it's the kids she's afraid can't handle this. But she resists. Something tells her she may lose her chance entirely if she pushes this man too far, and she can't risk that now. "In fact, I'd actually love to work at your institution."

...Not when it seems those kids need a friend very badly.

Gakuho blinks. "You would?"

"I would!" she confirms. "I may not agree with your view, and you certainly don't agree with mine... But..." She tilts her head. "I'd like to see how I could affect this school. The most fun part of life is clashing, right? I'd like to see how my teaching tactics would work in your environment. Who knows? Maybe I'll just prove you wrong."

Gakuho slowly smiles, and that same empty look behind his eyes, he says. "I'd love to see you try. You won't, but it will be amusing to watch nevertheless." He holds a hand out. "The school year begins in two weeks. You may start then. If you work with us for at least three years and display compelling skills, then you will be given the chance to upgrade to a main campus teacher and leave this sinkhole behind."

Aguri gives him a bright smile in return as she takes his hand. "I won't. But I'd like to see you try to sell me on that."

Gakuho stares, before deeply chuckling. "...I think I quite like your attitude, Yukimura-sensei. Here's to your flawed opinions. Now let us see if you're truly as confident in them as you say you are, or if you, too, will come to see my perspective in time. I look forward to seeing what sort of teacher you become."

They finish their proceedings in due time. And with that, Gakuho leads Aguri back down the mountain. Before she goes, however, she sends one last glance back over her shoulder at the ramshackle schoolhouse that sits on top.

...Indeed it'll surely need a bit of cleaning up. It looks ready to fall apart at the hinges. But even so, she thinks she can maybe make something beautiful of it. It'll take a bit of that Aguri charm, and of course, she's probably going to regret agreeing to sign up to teach them in such a rundown place when the summer months roll around, but there's no changing her mind now.

Not when those kids need her. Not when they're unseen in the same way she is. Not when she believes everyone has something beautiful inside of them, and not when their principal talks about them in the same harsh way her fiance talks about her through grit teeth. It may be hard... But what truly important thing in life isn't?
She made her decision when she decided to be a teacher. That she'd change the world for the better. And this is the first of her chances. In fact... She's just a little bit excited, even, to be welcomed into this class of misfits.

Because she's going to change their lives if it's the death of her!

"You wanna learn about Aguri!?"

There's a boundless enthusiasm in Makoto's voice as he leaps towards Kiyoshi and takes his hands.

"Uh... Yeah!" He says, trying his best to avoid desperately ad-libbing some sort of stupid-ass excuse this time around. Stay consistent. Stay consistent. He's just... He's just "I'm writing a book."

What is wrong with him!?

Makoto stares, his mouth forming into a tiny 'o,' before returning to a massive grin. "That! Is! So! Cool!"

Feeling a bead of sweat drip down the back of his neck, Kiyoshi nods.

"Sure is," he agrees, having a horrible feeling that he's going to have to actually go through with this commitment if he keeps the lie up a minute longer. He almost decides he's going to have to have Fumiko pay him back sometimes, but then remembers that Fumiko never actually told him to tell an increasingly wacky series of lies and that this one is all on him.

God! Why couldn't he have just stuck with the 'essay' excuse!?

"I... I'm so happy you're interested in her!" Makoto says, gripping Kiyoshi's hands tight. "She was a super good person!" He pauses. "Not really sure what you could write a whole book about, though. Other than the fact that she... like... saved the whole world and never got any credit for it! You should, like, totally get that one out there, for one."

"Well, maybe book was an exaggeration," Kiyoshi says in a desperate attempt to save his ass. "I was thinking more... like... an essay. Or an anthology of stories. Things... uh... people remember her by," he specifies. "Though... uh... the whole world-saving thing will definitely be mentioned. I mean... gah... that's why she deserves a whole book detailing how cool she was in... uh... average life!"

"A whole book?" Makoto tilts his head. "I thought you were just writing an anthology."


"Aren't vignettes only... Like... A hundred words long?"

"I don't know!" Kiyoshi says. "I am very bad at Japanese."

"And you're writing a book?"

"Yes," Kiyoshi says, just about ready to shrivel up and die. "A book of undisclosed and undecided length about the ways she affected the lives of the people around her. And... uh... the stories they have to tell about her... Or whatever."

"Is that the work-in-progress title?"
"...No. Absolutely not. It'll sound cooler. I swear."

Either Makoto must be the most willfully naive person on the planet, or Kiyoshi’s secretly a master manipulator, because he looks past Kiyoshi's strained smile and leads him over to the couch to plop down on it. Then, slapping his back, he grins.

"Well... I think that's a really good idea, Kiyoshi," he says. "Believe it or not, I've actually been thinking about Aguri a lot recently, too. Ever since Nagisa first brought her up." He glances down to stare at his hands. "...I think she'd be really proud of you for stepping outside of your comfort zone and trying to tell her story. I... I mean... I'm proud, too! More people need to know about her."

"I didn't even remember her until Nagisa told me. How messed up is that? After she changed my life? I don't know if that says more about me or about how history remembers her, but..." He pauses. "She deserves better than that."

There's a weird sense of sincerity to Makoto's voice. And as Kiyoshi takes a seat next to him, he quickly gets the impression that he's managed to blurt out an idea that Makoto's genuinely in love with. It makes him feel a little bad considering... Y'know, he's making literally all of this up, but...

...Well, doesn't that mean if Fumiko's right, this is really going to mean a lot to Makoto, too? Something tells him Makoto will forget about the novel in no time if he learns Aguri is beside him in the flesh.

('If. If Fumiko's wrong, Kiyoshi's in some deep shit, actually.)

(...Oooohhhh the things he does for his friends.)

"Have you asked anyone else so far?" Makoto asks.

Kiyoshi nods. "Uh... I've bugged Akabane-san and Asano-san a little, but they didn't know her very well. You're my first real source."

Makoto shifts. "Admittedly I'm not sure how much I can give you," he says. "I'm... still remembering her. But I'll try my best, okay? And... And after you're done with me, you can talk to Nagisa and Kayano!" He freezes. "Heck! You could talk to the rest of the E-Class, too! Facetime em! Everyone except Ritsu and Itona should have some really good stories!"

Kiyoshi just nods. He knows he's getting neck-deep into this, but what else can he say? He's not going to tell Makoto he's not going to contact them. And besides, even if he's obviously not writing an actual novel, Makoto's right. He can receive all sorts of interesting information on Aguri from the rest of the class. Information that could possibly help Fumiko and him out on their quest. Why hadn't he thought about that before!?

"As for what I know... What sorta stuff are you looking for?" Makoto asks. "I might not be super useful... but... I'll try my best. For Aguri's sake. And... And I'll update you on anything else I remember as it comes to me!"

Considering his phone's already buzzed thirteen times in the past day with periodic updates from Fumiko on her own memories, he's starting to feel like he's becoming a goddamn database on a topic he has absolutely no experience in.

"Of course, of course," he agrees, nodding blankly. "As for what sort of stuff I'm looking for... Well... Anything helps! Just... Things that stick out to you about Aguri. The way she talked or habits she had or things she told you about how she grew up. Little moments you had together, and big moments, too. Whatever you remember best about her all these years later."
"Whatever I remember best about her?" Makoto asks, frowning. His eyes drift up towards the ceiling as he thinks. "Well... Needless to say, she was really nice. I know everybody's probably already told you that, but it's true. She just... Had this really good energy to her. She'd step into the observation room and wave at me and there was this weird happiness that was contagious about it. She always treated me like a good guy. Even though she knew I wasn't. Because... She thought I could be if I just tried!"

He shifts slightly, smiling at the thought. "She was a pretty open book. She'd tell you all about how she felt and thought. That's why I knew... it was genuine when she was nice to me. Although I guess I sorta was the only person she could really talk to." He pauses, eyebrows knitting. "Her fiance was no good to her, and it's not like she could dump any of her worries on her students or sister. So... I guess I was all she had. But she was all I had, too. And... and I like to think we kinda bonded because of that!"

"We were really different people. I don't think in any other world or situation we would'a gotten a chance to become friends. But... because we both had it hard, and realized we only had each other to confide in... we ended up realizing we weren't as different as we'd thought. Or at least... I did. I think Aguri always sorta knew. She was really good with people in that way. At telling how they felt."

Kiyoshi nods. "That makes sense," he says. "She did work with kids, after all. You have to be pretty good at reading subtle signs."

"But she wasn't just this perfect all-loving hero, either," Makoto says. "She was silly, and naive to a fault. I mean... not even just when it came to me." He frowns. "Not even just when it came to getting killed."

He falls silent. But Kiyoshi doesn't dare speak. He doesn't want to push him if Makoto isn't ready.

Makoto sighs. "She wanted to see the best in everyone. And... I really appreciated it. Heck! I wanna be that person, too. Because... her kindness saved me. But she'd blame herself for everything. She couldn't see the bad in other people. Not when it mattered. She'd talk about how the kids at her school were picking on her, but that it wasn't their fault. It had to be that she was messing up somehow. Or that... the principal gave her the heebie-jeebies, but that that had to be her being judgemental. That there had to be some secret soft underbelly to him she was just missing."

Kiyoshi pauses. "...The principal?" he says. "Like... Asano-san's father?"

Makoto nods. "Like Asano-san's father."

Kiyoshi grimaces.

"Yeah," Makoto says. "...I don't think there was some secret soft underbelly to him," he admits. "I've had to learn the same thing."

"And that's not getting started on her fiance," he adds on. "The guy was... so mean to her. Yanagisawa, I mean. He didn't just do bad things to me." He takes a shaky breath. "He'd hit her and berate her and call her worthless. And... and she was never mad at him for it. She'd just cover her head and shriek apologies and then the moment he was gone, say that she must have done something to tick him off."

Kiyoshi's stomach churns. He'd learned that Aguri's fiance wasn't exactly nice to her, but hearing it put into words like that is downright overwhelming. Imagining Fumiko going through something like that... how much she must have cried... it makes him feel sick. That's not fair. That's not okay.
That's...

...Does she remember that?

He thinks about the way Makoto had cowered outside of the school sobbing when he'd confronted the worst of his own memories. The thought of Fumiko having to go through the same makes Kiyoshi's heart ache.

"...She... always wanted to see the best in him. Even when he hated her," Makoto pauses, voice quivering. "He hated her. I don't know why. But he did. He had to. There's... there's no other way he could have treated her like that. But she never hated him. Even when she walked into the observation room limping, she'd cock her head and laugh and tell me she was still trying to get through to him."

"...That... she couldn't love him. But that she wanted to like him at least. She'd tell me about how she respected his brains and his skills and his accomplishments, and that she could see so much good in him in the same way she saw it in me. That... he just needed one more chance to be seen. But he never let her see him. Ever. And... I still don't know why."

He's started to quiver, blinking back tears as he closes his eyes. Kiyoshi reaches out to place a hand on his shoulder.

"...That's terrible," he says. "I'm... sorry you have to remember that, Makoto."

"I'm sorry she had to go through it."

Kiyoshi sighs. "To me it sounds like... he didn't want to be seen. And he was never going to give her the chance. That's... not something that was her fault. Or yours. You can't help someone if they don't want to help themselves." He squeezes Makoto's shoulder. "At least... that says something good about you. That you weren't like him. Because... she could help you. You wanted to change, Makoto. And I'm... sure it made her really happy that she could at least save one person."

Makoto gives a halfhearted nod. "...So... yeah," he says. "...That's how she was: That's how I remember her: Good. Too good. Too good to be any good to herself." He pauses. "Nagisa described her as self-sacrificing to me. Said she always prioritized others above herself. But... the more I think about it, the more I think she just didn't like herself at all."

Kiyoshi gives him a concerned look. "...What makes you think that?"

"I don't know," Makoto says. "She'd... She'd just talk about how she was stupid and ditzy and not good enough. I can't see anyone putting others that far above themselves unless they just... really don't respect themself."

Kiyoshi leans on Makoto's side. "Yeah. I get that," he says. And he does. Shit, man... he's felt that way a thousand times before. It's sad to think that even someone so nice could have been going through that, but it's not out of the question.

"Self-sacrificing this. Too-nice that. Who am I kidding? She was suicidal, Kiyoshi. She killed herself for me."

Kiyoshi freezes. "She... she didn't know that she was going to die," he points out. "Shiota-sensei said-"

"But she didn't care when she did."
Kiyoshi falls silent.

"...She just... laughed and said that she'd made another dumb mistake. That she should have thought that through. That her own death, too, was her fault. But it wasn't. It was mine. And even if she said she didn't mind dying for me... because she cared about me so much..." He drifts off. "Well, I just wish I could have given her a reason to live for me, instead."

...He stares at his feet, looking ready to cry. And Kiyoshi leans on his side, taking a deep breath.

"Depression is... Hard, Makoto," He says. "You weren't a psychologist. You were just, like, a dude. You grew up with some pretty messed up psychological trauma yourself. How were you supposed to start to unravel any of that? I'm starting to get more of a picture of who Aguri was... and..." He pauses. "Well, I think she was a deeply troubled individual alongside a kind one. But... because of that kind side of her, she wasn't exactly inclined to talk about what was upsetting her. Even to the people she loved."

...It's funny. Fumiko can be stubborn in that exact same way.

"But she did," Makoto says. "At least... to me, more than anyone else. She was depending on me. I didn't want to 'unravel' it. I just wanted to help, even a little."

He stares down at his hands. "I have... this memory. She's really upset. About Yanagisawa. About school. About everything. She's just... so stressed. And she presses her forehead against the glass and holds her hand up to mine. And then, trying with all her might to hold back tears, she asks me-" He pauses, shaking his head. "No. Begs me to give her the strength to make it through just one more year. Not the rest of a life. Not to make her love it, either. Just to get her through it."

...Kiyoshi doesn't speak. Simply watches Makoto's hand tremble, trying his best to blink back tears himself.

"She died that night," Makoto says. "A year. I couldn't even give her that. She begged me to give her the strength to get through one more year, and I let her die."

He reaches up to paw at his eyes. But Kiyoshi lowers his hands before they can get the chance to reach his cheeks.

"Let yourself cry," he says. "That's upsetting. There's no reason to pretend it's not."

Makoto hesitates, but nods. Then, slowly sniffing, he bows his head and weeps. Whispers "I miss her," and "Maybe if I'd managed to help her, I'd have gotten to know her now. And... And you wouldn't need to write a book about her. Because everyone would know how good she was. And they'd remember her. For everything she did. For everything she was."

"...I'd have gotten to know her now," he says, and Kiyoshi hesitates.

But surely enough, he bites his tongue.

Fumiko was right. This is... way too serious of a topic to even risk being wrong about. Even if he knows Fumiko is full well possibly going to ease Makoto's heartbreak, there's no knowing for certain. He can't - he won't say anything unless they have proof beyond a shadow of a doubt.

Instead, he squeezes Makoto's shoulder and pulls him into a hug. Squeezing him tight, he lets him cry it out until his whimpers recede into gentle hiccups. There's a time and place for anxiety calming techniques, but maybe sometimes it's just best to let a person grieve.
"There's no changing it now," he says. "There's no changing it now. You did everything you could."

In due time, Makoto pulls away. Wiping at his eyes, he apologizes. "I... made that about me, huh?" He asks. "That wasn't a very fond memory of Aguri."

"...No," Kiyoshi says. "That was... fine. You wanted me to know she wasn't some perfect all-loving, all-happy savior. You wanted me to know she was a person. And about the struggles she faced. I'm sure she'd appreciate it. If anything... I'm just worried about you. I'm sorry. I didn't realize asking about her would bring you so much distress."

"It's okay," Makoto says. "I've been getting this way regardless, lately. It comes in waves."

"Mmm," Kiyoshi says with an understanding nod. And then he falls silent. What else... is there to say? He can't just go now. He can't ask Makoto to dump his sadness, then just move on to his next person to interrogate. That's not okay. What can he...-?

"Hey, Makoto. Can I ask you one more thing about Aguri?"

"Sure," Makoto says quietly.

"Can you just... Tell me your favorite memory you have with her. It doesn't have to be perfect. It doesn't have to be happy. You don't even have to remember it in full. Just... whatever you think about that still brings a little bit of a smile to your face."

Makoto pauses, mulling it over. But slowly, he opens his mouth and speaks. "...She... gave me my birthday," he states. "Cause of where I grew up... I didn't really know where I was born. Didn't really care, either. But one day she came skipping into the lab with something in her pocket. Said she thought it was sad that I'd never gotten to celebrate. Then, she reached in and held up this goofy, oversized tie."

"She said she'd heard me complaining about how my neck was cold. And so... Even if she couldn't get me out of that place, she wanted to do something to make it just a little more bearable for me, in the same way I'd done for her. That she wanted to give me a token of her appreciation."

"It was the first time anyone had ever really gotten anything for me like that. Gone out of their way to think of me," Makoto smiles. "It was... it was nice. It made me feel really loved." He gives a halfhearted laugh as his smile widens. And reaching up to wipe his eyes once more he says "She was really good at that. At making you feel like you really mattered. I... really, really cared about her. And I loved her. And I miss her. And I don't think I'll ever forget her."

...He falls silent.

"But that's no good as a story for a book, huh, is it?" he admits. "I guess I got a little ahead of myself there rambling."

Kiyoshi shakes his head, halfway to brink of tears himself. "Makoto... That's perfectly good an account for a book."

"Okay," Makoto says. "I guess I'm just... worried I don't remember enough. That I don't remember the things that matter. It took me so long to remember her. And after everything she did for me-"

"...Makoto, you remember plenty. You might not remember the little things... Her favorite color or what season you met her during or what shirt she wore on a particular evening. But you remember who Aguri was. You've given me a better idea of her than anyone else I've talked to yet. And that's
what really matters. You remember her as a person. And a person who had struggles of her own, at that. Someone who didn't just live for you. I'm sure... she'd really appreciate that."

Makoto gives a tiny nod. And this time, it's his turn to pull Kiyoshi into a hug. Practically stripping his lungs of air, he clings to him and buries his face in his shoulder.

"I'm just... so scared that after everything she did for me, this means I don't care nearly as much as I thought I did. That I'm here at all without her."

And again, biting his tongue... Feeling tears pool on his shoulder, Kiyoshi simply says. "Makoto... This wouldn't hurt nearly as much as it does if you didn't care with literally all of your heart."

"...I'm sure... You couldn't remember until now for a good reason. Maybe... It's because you were allowed to know who Korosensei was. But not Aguri. You were famous. You blew up the moon." He pauses and glances aside. "Well... Allegedly. But that's besides the point. You knew you were Korosensei because you had something to flip that switch. But you didn't have anyone to tell you about Aguri. Not until now. And that's the world's fault. Not yours."

"Why don't they remember her?" Makoto asks. "What did she do to deserve that?"

"I don't know," Kiyoshi says. "I don't know. But it's not your fault. You know now. Not remembering... Doesn't mean she wasn't important to you. Hell - I mean... You didn't remember Shiota-sensei until the beginning of the year, either, did you?"

"No," Makoto admits. "I didn't."

"And that doesn't mean you didn't care about him, does it?"

"No. I... I care about him," Makoto says softly.

"And what about Akabane-san? Yukimura-san? I... I mean - even my parents! There are so many things you didn't remember. And that's not because you're heartless. It's because... you just hadn't had the opportunity. But you do now. So there's no need to worry about it. It's only natural. There's all sorts of things you didn't remember at once, right?"


Envisioning Fumiko's face in his mind, Kiyoshi nods back. "It's not," he says as he slowly pulls away from Makoto.

This time, he manages to dry his tears for real. Kiyoshi hops onto his feet and grabs him a box of tissues, which he tears into with a renewed vigor. Wiping at his eyes and nose, Makoto's breaths finally seem to steady.

"Thank you for talking to me," he says, turning to face Kiyoshi.

"Thank y- Why are you thanking me?" Kiyoshi asks. "I mean, I'm the one who initiated this conversation, remember? 'Writing a book and all?' I'm the one who should be thanking you."

"Maybe," Makoto admits. "But still... it helped. It's... Nice to talk about this stuff. You guys always seem to have a smart perspective on it." He sniffs once, then reaches to blow his nose. "...Now that I think about it, I bet your book is gonna actually help a lot. You're gonna learn all sorts of things about Aguri. Maybe things even I can't remember. And because of that... When it's finished, I better be the first guy to know, okay? I wanna know everything. And... I trust you with this. I know
you're gonna do a great job."

It takes literally all of Kiyoshi's self-restraint to hold back a grimace. Jesus Christ, he really is going to have to write a book, isn't he!? He's a STEM major! He's not cut out for this! He's... he's...

...Not going to be able to break Makoto's heart, seeing as how Makoto is currently giving him the most enthusiastic pair of puppy dog eyes on the planet.

**GOD. DAMN. IT.**

"Well... Uh... I'm extremely flattered you think so," he sputters. "That I'm going to do a good job, you mean. She was - Uh... Very important to you, so I want to do right by you."

"Kiyoshi, I'm pretty sure you couldn't do wrong by me if you tried," Makoto says. "Just don't say she was, like, a crackhead or something else blatantly untrue and we're good."

"I... wasn't planning to, but duly noted."

Makoto gives a tiny laugh and kicks back. "...Who knows. Maybe... You'll even help her."

"Huh?"

"...Well... The other day I was talking to Fumiko, and something she made me think. Maybe... maybe I'm not alone. And Aguri is out there somewhere. But she just doesn't know yet. Because... The world hasn't seen her." He pauses. "But... We can change that. Who knows. Maybe one day she'll crack open this book, and then she'll finally, finally know what she's been looking for."

Kiyoshi gives him a stilted smile. "Yeah," he says through grit teeth. "That would be nice."

...Or who knows. Maybe he won't have to write a book at all when what Makoto's searching for has been standing by his side this entire time.

He just might not know it yet.

"Here's to hoping," he says.

"For Aguri," Makoto adds on.

"For Aguri," Kiyoshi agrees.

And even despite knowing he's not the guy for it, he decides someone somewhere should write a book for Aguri someday. Because it's sad. That the woman who fought her entire life just to see others has been left forgotten by the world as a whole.

...That she should have to resort to asking her friend to interrogate her family just to be given the gift of knowing where she belongs.

(*And for Fumiko, too.*)

Chapter End Notes

New chapter! New chapter! Happy early Thanksgiving everyone! Have a mostly chill and fun chapter! (Or at least... As chill and fun as any chapter involving the topic of
It was a relief to be able to explore Fumiko and Kiyoshi’s friendship again. It’s been a while since those two have been able to have some good banter, and they were tons of fun to write. All in all their dynamic is... Extremely cute, and I enjoyed letting Fumiko finally open up. Even if it looks like Kiyoshi may just be getting the start of a nasty impostor syndrome feeling he doesn't belong with his cool reincarnate friends.

On a MUCH less depressing note than Kiyoshi being terrified of not belonging anymore: Karma DID actually hit a teacher with a fire extinguisher and break a desk. I wish I was making this up, but if you go back to episode 3 and pause it when he's recounting why he got suspended he sure did actually do that. I hate this fucking menace.

His... Fire extinguisher tossing adventures aside, however, I had lots of fun writing little anecdotes about Aguri. Both from her perspective and from others'. I think my favorite of them all however would have to be Gakushuu mentioning 'tits on my balls.' Not nearly enough people treat the A-Class kids like the... Well, kids, they are, and so I decided to be the change I wanted to see in the world and have them laugh at the least mature thing possible. Pretentious or not, they WERE still 14.

My LEAST favorite anecdote to write on the other hand had to be the discussion with Gakuho. I had to research the actual science behind the worker ant principal and it makes NO FUCKING SENSE. Or, at least... In line with Gakuho's ideals. If anything, in it's actual context I'd argue it /directly contradicts his system./ But whatever. WHATEVER. I found a way to fudge it. So I hope he still makes sense. I'm going to beat him to death with my hooves for making me research that shit, but it's FINE.

(As is Fumiko, seemingly. That's another thing I had fun playing up in this chapter: JUST HOW DIFFERENTLY FUMIKO FEELS ABOUT AGURI'S EXPERIENCES THAN AGURI DID. They're... Starkly different people ahaahaha.)

Originally this chapter was going to involve all of Kiyoshi's investigations/Fumiko's introspection, but it ended up being WAY too long. And so the more important half of those got shunted into the next chapter. In the meantime I hope you enjoyed the beginning of their little intel-gathering.

Some songs that helped me write this chapter were Santa Barbara Skies from Psych, Partner In Crime from Tuck Everlasting, Waiting For A Friend by The Pretty Reckless, Watch What Happens from Newsies, Making Things Up Again from Book of Mormon, To Break In A Glove From Dear Evan Hansen, Here At Horace Green from School of Rock, and How To Save A Life by The Fray. A VERY strangely musical theater oriented chapter.

The next chapter should be up in a week. In the meantime, make sure to let me know what you thought of this one, and I hope to see you soon! o7
“I don’t get why you don’t just quit.”

“It’s important to me.”

“And why?”

...Aguri falls silent. She hates it when they have these conversations.

(‘Any conversation.’ Fumiko notes. Why doesn’t she seem to get that every single conversation between the two of them ends up becoming one of ‘those conversations’ sooner or later?)

“They don’t respect you.”

“I know,” she says.

“They don’t even like you.”

“I know.”

(She doesn't. She doesn’t want to believe it. If those kids will never love her, what does she have to live for?)

“Then why are you dedicating your time - Your energy - Your effort to a bunch of little brats who don’t give a shit about you?”

“I don’t care if they like me,” she repeats calmly. “They still need me. I’ll be there for them whether they like me or not. And I hope one day they’ll learn to be thankful for that. But if not, that’s okay, too. I just want them to have a future.”

He snorts dismissively. “You’re wasting your time.”

“I don’t mind.”

“You’re wasting your life.”

“I don’t mind.”

(What life?)

“And why? That’s all I want to know. That’s all I’m asking you. Why don’t you give up on them? They are never going to change.”

(And neither are you.)

“I never said I wanted them to change. I just want them to be happy. I know they can accomplish that one day.”

“Can they, though?” he asks in a tone that seems to imply ‘Can anyone?’

And staring at his back facing her, she’s not sure.
"I’d like to think so."

"One of these days you’re going to change your tune. One of those troglodytes is going to attack you or throw a temper tantrum and you’re finally going to get sick of it. I can assure you."

Aguri stares at the floor, lowering her voice to a whisper. "I still haven’t gotten sick of you."

Yanagisawa freezes, his breath hitching and his fist clenched as he asks, "What was that?"

Aguri takes a step back, her own breath quickening as she tries to pedal back. "Nothing," she says. "I—"


"I…” Aguri drifts off. "It was a joke. I didn’t mean it. I’m sorry. I didn’t think. That was… that was uncalled for. That was rude—"

"No," Yanagisawa repeats, slowly turning her way. "That’s not what I asked for. I didn’t ask you to apologize. I asked you to tell me what you fucking said."

"I…” Aguri hesitates. "It doesn’t matter—"

That’s all it takes. In an instant, he’s on her, grabbing her by the collar of her shirt and pulling her in close. His breath is hot on her face as he screams.

"I don’t give a damn whether it matters or not! I told you to tell me what you said about me, woman, and you better goddamn do so before you make me really angry!"

Lip quivering, Aguri wilts. And avoiding his eyes, she whispers "...I said I hadn’t gotten sick of you."

Yanagisawa grimaces, lips drawn back into a snarl. For a moment, Aguri even thinks he’s going to hit her. But instead, slowly but surely, he lowers her to the ground and releases his ironclad grip on her shirt.

"That’s what I thought," he snaps.

...It’s evident that seeing her scared out of her mind is enough to satisfy him for just this once.

Without a second thought, he turns away from her and marches back over to his work. Intensely fiddling with something or other, he says "You will quit your job. And you will give up on those students. Mark my words."

...Aguri doesn’t respond.

"I’m right. I’m always right. Have I ever been wrong before?"

Aguri stays silent.

"Have I ever been wrong before?" Yanagisawa repeats.

Catching the way his fist shakes is enough to convince Aguri.

"No," she says, her voice a low whisper. "...You’ve never been wrong before. You’re… always right, Kotaro."
Yanagisawa sneers. “That’s Yanagisawa to you.”

“You’re always right, Yanagisawa.”

“And?”

“And what?”

“And…” Aguri hesitates, close to tears. “...I’ll probably get sick of those kids one day. And then I’ll quit.”

Yanagisawa gives her a satisfied smile. “That’s right,” he says. “You will. And then you can work at the lab full-time like the rest of us.”

It wouldn’t take a supergenius to spot the dead, heartbroken look behind her eyes.

...So why is it the supergenius right in front of her doesn’t seem to notice?

(‘You know why,’ Fumiko notes. ‘You know why.’)

“I should… get back to work,” she says.

“You should,” Yanagisawa agrees. “Go and check on the guinea pig, will you? And make it quick. Now’s not the time for you to be pushing your luck.”

They don’t exchange a goodbye as she makes her way across the laboratory.

The Reaper cocks an eyebrow as she storms into the room, just barely holding back tears.

“Someone looks upset,” he says.

“You get why I don’t quit, don’t you?” she asks, pacing in wild, anxious circles as she gathers her notes.

“Quit what?” he asks. “This place?”

“No,” she says. “My teaching job.”

“And now why would you quit your teaching job?”

“Yanagisawa says I’m going to get sick of the kids. But I’m not going to get sick of the kids. You get why I’m not going to get sick of the kids, don’t you?”

Reaper gives her an indecipherable look, cocking his head ever so slightly. “Not sure I do,” he admits. “Mind explaining?”

“They- they- they…-” Aguri sputters. “They need me. No-one else in that school gives a shit about them. If they don’t have me, they don’t have anyone. And if they don’t have anyone in that environment, they’re going to collapse. Their entire futures are literally hinging on me. I can’t give up on them just because they hurt my feelings once or twice.”

Reaper nods along as she speaks, but doesn’t seem to have a comment of his own.

“And - Like… I don’t care if they’re mean to me,” Aguri continues. “Everyone deserves to be
seen! N… no matter how they act. I mean- Especially kids, for Pete’s sake. I can’t… I can’t just…” She drifts off. “You get it, right?”

Reaper gives a shrug. “I think it’s a complicated subject,” he admits, to which Aguri huffs with frustration.

...Why does no-one else seem to understand how she thinks!?

She knows deep down it’s because the E-Class is the least of her issues. Listening to Yanagisawa stomp around in the other room, there’s more than one person she refuses to give up on. And surely, noting the tears in her eyes, there’s far more dangerous things in her life than children leaving tacks on her chair.

But even so. She can’t give up. Not on… Not on…

...

...Well, not on the E-Class, at the very least!

And they can ask her why. Yanagisawa and The Reaper and the world around her. But Aguri knows who she is. And Aguri knows what she believes. And if that leaves her open to sharp tongues and bruised napes, then so be it. Because she’s sure one day she’ll at least help someone.

And she hopes more than anything it’ll be those kids.

But watching Aguri sit alone, talking to The Reaper with an intensity so strong that she may as well be talking to herself, Fumiko wonders, too.

Wonders ‘why.’

And feeling Yanagisawa’s breath still hot on her face as she trembles in fear, wonders if the way Aguri lived her life was truly worth it.

Kiyoshi gets all sorts of different tidbits from just about everyone.

Terasaka says she reminded him of a kindergarten teacher,, and Kanzaki says she had the sweetest laugh. Rio says she was easy to prank, and Okajima says she had ‘massive tits.’ Just ‘The largest he’d ever seen on a teacher.’ (HIS WORDS, NOT KIYOSHI’S)

They have all sorts of little stories about her. Okuda recalls the time Aguri let her turn in an essay late, and Fuwa recalls the time she went over a math concept for an extra hour just to try and help her get it. She smiles and mumbles something about how it was nice for a minor character to spend so much of her limited time on her. (Kiyoshi decides not to ask. He’s used to Fuwa saying weird shit.)

They’re not just nice stories, though. They’re embarrassing ones, too. Maehara says once she ate shit on the school stairs and taught the rest of class with a bloody nose. Hazama recalls how she loved using all sorts of out of date slang, and through laughter, Muramatsu admits she once apologized for nearly sitting on a rusty tack.

“Oh-! On a tack!?” Kiyoshi sputters, taken aback. “Who left a tack on her seat!?”

“Oh. I dunno,” Muramatsu says with a shrug. “Sure was a crazy day, though.”
Kiyoshi swears to fucking god he’s going to beat someone’s ass when he finds out who left a tack on technically-Fumiko’s seat. What is wrong with these people!?

Some of them hardly remember her. It’s understandable.

“Oh. I hardly paid attention at the beginning of the year,” Yoshida recalls with a snort. “It’s been a long time now. Before Korosensei showed up I was pretty sure I was gonna end up dead in a ditch. There was no point paying attention in school, y’know?” He awkwardly scratches his neck. “I feel bad about it in hindsight, but I probably couldn’t pick her face out of a lineup.”

“That was Kayano’s sister, right?” Kurahashi peeps up. “The one she got tentacles because of. I remember her breakdown, but… I don’t think I could say much about her sister.” She tilts her head and grimaces. “Sorry!”

“Oh! I remember Yukimura-sensei,” Takebayashi muses, pushing his glasses up his nose. “Now that was Korosensei’s girlfriend. His _lost Lenore_, if you will.” He gives a deep chuckle. “Now she was nothing truly impressive, three-dimensional and such, but-”

That’s when Kiyoshi hangs up the Skype call. There are many, many things he can bear, but one of his weird uncles unintentionally fantasizing about his two best friends mashing faces is where he draws the fucking line.

Takebayashi calls him back a minute later, screaming and wailing at the top of his lungs. “I was just joking! Please don’t tell your father I said that!”

Kiyoshi grimaces and says Takebayashi objectifying his father’s coworker’s dead girlfriend is a secret safe with him.

Aguri’s fashion sense is mentioned more times than Kiyoshi can even count. And he quickly comes to learn that among her wardrobe was not only bootleg Digimon, JPEGs of meat, and wholly inappropriate Russian phrases, but a whole slew of truly strange things.

“A screaming man,” Sugino notes, rubbing his chin. “Just… the most horror I’ve ever seen on a person’s face printed to her tank top.”

“Campbell’s Soup,” Kimura says blankly. “It was just… The Campbell’s soup logo. But it was discolored. I don’t know why, but it was blue.”

“Oh. I don’t even know where she got those things,” Yada says with a laugh. “Once she wore a whole-ass kigurumi to school.”

“Oh,” Kiyoshi says. “...Well, that’s actually kind of cu-”

“A leech kigurumi. What sort of person chooses that animal!?”

“And for a dozen different stories about Aguri’s clothes, Kiyoshi, in return, tells a hundred different lies about why he needs this information. They’re making a TV drama and putting on a school play. His father is reopening the investigation into Korosensei’s cruel and unusual death, and Kiyoshi is planning to write into a podcast. It turns out that amongst writing a graphic novel and a musical tribute, _whatever that means_, he’s also pitching an anime and giving Kayano a month early birthday gift.
He sure hopes the members of the E-Class don’t share with each other what Kiyoshi has told them, because he’s 98% certain they’d sniff out his bullshit in no time.

The most prevalent story, and his go-to answer, however, quickly becomes the book. Reality or not, it’s a nice thought. And when he mentions it to any member of the E-Class from across the screen, they gush at him and tell him it’s such a sweet idea.

...Oh, how little they know.

Either way, he tilts his head and smiles. Thanks them for their praise, but tells them it’s simply the right thing to do.

“Her story deserves to be told, after all, doesn’t it?”

He just doesn’t specify to who, however. Because the only source this story is going to is straight to the woman herself.

Sooner or later, a vivid picture begins to be painted in his mind. And it’s just about what he expected. The things that Karma, Gakushuu, and Makoto have already told him Aguri was like. A kind, if ditzy, and slightly naive person who held an optimistic outlook on life. Someone slightly troubled, but with a sweet demeanor despite it. The things they tell him about Aguri’s personality are nothing he hasn’t already heard.

The stories they tell her on the other hand, are what really end up making Aguri for him.

Phrases like “kind-hearted” or “unfashionable” are “opinions,” and “subject to debate.” But the fact that Aguri once misspelled her own name or wore a leech kigurumi to school aren’t. Those are things he can quiz Fumiko on. And something tells him those are the things that will really stand out to her, too.

Plus… you know, as Fumiko’s best friend and all, being able to learn for a fact that Aguri once tried to twerk and proceeded to call it a “nae nae” in a desperate attempt to reach out to ‘the youths’ is fucking gold. If there’s one thing he’s never going to let her live down, it’s that.

After a solid three days of contacting his parents’ ex-students via Facetime, Skype, Discord, and once even Kik, (You know what? Actually, in hindsight, that’s still more acceptable than Skype. He’ll take it.) Kiyoshi’s content. He’s heard near everything he’d need to hear, and has a whole composition book full of notes to help him with Fumiko. He’s almost ready set to go, with that leaving only two people left to ‘interrogate.’

The talk with Nagisa is simple enough. In fact… he gets about just exactly what he’d expected. He tells him all about how Aguri was a hero who changed Korosensei’s life. A hero who, by extension, saved the world. But that’s nothing new. Nothing he hasn’t already heard. And when he asks Nagisa if he has any more specific memories of her, he shrugs and admits ‘not really.”

“I never could have known how important she’d become at the time.” He frowns deeply. “For the most part we didn’t pay any attention to her. We felt… unfairly patronized, I suppose.”

He’s got this guilty look on his face, but quickly shrugs it off.

“If you’re looking for real information, you should talk to Kayano. She’s the expert.”

“That’s the plan,” Kiyoshi says with a firm nod. And he tries his best to mean it.

...Because that means he’s about to contact the most important person of all.
He’s sure he has more than enough information to sate Fumiko. A composition book full of scribbles and sticky notes is likely far more in-depth than anything she’s expecting. But he knows neither he or she will feel content until he talks to Kayano. To Aguri’s one and only sister. Because if there’s anything he’s missing, she’ll have it for certain. There’s no getting cold feet now.

It’s time to chat with the remaining Yukimura herself.

The answer doesn’t come easy. Nor does it come timely.

It plagues Aguri over months. And in turn, it plagues Fumiko over the course of that fateful week. Tossing and turning in bed, or making her way up the mountain towards Constellate, she wonders… If the way Aguri lived her life was really worth it… Or if she really made the right decision in dedicating her life to those kids. Why? Why had that become her purpose?

Is it because it was simply better than the alternative? She thinks of working in that lab for the rest of her life and wants to shrivel up and die. Did she… Did she default to focusing on her job as an educator solely to avoid that fate?

‘…No’, she decides. That’s not it. Memories of studying hard at the same time as babysitting her sister, and the first time she bumped into the monster at her college campus.

He didn’t define that. He didn’t define any part of her, but least of all her dreams. It… it wasn’t an attempt to run away. She’d always wanted to teach. Since she was 13 or 14. Akari gave her the tightest hug following some help with her homework, and told Aguri she was the smartest person she knew.

Aguri has to stay up through the night just to keep up with her classmates, and Fumiko’s midterm results come back as something she’d consider mediocre, but it’s a nice thought.

The real teaching world was nothing like tutoring Akari, however. A batch of abused, fatalistic, middle schoolers didn’t trust her in the same way the sister she’d bottle-fed from infancy had. She sees it in slivers of memory. Terasaka dozes off during class, and when she stumbles over her words they see it fit to laugh at her.

...Karma Akabane leaves a tack on her seat, and whispers to his friend that he’d love to kill a teacher.

A case of misguided intent, then. Simply not perceiving the world as what it truly was. Fumiko will be the first to admit that Aguri was less than intelligent.

(Who cares if she was a teacher? She shoves that thought aside. That doesn’t matter. She was stupid.)

She’d set out to do something kind. But something easy, too. And by the time reality had set in… by the time she’d realized just how hard it was, it was too late to back out. She’d hinged her future on something terribly stressful with never once stopping to think about how brutal it truly was. And by the time she’d realized, the only other future had fangs and claws.

...No. It’s not that, either. Aguri walks into school on her first day, and hangs her coat on the rack. She takes a deep breath before entering the classroom, then comes to face eyes every bit as dead as she’d expected.

She smiles nonetheless, and introduces herself.
“I’m Aguri Yukimura! Although you can just call me Yukimura-sensei! I’m gonna be your teacher from now on!”

...They don’t seem impressed.

So she knew what to expect, then. She knew what she was getting into, and persevered, anyways. Did she believe she deserved to suffer?

...No. Fumiko quickly shoots that idea down. Middle schoolers are just about the most annoying thing on the planet... She’d know. She is one. But they’re far from torment. This… isn’t some form of masochism or self-punishment. Not when true torment watches over her shoulder at every waking moment, threatening to tear this away from her.

(The things she finds truly important…)

She doesn’t let him. She won’t let him. Aguri’s spirit never breaks. She clings tight to her convictions - To her dreams and to her kindness, even despite hurt. Despite exhaustion and fear. And even despite that quiet voice in the back of her head asking herself ‘why?’

...Even despite Fumiko, with spirit already broken, demanding the same.


(Shes wants to know. She needs to. She just doesn’t want to turn out the same)

Aguri’s smacked upside the head, and even then, she doesn’t cry. Battered, beaten, bruised - Each time she simply repeats “Don’t. If you hurt me I won’t be able to teach anymore.”

“You think they give a shit!?” the monster demands, his voice cutthroat.

“Yes. I do,” she says. And she means it. Because it’s all she has left.

She’s not mad for her sake. She’s never mad for her sake. And so Fumiko’s mad in her stead. She supposes that may as well be the same thing, but nevertheless it’s fifteen years late. Her hands shake, and some part of her finds herself mad at Aguri, too.

(...Mad at herself.)

‘Why can’t you care about yourself!? Why can’t you do this for me!? Please-!’

She wonders if the way she works herself to the bone for her students is simply the side effect of something much darker. If that it’s not just her students who come before herself, but anyone - Everyone.

Thursday she asks Nagisa why he became a teacher. He stares at her, brows furrowed.

“What do you mean?”

“Well, I can only presume you were following in Korosensei’s footsteps at first,” she states. “But how did you decide it was for you? Isn’t it stressful!? Have you ever had your doubts over the years?” She scoots her chair in closer, hands close to her sides. “And working at a place like this, no less. We are…” she pauses. “Problem students, after all. Isn’t it difficult? What do you do when students don’t like you? Or… or when they tell you you’re only doing this to feel good about yourself?”

Nagisa’s gaze hardens as Fumiko speaks. And he clasps his fingers, deep in thought.
“That’s a lot of questions to dump on a guy at once,” he says.

“Sorry.”

“No. Don’t be,” he says with a reassuring look.

‘Don’t apologize for existing.’

And biting her tongue, Fumiko tells Aguri the same.

“I don’t mind answering one bit,” Nagisa says. “Just… give me a minute to think it over.”

They sit in silence, and Fumiko does her best to pretend that it wasn’t her on the other side of this desk almost sixteen years ago.

“Of… course it’s hard,” Nagisa finally says. “And of course I’ve had my doubts. Yes… I’ve had kids who didn’t like me. I’ve had kids who have hated me. And I’ve had kids with a whole lot of problems.” He sighs. “But I think what’s important to remember is that everyone has problems. Some people just need a little more help with them. I know, because I was one of those people. I like to think I’m paying it forward.”

He shrugs. “Plus, I like what I do. Even if it’s a lot of work… it’s rewarding.” He gives her a small smile. “Remember how much you hated me at the beginning of the year? It was impossible to get in a word with you. But look at you now! Look at how far you’ve come. You’re growing into a truly wonderful person. If that was the only change I could make over the course of my teacherhood, then it would still all be worth it.”

He leans in closer, voice lowering to a whisper. “And here’s the big secret: you do get to make a lot more change than that.”

...Fumiko thinks that over. And slowly but surely, she nods. Nagisa did change her life. Save it, even. And when he tells her he loves his job, she decides maybe he has a point.

“Though I’m curious. Why are you asking me this?” Nagisa says. “Are you considering becoming a teacher when you’re older?”

Fumiko gives a bitter laugh.

“Nah. I’m just… curious.”

...And even so, she wonders.

Changing lives for the better. That’s what Nagisa does, isn’t it? What Korosensei did, too. And what Aguri set out to accomplish.

But Aguri never got to live to see those changes. To bond with her students in that way. And… not because she was a bad teacher. Because of… things beyond her control. Because she just couldn’t care about herself.

But that was… a separate issue, Fumiko decides. Her school was her safe haven from how she saw herself. The place where she could truly put some good into the world. The place where she could help people who were just as powerless as herself.

And while she never did quite get to see that dream come to fruition, it feels rather nice to have planted the seeds.
Okuda nervously approaches her one day, mumbling something about how she needs help with an English assignment. She’s nervous… with her eyes to the ground and her little hands shaking, but Aguri’s heart soars… Because it’s the first time anyone has ever come to her for help.

They go over the paper together, and Aguri tells Okuda she’s doing a great job. She doesn’t seem to believe it, and only murmurs a quick thanks on her way out, but Aguri’s content nonetheless.

Because the next day she sees Okuda hold her head just slightly higher. And even when her peers toss insults her way just for her grades, she slows herself and breathes.

...Aguri breathes, too. Holds her head high as she passes Yanagisawa by. Because at least she can remind herself she did one good thing today.

Maybe it’s as simple as that. Maybe that’s the answer. Maybe the reason Aguri did what she did is because she wanted to put some good into the world, no matter how much it hurt. Because helping people just like herself was the most freeing thing she could do.

...But Fumiko supposes that’s just a hypothesis.

The E-Class never loves Aguri. Not like they loved Korosensei. But Sugaya gives her a surprised smile when she tells him he’s an awesome artist. Terasaka throws a punch when he catches one of his friends being picked on. And when she stops by Karma Akabane’s house one chilly day to drop off his work and check on how he’s doing during his suspension, he gives her a shocked look.

“...I… Didn’t know teachers were willing to do that.”

There’s very little Fumiko knows for certain. But there is one thing she knows: That they were good kids. Even Karma.

‘They’re good kids.’ Aguri decides. ‘The best.’

...And they make her feel good about the future.

Somewhere across the city, Kiyoshi studies the legacy Aguri Yukimura left behind. And right here… Right now… Fumiko wonders if that legacy is enough.

...Wonders… Wonders… Wonders.

And somewhere much less far away, Aguri wonders, too.

“So you want to talk about Aguri?”

Kiyoshi gives a tiny nod, plopping himself down on Kayano’s (...And Nagisa’s, and Karma’s, and so-on and so-on’s) bed. Her back to him, Kayano digs through the armoire as she glances over her shoulder and back his way.

“...Uh! Yeah!” he says. “If you don’t mind, that is-”

“No! No! I don’t mind one bit,” Kayano says. “...It actually… makes me really happy to hear. You’re not the first person to come to me asking about Aguri lately. It’s sweet to think that you kids care about keeping her memory alive.”

...That’s… one word for it. But for the sixtieth time this week Kiyoshi decides against mentioning the fact that Aguri herself might sort of be alive. There’s a time and place for everything, and dropping that bombshell on Kayano while she digs through an armoire seems like a pretty solid
way to get her to have it fall on her. That’ll have to be a no-go.

“Of course!” he says. “I mean… she was important to you and Makoto. It’d… it’d feel weird not to do at least a little bit of research.”


Kiyoshi’s silent, shifting ever so slightly. He hadn’t expected this to get so out of his control. And although he’d like to believe it’ll all be forgiven in the end, seeing as how this is for a good cause, Kayano is the one person he doesn’t feel comfortable lying to. Not about her own sister.

“I… Uh… I’m not actually writing a book,” he admits.

Kayano pauses, returning her own silence.

“I- I didn’t mean to lie to Makoto,” Kiyoshi quickly says. “And- and I am interested in researching Aguri! I swear! I just… I guess I got embarrassed? And before I knew what I was doing, I’d gotten all wrapped up in this huge story.” His gaze drifts to the ground. “I’m sorry, Yukimura-san. It was wrong of me to lie to Makoto.”

“The rest of the E-Class, too.”

“H-Huh!?” Kiyoshi sputters. “You know about that!?”

Finally, Kayano can’t contain her laughter a moment longer. She giggles, reaching up to cover her mouth with her hands. “Do you think we don’t talk?” she asks. “The moment Nakamura brought up your broadway show I knew something was up.”

Kiyoshi stares. “H-Hey! I… What? I never said I was making a Broadway show. Now it’s you who’s lying!”

“Orrrrr it’s Nakamura being Nakamura,” Kayano admits sardonically. “I should have known that was a bit out there, even for you.” She pauses. “But the point still stands that you told a close group of friends that you were simultaneously writing a book, penning an anime, and working on getting me an early birthday gift.”

Kiyoshi hisses in through his teeth. “Yeah,” he admits. “Okay. You got me there. I mean - I do have a birthday gift for you planned, though! Th- that bit’s not a lie!”

“I’m not worried about that, Kiyoshi,” Kayano says with another chuckle. “Although I am surprised any of you legitimately remember my birthday. But that’s besides the point.” She turns his way. “I guess what I’m trying to say is I’m not mad you lied to everyone, but I would like to know why you’re digging for information on my sister. I think I deserve to know.”

Kiyoshi gulps. There’s a million cogs turning in his head right now, and all of them are on fire. He’s been caught right in the middle of his poorly constructed alibi, and now he’s on the stand. Kayano has a point in that she deserves to know the truth. But he promised Fumiko he wouldn’t breathe a word of this until she herself was certain. That’s not his information to share.

That said, he doesn’t think he can make up another lie now. Aside from the whole ‘it would be all sorts of morally corrupt thing,’ he knows Kayano would catch him in an instant. The woman’s a professional actor. She’s a master at this sort of thing. He, on the other hand, is a thirteen-year-old boy with half a dozen extremely obvious nervous tics. He’s man enough to admit he’s outclassed here.
“It’s… a secret,” he admits. “I… do have a surprise for you. At least… I think so. I wasn’t making that bit up. But I can’t share it yet. It wouldn’t be right. You deserve to know the truth… But please wait, just a little bit longer. Then I can explain everything. I promise.” He gives Kayano a shaky smile. “It’s… for a good cause. I can tell you that much.”

Kayano’s quiet, her eyebrows furrowed as she looks at him, deep in thought. And feeling beads of sweat drip down his forehead, Kiyoshi stiffens.

“Well… plus…! Even if I didn’t have some surprise planned, I think I would want to know about Aguri! The more I’ve learned about her from everyone else, the more cool I’ve thought she was! I know I haven’t come into this exactly being open about what my intent was, but I do respect Aguri, I swear! Because you’re right! She… she deserves to be remembered by the world. And I know I’m just one person… but please… let me be the start.”

Kiyoshi’s hands tremble as he speaks. But the more he speaks, the more he’s certain he believes what he’s saying. Aguri… kind, sweet, troubled Aguri. He wants her story to be told. And he wants it to be told to him. Because… if anything ever happened to Fumiko… kind, sweet, troubled Fumiko, he’d be outraged if the world forgot about her.

...He wants to know her story.

Finally, Kayano relents. Her shoulders lowering, she says “Alright. I’ll be the first to admit this is more than a little weird, but I could never pass up the opportunity to talk about my sister. And I know how it is. That… there are certain secrets that just can’t be shared.” She gives him a tiny smile. “But the truth better come out soon. Lenient or not, I do want to know what’s going on.”

Kiyoshi quickly nods. “You will!” he promises. “The truth. Will come out, I mean. Just give us a few more days. Then… I’ll tell you everything.”

He gives her a nervous grin. He’s starting to think maybe he goofed up with the plural ‘us,’ but quickly shakes the feeling. Is there anything he’s a part of nowadays that doesn’t somehow involve the Himurasikawa duo? If Kayano has a single brain cell (Which, he knows for a fact she does) then she’s probably already pieced together that they’re scheming something.

...Which would make her wrong, because for once it’s only him and Fumiko in on this scheme. Makoto is just as left out as the 28 people in the E-Class group chat he blatantly lied to. So maybe he was on the right track by using ‘us,’ because therefore he’s misleading Kayano.

...Wait, shit. That just means he’s lying to her again. By omission. By accident. But one could still argue that he was deliberatel-

‘Jesus fucking Christ, Kiyoshi!’ he tells himself. ‘DROP IT!’

It’s not a lie, and what does matter is the fact that he meant it when he said the truth would come out soon enough.

If Fumiko’s right, then she can come forward to Kayano and tell her herself. And if she’s wrong, without getting anyone’s hopes up, they can simply explain their misconception to Kayano. She’ll understand.

Kayano turns back around and finally manages to retrieve what she’d been searching for from the armoire. Brushing off the dust with her hand, she turns back around to face Kiyoshi, holding a massive scrapbook.
“Well, if you’re looking for information on Aguri, here’s your holy grail,” she says, plopping down next to him. “This was hers. And it has all sorts of pictures in it. If you want a snapshot of her life, there’s no better place to look.”

Kiyoshi stares at the cover. It’s humongous, with tacky stickers littering it’s every surface. With an enormous heart stenciled onto the center of it in what looks like glitter pen, and cutesy messages hastily stamped on, it’s quite a sight to see.

“I…” Kiyoshi’s jaw drops. “I… see where Korosensei got his love for massive tacky books from.”

He decides not to comment on the overall… aesthetic of it. That would be literally the worst thing possible to say about someone’s dead sister. He simply files that away in the back of his mind as another thing to tease Fumiko about.

(Is that a sticker of toilet paper!?)

Kayano laughs. “Yeah,” she admits. “Turns out we have a lot of books this size from deceased mentors. Clutters the house quite a bit, but they leave behind nice memories.” She flips open the scrapbook! “Anyways, what are you looking for? I mean… In terms of info or stories about her or whatever. As you can see this is sort of thick, so we won’t have time to dissect the whole thing. And it’d take even longer for me to share every memory I have of Aguri.”

Kiyoshi thinks it over. “Well… I already have all sorts of stories about what she was like as a teacher,” he admits. “But I suppose I don’t know much about what she was like as a sister. What was it like growing up together?”

“There was a bit of an age gap,” Kayano muses. “She was eleven when I was born. So I guess we didn’t really ‘grow up’ together in that sense. It was more like… she helped raise me.” She flips through the scrapbook, stopping maybe ten pages in. There, Kiyoshi spots a picture of a young girl holding a bundled up baby, a delighted grin on her face. She looks a lot like a smaller Kayano. And for a moment he even thinks it is her. At least before he realizes that makes no sense in regards to what Kayano’s saying, and that Kayano’s the newborn in the blanket. The girl, on the other hand, must be Aguri.

In messy handwriting beside the photograph there’s excited gushing about her new baby sister. Declaring she loves her so much already, Aguri states she’s found her new best friend.

Kayano softly smiles, and it’s contagious. With a diabetes-inducing sweetness overtaking him, he decides maybe he can drop the whole ‘making fun of Fumiko’ thing if Aguri started this when she was, like,… ten.

“She always looked out for me,” Kayano says. “A lot of people in the E-Class…” she pauses. “Well, a lot of people I know in general didn’t always have the best families. But I had Aguri. I was so, so lucky to have Aguri.”

She flips the page, only to greet Kiyoshi with more baby pictures of herself. He hadn’t exactly realized this is what he was signing up for when he asked Kayano to tell him everything she could think of about her sister, but he’s not complaining, either. Baby Kayano is in all parts adorable, and Aguri’s excited document of her life paints a picture of her more vivid than any Kiyoshi has seen before: That of a downright doting older sister.

Beside one picture, she comments on Kayano’s first steps. And alongside another, she excitedly muses on her first words. In each and every entry, she seems to carry the same enthusiasm.
“Most of my first memories are of Aguri,” Kayano admits. “Playing ‘movie star’ or ‘don’t touch the floor,’ or jumping on the couch for literally no reason. Dad always got so mad about that. In hindsight, I can’t blame him much. Once I fell off the couch and cried for an hour. Aguri had to jump through about eight hundred hoops just to get me to shut up.”

...Dad. Dad. That’s the first time she’s mentioned a dad. It makes Kiyoshi wonder. Where IS her dad in all of this? He’s only in a few of the photographs. And Kayano’s first words are ‘mama.’ But there’s no mention of dad.

He knows enough about Kayano’s family by now to know that her mother’s deceased. But he doesn’t exactly know the full story behind dad. Kayano’s never seemed inclined to talk about it.

Kiyoshi wonders if it’s insensitive to ask. Whatever the answer is, it’s probably not a great one. But he decides it can’t do too much harm. Kayano’s a pretty down to earth person. She’s not going to yell at him for crossing a line. Especially not when it’s a line pretty important to painting a full picture of Aguri’s life.

“That’s really sweet,” he admits. “But… there’s still one thing confusing me here. I know your mom died when you were young, but where’s your dad in all this? It’s a little weird to see how Aguri’s almost playing the role of a doting mother to you more than a sister.” He pauses. “N- no offense!”

Kayano pauses, shaking her head. “None taken. You’re right,” she admits. “Aguri… did play that sort of role for me a lot of the time. After my mom passed, my dad… closed off from us a lot. He didn’t pay much attention to me, outside of helping curate my career. And because of that, the duty of actually taking care of me ended up falling on Aguri. She was of the age that she was starting to become a ‘young lady,’ after all.”

She sighs. “In hindsight… it’s really messed up. But Aguri never let me know anything was wrong. She did everything in her power to give me a normal childhood. I never felt like I had an abnormal family. And she never made me feel like… a burden. Even despite everything she had to go through for me, she always made me feel like I was the light of her life.”

Kiyoshi looks over photos of the two of them. Aguri commemorating Kayano’s first day of school, her arm slung tight around her baby sister. A trip to the beach with bright pink floaties, and a selfie of the two of them watching Kayano’s first movie together.

“...To me, it looks like you were.”

Kayano smiles softly. “...Yeah. I know. And she was mine.”

...Slowly but surely, Aguri grows older. She’s fifteen. Then sixteen. And before the either of them know it... She’s twenty. She commemorates deciding to become a teacher. Takes a photo of her first day of college. Now they’re not watching Kayano’s first movie, but her fifth. She celebrates when Dad’s company makes a breakthrough, and then she’s engaged. Her first day teaching at the E-Class, and her first night working at the lab.

Aguri’s optimistic smile never once fades. But as she turns page after page, Kayano’s does.

“She wanted to protect me so, so badly. Up until the end… She never let me know anything was wrong.”

Kiyoshi notes that some of the photos appear to be covered up with sticky notes. A person or place blocked out, and seemingly not by Aguri’s doing. But he can sense that deep-seated sadness in
Kayano’s eyes, and decides not to pry. He… can pick up on the context clues. Even without having
to lift those sticky notes up, he knows who - Or what - is hiding underneath. And he’s sure Kayano
has had more than enough of talking about the bad things in Aguri’s life.

...That shouldn’t be what defines her legacy.

“Met the nicest guy at work today,” Aguri writes alongside a photo of a black-haired young man.
“Yanagisawa didn’t want me to take a picture of him, but I snuck one in. I figure meeting an
infamous criminal is at least worth some commemoration.”

An infamous criminal. Then that must be…

Kiyoshi stares. At the Reaper. At Makoto. And despite himself, he shudders. He has this dead look
in his eyes that Kiyoshi can’t quite comprehend. Can’t quite feel safe around. But the minute he
sees just how happy Aguri looks in the next photo, his unease fades.

“He tried to trick me into letting him out of his chamber today,” she writes in bright orange pen.
“Thought he could get away with it just by asking me nicely. Who does he think I am!? I’m not
that easily tricked! I work with middle schoolers, after all!”

He can almost imagine the way she’d laughed to herself as she wrote that.

“Plus, nice or not, I know he’s killed a LOT of people. And I don’t intend to get killed that easily!”

...He wonders if she’d really believed that.

Aguri seems to be on an upswing for a little while. She talks about brunch with Akari and the new
school year beginning. She doodles hearts in her scrapbook, and says she thinks that this is the year
that’s really going to be different.

And then… abruptly, the pages stop.

Left blank, there’s nothing else to read. Because there’s no Aguri left to write them.

Slowly, Kayano closes the scrapbook. And she breathes in through her nose, turning carefully to
face Kiyoshi.

She has this calm, peaceful look on her face. But he doesn’t believe it for a second. What Aguri had
done for Kayano… that’s what all adults do for kids. Pretend everything’s okay, even when it’s
not.

He won’t let her dwell on that moment, that loss one second longer.

“I think that was… a really good account of her life,” he admits. “But I still have a few questions. If
you wouldn’t mind answering them.”

“Yeah?” Kayano says. “I don’t mind one bit. Hit me.”

“Okay. So this first one is gonna sound kind of weird… But…” Kiyoshi leans forward, flipping the
scrapbook back open. “There’s something peculiar I noticed as you showcased Aguri’s
photographs. Something that became more and more absurd the further we got into her life. At first
I thought perhaps I was imagining it, but slowly but surely my suspicions were confirmed.
Something defining is missing from these photographs.”

Kayano slowly raises an eyebrow. “What is it?”
Kiyoshi throws his hands in the air. “Why on earth wasn’t her fashion screwed up for the first twenty-three years of her life!?”

Kayano’s jaw drops, before she bursts out into snickers. Covering her mouth with her hands, she sputters “That’s what you wanted to ask me about!?”

“Yes! It’s very serious!” Kiyoshi declares, conveniently ignoring the fact that he’s mostly making up a topic just to get Kayano’s mind off of the whole ‘dead big sister’ thing. Because it is at least… mildly serious! If nothing else, he can use this as something to try and coax a memory out of Fumiko.

*Every single person I’ve talked to up until now* - From Kanzaki to Gakushuu - Has had *some* sort of comment to share about her fashion sense. About how *deranged* it was. The *one* recurring element in *every* account of Aguri’s life has been just how goddamn weird the *clothes she chose to wear were*. She wore a shirt with *raw meat on it*, for fuck’s sake!”


“No!” Kiyoshi snaps. “Not real meat! Fake meat!” Wait - No. “A picture of meat, I mean! But that’s still *weird!* That’s *super* weird! Are you seriously telling me this was some sort of *new* development!? How does someone go twenty-three years of their life with a *completely normal fashion sense*, and then end up suddenly thinking wearing a JPEG of raw meat is anywhere near acceptable!?”

Her laughter subsiding, Kayano shakes her head. “Would you believe me if I told you it was my fault?”

“Pardon?”

“Yep. You caught me. Red-handed. Aguri didn’t always wear weird clothes. I’m actually the one who sort of accidentally sold her on that.”

Kiyoshi stares. “…First of all, I don’t believe you. Second of all, if that *is true*, you’re a monster.”

“Accidentally! I need to reiterate: *Accidentally!*” Kayano says. “You ever just play a prank on someone and it goes a lot further than you’d expected it to?”

Well *now* she has his attention. “I’m gonna need the full story. Y’know. For my ‘novel.’”

...He gives her a cheeky smile.

“We all know your novel is bullshit, but I’d feel a little bad if I didn’t share the full story now,” Kayano relents with a laugh. “The basic gist of it is that for one of my films I was playing this sort of out-there loser character. Someone disconnected from society. And to help establish this girl’s oddball energy, the director I was working under found the *weirdest brand of cheap, knockoff clothes you could possibly imagine*. He bought a set of them in bulk and told me to just go *wild*. Pick out whatever I thought was funniest.”

“But when I showed Aguri the movie, I guess she didn’t really pick up on the fact that you were supposed to be a little weirded out by my character. I dunno if it’s just because I was her baby sister or what, but I don’t think she understood that the clothes were part of the joke. She asked me what I was wearing, and I jokingly told her that it was the next big thing in fashion. What all the movie stars were wearing nowadays. I expected her to detect my sarcasm, but the next thing I knew she’d gotten a matching set for herself.”
“She loved those clothes. At first it was the funniest thing I’d ever seen. But then I started to feel a little bad.” Kayano pauses. “It… took me a solid month to admit I’d been messing with her. I was so embarrassed. But I was even more embarrassed having her show up to my parent-teacher meetings looking like that. So I swallowed my pride and told her.”

“And..?” Kiyoshi asks.

“And it was too late. She didn’t care.” Kayano says, deadpan. “She decided she liked the clothes anyways, and decided to continue wearing them. ‘Who cares if they’re not fashionable? I’ll just have to MAKE them fashionable, then!’”

“O… oh my God.”

“I know, right!?” Kayano says. “It was ridiculous!” She tosses her hands in the air. “Aguri was nothing if not… well, I don’t want to say an actual trendsetter, but a wannabe trendsetter, at the very least.” She shakes her head with disbelief. “She never cared what anyone else thought of her.”

“Well… Even if it was probably for the worst in this situation, I guess that’s not a half-bad attitude to have,” Kiyoshi admits. He wishes he had the balls to wear clothes he deliberately knew were outlandish in public. But, no: Instead he’s the sort of person who’s already afraid people in the supermarket are judging him for being alive.

“…Yeah. She had a pretty good attitude all around.”

They talk for another hour. And they discuss all the weirdest, best, silliest and most memorable parts of Aguri’s life. Kayano’s favorite games to play with her as a kid, and whether or not they ever had any pets. Favorite colors and favorite seasons and favorite Pokemon. The time Aguri accidentally broke a window, and how she made sure to tuck Kayano into bed every night, even when Kayano got old enough to complain she didn’t need it.

...And by the end of their conversation, Kayano’s beaming.

Finally, Kiyoshi stands, admitting “That’s all I think I need. Thank you for helping me out, Yukimura-san. I know I haven’t exactly been truthful about everything, but I promise it’ll all make sense soon. That it’ll all be worth it.”

Kayano nods, pulling him in for one more quick hug before he can scram. “Anything for my favorite nephew,” she says with a smile. “...And thank you too.”

“For what?” Kiyoshi asks.

“I think you already know.”

...The smile on her face, and reliving the best memories of her sister. But as Kiyoshi makes his way to leave, looking at Kayano one last time over his shoulder, he decides she doesn’t really have anything to thank him for yet.

Not until he gets to the bottom of Fumiko’s dilemma.

Then, and only then, will she really be able to thank him.

...It’s funny how quickly a week passes by.

When Kiyoshi had pitched regrouping in a week to discuss their findings, that had seemed like...
forever from now. Like Fumiko would have nothing to worry about and plenty of time to collect her feelings. But now it’s Monday and it’s time for them to talk. She’s going to get her answer today whether she likes it or not.

...Honestly, it makes her a little nervous.

She stares up at the mountain, hesitant. She’s arrived an hour early and already made plans to chat with Kiyoshi before class starts. That should give them plenty of time. She can’t hesitate now.

She pulls her coat’s hood up over her head and takes a step onto the mountain. She’s gotten this far now. She’s not going to back out. And so, trying her best to ignore the winter chill, she begins the march up to the school.

It’s strange to think that half a year ago she resented this trip. That she resented this school. That she saw it as a punishment from her parents. A dangerous place surrounded by miscreants where she was put because she’d never belong. But now she belongs more than ever. And she loves this place.

*(Shouldn’t she have always? Aguri loved it, too.)*

She knows about all the things Aguri loved now. This school and its students and sunny days and secret companions. And she loves them too, she thinks. It just took her a bit longer to come around.

...Maybe it’s the way she was raised.

She thinks she’s finally starting to understand Aguri. Like… for real. If this is Aguri, anyways. Lost in her thoughts… In her memories, each day, she becomes less of a stranger. And Fumiko thinks she loves her, too.

*(That feels good, at least. Aguri was never capable of loving that.)*

A week ago, Kiyoshi asked her if she was really okay with this whole Aguri thing. If it would make her happy. She knows that doesn’t matter much, because this would be happening anyway, but it’s an interesting question.

At first… she was afraid. She thinks she pushed back about it. But getting to know Aguri, maybe it’s not so bad after all.

She *likes* Aguri. She *likes* the person she sees. At least she has that much going for her.

That person Makoto’s confronted with… even if she thinks she likes him, she knows it must be hard for him. To carry The Reaper’s burdens. She’s not faced with that same dilemma. She’s not forced to carry those guilts. Aguri was a good person. Aguri never hurt anyone.

Aguri’s funny… and sweet… and, most importantly, she doesn’t care what anyone else thinks. She wears those *absolutely abhorrent* shirts into school, and she laughs at the stupidest things. Even despite her pain… even despite her strife… she finds a way to be happy! To be *free*! And Fumiko wants to feel that, too.

She thinks she’s starting to. And not just because of Aguri. This whole year has been… a learning experience for her. And she thinks she’s starting to finally grow into someone who lets herself enjoy life. She loves that. And… she thinks she loves the way Aguri serves as a motivator for that. The way Aguri makes her feel closer to her best friend, and the way it feels like she has someone in the back of her mind cheering her on at all times.
But she doesn’t like everything about Aguri. She doesn’t want to be Aguri. Because… Some of the things she sees in Aguri scare her, too.

She hates how self-sacrificing Aguri was. How… She refused to stand up for herself. She let her father… Her fiance… Her heart talk over her own desires. And because of that she never got to live her own life. It reminds her of who she was at the beginning of the year. Maybe it manifested in different ways: Aguri’s eager to please attitude, and her own silent, bitter compliance… But when she’s stuck back in those hours that Aguri lay bruised on the floor, she thinks she feels the same thing.

If she… really is Aguri, she never wants to live her life that way again. She’s terrified of it. She’s seen where it leads, and that’s to nothing but heartache.

(For Makoto and her both.)

She won’t be that person again. She’s capable of making that decision, isn’t she? She wants to believe that she has the power. That she’s not stuck in some revolving door that is fate. But if she wants the answer to that, she supposes there’s another question she has to ask herself.

In… figuring out whether or not she was really okay with being this person - Being Aguri - she had to ask herself ‘do you like Aguri?’ But in figuring out whether she really treasures this life she lives… Whether or not she’s willing to throw it away, what she must ask herself is something much more simple.

‘Do you like yourself?’

She didn’t. For a long, long time. She lived in the shadows of others. But the fear she feels in her chest when she thinks of going the same way Aguri had: It makes her decide ‘yes.’

‘I think I do like myself.’

She’s not funny. She’s not particularly kind (Though she’s working on it.) And she cares a little too much about what other people think. But… She likes to think she’s getting better. And she likes to think she likes this person she’s becoming. This someone between the two of them - The Fumiko who hid herself at the start of the year, and the Aguri who hid her sadness all of her life.

…This person who’s willing to prioritize herself.

When he’d panicked… remembered her death, Makoto had asked one thing of her and Kiyoshi: that they never put themselves in the line of fire for him. That… they know they matter too. That they never sacrifice their own wellbeing for him. And although she’d hesitated to agree to that when Makoto first brought it up, she thinks he’s right.

She shouldn’t sacrifice herself for him. For anyone.

Some people would call that selfish. And… she’ll admit that. But… it’s not that she’s not going to look out for others. She will. Because it makes her happy. And because she has people she loves more than anything. But she thinks…

…She’s finally ready to look out for herself, too.

She wouldn’t die for Makoto, and she thinks that’s everything the either of them has ever wanted.

…She hopes he’ll be happy when he hears that.
Well, if he hears that. Technically she still doesn’t know she’s Aguri. She’s just-

Oh. Who is she kidding!? She’s pretty goddamn certain at this point. Chatting with Kiyoshi is just a formality. Everything’s starting to make too much sense to chalk it up to anything else.

And strangely enough, she’s not that afraid at all when she comes to that conclusion.

Things are… gonna be fine. She’s spent the past two weeks overthinking this. She doesn’t need to have some crisis. She doesn’t need to reconsider who she is. She’s who she’s always been! And that’s Fumiko and Aguri both.

...Now she just has the tools to put that into words.

The tools to learn from her mistakes. And her accomplishments, too. To look back on the life Aguri’d lived and see it through an entirely different set of eyes. A smarter, braver, and younger set of eyes. With their own view and their own lessons learned. The… things that Aguri went through. Maybe they weren’t pointless. Maybe she hadn’t thrown her legacy away. Because if Fumiko is here today to reflect on it, then maybe it hadn’t gone to waste.

...That kindness. That person Aguri was. Of course it scares Fumiko sometimes. But Aguri’s kindness, or her optimism, or whatever it may be is not what killed her. At least… Fumiko doesn’t want to think so.

Because kindness is still good. She’s sure of that. If there’s something she can learn from both the life Aguri lived and the one she’s living today it’s that. The kindness of the people around her and the kindness that’s spurred from herself is the only reason she’s standing on this mountain today. Kindness repays kindness. Even if she hadn’t known it at the time, isn’t it funny to think that the boy she refused to give up on all those years ago has become her teacher and protector since?

That all of those students have blossomed into bright, wonderful people. And that in some ironic twist, they give her the faith to believe she can, too.

...Yanagisawa was the exception, not the rule. Her parents are the exception, not the rule. There are bad, bad people in this world, but that doesn’t mean she should give up on the world as a whole. That doesn’t mean she should give up the heart that beats inside her chest.

It simply means she needs to know when to draw the line. That she needs to be the sort of person willing to reach a hand out even to those in hurting, but that she must know when to retract that hand as well.

That she needs to know that in sacrificing her own kindness, she’s inevitably hurting those who really do care about her.

...She thinks she does know those things. She’s spent the past two weeks reflecting on them, hasn’t she? Perhaps some deeper, more hidden part of her has spent the past half a year reflecting on them. And she finally has her answer.

She knows what she believes. She knows who she is.

That’s Fumiko. Fumiko Hisakawa. And she comes first. Even before Aguri. But she’s Aguri, too. And that doesn’t have to be a bad thing. In fact, that can be a great thing. Because she doesn’t hate Aguri anymore. Not like she did sixteen years ago.

It just means she can become the best possible version of herself. They’re one in the same. Aguri isn’t some foreign, incomprehensible force. She’s simply an echo of the past.
And Fumiko is no stranger to her. Fumiko is simply who she’s become with time. A better, stronger, and smarter version of herself. A version ready to face the future.

She just hadn’t known it up until this moment.

...She doesn’t have anything to worry about. She’s here. Makoto’s going to be fine. Akari’s going to be fine. And most importantly: She’s going to be fine. She’s not going to repeat her mistakes. But she is ready to repeat the things she did right. And that must be the reason she remembers what she does today. To give her the power to make things right once and for all.

She’s reaching the top of the mountain now. Bundling herself deeper in her coat, Fumiko scans the school for Kiyoshi. And when she spots him, she smiles.

But not before whispering, “This time we won’t make the same mistakes.”

...Even knowing they’re one in the same, the pessimist who wants to live looks the optimist who didn’t in the eye, and pulls her in close. Whispers “We’re finally safe,” and tosses her coat’s hood aside.

She’s finally ready to come home.

Chapter End Notes

Hell yeah! It's here. I know it's literally only been a week, but it still feels like forever between these updates. As such, I'm happy to finally toss this one at your heads. It's a chapter I had a lot of fun writing!

I'll be the first to apologize for making ya'll read that first scene. Yanagisawa... REALLY fucking sucks, and I hope I didn't make anyone too uncomfortable with that bit. I just think it's important to delve into just how bad Aguri's life could be before asking the question of 'what did it mean?' and 'was it worth it?' And seeing as how that was the theme of this chapter, that meant Trauma Time! I did enjoy getting to write Aguri sassing him back a little, however, even if I still fucking hate Yanagisawa for making me seriously write down the word 'troglodyte.'

...And, hey! Aguri's memories aren't ALL bad. I had lots of fun delving into both fond and silly memories from the class and from Kayano. Fun fact: I had to do actual research into what dance moves were popular in 2013-2014 to make that nae nae joke. Now alongside how to bake a cake, antimatter, and the worker ant principal, I can add '2013-era dabbing' to my list of 'stupid fucking shit Adventures In Solitude has made me research.'

I really enjoyed getting to write some Kiyoshi and Kayano interaction. Because not only is he right in assuming she'd be the best source of information on Aguri, but they also just have a really fun dynamic. It's one I'd like to utilize more. Fun fact 2: Kayano is actually Kiyoshi's favorite out of the Moonrise Quartet. Nagisa can be a little too doting, Gakushuu a little too scary, and Karma a little too Karma... But Kayano's just right. She's hands down his favorite weird aunt.

But the real thing we need to talk about in this chapter is the question of Aguri's life. Fumiko's gone beyond 'AM I Aguri' and landed straight in 'Is that really okay?"
territory. The question of whether or not Aguri's life was well lived is a complicated one. Because while she was right in the fact that kindness sews kindness, there's always things like being a happiness sink to worry about, and at the very least I'm happy Fumiko has the self awareness to realize Aguri sorta treated herself like shit. I still can't answer the question of whether or not Aguri's life was worth it, but Fumiko's reached her own conclusion, and she's ready to reach out towards the future.

As a note I am changing the day I upload these chapters. In the future all AIS chapters will be uploaded on Fridays. I've realized Wednesday is an incredibly inconvenient day for me now that I'm also playing a Pokemon based Tabletop Game based on it. Admittedly I also sometimes have DND on Fridays, so that's not MUCH better, but that's only sometimes, so I'll take it over Wednesdays being every single week. This means the next chapter will be up NEXT FRIDAY. Not the upcoming one. Not in two days. Not on 12/6, but on 12/13. I know it's a little bit of a longer wait than usual, but I hope you'll be able to wait it out!

Some songs that helped me write this chapter were Au Revoir by The Front Bottoms (The ultimate Mansplaining song...), She Used To Be Mine from Waitress, Far From by Olivia Millerschin, Sloom by Of Monsters and Men, Watch What Happens from Newsies, Always Gold by Radical Face, My Brother Taught Me How To Swim by Passion Pit, Barbara 2.0 from Beetlejuice, Already Home by Jukebox the Ghost, and Viktoria, by Maria Mena.

The last one which I'd love to give a special shout out to. Because GOD DAMN if the lyrics don't make me cry in regards to Fumiko.

"I looked away  
The other day  
Growing up slowly

Have you ever heard me  
Laugh so easily  
It's 'cause I'm growing up slowly

...

Me and my confidence  
We're now more than friends  
We're growing up slowly

She lives in me  
She whispers when I sleep  
She says "you're growing up slowly"

...

I have let go of my demons  
They left me when I sang the truth  
No bulges I'm finally even  
I can break all my rules

When I was ten  
My mother changed my name  
She said "you're gonna grow into it"
It took quite some time
But today it feels like mine
I guess I grew slowly"

I hope you enjoyed the chapter, and I hope to see you next Friday! Make sure to let me know what you thought, and until next time! o/
It turns out that discussing your findings in a meeting that could take upwards of an hour out in the freezing cold is a piss-poor idea.

Fumiko meets up with Kiyoshi outside of the school. He waves her over and proudly holds up a composition notebook. She asks him if he’d seriously taken notes on the matter, and he shies back with embarrassment, admitting he’d wanted to take this seriously seeing as how it had seemed so important to her.

She calls him a dork and gives him a quick thanks. He asks her how she’s feeling, and she admits, “Pretty good, actually. You?”

Kiyoshi shrugs. “Good as I can be.”

Before they can dig into his findings for real, however, they realize just how cold it is outside. Fumiko grits her teeth and tries to bear it, seeing as how this is sort of a big deal, but the minute she catches Kiyoshi shivering as he attempts to ply his notebook open she changes her mind.

She grabs his hand and drags him towards the school. “We’re discussing this inside.”

“What? But-? Someone might hea-”

“Don’t worry. I have an idea.”

Fumiko sincerely doubts anyone - even Nagisa, will be at the school an hour early, but better safe than sorry. Kiyoshi’s right. She doesn’t want anyone overhearing this. Not yet. Instead, she leads the two of them straight towards the teacher’s lounge.

She unlatches the door and lets herself inside.

“We really should not be here,” Kiyoshi admits. “What if Shiota-sensei-?”

“Shiota-sensei won’t care. He is the most lenient man I know. We could tell him we were using this room to discuss Pokemon spoilers in secret and he’d believe us. We’ll be fine.”

Kiyoshi gives her a deadpan look and a shrug as he steps into the room. “Touche.”

“Besides. I’d argue I sort of have every right to invite myself into this room, Aguri thing considered. This was mine before it was his.”

Kiyoshi blinks, dumbfounded. “You’re going mad with power!”

Fumiko pulls out a chair and sits down. “I’m joking, dumbass. It’s true, though.”

Kiyoshi sits across from her. “So you’re certain, then?”

Fumiko clasps her hands. “Let’s talk about it.”
Kiyoshi places his notebook on the desk, careful not to disturb any of Nagisa’s papers. He quietly flips it open and meets Fumiko’s eyes. “Okay. So where are we gonna start?”

Fumiko’s tempted to bring up the fact that this whole thing was Kiyoshi’s plan in the first place and he should probably know where to begin, but decides against it. It’s clear he went out of his way for her. Now’s not the time for smarminess. She’ll just... Ask nicely!

“I… don’t know. You got any ideas?”

“Well… Let’s start simple. What are you thinking? I know that doesn’t mean much factually, but…” Kiyoshi pauses. “I think it’s a good starting point. How are you feeling about this? You’ve had a week to reflect on it. Do you still think it’s true?”

Fumiko takes a deep breath, before admitting, “Yeah. I do. A… lot of stuff has happened over these past two weeks, and at this point I don’t know how to explain it if not for Aguri.”


Fumiko shrugs. “I dunno. That’s pretty good too. I didn’t think so at first, but… Aguri’s actually a really cool person.”

“Okay. That’s… a really solid basis,” Kiyoshi muses. “I know I already said this: but I meant it when I told you that there’s no way for me to definitively prove this. Until we have real proof for reincarnation being an undeniable thing, which is way beyond my skill level, all I can do is help you come to a conclusion on your own. If you already have a hunch, that means we’re on the right track.” He gives her a sheepish look. “Hell, if you’re really certain, you might not even need my help. We could just forgo this entire affair and come to our conclusion without digging into my findi-“

“No way,” Fumiko interjects. “Dude: You wrote what looks to be an entire book for my sake. I am not going to toss that in the trash just because I have ‘a hunch.’” She snorts. “Besides, even if my heart is in this, it’s probably a good idea to get my head in it too before I say anything I’ll regret.”

“Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. That’s fair,” Kiyoshi admits. “Though - Uh - For the record, this is not a book. Nor is it a novella, a collection of anecdotes, or a musical tribute. Please don’t call it that.”

Fumiko squints. “Excuse me?”

“I just want you to know what to expect. This is an extremely messy collection of notes. Nothing more, nothing less. If Asano-san tells you I’m writing a Wikipedia article, don’t believe a word he says, because he’s just messing with you.”

“I… Have no idea what you’re talking about. Let’s just compare notes.”

Kiyoshi’s voice seems to crack, but he nods. “Let’s.”

“So what are you thinking?” Fumiko asks. “You read things out of there and quiz me? Or?”

“I was actually thinking you could tell me things you remember, then I could see if I can verify them. I’d like to see what you’ve discovered on your own before I give you any potential hints.” He pauses. “Then - maybe - I can ask you little questions related to what you share and see if that helps any. I dunno. I don’t really have a plan, but-”

...An hour to discuss what she’s remembered. The life she’s had two weeks now to dwell on. Surely there won’t be enough time to explore every aspect of it. She needs to get right into the things Aguri treasured. The things the people she loved would remember her by.

Fumiko shuts her eyes, deep in thought. And silently, she asks herself what mattered the most.


“Yeah.” Kiyoshi nods. “Go on.”

“Pretty much… everything from when I was young involved her in some way. I’d do my homework while babysitting her, or take her out for a walk around town to shop, then grab treats. Never ice cream, though. I remember that very distinctly.”

Kiyoshi cocks an eyebrow. “Really?”

“Yeah,” Fumiko says. “She hated sweet things. She doesn’t anymore, so something must have changed, but…” She pauses, reflecting on the passing of time. Wondering how different they are. Wondering how little she knows the girl she raised from a baby now. “...She did. And so I’d always get ice cream, but she’d get a pretzel.”

Kiyoshi gives her a gentle smile. “That’s… adorable,” he comments, before returning to thumbing through his journal. “It sounds like you were a really good sister.” He stops at a certain page. “Can I ask you a question, actually?”

“Considering that’s the entire point of this exercise, yes, you may.”

“What age do you think you were when Akari first came into your life?”

Fumiko frowns. “Oh… I don’t know. Maybe… Ten? I was pretty young, but I wasn’t… like… a toddler.”

Kiyoshi nods, scrawling something down in his notes. “Okay. Go on.”

His expression is indecipherable. And Fumiko suddenly feels weirdly tense. She knows she asked him to do this, but holy shit does it feel like he’s genuinely analyzing her.

...She supposes Kiyoshi is nothing if not passionate!

“I loved her movies, obviously. Tons of memories of watching those. First one was that superhero flick where she played the main character’s daughter. We got an early screening copy, and she pointed to the screen all excited whenever she appeared. We built a blanket fort to celebrate and everything.”

Kiyoshi gives her another soft smile. Analytical poker face or not, he’s completely unable to mask his delight. “It sounds like… you were really supportive.”

“I tried my best,” Fumiko admits.

“Though I do have one more question about Akari before we can move on. This might sound a bit strange… But did she ever mess with you?”

“...Mess with me?” Fumiko asks.

“Y’know. Like… Play pranks. Perhaps… Tell you things that weren’t true.”
“I mean… yeah? She was like, nine. Of course she’d eat the last brownie and tell me she didn’t. But I don’t think she ever did anything… like… genuinely malicious…”

Kiyoshi hides another wry smile. “Okay. Okay. Perhaps we’ll touch on that a little bit more later. How about in the meantime you tell me about something else?”

His smug aura is insufferable, but there’s no time to dwell on it. Fumiko’s sure… whatever inane joke he’s making about Kayano will all make sense in due time. As for now she just simply rubs her chin and tries her best to think. What else was important to her? What else defined her? And what else is worth sharing?

...It’s not hard to decide.

“I also remember lots of things about being a teacher. I only got to teach for, like, the last year of my life, but it was my dream ever since I was… maybe sixteen? When I came to Kunugigaoka, it’s like I was on cloud nine. It was far from perfect, and in hindsight most of what went down there just makes me want to throw a chair, but at the time I loved it.”

Kiyoshi cocks an eyebrow. “…Throw a chair? Seriously?”

“Yes, seriously,” Fumiko rants. “That place was insane! People regularly fell asleep in class. Thrice I had to tear kids apart from trying to beat the living daylights out of each other. No-one paid attention, and the rest of the staff didn’t give a shit! The principal just pedaled these highly troubled kids up to a building in the middle of nowhere and expected them to get by with no air conditioning or praise. Then, when one of the students, who I know had to be Karma, leaves a rusty tack on my seat, I’m told that’s just proof I should believe these literal children don’t deserve to be alive.”

“...Don’t... Deserve to be... alive,” Kiyoshi repeats, dumbfounded.

“I am not exaggerating. The headmaster’s. Actual. Words. I never understood just how exhausting Shiota-sensei’s job was until recently. The man’s a saint.” Not that she thinks she qualifies as a saint or anything, despite going through the exact same thing. That would take a level of narcissism even a Hisakawa doesn’t have. “But that’s… Besides the point, I’ll admit. We all already know that Asano-san’s father is a sociopath and that historically Kunugigaoka was a school shut down for piss-poor maintenance. I’m not sharing anything new.”

Kiyoshi gives a shrug. “I mean… I guess not, but it’s interesting to hear your perspective on it.”

“My perspective, for the record. Again: I need to reiterate: As Aguri I loved my job. I knew everything going on there was messed up on a fundamental level, but I really did feel like I was putting some good into a miserable environment. Please don’t throw the ‘Fumiko is Aguri theory’ into the garbage because you don’t have any notes stating that I ‘wanted to burn that cesspit to the ground.’ Because I didn’t.” She pauses. “And… I mean: I still don’t, obviously. A lot of my fondest memories come from my time as a teacher.”

Kiyoshi tilts his head. “Really?”

“Mmm,” Fumiko admits. “It was… hard work: But like I said, I felt like I was doing the right thing. I never got through to those kids in the same way Korosensei did, but… even the little things were rewarding. Seeing Okuda give me a tiny smile after staring at the ground all year… Or grading Yoshida’s first C+ assignment… It felt really good. Like I was making some sort of change in the world. Like I really could really, genuinely, help people.”
“I have memories of Shiota-sensei, too. He was so different back then. He tried to make himself look so small. It’s… really nice to see what sort of people they’ve all grown into. Happy, healthy, successful people. Because that means… I was right. About them. About the world.”

“I know most of the reason they turned out so well is because of Korosensei, but…” Fumiko drifts off.

“Well, Korosensei would never have become a teacher if not for you, yeah?” Kiyoshi replies. “I’d say you had a pretty huge part in changing their lives, too.”

Fumiko gives a tiny nod. “...Exactly.”

It’s funny… But as hellish as it was, there’s this little nagging feeling in the back of her gut telling her she should do it all over again. Not - Uh - The whole huge mistakes self-sacrificing thing, considering she just had a massive internal monologue denouncing that, but the teaching thing. It was her dream, and she only got to live it out for a year. If this is really the second chance she deserves… The life she’s dedicating to her own happiness, then maybe she owes it to herself to give herself another try.

She’s not certain. Not even remotely. But comparing the shy, self-loathing Nagisa with the Nagisa who’s since grown up into such a functional adult, she files it in the back of her mind as a possibility.

At the very least, it’s a nice thought.

“Speaking of… mind telling me about The Reaper a little?” Kiyoshi asks. “If you want, I mean. He seemed really important to you, too.” He pauses. “This is weird… but maybe… Start with telling me what he looked like? Believe it or not, you took a picture of him.”

“I what!” Fumiko sputters.

“You heard me: You took a picture of him,” Kiyoshi says. “A shitty, cell-phone quality picture, but a picture. You put it in your scrapbook and everything. Yukimura-san showed me.”

This is a lot to take in. Fumiko had entirely forgotten she’d kept a scrapbook up until now! Had she seriously taken a candid shot of the world-famous serial killer? That’s ridiculous! That’s insane! That’s…

...So her.

Kiyoshi has literally no reason to be making this up. Okay. Fine. She’ll accept it. She took a picture of The Reaper with her cell phone camera. She was out of her goddamn mind, but at least now it’ll help her prove her identity. All she has to do is describe him.

She shuts her eyes and frowns.

...He’s… Hard to make out. Overlapping and ever-shifting. One moment he’s calm, and the next her mind is superimposing the face of her best friend. But that’s not him. Not yet. This was… a long time before that. A time when he had a very different demeanor. That demeanor… she needs to focus on it. She needs to make it out.

Sometimes his skin writhes, and other times it doesn’t. One day he coughs up blood, and the next he looks to be the pinnacle of health. But what - What stands out to her the most?

“His smile. He… had a very distinct smile,” Fumiko says. “It wasn’t anything like Makoto’s. Most
of the time it was this… forced, fake thing. You could tell by looking in his eyes. He had these… Really dark, really blank grey eyes. And whenever he was smiling at you in that way, you could tell whether or not he meant it by looking in his eyes.” She shuts her eyes tighter, hand gently shaking as she focuses.

“It was really rare… But when he really smiled you could tell, too. His lip would upturn just a little bit uneven, and you could finally see something behind his eyes. It wasn’t always a lot… But it felt like he was finally looking at you.” She takes a deep breath. “His hair was… dark, too. A little long and unkept. He was really dangerous to deal with, so the rest of the lab tried to avoid dealing with his hygiene as much as possible. I’d say they only cut his hair… Twice in the whole time he was there.”

“I would have offered, but I wasn’t allowed to do it. I wasn’t allowed to touch him. Not until he found a way to touch me through the glass.” The tiniest, and equally as uneven smile comes to her lips. “...There was something in his eyes, then. This golden glow. The most I’d ever seen.”

Slowly, she opens her eyes. And when she catches Kiyoshi staring at her, astounded, her face flushes red. “Although-! I suppose that’s… Not a very helpful description!” She admits. “I- Er… Sorry, I got lost in the moment. He had black hair, grey eyes, grey or blue or white garments. I can’t quite remember. That’s all I needed to say-”

“No,” Kiyoshi responds. “That was… a good description. I think… it looked like he had dead eyes, too.”

“So I’m right?” Fumiko asks. “About what he looked like?”


Fumiko gives him a proud grin. “Well then, what else do you want to hear about? Whatever it is, I’ve got it.”

She’d walked into this conversation nervous, but now that she’s in the midst of it it’s actually really easy! What had she been worried about? She believes herself. And if she’s right, that means she has nothing to worry about. She’ll remember what she needs to. If it was important to her… Then she’s sure she’ll have no trouble getting it recalled.

Kiyoshi rubs his chin. “How about… You tell me about your friendship with him a little. I know you met at the lab, but why did you start talking? What sort of things did you bond over?”

Fumiko takes another minute to think it over. In the meantime Kiyoshi continues to flip through his journal, curiously peering at his notes.

“Well… I think we started talking because I was lonely,” Fumiko says. “I know that’s a pretty messed up reason, but it’s true.” She pauses. “A… lot of people weren’t very nice to me. I didn’t get along well with my fiance. And I didn’t really have anyone to talk about how I felt with. I mean, there was Akari, but I’d never put any of that on her.”

Kiyoshi nods. “Of course. Of course.”

“And so… one day I just started talking. When I first met the Reaper I didn’t do much more than be polite, but eventually I realized I wanted this to be someone who could really care about me. I’d just ramble about my issues, and he’d listen. He almost never had advice, but he listened.”

“Eventually… he opened up. I think… Some things about how he ended up getting arrested were eating at him. And it turns out… I was the only one he had to talk to, too. So one day he just spat it
“I think that’s when we first started getting close. Because… I realized he had anxieties too, and he realized I could be ‘useful’ to him.” She bites her tongue. “Although it sounds extremely manipulative when you put it that way. I don’t mean to - he wasn’t - I just can’t think of another word. He…” She pauses. “He realized I could give him emotional support, and he’d never had anyone do that for him before. He wanted that more than anything. And so I gave it to him. Company, and a listening ear.” She smiles and sighs. “That sounds better.”

Kiyoshi nods. “And so you two… sort of played therapist to each other.”

“I guess,” Fumiko says. “But it was more than that, too. We were… friends, even if our troubles are how we bonded. Some days we’d hardly speak a word, but it always felt just as nice to be in his company. I always looked forward to seeing him. He was… one of the people I treasured the most.”

...Kiyoshi’s giving her this strange look. He laughs softly and gives her a stilted smile.

Fumiko straightens up. “Although I… suppose that’s sappy. Pardon me. I’ve just been… sentimental lately.”

Kiyoshi shakes his head. “Don’t apologize,” he says, a tired lilt to his voice. “I think it’s sweet. And… Makoto’s had similarly sentimental stuff to say about you. So it’s not like this is new to me.”

Now that earns Fumiko’s attention. She leans forward over the desk, eyes wide.

“Really!?”

Kiyoshi nods. “Really.”

“We- well, then,” Fumiko stutters. “We… need to get on this, so we can tell him! How’s my report looking? Does it line up with what everyone else has told you?”

“Pretty much,” Kiyoshi says. “I’m… actually surprised by how accurate you’ve been. But I do have one more thing to ask you before I can approve your thesis. Something very important.”

Fumiko huffs proudly. “Hit me. I can answer anything you throw at me.”

“Okay. This is going to sound strange at first, but I must reiterate: I genuinely believe I will not be capable of ending this conversation until I grill you on this topic. Because there’s still one thing I’ve heard everyone I’ve interrogated mention, that you haven’t breathed a word of.”

Fumiko raises an eyebrow. “Which… Is…?”

“The shirts,” Kiyoshi says matter of factly. “Do you remember the shirts?”

Fumiko freezes. Face going red, she stiffens. And darting to cover her face with her hands, before realizing that would only make her more incriminating, she yelps.

The shirts. The god-forsaken shirts. Of course she remembers the shirts! They’ve haunted her every memory. But she hadn’t thought they’d come up. Had Kayano, Makoto and the rest seriously sold her out to Kiyoshi like this!? God damn it!

Now there’s this weird goofiness to his voice. Holy shit! He’s not interrogating her any longer! He’s… making fun of her! He’s teasing her! He’s… He’s… He’s-

“Fumiko.”

“Yes,” she finally snaps, eyes glued to the ground. “I remember the shirts. The terrible, god-forsaken shirts.”

“Oh, Okay. Okay. Okay. And can you tell me which of them you remember? Believe it or not, I have a full wardrobe description provided by the E-Class. How about you tell me about some of the ones that stand out to you? Then I can see if they match up with-”

“I am not doing that!” Fumiko shouts, utterly humiliated. Did Kiyoshi seriously take notes on her bad fashion!? Even for the wimpiest person she knows, he is brutal sometimes. “You and I both know I’ve proved my point, so drop it.”

That ‘wimpiest person’ moniker kicking in, Kiyoshi relents. He must detect the hostility in her voice, because he shuts up. Quick. “Okay, okay…” He says. “I’m not making fun of you, but I understand-”

“Yes. You are.”

He gives her a sheepish smile. “Okay. Maybe a little. But I do think it’s sweet, too.” He pauses. “That you let yourself wear things like that. I know it must be really embarrassing now, but I bet you were having a good time. Not caring what anyone thought of you or whatever.”

Fumiko shrugs. “I guess. But it’s still… humiliating. Seriously. If there’s one thing I don’t know what I was thinking: it’s that. I am never doing that again.”

“Fair enough,” Kiyoshi says. “I’m sorry. How about… you let me just ask you one final thing about them, and then I’ll drop it. I’m not messing with you, I swear. I’m genuinely curious.”

Fumiko’s lip twitches. “I’ll… allow it. But only for you. And after this, we never talk about them again.”

“Do you remember why you started wearing those?”

The silliness has vanished from his voice. He asks it completely straight-faced, as if ‘why on earth did you think wearing a t-shirt of Gudetama with Homer Simpson’s face was an acceptable life decision?’ is a normal question to ask your best friend. Then again, Fumiko supposes there are no normal questions when the reason you’re interrogating your friend in the first place is that she believes she was some lady with abhorrent fashion in a past life.

She gives a shrug. “Not particularly,” she admits. “I did all sorts of dumb things. I suppose some aspect of it could be psychoanalyzed down to trying to have some sort of control over my life, regardless of how minor, but now’s no time for that. And anyways, I do not think it was that deep in reality. I was just sort of… goofy. I don’t think I had a particular reason for-”

...She drifts off mid sentence. And she swears she can just barely make out Akari’s face.

“Don’t you know?” she says, tilting her head and pointing at the television. “They’re the new hip thing!”
“No,” she interjects, her tone shifting. Voice bristling with anger, she says “I started wearing those things because my little sister lied to me! To my face! She told me they were high-end fashion, and she was just messing with me. That’s how I ended up in this predicament!”

Her fist trembles. Sibling rivalry reactivated in one burst of righteous fury… She suddenly feels to have a baseball bat with Akari, ‘Kayano,’ Yukimura’s name written on it.

“I can’t believe her!”

As the realization dawns on her face, genuine wonder dawns on Kiyoshi’s. Covering his mouth with his hands, he grins, and laughs... And laughs.

Fumiko’s rage hones in on him. Snarling with disbelief, she asks, “Why are you looking at me like that!? Why are you laughing!? Is that story really so funny to you!?” She thinks she’s going to combust from the utter humiliation.

“No. No. She… she can’t… she didn’t think... She’s what!?”

And in an instant the anger in her chest fizzles out, only to be replaced by shock. She’s… she’s right?

That shock grows into joy - into ecstasy... And in a moment she leaps from her chair. Her feet carrying themselves, she rushes over to wrap Kiyoshi in a hug.

He lets out a surprised yelp, but quickly returns to laughing, throwing his arms around her neck. And before she knows it, she’s laughing as well.

“We really did it!”

“We did!” Kiyoshi exclaims. “We did it! You did it, Fumiko!”

Fumiko shakes her head, stifling another laugh. “Are you kidding me, Kiyoshi!? I never could have gotten this figured out without you! You did it, too!”

Squeezing her tighter, Kiyoshi sputters. “I… I guess I did!”

“I’m Aguri! I’m Aguri! I-” Fumiko drifts off. “...should really stop shouting that in public.”

Kiyoshi pulls away from her, snorting. “Probably. Correct or not, something tells me most of our classmates would probably believe you to be delusional.” He pauses. “Plus… you wouldn’t want to spoil the surprise for Makoto.”

Fumiko stiffens, releasing her grip on Kiyoshi. “You’re right! Makoto!” Oh my god! Makoto! Wonderful, ever-present, annoying as hell Makoto! Makoto, who she started this whole investigation for in the first place! In her euphoria, her exploration of and delight in herself she’d almost forgotten!

“Oh my god! We need to tell him! When should we tell him!?” she rambles. “I mean - we could always - we could always do it now, but then he’d never be able to focus in class. And what if someone else heard!? That would be… very weird! Maybe this afternoon? But that’s... that’s so
soon! I won’t know what to say! I mean, I should - I should really plan at least something sentimental out."

She hasn’t felt this excited and nervous at once since… Well… Ever! Like a little kid too excited to fall asleep the night before Christmas, she steps away from Kiyoshi and paces in circles.

“Maybe- maybe tomorrow afternoon. That would give me some time to think. But I wouldn’t… like… Keep him waiting too long.” She nods. “Yes. Tomorrow afternoon seems good. We’ll tell him tomorrow afternoon.”

She holds her head high and smiles. Tomorrow afternoon. It’s perfect. It’s a plan.

“…We?”

Fumiko pauses midstep.

“Pardon?”

“I’m - uh… Just confused as to what you mean by ‘we.’” Kiyoshi says. “I know you appreciate me helping you with this… But… shouldn’t this be just the two of you? I’d… I’d hate to intrude.”

Fumiko turns back to face him, shaking her head. “Kiyoshi, you are not an intrusion. I… I need you there. I never feel more confident then when I’m by your side. I want to make sure I do this right.”

“…Fumiko,” Kiyoshi says. “You don’t need to worry. I’m sure… You’ll do this right no matter what you say. Makoto’s going to be overjoyed. You… You won’t need me backing you up. It’s not like he’s not going to believe you. He…” He glances towards his notebook. “He’s Makoto. It’s not like he’s going to need me to get this out in front of him.”


Kiyoshi stares at her, or maybe through her. And his lower lip quivering, he asks, “Are you sure? You’ll never get a second shot at this. Do you really want me to be there? This seems… really important to you.”

“Are you kidding me?” Fumiko asks, stepping forward to wrap him in another hug. “That’s why I want you there! We’re… we’re family, the two of us. Remember? That’s not about to change.”

Kiyoshi tenses, utterly silent for one long moment, before he collapses into Fumiko’s embrace. Stress built up over weeks and weeks finally caving in on itself, he falls limp in her arms

“…Even now that you have your real family? K… Korosensei? And… And Yukimura-san?” he asks in a tiny, muffled voice.

“Now more than ever. It’s the three of us against the world. You’re the one who promised me that. No backing out now. Me being Aguri or not, you’re still one of us.”

For one moment, Fumiko’s shoulder grows wet with tears. But quickly, Kiyoshi pulls away, wiping at his nose. “I’m sorry. I… Shouldn’t be doing this during your moment. I should be happy for you. And- And I am! I just… I just don’t know what’s wrong with me.”

“There’s nothing wrong with you,” Fumiko insists. “You’re just… scared of being replaced. No-one could fault you for that.”
“I know,” Kiyoshi says, a whine in his voice. “I know. That’s what people tell me every time I get scared like this. But… now’s not the time for this. I… I should just let you have this.”

“No,” Fumiko says firmly. “How you feel matters too.” She glances at the clock. “Look: we still have fifteen minutes before everyone shows up. So… how about we sit down and talk this over. You just spent the past week writing a book for me. I think the least I can do to repay you is tell you I’m not going to leave your side.”

“You… you don’t need to do that—”

But Fumiko’s already marching over to the other side of the desk and grabbing Nagisa’s chair to drag it to Kiyoshi’s side. Plopping down next to him, legs crossed, she stares at him intently. “But I am. So talk.”

Kiyoshi sighs, rubbing his temples. “You are stubborn.”

“And I don’t intend to change. Now open up before I lock you in this room.”

Now that earns Kiyoshi’s attention. He stares at her with wide, bewildered eyes. “You wouldn’t actually do that.”

“Try me.”

Kiyoshi lets out a groan. “…It’s not anything you haven’t already heard me complain about before. I guess… I’m just scared of you two getting closer.” He freezes, looking utterly ashamed. “Which sounds stupid. Which sounds selfish. I should want my friends to be happy. I should want my friends to be close. But I guess I’m just… I guess I’m just…” He pauses. “…Scared you won’t need me anymore.”

Fumiko-stares at him, eyebrows knit. She reaches a hand out towards him, but he shakes his head in response.

“You two are… special now. We’re… Not on even playing ground. My whole life I’ve lived… Feeling overshadowed by people. Not good enough. Like I should be something more, and I’m not, so that makes me a disappointment. I mean… I’d look at my parents: who are so cool. Who have accomplished so much. And then I’d look at myself and think ‘you’re a waste of their time.’” He takes a deep breath, trying to hide the quiver in his voice. “‘You’ll never live up to them.’ ‘You never should have been born.’”

Fumiko’s fist clenches. “That… that is not true! You’re an amazing person, Kiyoshi.”

“People keep saying that, but I look at myself in comparison to them and I just don’t get it. I’ve… Always thought I was worse than people. But with you two, it was different. I felt… Like I really belonged. And now I’m scared I won’t anymore. Because I’m not like you. Just like I’m not like my parents. What if… what if this thing we have goes away, Fumiko?”

…She… hates the thought. She’s lost so, so much by now. Her own childhood wonder, and the dreams of distant lives. She cannot - She will not lose a single thing more. She… she doesn’t care if Kiyoshi’s different than the two of them! He makes her happy.

“It won’t. It won’t go away. I won’t let it.”

“...Then it’ll change.”

“Excuse me?”
“No matter what you say - no matter what you do, everything is going to change when you tell Makoto the truth. Y-”

“You don’t want me to tell him, then?” Fumiko asks, suddenly feeling as if she’s been forced on the defense. She… she can’t not-

“That’s not what I’m saying. Tell him. Please tell him. He deserves to know. I want you two to be happy. I’m not confiding this in you because I want to guilt you out of living the life you deserve. I’m… only telling you because you want me to. If… if you went back on this because of me, I don’t think I’d ever forgive myself.”

“All I’m saying is… I’m scared. And it makes me a bad friend, but I am. Because… you two were close. And, I mean… I didn’t even exist. You two were there for each other… making memories, protecting each other before I was even born! You… you can say whatever reassuring thing you want, but I’ll… never be the sort of person you two were for each other. You… you were in love, for Pete’s sake! I can’t live up to that-”

...In… In love!?

The thought makes Fumiko go red. Is… is that the impression Kiyoshi got from weeks of research? She wasn’t… She wasn’t really in love with Korosensei. It was just a sort of…- Or maybe she was? She… she doesn’t know! Whatever! It doesn’t matter! There are way more important things to focus on right now.

“That… that doesn’t matter, Kiyoshi! We’re not back then. We’re now! We’re lucky to have you. Who… who cares if you weren’t there with us in that miserable lab!? I’m happy you weren’t! I wouldn’t want you to experience that! You’re still important to me. To who I am now. Even if… Even if me and Makoto…” Oh god, this feels rather awkward. “...Become better friends, we’re not going to suddenly exclude you. We’re not going to leave you behind. I’ll make sure of that.”

Kiyoshi’s quiet for a long moment. Staring at the floor, he flexes and unflexes his hand… Slowly shutting his eyes. Then, speaking up in a quiet, bitter voice, he asks, “Why?”

“Why!?"

“Why haven’t you given up on me!? I’ve been asking myself that all year! I just don’t get it! This… this is your chance! You can move on without me. You have your reason. So why won’t you? You’re… you’re such cool people. You’re heroes. You changed the world. And I’m just… Kiyoshi. I’m just average. And that’s all I’ll ever be."

He’s making no effort to hide his tears by now. Trailing down his cheeks, he doesn’t bother to wipe them. Instead, he merely breathes heavily and whimpers.

Fumiko stares at him, her own breaths hitching. And sitting there… watching him cry… She reflects on the night she stayed at his house.

“You… told me the same thing back then, didn’t you?” she asks. “When I visited your home. That… you doubted Makoto’s intent for being your friend. And I didn’t have a concrete answer to ease your fears. Because I couldn’t read Makoto’s mind. I’m sure you must be feeling that same thing doubly now. That you don’t belong. But I’ll tell you the same thing I told you when you confided in me then, and this time I’ll have a satisfying answer for you. Because if there is one mind I can read, it’s my own."

“You’re right. You’re not like us. There’s no reason for us to be friends with you based on our past
lives. But there are reasons for us to be friends with you. And I think… in light of everything that’s come up recently, those reasons only make you more special. Don’t think about it like you’re the odd one out in a group of people with past lives. Think about it like those people could have chosen to be friends with anyone, and they both chose you! That must mean… that must mean you’re a really worthwhile person.”

Kiyoshi shoots her a skeptical look, but she’s not about to relent.

“And you are. That’s not some theoretical statement. I’m one of those people. I know why I’m your friend! I’m your friend because you’re a good person. Because I like you! Because you’re not a waste of time! And I am so, so lucky to have the chance to have gotten to know you.”

“Y… you’re kind… And funny, and smart, and thoughtful. You’ll do anything your friends ask of you, no matter how stupid. Look at this past week! I sent you out on what very well could have been a goose chase, and you helped me out with a smile. I couldn’t have done this without you. I couldn’t have. I know that.”

Kiyoshi’s lip quivers, and he stares at her with these big watery eyes. Blinking rapidly just to try and hold back the tears, he sniffles and gives her a touched look.

“Makoto is an amazing friend. But you are too, Kiyoshi. Maybe more. I… care about Makoto, more than anything. But you’re the one who always knows what to say. You’re the one who always knows how to help! Remember… remember when he broke down a few weeks ago? About… What happened to him? How he became Korosensei? I was helpless. I didn’t know how to comfort him. I just sat there, wishing there was something I could do.”

“But not you. You crouched down to his level and you reassured him. You grounded him back to reality, and you knew exactly what to say. I watched you slowly ease him out of that state… Watched the smile return to his face… And sitting there, feeling helpless, I thought… that I’d do anything to be more like you.”

“And… I still remember when I had a panic attack at your house. How… you came to comfort me. How you helped me catch my breath, told me everything was going to be okay, and promised me that we were going to be family from now on. That… we weren’t normal, but that was okay. Because we had each other. You did that. You said that. Not Korosensei. Not Akari. Not Makoto or anyone else in the world. The one and only Kiyoshi.”

“…You’re the first person I ever trusted like that. With… everything that scares me. I don’t care if you’re ‘nobody.’ Because… you’re someone to me. And I need you.”

That’s all it takes for the dam to finally break. Bursting out into full-on sobs, Kiyoshi desperately wipes at his eyes and weeps. Then, in a trembling, tiny voice, he finally admits, “I need you too.”

“Don’t,” Fumiko says, passing him another tissue. “For once in your life, just stop apologizing.”
“I’ll… I’ll try.”

Another minute passes, and some of the red is beginning to fade from his face. He blows his nose and wipes his eyes and gives Fumiko one last huge hug.

“…Thank you.”

She gives a lazy shrug. “No need to thank me. I’m just repaying the favor.”

By now the other kids are arriving. Fumiko hears their chatter as they flood into the building. But even as she catches the sound of Makoto’s cheery voice, she doesn’t rush to greet him. Instead, she helps Kiyoshi to his feet, and grabs his notebook for him.

...Because even Korosensei can wait.

“We should get going,” he admits with a sideways glance. “Everyone else is starting to show up. We’re gonna get in really big trouble if Shiota-sensei finds us here.”

“Once again: I sincerely believe we won’t, but I suppose it’s better to be safe than sorry.” Fumiko steps towards the door, and sends Kiyoshi one last look over her shoulder. “…Just… remember this conversation, okay? I don’t care who I was. I care about who I am. And you make me happy. I’m glad to exist at the same time as you. We’ll tell Makoto together. And we’ll tell him you’re every bit as responsible for this discovery as I am.”

Fumiko smiles.

“…We’ll tell him that you’re the reason he has his friend back.”

Kiyoshi gives her a quiet look, lips pursed. And in a quiet voice he says:

“Promise.”

“…Promise what?”

“That I make you happy. That you’re not going to leave me behind.” He pauses. “I… I know it’s inane to ask that of you. I know I should just believe your word. And maybe that makes me a bad friend, but-”

Fumiko whirls around to take his hand, and squeezing it tight, she declares, “I promise.”

Kiyoshi stares at her, genuinely surprised. But all he can find it in him to say is a startled “A… ah. You interrupted me again,” as he wilts.

Fumiko cocks her head. “Turns out I have every right to interrupt you when you’re saying dumb, self-degrading shit.”

...Kiyoshi laughs. He lets out an awkward, genuine, and shameful laugh. “Fair enough,” he says. “…Fair enough.”

“Gotta make sure to when it’s always gonna be the three of us. And it will be. I promise.”

She’d learned a long time ago not to make promises like these. That... they’re dangerous. And that she can never predict the future. But seeing Kiyoshi smile at her, catching the genuine wonder in his eyes... She wants to preserve that happiness more than anything. And as such... She lets herself be stupid, just this once.
“I swear it on my life.”

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It’s Monday evening, long after the kids have been sent home, when Kayano brings up what they’ve all been thinking.

“Is anyone else worried about Kiyoshi?”

Now that earns their attention. They’d been chilling in the living room, half-watching-tv, half working on other stuff when she speaks up. Glancing up from his schoolwork binder, Nagisa opens his mouth to speak, but Gakushuu beats him to it.

“Yes. At literally all times. But you’re going to need to specify what in particular is on your mind, because he’s always like that.”

Kayano rolls her eyes, but humors him anyways. “I just can’t stop thinking about how weird it is that he lied to all of us. That’s… Extremely unlike him. He told me he and his friends were… Like… Planning something, but I’m not sure what that has to do with my sister.”

“I’m sure it’s nothing to worry about,” Karma says with a shrug. “Those three are always up to something. But whatever it is, I sincerely doubt it’s malicious.”

“Of- of course it’s not malicious,” Kayano sputters, shaking her head. “If you can come up with a way to use information about Aguri Yukimura for malicious purposes, I’ll give you the Nobel Peace Prize my damn self.” She pauses. “Except… like… the opposite. Because you’d be putting literally an incomprehensible amount of bad into the world-”

“The Nobel Piss Prize,” Karma interjects.

“I was thinking like… The Evil Chaos Prize, but as always you’ve proven yourself to have a way with words. I literally hate you.”

“Can I win the nobel Piss Prize for coming up with the title? Is that putting enough bad into the world?”

Sick of hearing the word ‘piss,’ Gakushuu quickly interrupts with “We’re getting off-topic.”

“You’re right,” Kayano says. “Where was I?”

“Kiyoshi isn’t psychologically tormenting you,” Karma ever-so-helpfully reminds her.

“Right,” Kayano says. “No, of course I don’t believe he’s messing with me. I don’t think any of them are planning something bad. But I’m still kinda weirded out. I hope Makoto’s not pressuring him into gathering information or something.”

“I doubt it, Karma says. “Makoto couldn’t bully another person if his life depended on it. Whatever it is, they’re in it together.”

“A fair point, but I would like to address the fact that you hardly need to ‘bully’ Kiyoshi to convince him to do something,” Gakushuu says. “That boy could be swayed by the slightest gust of wind.”

Karma cocks his head, craning his head towards Nagisa. “What do you think, Teach? You spend the most time around ‘em. But you’ve been awfully quiet.”
Nagisa shrugs. “Sorry. I’ve just been thinking,” he admits. “But no, for the record, I don’t think Makoto’s forcing Kiyoshi to do anything. I don’t even get why he’d need to rely on Kiyoshi to gather information about Aguri in the first place. He knows he’s free to talk to us whenever he wants.”

“Maybe we’re all just making jackasses of ourselves and Kiyoshi really is writing a book,” Karma points out. “What do we know?”

“No. He’s not,” Kayano says bluntly.

“This is going to sound absolutely hypocritical coming from me,” Nagisa says. “But I’d try not to worry about it for now.”


Nagisa rolls his eyes. “He said he’d tell you what was going on eventually, right? I’m sure… it’ll just end up being something mundane. I mean… What on earth could they possibly be coming up with?”

“I… Don’t know,” Kayano says. “I don’t know. I guess I just can’t help but wonder.”

And try as he may to return his focus to his schoolwork as their conversation returns to something much more mundane like piss prizes or B-List movies, he finds himself incapable. Because despite himself, Nagisa wonders, too.

...Turns out preparing to tell your best friend you’re secretly the reincarnation of his dead sorta-bestie, sorta-lover, sorta-ex is the most nerve-wracking feeling on the earth.

Fumiko stares into the mirror Tuesday morning, and gives her clothes another lookover, just for good measure. She’s not sure why she feels the need to dress impressively for this considering Aguri herself dressed like a goddamn lunatic, but she can’t shake the feeling that this has to be perfect.

This is going to be... So important to the two of them. This could change their lives forever. This is how Makoto is going to remember this moment... Remember her for the rest of his life. If she doesn’t put her best foot forward, then she’s always going to regret it.

She turns back towards her bed, sending her other options another glance. The all-purple look is cute, but is it really what she wants? Maybe… she should try the long skirt. Or the flower cardigan.

...Ew. No. That won’t match with literally anything she owns. She needs to remain sensible about this.

She’s just... So excited! And nervous. Extremely nervous. But mostly... excited. This isn’t just going to be something Makoto remembers for the rest of his life. This is going to be something she’ll remember for the rest of her life, too. Even if it’s increasingly likely he’s not going to notice or care what color skirt she wore, she will. And this is important to her. This is the first time she’s going to declare it. Going to scream it from the rooftops and take her life back.

‘I know who I am! And I’m finally coming home!’

It has to be... It has to be perfect. But she doesn’t have time for perfect. She has a feeling that if she spends a single moment more deciding what she’s going to wear, her parents are either going to snap at her, or Kiyoshi is going to assume she made herself so nervous that she threw up, and head
on to school without her. (Jokes on him. Aforementioned snapping parents wouldn’t allow her to miss school even if she had projectile vomited.)

She just needs to… just needs to make a decision. Follow her heart. That thing Aguri was really good at. But again: Aguri dressed like a lunatic, so maybe it’s best not to follow her lead on this. Or maybe it is? She could always-

No. She doesn’t own anything like that. Besides, that would tip Makoto off to the surprise, and Yukimura-incarnate or not, Fumiko wouldn’t be caught dead in a graphic tee featuring a JPEG of a slab of meat. She’ll… she’ll wear something fashionable. She’s treasuring herself too, after all.

...She looks into the mirror and gives herself an awkward smile.

‘The both of us.’

She looks so tiny. So nervous. So exhausted. She leans from foot to foot, and paces in circles. With her purple hair and crimson eyes, she’s so… Different. It makes her wonder if Makoto will really be happy to see her.

But she quickly shakes her head. No. She won’t doubt that. Not even for a second. That’s… Giving him far too little credit. He’s not shallow. He’s just going to be happy she’s there at all, right…?

(Even though he’s so similar? Sometimes it seems he hasn’t changed at all from the days he was Korosensei. And here she is: Melded and reshaped entirely by a life she had no choice in.)

‘He will,’ she tells herself. ‘You know him. Better than anyone. That’s not just Korosensei you’re going to face today. That’s Makoto. That’s your best friend. You knew him first.’

‘He is going to love you.’

...Now that makes her nervous, too. He… he isn’t going to want to make things weird, right? Kiyoshi’s already, like, petrified of being third wheeled. It would be goddamn terrible if she and Makoto started actually going out. besides… she… doesn’t really want that, anyways. Sure he’s… Adorable. And he’s sweet. And… He makes her happier than anything, but… she likes how things are. She doesn’t want that to change.

Besides, she’s not ready for a relationship. She’s thirteen. She was hardly prepared for a relationship at twenty-five. What makes her think she’s ready now?

No. They’ll just - Like, Korosensei and Aguri didn’t make out, anyways. So… it doesn’t matter. There was nothing official. Just an increasingly uncomfortable air of sexual tension. One she is not planning to bring up unless Makoto does.

And… he won’t. At least… She hopes so. He’ll probably be… too busy crying over her. And telling inside jokes. Oh god - Wait. She doesn’t want him to cry.

She’ll - uh - have to find a way to prevent that, too.

She’s had two days to plan what she wants to say, and she’s still lost. Holy hell! Clothes are the least of her worries. What really matters is how she’s going to break the news to him. She can’t just walk up to him and tell him she’s his dead best friend! He’ll ask how long she’s known! And she’s not going to lie to him! The answer is weeks! But when he asks why she didn’t tell him she can’t say it’s because she still had to convince herself. That’s not exactly a fantastic stamp of authenticity.
...Why is she even worried about proving herself to Makoto!? He’s going to believe her. He’s Makoto. The average thing going through his mind is… like… How he’s going to bother the cat after school, or how he’s going to steal a piece of candy from Nagisa’s desk. He’s not going to fact check her. Which he doesn’t need to. Because she knows who she is.

Now… she just… needs to… share that with Korosensei!

Easier said than done, but she knows she can’t waste another second. The future is rushing towards her, and she is not going to mess it up again. Today’s the day that her life is going to change, and, finally, it’ll be for the better.

Okay! It’s time to go! She just needs to step out of that door! Right now!

...But not before changing her clothes just a little.

She slips out of her skirt. What was she thinking with the purple on purple look? She’s already so purple. The hair. The hair again. Her socks! She needs to change it up a little. She’ll keep the lavender polo… But… what to replace the skirt?

...White. The white skirt with the frills. And the bows. Lavender looks simply extravagant with white. She slips it on and grins, deciding it looks rather lavish.

Oh god. She’s slipping into pretentious rich girl mode again, isn’t she? Don’t do that. That’s… that’s not who she wants to be, either. That is possibly the WORST part of Fumiko Hisakawa. Maybe she should wear something less fancy... -

...She doesn’t own anything less fancy. Of course she doesn’t. What was she thinking? Her parents would only permit the most high-end for her. These are… her only options. This is the only impression she can get across.

What if… what if it’s the wrong one?

There’s no way she’s going to be able to do this right, is there? No way she’s going to be able to do this perfectly. She… she hasn’t had enough time! She doesn’t know what to say or what to do or what to wear! She doesn’t have the options. She doesn’t have the experience. What if she screws this up? What if… Makoto doesn’t like it?

What if… Makoto doesn’t like her?

She knows it’s an irrational thought. She feels surrounded by those lately. But there’s too much on the line for her to shake it off. Who cares if it isn’t likely? It’s still a possibility, and that terrifies her!

They’ve been through so much together. She needs him. She…

...She’s crying.

Again. For what feels like the third time this week, she’s crying alone in her room.

She doesn’t have time for this, either. She takes a deep breath, and focuses on the anxiety calming techniques Kiyoshi taught her. Breathe in… Count to ten… Breathe out. She focuses on the sounds around her, and the things she can see. The way the sunlight peeks in through the blinds, and her reflection in the mirror. The tear trails running down past her cheeks. And the more she stares at them, the more she decides how silly they look.
Because *why does it matter what Makoto thinks?*

She… decided she was going to treasure herself from now on, hadn’t she? And it turns out that’s a bit more difficult than she’d initially expected. But the realization she’d made still stands: That she *likes herself.*

As long as that’s true, why does what he thinks matter?

Makoto… Korosensei. Those people. That *person* who’s given her so much comfort over the past sixteen years. Why would she let him make her feel anxious!?

He’s not going to care what she dresses like. He’s not going to care what she says! He’s just going to be happy to have his best friend back. This is a her issue. And she’s projecting. Which means the question she should really be asking herself is…

...Does she like how it looks?

She glances back towards the mirror, and gives her skirt a twirl. She can’t help but laugh. Sure… it’s a little extra, but… she likes it. She *likes* the fancy look. Sure… she supposes that’s a trait she probably inherited from her less-than-awesome parents, but is there really a problem with finding something to like in the things she does have? She… she *likes* the stupidly expensive skirt with it’s stupid frills and it’s 800 bows. It makes her feel elegant! She shouldn’t have to shun that. She looks adorable.

Okay. Okay. The lavender matches well with the white. She was right about that. Perhaps it’ll be a little cold outside, so she can slip on her grey overcoat. And… and her scarf! If she wants to go for something a little less formal, her scarf is always a great option. She’d have to be *out of her mind* not to wear her first gift from Makoto to celebrate this moment.

It is *colorful,* though. Is she really going to wear something that will pop out in such an isolated fashion? It’s cute… but not cute enough.

She gets an idea, and leaps to dig through her drawers. After half a minute of searching, she manages to find a few hair clips she hasn’t worn since she was a little girl. They’re colorful. Bright yellows and pinks, with stars and hearts attached. Of course, she pockets them for now, seeing as how she can’t be caught dead wearing those in front of her parents, but it’s nice to meet herself in the middle.

She slips on her usual Mary Janes, and strikes a dumb pose in front of the mirror. It makes her feel *extremely stupid,* but she finds herself laughing either way.

...She thinks she’s ready now.

She still doesn’t know what to say. To Makoto, she means. About… All of this. But… That’s okay. She didn’t know what to say back then, either. And… They ended up having some pretty good conversations, didn’t they? She’s the best version of herself. She’s sure… With those experiences having her back, she’ll manage to figure it out.

Cutesy hair clips in her pockets, and designer shirt round her waist, Fumiko meets her eyes in the mirror. And giving herself one last, significantly less nervous smile, she turns back towards the door.

...As long as she listens to her heart and brain both, she’ll have this under control.
The rest of the day seems to fly by. In a half-anxious, half-excited haze, the hours are simply over before Fumiko knows it. Nagisa quizzes them on something or another, and she, Makoto, and Kiyoshi meet up for lunch. But nothing seems to really matter until she hears that bell ring to dismiss them at the end of the day.

...When she first enters the classroom that morning, Makoto spots how she’s dressed. And with an excited grin on his face, he asks her if she has special plans for today.

“Yeah,” Fumiko replies, grinning back. “Something like that.”

The minute they’re dismissed, Kiyoshi and Fumiko tell Nagisa he can go on ahead to his place. They actually have something to talk about before they follow after.

“Wouldn’t want to keep your spouses waiting,” Fumiko says. “Just get going.”

Nagisa curiously raises an eyebrow, but knows not to push. Looking over the two of them, he asks if he should take Makoto with him.

“No,” Fumiko and Kiyoshi seem to say at once. “Makoto needs to be here.”

If Nagisa’s eyebrow was raised before, it’s ascending from his forehead by now. But if he doesn’t trust them, he sure doesn’t let it show.

“...Okay,” he says. “And you’ll still be stopping by my place?”

“Yeah,” Fumiko says. “We just have some stuff to discuss first. Private stuff.”

“Alright. See you soon.”

Fumiko nods, trying her best to hide the jitters from her tone. “See you soon.”

...With each passing moment, it’s creeping closer.

They told Makoto to wait outside of the school. And sure enough, when they step outside, he’s there. But not before Kiyoshi stops Fumiko in the hallway, and asks her if she’s really ready for this.

“Ready as I’ll ever be,” she admits. “I’ve been... waiting my whole life for this. Now’s the time.”

Kiyoshi gives her an understanding nod.

And she places a hand on his shoulder. “Are you ready for this?”

“Ready to back up my best friend?” he asks, cocking his head. “Hell yeah.”

They meet up with Makoto outside, and he hops to his feet. Tells them Nagisa went on ahead without them, but he wanted to wait.

“You guys would get so lost.”

But the moment he steps forward to follow, Fumiko tells him to stop. And when he pauses… Turning his head over his shoulder to meet her with those familiar eyes, he has the most confused expression on his face.

“Huh. Why?”
And like an inside joke only the two of them are in on, Fumiko and Kiyoshi both step forward with a smile.

“Because we have something important to talk about.”

Chapter End Notes

This is the part where usually I’d apologize for leaving ya’ll off on that cliffhanger/tease, but I actually don’t regret it one bit. This chapter would have been 800 years long if I had included the entirety of her telling Makoto, so ya’ll will just have to wait a little ahaha. That said, I hope I have you all on the edge of your seats! Next chapter it all comes out, I promise. Both Makoto AND Kayano will find out in the next chapter, so please look forward to that!

I know this was deffo a bit of a plot-slowdown chapter, but it involved a few moments I thought were necessary to include before jumping the gun. Namely one last look at Fumiko's feelings on the matter, and, of course, Kiyoshi's fears of being left behind.

I had SO much fun going into the latter. Kiyoshi is a deeeeplyyy insecure person, but I treasure his friendship with Fumiko, and so does he. He'd be heartbroken if anything happened to it. And that's why we get some reaffirmation of "Hey! No! Fuck you! I'm not going anywhere." It was a very sweet scene.

...Unlike the scene involving the phrase "Nobel Piss Prize." I actually have that one to thank my friend Flower for. I jumped in my writing channel like "Does anyone have a good name for like, the opposite of a Nobel Peace Prize? The bad version? For when you just. Make the world unforgivably worse?" and without even a SECOND of hesitation they INSTANTLY typed "Nobel Piss Prize." If you remember, this is actually the same friend who pitched the mad cow joke to me. They're the funniest person I know, and should honestly be writing this fic instead of me.

Some songs that helped me write this chapter were Good Company from Oliver and Company, Ikanaide covered by Jubyphonic, Tonight At Eight from She Loves Me, Secrets by Mary Lambert, and Drops of Jupiter by Train. Not a TON of songs, but I'd like to talk about that last one a little.

I dunno what people typically perceive that song as, but up until recently I actually thought it was a love song. That is NOT the case, however, and I actually learned it was about the singer's dead mother. And in one part of the song he laments a specific fear that if his mom ever came back for him, she’d find him boring and unloveable in comparison to the wonders of heaven.

"Now that she's back in the atmosphere
I'm afraid that she might think of me as
Plain ol' Jane, told a story about a man
who is too afraid to fly so he never did land"

Obviously the entire song does not fit, seeing as how Kiyoshi never knew who Fumiko was before, and she certainly wasn't his FUCKING MOTHER, but that fear of becoming plain certainly still shines through, and I really appreciated it as a thematical rock for writing the scene.
Here's the part where I probably SHOULD apologize, because I'm going to need to let you all know it'll be a 2 week wait before the next chapter. I KNOW it sucks to leave it off on a cliffhanger like this, but I'm starting to catch up to myself on my writing, and I'd hate to fall behind. Please have patience, and accept the fact that I'm posting this early at 7am instead of the usual 2pm as a peace offering.

I hope you enjoyed the chapter, and make sure to let me know what you thought. I'll see you in two weeks, when Fumiko finally tells the world!
“Something… important to talk about,” Makoto repeats, raising an eyebrow. “Uh- Okay. What is it?”

Fumiko’s faintly aware she could blurt it out right now. She could cry, ‘I’m Aguri Yukimura,’ and it would be an appropriate time. Finally, the moment is here, and she doesn’t need to wait a second more.

But… she’s not going to just blurt it out. She’s going to make this perfect. Or… at the very least, meaningful, even if she doesn’t quite know how.

“Maybe you should… sit down first,” she says. Nagisa has some benches out by the front of the school. “This is pretty big.”

“Nah. I’ll be fine,” Makoto says. “You think I’m seriously gonna pass out?”

He says it confidently, but Fumiko can spot his nervous tics. He’s a lot more readable than Reaper in that way. The way he bounces from foot to foot, and the way he fidgets with his hands. He tries not to take things too seriously, but he must pick up on just how seriously Fumiko and Kiyoshi are taking it when he catches them exchange a glance that seems to say ‘You just might.’

“C’mon. Just spit it out,” he says. “Whether it’s good news or bad news, I can handle i-”

“It’s good news,” Fumiko reassures pretty much instantly. “It’s… really good news. I promise.”

At least… she thinks so.

She shakes her head. No. Now’s not the time for that. She knows.

“That’s… really awesome! There… There really are other people
“The funny thing is, I think I’ve always sort of known. The moment I had the first dream, I… pretty much instantly recognized what was going on. But I was hesitant to believe it. I guess because I don’t… Tend to believe in myself. Or believe I deserve good things. But I’ve spent the past two weeks thinking it over, and I know who I am now. But it’s one of those things I don’t think I can just… say. It’s one of those things that’s too special to just say. So… how about I tell you a story, instead?”

Makoto pauses, but gives a shrug. “I don’t see why not. Go ahead!”

“Okay. So… I’m having this dream. And you’re there.” Fumiko pauses. “I mean… it’s not you, but I know it’s you. If you… Know what I mean. Like… do you ever have a dream where… someone doesn’t look or act like they’re supposed to, but you still know it’s them because your head or your heart or something else is telling you they are?” Makoto and Kiyoshi both give her a blank look, and Fumiko shies back, embarrassed. “...Yeah. It’s that sort of dream. But anyway-”

“It’s… uh… just the two of us. Like… not in reality. There’s all these people around us. People doing their jobs or living their lives or trying to hurt us. But they don’t matter. Because we’re the only two real people in the dream. And… you’re the only person I care about. And it’s just the two of us. And we’re talking.”

“And… sometimes we’re not. Sometimes we’re quiet. But we’re always together… In this dream. Like… No matter what. I walk in… And I’m having a really bad day. But then you… or… Not you, or whoever he is gives me a smile… and I think… maybe everything’s going to be okay. Because at least we have each other.”

“But we don’t. Not really. You wanna know the strangest part of the dream?”

Makoto has this unreadable expression on his face. But slowly, he nods. “...Uh… sure.”

“Even though we have each other, we’re separated. We’re always… a few feet apart. No matter what I do, I just can’t manage to reach out to you. No matter what I try, we’re always separated by this… wall.” She pauses. “And it’s a real wall. But it’s not just that. It’s… a metaphorical wall, too. Because there’s always this… Something different between us. This last brick I just can’t break down.”

“At least… until the end of the dream. Even though we’ve always been so far apart, at the end of the dream… that changes. Finally, you meet my eye. And I think I finally see the you that I know. And somehow… some way… you reach out to touch me.”

“Which… I guess doesn’t make a lot of sense. Most dreams don’t. Most of life doesn’t. And there’s probably a more coherent way I could have worded that. But…” Fumiko pauses and shuts her eyes. She takes a deep breath... then opens them. And hesitantly raising her hand, she gives a shy wave. “...I guess what I’m trying to say is… ‘I’m home, Mister Reaper.’”

Makoto’s eyes widen. He doesn’t move an inch. Staring at Fumiko blankly, he whispers “No way.”

But before she can even finish saying “Yes way,” he’s on her.

He rushes at her, slinging his arms around her shoulders and lifting her into a hug. He squeezes her as tight as he can... laughing... and crying... and laughing some more.

“Oh my god,” he whispers. “Oh my god-”
“A-ack!” Fumiko sputters, instinctively trying to wiggle out of his grasp. But when he doesn’t even begin to loosen his grip, she relaxes. And she doesn’t dare to cry the, ‘You’re crushing me! I can’t breathe, Makoto!’ on the tip of her tongue.

...Because she can. She can breathe. And she can feel the way he crushes her rib cage like a coke can. And she can feel his tears on her shoulder and the way her hand shakes and the way he’s holding her. And he’s real and he’s alive and she’s real and she’s alive. They’re alive. They’re alive, and they can breathe, and they can laugh, and there will never be a wall between them ever again.

Fumiko throws her head back and laughs and laughs. Because she's alive, and she wouldn’t have it any other way.

“Oh… oh my god, indeed,” she simply murmurs.

“You… You have no idea how worried I was about you-!” Makoto cries, nestling his face in her shoulder. “I… I missed you so much. But… but…” He shakes his head, lifting her up higher and letting out another laugh. “What was I so worried about!? You were right here! This whole time! My best friend!”

His best friend. His best friend. She knows it’s true and that it’s always been true and that it’s been the truth for months now. But that makes it no less euphoric to hear. Makes it no less euphoric to feel the way his arms wrap around the small of her back as he dances and whirls her back and forth to the sound of his laughter. Laughing, too, she wraps her arms around his neck and returns his embrace.

“I’m sorry I didn't say something sooner,” she whispers. “I… I must have caused you a lot of grief. I... feel so bad I didn’t-”

“Don’t be!” Makoto shouts. “I… I’m…” His voice seems to crack. “I’m just happy you’re here!”

He pulls her in closer to his chest, and squeezes her as tight as he can possibly muster. “I was… I… I was so scared for you! But now… I don’t have anything to worry about. You’re here now!” He pauses. “You’ve always been here! Oh my god.” He’s sobbing like a madman, but doesn’t have the free hand to wipe his eyes with. Instead, he sniffles and wipes his face on Fumiko’s shirt. On any other day, she'd be mad at him. But not right here. Not right now. “You’ve always been here!”

His voice quivers with pure, unbridled joy. Hugging Fumiko so tightly she thinks a rib just might pop, he repeats “You’re here!” and dances from foot to foot.

And Fumiko lets him. Swayed to and fro alongside his joyous steps, she clings tight to his neck and allows his happiness to carry her.

“Yeah. I’m here,” she promises.

“I missed you so much!” Makoto cries. “Which… Which I know is sorta dumb… Since… Since you’ve been right here, but… But…” He drifts off, seemingly unable to find the words.

It’s okay. Fumiko will find them for him.

“No, I get it.” She pauses. “...I missed you too.”

...And before she knows it, she’s crying as well.

“I hope- I hope you’re not mad at me,” Makoto says. “I mean, for getting you killed- I know - I - I didn’t mean to, but… I mean, I wouldn’t blame you if you were mad--”
“Of course I’m not mad!” Fumiko shouts. Upset, maybe, but mad, no. With his arms around her back and his tears fresh on her shoulder, she doesn’t think she could be mad at him if she tried. “I’m not mad, Makoto! Why would I be mad at you?”

“I don’t know!” Makoto replies. “I just thought maybe… you’d think it was my fault.”

“No,” Fumiko says. “Never.”

“...Even though I couldn’t save you?”

“...Even though you couldn’t save me.”

Makoto’s movements slow. And he falls still, simply holding Fumiko in his embrace. “It… It won’t happen again,” he says. “I promise. Nothing is going to happen to you ever again. I’ll get it right this time. I’ll protect you.”

“You know what, Makoto?” Fumiko asks, her voice a whisper. “...You don’t need to worry about that. This time around... I think I’m finally ready to protect myself.”

Makoto’s still for one moment more, and then, throwing his head back, he laughs. And without another second of hesitation... without a single burden left to carry.. he returns to twirling Fumiko through the air.

“Aw, c’mon!” he jokes "Then what am I supposed to do!?"

“I don’t know! You figure it out!” Fumiko snaps.

“At least let us tag-team it! I look out for you, and you also look out for you! It’s perfect!”

It’s... literally the stupidest thing she’s ever heard. The way it’s phrased, at least. But... he’s not wrong. Isn’t that what they’ve always done, after all? Sat back to back… opened up about the things they felt inside... and protected each other with all their might.

“...Perfect indeed. I guess... we've always made a pretty good team, huh?”

“The best!” Makoto declares. And he twirls her so hard she thinks they may just fall. But when he begins to stumble, he manages to catch himself with the back of his shoe just before they go tumbling into the grass. Staring at her shocked expression, he giggles once, before bursting out into another round of full-out laughter.

That’s when a tiny voice speaks up.

“Okay. Uh. I didn't wanna say anything, but... am I… interrupting a moment?”

And every eye in the vicinity flits towards Kiyoshi Karasuma.

He stands shyly, his hands in his pockets. “Er… Fumiko asked me to be here to support her, but if this is getting personal I can, like… peek out now.”

“You think you get to peek out?” Fumiko asks, a half-devilish, half-delighted grin overtaking her face. “We haven’t even gotten a chance to thank you!”

“Oh - I - Really - Uh - Don’t need thanks,” Kiyoshi insists.

But the gears are already turning in Fumiko’s brain, and deep down she knows he could use some thanks more than anything.
“Makoto,” she says. “I never would have been able to get any of this figured out if not for Kiyoshi. It was… Him who helped me investigate Aguri when I needed more information, and it was him who… gave me permission to believe in myself. I never would have been able to know who I was without his help. So please… don’t forget him now.”

It’s an exaggeration at best. That… he really helped her get too much figured out about Aguri at all. But… she wants him to feel appreciated. After their conversation yesterday, more than anything she just wants him to feel appreciated. And… Hey, even if he didn’t exactly help her get Aguri Yukimura figured out much, she doesn’t think she’d ever have gotten a chance to learn who Fumiko Hisakawa really was without his help.

Makoto’s neck cranes towards Kiyoshi, and slowly… his jaw drops.

“That’s why… That’s why you were asking me about Aguri!” He says. “Oh my god, you two! You… you really duped me! I didn’t suspect a thing!” He laughs, and carefully, he lowers Fumiko to the ground. Then, like an apex predator who’s spotted a brand new kill, he stares at Kiyoshi with those same teary eyes.

Before anyone can move a single inch, he rushes at him.

Taking no caution to avoid sending him tumbling to the ground, he tackles him, full force, as he wraps him in a bear hug. And although at first Kiyoshi yelps, just barely avoiding banging his head on the hillside, his expression relaxes when Makoto buries his face in his chest and mumbles, “Thank you,” time and time again.

It’s only as Makoto calls him his hero, however, that Kiyoshi shakes his head with disbelief, and finally returns Makoto’s embrace. Giving him a firm, reassuring pat on the back, he smiles and admits “It was nothing.”

Makoto practically heaves him to his feet. Flinging Kiyoshi by the arm like a ragdoll, Makoto shakes his head and shouts “It’s not nothing! You brought my best friend back to me! I’ll never be able to thank you enough!”

Kiyoshi sheepishly grins. “Really. I mean it. It was nothi- ACK.”

His modesty is quickly cut short as Makoto drags him towards Fumiko. And just when she thought that she was free, Makoto pulls the both of them into his hug.

“…Okay, okay…” Kiyoshi relents. “You’re welcome, big guy…”

Fumiko mutters something about how she thought she’d finally be able to breathe, but makes no effort to break away from the hug. With Kiyoshi’s head nestled on Makoto next to her, and the steady rise and fall of Makoto’s chest promising her that everything is going to be okay, she thinks if given the choice she’d never want to let go at all.

“We… We have so much to talk about!” Makoto declares. “So… so much catching up to do! I mean - I know we’ve been talking this whole time, but I’m sure there’s something I haven’t shared. Did you… did you…” He pauses, before impulsively blurring out, “Did you know I have a cat now!?”

Fumiko chuckles. “Yes, Makoto, I know you have a cat now.”

Makoto’s shoulders lower. “That was a stupid question. You guys couldn’t forget Miss Nao if you tried.”
“And we’ve tried,” Kiyoshi interjects.

“I’m sorry. I just… I just… want something to talk about? Or-” He squeezes her tighter, and lets out a delighted squeal. “I’m just so happy you’re here!”

And Fumiko’s… Happy to be here. She’d been so, so worried about this for the past two weeks. Worried about what she’d say or what she’d do or what any of this would mean for her. It had felt like a constant weight in her chest. But now… all of that seems to have faded away. She knows where she belongs, and she knows why she’s alive. She knows… How lucky she is to be standing here at all. And with the stress of what feels like a thousand lives falling from her shoulders, pure joy seems to blossom from her chest.

“Me too, Makoto. Me too.”

“Aguri. Aguri Yukimura. I can… I can hardly believe it!” Makoto pauses. “Is… Is it okay if I call you that? Or would it be weird? Or-?”

“Like anything could possibly be any weirder than meeting up again and becoming best friends a second time,” Fumiko snarks. “Call me whatever you want, Makoto.”

“Aguri,” Makoto repeats. “Aguri. Aguri.” And his voice heightens with delight. “I missed you Aguri!” However, he freezes. And he shakes his head, quickly swapping that out for “No! I’m happy for you, Aguri! Because I’ve had no reason to miss you at all!”

He’s smiling so wide his eyes are shut tight. And despite herself, Fumiko grins too. It’s… Weird to hear. That name. She doesn’t think she’d like it to be hers forever. To hear it from just anyone. Because what would that mean in regards to her moving on? But from Makoto…?

She thinks she likes the way it sounds.

“Just… don’t make a big deal out of this,” she quickly adds on. “Which - Well - I know that’s hard seeing as how this is a very big deal, but… I think I want to keep this between the three of us for now. Er-” She pauses. “Us and Akari. I don’t want… anyone else to know yet.”

Makoto cocks his head. “Huh? Why? This is awesome!”

“I dunno. It just feels… weird. I don’t want them to treat me any differently. And I know they will. So… I’d like to keep this between us. I hate to ask that of you… to lie… But can you please keep this secret? For me?”

“Fumiko,” Kiyoshi says bluntly. “I have already lied to hell and back for you.” He gives her a blank expression, before cracking a smile. “Of course I can tell one more.”

It takes Makoto a little longer to decide, but finally, he speaks up. “Well… If that’s what you want,” he says. “I’m just happy I get to know. But if you don’t want anyone else to figure it out… Then so be it! It’ll be like we’re secret agents! With a truth no-one can learn!” He pumps his fists excitedly.

“Yeah,” Fumiko says with another laugh. “It’ll be just like that.” She shakes her head with disbelief. “And don’t worry. I’ll tell Akari soon. I’ve missed her too much to wait much longer.”

“She is going to be so happy!” Makoto says. “She’s missed you so, so much. I bet you’re going to make her day.” He pauses. “No! Make her week! Her month! Her year! Her sister’s back! Holy hell!”
Fumiko nods. It’s... wonderful to think about. She can only hope Akari will take this as well as Makoto has. She’s not sure she could bare facing her scorn.

...But swinging a baby Akari around in her arms in the back of her mind, she knows deep down she won’t have to. They’ve always been there for each other, haven’t they?

“Are you… are you gonna do it today?” Makoto asks. “Tell Kayano? I mean - It’s fine if you do. I was just thinking… Maybe today could be for us.”

And oh, how Fumiko loves the thought.

“Fine by me,” She says. “I tell Akari tomorrow afternoon. As for now… I suppose we can celebrate. Reminisce. I… am happy to be by your side after all.”

“You better be!” Makoto asks with a laugh. “I’d be pretty damn embarrassed if you weren’t!”

“Well you’d just have to feel embarrassed then, wouldn’t you?” Fumiko huffs.

“Well luckily for me, I don’t!” Makoto says, reaching out to take her hands. “You said you’re happy, remember? No takebacksies now!”

Fumiko rolls her eyes. But her smile never once fades. “No takebacksies, indeed.”

They talk for what feels like an eternity, with Makoto never once letting go of her. He's always wrapping his arms around her neck or clasping her hand somehow. Momentarily, he’ll get caught up in an inside joke, and seem to forget. But then, just as soon, he’ll remember what he’s learned, and let out a delighted squeal.

“It’s you! It’s really you!”

...He just can’t stop repeating how happy he is.

They only realize how late it’s getting when Kiyoshi points it out. Glancing at his phone, he admits it’s almost four. “We should get going before Shiota-sensei starts to worry,” he says. “Like… If you guys are okay with that. I’d never want to rush you, but I do fear the man is probably on the brink of a stress-induced heart attack right now.”

“No, no. You’re right,” Fumiko admits. Although to be truthful, she never wants to leave this moment… life marches on. She can’t ignore the rest of the people around her. Besides, she fears if she stays here for one moment more she’ll melt into a puddle of goo. She pulls away from Makoto, and proudly begins to lead their way down the mountain.

...Even so, the skip in her step just doesn’t fade

She finds herself glancing at him time and time again. And ever so nervously, Makoto glances back. They tell stories… Fill in the gaps for each other. And they’re careful to include Kiyoshi. Nudging him and telling him it was just like the time the three of them did something.

It’s… nice. Fumiko can’t even find it in herself to mind the winter chill as the sun sets over the horizon. Because… Everything is the same. But it’s better, too.

Which… doesn’t make much sense. At least, on paper. But it makes sense to her. Her life… Her friend group is what it’s always been. But now she has the power to enjoy it to her fullest potential.

When Makoto trips over a tree branch and nearly eats shit on the frosty ground, she just barely
manages to catch his hand. He props himself up on a tree trunk, and gives her the same thankful smile he’s seemed to be flashing her all afternoon.

‘Thank you for being here at all.’

She just can’t shake that smile from her mind or the skip from her step or the sound of his laughter ringing in her ears.

...When did he become such a happy person?

When did she become such a happy girl?

It’s funny. This is the last place she’d ever have envisioned herself at the start of the year. Friends with these… These people. Much less reminiscing on cosmically ancient memories with them.

“Hey. Makoto? Can I ask you something?”

“Anything.”

“You don’t wanna… make things weird, right?”

Makoto pauses. “...Huh?”

“You know. How… how Korosensei and Aguri… Y’know. You don’t wanna. Do that, right? I mean - I don’t wanna do that. But I just wanna make sure. You don’t wanna do that. I’d feel weird if I… uh… didn’t bring it up.”

“You mean like…” Makoto blinks. “Yeah - nah. Let’s not - nah.”

Another weight seems to lift from Fumiko’s chest.

“And you’re sure-”

“Yeah. I mean - yeah. As long as you’re sure.”

“Of course I’m sure. I mean - At least for now. P- probably forever! I mean… that feels… forced? We - Uh - Have a lot to deal with right now, anyways-” ‘At least for now.’ What is she fucking thinking!? Get it together, Hisakawa! “So… As long as you’re good, I’m good.”

“I’m good. I’m great!”

“I just wanna… Make sure you’re not disappointed, I guess.”

Makoto’s brows furrow. “Disappointed? Why would I be disappointed!!?”

“Because… things aren’t exactly the same.”

“Fumiko…” Makoto steps over another tree branch, careful not to snag his foot on it this time.

“Aguri… I’m just… I’m just happy you’re here! You could have ended up being a knife-wielding circus performer and I would have been happy as long as you were! And instead, you ended up being my best friend of all people. Why would I be upset!? This is… This is the best possible scenario! I couldn’t ask for anything more!”

...It takes all of Fumiko’s self-restraint to avoid bursting into tears then and there.

“Yeah,” she says softly. “...Neither could I.”
And as snow begins to drift down from the sky, she pulls her hood up over her head. In any other situation, she’d cuss. Isn’t it too early in the year for this? She gets cold so easily. Does the world really have to screw her over like this?

But holding hands to keep warm, she decides snowfall or not, her heart feels warmer than ever.

If Fumiko had been under the impression that the past two weeks had gone by quickly, she must admit that would have to make this afternoon a goddamn bullet train.

The rest of the day flies by. And in comparison to the last two hazy weeks, it does so in delight. She and her friends make their way to Nagisa’s house and apologize for being late. Nagisa, of course, says it’s okay, but Fumiko’s attention ends up centered on another one of the people who greets them at the door.

She meets Kayano’s eye for just the briefest moment, and has to avert her gaze just to hide her grin. Makoto gives her a knowing nudge, but if the adults notice anything, they don’t say it.

They spend the evening whispering inside jokes and playing with the cat. Fumiko calls her ugly, and when no-one is listening, Makoto jeers “You don’t get the right to call anyone ugly now that you know about all the ugly stuff you wore!”

“Wore,” Fumiko reiterates. “I had the capability to take those off at any time. Miss Nao’s gruesomeness is written in her flesh.”

“You had the capability to take them off, and you didn’t,” Kiyoshi says. “I’d say that makes you just as bad, if not worse.”

Fumiko’s face flushes red, but Makoto laughs so hard she thinks he might just suffocate. And when Kiyoshi joins in, his laughter a low giggle, Fumiko decides some brief embarrassment might just be worth it.

When the time comes for her to head home, Fumiko and Makoto exchange a tight hug. Clinging to her, he makes her promise he’ll see her tomorrow.

“Of course,” Fumiko says. “I’m not about to go anywhere.”

And this time… she means it.

She and Kiyoshi step out together. It’s already pitch black by the time they start to trail home, which Fumiko decides is just another reason she hates winter. But marching through the slush, Kiyoshi leads the way, and is careful not to leave her behind.

“Thank you. For today,” she says.

“Really,” he insists. “It’s nothing.”

“It’s not. I mean… You saw how happy we were.”

“I suppose,” Kiyoshi admits. “But I guess I just don’t see how I really managed to help you out with that. You always sorta knew, didn’t you, Fumiko?”

“Perhaps,” she replies. “But… I don’t think I’d ever have been confident enough to say it without your help.” She pauses. “There are a lot of things I don’t think I’d ever have been able to do without you.”
And even in the dark, she can spot Kiyoshi’s flustered smile.

True to her word, she meets up with Makoto outside the school the next morning. And the actual school day flies by. In the building that feels somewhat ‘hers,’ study, assassination, and free time alike don’t dare drag on. Instead, they push her proudly towards the afternoon. And, thus, towards her talk with Kayano.

“Do you know what you’re gonna say?” Makoto asks her on the walk back to Nagisa’s house.

“...A little,” she admits, her hands in her pockets. She’s spent all day thinking it over. A bit of last night, too.

But with how well the conversation with Makoto had gone, she can’t find it in herself to be too nervous. This is gonna be a good thing. For her and Kayano both.

She knocks on the door, holding her head high. And she’s almost disappointed when it’s not Kayano who cracks it open.

“Hey,” Gakushuu says. “Feel free to come in.”

She leaves her shoes in the entryway and asks where Kayano is.

Gakushuu tells her she’s still at work. Filming must have gone late or something. And when Karma peeks his head in from the hallway, asking if they’re not good enough for Fumiko, she shakes her head and bitterly retorts that he must be one pathetic bureaucrat to work fewer hours on average than a movie star. Even so, she’s content to wait. And she passes the time chatting with Makoto and Kiyoshi on the living room couch.

It’s half-past five by the time Kayano comes in through the door. Fumiko does the mental math in her head, confronted with the fact that if she’s to head home at 7:30, that only gives her two hours to talk with Kayano. Which, for the record, is PLENTY of time to explain her situation… but feels like so little to spend with the sister she’s missed all these years.

...It makes her heart ache. But despite that feeling, she stands. They have so little time. She doesn’t want to put a moment of it to waste.

Makoto gives her a thumbs up, and Kiyoshi whispers in a hushed voice that he believes in her. Then, before Kayano can even fully manage to take her own shoes off, Fumiko’s by her side.

“We need to talk,” she says, trying to hide the quiver in her voice.

“About your independence?” Kayano asks, peeling her shoe off her foot. “I can get the other two. If you have anything you need to ask us about~”

“No,” Fumiko says. “It’s… uh… actually not about that.” By now Gakushuu and Karma have retreated to the kitchen to do whatever it is dysfunctional adults do. And thank god for that, because she doesn’t need them listening in on this. “I was… wondering if we could talk about something. Just the two of us.”

Kayano’s brow furrows, but she nods. “Of course. Just give me a second.” She tosses her coat on the rack and looks back Fumiko’s way. “You wanna go somewhere more private?”

“...I’d like that.”

Kayano marches towards the study, and Fumiko follows in tow. It feels like they seem to have all
of their private conversations in here. The family should really get one of those flippable signs that say ‘please don’t enter. The kids wanted to discuss something deeply private’ at this point.

Kayano plops down on the couch, patting the spot next to her as if coaxing Fumiko to follow. And quickly, she does so. She takes her place next to Kayano, and watches her legs dangle from the couch.

“What is it you wanted to talk about?”

And how… how to break the news? She could always just say it. But something tells her that’s a surefire way to send Kayano into cardiac arrest. She just got her little sister back. She is NOT about to lose her to something as stupid as that.

“…Yukimura-san, can you promise me that everything we talk about in here will stay between the two of us? It’s… personal to me.”

“Of course,” Kayano says, placing her hand on Fumiko’s shoulder. And Fumiko already feels ready to cry. “You can trust me with anything.”

‘I know.’ That little voice in the back of Fumiko’s head says. ‘More than anything… I know.’

Fumiko takes a deep breath, and shutting her eyes… Squeezing her palms… with all the willpower she has left, she speaks up. She speaks up, and she starts small, but it’s okay, because she speaks at all.

“I’m not sure if you’ve noticed, but Kiyoshi’s been researching your sister as of late.”

There’s a weird atmosphere to this conversation. A strange, ethereal quality to the air. And an all too resigned look on Fumiko’s face as she stares Kayano down with those piercing little eyes.

From the moment Fumiko approached her in the doorway, that determined look in her eyes, Kayano knew this was going to be a serious conversation. But she hadn’t anticipated just how serious it would become until Fumiko brought up her sister.

“Yes,” she says. “I’ve noticed.”

And how could she not? It’s been so glaringly obvious. Kiyoshi is many things, but a convincing liar is none of them. He’s been doing recon on her sister. It’d take a moron not to figure that one out.

“I… had a feeling the two of you were involved in that. Are you finally going to explain what this is abou-“

“It’s just me, actually,”

“Pardon?”

“You said the two of us. But Makoto doesn’t actually know about any of that. I’m the one who asked Kiyoshi to do research on Aguri. And… I guess… it’s about time I tell you why.”

Kayano blinks, but nods. “...Very well,” she says. To be truthful, she’d expected to receive the truth from Kiyoshi, but if this is what Fumiko wants to talk about, she’s not complaining.

‘...A surprise’ Kiyoshi had said. Research going towards a good cause. Kayano just hasn’t been able to get her mind off of it. Why is it now… All these years later that the thought of Aguri is
popping up in her life time and time again. Why does it feel everything comes back to her? And most importantly… what on earth is it Kiyoshi and Fumiko needed information on her for?

Kayano doesn’t know. And to be truthful, it scares her a little. But she knows her duty. As a little sister, and as a mentor to these kids. And that’s to get to the bottom of this. No matter what it means.

“Go on. I… think I’d quite like to know why as well.”

...She’d told herself this was going to be easy, hadn’t she?

Fumiko hates just how nervous she feels.

It’s one thing to explain this to another kid. And to a kid with a past life of his own, at that. But it’s another thing to explain her situation to a fully grown adult. She knows it’s a ridiculous hesitance… Kayano believes Makoto after all. But even so… it terrifies her. She hates the way Kayano looks at her with confusion. Like she’s a stranger. Because that’s not right. That’s not right at all.

She breathes deeply. Whispers reassuring words in her own mind. ‘It’s okay. It’s going to be okay. This is your sister you’re talking to. And she is going to be so, so happy.’

For one moment, Fumiko’s hesitant to believe it. But when she catches what else Kayano looks at her with… Compassion, and with understanding in her eyes, she decides it’s not so ridiculous after all.

She can do this.

“I’m not sure if you’re aware, but I only learned of the existence of your sister rather recently,” she says. “During… Nagisa’s lessons on Korosensei’s life.”

Kayano gives a small nod. “I figured. Makoto himself only learned about her recently as well.”

Fumiko gives an awkward nod. “Indeed. And… having learned about your sister, I quickly realized she was a fascinating topic to me. Something I could not get my mind off of. As… a historian, or at least someone who would like to do research on such matters one day, I could not believe that someone who had such a massive effect on the world could go forgotten by it as a whole. It upset me. And it vexed me. I found myself thinking about her and the life she led in depth.”

“Even as… time continued to pass, and we moved on to other topics in class, I continued to think about Aguri. The people she loved and the things she accomplished. Why she made the choices she made, and how she was strong enough to stick by them. Whether or not the decisions she made were right for herself or not, and what the life she left behind meant. Am… sure you have thought about it in depth as well.”

“Of course,” Kayano says. “But I’m still not sure what you’d like to talk about. Are you just here to... get my opinion on that?”

“No,” Fumiko says. “No. Don’t worry. I’m here to finally say something meaningful.”

Kayano’s brows furrow, and she frowns. “Something… meaningful?”

“I’m sure you’re asking yourself ‘what does that mean?’ ‘Is she simply being pretentious?’ ‘Is she writing the book that Kiyoshi clearly isn’t going to write?’ The answers, however, are no and hell
“Fumiko,” Kayano interjects. “I would never call you pretentious-”

“I know.”

“You can tell me what you mean. There’s no need to dance around it. Whatever you’re going to tell me… I’ll support you.”

Fumiko pauses for one long moment. ‘Dancing around it.’ Is that what she’s doing? She hates to think so… and even yet…

“Are you aware of how Makoto came to the realization that he was Korosensei?”

Kayano thinks. She’s got this indecipherable look on her face. Something between baffled and maybe… just barely… Hopeful.

“Of course,” she says slowly. “He knew all sorts of things he wasn’t ‘supposed to.’ Things he would have no way of knowing without some sort of supernatural explanation. They came to him in dreams or whatever.”

“Indeed. When I first learned of Makoto’s condition, I was hesitant to believe him. But I, too, was swayed in time. I ‘came around,’ so to speak. And began to believe he was truly the person he said he was. But even then, I am not sure I understood what he was going through until very recently.”

“A little over two weeks ago… I had a similar dream. Then I was another person. With different thoughts, and different beliefs, and different memories. At first… it shook me to my core. But the more I thought it over, the more sense I began to realize it made in regards to my life. Those dreams have… continued to plague me ever since. I am… Sure we both know the person I am talking about. And as such… I was wondering if I could tell you about those dreams.”

“You… do not have to believe me. At first, I simply believed I was trying to be special as well. But over the weeks these dreams have become too vivid to ignore. I have spent the past week fact-checking my memories with Kiyoshi. And I would like to…” She pauses. “…be able to prove myself to you as well. Because I knew… From the very moment I first saw you on the big screen… That you were someone dear to me.”

…She doesn’t meet Kayano’s eyes. She’s far too embarrassed and overwhelmed all at once. If Kayano were to stare at her with doubt, or god forbid, disgust… She’s not sure she could handle it. Not after everything they’ve been through together.

If Kayano has a response, however, she does not speak it. They sit in silence. Terrifying, deafening silence. Fumiko stares at the floor, her lip trembling. She tries to ignore the pit growing in her stomach, and repeats herself… speaking up in a tiny, quivering voice.

“Please, Yukimura-san. Give me permission to prove myself to you.”

…Silence.

“Please, Akari-”

She thinks her voice is going to give out.

Kayano, still, does not speak. Instead, she reaches a hand out… and places it on Fumiko’s cheek. Softly… gently… she turns Fumiko’s head towards her. And a compassionate expression on her
face, she says:

“You don’t need permission from anyone. Please, go on.”

Her voice sounds half ready to give out itself.

Having Kayano stare at her with that familiarity… That warmth she’d so deeply craved… It’s downright overwhelming. But it’s reassuring, too. And spotting that heartbreak just barely hiding behind her eyes, Fumiko knows there’s no backing out now. She will fix what she broke.

“Most of them… involve us. I mean, of course they do. I’ve dreamed about other things… Korosensei and classrooms and strife. But the dreams that have always stood out the most to me have been just the two of us together.”

“I… remember when Mom first brought you home. It was actually quite warm out for a November night. I’d said I wanted to go to the hospital with them when you were born, but Mom ended up going into labor in the middle of the night, so they left without me. I woke up a bit later, and realized I was all alone in the house. But I wasn’t scared for long. I was a big girl... and I could take care of myself. And I knew… If they were gone, that meant you were coming home soon.”

“So I snuck outside and waited in the driveway. I didn’t need much more than a jacket. Like I said: It was a warm night.” She pauses. “…I was a lot better with cold back then.”

It’s funny. To think how much’s changed. Would she really be able to wait out in the cold November night for Kayano again? Could she handle it?

...She only needs to think it over briefly. Of course. Of course she would. On any day. In any world.

“It took them an hour and eleven minutes to come home. I counted. I sat out there looking at the stars, and I counted. And then they brought you home. And you were this tiny little bundled up thing. You were so much smaller than I thought you’d be. And I was so scared I’d do something wrong… Or drop you… Or start crying. But Mom hurried to put a coat on me, and Dad ushered me inside. And they let me hold you. And I decided I was going to do everything perfectly.”

She chokes up. ‘Perfectly.’ What a joke that’d been.

“I still remember when she died. Mom, I mean.” She sighs. “Then it really was just the two of us. Dad was always so busy. But… I mean, I didn’t mind,” she straightens up, shaking her head. “At least, I tried not to. I was happy as long as I was with you.”

“I remember doing your hair… and playing dumb games. Helping you study, and getting you all dressed up for your first film debut. The dumb inside jokes we’d tell each other, and the ways we’d prank each other.”

“You really were a little shit. You know that? I know about the shirt thing now.” She pauses. “I mean… I guess I always did. Back then, at least. But I remembered it. How you lied to me with such a straight face. Told me that brand was the high end of fashion. And then the way you shamefully confessed you’d lied to me, your face bright red.

“...How I never stopped wearing those shirts, even once I knew.” Fumiko shuts her eyes. “Which I guess is nothing much for me to tell you. It hardly proves the validity of my statement. After all, that’s what you told Kiyoshi, didn’t you? For all we care, I could just be repeating the facts he's given me.”
“...Almost. I could almost be repeating the stories you told him, and the stories he told me in turn. But I’m not. And I think I have one thing I can share, that neither of you would know... To prove my point. My real... definitive... proof:"

“Why Aguri kept wearing those shirts.”

Fumiko takes a deep, deep breath.

“I had a feeling they were dumb, even before you told me. It was hard not to notice the way my coworkers stared. But I tried not to mind them. And I tried not to mind my ridiculous purchase. Because... even after I learned those shirts were a prank... that you’d been messing with me: I decided I still needed them.”

“Things were... very hard for me at the time. I’m sure you know that better than anyone by now. But those shirts... they reminded me of you. And that’s why I kept wearing them. Because at a time like that, I needed a reminder of things like you. A reminder that everything in my life wasn’t bad.”

“Because... at the very least, you loved me, and I loved you. We were sisters. And no matter what happened to me... That was never going to change.”

Fumiko rubs her arm. “I know that’s a pretty silly excuse,” she admits with a laugh. “I probably wouldn’t do it again. Wear those shirts, I mean. I think I could care about you a thousand times over.”

...There’s a long, teary moment of silence. And Kayano doesn’t speak. Simply sits there, covering her mouth with her hands. She stares at - nearly through - Fumiko, and it’s like every word is ripped from her mouth.

“It’s okay if you don’t believe me,” Fumiko says. "I’m making a very big claim. And... I don’t have a ton of proof. I mean, I’m not like Makoto is. I’m not a very similar person. I... I won’t be mad if you don’t want to think about that. If... if I’m not enough. Or... or if you... you don’t want me as a sister, but I just... I just...”

She pauses, blinking back tears.

“...Thought I should let you know.”

Kayano stares at her for one moment more. And then, choking back a sob, she pulls Fumiko into a hug.

She weeps on Fumiko’s back, pressing her to her chest. And as she hugs her tight, her whimpers turn to wails. Incomprehensibly, desperately, she clings to Fumiko, like a little girl who’s just lost her mother.

...In some ways, she is.

Fumiko reaches up to pat her back. Places a palm on her shoulder, and rubs tiny circles in her shoulders.

“You... you believe me?” She asks hesitantly.

"Of course I believe you-” Kayano bawls, shaking like a leaf. “How... Why wouldn’t I?”

“I don’t know,” Fumiko says, holding her trembling sister. “I don’t know.”
“Of course you’re enough, Fumiko,” Kayano reassures, her voice a high pitched whimper. “Of course you’re enough, A…” She can’t finish the sentence. She tries, mumbling “Ag… Agur…” but she can’t bring herself to. Instead, she buries her tearstained face further into the back of Fumiko’s shoulder and whispers “I thought I’d never see you again.”

“I thought… I thought-” She’s having trouble catching her breath. She’s choking on her tears. “I thought you were gone. I thought Makoto was the only one. I… I thought he was going to be all alone-” Her nails are digging into Fumiko’s back. “I thought I was all alone-”

“No,” Fumiko whispers, trying her best to sound comforting. “You’re not alone. You’re never going to be alone. I’m here. I’m here.”

...And in an instant, she’s back there again... In her youth. The first one she’d ever had the gift of having. And she’s not jumping on the bed, or sneaking into the closet for a round of hide and seek. She’s comforting her baby sister... because she scraped her knee or got rejected by a boy or something equally as inconsequential. Except her knee’s not bloodied and her heart’s not broken. At least... not in that way.

She’s sobbing because she’s standing in front of a casket. Weeping, because she’s 14 and there’s no-one left to take care of her.

Even fifteen years later, the grief wracks her body so hard she sobs. Because fifteen years isn’t that long ago. And her big sister isn’t there anymore to tell her there’s no monster hiding under the bed. ...At least, not until now.

“It’s okay,” Fumiko repeats “I’m not going anywhere.”

And before she knows it, she’s crying herself. Because her sister is sobbing and the catharsis floods from her chest and she knows she can finally stay true to her word.

“I’m sorry I didn’t figure it out sooner.”

“It’s not your fault,” Kayano whispers, shaking her head. “You… how were… how were you ever supposed to know?”

“I don’t know,” Fumiko says. “It feels like I’m so late to something I should have known years ago.”

Kayano squeezes her tighter, letting out little hiccupy sobs as she tries to pull her in as close as possible. “...It’s okay. We... we don’t need to worry about lost time.” She sniffs, trying her best to take a deep, shaky breath. “...I’m just happy you’re here now-”

...And Fumiko’s happy to be here. More than anything. Even having her ribcage crushed and her shoulder soaked in tears, she’s overjoyed. Overjoyed to exist and to breathe, and to be able to continue rubbing tiny circles in her weeping sister’s back.

“Me too,” she says, quietly. “Me too.”

“I thought I’d never see you again-”

(She’s bleeding out on the lab floor. And he’s there. And he loves her. And she thinks she’s content. But somewhere in the back of her mind, she comes to the realization that her sister will never know why this happened, and it breaks her heart.)
“Me too,” she repeats. “Me too.”

... 

“But I’m here now. And nothing’s going to change that.”

“Nothing?” Kayano pleads in a shaky voice. Like a heartbroken child who still believes in promises in the unpredictable whirlwind that’s life.

“Nothing,” Fumiko says, and she decides she’d like to believe in them, too.

She’s not sure how long it takes Kayano to stop crying. She’s not quite sure how long it takes for herself to stop crying, either. But even as their tears dry to reassurances of “I’m here for you,” they never once motion to let go of each other. Instead, Kayano keeps Fumiko pulled in close. And Fumiko, shutting her eyes, rests her head on her shoulder.

It’s nice. She feels like she can finally shut her eyes. And with an exhaustion beyond compare resting on her shoulders, perhaps more than anything... she needs it. But she doesn’t dare. As tempting as the thought is, there’s so many things for them to talk about.

She’ll collapse on the couch when she gets home.

“...I’m... happy you believe me,” she says. “I was really worried I was gonna lose you.”

Kayano runs her fingers through her hair, gently brushing a strand from her face.

“No,” she says. “Never.”

“Or... or that you’d think... I was worse, somehow.” She sighs, pulling her legs up onto the couch. She curls up, wrapping one arm around her knee. “Which... I know is dumb. But I am different, I suppose.”

“It’s not dumb,” Kayano says. “...It’s scary. I know. I can imagine. But it’s okay.” She holds Fumiko tight. “Different doesn’t have to be bad.”

She’d... come to the same conclusion. Or, at least... she thinks she has. She likes this person she’s become. But if that person had become the one to drive her sister away, she doesn’t think she could ever have forgiven herself. She’s... relieved that now she’s told the two people she needed to. That they believe in her. Because that means she can finally believe in herself without any hesitation.

“I’m... I’m happier now. You know that?”

Kayano’s silent.

“I mean... I know things are still bad. But this time I think... maybe I can believe they’re really going to change. I have you... and Makoto... and Kiyoshi... and Shiota-sensei. Even Akabane-san and Asano-san. You’ve all... helped me more than I can possibly say.” She gives a small chuckle, pawing at her eyes. “You’ve all... you’ve all made me feel like a really good person. Someone worth loving. Even if... Even if I mess up.” She turns to Kayano with a bittersweet smile. “...I finally treasure myself.”

Kayano squeezes her so tight she thinks she might just pop. And all Fumiko can find it in herself to do in return is squeeze her sister twice as tight.

“You have no idea how happy I am to hear that...” Kayano whimpers. “I’ve wanted you to believe
“It’s time,” Fumiko says. “It’s finally time.”

“You’re right. I promise that you’re right. It’s gonna be different. It’s gonna change. No matter what,” Kayano reassures. “I’m gonna get you out of there. No matter what. I’m gonna get you out of there. I won’t let your parents hurt you. You’re gonna be safe. No-one’s gonna hurt you ever again. I won’t let them. I promise.”

...She sounds like she’s trying to reassure herself more than anything, but Fumiko doesn’t mind. Instead, she merely leans closer into Kayano’s embrace and nods.

“I know,” she says. “...I know you’re gonna protect me. And... and I’ll try my hardest to protect myself.”

“We’ll come up with a plan,” Kayano says. “Before you even know it, we’ll come up with a plan. And you’re gonna be safe... And you’re gonna be happy.”

Her words are so panicked. Her breaths are so quick.

“Akari,” Fumiko says, her voice firm. “When I’m with you guys, I already am.”

She doesn’t even need to see Kayano’s face to spot the tears trailing down her cheeks.

“I’m the adult this time around,” Kayano says softly. “I promise: I’ll do everything in my power to keep you safe. Just like you did for me.”

...Fumiko wonders if that ‘everything’ she did was really enough. As if she hadn’t broken Kayano’s heart and shredded it into a tiny million pieces. As if she hadn’t told her she loved her, then had the audacity to leave her behind. Had she really done enough...? Really fought as hard as she possibly could for the girl who lit herself on fire one year after she vanished, and who weeps on her shoulder fifteen years after that?

...She doesn’t know. But either way, she decides she’ll finally get things right this time around, too.

“Okay,” she says in a shaky voice. “Okay. I’m safe. I’m gonna be safe.”

Kayano nods. “I’ll make sure of it.”

Fumiko sniffs, burying her face in her chest. “...I can’t believe you’re all grown up.”

“Sometimes I can't either,” Kayano says with a laugh.

“I missed so many milestones...” And for a moment, Fumiko feels a horrible pang of sadness. But she quickly shrugs it off. There’s no use in being sad now. “Any funny stories to catch me up on?” She jeers. “Any embarrassing teenage haircuts?”

Kayano rolls her eyes. “Oh god, no. That was Nagisa.”

“Pardon?”

“For a solid year he rocked the ‘I’m fifteen and I can finally present as transgender’ undercut. Now that was crazy.”

Fumiko grimaces. “Good lord.”
“I know, right? I just about lost my crush on him until he remembered ‘Oh. Wait. Men are allowed to have haircuts that don’t make them look like fuckboys.’”

It’s... Crazy to think how much she’s missed. Sixteen years with no idea. Sixteen years of her world moving on without her. And thirteen of those spent alive with no idea. But when Kayano holds her tight and laughs because she’s recounting a funny memory to her big sister, Fumiko somehow feels certain they’ll manage to make up for that lost time no matter what. That those sixteen years hardly matter, because they’re together again, and they’re lucky to have time left at all.

“I mean it. About how much you’ve grown,” she admits. “It’s... it’s almost impossible to believe.” And it’s her turn to hold back a laugh. “...It’s like... Everything I just knew you could do, you reached out and accomplished. I’m really happy to get to see how your life turned out.”

And finally, Fumiko pulls away. Despite every part of her wanting to cling to Kayano as tight as she can, she pulls away. She pulls away and shakes her head and meets Kayano’s eyes. Looks at her face and takes in just how far she’s come.

She’s older now. So much older. At thirty, she’s older than Aguri ever got to be. And her golden eyes glow. Despite everything she’s been through... Despite the tears pricking at the corner of her eyes and the way her face creases when she smiles, she glows. Even as Fumiko pulls away, she keeps a gentle hand on her shoulder. And with her beautiful brown hair spilling over her shoulders... A single green streak passing by her ear like a reminder... She glows, like a beacon in the dark.

“You really mean that?” she asks, her lip quivering.

“Of course,” Fumiko says. And desperately - wearily - she tries to find a way to express the pride she feels burning in her chest: Warm, and more comforting than anything. But she can’t. There are no words to express it: the love a big sister feels for her little sister. And as such, she supposes she’ll just have to make do with what she can find.

“You’re... you’ve become... Such a wonderful person,” she whispers. “I mean... Of course you’ve always been, but...” She pauses. “You’ve grown into this beautiful, kind, accomplished woman. You’re famous, and you’re funny, and you’re loved. You have a family who makes you so happy. And... you make them happy right back. It feels so relieving: To know that you’re safe. To know that you found a place where you belong.”

(‘That you’ll never have to go through what I did’)

“I’m so happy for you. I’m... I’m...” Fumiko pauses. “I’m so proud of you-”

That’s all it takes for the dam to break again. Tears spilling down her cheeks, Kayano stares at her lap and wipes her eyes with her arm.


“It’s just... a lot,” Kayano admits. “I never thought I’d get to hear that again-”

“Well... You did. And... And you’ll hear it a thousand times more. Because I will never stop being proud of you,” Fumiko says. And hopping to her own shaky feet, she hurries across the room. She grabs a box of tissues and returns to Kayano’s side.

Kayano tears into them. And as ashamed as she is to admit it, Fumiko needs a few as well.
She blows her nose and shakes her head. “I never thought I’d see the day I heard myself say something so sappy,” she admits with a halfhearted laugh. “But… I’m happy I could say it. I’m happy I can be here with you.”

“I’m happy too,” Kayano says. “I guess… I guess your precious little sister just managed to drag some of that old sappiness of of you.”


“I’m not that old, am I?” Kayano asks, still dabbing at her eyes.

“No,” Fumiko replies. “Of course not. But it’s still strange. That you’re older than me now.” She pauses. “Does that make me the little sister?”

Kayano’s silent, as if mulling that over. She furrows her brow and brings her hand to her chin.

“No,” she decides. “That’s just… weird. You’re more like… The middle sister now.”

“Wait, what?”

“You know. Since I’m the little sister. And… sort of the big sister. And then you’re… just…” She drifts off.

“Just Fumiko?” Fumiko offers up.

“Yeah,” Kayano says with a smile. “Just Fumiko.”

They talk for the rest of the evening. Talk, and hug, and cry. Fumiko tells Kayano about how she doesn’t want the others to know, and how Makoto already does. She tells Kayano about how the reunion went, and about just how happy she was. Just how happy she still is. She tells Kayano about how she confided in Kiyoshi, and how she promised him nothing was going to change.

“...At least, between the two of us,” she says. “I think a lot of things are going to change now. But I also think he’ll always be my best friend.”

Kayano gives her a warm smile. “...You’re a good friend, Fumiko. I bet he’s really happy to have someone like you..”

“...Not as happy as I am to have someone like him.”

But in due time, their talk needs to end. As sunset begins to creep in through the windows, Fumiko realizes it’s just about time for her to go home. To go home… Back to the family that’s never gotten her.

“I’m scared,” she admits as she gets to her feet.

“I know,” Kayano says. “But I promise you: No matter what, we’re gonna find a way to fix this. We’re working on a plan, remember? So please… just believe in me.”


“I’m sorry there’s not more I can do.”

“It’s okay,” Fumiko says. “...Just seeing you is enough.”

She doesn’t dare step back out into the hallway and back out into the world where no-one else can
know before giving Kayano a hug. Squeezing her tight, she whispers “I love you, Akari.”

And that same overwhelmed quiver to her voice, Kayano shakes her head and smiles so wide she looks like she might just cry. “Love you too.”

The moment she steps out of the lounge, Makoto’s on her. He bounces to his feet and asks her how it went. She shushes him, however, and tells him to lower his voice. “Our secret, remember? I’ll let you know tomorrow. I really need to get home.”

Makoto frowns, but nods. He gets it. Though quickly, like a lightbulb’s flashed above his head, he offers to walk Fumiko and Kiyoshi home today.

“You’re really that excited to hear how it went?” Fumiko whispers.

“Yeah, man!” Makoto declares.

Well... she has no reason to decline his offer.

The three of them make their way out of the house, although not before stopping to tell Nagisa they’ll see him tomorrow. Then, with an almost timed precision, they file their way down the stairs and out onto the sidewalk.

“It went awesome,” Fumiko says the moment she’s sure they’re out of earshot. “She was so happy, guys. You have no idea how much I cried.”

Makoto punches her shoulder. “You really are getting soft!”

Fumiko laughs. “Certainly feels like it lately.”

“...I’m really happy for you.”

They chat the rest of the way home, dropping Kiyoshi off at his place with a hug and a high five. And before they know it, they’re coming up on Fumiko’s property. They stop, staring out over the massive estate from maybe half a kilometer away as Fumiko sticks her arm out.


“Yeah,” Makoto says. “Don’t worry. I get it. They’d have your head if they saw you hanging out with me. I’ll scram.”

“See you tomorrow?”

“Yeah,” Makoto says with a smile. And pulling Fumiko in for one last hug, he says “I’m really glad things went well with Kayano, Aguri.”

“Me too,” Fumiko says. “Me too.”

And with that, he’s gone. Skipping off towards God-knows-where. She watches him until he fades over the horizon, then turns back towards her own home. The home she hates and the home she’s still afraid to confront. Taking a deep breath, she marches towards the mansion and makes her way in through the door just before eight. The empty hallways greet her.

“Fumiko,” her mother says from another room, in that voice devoid of love. “It’s about time you’ve gotten home.”
...It’s such an empty feeling.

As things always are with her family, the rest of the evening feels the same. Mother makes her classic jeers over the dinner table, and Father stares at her with that same disapproving scowl. Her sisters roll their eyes when she makes a report on her grades... and when Father tells her she needs to be doing better, they don’t dare stand up for her.

...Even so, she knows she’s not alone.

As bedtime draws near, she retreats to her room, slips into her pajamas, and stares at her phone. Texts Makoto good night, and Kiyoshi another thanks. It’s not long before they respond in turn, with their “aw shucks, it’s nothing”s, and their own good nights, plastered in octopi and laughing cat emojis.

They’re not what really reassures her, though. Just this once, it’s someone else. And as she opens a near untouched contact on her phone, she smiles.

[11/6/2030 10:12 PM:] [Fumiko]: I’m happy I got to talk to you today. It was really nice. To tell you everything.


She turns over and shuts her eyes. And despite the bed she lies in... Despite the family she’s surrounded by and the body she sleeps in, she’s content. Because not even a minute later, Akari Yukimura texts her back, and she says, “I love you too. Sleep well.”

Fumiko Hisakawa has never felt at home with her family. Never been enough, and never lived up to their standards. And staring out at what other people had... it broke her heart. Because she knew she’d never, ever have a family like them, no matter what she did.

...Well, it turns out she was wrong. In fact, she hardly needed to do anything at all. Because all this time, she has had family waiting for her. Real family. Who loves her. And who always will. Her big-little-sister, who’s just as every bit proud of her and she is of her. Who held her tight... and told her she missed her... and texted her, “Goodnight, I love you,” with no strings attached.

“I’ll protect you,” she’d said this afternoon. And she’s far from the first. Makoto had said the same the day before. And so had Kiyoshi, crouching in his hallway and passing her tissues. Nagisa, too, had placed a hand on her shoulder all those months ago, and promised “You’re safe now. No-one’s going to hurt you ever again.”

She’s not sure that’s true. It’s not that simple. It’s not that easy. Her parents’ sharp words make that much clear. But Fumiko has more than blind faith now. She doesn’t just believe everything’s going to turn out okay because she wants it to. She believes everything is going to turn out okay because she’s gonna fight like hell. Like her sister before her, and like she knows that she can. She’s gonna be proactive... And smart... And she is not going to give up.

She is going to stand up for herself. Because she’s protecting herself now, too. And no matter how long it takes, it’s nice to know she’ll have people backing her up the whole way through. Cheering her on, and fighting by her side.

Because at the very least, with their support, the words “You’re a failure of a Hisakawa” don’t sting nearly as much as they used to.
In fact…

...She thinks she's much happier being something akin to a Yukimura.

Chapter End Notes

IT'S FINALLY HERE! And... Four hours later than usual. Haha. My apologies about that. As if equivalent exchange just HAD to rear its ugly head because I posted last chapter hours early, I ended up sleeping in hours past my alarm today and then scrambling awake at 5 PM like "OH SHIT, MY FANFIC"

That said, I hope you enjoyed the chapter! I know it features two conversations people have been looking forward to for a long-ass time, so I hope I came through! It was very cathartic to write, although in different ways.

In Fumiko's 'reunion' with Makoto I tried to focus mostly on pure joy. But w/ Kayano there's definitely a feeling of bittersweetness involved. This stems from a lot of different things, and it was fun to flesh out. It's also very fun that Makoto and Fumiko have very little to "catch up on," while the pair of sisters have a LOT.

If anyone's wondering about the trans undercut joke, since I've been told this isn't really a thing outside of certain trans circles: There's a sorta common phenomenon when trans dudes first come out as trans that they get a not so great undercut as baby's first boy haircut. As usual with anything people do when they're fifteen, they tend to look back on said haircut w a little bit of embarrassment. That said I do feel like I should clarify /I/ don't actually think there's anything wrong w undercuts, and I would /never/ call you a fuckboy for having one. (...Kayano, however...)

The more important thing I should clarify however is that the dates are SUPER fucked up right now. (The in-universe dates for texting and such, I mean.) I realized at the rate they were going by they were going to pass Kayano's birthday before I wanted them to, and so I backpedaled a little and pushed the dates back. This means right now the dates in this chapter might not match up with or may even be BEHIND dates listed in previous chapters, so please be patient w me while I procrastinate on fixing that.

The next chapter will be up next week! And it is a LONG one. Initially, I debated splitting it up into two halves, but it ended up being a bit of a Christmas episode, so I wanna get that out as soon as possible before the actual holidays are over. Because of that, there'll probably be another two-week break after next chapter, but not before ya'll'll get some teeth rotting fluff as an apology for all the Seriousness lately. Plot buffs have no fear, however! The rest of the fic will NOT be just fluff, haha. I still have plot up my sleeve. You may ask "how the hell?" but trust me when I say I still have things I need to wrap up.

Some songs that helped me write this chapter were Everything's Alright from To The Moon, Coming Home Pt. II by Skylar Grey, Fellow Feeling by Porter Robinson, See You Again by Wiz Khalifa, Sweater by Hey Dog Dog, Somewhere Only We Know by Keane, Never Be Alone by TheFatRat, How To Return Home from Our First Mistake, I Am The One Reprise from Next To Normal, Nightclothes by Radical Face, and Sisters by Radical Face as well. What I'd like to leave this authors note off on,
however, is a set of lyrics from the aforementioned Everything's Alright.

"When this world is no more
The moon is all we'll see
I'll ask you to fly away with me
Until the stars all fall down
They empty from the sky
But I don't mind
If you're with me, then everything's alright
If you're with me, then everything's alright"

I hope you enjoyed the chapter! Make sure to let me know what you thought, and see you soon! o/
Interlude Time

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Even as the days grow colder and the nights grow darker, Makoto’s life seems to be so warm.

He’s always been a bit of an optimist. He knows that! But each morning, when the sun rises later and later than the day before, and he spots his friends' faces waiting for him over the crest of the hill, he decides he finally has a reason to be.

Needless to say, school is better than ever before.

He’s working on getting back into P.E. It’s still a little weird after all the harm he did, but he doesn’t wanna worry Nagisa. It’s just a game, after all. No-one’s in any real danger. And they’re never gonna be ever again. He’s not an assassin anymore. He doesn’t need to be. And when they’re all parched and exhausted from trying to fake-kill each other, Nagisa offers them hot cocoa... and Makoto decides gritting and bearing it might have been worth it just this once.

He still thinks about it sometimes. What it was like to hurt people. A blade in his hand and blood cascading behind him. But just as soon, he shakes it off.

...At the very least, he feels better now that he can talk about it. And thinking that if some of the harm he did has been undone in Fumiko, then maybe all of it is undone somewhere else. It doesn’t make him feel completely better, but when he catches the self-loathing creeping up on him, he glances her way and decides to compartmentalize that guilt for another day.

It’s the Holidays, after all! He’s supposed to be happy. And he is! After all, he’s spending them with the one person he thought he’d never see again.

She hands him a coat one day, saying he can keep it.

“My parents won’t notice. I haven’t worn this thing in years. I’m surprised we haven’t thrown it out.”

Makoto slips it on and asks "Why the gift?"

Fumiko shrugs. “I noticed you didn’t have a winter coat that was anything more than a ratty menace. And I couldn’t let that stand. We need to look out for each other, after all, don’t we?”

Something tells Makoto Nagisa and the others were going to buy him a winter coat before things got much colder outside, but he doesn’t complain. Instead, he merely focuses on how fluffy it feels, and the way the fur collar tickles his nose. It’s plain beige, and a little too small for him.

He declares that he loves it, and wraps Fumiko in another hug. This time she doesn’t resist.

The flowers outside of the school building are beginning to die. They have been since October now, but it’s still sad to see them wilt. The day Makoto walks into school and can’t see them for the first time because they’re buried in snow, he thinks he sheds a tear. It’s stupid and sentimental, but they remind him of the past.

He still thinks about Damien. A lot. Wonders where he is... wonders if he hates him. He’d get it if he did. Sure, Fumiko was happy to see him, but that’s a bit different. They were friends. Like...
good ones. Damien and he... weren’t. Maybe Damien’s out there somewhere, cursing his name.

‘That’s okay,’ Makoto decides. It makes him feel like crap, but he can’t fault the boy. Nor is it fair to put words in his mouth. What does he know? Maybe Damien misses him too. He’d like to see him again one day if possible. Just once. For… closure, or whatever. Apologies that should have been said a long time ago.

He hopes Damien would like that, too.

Nagisa tells Makoto they’ll replant the flowers in March. As a class. Makoto nods, snug in his winter coat, and asks Nagisa if they can plant thyme. Nagisa thinks it over, and shrugs, with an “I don’t see why not. It’d look awfully nice with some roses.”

Makoto agrees, and the pain eases just a little. He’s not sure it’ll ever stop hurting completely, but it’s nice to think that everything will bloom again in the spring.

“I believe in you,” he whispers one morning, passing by the now-dead flower bed. “We’re gonna do better this time. I promise.”

Fumiko helps a little when he dreams about his sins. Of dying screams and mistreated little boys. She doesn’t get it. Not really. Aguri never did anything wrong in her entire life. But at the very least when Makoto awakes in a cold sweat, her dying face still fresh in his mind, he can text her and receive an, “I’m right here,” in response.

He’s spending more and more time at Nagisa’s place. As second-trimester finals come up, he says he’s doing it to study, but he knows that’s not the truth. He’s doing it because it’s somehow more of a home than home’s ever been. And even that’s okay. They play games and exchange stories. Miss Nao catches a mouse and Kiyoshi falls asleep on the couch one late November day. Fumiko and Makoto try to carry him home, but end up waking him up halfway to the Karasumas’ because they’re laughing too loud at their own conversation.

Makoto not sure what’s gonna happen from here on out. From how good things feel right now. He’s not even sure how the rest of the year is gonna go, honestly, and that ends in, like, two months. But he’s not too bothered. Not even two months ago, he felt hopeless. Felt like he didn’t deserve to live. And now everything... everyone around him seems to scream ‘you were wrong.’

A learning experience at it’s finest. He loves it. What is life, if not for being wrong?

He lets Fumiko borrow her own coat one day when she forgets to bring a jacket. And when she hands it back to him after P.E, whispering a barely audible “Thanks, Reaper,” he grins from ear to ear. Then and there, he decides that life is for being overjoyed, too.

Kayano’s always had pretty good birthdays. At least, for the past eight years. But she’s gotta say… This one takes the cake.

There’s a lot of things that suck about an early November birthday. For one, it’s cold outside, but not the pretty sort of cold. If you’re lucky, there’s slush. If you’re significantly less lucky, you’ll probably end up slipping on said slush and breaking your hip two days before your birthday. Now that was an interesting year.

For two, extended family members and friends love the assumption that just because your birthday is relatively close to Christmas (And not even THAT close, let’s be real. It’s NOVEMBER 9TH, people) they can skip out on getting you a gift for each, and just sort of send you a mildly worse
amalgamation gift. She’s not, like, a materially obsessed person, so she doesn’t really care, but at that rate, she’d just rather not get a gift at all.

For three, November birthdays suck because every year they remind you of what family used to feel like.

That’s not always a bad thing. Sometimes, it’s a reminder that family is better. That when she was a little girl, her father didn’t show up to her birthdays. And that even now, she’s lucky to get a card. Which, needless to say, is a stark contrast to the family she’s surrounded herself with.

But other times it’s a reminder of the things she’s lost. And that wonder she hasn’t held since she was a child. Long gone hours of binging her favorite cartoon, before skipping into the kitchen and blowing out the candles on a cake she doesn’t even like the taste of. But devouring it anyway, because her big sister spent hours making it, and it’s awfully cute, even if she tends to hate sweet things.

She supposes that isn’t innately a November thing. Or even innately a birthday thing. Sometimes, her entire life feels like a series of being reminded of things she doesn’t want to think about. But something about the ‘Holidays are quickly approaching’ atmosphere serves as an ample reminder that half of her biological family is dead, and the other half may as well be, at least in her eyes.

...Not to seem ungrateful. Like she said: Even though November birthdays aren’t exactly an ideal time, the people around her have always done their best to make it worth her while. She has good birthdays. She has great birthdays, even. Because she has a new family now. And they love her more than anything.

She’d say on her birthday Nagisa treats her like a queen, but that would seem to imply he treats her as anything else on an average day. (Hint: He doesn’t.) And for once in their lives, Karma and Gakushuu try their best to behave. In stark contrast to their usual behavior as goddamn circus animals, they tend to spend the day in a bake-off, competing to see who can bake Kayano the most impressive dessert. Even Nagisa participates, sitting awkwardly on a dining room chair, and making sure they don’t light the house on fire.

...It’s nice. It makes her feel appreciated. And for the past eight years, it’s almost been enough to make her forget entirely that there had been a time when she’d turn her head up at layer cake and pudding. A time before her sensei’s blood and pure, cold, vengeance ran through her veins.

That said, this year is different. While those seven years on her own she spent battling her grief, and the past eight she’s spent surrounded by people who almost made her forget it existed, this year, she thinks it finally fades away entirely.

How could she be sad for a minute more when Fumiko is right there?

There’s this weird, giddy, anxious feeling in Kayano’s gut as her birthday fast approaches. And she decides she’s rather relieved that Fumiko let her know about the Aguri thing before it came. As sweet of a birthday surprise as it would have made, she thinks she may have started outright crying watching Makoto crowd around the table and try to blow out her birthday candles for her. Without her.

Surely she'd have felt something other than this relief.

Yes. Relief. That’s what it is. That’s what she feels on her birthday. Even above weird, and even above giddy, Kayano just feels relieved.
It falls on a Friday this year, and Karma takes a rain check on work. Tells his boss he’s handling ‘important business,’ and tells his family he just wants to get a head start on the baking competition. Kayano, however, is just pretty sure he’s catching a cold, and full-well lets him know that if he gets her sick she will kill him. If he doesn’t, however, she appreciates the effort!

Now that has Gakushuu bitching the whole morning. About how he has to do important work, and it’s unfair that Karma gets an advantage. About how Karma’s a cheat, and he should be disqualified. At least until Kayano reminds him this isn’t an official competition by any stretch of the means, but rather something they themselves entirely formulated.

“I’m not going to pick favorites,” she says. “I’ll appreciate whatever the both of you make me.”

Karma pouts. “Why not?”

Nagisa perks his head up, and comments “Because she’s not willing to give either of you the satisfaction of ‘winning.’”

Kayano nods sagely. “Because I’m not willing to give either of you the satisfaction of ‘winning.’”

Now that shuts them up.

Gakushuu heads out soon after. And Nagisa, after him. He hugs Kayano in the doorway and tells her to have a good day.

“I will,” she promises.

And when he returns, eight hours later, that’s what she’s really been looking forward to... because he brings the kids with him.

Makoto rushes to tackle hug her, shouting, “Happy birthday!” And his friends are soon behind him. Fumiko stands with a present wrapped ever-so-delicately in her hands, and a tin under her arm. Kiyoshi, on the other hand, holds out a massive stuffed rabbit, and says he told her he wouldn’t forget.

“I - I mean... I’m not sure it’s a very cool gift, but I had to get something. and... and I didn’t just get this because of our conversation! I was - I was planning something before. I mean, what sort of nephew would I be if I wasn't? A - Uh - Bad one. That’s what. Anyways. I... I hope you like it.”

She smiles, and crouches down to pull him into a hug.

“Kiyoshi, I love it.”

Fumiko, in true Fumiko fashion, ends up feeling the need to show him up. And as such, she gives Kayano two gifts. The first an authentic emerald necklace that looks like it cost an arm and a leg, and the second, somehow even more priceless: a batch of sloppy, homemade sugar cookies.

“I... er... baked them myself,” she admits, staring at the floor. “I’ve been learning how to cook, you know. To fend for myself. But that’s a rather sad reason. And so I supposed I could put those skills to some good use.”

They’re far from gourmet. They’re homemade, and they’re misshapen... and it shows. But when she reaches up to take a bite, somehow they’re sweeter than anything else she’s ever had.

The boys go all out. Gakushuu makes her homemade fudge, and Karma bakes her a blueberry-banana pie. It’s enough dessert to last a girl a month. Well, most girls. Kayano’s pretty sure this
will last her approximately three days, but that’s ‘just how it be’ when it comes to her. And she
knows if she really wants more, the family will be down for sitting down and making it together.
After all, she’d do the same for them.

...The dessert she thinks she’s really gonna miss the most when they’re gone are the cookies.

Even as the boys unveil their creations, she keeps finding herself drifting back to them. Flaky and
burnt and full of love. A declaration of not only ‘I’m back,’ but ‘I can fend for myself now. And
I’m going to make the most of that.’

It’s almost enough to make her cry.

The dumbass duo stumbles over themselves, demanding to know who made the superior dish. And
she reminds them she ‘isn’t giving either of them the satisfaction.’

“Besides,” she admits. “Fumiko’s is my favorite by far, anyways.”

Their jaws drop, and they demand “Seriously!?” but she doesn’t budge. She knows what she said.
And she meant it.

Fumiko pumps her fist and grins. But not long before Karma places a hand on her head and ruffles
her hair.

“God damn it, kid. I hope you realize this makes you an opponent from now on. Next year I am not
going easy on you. Welcome to the rat’s race, you little bastard. You better start watching your
back.”

Fumiko snorts, hardly sending him even an aside glance. “I’d say the same to you, Akabane.”

She later admits to Kayano that she genuinely considered leaving a tack on his seat, but didn’t want
to risk putting anyone else through that. Or, like, ruin Kayano’s idea of her as a perfect, all-loving
big sister, but mostly the not putting anyone else through that thing. It’d really suck to accidentally
skewer Makoto with a rusty tack.

“Aguri,” Kayano says in a low voice. “If you think that would be enough to ruin my idea of you,
then you’re out of your mind. I consider leaving a rusty tack on Karma’s seat every single day.”

That makes Fumiko burst into delighted laughter. And deciding it’s the best sound she’s heard in a
long, long time, Kayano laughs too.

The rest of the evening flies by. They spend it splitting the desserts and blatantly neglecting the
need to have an actual dinner, alongside making fun of someone for forgetting to grab a gift. Now
that makes Makoto scream.

“I thought it was in January!” he cries, covering his face with his hands. “I don’t know whyyyyy!”

“Some sensei you are,” Karma says, barely stifling a laugh. But needless to say all of them, him
included, let up, when Makoto actually starts to cry.

“Hey. Hey. It’s okay.” Kayano reassures, awkwardly patting his back. “I don’t mind. I don’t need
anything from you. And if it’s really still bothering you by then, you can just grab me something in
January, alright? Does that sound good?”

Makoto nods, eyes watery, and face red. “...Sounds good.”
Soon enough it’s time for Fumiko to head out. The moment Kayano’s been dreading. And before she goes, she asks for a moment alone. Of course, Kayano obliges.

“Sorry I couldn’t do more,” she says, awkwardly scratching her arm. “To celebrate. Like we used to.”

But Kayano wraps her in a hug and shakes her head. “Fumiko, this was more than enough. You being here with me at all is the best birthday gift I could have possibly asked for.”

Try as she might, Fumiko is unable to hide the way tears prick at her eyes.

“Well… next year will be even better. I swear,” she says, staring intently at the floor.

“Even better than perfect?” Kayano asks with a smile. “...I can’t wait.”

With that, she shoos her on her way. She’d hate to be the reason why Fumiko’s late. But not before exchanging one last hug with her in the doorway, and reflecting on just how lucky she’s become.

Her happiness must shine through. Because later that evening… long after Kiyoshi and Makoto have headed home, Karma catches her digging through her cookie tin with a goofy, delighted look on her face. And he asks her if something special had happened.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“I dunno. You just seem… even happier than usual.”

“Can’t a girl just be happy on her birthday?” Kayano asks. “You people make it hard not to be, after all.”

Karma shrugs, nabbing a cookie for himself. And taking a bite, he says, “Touche. We’re a motley little crew, ain’t we?”

Kayano nods, and with that, he drops it. But she knows he’s not wrong. That this birthday was even better than the last, and that that’s saying a lot.

But that’s her little secret, and somehow… It feels delightful to keep it.

For the first year in what feels like forever, Gakushuu doesn’t get a Christmas card from his family. And that comes as an odd relief

It’s been months now since Nagisa blocked Gakuho. And to Gakushuu’s surprise, Gakuho hasn’t made another attempt to get in contact. Seeing as how for the past four years he’s mailed out corny Christmas and Birthday cards Gakushuu’s had to reply to with “I’m getting a fucking restraining order,” that genuinely comes as a shock. He hadn’t expected it to be… so easy.

(‘So easy.’ So easy? He’s been trying to cut the man off for years now. He had to scream at him from across the phone until his lungs gave out. How hard does it need to be for him to be satisfied?)

He knows deep down why Gakuho hasn’t called... hasn’t sent a gift, or even a tacky sweater... and that’s because Gakushuu finally broke him. Not because Nagisa blocked him, and not because he did it nicely. Not in a world with burner phones and throwaway numbers and shitty in-laws willing to send his mail for him. The reason he hasn’t attempted to bother his son this year is because Gakushuu finally helped him run out of reasons to keep trying.
His mind keeps wandering back to it. Their last conversation. If it actually made him feel any better. And it didn't. It doesn't. He’s ashamed to say it, but it doesn’t. It makes him feel like shit. And it makes him feel bitter. And it makes him feel overdramatic. But even still, he doesn’t regret it. Because he thinks about what it would have felt like to continue to have his father in his life, and somehow that’s even worse.

...There’s no way he could have won. Nagisa told him that himself. But it still hurts to admit. That no matter what he said - no matter what he did this was going to haunt him. If he said nothing, he would have always regretted not getting in the last word. And having gotten it in, he can’t help but feel haunted by how little it fixed. How little it always has. How he’ll always be this person.

This person who needs to throw the last punch. This person who always needs to win. When will he learn? That in this life... with these people...

...There really are things he can’t win.

He hates it. He was raised to be a winner. That’s why he’s so screwed up in the first place, isn’t it? He was raised to hold victory above all else in a world where there are more loss/loss situations than he can count. And he will never forgive his father for that.

(Or himself. And that’s why when he doesn’t get a Christmas card this year he pumps his fist, and he says “good riddance,” but then sits down and asks himself if there was some way he could have gone about that better.)

...Some better way to cut him off. Some better way to have changed his mind. A way to have saved himself before so much damage had been done. Every day, he wishes he could go back in time and instruct his teen self on just what to do. Just what to say.

But he knows deep down that even if he were given the chance, he still wouldn’t find the perfect solution. All these years later - 15 after his father dared to strike him across the face - At almost age 31, he doesn’t think he ever will.

...He’d like to, though. And he knows that more than anything each time Fumiko stops by.

The more he hears of her story, the more he sees himself in her. The standards she’s held to are the same as the standards he holds himself to to this day.

Of course... they’re different in some ways. Fumiko’s parents have never laid a finger on her, even if she admits she’s terrified of it happening one day. And Gakushuu knew how to bake the best damn meal you could have laid your eyes upon at the tender age of 13, even if he was scared that would still never be satisfying enough.

Gakushuu learnt his lessons growing up not only through psychological warfare, but through a clenched fist as well. Fumiko doesn’t know how to cook, or to clean, or how to mail a package. But when he looks in her eyes as she stops by each day over winter break, he knows the technicalities don’t matter. And that they feel the same.

...It’s almost like he got his wish.

And just like he’s always been - Like he’s always supposed to be - He was right. He doesn’t know what to say. None of them do. Not Kayano, or Karma, or any combination of them. They pretend they do to her face, but behind closed doors, they talk and they talk and they talk.

“She can’t technically get legal emancipation until 20,” Karma notes, pacing in circles. “That’s when they can’t do anything else to her. But that’s too long of a wait.”
“We are not leaving her in that situation until 20,” Kayano snaps, breath heavy. “We need to do something. And we need to do it soon. You’re into politics, can’t you do something?”

“I’m a bureaucrat, Kayano, not a lawyer,” Karma says. “This is way out of my area of expertise. I wouldn’t ask you to shoot a film, now would I?”

“No,” Kayano admits with a groan. “I just wish we had something to base our case on. If we could get at least one of her parents to agree, she could have her own property, but-”

“They won’t,” Gakushuu says. “There’s no way they’re going to agree.”

“Exactly.”

As fucked as they were sometimes, at least Nagisa and he had had that luxury. When Nagisa had gathered up the courage to go out on his own, his (Marginally more reasonable) father had been willing to sign off on his apartment. And… Gakushuu’s significantly less reasonable father had as well.

“Very well,” he’d said, with that amused smile Gakushuu still can’t wipe from his mind. “If that is truly what you want… Then I am intrigued to see what you are capable of accomplishing out on your own. Just give your father a call now and again, won’t you?”

(He won’t.)

“Even if we can make an abuse case,” Karma says “Which I sincerely doubt we can do without any evidence of physical harm, she’d be taken away. We’re not getting custody of the kid, as nice of a world to live in that’d be.”

“They can’t take her away,” Kayano says, near instantly. “We don’t know her situation would be any better. She needs this support system. If… if she didn’t have Constellate, or her friends… I’m not willing to imagine what would happen.”

“Something bad,” Gakushuu says simply. “Something very bad.”

He still doesn’t know what would have become of him without a support system. If he ever would have been able to break out of that mindset. If he would have ended up just like his father without some sort of guidance. But he knows he has people like the Virtuosos, Nagisa, and even (Ugh. This feels disgusting to admit) Karma to thank for the person he is today. And he knows, watching Fumiko wrestle with Makoto in the backyard and, like, hit him with sticks or whatever it is that kids do nowadays, that she’ll have people like him to thank for who she becomes in the future. He is not going to be the person to put a stop to that.

He refuses to be a bystander, however, either.

He clicks his tongue and sighs.

“I don’t know how Nagisa does it,” Kayano admits. “Deals with this, like, all the time. They’re such huge choices to make.”

“To be honest, I think he’s hardly managing to deal with it,” Karma says. “He’s stressed out of his mind. Even long after he gives those kids a support system and as many resources as he can, he still tells himself it’s not enough.”

“Because it’s not!” Kayano hisses, flopping on the bed and covering her face with her pillow. “And that sucks. When there is literally nothing more you can do, but as the adult here, you’re supposed
She’s right. When you’re a kid, you believe that adults are supposed to be able to do anything. That they’re just choosing not to. But it’s not that simple. He’s thought about it a lot.

Wondering if there were any adults who wanted to protect him, but couldn’t. Wondering if Korosensei had wanted to do more for Nagisa, but just couldn’t. Or, even worse, if he just decided he wouldn’t.

...At least he tried. (Or... pretended to?) But no-one - No adult - had ever even attempted to help Gakushuu until he decided to help himself.

He could have used a sign. That would have made his life a lot easier a lot earlier. It wouldn’t have had to be grand. A simple “This isn’t okay,” would have been enough. But he never got that. Not from an adult. From other kids and students, sure, but never from a teacher.

Sometimes he wonders if the adults had resented him. Korosensei included. What had they seen him as? After all, wasn’t he the one piling onto the E-Class’s abuse? Engaging in the mockery of what Korosensei considered closest to his heart, and the one beating down on what most of the world already knew was vulnerable? Is that why no-one tried to help him? Because he was the bad guy? Because he was fourteen, and he was cruel? Because he was an Asano, and he was born with a silver spoon in his mouth? Having everything and nothing at once?

...Whatever. He’s gotten off track.

They talk it over and talk it over. What to do with Fumiko. For hours. Over the course of days. But as these things are, they come to no concrete conclusion. And looking back… looking back, Gakushuu still doesn’t know what he’d say to himself all those years ago.

Late during Winter break, Fumiko declares herself what she’d say, however, if given the chance.

“I think I have a plan,” she declares, slamming her little palm on the table. She’s gathered the three of them in a circle, somewhere in the lounge. And she’s looking up at them with these determined, unwavering eyes.


Fumiko nods. “It’ll take a few years to set into motion, so it’s not perfect, but…” She pauses. “I think I came up with something. What I want to do. But before I act on any of it, I want to get through middle school.”

Karma raises an eyebrow. “Are you sure? That sounds...” He pauses, glancing at the others.

“Risky,” Gakushuu finishes for him. A few years can be the difference between life and death in a situation like this.

“I’m certain,” Fumiko says. “My plan involves… disobeying my parents. Bigtime. And to their faces, at that. I know this may sound inane… and fully unprofessional, at least at first, but please hear me out. I am going to get them to disown me.”

Gakushuu sputters.

“P-pardon!?”

Fumiko holds up a finger, ‘uh-uh-uh’ing him with an unamused look. “I told you to hear me out,
Asano-san,” she says.

Gakushuu’s baffled, but stands down. Why is he being scolded by a middle schooler again!?

“I’ve come to the realization that there is very little my parents can actually threaten me with,” Fumiko explains. “My entire life… I have been told ‘do this, or you will be a failure.’ ‘Do this if you want to live up to the Hisakawa name.’ But I don’t care about that any more. So much of their manipulation has relied on mere words. On pressure that no longer affects me. If I’m no longer scared of disappointing them, then the biggest weapon is gone from their arsenal.”

“That is why I intend to act out. And I intend to strike back with a worldly weapon of my own. A preposition. That they are to disown me or else. If they do not do so, I will continue to act out as loudly as possible, under the Hisakawa name. Suddenly the legacy they’re obsessed with protecting will become their weakness. I know very well by now that they care about their status more than me. They’ll be willing to give me up to protect it. And it'll become their only option.”

“Their words are useless, and any other way they can possibly fight back will end up just as inefficient. If they attempt to take away material goods from me, I simply won’t care, seeing as how those things can be replaced. And if they dare to lay a hand on me, which I sincerely doubt they even will, for the record, there’s our case right there.”

She grins proudly, eyes closed and hands clasped. Although her gaze quickly flits between the three of them, as if searching for approval.

“What do you think?”

“Well… It has some kinks that’d need to be worked out,” Kayano admits, scratching her shoulder. “And I’d be pretty worried for you, but…”

“I know I, for one, would be willing to help you stir up trouble,” Karma says. “‘Acting out?’ I’m an expert at that!”

“You’re very correct when you say that it’s far from perfect…” Gakushuu muses. “But…it’s nice to hear what you want to do.”

“The two biggest flaws I can think of are the risk of being cut off from Constellate, and finding a place to stay after I get kicked out. But I believe I have those under control. The former is why I will wait a few years, which will additionally give me more time to think this over, and the latter… well…” She pauses, glancing at her feet.

“I was wondering… Would you all be willing to give me a place to stay for just a little while? I know I will no longer be Shiota-sensei’s student at this point, but I promise it will not be permanent. Just a year or two while I take the time to get myself off of the ground.”

The three of them exchange a unanimous glance.

“Fumiko,” Kayano says, reaching over to hug her. “You can stay with us as long as you need.”

Tentatively… they settle on it. There’s still a few things they’d like to fix up before they go through with the plan, but they have the next two years for that. In the meantime, they can continue to help Fumiko on her life skills. On becoming an adult that will truly thrive on her own.

As they agree, a weight seems to lift from her shoulders. She whispers “thank yous,” hugging Kayano back, before leaping to her feet, and slowly embracing the others.
“I can’t thank you enough,” she says. “For everything the three of you have done for me. I don’t know how to express just how much it means.”

And when she stops to hug Gakushuu, he almost feels ready to cry.

She’s come so far. She’s already growing up. She’s doing so, so much better already than he ever had. And it brings goddamn tears to his eyes.

He still doesn’t know what to say. What he wants to say to a younger Gakushuu, or would have wanted to hear all those years ago. It’s too complex a riddle in a life with far too few answers. But even then, there is one solution he can deduce. One answer he can infer. And that is what he would have wanted someone to do for him all those years ago.

As such, he leans down and hugs Fumiko as tight as he possibly can. Squeezes her, as if saying ‘everything is going to be okay soon. Just you wait,’ and smiles.

“I’m so proud of you,” he whispers. “You’re doing great.”

Later that day, when the two of them are alone, he admits he doesn’t know what he’s doing. That this is his first time dealing with anything like this, at least on this side of the story. And Fumiko raises her eyebrows at him.

But he admits it. And he admits it without shame. Because he’d rather admit he’s not perfect… That he’s downright clueless, and adults can be at a loss sometimes than let her think years down the line that he’d just wanted to stand by. That he’d just wanted to let her come up with that plan on her own. That he’d somehow thought she didn’t deserve help.

He will not let her lie awake in bed at night thinking about that.

“...It’s okay,” Fumiko says. “We’re all just trying to get by, aren’t we? I’m glad you’re trying your best to help, even if you don’t always know how.”

“Yeah,” Gakushuu says. “I’m glad we could at least figure something out.”

“And if you ask me...” Fumiko says, voice quiet. “You’re already doing plenty. For me. Even if you don’t exactly always have it mapped out.” She sighs and gives him a tired smile. “Just supporting me... Helping me figure it out is more than I thought I’d ever get. Please don’t apologize.”

And even in a life without victories... without 100%s and easy answers... Seeing her smile feels like just a bit of a win after all.

“I won’t,” he says, shaking his head.

And quietly... Carefully, he simply thanks her instead.

Okay, so obviously all of them are doing some hard work, but watching Nagisa toil over lesson plans at 1 AM one wintry night, Karma wonders if he’s pushing himself too far.

He’s wondered about it for a while. Years, even. But this year has been worse than usual. Ever since he’d become a teacher, Nagisa has worked himself to the brink for his students. It’s a fundamental part of who he is. And his family has grown used to it. Grown around it. And learned to remind him when to take a break. But with the whole Makoto thing looming over his shoulder these past few months, Karma is beginning to wonder if Nagisa’s now not just pushing himself far,
but to his breaking point.

It’s a ridiculous thought, but a ridiculously likely one, too. It’s a miracle Nagisa hasn’t already burned himself out at some point or another. Sooner or later, he’s gonna collapse.

Karma and the others have talked it over a thousand times. They all agree Nagisa needs some assistance if he’s ever gonna keep the school running the way he is, much less work on expanding it. But god damn if Nagisa can’t be stubborn when he feels strongly about something... and this is his life’s work!

Karma can’t blame him for getting defensive, but he wishes Nagisa would listen to them for at least five seconds and get (at the very least) a teacher’s aide. It would make his life so much easier.

...Sometimes he wonders if Nagisa doesn’t want things to be easy. He’s... a self-deprecating person. If things are too easy, that means he’s not doing his job. That he’s not helping enough people. And if things aren’t hard, that means he needs to make them.

The thought makes Karma want to punch a wall. Needless to say, however, he doesn’t. They pay way too much for this house, and also that would scare the shit out of his husband. He misses the days when they weren’t adults. When they were in what may as well have been a tween fight club, and beating the piss out of each other in the forest was an acceptable way to resolve their differences.

But it’s not anymore. And as such, Karma simply settles on chucking a blanket at Nagisa’s head.

He lets out a yelp, tossing it aside on the couch as he flails. Head whipping around, he turns to stare at Karma.

...Karma supposes he hadn’t noticed him before. That’s hyperfocus for you.

“Hey,” he says, already crouching down to grab another blanket.

“Don’t,” Nagisa groans. “Can’t you see I’m doing work?”

“Clear as day.”

Nagisa sighs. “Why are you up, anyways? It’s late.”

“I could be saying the same thing to you, young man,” Karma replies, to which Nagisa only groans louder. But Karma, never to be dissuaded, marches over to the couch. “If you really want an answer, I’m worrying about you. Again.”

Nagisa’s brow furrows, and he scratches the back of his neck with this all-too-familiar concerned look on his face. “Don’t,” he says. “I’m fine. I swear.”

“You keep saying that,” Karma replies, plopping down next to him “But this is? What? The fourth night in a row you’ve stayed up like this?”

“Fifth, actually,” Nagisa just has to specify, although he quickly realizes he’s not exactly helping his case. His shoulders sink. “Listen. It’s not permanent. Work’s just been… busy lately.”


“I need to prepare for third trimester. It’ll be up on me before I even know it. I need to plan out a unit on Geometry, I still haven’t picked a pair of class representatives, and if I don’t find a way to
convince them that writing an essay on Catcher In The Rye is somehow worth it even though the book is like that, either the school board or the kids are gonna have my head. Maybe both!”

Karma snorts. “They’re 13. Are you kidding me? The kids are going to love The Catcher In The Rye. They’re still all angsty and Chuunibyou, aren’t they? It’s going to ‘vibe’ with them big time.”

Nagisa snorts back. "Bold words coming from ‘Delinquent Type,’ but I do see your point.”

Karma, never a fan of being reminded just how edgy he was in middle school, does his best to hide a humiliated blush, and grumpily mumbles something about how ‘Yeah. Sure. It vibed with me as well. But that’s besides the point.’

“What we really need to be talking about is you,” he says, tapping Nagisa’s chest. “I’m not letting you distract me. You gotta give yourself some time to breathe, man. We’ve talked about this so many times.”

“I know-”

“When are we gonna see some change?”

“...Listen. I know it’s not fair to you guys-”

“No. It’s not about us. It’s not like you’re not spending time with us. You’re spending plenty. You’re just not being fair to yourself. When’s the last time you got a full eight hours of sleep?”

Nagisa’s silence seems to imply that he doesn’t quite remember, either.

“One of these days you’re gonna pass out. In class. And you’re gonna embarrass yourself. Or even worse, you’re just gonna have a real-ass heart attack. What are your kids gonna do if you’re hospitalized? What are we gonna do if you’re hospitalized? We need you, man. You don’t want me crying, do you? Because if you give yourself an aneurysm, I will cry.”

“...Is it a heart attack or an aneurysm?”

“Does it even matter!? It could be Influenza and I’d cry. All gross and vulnerable. All over you. Is that what you want? Weepy, tender, Karma? Boo-hooing? Cussing up a storm? Getting into fistfights ripe with misdirected anger towards doctors because visiting hours are for the weak?”

Nagisa gives him a glance. “...You wouldn’t actually do that.”

“Or would I? Either way, my point still stands. Do you want to make me sad?”

Now that gets Nagisa to relent. He sighs, shaking his head. “No,” he admits. “I hate it when you cry.”

“I’d hope so,” Karma says. “If you answered ‘yes,’ I was gonna be a little bit concerned.” He pauses. “Though, actually, I’m already pretty concerned. Y’know. The whole ‘you haven’t had a good night’s sleep in six years’ thing. Seriously, dude. Is it really asking you too much to ask you to take just a little bit better care of yourself?”


“You swear?” Karma says.

“I swear.”
“Good,” Karma replies. And he doesn’t believe it for a moment, but it’s still nice to hear out of Nagisa’s mouth. “I’ll be enforcing that, you know. Hauling you into bed if it’s the death of me.”

Nagisa groans. “Why are you like this?” he asks. “What happened to being ‘rebellious’ and ‘a delinquent?’ Don’t tell me all that spunk’s faded from you. Are you seriously going to tuck me into bed?”

“Hey! When everyone around you’s a fucking idiot, it turns out that going to bed at 10 PM is ‘counterculture’ and ‘unheard of.’” Karma refutes, conveniently ignoring the fact that this is in no way a recent development and that he has gone to bed at 10 PM since he was 14 because, despite all his talk and his many, many fistfights, grades are important!

He snakes his arms around Nagisa and leans over on him with his full weight. “If you haven’t gotten the memo, for the record,” he clarifies, “You’re one of the aforementioned ‘fucking idiots.’ Time to get into bed, big boy!”

“Hey! Hey! Not right now!” Nagisa insists, attempting to wiggle out of his grasp. “At least let me finish this!”

“Mmmmm… I’d consider it,” Karma says, leaning further on Nagisa. “But last I’d checked, you had no concept of time. And ‘finishing this’ could take thirteen hours. Sorry, bub! Request vetoed!”

Before Nagisa can even protest, Karma’s buried his face in his shoulder. And shaking his head wildly… planting kisses on his neck, he hauls him up into the air and steps away from the couch. Nagisa lets out an embarrassed shriek, kicking at his stomach and flailing with all his might.

“God damn it, Karma!” he hisses.

“Don’t you ‘god damn’ me. You’ve got literally all of tomorrow to deal with the rest of this. I’m just looking out for you. Trust me when I say you’ll thank me in the morning.”

Nagisa falls limp. “I suppose,” he admits. I have been rather exhausted lately. Maybe you’re right, Karma.”

…

“Or maybe you’re just a little bitch!”

And in an instant, he’s on Karma, pressing back with his own weight. Which is, admittedly, very little weight, but it seems he’s banking on the element of surprise, and for once, his faith isn’t misplaced. Karma stumbles back, surprised, but not about to go down. At least until Nagisa wraps his own arms, backwards, around his neck, and with a precision only a boy who genuinely considered becoming an assassin at age 15 could muster, he squeezes tight and sends them both tumbling onto the couch.

Karma hisses in through his teeth, shocked. But Nagisa succeeds in his goal and successfully breaks from his grip. Rolling over, he attempts to reclaim his rightful spot on the couch.

Karma rubs his elbow, which he’s pretty sure he hit on Nagisa’s something, and groans. “I should have known better than to trust the words ‘Maybe you’re right, Karma,’ shouldn’t I?”

Nagisa nods. “Without a doubt.”

He says it with snark, but there’s a smile on his face. Karma hopes he’d managed to ease his
tension, even a little.

“...Listen. I’ll hear you out. But only because you bested me in battle. And because I love you or whatever. But mostly the first thing. What do I look like? A sap? No. I have a warrior’s spirit.” A claim neither he or Nagisa believes. “I’ll give you... five more minutes. To finish this up. Then, after that, you go to bed.”

Nagisa thinks it over.

“Fifteen.”

“You know, we make fun of Gakushuu for always needing to get in the last word, but you’re the one who really always needs to have it exactly how you want it, aren’t you?” Karma muses. “I’ll meet you at ten. But I’m not budging any further than that. And only if you cuddle me.”

“You say that like it’s a bad thing,” Nagisa replies, rolling over on the couch. “Ten minutes it is. Then we go to bed.” He pauses. “I hope the others aren’t too mad at us for causing a commotion.”

Karma shakes his head. “Are you kidding me? They’re used to it by now. Now get to work. The timer begins on one... Two...-

“Okay! Okay!” Nagisa relents, scrambling to grab his pencil. And Karma chuckles, watching him close as he works, and pulling him into a snuggle.

....He ends up going a few minutes over ten. But that’s okay. Karma just can’t say no to that face. And hey, before they hit the fifteen-minute mark, or before Nagisa even manages to finish his lesson plan, for that matter, he dozes off, snoring gently on Karma’s shoulder.

Karma watches him sleep and smiles at just how peaceful he looks. He sighs and places his hands behind his head as he stares up at the ceiling. He supposes this is where he’ll be spending the night, huh? He doesn’t have the heart to wake the dumb bastard up. Not after how much work it took to get him to fall asleep in the first place.

“Night, you big dumb moron,” he says, his voice a whisper. “...I’m putting my faith in you. Please don’t let me down. Just... be careful, okay?”

...Nagisa doesn’t answer. Instead, he simply snores. But that’s okay, because his stubborn, slumbering face still manages to offer up an answer.

“I won’t,” it says as he drools on Karma’s shoulder. “I won’t.”

Karma sighs, and shifts slightly. Prepares himself for a night on the couch, and listens to the gentle sound of Nagisa’s breathing. Shutting his eyes before he can get the chance to roll them, he leans back on Nagisa and shakes his head.

That’s his dumbass.

Nagisa doesn’t get what Karma’s going on about. He’s fine. He’s fine!

Yeah, sure, he’s doing a lot of work, but he knew what he’d be in for when he signed up to be a teacher. And besides, his work’s rewarding. In fact, it’s been more rewarding than ever as of late! Winter has been awesome!

For one, the kids have been off a ton. And snow days are always a delight. Sure, it’s a little
stressful falling behind on his lesson plans, but hey! No-one can control the weather. And not only has he gotten to watch Makoto and co have snowball fights in his backyard, but he’s also getting some of that ‘much-needed sleep’ Karma’s so worried about. It's a win-win!

Once or twice, he and the others even go outside to join them in their little competitions. Which is fun until Karma inevitably pegs Kiyoshi straight in the face with a half-frozen snowball. Now that sends him tumbling over on his ass... and is gonna make for a delightful story to have to explain to his parents! It takes him thirty minutes to stop crying, and even longer for Karma to stop freaking out. Turns out he is capable of feeling guilt once in a blue moon!


“I enjoy besting those who deserve it! Delivering recompense upon the evil, you know!? Karma! Giving a thirteen-year-old a concussion is hardly my proudest feat!”

From there on out, Karma is banned from snowball fights, which he’s only mildly bitter about. He hates to be excluded, but Nagisa, who sorta sucks at snowball fights anyways, joins him on the porch with a mug of hot cocoa and jokes that his power simply needed to be contained.

Thankfully for the both of them, Karma’s stupidity doesn’t seem to leave a bruise. And Kiyoshi is back his cheerful, carefree self in no time. (Or… at least, as carefree as Kiyoshi can get.)

Miss Nao quickly starts to become a menace. Which in and of itself is a phrase that is a huge oxymoron, seeing as how she's already... like that, but she gets worse. It seems like every other day she’s trying to bust out of the house through windows or slightly ajar doors. He knows she used to be an outdoor cat, but it’s 20 degrees outside! Does she want to freeze to death? (...Probably, actually, knowing Miss Nao. But...)

Nagisa won’t allow it! He brings her back, kicking and screaming, with every attempt she makes. She may be atrocious to look at, but she is a part of the family and Makoto loves her!

Ultimately, they settle for putting a bell on her. It both fits with the festive atmosphere, and gives them an idea of where the menace is at all times. She hates it, but sometimes we just have to deal with things we hate, now don’t we? Besides, there’s no way in hell she can possibly hate it as much as the fact that Makoto later attempts to put a Christmas sweater on her, so Nagisa hopes she’s reconsidering her priorities.

(For the record... (And don’t let anyone hear he said this, but) she almost manages to look cute in a sweater. Almost.)

As Karma’s birthday, and, like... Christmas or whatever quickly approaches, the seven of them decide they want to celebrate. They make a bit of a weird group, but they’ve spent a lot of time around each other over the past year. Makoto’s the first to declare they should do something in honor of that. Luckily for him, Nagisa and co already have an idea brewing: Something they’ve been celebrating between just the four of them for the past several years.

Fumiko looks at him like he’s a crazy person when he explains.

“The hell’s Secret Santa?”

(And when did her vocabulary become so vulgar!? He’s happy she’s finding new ways to express herself, but could she maybe use nicer words!?)

“Allow me to explain,” Gakushuu says, stepping forward with poise and grace. He may as well
have had a goddamn Powerpoint prepared, because Fumiko’s expression shifts from that of skepticism to pure respect the moment he begins his explanation. God damn fancy, overprepared, bastard.

“As you may be aware, I worked overseas for many years. I went to college at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and I got my business off the ground in Silicon Valley. During my time there, I picked up several foreign traditions. One of them being Secret Santa. Although at the time we did it over mail because we were not living in the same house... or even in the same country for that matter.”

“Most simply put, Secret Santa is a process where everyone involved is to get a gift for another person involved. The most fascinating aspect, however, is that no-one is to know who they’re obtaining a gift from in advance. Nor is the gift giver allowed to ask what they believe the recipient would most want. Instead, they simply draw a name from a hat, bucket, or other such instrument, and follow their gut instinct when it comes to getting a gift for their beneficiary.”

“Hat, bucket, or ‘other such instrument,’” Karma repeats under his breath, stifling a snicker.

“I don’t want to hear it from you, Mister ‘Delivering recompense upon the evil.’”

“...Touche.”

Nevertheless, the kids seem to agree that it’s a fun idea. Kayano’s quick to write names and toss them into a shoebox. (...’Other such instrument’ it is!) She gives it a firm shake, just for good measure, then holds it out and invites the others to pick a name.

Makoto elbows his way to the front. Never one to be bested, he demands to be the first to draw the name of one of his friends. And when he receives it, swiftly cupping it between his hands so no-one else can see, he mischievously grins from ear to ear.

“I have the perfect idea!”

In due time the rest of them draw. And Nagisa reminds them that whatever they get doesn’t have to be expensive. Or even bought, at all. It can be homemade. The price isn’t what matters. What matters is showing how they care about each other.

...Needless to say, he’s excited to have drawn Kayano’s name.

They agree to exchange gifts on the 23rd. The 24th and 25th are somewhat family-oriented days, and they’d hate to rob Kiyoshi of spending time with his. They may love him as much of a pack of weird aunts, besties, and uncles can, but he ultimately has a mom and a dad to come home to. Besides, Karma’s birthday is the 25th anyways, and lord knows he’s gonna want the attention all to himself.

Makoto is the first to show off his gift. They scoot into a circle on Christmas Eve-Eve, and before Nagisa can even finish asking “Who wants to go first?” his hand shoots in the air. Grinning proudly, he holds up a carefully wrapped box.

Without a moment’s hesitation, he slides it Kiyoshi’s way. And excitedly mumbling something about how he hopes he likes it, he encourages him to tear into the gift wrapping.

Kiyoshi’s unwrapping could more aptly be described as a gentle removal, but the point still stands. He places the wrapping paper aside, as if he’ll actually manage to find some use for it later, and then cracks open the box!
Inside it a hand-knitted winter hat. Snow white and with adorable ears attached, just for good measure. It takes a minute, but when everyone seems to simultaneously realize they’re Taro-shaped, a ‘d’awwww’ overtakes the room.

Makoto shyly twiddles his fingers, giving Kiyoshi a smile. “…I couldn’t afford a whole lot, so I thought I’d make you something! I have my winter coat, and Fumiko has her scarf, but I realized you don’t really have anything to keep you warm. I handmade it and everything! I really hope you like it—”

Before he can finish, Kiyoshi’s got him in a bear hug. Shaking his head back and forth, he lets Makoto know he loves it. And, of course, he’s quick to try it on. It’s a little big for him, and falls over his eyes when he tilts his head forward. But that’s okay. He reiterates that he’s still got a lot of growing to do. Being a! Karasuma and all! He’s sure he’ll grow into it.

Karma suggests they may as well go in a circle. Easier than waiting for volunteers in this family of introverts. Why doesn’t Kiyoshi go next?

He’s a little nervous about it, but he agrees. He lifts his box up from off his lap and passes it Nagisa’s way.

Nagisa doesn’t even need to open it to start crying. The thought of simply receiving a gift from sweet little Kiyoshi, who’s grown so much over the past year, is more than enough to bring him to tears. Dabbing at his eyes, and mumbling something about how he swears he’s not crying for real, he unwraps the box.

Inside, is not one, but two gifts. First and foremost, a carefully folded, baby blue blanket. And underneath it, a beautiful, snake-skinned journal/planner combination.

“It’s. Uh. Artificial,” Kiyoshi’s quick to clarify. “I would. Not get you. An actual snakeskin journal. When you own a pet snake. That would just be cruel. But - Uh - I did get you a journal!” He gives Nagisa a nervous smile. “I heard from Mom and Dad that you used to keep a journal on Korosensei back in the day. So… you’re at least sort of a writer, yeah? I figured maybe you could outline lesson plans, or write about what’s worrying about you or whatever in there. It could be stress-relieving!”

“I keep a diary!” he adds on. “It’s really helpful! And I got you a blanket, too. In case you didn’t like the journal. It’s really soft! Feel it!”

Nagisa runs his fingers over the blanket. And true to Kiyoshi’s word, it’s velvety soft. Nagisa’s expression melts into a sappy smile as he meets Kiyoshi’s eyes.

“…It’s wonderful, Kiyoshi. Thank you so much. I’ll make sure to use them both.”

He’s mildly concerned by the fact that everyone in his life seems to think he desperately needs some organization, but appreciative nonetheless.

He, too, pulls Kiyoshi into a hug. Something tells him there are gonna be a lot of those exchanged tonight. Then, awkwardly, he fumbles for his own gift, hiding behind his back.

“So - Uh - For the record - I do want to put it out there that I got two gifts as well. Namely because this first gift is going to make you want to kill m-”

“None of you know the definition of ‘one,’ do you?” Karma asks, deadpan.

“Namely because this first gift is going to make you want to kill me,” he turns towards Kayano and
sweats. “Akari?”


Sheepishly, Nagisa slides the box her way.

The first of his gifts for his beloved wife, and the gift he genuinely believes will entice her to remove his kneecaps, is a mint green shirt labeled “SHORTY SQUAD: OPPRESSING TALL PEOPLE SINCE 2014” in all capital letters. Before Kayano can burst into laughter, Nagisa hurries to explain.

“I just! Figured since we had so many inside jokes, I could get us something to celebrate one of them. And… I mean, what do we hate more than tall people? I pretty much instantly regretted it the moment I ordered it, but it was too late to cancel. I got myself a matching one... if it makes you feel any better.”

Kayano’s laughing so hard she’s crying. But shaking her head with disbelief, she asks “Why did you think I’d hate this? If anything, it’s those two you should be afraid of.” She points a thumb towards Gakushuu and Karma, stifling another laugh. “Remember? They’re the enemy.”

“Oh, you two,” Karma snaps. “You’ve really crossed the line, now. This is all-out war.”

“Can we please continue with Secret Santa?” Fumiko asks. “I have no interest in your strange and petty feuds.”

His second gift for Kayano, however, is far more genuine. A pair of crimson and gold earrings he’d gone and handpicked. Shaped like roses, he’d thought they were rather cute.

“...Just like you,” he clarifies. “I thought they fit you well.”

She takes surprisingly better to both his gifts than he’d thought she would. Pulling him in to give him a kiss on the cheek, she thanks him with a genuine delight to her voice. And as soon as she’s pulled away, she’s already got her hands on her own gift.

“You guys have no idea how excited I was to draw this name. Without further ado, I present Fumiko Hisakawa her gift!”

She takes a mock bow and slides the box Fumiko’s way.

...Strangely enough, Fumiko already looks halfway to tears herself.

She hurries to unwrap her gift, tearing at the paper with an ecstatic messiness Nagisa never would have thought he’d ever get to see in her just a few months ago.

...He’s really proud of her.

“I had a lot of trouble picking something out for you,” Kayano admits. “Over this past year… you’ve become a very important person to me and my family. You’re a bright, beautiful, and kind young lady. And almost every day we find another reason to be proud of you. I wasn’t sure what sort of gift could surmise that type of pride, if any at all. But nevertheless, I hope you like it. And needless to say, I grabbed you several things as well.”

Quietly, Fumiko leans on her side.

“Y… ukimura-san,” she says, voice quivering. “There’s no gift I could ask for more than to hear
those words. I’m beyond lucky to have your family, and I’m beyond lucky to have you. Whatever it is, I’ll love it.”

Inside is not one, and not even two, but true to Kayano’s word, three gifts. Fumiko lunges for them and races to proudly hold each up.

“Okay. Seriously. I was joking earlier, but none of you know what ‘one’ means, do you?” Karma asks.

Unanimously, he’s ignored. Instead, everyone’s attention is glued to Fumiko’s prizes. And what prizes they are.

A pristine, hardcover book, dedicated to the strangest, most fascinating, and funniest facts about history, a miniature sewing machine, and a small, colorful pair of socks.

“I know you’re a bit of a history buff, so I figured you would appreciate learning some facts you maybe hadn’t heard about yet. Sorta useless in the age of the internet, but who knows? Did you know that during World War II, a Liechtenstein army went out with 58 men, and returned with 59 because they made a friend?”

“I did in fact,” Fumiko admits. “But I’m curious to see what I don’t know.”

“...As for the sewing machine, Makoto actually pitched it to me while he was making his hat for Kiyoshi. I expressed that I thought you’d appreciate a creative outlet, and he said you should join him! I dunno if it’ll be up your alley, but it’s worth a try.”

Fumiko nods! “Who knows? I do appreciate the idea of being able to stab things.”

Nagisa feels that on a spiritual level.

“...And the socks,” Kayano laughs. “You’re a weird kid to pick things out for. I mean… It’s not your fault, but you can’t really have a stuffed animal or anything. You can’t even bring your scarf home. You’re in an environment where that sort of thing is hard. So I figured maybe I’d go for something subtle. Something you could take with you everywhere, that seemed unassuming, but served as a reminder that you have people rooting you on.”

“Just colorful enough to remind you that you have some light in your life, but ‘normal’ enough that they won’t get confiscated or anything. Plus, if you ask me, they’re rather fashionable.”

Now that makes Fumiko roll her eyes. She kicks gently at Kayano’s ankle, but never once makes the attempt to lean away from her. At least… until she realizes it’s just about time for her to go reaching for her own gift.

“...Thank you, Yukimura-san,” she says, in a voice still touched. “I’ll treasure them. Does that… make it my turn?”

Nagisa nods! “I think so.”

Carefully, Fumiko retrieves a large box from behind her. And she slides it Gakushuu’s way!

“There’s a card attached,” she specifies. “Please read it before opening your gift.”

Gakushuu blinks, but nods affirmatively. Careful not to tear it, he removes the card and gives it a read.
It takes him a minute, but as he closes the card he blinks back tears. Turning his head to Fumiko, he mumbles a quiet “...Thank you. Sincerely. I’m... flattered you believe in me to that degree.”

He tries to be subtle about it, but there’s no hiding the way he dabs at his eyes.

Oh, now Nagisa’s curious. “Do you mind if we give it a read as well? Or do you want this to stay between the two of you?” He asks Fumiko.

“I suppose I don’t particularly mind,” Fumiko says. “Just give it back to Asano-san when you’re finished.”

Gakushuu hands the letter over to Nagisa. Written is the following:

“Dear Asano-san,

I was quite surprised when I received you as my Secret Santa recipient. I’ve always seen us as rather similar people. And as such, I suppose I had about as much difficulty picking out a gift for you as I would myself. Which is, needless to say, much.

I had to make sure it was something good. Over these past few months, you and your family have been an immeasurable help to my happiness, and wellbeing. In many ways, I have you four to thank for helping me grow up. But that is not just some group statement. You are not just some collective. You specifically have helped me in your own ways. Your progress. Your pride, and your happiness. The family you surround yourself with. You’ve given me hope for my future in a world where I had very little before. Because if you can do it... if you can succeed despite your upbringing, perhaps so can I.

But I believe we are not to be defined by our pasts. By that horror that makes us one in the same. The people who have hurt us, and the families we were raised by. I did not want to get you something reflective of our shared wealth. As sweet as the concept of a freshly-pressed “#1 Teacher’s-Husband” tie is, we are defined by so much more than fancy outfits and business meetings. We are survivors.

As such, I decided to go with something else we share, instead. We are surrounded by a rather eccentric cast of characters, after all. I hope this will manage to assist some with the migraines our friends and family are inevitably to give us.

Yours truly, Fumiko.”

Just reading that, close to crying himself. And by the time he’s glanced up to pass the card onto Kayano, Gakushuu’s already got his gift unwrapped.

Sitting proudly on his lap is a coffee maker. And with 80-something different flavors, to boot.

“I figured since you drink a lot of coffee, you could use some assistance with that. That thing you have in your kitchen is positively ramshackle,” Fumiko says, as if she didn’t just pour her heart out. Awkwardly scratching her shoulder, she gives him a nervous smile.

Gakushuu pulls her into a hug and laughs. “Good thinking. I’ll make sure to give it use.”

...Scratch ‘proud of her.’ Nagisa’s proud of the both of them!

“I suppose that makes it my turn,” Gakushuu says, stretching as he pulls away. “It turns out I was rather surprised to receive my recipient, as well. Although where Fumiko perhaps experienced
delight, I experienced abject horror.” Slowly, he turns his head. “Akabane?”

Karma snorts. “Ohhhh boy. Here we go.”

“I don’t mean to give a monologue, but truly, I had no idea what to think when I received my husband’s name as my assignment. Sure, in the past eight years, I have received the one and only red menace before, but each time it remains a monumental task. A delirious enigma of pleasing a man I have the most complicated relationship on the planet with.”

“As every person in this room knows, Akabane is a truly bothersome person. But to boil him down to just that would be such an erasure of his true… complexities. Despite his mind-numbingly irritating personali-”

“Is this my gift?” Karma interjects. “Is this my gift? Are you giving a speech where you drag me through the dirt as my gift? Don’t get me wrong - I don’t mind one bit. But if this is my gift, I think I’d like to record it.”

“Please let me finish my monologue. No, it is not your gift.”

“I thought you said you didn’t want to give a monologue.”

“This is why I need to give a precursory speech to this gift in the first place,” Gakushuu grumbles, motioning towards Karma. “As I was saying: Despite his mind-numbingly irritating personality, Karma somehow still remains a diamond in the rough. If all I saw to him - If all we saw to him was his attitude, then I’m sure none of us would be here listening to him blab his mouth today. And yet… here we are.”

“Fifteen years ago, I never would have thought I’d be on speaking terms with him, much less wed to him under the court of law. If we’d had things my way - Or at least fifteen-year-old me’s way - Karma would be dead in a ditch. But as we can all see, he’s not. And… in fact, Karma has had a monumental impact on my life. One that I would never take back, even if given the chance.”

“We… all give him slack, myself included. But I’ll be the first to say I would not be where I am today if not for his occasional kindness, and, yes: his blatant disrespect. He gave me something to strive for, and has not let up on that once in the almost sixteen years I’ve known him. He never ceases pushing me out of my comfort zone, oftentimes in irritating and downright humiliating ways. And while, usually, the average person would find this to be irksome… I know I certainly have at times… Since his birthday is coming upon us, I suppose I can drop the facade for one moment and say what I truly feel in my heart.”

“...Despite his attitude, Karma is one of the people who has had the most monumental impact on my life. Every day he makes me strive to be a better person, in a way that doesn’t make me feel bad about myself. And I’d like to hope I’ve done the same for him.”

He falls silent, watching Karma’s expression. And when Karma gives a flattered laugh, mumbling something along the lines of, “Shit, dude. I didn’t expect you to get sappy. Now I’m gonna cry,” he smiles.

“I guess what I’m trying to say is: Although this is perhaps the rudest gift I have ever allocated to the red menace, it’s a rudeness drenched in love. The same sort of rudeness he’s always shown me. Here’s to our rivalry, and please don’t divorce me for this.”

Karma laughs louder as Gakushuu shoves the box his way.

“You’re gonna have to try harder than that to get rid of me. Whatever it is, I can handle it.”
Nagisa and Kayano, on the other hand, cannot. When Karma unveils his newfound mug spelling out ‘CUNT’ in all capital letters, (Yes, the handle included as an oversized and overinsulting ‘C,’) they burst into laughter.

“It’s certainly- fitting-” Kayano admits between snickers, covering her mouth with her hands.

“I’m glad you agree. I’d hate to be alone in this assessment,” Gakushuu replies.

Nagisa, on the other hand, instantly regrets his laughter. Glancing from the kids to Gakushuu and back to the kids, he hisses, “Come on! Why couldn’t we have kept it appropriate!?”

“Learn to live a little, Nagisa!” Karma replies. “I, for one, love it. And I’m sure the kids already know their English swears.”

“No! No! I don’t!” Makoto says, leaning forward. “What’s it say? What’s it say!? I want in on the joke!”

“...I must admit that is a word I’m not acquainted with, either,” Fumiko muses.

Kiyoshi, on the other hand, remains eerily silent.

“Who do you think I am!?” Nagisa asks. “Why do you think I’ve taught them that!? What sort of teacher teaches their students English slurs!?”

“Bitch-sensei,” Karma answers. “We learned wayyy worse stuff at their age, and we turned out fine. Next question.”

He’s not sure about ‘fine,’ but that shuts up Nagisa for now. Kiyoshi, on the other hand, covers his face with his hands and flops back onto the couch with utter embarrassment.

“I can’t believe my mom,” he whispers, shaking his head. “She’s the worst. She’s the worst-”

A bold claim to make in a room full of people with actual bad parents, but one Nagisa will let slide for now. He’d be pretty upset too if his mom had (In detail) explained what ‘a cunt’ was to a room full of middle schoolers.

Needless to say, however, Nagisa and co do not follow in her lead and explain to this set of middle schoolers. That would be wholly inappropriate, and also they’re pretty sure Kiyoshi is going to explain the joke to the two of them later anyways. All’s well that ends well.

...Meaning Karma is the last one with a gift to hand over, and what a pair of gifts it is.

“What happened to you complaining about us giving too many gifts?” Kayano asks as he hands the boxes over to Makoto.

“Well, the plan was for me to be the only one who was ~thoughtful enough~ to give multiple gifts. Then the six of you were supposed to lavish me in praise for being so considerate. Good job stealing my thunder, Yukimura.”

“Just putting you in your place,” Kayano retorts.

“There is a card attached, by the way,” Karma says. “Not nearly as sweet as Fumiko’s card, but I hope it makes ya laugh.”

Sure enough, attached to one of the pristinely wrapped boxes is a card. And printed on the front, in bold, 72pt Impact font is the following.
“THANK YOU FOR STABBING ME”

Everyone else stares at Karma with utter disbelief, but at the very least Makoto appreciates it. He proudly sets it aside, before unboxing his two true gifts.

The first is a Korosensei kigurumi. One which no-one has any idea where he fucking got it from. When questioned, however, Karma simply shrugs and says that people on Etsy will do anything “If paid in enough heaps of fat cash.”


...Well! Always good to know how the government is spending their hard-earned money!

Makoto wants to put it on right away, but everyone insists he’ll overheat. At the very least he should open his other gift before he slides it on and passes out on the couch.

...A suggestion they soon regret when they see the other gift is a box chock to the brim with party poppers.

“You seemed to really enjoy these at your own party, yeah? So I figured I’d get you some more. And you know what the coolest part is?” he asks, leaning in with a grin.

“It’s my birthday. And that means I’m in charge. No-one can tell you to stop. Go hogwild, kiddo.”

Makoto lets out a delighted laugh.

“Not for two days it’s not-” Kayano insists.

But Karma isn’t to be stopped. He shakes his head and asks “Awww. And so you have the heart to rain on his parade?”

Makoto gives his best set of puppy dog eyes. And somehow, Karma’s right. They just don’t have the heart.

...Needless to say, the rest of the night is very… loud.

And somehow, despite that, it’s still the memory that sticks out the most to Nagisa about the end of the year. Karma’s birthday is perfect, and Gakushuu’s does everything to outclass it (Because… of course it does,) but he thinks the Secret Santa ends up being his favorite.

...Seeing those kids thrive… hearing his family laugh. It reminds him of what he’s doing this all for. And late one night… two days after Gakushuu’s birthday, and unable to sleep, he decides to give the journal Kiyoshi bought for him a try. He brews himself a cup of coffee from Gakushuu’s brand new machine, glances outside at the moon, and tries to surmise his thoughts.

It takes a little thinking, but half a cup of coffee later, and he thinks he knows what he wants to say.

“I think 2031 is going to be a good year,” he writes. “I’m excited for the third trimester, and the kids are doing great.”

He smiles, writes one last thing, and tucks his journal away, ready to go back to bed.

“The future looks bright.”

Kiyoshi’s future is over.
The holidays are perfect. Maybe a little too perfect. He should know not to accept perfect by now. That something always goes wrong. But he just has to get his hopes up, doesn’t he? And LOOK WHERE IT GETS HIM!

Three days after Christmas, his parents share the bad news.

...At first, he doesn’t believe his ears. He thinks it’s making it up. He tends to do that when he’s worried about something. But when they reiterate, he feels his heart sink.

“Mom’s going to Ukraine.”

No. No. Nononono. He hates it when his parents go overseas. He hates it when they go to deal with foreign warfare. And he hates it when they put themselves in danger. It makes him anxious! It makes him upset! It makes him…-

“It won’t even be a whole three months,” Mom reassures, crouching down to his level. “I’ll be back by March. I promise. Just in time for your birthday.”

More than anything, Kiyoshi wants to express that he doesn’t give a shit about his birthday. She can miss a thousand birthdays for all he cares! All he cares about is that she comes home safe. That is not the issue here!

Instead, he simply shuffles awkwardly and nods.

...He doesn’t like talking about how much it upsets him. He doesn’t like talking about how much anything upsets him, but this is the epitome of that. All his life he’s been told how important the work his parents’ do is. He’s not going to put a stop to that just because he’s scared. That’s the most selfish thing he can possibly fathom. They’re saving lives. They’re protecting the peace. They’re serving their duty as heroes. And that’s far more important than he could ever be.

“I’m sorry I’m leaving so soon after the holidays,” Mom says. “But there was nothing we could do about it. Your father was insistent.” She puts on a mock-deep voice, placing her hands on her hips. “‘It’s become an emergency, honey! So now I’m relying on my very hot and brave wife to go and knock some sense into them. You need to go as soon as possible.’”

“...You are not to be ‘knocking sense’ into anyone,” Dad reiterates. “Nor did I… use those words, but that’s besides the point-”

“You don’t think I’m hot?” Mom interjects.

“That is not - that’s not what I’m- that was not the point of my sentence,” Dad replies. “I’m simply saying-”

Mom drapes herself over Dad, moaning. “Kiyoshi! Your dad doesn’t think I’m hot!”

Mumbling under his breath and rubbing at his temples, Karasuma groans. “...I think you’re plenty hot, but I am going to cease doing so if you don’t quiet down right this instant and let me please communicate with our son.”

...That shuts Mom up real quick. She’s nothing if not predictable.

Karasuma doesn’t bother to crouch. Instead, he simply sighs and meets Kiyoshi’s eyes.

“She is right about one thing, however. And it’s that this is urgent. I hope you can understand.”
“Of… of course,” Kiyoshi replies. “There’s no need to apologize. I know it’s just work.” He shifts slightly, forcing a smile. “…What time will she be heading out?”

“Shortly after New Years,” Karasuma says. “She’ll be gone for roughly two and a half months. It’s a routine investigation. There’s nothing for you to worry about.”

“I’m not worried,” Kiyoshi swears. “So- you don’t need to worry. About me - I mean. I… know everything will be fine.”

He doesn’t. But he doesn’t dare voice that. He fears the moment he voices his paranoia is the moment it will bleed into reality. And surely - inevitably - something horrible will happen.

“Fine?” Irina asks. “Pah! You two are giving me too little credit. Things will be *more* than fine. I’ve got this in the *bag.*” She flops down on the couch and wraps an arm around Kiyoshi’s shoulder. “Besides, it’ll give you two boys some much needed father-son time. ‘Men’s bonding,’ or whatever. You can go fishing! Get in a fistfight! Shoot something!” She pauses. “…What is it exactly boys do for fun again?’

“...Not that,” Kiyoshi assures. “I am… I am not shooting anything. I can promise you that much, at least.”

“Pooie,” Mom replies. “All that training for nothing.”

Karasuma, seemingly deciding not to comment on the fact that his wife has very little knowledge of what men enjoy for a person who spent the first twenty-five years of her life seducing them, places himself down on the other side of Kiyoshi.

“Ignore her. You know she’s just teasing you,” he says. “I do look forward to getting to spend some time with you, however, Kiyoshi.”

...He says it so straight-faced, but Kiyoshi knows neither of them believe it. Mom has gone away a thousand times before. And nothing has ever changed between him and dad. It’ll be just the two of them. Again. The two of them and that horrible, suffocating silence.

“Excited to get to spend some time with you, too,” he says, pretending for just one moment that his father’s telling the truth.

...He almost manages to muster a smile.

They spend the rest of the night checking up on him. Making sure he’s really prepared for this, and that everything will be fine. Mom, of course, pinches his cheek and tells him she doesn’t know what she’d do if anything happened to her little man.

He doesn’t have the words to tell her that he doesn’t know what he’d do if anything happened to her, either. So instead he just says “Love you, too.”

Later that night he hears them talking about him. Behind closed doors. He knows he shouldn’t listen in, but he does anyways. Because there’s something seriously wrong with him, and he just can’t shake the weight of what others think about him.

...They’re worried. They say it themselves. He can hear Mom pacing in circles. Raising her voice and asking if he’s really going to be okay.

“Of course he is,” Dad replies. “He’s a strong boy. And this is an important mission. He’ll understand.”
“...I’m just scared maybe he’s getting worse instead of better.”

Mom says it, and he feels his breath hitch in his throat.

He covers his mouth with his hands and blinks back tears. Not because he’s offended. Not because it’s untrue. Not even because he’s scared of that being a possibility.

...He covers his mouth because he knows it’s already the truth.

He just wishes they wouldn’t see the way he falls apart. They already have so much on their plate. The last thing they need is some sniveling, whiny brat stressing them out. But here he is, causing them worry no matter what he does. Because worrying is just his nature. And because he can’t be like them. It’s not their fault he’s like this. They shouldn’t blame themselves! They shouldn’t be stressed! They should just… They should just...

...Give up on him and wish they’d never had him like they should have a long time ago?

He knows it’s a ridiculous notion. Mom says he’s the light of her life every day. But he just can’t shake it. That maybe they really would have been happier without him. They certainly could have followed their dreams with a lot less strife.

By the time Mom and Dad open the door, he’s gone: Marched up to his bedroom, and buried his face in Taro’s fur. He’s an expert at not getting caught eavesdropping. After all: you know: the whole ‘doesn’t wanna make them more stressed thing.’

Mom comes in to wish him goodnight. Kisses his forehead, and ruffles his hair. Tells him she’s proud of him, and that she’ll come home no matter what.

...Kiyoshi wonders which of those is a bigger lie.

He doesn’t let his worry show, however. At least… he tries not to let it. Instead, he simply smiles and holds onto her hand for one moment more before she goes.

Dad watches all the while, standing in the doorway with those blank eyes. But he doesn’t speak. And when Mom turns to exit the room, he soon follows after.

Kiyoshi’s not sure how long it takes him to fall asleep that night.

The next few days are a blur. They always are with this sort of thing. Makoto must catch him worried one day, because when it’s just the two of them… trailing off towards Nagisa’s house... he pokes him in the back and asks him what’s wrong.

“...Mom’s- she’s-” Kiyoshi pauses. Does he really feel comfortable talking about this? He could trust Makoto with pretty much anything, but he’s pretty sure if he says it now he’s going to burst out crying. Instead, he shakes his head and asks “…Can I ask you a few questions about my mom?”

Makoto cocks his head, but shrugs. “Sure,” he says. “What is it?”

“My mom… do you think she’s strong?”

“How so?” Makoto asks. “Physically? Emotionally? Or-? I mean, either way it’s a hell yes, but-”

“Like… if she was in a dangerous situation. Do you think she could manage to keep herself safe? Or… do you think there’s a chance something terrible could happen?”

Makoto stops, standing there on the sidewalk, and brings his hand to his chin.
“...You say that like she hasn’t been in all sorts of dangerous situations before. I’m sure danger is nothing new to her,” he muses. “...I mean, after all, she grew up in a place like that. And she dealt with me. And she was a professional assassin. And now she’s a secret agent! She’s used to that kind of thing, I’m sure. I mean - I’d say she knows how to protect herself.”

“Mmm,” Kiyoshi says. “...I guess I’m just scared one day she’ll slip up and get hurt.”

“You should have more faith in her than that,” Makoto replies as he resumes walking. “She’s a really cool lady! Besides, I don’t think she’d let anything stop her from coming home to her family. She’s super stubborn like that! I know she did some crazy stuff just to keep the class safe. And they were only her students. I bet she’d do anything to make sure you’re happy.”

“Mmm.”

“Don’t you keep ‘mmm’ing me!” Makoto huffs, hands on his hips. “I’m telling the truth.”

“...I guess I just have trouble believing those sorts of things,” Kiyoshi awkwardly admits.

“I know you do. That’s why it’s my job to remind you when you’re being a big dummy.”

“I have another question about my mom, then.” Kiyoshi pauses. “Or... about both my parents, really, I suppose. Though I know this one is really gonna make you yell at me.”

“I’m not gonna yell at you,” Makoto replies. “What is it?”

“...Do you think I’m...” Kiyoshi pauses. How is he supposed to word this? “Back then. When you knew my parents. Do you think I’m the sort of son they would have wanted? Like... when they first got together. Did you ever imagine their child turning out like this? Or... them wanting him to? Or do you think I’m... I dunno. Not what they expected?”

Makoto’s quiet for a long moment, thinking it over. Kiyoshi almost thinks he’s mad him as he continues to march along, but finally, he speaks.

“You can’t ‘expect’ anything from kids,” he decides. “When you become a parent... you don’t know what you’re gonna get. And that’s okay! It’s not like it’s some roulette wheel. It’s family. You should be prepared to be happy for whatever sort of person you raise.”

He places one hand in his pocket, and the other on Kiyoshi’s shoulder. “I know I got to raise all sorts of different kids in the E-Class. Of course... I wasn’t their father, but it’s the closest situation I can relate to.” He shrugs! “I had no idea what to expect walking into that classroom at first. But as I got to know everyone, different as they were... I think I loved them all equally!”

“...Terasaka was super loud, and Okuda was super not. Sugaya loved to draw, and Yada was a bit more sporty. Some of them warmed up to me right away, like Kurahashi! And for some of them, I don’t think they really even liked me at all until the very end of the year. But, I mean... that didn’t make any of them ‘worse’ or ‘better’ than each other. That just made them people! And that’s what was so cool about it!”

He smiles at the fond memory. “You want my real, honest take?”

“Oh course,” Kiyoshi replies.

“All those years ago, your parents didn’t really strike me as the child-having type at all! Your dad was sooo awkward, and your mom was super r bad with kids! I didn’t think they’d ever have a son. But it turns out they’re a little unpredictable, too.” He laughs. “Who knows? Maybe... they also
learned something from the E-Class. How good it feels to teach a kid. And maybe because of that… they decided they needed you. And, well… if that’s true, that means you could have been anything, too, doesn’t it? Because the first kids they raised were already allowed to be so different.”

“…I suppose.”

“But that’s just what I think! I’m no mind reader. You gotta talk to them, Kiyoshi. If you’re not feeling good enough… well, I think they’re the sort of parents you can talk to about that. They’ll get it. I promise. And they love you. I know that much.”

“I know,” Kiyoshi replies. “Or… well, I know, but I don’t… know? It’s weird.” He shakes his head. “…Anyways. I can’t do that now. My mom’s about to head off to Ukraine. I’m not giving her another thing to worry about.”

“Ukraine?” Makoto asks. “Is that what you’re worried about? Ukraine!? She grew up in Serbia! In the middle of a war! And killed a bunch of dudes! She faced off against me: The ultimate monster! Once she betrayed us all for a terrorist, got crushed by a wall, and still found the energy to stand up and fawn over your dad. And you’re worried about Ukraine!?”

“I know- I know,” Kiyoshi admits. “It’s silly-”

“If anything, you should be worried for Ukraine! She’s gonna destroy the entire country with her boundless horndog energies!”

“Please don’t say that.”

“She’s gonna start an orgy and kill everyone!”

“PLEASE DON’T SAY THAT.”

“What!?” Makoto asks, his voice a shrill laugh. “It’s true!”

Kiyoshi’s this close to tripping him and letting him eat shit on the concrete. But when he sticks his leg out to blockade Makoto, he just barely steps out of the way.

“Hey! Now what’s this for!?” he demands.

“For consistently talking about my mother this way!” Kiyoshi roars in response.

“No fair! I thought she was hot before you were even born! You can’t take away my freedom of speech now!”

“Oh yes I can! And I am!”

“No fair! No fair!”

They spend the rest of the way to Nagisa’s house chasing each other. And slowly but surely, as the topic drifts from Kiyoshi’s mom, he laughs. He doesn’t even realize he’s gotten his mind off of it until later when Makoto asks him if he’s feeling any better.

...He doesn’t know. As soon as Makoto says it, there’s this pit in his stomach again. Like his whole world’s in danger, and there’s nothing he can do about it.

But he’d managed to distract himself for just a little while. And… hey, he’s never done that before.
So he’ll give himself this little victory, and decide maybe some things can be perfect after all.

“...Yeah,” he admits. “Just a little.”

Fumiko doesn’t get to spend the new years with her friends. At least... not in person. In spirit, they never seem to leave her.

She’s used to the feeling by now. Of feeling backed up no matter where she goes. It’s a new sensation, and an unexpected one at that, but it’s far from unwelcome. And with its help, somehow even through a barrage of formal events and family gatherings she survives.

No - more than that. She *thrives*. Even through barely disguised jeers and their scorn she thrives. She texts her friends underneath the table, and holds her head high as she imagines where she’ll be three years from now.

Certainly, it won’t be sitting around this table.

It’s reassuring to know that she has a plan. A ramshackle plan, built on desperation and foolishness, but a plan nonetheless. She knows what she’s going to do. She has the upper hand: The element of surprise. And there is *no way in hell she’s going to let herself lose*. Three years from now, she’ll be happy. And she’ll be free. And she will live to see it.

But that leaves the question of what to do in the meantime.

She knows she’ll burn herself out if she spends all her time looking towards the future. She’ll only get to be young once. (...Er… twice?) As beautiful as the idea of an independent future is, she also needs to ask herself what will bring her happiness in the upcoming year.

...Well, her friends and her family are the obvious ones. They’re the reason she’s waiting three years at all! (That, and the fact that no-one in their right mind would let a thirteen year old live alone.) But that can’t be all. She’s learned by now there’s no happiness to be found in only seeking your self-worth through others. She’ll bring herself happiness, too. She’ll do what she loves, and she’ll discover more about herself. She swears it!

Yes. It’s a plan.

When she’s expected to display her New Year’s resolution, she’s not sure what to put. The easiest answer would be to say something simply acceptable. Something that would raise no suspicion from her family. But that feels like the easy way out. And as such, she mulls it over in-depth in the days leading up to the end of the year.

Ultimately, she writes ‘To be successful.’

It’s innocuous enough. To be successful in work, in school. To be a successful daughter, and a successful businesswoman one day. But she knows that’s not what it really means. It means she will be successful in breaking away from her family many years from now, and that she will be successful in being kind to herself in the meantime.

Her mother stares, apprehensive. And her father nods, placing a hand on her shoulder.

...Fumiko jumps.

“I’ll be holding you to that,” he says in a voice almost like a threat.
But Fumiko soon steadies herself. And she stares back with her own resolute gaze.

“I fully intend to follow through.”

...Little does he know, her words can be a threat, too.

When they return to class for third trimester, it comes as a relief. And when Nagisa implores them to share their New Years resolutions in front of the class, Fumiko steps forward proudly.

“I’m going to try to be a little more confident in myself,” one classmate declares.

“I’m going to get straight A’s!” proclaims another.

“I’m going to make the people I love laugh.” From Makoto.

“...I think I’m going to get some things figured out with my family.” From Kiyoshi.

And “I’m going to be successful in all I set out to accomplish.” From Fumiko Hisakawa.

...Nagisa seems proud of her as she walks back to her seat.

And watching him smile… feeling the own smile creep up her face, she decides this might just be the start of one of the best damn years of her life.

Chapter End Notes

"One of the best damn years of her life," she says, as if that's not writer for "something's about to go horribly wrong."

Hey, everyone! Long time no see.

Here’s where I’d apologize for the super long chapter, except I remembered I’m not supposed to apologize for giving ya'll extra content. FGHDHFJDJ. I debated splitting this chapter into two, but ultimately decided against it because of how some of the scenes ended up feeling a little holiday oriented. I didn't really PLAN it to turn out this way, and I 100% would have had the Secret Santa scene regardless of when I ended up writing this chapter, but it'd just be WEIRD to publish an unintentional holiday episode in mid-January.

I wanted to do a chapter w a little bit from everyone's perspectives! It's definitely a bit of an in-betweener, and the bridge between trimesters two and three, but I hope you enjoyed the (Mostly) chill atmosphere! Here we've got us some sweet ass fluff, but not without hints of where characters' and their plots will be going in the upcoming months.

Namely KIYOSHI'S and FUMIKO'S. It seems Fumiko has a bit of a plan up her sleeve. And Kiyoshi's suddenly confronted with the frightening reality that is his unstable family. They're gonna have to band together now more than ever, aren't they? And that's not even getting STARTED on Makoto. How long can he possibly keep this cheery attitude up for?

I'm afraid I don't know!
What I /do/ know however is when the next chapter will be up: In that's in two weeks! Mark your calendars, because although it's also mostly a chill, silly chapter, as the start of trimester three, it's got some HUGE plot developments! It's a chapter I've been looking forward to for a VERY long time, and so I can't wait to share it with the rest of you!

While we're waiting for said chapter, I have a small announcement! And that is the return of the POPULARITY POLL! I won't be forcing ya'll to comment this time since that's such a hassle, but I've set up a Strawpoll! Has your favorite character featured in the fic changed over the past 200-thousand-something words? Let me know! As last time I'll draw a little picture to commemorate. And feel free to let me know /why/ your fave is your fave if you'd still like to!

https://www.strawpoll.me/19169373

Some songs that helped me write this chapter were Embers by Owl City, Grew Up (In A Big Big House) by Human Petting Zoo, Three by Sleeping At Last, Wanderer's Lullaby by Adriana Figueroa, Simply Having A Wonderful Christmas Time by Paul McCartney, Home For The Holidays by Perry Como, Make Me Happy from 35mm, My Mom by Kimya Dawson, and This Year by the Mountain Goats.

As usual, I hope you enjoyed, and make sure to let me know what you thought! See you soon! o/
Hi everyone! Long time no see! I decided to release today's chapter pretty early this morning! You know, as a little treat. But before we get into the chapter there're actually one or two things I'd like to discuss in the pre-notes because lord knows I will not be able to get to them in the end notes. A LOT happens in this chapter, and trust me when I say ya'lls mind won't be on the goddamn popularity poll once it's done.

So let's chat about that!

I didn't get a chance to draw anything to commemorate this time, but thank you so much for voting, everyone! It was really insightful to see who everyone's favorite characters were, and it made me grin from ear to ear to see the numbers climb. Ultimately Kiyoshi ended up winning out with a WHOPPING 5 points, solidifying his place as token Best Boy. Makoto, close behind, took second place with four. And Fumiko and Kayano ended up tying out with two each! Karma, never one to be completely bested, managed to pull in a single point: Leaving poor Gakushuu and Nagisa in the DUST.

It was a fine time, and I loved seeing which characters you guys liked!

Secondly, before we start, a brief note about minor characters in this chapter:

This chapter features minor characters semi-prominently, as a chapter focusing on the class. But like I said during earlier chapters: I don’t expect you to put any personal investment in them. They’re, as always, serving as plot devices for the main character's stories. Don't feel a need to particularly remember their names. But if you’d like a reminder before any of them show up, Yoshito is the boy who accused Nagisa of having favoritism a few chapters back, and Kazuki is… basically the class clown. Riko’s the one who started the “Is Korosensei sexy?” conversation because of course she is.

And that's all I said! Without further ado... here's the chapter! Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“...I wish I could understand you.”

“Are we really on about this again?”

“We’re going to spend our lives together! It’s important!”

...Fumiko gets the idea when Nagisa doesn’t mention it.

She doesn’t know if he just forgot, or if it was intentional. But when he goes all of the first day of third trimester without mentioning the new class representatives, she gets a crazy, wonderful idea.

“We should ask!”
“...Excuse me?”

She pitches it on the way home from school. And Makoto and Kiyoshi must not get what she’s prattling on about, because they’re staring at her like she’s a crazy person.

“To be class representatives,” she says. “Shiota-sensei didn’t assign anyone as the new representatives for this trimester. We should talk to him and see if we can get the position.”

She pauses and looks Kiyoshi’s way.

“Er- Makoto and I, I mean. I mean, I’d love if there could be three. Maybe Shiota-sensei could make an exception for there to be three. I wouldn’t want to-”

“No,” Kiyoshi interjects, holding up a finger. “You don’t need to sugarcoat that one. I don’t wanna be a class representative. I am horrible with positions of power.” He sweats. “I can hardly decide what to eat for breakfast in the morning. You think I could handle being in charge of people? No way.”


“And I appreciate it.”

Fumiko smiles and turns to Makoto. “Think about it. Shiota-sensei would be so proud of us. And… and we could help everyone in the class! We… never got a chance to do that together back then. Wouldn’t it be sweet to take our rightful place back now, even just for a little bit?”

“Well, it sounds insane when you put it like that,” Makoto admits, eyes fixed on the ground. “Do you really think we could handle it?”

“Of course we could!” Fumiko replies, reaching for his hand. What is with him today? Usually he’s the one encouraging her to try new, stupid shit. Has she seriously managed to pitch something beyond his consideration? “I mean, it’s at least worth a shot. If he says no, he says no. But if he says yes, we’ve got this in the bag. It’s not like it’ll be actual work. We’ll just be in charge in case anything happens and he needs to leave class.”

“...Well, I suppose it could be sort of fun,” Makoto says, cracking a smile. “And I would like Nagisa to see how far I’ve come.”

“Then you’ll consider it!?”

Fumiko’s humiliated by just how quickly the excitement creeps into her voice, but manages to hide it well. With how damn cold it is outside, it’s easy to disguise the pink creeping up her cheeks as nothing more than the chill. She will not be caught ashamed of being passionate. She’s just managed to find passion, after all.

And besides… silly as it is, she thinks this will be a good taste of what being in charge of a classroom environment feels like. If she really wants to consider maybe following in her own footsteps later in life, she needs to see if she actually likes it.

Makoto’s expression seems to lighten as she speaks. Laughing, he tilts his head and says, “Well I don’t see why not. You’re right. How hard can it be?”

Fumiko’s shoulders relax. “I’m glad I managed to get you to relent,” she says. “If you hadn’t caved, I was gonna have to force Kiyoshi to run with me.”
Kiyoshi’s head whips around. “I never agreed to this!”

And Fumiko snickers. “Well thankfully, you won’t have to.”

She says it as a joke, but deep down she is relieved Makoto had agreed to back her up. Pathetic as it is, she doesn’t know if she’d be willing to do this without him. She’s honestly pretty bad with strangers still. So she’d much rather do this by the side of someone she knows well.

(And as Kiyoshi said, he never fucking agreed to this. They joke, but she’d never intentionally force him into a position he’s not comfortable with.)

With a cheery attitude, they agree to pitch the concept to Nagisa tomorrow morning.

“No. It’s not. The only reason it keeps coming up time and time again is because you’re an ignorant and stubborn person. You’re not capable of understanding me. When will you get that?”

“Well, then. Let me rephrase. I wish you’d let me understand you.”

“There’s a difference?”

“You… want to be class representatives?” Nagisa asks, staring at them from across his desk.

Fumiko gives a nervous nod, bouncing from foot to foot.

“Obviously… I would never make the claim that I am entitled to any right, but I believe I and Makoto have come rather far over the course of the year, and would only benefit further from such a position. If you do not believe it would be a good fit for us, you have every right to decline, but I figured it was worth asking. After all, it seems you have not decided on who is to be in charge for the next trimester.”

Nagisa awkwardly scratches at his shoulder, glancing from his planner to his watch and back to the two of them. “…Yeah,” he replies “It seems I have. I knew I was forgetting something.” He admits with a nervous laugh. “But I’m not sure I can just hand that role out to the two of you-”

“And why not?” Fumiko replies. She’s open to a dismissal! She swears! She’d just like to know why.

“Personally, I think the two of you would make wonderful class representatives. But I am a little afraid your classmates would feel the two of you had an unfair advantage. I spend a lot of time with you, after all. I wouldn’t want anyone else to think they didn’t get a chance because we’re somehow not ‘close enough.’ This is very much an environment where I try to foster the atmosphere that everyone is on an equal playing ground.”

Fumiko’s gaze drifts towards the ground, but she nods. “…I understand. And so that’s a ‘no,’ then?”

“Now I never said that,” Nagisa replies.

And Fumiko’s head shoots up. “You mean there’s still a chance!? she asks. “How!?”

“Well… there’s this thing I’ve been mulling over,” Nagisa says. “I’m not sure if you know, but we’re coming up on a unit about different types of political systems in history class. Your democracies, your monarchies, your anarchies and so on. And I’ve been looking for a way to make
it more interesting and hands-on for all of you. You know very well by now that I’m not too into the ‘sit down and write notes’ sort of learning.”

“It turns out this just sort of conveniently ended up aligning with my other problem: that I just haven’t been able to decide on a class representative for the upcoming trimester. I’m not sure if it’s a silly idea, but I’ve been thinking about maybe letting you kids run a mock election to see who should become the next class reps. Anyone who wanted to could run, and it would give you all some experience in flexing your strategic muscles and getting to know a little bit more about your classmates.”

“What do you think?” he asks. “Do you think it’s a good idea, or sort of pointless?”

Fumiko opens her mouth to speak, but pauses when she sees Nagisa’s eyes are firmly fixed on Makoto. Ah… and so it’s not her opinion he’s particularly looking for.

That’s fine. It’s whatever. It’s not like he knows her secret, after all.

Makoto’s quiet for a long moment, as if thinking it over in depth. His eyes drift towards Fumiko, then back towards Nagisa… and suddenly, he stands up straight. Like a lightbulb’s gone off in his head, he nods, and with intensity at that.

“I think… that’s a great idea!” he says, the excitement growing in his voice. “Because then everyone would be on equal playing ground. We’d all have a chance!”

“Exactly. If you two want this position, you’re gonna have to earn it. And not from me,” Nagisa says. “Which… is probably a good thing. I’ve been told I’m a little too easy to win over.”

He laughs, clasping his fingers with a smile. “Instead, you’ll have to win over your classmates. Which I’m sure will be no easy feat, at least in comparison. You’re gonna need to give them all a reason to support you. What can you offer them that they can’t offer themselves? And what qualities do you have that make you a good leader? I think it would be a good thing for everyone in the class to think these questions over. And I suppose this election will give you the chance. It’s settled, then.”

“We’ll run a class election!”

...Strange as the whole ordeal is, Fumiko isn’t too opposed. She knows all about political systems (which made Nagisa’s reference of Anarchy earlier all the more concerning) and she believes in her own strengths. She’s got this in the bag.

No. They’ve got this in the bag!

The rest of the class, however, is much less receptive.

As usual with Nagisa’s ideas, everyone around him is downright baffled. An election!? For seventh-grade class representatives!? Seriously!? What is with this class!? But after a bit of honestly understandable confusion, they seem to come around. Because, hey, at least it’s a break from the normal slog of class. And although while for the most part no-one else seems too interested in ‘running,’ two other pairs of classmates do step up to the plate.

Kazuki and Rin, one of whomst is clearly taking this much more seriously than the other, and Yoshito and Kanon, who shoot her the strangest look when she says she’s going to run as well.

Nagisa says he’s very proud of all six of them. And that he wishes them all the best in this upcoming (and very fake) election. He reminds everyone else to take this seriously, and not to just
vote for their friends. Because the class representatives will be in charge if anything ever happens to him.

“Temporarily,” he specifies. “If I. Fell over dead they would not become the new teachers. But mostly only because that’s not legal.”

He claps his hands. “Additionally, I’ll be allowing them to make up one additional rule for the classroom. One that they believe would help the class, specifically. If the new class representatives decide on ‘everyone should be allowed to bring their 4ds into class and play it unsupervised,’ I’m afraid I am going to have to revoke their privileges. But… that won’t happen, will it?”

Fumiko’s not so sure, but that does make every head in the room perk up. There’s nothing that motivates kids if not for the concept of unrestrained power. With something slightly more monumental than ‘technically in charge maybe once a month’ on the table, excitement around the election finally begins to buzz just a little more.

Although the rest of the classes continue as usual, (Nagisa says in between the sports festival and the moon unit he can’t allot any more full days to single topics) History hones in on the election. As Nagisa explains different political systems, the students in running discuss their gameplans. And the students who are not participating circle their desks, stopping by with spiral notebooks and surprisingly intense looks. Here to ask questions about what sort of changes their classmates would enact on this classroom if given the chance.

“I… am not really sure quite yet,” Fumiko admits. “We still need time to plan before making a definitive statement. But thank you for your interest.”

“Oh my god,” Riko comments through a snort-laugh. “You guys are taking this seriously, aren’t you?”

“Only kinda,” Makoto admits. “But thank you!”

That only makes Riko laugh harder. With a charmed smile, she sets her notebook aside. “Try not to stress about this too much, ‘kay? Shiota-sensei’s making this seem like such a big deal, but I’m voting for you guys anyways. You are my friends, after all.”

Fumiko’s not sure about friends, but Riko is a nice girl. She sits behind her, and when her closer friends either end up absent or playing hookie, she’s nice to chat with. She’s funny, sweet, and she, too, thinks monsters are hot shit.

However...

“Isn’t that what Shiota-sensei told you not to do?” Fumiko asks. “While I appreciate the flattery, I’d like to win on my assets, as opposed to my popularity.”

“Please don’t call it your assets-” Kiyoshi whispers from his own desk, but is swiftly ignored.

“I ‘spose,” Riko replies. “But I do believe in your guys’ ‘assets!’ That’s why we’re friends. I saw what you guys did during the sports festival. You pulled off some really cool stuff! I bet you’d make great leaders.”

And clear as day, her sincerity shines through. Fumiko hides a dorky smile, instead whispering a quick “thank you,” and a “we appreciate your prolonged support.”

Riko laughs the loudest she has yet as she returns to her seat. And somehow the opposite of humiliated, Fumiko feels her heart glow with pride.
“Of course there’s a difference!”

“Then please, enlighten me, the literal genius. Let me in on what I’m so incapable of understanding.”

“I’m not accusing you of not understanding anything!”

“Really? Because I thought I heard—”

“Why do you always do this!? Why do you always put words in my mouth!??”

Kiyoshi voices the same opinion later in the day. Long after Riko’s marched off to do whatever it is Riko does, he speaks up in a quiet voice.

“She’s right, you know.”

“Pardon?” Fumiko asks.

“That you’d make really good leaders. You’re super inspiring people.”

“You really think so?” Fumiko asks, craning her head back to meet his eyes. “I dunno. I mean, we are up against some pretty legitimate competition.”

Kazuki’s a big fat joke, but Rin’s got her head screwed on straight. She’s analytical, clever, and good with her words. Even if she’s partnered up with probably the worst candidate on the planet, Fumiko has a feeling she’ll still give them a run for their money. And that’s not getting started on Kanon and Yoshito, who she thinks might just be taking this even more seriously than they are. With their folders propped up on their desks to hide whatever it is they’re working on, they whisper under their breath.

They keep looking her way. And with such a nasty gaze. Seriously! What did she even do to them?

“I mean, yeah,” Kiyoshi admits. “But you guys are the ones with experience. You know what you’re doing... sorta.” He pauses, his gaze drifting to Makoto, who appears to be having trouble getting glue unstuck from his hand. “Barely. Whatever.”

“I’unno,” Makoto admits, picking at it with the back of his nail. “I don’t think experience really matters in this sorta situation. I mean, I had none back then. A lot of it is improvisation. Teaching, I mean - Which. This isn’t even really. This is more like running for prime minister.”

Kiyoshi blinks. “I wouldn’t say it’s—”

“It’s running for prime minister.”

“Okay,” Kiyoshi relents.

“Yeah. At the most this will just be helping Shiota-sensei out a little,” Fumiko agrees. “And... getting to make up a rule, whatever that means.”

“You got any ideas for that yet?” Kiyoshi asks.

“No way,” Fumiko replies. “I mean... I didn’t do this because I wanted to make any change. I like Shiota-sensei’s classroom. I guess I just wanted to relive it or whatever. There’s nothing wrong with that, is there?”
“No,” Kiyoshi says. “At least, I mean… I don’t think so. It’d be different if you sucked at this, maybe - But you don’t. I think you two would make perfectly good class figureheads.”


Kiyoshi nods, giving her a genuine smile. And as Makoto finally manages to pick the glue off of his hand, he stares intently at the table.

The clock ticks, and the second day is soon upon them.

"Because you’re obsessed with disrespectsing me!"

“No! I’m not-"

“Then tell me-”

“What I’m saying is that I wish you would tell me. If I’m so stupid… so incapable of understanding whatever it you’re going through, then I wish at the very least you would open up to me.”

“…”

Kanon, and Yoshito, especially, don’t seem to carry the same sort of faith in regards to them. They strut up to their desks Tuesday afternoon, right in the middle of history class. Yoshito leading the way, and with Kanon right behind him. She holds her notebook carefully to her chest, as if trying to hide it, but Fumiko can spot it’s pastel pink cover.

She glances up from where she’d been working on a paper imploring them to consider what they’d like to accomplish in the next trimester. And hiding her answers with her hands, she asks “What do you want?”

“Nothing in particular,” Yoshito answers. “I just figured it could be productive to interview the other candidates. Shiota-sensei gave me permission to. Can we talk?”

“Of… course,” Fumiko answers, pulling up a chair beside her. Kanon and Yoshito quickly take a seat, their expressions strangely harsh. “What is it you’d like to know about?”

“Well, mostly we were wondering about your game plan… what you intend to do if you succeed in obtaining this position. Shiota-sensei said himself he intends to allow the victor to change a rule in class. What is it you’re planning on changing? How do you intend to assist your classmates?”

“Er… well… “ Fumiko shifts uncomfortably. “That’s something we’re still trying to get figured out.” She hates being put on the defensive like this! “Honestly, when we signed up for this, we didn’t realize we’d be given an opportunity to change the way the classroom functioned. We just thought-”

“You deserved it, then?”

“Excuse me?”

“You clearly had no intention of changing anything in particular. You just admitted that. Then why did you decide you two of all people were eligible for the position? Is it simply because you thought you were entitled to it?”
“Of course not!” Fumiko sputters. And she’s getting angry, now. Who does this kid think he is that he can just strut up to her and accuse her of these things!? She just thought it would be…

...Fun? Nice? Nostalgic?

No. She - she won’t consider it. There has to be a better reason than that. And… why does it matter, anyways!? This is just some silly student council position at best. It doesn’t have a reason to be important to anyone else!

“Why, then?” Yoshito asks, his voice pure acid.

“I… I don’t know-” Fumiko says. “Do you need a reason? It’s - It’s not that important, honestly. This classroom is… borderline perfect. What is it you think is so important that you need to change it now?”

“I dunno…” Yoshito muses, a nasty sneer on his face. “Perhaps - As a rule - I could ask Shiota-sensei to finally start paying equal attention to all of his students.”

“I -” Fumiko stares. “What are you talking about!? That man works himself to the brink for us!”

“For you.”

“Uh-! No!? He loves all of us equally!”

“Of course you’d think that. You practically live at his house.” Yoshito muses. “But some of us aren’t afforded that luxury.”

“If you think he’s not- If you- If you want something from him you can just ask him. Don’t you- don’t you dare go up there and demand that from him in front of the entire class! You’re going to hurt his feelings!”

“Tch,” Yoshito says. “Maybe then he’d just know how it feels.” He crosses his arms and stands up. “Anyways… I suppose that’s all I was trying to do. To figure out if I was right about you two. And it seems I am. That’ll be useful in the upcoming days.” He turns! And Kanon follows. “Watch your back, okay? Because if you thought this was going to be easy… that you could just get this position because you’re Shiota-sensei’s favorites, then think again. The class is going to decide this. And we know what we really want.”

Fumiko stares as he goes, her jaw agape. What is he even on about!?

She doesn’t - WHAT!?

“What is his problem!?” she asks. “I…- Do you think he’s actually gonna say that bullshit in front of Shiota-sensei?”

Makoto grimaces. He’d been weirdly quiet throughout that whole conversation, but that seems to earn his attention. “He better not!” he says. “I’d… I’d…” His fist clenches as it shakes.

“He won’t,” Kiyoshi reassures. “It’s… clear he’s just bluffing. And doing some weird projecting or something. I don’t know.” He scratches his arm. “Usually when people say stuff like that they’re just repeating things they think about themselves. There’s no way he actually thinks that’s true. Not about you, and not about Shiota-sensei. At least… I hope not.”

But his words do little to reassure. Not only do the two of them now know they have a legitimate enemy in what initially seemed like a silly endeavor, but maybe also that he does have a point about them. Fumiko can’t tell what Makoto’s thinking, shifting uncomfortably in his seat, but even as she tries to get her own mind off of it, it gnaws at her… A sudden doubt she hadn’t felt before.
"Is that her motivation?"

And if it is… just how wrong does that make her?

“The silent treatment won’t make me any less right.”

“You’re never right, woman.”

“…”

“Who’s silent now?”

“You know, you’re not very capable of understanding me, either.”

“You… you don’t think he’s right, right?”

“’scuse me?”

She asks Makoto Wednesday afternoon. It’s lunchtime, and it’s been a little over 24 hours since Yoshito confronted the two of them. She hates the fact that she’s letting it get to her so much, but if she doesn’t say something she thinks she’s going to explode. Makoto pauses, skidding to a stop from where he’d been pacing and turns his head her way.

“Yoshito, I mean,” Fumiko says. “What he said about us the other day. You don’t think I’m entitled, do you?”

“No,” Makoto quickly responds. “I don’t think you’re entitled at all. You just wanna… do a thing because you think it’d be fun. It’d be different if you were doing this just because you wanted to make sure no-one else could get the position. But you’re not.”

“I know,” Fumiko says. “I mean, I guess… I’m afraid my motive is just shallow?”

She keeps her voice low. It may be lunchtime, and everyone’s busy with their own conversations, but all the same, they are in the same room. No-one’s allowed to go outside for lunch during this time of the year. Understandable, considering Fumiko likes being able to feel her face, but inconvenient when she’d hate to be overheard.

“No,” Makoto responds, returning to his pacing. He hasn’t motioned to touch his lunch. “I think… you have a really good reason for this. No more shallow than doing it out of spite.” He shrugs. “If anything, I don’t think he was even really mad at you. He was probably talking to me.”

Fumiko blinks. “What do you mean?”

“I mean… all that stuff he said about not having a good reason to do this. Just… doing it because it’s what I’ve always done… he was sorta right. I’m, uh… not really a great leader. Maybe I am being entitled in thinking I’d be okay at any of this. I keep wondering if maybe it’d be easier if I just dropped out.”

Fumiko bolts to her feet, firmly shaking her head. “Don’t say that,” she says, reaching for his shoulder. “I need you. And… you’re- you’re a great leader! I mean… look at all the things you’ve done.” She motions around the classroom. “Don’t let that jerkass get in your head. We’re gonna do this, and we’re gonna be awesome at it.”

Damn. She’d sure been doubting herself before, but it turns out nothing gets her raring quite like
spite, either. She hates to hear Makoto talk about himself that way. He’s plenty inspiring. He’s the one who taught her how to step outside of the box!

“...Mmm,” Makoto replies, his shoulders lowering. “I’m sorry. You’re right. I dunno. I’ve just... felt weird lately?” he shakes his head firmly. “But... you’re right. You’re right. I want to do this with you. So we can’t give up now!”

It takes him a second, but slowly that determined grin returns to his face. And it’s like a switch has flipped. He’s back to his usual self, cracking jokes and making dramatic gestures with his hands. Fumiko lets out an audible sigh of relief. She doesn’t know what she’d do if he lost his spirit now.

“We’ll... prove him wrong,” she reassures. “Prove that he got the wrong impression of us. We’ll come up with a great reason for our classmates to support us. And we’ll come up with a rule that’ll help everyone.”

“One that won’t hurt Nagisa’s feelings,” Makoto adds on.

“Of course not,” Fumiko replies. “So let’s brainstorm. We’ll come up with something to knock their socks off.”

And so they return to campaigning. But with only two days left until their deadline, they’re running out of time. And looking at the awkward way Makoto scratches the back of his shoulder, Fumiko wonders if they can really keep their spirits up that long.

...Wonders if goodwill is even the reason this is so important to her in the first place.

“Excuse me?”

“I...”

“What the hell is into you today!? There is something seriously wrong with you, lady. You think I really don’t understand you?”

“I’m just saying-”

“You think I’m not capable of understanding you!?”

On Thursday, they talk to the others: the candidates running against them. Yoshito’d certainly went about it in an unnecessary way, but Fumiko’s starting to think maybe he’d had the right idea in talking to his competitors. She wants to know what she’s up against... both to give herself an edge, and to maybe understand why she wants to do this just a little bit better.

By day four, Rin looks like she’s been hit by a bus. To her complete and utter distress, Kazuki’s still treating the whole campaign like a big fat joke. When interviewed alone, she buries her head in her hands, and bemoans, “I didn’t even want to run with him in the first place. He was just one of the only boys left!” she sounds half ready to cry. “Why is this whole position decided by gender, anyways!? I think two girls should be able to run!”

“I...” Fumiko blinks. She has a point. Especially in Nagisa’s classroom, where gender-roles seem to have gone out the window decades ago. What is with that!? “...will bring that up to him if we win. As... one of the general concerns of the classroom. You will not be mentioned by name. Here’s to seeing if we can make some change.”
It hardly seems to reassure the distressed Rin, but she does relax a little when Fumiko places a gentle hand on her shoulder.

“You don’t need to say you won’t mention me…” she whispers with a tired laugh. “He’ll know that concern’s coming from me. But… while you’re doing that, can you please ask Shiota-sensei to expand the classroom library, if possible? That’s literally all I want. That’s the entire reason I’m running. I’ve read every book he has back there, and I’m bored out of my mind. I can’t afford books of my own. Please, Fumiko. I’m begging you.”

“I’ll… see what I can do.”

When asked about his own desires, Kazuki simply expresses the want for a classroom waterslide. That request, however, is swiftly dismissed with a flip of Fumiko’s middle finger. Makoto scrambles to smack her hand down, laughing nervously as he reassures that she probably didn’t mean that.

“No,” Fumiko says. “I definitely did.”

Kazuki winks and returns his own middle finger.

_Ugh! Weirdo!_

It turns out everyone has a little something they’d like if possible. Of course, some requests are a little (or a lot) bigger than others, but just about everyone in the class has an idea they can pitch.

“Longer lunches,” Komoshi says. “Not… uh… like in an exploitative way, if Shiota-sensei is worried about that. Just five minutes or so,” he specifies, scratching at his nose. “Sometimes I don’t have enough time to finish up all of my meal…”

“More animals!” Rosey declares. “Mary and Korokohai and the girls are so sweet, but I’d love to see even more class pets! Like… what about a puppy!? Wouldn’t a puppy _rule!?_”

“No puppies,” Minako begs. “That’s it. My entire request is that you do not pitch Rosey’s request. I am… like… super allergic.”

“Duly noted,” Fumiko responds.

Ultimately, Rosey and Minako meet in the middle, and decide a hamster would be pretty okay.

“Waterslide,” Kazuki repeats for the fourth time today. “Just think about it. That’s all I’m saying.”

Fumiko decidedly does _not_ think about it.

“I think we should be allowed to use more weapons during our attempts on Shiota-sensei,” Ryoka declares with a cock of her head. “I know why we can’t bring in our own: Because some guy, like, clocked him with a lamp a few years ago or whatever, but he should at least offer us some more options. I’m so bored of knives and BB guns. He should offer up… like… axes! Ooh! Oooh! Or spears! I’d _love_ spears.”

“Spears... spears,” Fumiko mutters as she writes that one down. And wondering just what happened to the classroom she swears at one point was a normal fucking teaching enviornment, she circles “MORE WEAPONS” in a big red circle in her notes.

“What did you _do_ to my classroom?” she asks Makoto under her breath one moment when they’re alone. There’s a laugh to her tone, but he must not pick up on it, because he goes tense when he
finally seems to process it’s him she’s addressing.

“What? Me?” he asks, as if snapping out of a daze.

“Yes, you,” she replies, nudging him with her elbow. “I seem to recall a time when everyone in this classroom wasn’t obsessed with pumping each other full of lead. What sort of tradition did you start?”

His shoulders relax as he realizes what she’s talking about. Letting out a low laugh of his own, he admits “Hey, you can’t blame me for that. I only made it like that for a single year. I didn’t expect the tradition to stick around! It’s Nagisa you should be yelling at for keeping this place a bloodbath. He’s been a teacher way longer than I ever was.”

...Huh! A terrible thought! She’d never quite realized it before, but Nagisa really has been a teacher longer now than the two of them ever were combined, huh? She hates that, actually! As such, she decides to tuck that factoid away in the back of her brain and never think about it again. Otherwise she thinks she’ll start dissociating.

“Over my dead body,” she says with a snort. “Besides, I suppose it’s sort of nice: this dumb thing you’ve started. Our classmates seem to like it, at least.”

“You included?” Makoto asks, a hopeful lilt to his voice.

“Of course,” Fumiko says, remembering the euphoria she felt the first time she stabbed Nagisa in the back. “Me included.”

Some of their classmates’ requests’ are far less goofy. In fact, they quickly cross the line into downright upsetting! All the same, Fumiko writes them down, trying her best to hide a horrified grimace.

“I guess I just wish… we had someone we could talk to,” Terumi admits with a sigh. “...Like, anonymously. Shiota-sensei’s really nice, but I’m always afraid he’s gonna make such a big deal of my issues if I talk to him. I don’t want him to cause the end of the world over me. I’d just like to get it off of my chest.”

“Yeah,” Emiko says when approached on the topic. “...I’ve been through some pretty serious things. I think we all have. But I don’t want him to, like… become stressed about it or whatever. He already does so much for us. I don’t want what’s wrong with me to be the reason he, like… stays awake at night.”

“It’s not that he’s anything less than patient,” Aina reassures. “He’s very nice. I guess I just… don’t want to be a burden?”

“And I’m a little scared of what I’ll do after if I become too used to this luxury,” Minako points out. “If he helps us too much now, what are we going to do for the rest of our lives? I want to become someone who can fight for myself.”

...All notions - Feelings - Fumiko understands well. What are they if not the same fears she feels every day? The terror of becoming a burden, and the uncertainty that a support system will last. But still… it breaks her heart to hear her classmates feel the same. And through no flaw of Nagisa’s - through no unwillingness to be welcoming enough. Simply because being a kid - being a person- is goddamn scary.

She’s starting to wonder if maybe she hadn’t done all that bad back then. That she simply set out to accomplish what was an impossible feat.
Does she really want to do this?

...Not becoming class representative. That’s a silly, goofy, thing. (Although to be honest, she’s starting to wonder if she’s maybe not ready for that, either.) But being a teacher. Is that really all it is? Being unable to make a change?

She doesn’t know. But all the same, she writes down each and every request her classmates pitch. The reasonable, the goofy, and the horrifying. Because no matter how much they hurt her heart or make her want to roll her eyes, they have to be important to someone. And even if she isn’t cut out for this position - even if she doesn’t deserve it - She’ll do everything in her power to help Nagisa hear their voices.

She thinks that’s why Kanon and Yoshito are starting to make her so mad. She overhears them aggravating her classmates... asking them what they’re unsatisfied about... if they, too, are sick of how the classroom is run... and she thinks she’s going to burst. Their peers already have so much to stress about! So many individual traumas and worries. Who do these assholes think they are to extrapolate on that?

To prey on that?

That’s all it is. Taking advantage of the sadness around them. And out of what? Spite!? Bitterness!? How shallow can they get!?

...At least that’s what Fumiko think until she overhears Riko call the two of them out. It’s Thursday afternoon and they’re discussing something or another, circling her desk like sharks, when she finally asks them what the hell is wrong with them.

Yoshito stops in place, his shoes squeaking against the hardwood floor as he freezes. Kiyoshi nudges Fumiko and points over his shoulder. Her head turns and she watches carefully as whatever this is goes down.

“Excuse me?” Yoshito asks, his voice stiff.

“I said what is wrong with you?” Riko repeats. “You keep asking me what’s upsetting me. What I’m angry about. Like you have any right to that information. And for what? Because you have some grudge against Shiota-sensei?”

“I don’t-” Yoshito sputters. “It’s not a grudge.”

“Yes. It is. And if it’s not against him, then it’s against those two.” Riko points a finger towards Fumiko and Makoto, shaking her head and grumbling. “Seriously. What is wrong with you? What on earth did they do?”

“What- what did they do?” Yoshito asks, his voice quivering. “They’re entitled! They... they think they deserve everything. And Shiota-sensei thinks so, too!”

Suddenly, Fumiko feels awfully put on the stand. Makoto freezes up, his arm going stiff, and she bolts to her feet, hr lips drawn back into a snarl. She opens her mouth to speak - To defend the two of them - But Riko beats her to it.

“Oh, can it!” she snaps. “Maybe Shiota-sensei is nice to them because they actually act like they can stand him. Look at you! He put this entire thing together for us, and everyone else is having a good time. But instead you’re finding another thing to complain about. Are you out of your mind?”

Yoshito freezes, his breath hitching in his throat. And he seems to stare through Riko. Hand gently
shaking, he growls “Maybe… maybe I am! And maybe… maybe that’s why he doesn’t like me. And I can see that. And you can call me mean or entitled or delusional for that, but I see what’s happening. And I guess I just assumed… someone else felt the same.”

Before anyone else can speak, he whips around, storming off towards his desk. And under his breath he only whispers one last phrase:

“I’m sorry I just wanted to feel happy here.”

...The rest of them watch him go.

“I’m sorry,” Kanon says in a low voice. Her eyes are fixed on Riko. “He’s… he’s been having a hard time lately. He doesn’t mean those things.” Nervously, she fiddles with her hands. “You shouldn’t have said those things either, though.”

Somewhere across the room Yoshito is staring at the wall.

“...I think you really hurt his feelings.”

“Well,” Riko says, pinching the bridge of her nose. “They have feelings, too. I think you should tell him to consider that.”

Kanon pauses and frowns, as if considering that herself. And then without another word she turns back around. She makes her way over to Yoshito and pulls a chair up, placing a gentle hand on his back.

Makoto, Kiyoshi and Riko are talking. About what just happened. But Fumiko can’t focus on their words. She’s too busy watching Yoshito and Kanon talk about something or another she can’t understand. Watching the way Yoshito jolts at her touch, and how he soon returns to staring at the wall, an all too bitter look on his face.

But Fumiko can spot something more.

...The way that no matter how angry he tries to pretend he is, he still blinks back tears.

He has one leg up on his seat. He blinks fast. And as he turns back to look Kanon’s way, Fumiko knows just the sort of upset he feels in his chest.

How could she not? Hurt people hurt people. Angry people - angry kids no less don’t act out for no reason. They act out because they’re jealous. They act out because they’re sad. They act out because it’s learned behavior.

...They act out because people his age don’t call themselves mean… or entitled… or delusional without having heard that from someone else’s mouth.

This ordinary, stupid and unremarkable bitch would know all about that.

She still doesn’t know how to talk to him. It’s not her place. Not something she has any right to ask him about, or something she’s even close to prepared for handling. But it does give her just a little bit more empathy. And it does give her just a bit of an idea. Because she thinks she knows what Yoshito needs more than anything. And it’s something she could use a bit of as well.

...Well, at the very least she’s come up with her rule.
“...I just think you don’t want to!”

“Really? Because I think I understand you perfectly well. You wanna hear what you really are? What sort of impression I’ve gotten?”

“Please don’t-”

“Of course you don’t want to hear it. Of course you don’t want criticism. Of course you don’t want the truth. Because you are a delusional, narcissistic know-it-all with a messiah complex. You think you are better than everyone. You think you are smarter than everyone. You think the only perfect world is one where everyone behaves exactly like you. And you can try to hide that behind a cutesy face. Behind an innocent ‘I just want the best for you.’ But I know who you really are. And you are someone who thinks I am broken. You are not special just because you’re passiona-”

“I do not think you’re broken!”

“DON’T INTERRUPT ME!”

On Friday morning, campaign speeches soon approach. Nagisa lets them know that voting will commence after they finish, so to please do their best in getting through to their classmates. Fumiko’s not sure if her best is very good at all, but she’s damn well prepared to try. And as such… she raises her hand, quietly stands, and asks if she could please go first.

Nagisa nods. “Of course,” he says. “Go right ahead.”

She leads Makoto up towards the front of the classroom, trying her best to ignore the stare of their classmates. Kiyoshi gives them a nervous thumbs-up, and Nagisa tells them they can start whenever they’d like. But Fumiko’s gaze just keeps drifting and drifting back to the way Yoshito stares through her.

...She’ll prove him wrong. For her sake and his.

“...As you know, the two of us are running for class representatives. But so are many other people in this classroom,” she begins. “And because of that you may ask yourself ‘What can you do for us?’ ‘What did you do to deserve this position?’ ‘How are you different from any of us?’ And while I’m still not sure I have a concrete answer, I have spent the past week thinking those questions over. And I have… some sort of conclusion, at the very least.”

“The answer is: I’m not. I’m not any different than a single one of you. We’re all students of Constellate Junior High, and while we’re all here for some reason or another, I believe those reasons to actually be rather similar. We’re here because we’re scared. Because we’re alone, or because we felt we needed help. And it was Shiota-sensei who offered that help to us. Of course… he hasn’t always been perfect, but he’s done everything within his power to give us the support we need. And that is why I would like to repay the favor.”

“...At the beginning of this school year, I was a deeply unhappy person. I was terrified of what others thought of me, and because of that, I became judgemental and bitter. I pushed everyone I could away. And I thought myself better than others - a hilarious notion, considering I, at the same time, saw myself as less than dirt. But there are a few people who met me during this time and even still refused to be deterred by my abhorrent demeanor.”

“One of them, Kiyoshi Karasuma. I suppose I shouldn’t say too many words, because he hates the attention, but trust me when I say I’d have fought with everything in my power to have him
standing beside me today if he’d actually wanted a position of leadership. He was… the first person I found myself able to open up to. And although I know this is going to fluster him, I want him to know I’m thankful for him every day.”

Sure enough, Kiyoshi reaches up to cover his face with his hands. But as every eye in the classroom flits towards him, even his blush is unable to mask a flattered smile.

“Another, Makoto Himura. Where Kiyoshi was a quiet, comforting figure in my life, Makoto took me by the hand and dragged me right out of my comfort zone. At first, I despised him a little for this, but the more he helped me grow the more I was able to discover about myself. Even on the days when I was gloomy and cruel, he always greeted me with a smile. That is why I believe he deserves to be up here running for this position with me today. Makoto believes in everyone, and he’s the best at helping others see that. He’s bright, he’s sweet, and he’s a wonderful leader. He’s... the sort of person I want to be more like every day.”

There’s this indecipherable expression on Makoto’s face as he stares at her, jaw dropped. But he doesn’t speak. Simply shakes his head and grins, taking a step closer to her.

“And finally… Shiota-sensei. While my friends are lovely… I wouldn’t trade them for the world, Shiota-sensei is a special sort of important to me. He was the first adult to believe in me. The first adult to tell me that others treating me like garbage wasn’t normal, and the first adult to tell me that I deserved so much more than I was letting myself have. He’s always - and I mean always - believed in me, and I sincerely doubt I’d be standing up here with the courage to give this speech in the first place if not for his constant support.”

“...But Shiota-sensei isn’t for everyone. Shiota-sensei isn’t capable of helping everyone. And that’s okay. Sometimes personalities don’t mesh. Sometimes certain people don’t feel comfortable coming to him for support for one reason or another. And that’s fine, I suppose. It’s nothing for him to beat himself up over. But it is something I’ve thought about extensively, and what’s driven the rule I’ve come up with to suggest for our classroom.”

“Because everyone deserves a Shiota-sensei. And everyone deserves to feel what he’s helped me feel standing up here today. That is why… what I wish to request from Shiota-sensei… even more than waterslides or expanded libraries or any possible assortment of weapons… is for a school counselor.”

“I’m delighted Shiota-sensei has been here for me. And I’m sure there’s many other people he’ll be there for in the future. But he can’t do everything alone. No-one can. He’s part of the reason I managed to get that fact through my thick skull. And as such… I believe it would be for the best that he get someone to be able to talk to us about the things we maybe don’t feel comfortable telling him.”

“Not because of any fault of his. Not because he’s not doing well enough or somehow isn’t living up to some legacy. Because everyone needs a little help. And the better support system we have here… well… the better I believe we’ll all be. Towards ourselves and towards others.”

She can hardly believe her ears… that she’s truly speaking this aloud. But she’s spent the past twenty-four hours thinking it over, and slowly but surely her conclusion has become concrete. That no-one in this classroom is evil. No-one in this classroom is broken. But that Shiota-sensei isn’t capable of fixing every issue the twenty-six of them have. That Yoshito is right. And that… he doesn’t need to be cruel about it. He doesn’t need to push Nagisa to his breaking point. All he needs to do is tell him what their teacher’s been telling them all year:

“You’re not in this alone.”
...She’d briefly wondered if there was anything she could do. If she was capable of helping - of fixing - everyone around her. But as she met Yoshito’s hateful eyes… she realized it’s not her place. Maybe he’s never gonna want help from her. And that’s okay. She’s already told herself she’s never gonna become a happiness sink ever again. But the least she can do is offer up an opportunity for everyone else to get some help, even if it’s not from her own mouth.

And watching the class stare at her… eyes wide with wonder, she finally knows why she wants to do this. Why she wanted to do this back then, and why she thinks she’ll always want to reach out for this dream.

She doesn’t want to become a class representative because she’s entitled. Nostalgic, sure, but deep down, that’s not even the main reason. She wants to become a class representative because teachers - Because leaders are never obsolete. And because people never stop needing help. She will never push herself to her breaking point again. But she’ll also never stop loving people. And because of that, she’d like to be able to foster an environment where people can love themselves, too.

“I know that sounds saccharine. Maybe even forced. But I swear I mean every word I’ve spoken up here. Because I have been in all of your shoes. And next, I would like to step into Shiota-sensei’s. To say ‘thanks’ for everything he’s done for me, and to reach a hand out to you. One day I’d like to run a classroom, just like he does. And, well… I think this is a good start.”

“You don’t have to believe in me. You don’t have to like me. But… that’s the full and honest truth. I have… grand plans for my future. And I believe… you should, too. Because… I’m sure a very long time ago people like Shiota-sensei felt just like us. Believed they’d never accomplish anything. But look at all they’ve already set out to accomplish.”

...She looks out across the classroom, and she sees the twenty-five of them for a brief moment. Nagisa sitting near the front of the class, and nervously twirling a strand of hair around his finger. Okuda staring at the floor, and Karma standing up only to place a tack on her seat. But they fade. With fifteen years, they fade. They grow up, and they move on, and they do great things. And now, they no longer sit in front of her. Instead, she stares out across the classroom at an entirely new set of faces.

Yoshito with his stun-shocked face. Kazuki on his phone, and Riko clasping her fingers as she looks up at her. Chiharu anxiously drums his fingers on his desk, and Kiyoshi meets Fumiko’s eyes.

The E-Class… they’ve already had their stories told, with or without her. But wonderful people will never stop making strides each and every day.

“...You’re going to do great things, I just know it. And I can’t wait to see what you-” No. “What we can accomplish.”

And all at once that energy drains out of her. Finished with her tirade - done speaking from the heart, she runs out of words. And looking out at her classmates, she feels a nervous exhaustion overtake her body.

She’d really gotten up there and said all of that… hadn’t she?

...Huh. Oddly enough, she’s almost proud of herself.

She gives a curt bow. Mumbles something about how she hopes they’ll consider her. And she
glances towards Makoto, biting her lip. But before she can ask him if there’s anything he’d like to add on, he speaks.

“...Thank you indeed,” he says. “Honestly… uh… I don’t have any great qualifications for this,” he admits, scratching at his arm. “Any cool future plans or things I’m going to do. But… Fumiko wanted to do this with me. And, well… as you all heard, she’s… she’s going to do some really wonderful things. Whatever it is she accomplishes, I just want to be by her side for it. I… hope that’s not too much to ask.”

He almost seems nervous for a second, but quickly shrugs it off. Flashing Fumiko a smile, he gives a bow as well, and then hurries back towards his seat.

“Was that an okay way to end a speech?” he asks.

“...I have no clue!” Fumiko admits. “I just… I just hope they think we did well.”

“Are you kidding me?” Makoto says. “You did great.”

And that indecipherable expression has become one of wonder. He stares at her, reaches out for her hand, and squeezes it so tight she has to tell him to cut it out. But all the same, she feels a warm feeling in her chest. As someone who’s spent all year looking up to Makoto, it feels nice to be the one taking charge for once.

“That’s not too much to ask, you know,” she whispers. “I’ll always need you here.”

“I know,” he whispers back. “But I didn’t mean of you. I meant of them.”

...And as he slides back into his seat, Makoto motions to the rest of the class.

They’re looking at them, stunned. And as Fumiko meets Yoshito’s eyes, she thinks she even catches a little bit of wonder in them, too.

Ultimately, Rin proclaims she’s dropping out. Sighing deeply, she glares at Kazuki, and says that although this campaign was admittedly kinda fun, she doesn’t think she’d let that maniac obtain a position of power for all the libraries in the world.

Nagisa understands. And when she voices her concerns that maybe two girls should be allowed to run next year, he agrees. As sweet of a duo as Megu and Isogai made, not everyone can be held to the same standards. It’s time to smash the patriarchy. And if two girls (Or two boys, for that matter) would like to run together next time, he’ll allow it.

...Love wins, Fumiko supposes?

Not that - Gah! Not that running for class representative with someone is an indication of anything! It was a joke! It was just a damn joke!

She bites her tongue and resents herself for the thought, even as Yoshito and Kanon step up to give their own speech.

Her embarrassment quickly fades into shock, however, as they reach the end of their speech, and don’t say what they were planning to about their teacher.

Instead, they merely reiterate that they’ll consider the needs of the class, and that they want a place where everyone’s struggles are perceived equally. But never once, even as Yoshito’s fist clenches, do they insinuate that this is Nagisa’s fault.
In the end they simply take a bow of their own... and sit down without another word.

Fumiko doesn’t understand. She supposes it’s entirely possible that they’d just been trying to scare her, but it hadn’t felt like that at the time. The vitriol Yoshito held towards their teacher... it had felt palpable. There’s no way he could have managed to fake that. But if it hadn’t been a fabrication… then…-

When voting time comes around, he pulls her outside.

She notes just how unprofessional this whole classroom environment is when Nagisa doesn’t even bat an eye. But when Yoshito asks to talk with her alone out in the hallway, Fumiko obliges.

She doesn’t know why. She still can’t really stand this guy. But she supposes she’s trying harder to see the bigger picture nowadays.

“If you’re here to argue with me,” she warns. “I won’t just sit down and take it. I’m not interested in being your enemy. And if the two of us win, we earned it. Don’t you dare accuse us of-”

“I voted for you.”

“Pardon?”

“You heard me,” Yoshito says flatly. And as Fumiko asks him to explain what exactly the hell he’s on about, he props himself up against the wall, watching her carefully.

“Then… then what was that?” she asks. “That whole show about Shiota-sensei!? Did you just want to start something? Impress your lame friends? Because that is not funny. You made me think you hated him!”

“Oh,” Yoshito says, one foot kicked up against the wall. “I did. Still do. But seems I gave you two a little too credit.

“And that- that means?”

“It means I didn’t realize you had any actual balls on you. I meant everything I said. About thinking life came easy to you two. You three, even, if you count the little guy.”

“Kiyoshi.”

“Yeah. Whatever,” Yoshito says. “That’s not the point. I think… I was being a little bit presumptuous. About what you people are like. About why you wanted that position.” He shifts slightly. “...This is genuinely really important to you, isn’t it?”

Fumiko shrugs. “I think so,” she says. “I mean… I’m still trying to figure out what I want to do, but I have some ideas. And this might just be a start for me.”

...She hates being put on the spot like this. Much less in front of this asswipe of all people. But at the very least he’s not coming off as particularly hostile. If anything, with his tapping foot and avoidant gaze, he strikes her as more open than she’s ever seen him.

“Did you mean what you said? About wanting to be a teacher?” he asks.

“Mmmm,” Fumiko repeats. “...Didn’t come to the conclusion until recently, but…”

“I wish you’d have just said that from the start.”
“Excuse me?” Fumiko asks. “It’s not- It’s not my job to project that to the world. It’s not my obligation to share that with you. I’m not even certain. I just thought-”

“That it would be nice to help people?”

Fumiko pauses. “Huh?”

“You thought it’d be nice to help people. That’s all, right?”

“...I mean, yeah,” Fumiko says. “Why wouldn’t I-”

“Than that’s what you should have said from the beginning. Scratch the other thing. Though on second thought, I’m not sure I’d have believed you.”

“About-? About caring about people?”

“Mmm,” Yoshito admits. “...Never admitted I was beyond acting like an asshole, too. But I guess I just saw you walking around with your terrible attitude and your gratuitous wealth and your popular friends and assumed there was no way you could give a shit. But seeing you step up there to talk about it… wow, man. You have had it hard, too, haven’t you?”

Fumiko shrugs. She’s not entirely interested in disclosing any of that to this guy, but...

“Of course I have. I think everyone in this class has. That’s why... that’s why I think it’s such a shitty thing to do to diss Shiota-sensei like that. Of course he’s not perfect. Of course he’s gonna screw it up. But at least he’s doing something. At least he’s trying. Most people don’t. Most people won’t.”

“Sometimes it feels like seeing someone try and fail is more frustrating than seeing someone not try at all. I don’t know,” Yoshito admits. “...But you’re right. I decided not to say that to his face. If he’s so important to you lot, then I don’t want to break that illusion. Lord knows we’ll all take whatever we can get.”

Fumiko raises an eyebrow. She still hates his tone, but only because it’s one she knows well. It’s aloof and above it all and oh-so-cynical. But that’s just how you tend to sound when you’re hurt, and don’t know how to express it in a way that’s vulnerable yet.

“...Mmm,” she simply says. “Thank you for that. And not for my sake. For his. Just because he’s a grown-up doesn’t mean it doesn’t hurt when people say things like that about him. He really cares about you.” She pauses. “He really cares about all of us.”

“Mmm,” Yoshito says back.

“But there’s one thing I still don’t get. Yeah, sure... you understand me a little better. You even decided not to take your frustrations out on Shiota-sensei. But why did you vote for us?”

Yoshito laughs a bitter, sardonic laugh. And Fumiko finally realizes just what’s getting to her about this kid. It’s not that he’s angry or bitter or even just mean. It’s that he’s right smack dab in the middle of his chuunibyou phase. She’s not sure how many ‘tch’es she can bear to listen to before she fucking explodes.

“Why did I vote for you?” he asks, sliding back further down the wall. “...Because honestly, I didn’t care much about the position in the first place. Kanon neither. I’m actually... really terrible with people. The only reason I stepped up to the plate is because I didn’t want you to get the position. But now that... I know you have this in the bag, I don’t have much of a reason to pretend
anymore.”

Fumiko softly reminds herself that she has what is basically an extra 25 years of knowledge on this thirteen-year-old boy, and decides not to make fun of his Sarada-adjacent behavior. Instead, she’ll point out the real gaping hole in his logic here.

“...Then… you were being a hypocrite.”

And with that, it’s Yoshito’s turn to ask “Pardon?”

“All that nonsense you said. About us being entitled. About wanting whatever Shiota-sensei handed out just to snatch it from you. You really were talking about yourself. Or at least acting pretty damn blindsided. You saw something we wanted, and you tried to take it just because you c-”

“Yes. I did,” Yoshito interrupts, face bright red. He bites his lip. Hard “But I dropped it, okay? As... as soon as I realized this was actually important to you, I ended up feeling like a massive asshole. I didn’t mean to - I didn’t mean to cross a line.”

Fumiko snorts. “Well, you certainly still did. For the record.”

“I know,” Yoshito admits, wilting. “And - uh - I’m sorry about that.” It’s far from the most sincere apology, with his averted gaze and the awkward way he scratches at his arm, but Fumiko will take it.

“It’s... uh. Fine,” she says. “Just... cut it out from now on? Whatever it is you have against the three of us. And whatever it is you have against Shiota-sensei, too.”

“Of course,” Yoshito says, bowing his head. “If that’s all you have to ask of me-”

“It’s most certainly not. This is where I’d like a formal apology. Written essay is preferred. 12 point font. Two pages, with a full deconstruction of your misbehavior.”

Yoshito stares.

“That was. A joke. For the record. I was joking.”

“Oh,” Yoshito says, looking like he’s just had a hundred-pound weight lifted from his shoulders. Eyes wide and bewildered, he admits, “It is impossible to tell with that tone of yours.”

“Maybe that’s the point,” Fumiko says with a scoff.

...Finally, Yoshito smirks. Visibly relaxing, he lets out a tiny laugh. And a genuine one, at that.

“You know... I think that attitude will help you out.”

Fumiko blinks. “Pardon?”

“With becoming a teacher,” Yoshito says. “I mean... if that ultimately ends up being what you want to do. I’m sure Shiota-sensei’s a fine guy, but...” he pauses. “He’s too much for me. His attitude. It’s patronizing. Sometimes... it’s hard to hear ‘oh, but I believe in you.’ or ‘you can do anything you set out to accomplish’ when you can hardly get out of bed in the morning. Those things... they just don’t feel true. It can be a lot nicer to receive the blunt truth, as ass-backwards as that sounds.”

“No,” Fumiko says. “I get it. And noted! I’ll make sure to have my future students write a two-
page essay on why I’m the realest teacher they’ve ever had. Seeing as how it seems to have worked so effectively on you.”

Yoshito sputters. “That’s-! That’s not what I meant!”

“Isn’t it, though?” Fumiko asks.

Yoshito groans and buries his face in his hands.

Fumiko glances towards the doorway. She should really get heading back into class soon. But not before she notes one more thing.

“...You know, you’re welcome there. If you ever really need it. Shiota-sensei’s place, I mean. It’s not just our stomping ground. He’s made that clear from the beginning of the year. It can be your refuge, too.”

Yoshito shakes his head. “...Nah. No thanks,” he says. “For someone who’s acted like such a jealous bitch, honestly… I’m not too interested in having what you have. Shiota-sensei’s already given me a lot of extra leeway. Privilege or whatever. Walked me to school and everything. But it’s just not my thing. Like I said: I just don’t vibe with the guy.”

“...Thank you for the offer, though,” he quickly tacks on. “Maybe that really is proof you deserve this position. Lord knows I wouldn’t have offered it to you if...”

“Hey,” Fumiko says. “Don’t give up yet. We still don’t know how the voting turned out. For all we care you did win.”

Yoshito rubs his temples. “Good Lord. Wouldn’t that be the worst?” he muses. “Nah. I think this is much more up your alley. I’m sure your classmates will see that.” He pauses. “...Even if your campaign partner lacks a little passion.”

Fumiko frowns. “I’m- I’m not sure what you mea-”

“Makoto. He wasn’t the one who stepped up there to give a speech. He said he just wanted to do a fun thing with his friend. And while there’s nothing wrong with that... “ He shakes his head. “Just? Don’t push him too far, okay?”

Now Fumiko feels like he’s putting words in his mouth, but she’s not in the mood to get in another argument with this kid. She knows how passionate Makoto is, even if he hates conflict. Even if he can be a little shy.

“I won’t,” she promises.

“Good,” Yoshito says. “Now let’s get back to your domain.”

He doesn’t wait for a response before sauntering back to the classroom. Fumiko follows soon after, peeking her head into the room.

“Hey!” Nagisa says, craning his head towards them. “Just the two I was looking for. Sit down. I was just about to look over the votes.”

Fumiko nods, returning to her seat and sliding in next to Makoto. Nagisa, in the meantime, reaches out for a shoebox he’s placed on the front of his desk. Only now does Fumiko seem to realize this is the same goddamn shoebox he used for Secret Santa, but there’s no calling him out on it, because he’s already on his feet. Shoebox slung under his arm, he races towards the chalkboard.
“I’ll be reading votes aloud. Although of course, I won’t reveal who voted for who even if I do recognize your handwriting because that would be a blatant breach of voter-government anonymity. I will also be keeping tally on the board, so please pay full attention.”

Most of the class does not. Needless to say this project is a bit of a miss compared to Nagisa’s track record of home runs, but Fumiko appreciates it at the very least. As Nagisa reads each vote aloud, marking each candidate’s side with tally marks on the board, her eyes remain glued to the count. As they reach vote ten and then vote fifteen, her name spoken seven of those fifteen times.


Makoto shifts slightly, sending her a nervous glance. But when she meets his eyes, he musters a smile, even as Nagisa marks down the nineteenth vote.

How many times has he said their name now? She does the mental math in her head. Counts the tallies as quickly as she can. But he’s already onto twenty. Does she see her name eleven times? Twenty-one. Twenty-two. Twenty-three, and, finally, twenty-four.

With a deep sigh of relief, Fumiko watches Nagisa draw the chalk across the board one final time, bringing their tally to thirteen. Thirteen to Yoshito and Kanon’s eleven. They’ve won!

She thinks Nagisa announces their victory, but she hardly hears it. There’s this ringing in her ears as she reaches out to high five Makoto. He just barely makes it, meeting her palm with his wrist and an awkward laugh as she descends upon him like a rabid animal.

“Did we- did we really do it?” he asks, glancing back towards the board as if he hasn’t fully processed it.

“Hell yeah we did it!” Fumiko replies through a gleeful laugh. And meeting Makoto’s shocked eyes, she feels on top of the world. Because she honestly didn’t know if she could do this. But she could! She could! And that means so many people believe in her.

More than anything she wants to wrap Makoto in a hug. Declare their victory a thousand times more, and shout it from the rooftops. But as every eye in the classroom is glued to them, she resists, and instead settles for giving him another high five.

He makes it this time. Though he quickly yanks his hand back, hissing in through his teeth.

“Holy heck, dude!” he says. “Your high fives hurt!”

And Kiyoshi chimes in behind him. “That’s what I’ve been saying!”

Fumiko gives a sheepish laugh, drawing her hand back and murmuring a meek apology. But as Makoto tells her it’s nothing, she turns to Kiyoshi with a snide expression.

“Is that really all you’ve got for us? After all our hard work? After we just won? Insulting my high-fives? Jeez, Kiyoshi, that’s weak, even for an insult. Some way to say congratulations.”

“A-ah!” Kiyoshi sputters. “No! It wasn’t - It wasn’t an insult! I didn’t mean to - I was going to shit! I was going to say ‘good job,’ I swear!”

Fumiko chuckles. “I know, Kiyoshi. It’s fine. I’m just pulling your leg.”

“Well - well either way... I mean it. Congratulations, that is. You guys did a lot of hard work to
make it to this point. I hope you like it!”

Fumiko’s not sure if a week of ‘campaign PR’ and catfighting with Yoshito qualifies as hard work, but she appreciates his kind words nevertheless. She thanks him and offers up another high five. Although she’s careful to be gentle with him this time.

The rest of their classmates murmur congratulations. Riko cheers, and Kazuki groans, bemoaning the ‘inherent unfairness of the democratic system.’ Yoshito coughs, whispering ‘congratulations… or whatever,’ under his breath, and Nagisa makes his way over to the two of them.

He admits that it’s not exactly a legitimately glorious position. If anything, it’s a little pointless. But he hopes they learned something about themselves and about their classmates in the process of running. Additionally, yes, he’ll be seeing about getting Fumiko’s rule instated.

“Admittedly… that’s not what I expected you to ask me for, but it’s a… valid request. I’m going to have to do screening because I don’t want just anyone working at my school, but… I’ll try my very best to have a counselor in the building by the end of third trimester.”

Fumiko nods. “…That’s all I could possibly ask of you.”

And even having won something so pointless… Fumiko feels proud of herself. Because she set a goal for herself, and she accomplished it. Because Makoto tells her ‘awesome job.’ And because Yoshito looks at her from across the room and gives her an awkward thumbs up.

Worthless or not, a position like that just has to mean a little something.

“I don’t! I would never-”

“You pity me. I don’t want your scorn. I don’t want your sympathy. I don’t want to be like you. I don’t need you. You. Need. Me. The only reason why you are where you are today is because of me. The only reason your family is where they are today is because of me! Why do you always need to step out of line? Why do you always need to say the one thing you know you don’t need to say!?”

“Because I want to care about you!”

...Makoto doesn’t know what he’s doing.

He says he does. That he’s prepared for just about anything. That he’s cheery, and he's optimistic, and that he can always find an upside. But he doesn’t. And he hates it. Because he’s not supposed to be the downer friend.

Watching Fumiko run so passionately past him, her own dreams clutched tightly in hand, he wonders if he’s ever gonna know what he really wants to do.

She spends the rest of the day on cloud nine. Applauding herself, and applauding him. Telling him what an awesome job they did. But he just feels so… empty about it. Like he hadn’t really tried. Like he doesn’t really deserve this.

When she suggested becoming class representatives, he’d hesitated. And when Nagisa had suggested running, he’d crossed his fingers, and hoped maybe he’d lose.

...Nope. Never by her side.
It’s not that he wants to shit on her dreams. Never! He thinks… he thinks she’s going to do some really wonderful things. He’s just not sure… he’s capable of doing the same?

He doesn’t know. It’s stupid. He hasn’t felt like this before. He’s not some… insecure person. He just feels so weird about this whole thing.

...About being in charge of this classroom again.

When Fumiko asks him to talk with him alone, he hesitates a second time. But like any good friend, he complies. Meets up with her after school, and tells Kiyoshi they’ll regroup with him at the base of the mountain.

“It won’t take long,” Fumiko swears. “I just want to talk with him about some… uh… y’know, stuff. I hope that’s not weird.”

“No, no-” Kiyoshi reassures. “That’s not weird at all. If you have something from back then you don’t feel comfortable sharing, then it’s not my place to pry. I’ll… uh… see you soon.”

“Only a few minutes-” Fumiko promises. “It’s not a big deal, I swear.”

But as Makoto watches her pace from foot to foot… Nervously shuffle and fiddle with her scarf, he wonders if this might just be something huge after all.

Kiyoshi goes without another word.

“So… what is it?” Makoto asks. “That you wanted to talk about.”

“Uh… maybe we should sit down somewhere first,” Fumiko admits. And her eyes flit towards the school. “Actually, I have the perfect idea. Follow me.”

She gives a lazy motion for him to follow. Struts towards the school, and props her foot up against one of the wooden planks.

Taking hold of the windowsill, she pulls herself up and scales the side of the building.

Standing proudly on the roof, she holds a hand out. Makoto takes it as he hops up onto the windowsill, clutching like his life depends on it as she pulls him up towards the sky and onto steady ground.

She sits down, motioning for him to follow. Legs dangling off of the building, she smiles.

“Pretty niche spot, but I figured no-one was gonna overhear us up here.”

Makoto nods, plopping down next to her. He keeps one leg curled up by his side, the other hanging down off the roof.

...Right next to hers.

“Yeah, no way. School roof in the middle of winter? It’s pretty much the most obscure hangout spot you can get.”

For a chilly day, it’s actually pretty nice out. The sun peeks through the barren trees as it sets, casting a beautiful light over the horizon.

Fumiko lets out a small laugh. Turns her head and asks, “Remember when you first climbed up here? How I screamed at you at the top of your lungs and told you you were gonna break your
"How could I forget?" Makoto asks. It had been so much fun blundering around on the school roof. Now that he thinks about it, hadn’t that been the same day Fumiko’d let him take shelter in her home?

That was before he really knew Nagisa. Before he really knew Fumiko or Kiyoshi or any of them. Before he even knew who he really was. He’d felt so carefree.

“...Crazy how much things change.”

“I know, right?” Fumiko responds. “Back then I was so scared to follow you. Convinced I’d, like… get in trouble, or trip and fall. But look at us now!”

Nagisa’s held lessons up here since then. At least a good dozen. Makoto’d watched Fumiko as she’d slowly become more and more acclimated to the roof. First shaking like a leaf as Nagisa held her hand tight, then, all those months later, pulling herself up all by herself, without a single ounce of fear.

“...We sure have come a long way,” he notes. For better or for worse, however, he’s not sure. “I’m proud of you.”

Fumiko smiles. And it’s a warm, happy smile. Makoto’s certain of one thing: She’s changed for the better, at the very least. She seems so much happier these days.

Even during moments of fear, it makes his heart feel warm.

“I still remember what you told me,” she says, eyes drifting back towards the horizon. “You said you felt like king of the world up here. I’m not sure I got it at the time… but...”

“You do now?”

“Mmmm.”

Makoto kicks his feet gently. “I actually remembered for one of the first times up here,” he muses. “Think it was the same day. I was standing up here thinking ‘What a wonderful place this is.’ ‘It just feels so much like home.’ And then I just… saw them. It’s like you were gone. We were both gone. I was taller… and stronger…” and happier “And I was standing right here. Watching E-Class flood into the school.”

“I couldn’t believe my eyes. I mean... I’d dreamed about stuff like that before, but until I started going to school here nothing really ever happened in person. It weirded the shit out of me.”

Fumiko nods. “I can imagine. The first time I remembered something about being Aguri, I freaked the fuck out. I was scared out of my mind, Makoto. Convinced I was making it up or that someone was going to hurt me again.” She sighs and shakes her head. “It was crazy. I feel a lot better now, though. That I know who I am. I feel like I understand the person I’ve become better than I ever did before I knew I was Aguri.”

...A sentiment Makoto wishes he could share.

He smiles wide and nods. “Yeah. Same. About being Korosensei, I mean.” He knits as his hands.

“Before I was so confused about what sort of person I wanted to be. Where I belonged. If I’d ever have a family. But when I arrived at the school... it all just seemed to come together.”
And that much is true. Nagisa welcomed him with open arms. The creak of the wooden floorboards and the strong scent of sawdust felt like home. When Nagisa had let it slip that he believed Makoto was Korosensei, he’d been ecstatic. His heart had leapt from his chest. Because everything had finally made sense!

But now it doesn’t. With every passing day, Korosensei makes less and less sense. Makoto doesn’t even understand how he can manage to loathe the guy and be so jealous of him at the same time.

He resents the things Korosensei did. The people he hurt and all the ways he failed. They make him feel terrible. But at the same time, he looks at Korosensei and sees someone he’ll never live up to. Someone who changed Nagisa and Karma and Kayano’s lives. Someone who changed the world for the better. And he’s become what now? This?

Makoto doesn’t have superpowers. He doesn’t even have super-intuition. He’s not smart, and he’s not particularly heroic. He can’t see himself changing the world in the same way Korosensei did. So what does that mean? For him? For his future? Is… is the rest of his life really going to be looking back on his glory years?

...He’s thirteen, for Pete’s sake! He shouldn’t be having a midlife crisis!

“You have no idea how excited I was,” he continues. “When I was certain. Because I could look back at all the work I did, and say ‘it really was worth it.’ They really are happy now. All that fighting… all that teaching I did for those kids, they never forgot it. Those scared, insecure students I saw marching into the building with their heads down had gone on to become politicians. Scientists. Business-owners. Superstars! Anything they dreamed of!”

He’s quickly starting to realize they’ve gotten off-topic, but can’t find it in him to ask what this conversation was actually supposed to be about. Does it even really matter?

“You think you got excited?” Fumiko asks. “Imagine how surprised I felt! Last I’d seen these kids, they were ‘teacher-murdering’ delinquents with no hope for their futures!”

“Oh. You think you know about teacher-murdering?” Makoto asks, a sneer to his voice. “I’ll do you one better.”


...The sun burns bright, and the two of them fall silent.

“I think we should do it all again...”

She says it quietly... quickly, but Makoto overhears. And he freezes up, his blood running cold.

“H-huh?”

“Teaching, I mean,” Fumiko quickly specifies, her posture stiff. “Not the other stuff. None of the... drama... or the death... or the letting people hurt us. Just the two of us!” She reaches to take Makoto’s hand, clasping it tight. “I meant it. What I said earlier. About wanting to teach again. Maybe even about wanting to teach here. Can you... can you imagine how awesome it’d be if we did it together!?”

Makoto can’t find the words. He’s... he’s shell-shocked. He can’t believe what she’s asking of him!

“...With... with me?” he incoherently stammers.
“Yes, with you, silly!” Fumiko declares. “I mean… I could do it alone. I think I’m going to either way. But… don’t we owe this to ourselves? We were… we were robbed! We never got a chance to live out our dreams together. But now… we… we can! No-one can stop us! Shouldn’t we… shouldn’t we try? Imagine all that we could accomplish together!”

Makoto stares, his mouth agape.

She wants to… she wants to… With him!?

Well, he’s not really sure he’d like to - He’s never thought about being a tea- He probably wouldn’t be very good at it. Besides, aren’t there- Aren’t there already all sorts of people who have that field under control? People like Nagisa! People like Fumiko!...People like Korosensei.

All the same, Fumiko stares at him with wide, hopeful eyes. She clasps his hands, and grins with this huge, passionate smile. Fingers interlaced with his own “We could change the world,” she repeats. And Makoto feels the weight of that very world on his shoulders.

Does he… does he really have the heart to crush her spirit? She says she’ll do it on her own, but her face tells a different story. Screams ‘I want you here,’ and her words say “It just won’t be the same without you.” Makoto shakes, and Fumiko lets out a nervous laugh, and sure enough, when he himself grins wide and cocks his head, he finds his answer.

“I’d… I’d love to!”

‘We owe it to ourselves,’ she says. But he knows what he really owes. And he owes it to her. He’s already stolen everything from her once before. If he were to shake his head… sneer, and decline her offer? Then… well, he really would be a monster.

“You would!?” Fumiko responds, her breaths quick. And before Makoto can even respond - Seal his fate a second time - she tosses her arms around his neck, and squeezes him so tight he thinks he might just explode.

“I just knew you would! I’m so glad I asked!”

“Yeah,” Makoto says, deliberately letting the tension seep from his posture. He won’t let her know he’s hesitated. Not when he’s already done that so many times before. “Me too.”

He still doesn’t know why he feels this way. How something that used to make him so happy has managed to become something that makes him so sad. But it just has. And there’s nothing he can do to change that. Nothing except pretend, and shut his eyes tight, and put on the widest smile he can possibly muster.

Because even if Korosensei… if knowing all the things he did and the people he hurt and the feats he accomplished and will never accomplish again doesn’t make him happy, he knows what still does. And that’s his friends. That will always be his friends.

He doesn’t have any plans for his future. He doesn’t see any hope for what Makoto could possibly accomplish. In the field of teaching, or a field 900 topics removed. Why shouldn’t he settle? At the very least, he might have a chance of making her happy.

Because she’s the same. No. She’s better. Fumiko carries Aguri’s heart and a willpower that’s her own and so much more. She’s unique and she’s brave and she’s every bit as beautiful as she was sixteen years ago. Where Makoto’s a downgrade… something… wonderful becoming something not, she’s anything but. She finds a new way to glow every day. And all she wants to do is have another chance at the dream he stole from her with him by her side. He can’t - he won’t turn that
It doesn’t matter if he’s happy. It doesn’t matter if he’s settling. It doesn’t matter if he has dreams or if he doesn’t. Because he’s not Korosensei. He’s a shell of his former self. And now all he wants to do is stand by her side and whatever it is she’ll accomplish.

...He just knows it’ll be something great.

They discuss it for the next fifteen minutes... Fumiko laughing, and squealing, and sharing all the plans she’s already made. All the things she already wants to try. And Makoto laughs back, smiling his widest, fakest smile, and telling her he can’t wait to be a part of it.

They have to go soon enough. Wouldn’t wanna keep Kiyoshi waiting, after all. But before they do, she leans once on his shoulder, and looks at him with the most content look on her face.

“Hey, Reaper?” she says in a voice that he just knows means ‘I feel safe.’

“Mm?”

“...I’m really happy you’re here.”

And biting his lip softly, smiling back… Makoto, the biggest liar on the planet, says “...Yeah. I'm happy I'm here, too.”

He turns his back to her... And he lets out a bitter, low laugh.

“The fact that you don’t already says enough about you in and of itself.”

He’s not wasting his time a minute longer. It’s clear there’s nothing else for him in this conversation. He marches towards the door, and only in his one-track minded rage does he manage to ignore what he hears her murmur next.

“...You know what? I do know what you really are. Kotaro...”

And as his fist crashes through the wall...

“...You’re just mean.”

...Things are actually going a lot better for Kiyoshi than he’d expected them to.

His mom heads out in early January, as expected. And it sends sheer terror running down his spine. But as he lays awake late at night, staring up at the ceiling... Makoto shoots him a text with a dumb joke or pun, and he gets his mind off of it for just a moment.

They text for hours, knowing they’ll regret it in the morning. But when Makoto shows up to school looking like he’s been hit by a bus, he never blames Kiyoshi. Instead, he punches him on the shoulder, calls him a dork, and repeats some ridiculous in-joke from the night before.

Fumiko shows her care in her own way. Kiyoshi lets her know soon after Makoto. What sort of friend would he be if he didn’t? They don’t keep secrets. And anyways, he knows he needs her support. She makes him half-burnt homemade cookies, admitting they’re nothing special, but hoping he likes them anyways. And when she catches him staring at the ground, or gently fiddling with his own hands, she places a hand on his shoulder and promises him that everything is going to be okay.
Mom calls from the airport. Sends him goofy selfies and gossips about the dumb agent seated next to her on the plane. Dad reminds her that this isn’t a vacation, and that she needs to be careful, but she shrugs him off and reminds him that she’s been embarking on dangerous missions since before they even met. She’ll be fine.

She Facetimes them from her destination, and cheekily sticks her tongue out at Dad. Demands to hear about Kiyoshi’s school day, and throws a fit when Taro photobombs the camera. But as soon as the ‘dumb mutt’’s dealt with, she reminds them she loves them, and that she’ll be seeing them before they even know it.

“I know,” Karasuma says with an assured look.

“...I know,” Kiyoshi repeats, trying to muster up some of that same courage.

Fumiko and Makoto run for class representatives. And they end up winning the position with relative ease. Kiyoshi doesn’t participate in the whole ‘candidate’ thing, (God, he thinks he would rather lose his mind) but he has a good time helping them campaign. It’s a nice distraction from everything else going on in his life, and the two of them seem to appreciate it.

Fumiko especially. Kiyoshi finds himself downright taken aback by the passion she shows for the position. And when she gives her speech, declaring proudly that she’s going to become a teacher again, he’s weirdly happy for her. She’s always been a pretty introverted, uninterested person, and so it makes him happy to see her finally find something she feels so strongly about.

He feels a little weird when she asks to talk with Makoto alone, but he gets it... mostly. He’s sure it’s another Korosensei or Aguri or whatever thing. AKA none of his business. And although he feels a little lonely beginning the trek down the mountain on his own, when he glances over his shoulder and catches sight of the two of them smiling and laughing on the roof, he’s just happy to see them happy.

Sure, he doesn’t know what they’re talking about. But… maybe he doesn’t always have to.

Besides, they don’t keep him waiting long. As promised, they regroup with him at the base of the mountain. And Fumiko takes him by the shoulder, bouncing from foot to foot, and telling him just what they’ve decided on.

“Teachers. The two of you, huh?” He can… almost see it. Maybe a bit of an outlandish duo, but he thinks they could do a pretty good job! After all: They’re both smart… empathetic, and they work best as a pair.

“I say go for it!” he responds. “That’s awesome, you two!”

And he’s happy for them. Like… really happy. Not the jealous sort of happy or the halfhearted sort. He doesn’t want part in that. Again: he is way too bad with people. So it’s not like he’s being excluded. They are not excluding him. They’re just trusting him enough to let him know their hopes for the future. And there is no higher honor.

...It’s starting to feel like they’re part of something so important. Something so cosmic and beyond them. But the more Kiyoshi watches them chat about it: Talking in low whispers and speaking each other’s ‘old names,’ the more he thinks he’s fine with not being a direct part of that. He’ll never be like them. But… that’s okay. He’s himself. And he’s starting to finally accept that.

Who cares if he doesn’t have some heroic secret identity? Makoto ruffles his hair, and Fumiko shares a snide remark. And Kiyoshi knows he’s loved all the same.
He’s really lucky to have them. He never thought he’d be able to feel this way about people. That they could have things he didn’t, and that he could look at them without envy. Without self-loathing or anger. But less and less he feels bad about himself in comparison to his friends. Because they do everything in their power to make him feel like a hero in his own right.

Home is still weird, but that’s okay. He arrives, greets his dad, and pretends things aren’t awkward between them. He crouches down to scratch Taro behind the ears and lets the dog trot after him into his room. They lay back on the bed, and he spends the afternoon screwing around on his Nintendo Verse and practicing deep breathing.

He and Dad make small talk over dinner. It’s awkward… stilted… like two old friends who haven’t talked in years. Except they’re not friends. He’s his son. And he still doesn’t know what to say. But Dad slides Taro a bit of his plate, hoping Kiyoshi won’t call him out. And when he recites a small, funny story about Mom, Kiyoshi almost swears he catches a smile on his face. Perhaps one he’s hoping his son just won’t notice, either.

Kiyoshi actually goes to bed with a pretty good feeling. Not perfect, but… good. Fumiko texts him goodnight, and Makoto sends him a selfie with the cat. His mind drifts back to mom, but… at least he knows he’s loved. And as he stares up at the ceiling, trying his best to drift off into sleep, he decides maybe… just maybe… things will be okay.

...
until his throat burns raw. At the top of his lungs and with all of his heart and all of his demons manifested for the world to see.

Collapse. Of the world around him, and of the pristine white building. Debris clouding the air and filling his lungs. The sickening crack of a support beam as the roof falls in and the walls crumble and the monster laughs. It laughs and laughs and laughs because it’s it’s turn to laugh and everything is over. Another scream, and this time it’s not sewn by the seeds of his own rage, but rather his adversary’s unending fury. Gunshots and screaming and blood and so much blood. And it’s not his. Not yet. But it locks eyes with him and it doesn’t need to speak to say “You're next.”

“KILL IT! JUST KILL IT ALREADY!”

Collapse. Of his mind and his thoughts and everything he’d thought he could grasp. He paces in circles and growls under his breath and puts another hole in the wall. The doctors shriek and reprimand him and tell him he can’t - He can’t do that. But no-one tells him what to do and so he grabs them the collar and pulls them in close and lets them know that they will never understand what he’s lost.

Revenge-minded. No - obsessed. It’s the only face he can make out in his mind. And it fills him with hate. The creature laughs and the building and his mind collapse, and all he has left is vengeance. He paces in circles. And when he punches a hole in his own wall, none of the scientists reprimand him.

“At least…” he hears one of the survivors whisper in a low, raspy tone. “…He isn’t touching us anymore…”

Of course not. Never. The sheer narcissism - The audacity of assuming they’d ever be worth enough to earn his fury. No-one - no-one except that beast in misery could ever sate his rage.

It hadn’t always been that way. Once, any target had worked to satisfy the flame inside his chest. One out of line comment or ignorant idea or wrong look. Simply being there. The wrong time. Collarbones wrapped in palm and sputtering for breath and kicking desperately in some attempt to fight back. Claws raked across shoulders and feet brought down - stomping and kicking upon the back of necks.

Euphoria. Catharsis and recognition. Because they know just what he’s capable of. And they fear him.

...Collapse. Of a ribcage beneath his fist, and watery eyes, staring up at his own, as if asking “How could you do this to me?”

The answer is no more satisfying than an empty “Just because I could.”

That night, Kiyoshi dreams of collapse. And when he awakes, breathing raggedly… afraid of the things he’s seen and the things he’s said and the things he knows… petrified, unable to move, and caught up in the clutches of sleep paralysis… wanting to reach up and cover his eyes and scream at the top of his lungs and claw at his skin and hurt someone and hurt himself and cry, he swears he feels one last thing collapse.

...The heart inside his chest.

Chapter End Notes
You know, there’s this story idea I had in the third grade or so. I’m not sure how many of you know this, but I was raised pretty religious. Like… super religious. Even so, sitting somewhere in a third grade writing class, I suppose I wasn’t too into the idea of innate evil, because I asked myself, “What if there was a story where the antichrist was born… but he was good?”

I dunno if this, like, theoretical antichrist just didn’t KNOW he was the antichrist, and defied his nature because of that, or if he KNEW he was the antichrist, and decided he wanted to be good anyways. That WAS like eleven years ago. But that sure was an idea I had once. I never did anything with it. And honestly, it turns out I didn’t need to. A lot of media has already explored similar concepts. Iirc Good Omens looks into the concept? But that’s besides the point. I’m not here to talk about the antichrist.

I’m here to talk about the idea of innate goodness.

I’m not sure I believe in it, or innate evil, either, for that matter. It’s something I’ve thought about a lot ever since I was a little kid, though, and I think it’s always seeped into my writing.

But I suppose that’s all besides the point and what I’m really trying to say is.

GOTTEM!

If you’re wondering “Did what I think just happened SERIOUSLY HAPPEN?” the answer is yes. And I’d apologize if I were even remotely sorry, but I’m not. I’ve spent the past almost-a-year building up the moral quandaries of questions like “are we responsible for our actions in a past life?” through characters like Makoto and “just how much are we allowed to change as people over those lives?” through characters like Fumiko. But we’ve never quite found an answer. Not yet. Through one, horrible revelation, and one, terrible, final arc, I think I’m finally ready to answer those questions for good, and wrap them up with a nice little bow, to boot.

I know half of you are probably about to kill me. Literally murder me. Reach through the screen and choke me half to death. But before you slam that unfollow button, I want to make one simple request of you all:

Trust me.
If you’ve doubted anything in this fic before... Nagisa’s polyamorous relationship... The abuse narrative... Fumiko’s past life. And you’re still here, then please trust me. I fully intend to do this topic justice. I don’t intend to sympathize any abusers (To be truthful, I don’t even LIKE that character. This isn’t REALLY about him), nor do I intend to play with your emotions for the sake of playing with them. This is all leading towards something. Towards the ultimate tying-together of this story’s themes and I promise it’ll be worth it, even if you’re probably in shock right now.

...If it makes you feel any better, so is Kiyoshi.

One final reassurance before I pop out of this author’s note and run like hell: His “heart collapsing” does not mean Kiyoshi just turned evil, or just lost his empathy. It means he’s just been crushed. Because every hope he’d had towards his future or himself collapsed in one fell swoop.

Fun stuff! Can’t wait for the “baby boy” all of you have loved for the past 30 chapters to have to confront THAT monumental grievance. But in the meantime, I hope you enjoyed, and I’ll see you all in a week!

(...Some songs that helped me write this chapter were The Election of 1800, Nonstop, and Aaron Burr, Sir from Hamilton, The Competition by Kimya Dawson, For Forever from Dear Evan Hansen, Defying Gravity from Wicked, Strawberry Blonde by Mitski, In My Mind by Amanda Palmer, Something Is Not Right With Me by Cold War Kids, and, of course, Wolf In Sheep’s Clothing by Set It Off.)
Chapter Notes

Warning for discussion of abuse and a brief paragraph about suicidal thoughts in this chapter! You know the deal: Tread carefully.

Murphy’s law states that if something can go wrong, it will go wrong. And to any optimists, this may seem like a rather negative worldview to hold. But for someone who’s only 13, Kiyoshi’s actually pretty well acquainted with the world... and he knows within the deepest recesses of his soul that, if for no-one else, Murphy’s law at least applies to him.

He was born one month prematurely, and to a family that wouldn’t be around for most of his major milestones. At age 3, he received Taro: a silky white Samoyed for a birthday gift, and approximately one month later Taro just about bit his hand off for one too many curious tuggings of his tail. At age 4, to his complete and utter surprise, he was the most popular kid in his kindergarten class.

“You know how to work with people,” his mom had said cheekily. “You must have gotten it from me.”

But by age five, they had gotten bored of him. And in a flash, most of what his mom had addressed as his ‘groupies’ had vanished.

The rest of his life has been much the same. Through Elementary school, and up until the start of Junior High, he’s always felt like happiness has been held ever so slightly from his reach. Like he’s a mouse on a wheel... running in circles, never once realizing he's as far from his destination as he started.

Dad missed his elementary school graduation, and he’d never really kept a consistent friend group in grades one through six. He was born with a ‘genuinely troubling’ genetic disposition towards anxiety, and a life that only seemed to amplify it. Not once - Not twice - But thrice he’s knocked out shiny Pokemon, and it seems like every time he starts to get attached to a jacket or pair of jeans, he inevitably tears a hole in them.

His mother’s overseas risking her life, and more often than not the door hits him on the way out. Yes, in both major and minor aspects, Kiyoshi’s luck is fucking terrible.

But this… this is a new low!

He’d really started to believe things were finally going to be okay.

He knows that’s his fault. He shouldn’t have gotten his hopes up. He knows better than that by now. But Fumiko… Makoto… they’d made him dream. They’d made him laugh. Had it really been so bad to just believe for one second?

( ‘Yes,’ he thinks, and he knows it without a doubt... feels bile rise in his throat. ‘Had you seriously thought the three of you could be happy together?’ )
Fighting the urge to throw up, he attempts to focus on wiggling his fingers. He can’t think about it... what he’d seen. What he’d done. (No. Nononono.) He’s locked deep in the clutches of sleep paralysis. He’s not in his right mind. Shadows dance in the corner of his eye. If he throws up now, he might just very well suffocate himself.

(...Maybe he deserves it.)

‘What was that?’ he asks himself, only to be met with. ‘No. Not now. Anytime but now. You know you can’t do this now.’ He can’t panic. He can’t freak out. He can’t think. He can’t face it. He won’t face it.

‘Don’t act like you don’t already know.’

No. Nonononono. Shut up. Shut up. Just breathe. He can breathe, can’t he? What is it his mother had taught him? When he’d first started having these episodes? Just wiggle your fingers... focus on something small. You’ll wake before you know it.

He can’t. They won’t. They won’t move. No matter what he does. Why!? Why won’t they move!?

His breathing quickens. He knows that goes against everything she taught him, but does that really matter anymore? With what he’s seen?

‘You don’t know that it meant anything,’ he thinks.

‘Yes. You do. And you’ve always known.’

No! He hasn’t! Shut up!

‘Then why have you always agreed you deserve to suffer!?’

The shadows are creeping closer. Growing tendrils and eyes. But those aren’t what scare him. Not really. Even as his heart races and his fingers lay still... what really scares him is the way he swears he catches the ghost of a familiar smile.

A familiar face. A familiar laugh. A comforting presence. Where has it gone!?

A weight on his chest. A burning in his eyes. A maniacal laugh, and it’s not his own. He feels something gently press against the back of his hand. But suddenly, the warmth isn’t so comforting.

“What? Are you scared, Kiyoshi?”

...He’s always been, hasn’t he!? Of Korosensei!? Of Makoto!? Of the sleep paralysis demon stalking the corners of his childhood bedroom and the sound of that low, deadly laugh? Makoto slams his palm on Kiyoshi’s desk and says ‘we’re gonna be partners now,’ but Kiyoshi looks straight past him. Sees what lurks beneath.

‘I’m Korosensei,’ he says one day over ramen. And Kiyoshi rolls his eyes. His parents’ coworker? (The beast?) This little boy? It’s just not likely. It’s just not possible. A delusion. That’s all.

That’s what he tells himself.

Makoto brings his hands together during the sports festival. And an ear-shattering clap rings out. Kiyoshi stares, eyes wide and posture stiff. And he finds it that he can’t move then, either. That’s the first time he realizes what Makoto’s capable of.
That’s the first time he’s SCARED of him.

...When had been the second?

He can’t remember. He’s lightheaded. He feels unwell. And he just wants to move. Please! Just let him move!

Another soft laugh.

He can’t breathe. He can’t breathe. He can’t breathe. Heart monitors are beeping and the ceiling is a plain white and he can’t breathe. The monster creeps closer, and a claustrophobic feeling sets in. Kiyoshi wants to claw at the bedsheets. At his eyelids. At his chest. But he can’t. He doesn’t. He can’t breathe.

The moon unit. It had been the moon unit. Nagisa had shared what Korosensei had done, and Kiyoshi had felt empty. A kill count... of thousands. Makoto couldn’t really be capable of that, could he?

(The building collapses, and the victims shriek. Her body lays lifeless, and he feels the worst pain he’s ever felt before his vision goes to black.)

Oh. He could. He most certainly could. And Kiyoshi had known it. Even back then. He’d glanced at Makoto... at his classmates... At Fumiko... And wondered how no-one had seen what he’d seen.

(Because he’d been WRONG!)

...Seen the danger lurking behind that boy’s smile.

“I’ll protect you,” Makoto had said, laying right beside him in this same bed. “From the demons, I mean. ‘Cuz we’re friends now.”

Kiyoshi wishes he could say Makoto was nowhere to be seen right now. But he is. Oh... but he is.

The beast creeps closer. Brushes a finger mockingly past his cheek.

“I could do it all again, you know,” it hisses, its voice a foul snicker. “I could kill you. I could maim you. I could take it all from you. And you know what the best part is?” It slinks closer, crouching menacingly beside his sleeping form. “You’d finally know you deserve it.”

Kiyoshi’s blood runs cold. His breath hitches and his heart pounds and the creature grins. Its jagged teeth glint in the light of the moon. Its eyes glow bright. And he can’t make it out. He can’t make it out. Whose face is that? Looking at him? The man in the lab all those years ago, muscle writhing under his skin...? The creature, face distorted pitch black with rage, and veins throbbing with its heartbeat? Or his best friend, looking at him with teary eyes and begging to just feel safe.

‘I don’t know,’ Kiyoshi thinks, choking back a sob. ‘I don’t know!’

Maybe it doesn’t matter. Who he’s looking at. They’re all one and the same, aren’t they? The terrifying beast and the boy who hides his weakness? The man who looks at him with those dead eyes, as if challenging him to ‘do his worst,’ and his companion, who dared to ask of him “Are you afraid of me?”

(Yes. The answer is a resounding yes.)
Because they all grin. They all smile. And it never once falters. Behind that toothy expression lies a psyche wracked with pain. Wartorn worlds and human experimentation. Lost loves and assassinations and unfair goodbyes. Angry fathers and repressed memories. The question of ‘will I ever be what I once was?’ swirling in mind like a goddamn tornado. But you’d never know. Not with that smile. Not unless you looked ever so carefully, and watched the cracks splinter out from his alibi like veins marred bright red.

“It’s… it’s like I was back there again,” he sobs, rocking back and forth on the grass outside the school. His face is contorted into a grimace, and his arms are scratched raw. “That… I was that person. And that there was nothing I could do to save myself-”

Steel restraints round his wrists, neck, and ankles. When his hands start to writhe, they lock those up, too.

“Like I was being destroyed from the inside out-”

The Reaper had never cried. Makoto does. He sobs into his hands and wipes his runny nose on his elbow. Kiyoshi wonders what the Reaper had felt. Kiyoshi wonders if he’d wanted to cry, too.

“What if… what if that guy comes looking for me?” Makoto asks, his voice a breathless whisper.

“No,” Fumiko says, like she knows anything at all.

“He loved doing that to me! He loved hurting me! What if… what if he hunts me down? What if he finds me? What if he wants to make me pay?” He stops for a moment to incoherently weep, unable to catch his breath at the mere thought of it. “What if he’s right? What if I deserve it? What if I’m always supposed to feel that way because I enjoyed hurting people, too?”

Kiyoshi stares, eyes wide, and mouth agape. The Reaper tears apart dozens of bodies and lives on March 13th, 2014, and Kiyoshi leans in close, fist clenched and expression stern.

“You don’t. I just know you don’t. You’re a good person, Makoto,“

Maybe he doesn’t know anything, either.

“I’ll protect you. I promise.”

He tells Makoto to listen to the birds. To feel the grass between his fingers, then look at his face. “We weren’t back there, were we?” he asks. “In the lab. We weren’t with you.”

She laughs at the test subject again and his blood boils. He pounds his fist against the glass and smacks her face. Hard.

“No,” Makoto says with half a laugh. “...You guys weren’t born yet.”

“How could you trick me like that?” he beast asks, a snide, fake sadness to its tone. “How could you lie to me, Kiyoshi?”

“I didn’t know,” Kiyoshi wants to whimper. “I didn’t know-”

The shadows creep closer. The pressure grows stronger, crushing his ribcage and lungs.

“How could you say you were my friend? After everything you did to me?”

‘I didn’t know! I DIDN’T KNOW!’
He wants to scream. At the top of his lungs and for dear life and just to hear *any other sound*. But he can’t. He *can’t* scream. His body’s frozen, and his heart is, too. He doesn’t think he would, even if he could.

He still remembers what his own scream sounded like. Back then. The scream that ran his throat ragged and made his loved ones cower. How scary he’d sounded. How *evil*.

...Just how scary would he sound if he screamed now?

Instead, he shuts his eyes tight. *‘Please, Makoto,’* he begs. *‘I’m sorry. I didn’t know. I didn’t mean to. I’m sorry—’*

*“Oh yes. You did. You knew exactly what you were doing. And you *loved it.*”*

Even with eyes closed, he can feel the monster’s breath on his face.

*‘I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I don’t want to hurt you—’*

*“Oh, Kiyoshi,”* the beast chides, it’s voice saccharine. *“...But you already have.”*

He can’t rid that smile from his mind. That horrible, sickening, mockery of a smile! He wants to claw at his head and scratch at his eyes and - Anything! Anything to get rid of it!

*‘Please,’* he begs, mind desperate. *‘Please.’*

He knows that Makoto - that Korosensei could do anything he wanted to him, and that he’d without a doubt deserve it. But even so, the thought makes his blood run cold. He’s scared. He’s scared!

*‘I’ll do anything.’*

*“Say it.”*

Kiyoshi’s lip quivers. Tears run down his cheeks. The monster grins.

*‘What?’*

*“Say it. Say who you are. Say what you did to me. To your best friend. *Admit it.*”*

*‘No,’* Kiyoshi thinks, heart pounding in his ears. *‘Not that. Anything but that.’*

*“Tell me you recognized what you saw. Tell me you knew those faces. That you *knew* those scenarios. And you *know* who did those things.”*

No. *Nononono*. It’s not true! *He doesn’t want to believe it’s true!* That’s not him! *He doesn’t want that to be him!*

*“TELL ME IT WAS YOU!”*

The creature’s upon him, it’s breath hot in his face. The shadows slink in like tendrils, and the tightness in his chest worsens. He knows it’s not real... but all the same, he briefly wonders if he’s going to die. And even worse, he wonders if he’d somehow deserve it.

...Because the beast is right. Because the victim is right. Because his *best friend* is right. He *does* recognize those faces. The ones he’d seen in his dream. He *recognizes* the beast ravaging the
building and the man vomiting blood and the woman lying bruised on the floor. And he’s seen
them before... in none other than Aguri Yukimura’s scrapbook, smiling next to a bogeyman
covered up by sticky notes.

They hadn’t known what was coming for them then... or maybe they had. Kiyoshi doesn’t know.
But Fumiko and Makoto most certainly hadn’t. He still remembers the way Makoto had sobbed
outside the school; gently rocking himself back and forth as he just begged to feel safe... the way
Kayano had recounted Aguri’s pain. “Sometimes, I think she thought she deserved it.” He wonders
which nights Fumiko has lied awake, staring up at the ceiling with her own monsters to battle.

...He wonders how he couldn’t have known that’s his fault.

Because it is, isn’t it!? He’s pretended it’s not and pretended he’s good and pretended everything’s
okay! But it’s not okay! And it will never be okay again. Because he feels some form of residual
anger - residual fear and residual hubris in his chest-- That which he so desperately wishes wasn’t
his own, and he sobs.

Because he doesn’t want to be this person. He doesn’t want to hurt anyone. But he already has.
Beyond belief. Because he’s scared of Korosensei. Because his eyes are mismatched and he likes
science and he lays awake at night wishing he could move! Because he’s a bastard. And some part
of him knows! Has always known!

He’s... he’s... he’s-!

“SAY IT!”

'I'm Yanagisawa! I'm Kotaro Yanagisawa!'

He shrieks it. At the top of his lungs and through sheer terror. At least... that's what he thinks.
When he bolts awake, clawing at the bedsheets, he realizes none of that had been real. Of course it
hadn’t. He hyperventilates... sobs softly, and looks around his room.

The beast has vanished. Korosensei’s gone. But it does little to ease the aching in his chest.
Because he's said it. And he'd believed it. And he hates it.

...All he’d wanted was to like himself. Now he doesn’t think he ever will.

It makes his body shake. Makes his hands tremble and his eyes water and his heart pound. As he
gently flexes his fingers... staring at the wall across the room, he relishes in his ability to move,
before wondering if that's an honor he maybe doesn't deserve, either.

...He doesn’t know. He doesn’t fucking know, and he maybe never will. And that scares him.
More than anything. Because he thinks he was finally starting to find a place where he belonged.
But now it is never going to be home again.

He shuts his eyes tight, desperately pawing at his tears with a shaky fist. And as he feels his chest
sink... feels his hopes deflate, and feels the guilt engulf him, more than anything, he just wants to
scream.

But he doesn’t. He doesn’t scream. At the risk of scaring his father, or scaring his fucking self, he
doesn’t scream. He doesn’t stand, he doesn’t plow his fist through the wall, and he most certainly
doesn’t scream.

Instead, Kiyoshi buries his face in his hands and he weeps.
Weeps softly... hoping no-one will hear him. Weeps weakly, because any urge to fight has seeped from his body. And weeps so hard it wracks his chest, because he’s a liar. And he’s bad. And no-one is ever going to trust him again.

...Kiyoshi weeps because Korosensei isn’t here. Because Makoto’s not here, and neither is The Reaper. The monitor doesn’t beep, and the walls don’t come crashing in. Cicadas chirp gently outside, and he hears a scream in his mind. Not that of his own, but of a woman who’d more than anything just wanted to love and be loved.

Kiyoshi weeps, because with the beast gone, he finally knows for certain that the only real monster that’s ever set foot in his room is himself.

Kiyoshi doesn’t sleep a wink that night. Nevertheless, he prepares himself to meet up with everyone at Nagisa’s place in the morning. He’d hate to give it away that anything is wrong. To make his ‘friends’ or ‘family’ worry. This is his burden to bear. His monster to confront. He doesn’t want anyone else’s concern. Not when he knows he doesn’t deserve it.

He hauls himself out of bed, limbs feeling heavy. He almost wonders if he’d caught the Flu. It is that time of the year, after all. His head does pound. He almost smiles at the thought. ‘Yes, that would be nice.’ He decides... if this was all some fever-induced nightmare. But when he presses his fingers to his temple and doesn’t feel heat, he knows it’s not.

...He knows he’s doomed.

He walks towards the bathroom, splashes water on his face, and hopes it’ll do something to reduce the bags under his eyes. But when he looks at himself in the mirror and meets his mismatched eyes, he decides it hadn’t. He looks like he’s been hit by a bus. Some part of him almost wishes he had been.

‘It’s okay,’ he tries to reassure himself. ‘I mean... you don’t know for certain. It was... it was just one bad dream.’

His whole goddamn life is starting to feel like a bad dream at this point.

He slips into his clothes. Out of his pajamas, and into something much more apt to ‘greet the day’ with. He stares down the stairs for what feels like an eternity, before descending down towards the hallway or towards hell or wherever they may lead.

His father’s waiting for him in the kitchen.

They don’t talk. They never have. Dad sends him these concerned, sideways, glances, like he knows something is wrong. But he doesn’t voice it. For once, Kiyoshi’s thankful he doesn’t. Instead, he simply nurses a cup of coffee as they sit in silence.

“Have a fun time with your friends,” he says with an awkward cough. “I’ve... heard you’ve been doing well.”

“Mmm,” Kiyoshi says blankly. “I will.”

They don’t hug on the way out.

He meets up with Fumiko outside her house. She’s already waiting when he arrives. She gives him a big wave, skipping over to meet him and instantly digging into some topic or another. Any other time, Kiyoshi would be happy to see her acting so open. But this morning he can hardly make out
her words.

“. . . . I heard from Makoto that miss Nao . . . . Do you think she got into something?”

“Maybe,” Kiyoshi replies halfheartedly. ‘Maybes’ and ‘mm-hms’ make up most of his side of the conversation. He knows it’s suspicious; giving her halfhearted replies and sideways smiles, but when she speaks his sides simply ache. She has no idea... what he saw last night... what he did. She thinks he’s her friend.

He wishes he could be. It’s not that he hates her. Maybe he did back then. He doesn’t know. But he doesn’t hate her. He doesn’t believe those things he’d thought. At least… he doesn’t think so. But even just remembering them - What it felt like… it makes him wonder if some things are simply too broken to ever fix-

‘No. No. No,’ he reminds himself, shaking his head. ‘You don’t know that yet. Not for certain. You could always just be scaring yourself. It was one bad dream. You don’t have the proof. You don’t have the facts.’

...But life is about a lot more than proof and facts. And he knows what he feels when he meets her smiling face.

“. . . .Are you okay?” She asks rather suddenly. She sends a nervous glance over her shoulder as she leads the way. “You seem . . . . weird today.”

Kiyoshi almost trips over the sidewalk as she speaks. Straightening up quickly, he brushes himself off and nods. “Of course I’m okay,” he reassures. “Just… had a long night.”

That’s an understatement.

Fumiko’s brow furrows with concern. And Kiyoshi can see her making that same face at him... in his dreams. In his nightmares. She slows down a bit, sticking closer to his side. She places a reassuring hand on his shoulder.

He jolts, tearing himself away. Staring at Fumiko with half-shocked, half-apologetic eyes, he sidesteps away, nervously admitting that he’s maybe not in the mood to be touched today.

She looks surprised, but quickly nods. “Of course. I’m sorry. I should have asked.”

She’s sorry. She’s sorry. She’s the one apologizing. If it weren’t so horrible, Kiyoshi thinks he’d laugh.

“It’s fine.”

(She apologizes, and he does a whole lot more than tap her on the shoulder.)

It’s not fine.

“. . . .Nightmares?” she asks.

And it takes him a whole ten seconds to realize she’s addressing him. Looking at her with these big blank eyes, he gives another “Mm. How could you tell?”

“You look like, shit. That’s how,” Fumiko responds. “Pardon me for the language, but... it’s true. Did you get any sleep?”
“Hardly,” Kiyoshi admits.

“Try not to . . . . . pass out at Shiota-sensei’s place.” At first he thinks it’s a command. But when his gaze drifts to meet Fumiko’s eyes and he spots her cheeky grin, he realizes it’s a joke. She’s joking with him... like nothing is wrong. “Makoto and I would hate to have to . . . . . tuck you in.”

...She really doesn’t know.

He could say it now. He probably should. She deserves to know, doesn’t she? Now that would put an end to the amiability in a split second. But when he hears her laugh at her own joke, he knows he just doesn’t have the heart to. What could he possibly say? That the person she’s trusted all these months - the person she’s welcomed into her heart - bears the sins of the monster that lurks in her nightmares?

It’s funny. That even this cold, rotten heart is too much of a coward to let her look at him with scorn.

It takes all of his effort not to cry... to shakily gulp, and ball his fists tight and breathe steady. Because his life is over and his dreams are dashed and he’d never even known until now. Because Fumiko’s still treating him like her best friend and looking at him with those naive eyes and trying to cheer him up.

She jokes and tries to make him laugh and asks ‘are you sure you’re really okay?’ and hangs close to his side. And she can call that whatever she wants, but he knows it’s an attempt to cheer him up.

She’s been trying extra hard for him lately. Ever since he confided in her in the teacher’s lounge. “I just don’t want to be left alone,” he’d said. “I’m scared.” But now he thinks if given the choice, being left alone is all he could possibly want.

He wants to appreciate that kindness. He wants to let it work! But he can’t! He just can’t when he meets those eyes and he remembers a different sort of balled fist. He can’t when he hears that laugh, and remembers the way it petered off as he entered the room. He can’t when he doesn’t deserve it!

Fumiko skips by his side and Aguri bleeds out on the floor. There’s a bruise the size of a grapefruit on her temple and she’s not dying yet, but she may as well be. She spits out blood, clutching at her forehead, before turning to look up at him with watery eyes.

“...I wish I could understand you.”

And Kiyoshi grits his teeth. Shakes his head and growls. Why does he feel so bad!? It’s not his right! He’s not the real victim here!

Fumiko stops in place and Aguri struggles to her feet. As Fumiko looks over at him once more, genuine concern in her eyes, Aguri props herself up on the wall with shaky breaths.

“Are you sure? That that’s it?” Fumiko asks. “You don’t need to talk about it if you don’t want to, but it seems like... something more is on your mind. Are you okay? Like... for real, Kiyoshi. I don't wanna pry, but... I’m worried about you. You’ve always been there for me. The least I can do is repay the favor.”

It takes all of Aguri’s strength not to collapse right there and then. She’d never admit it, but he can tell from the way her knees shake.

“I don’t know,” he admits. “I don’t know if I’m okay. But... it’s fine. I don’t want to talk about it.
So please. Don’t worry. About… about me.”

Fumiko frowns, taking another step closer to him. She doesn’t reach out to touch him again, but she does stick close.

“…How could I not?” she asks. “We’re friends, Kiyoshi. Don’t ask that of me.”

And pushed to her limit, Aguri screams through tears “I just want to care about you! Why!? Why won’t you let me!?”

“Anything you need,” Fumiko says, reaching out a hand. “I’m here for you. No matter what.”

She she smiles. Fumiko smiles and Aguri screams. Yanagisawa punches a hole through the wall.

And Kiyoshi? Kiyoshi turns tail and runs.

He can’t. He can’t do this. Murmuring a quick thanks, he says he’ll keep that in mind, but that he really needs to go, actually. He’s suddenly feeling… super unwell. Like he might pass out. And that much isn’t a lie, at the very least.

Fumiko watches him with concerned eyes, but she doesn’t stop him as he goes. Instead, she simply asks him to text her later.

“I worry about you, you know.”

...He’s already gone.

He barely remembers the trip home. Just adrenaline and the icy bite of the wind on his cheeks as he speedwalks. He fumbles for his keys with shaky hands, dropping them and swearing under his breath as he attempts to unlock the door. He has to crouch down and swipe them with one hand just to successfully get in. And when he doesn’t see his father waiting for him in the doorway, he’s oddly relieved.

He steps inside, tossing his coat on the rack. He reaches for his shoes and places them aside. Taro trots his way, pointing a curious snout towards him, but Kiyoshi gently shoves it aside, not in the mood. And in a low, hushed voice he asks “Please don’t bark.”

Taro barks. And by the time Kiyoshi’s managed to relock the door, he hears his father’s footsteps traveling down the hall. He bites his lip and starts to speedwalk. Maybe if he’s quick enough to get to his room, he won’t have to-

...Talk.

He just about crashes into his father. Taking a careful step back, Dad watches him curiously. His expression hardly shifts, but he does slightly raise an eyebrow.

“I thought you’d left to go spend time with your friends.”


And it’s not a lie. He thinks he may just throw up right here and now. “Lightheaded, too. I think I may be coming down with the Flu.”

The Flu? The Flu!? What is he thinking? Why is he such a bad liar!? (Unless he’s hiding his true nature. That seems to have come to him so easily.) He doesn’t even have a cough! There’s no way in hell his dad will believe he has the Flu!
Dad reaches a hand out. Places it on his forehead and furrows his brow. “You don’t have a fever,” he admits. But when he feels the way Kiyoshi trembles at his touch, he steps aside. “However… you do look unwell. You should get some rest.”

Kiyoshi lets out a relieved sigh. He steps past his father and into the hallway. As he makes his way towards his room Dad asks him if he’d like anything. A Tylenol? The heating pad? Does he want to take the dog with him? But Kiyoshi declines it all. Something tells him his sickness isn’t something that can be cured with over the counter pills. And the last thing he deserves right now is a dog’s loving embrace.

(...The last thing he deserves right now is a dad who’s willing to pretend he cares.)

The moment he’s alone, the dam breaks. As he fumbles to lock his door, tears trail down his cheeks. And when he flops onto the bed, covering his face with his sheets, he begins to sob. Hiccuping softly under his breath, he wipes at his eyes with the blanket and lets out a hopeless whimper.

What was he thinking!? That he could pretend things were okay!? Nothing is okay! He may very well just be the reincarnate of the worst person on the planet! He spent all of last night dreaming about pummeling his best friend into a bloody heap! He can’t pretend! Not even for a moment!

Even just seeing her - hearing her greet him with such kindness had been enough to reduce him to tears! How is he supposed to react if he sees her cry!? If he hears her scream!? If she trusts him enough to confide in him about the horrible things that were done to her? Could he, the culprit, just stand there with a straight face?

No. Nononononono. And what about Makoto?

He’s going to hate him.

He’s at a loss. He doesn’t know what to do… for the next month or the rest of his life or even for the next five minutes. He doesn’t have a plan. He can't even pretend! His head’s pounding and each anguished sob only makes things worse. He wants to think he’s good. Or at least… okay. He’s… he’s not like that, is he? Not… anymore. But he remembers just how righteous he’d felt back then, and wonders if he’s blindsided now, too.

...If he’s just as bad as ever, and only a little bit better at pretending.

Taro scratches at the door outside, but dad quickly ushers him away. He asks Kiyoshi again if there’s anything he needs, gently jiggling the doorknob. But not willing to be caught with a tear-streaked face, Kiyoshi shakes his head and replies with a simple “No. I’m fine.”

“Okay,” Dad says with an equally as simple tone. “Just let me know if you need anything.”

...He’d said Kiyoshi should rest, hadn’t he? And Kiyoshi briefly considers it. But when he remembers what he just might see, he staunchly decides against it. Even a chance of alleviating his pounding head is not worth the risk of facing those dreams again.

He spends the rest of the day in a haze. On and off crying. He doesn’t bother to use tissues. There are none in his room, and he’d hate to bother his dad. (...Hate to be caught in a moment of weakness.) Besides, he doesn’t mind the raw eyes much, even if they make his heart pound and his blood rush.

(He hates them. He can’t stop looking. In the mirror. At his own frazzled hair and wild, mismatched eyes. Blue and black. Black and blue. Has he ever thought he was ugly before now?)
He briefly tries to use the Verse. But when he hears the triumphant swell of Zelda’s menu music or dares to hover over the colorful icon for Let’s Go Zorua, he feels a sinking feeling in his chest. They’d played these games together, hadn’t they? Maybe… maybe it’s for the best he leaves them alone for now.

(What’s the point in trying to distract himself, anyways? He can’t run forever. This is his crime to face.)

He tries to read. But that’s hardly better. His eyes drift from the words, and his hands tremble as he tries to flip the page. He’s read all of these before, hasn’t he? Norman Mailer wasn’t a great guy. No Longer Human discusses some messed up topics pretty in-depth. Fuhrer Grumman reminds Mrs. Bradley that if her demon of a son behaves out of line, they may just have to put him down. Kiyoshi places his books aside and decides that’s enough reading for today.

He paces a bit. Then paces a lot. Walks circles round his room. And he thinks. Mostly… more than anything he thinks. He doesn’t find an answer. He’s not even sure what question it is he’s asking exactly. He just wanders… and wonders… and decides that maybe there’s something deeply wrong with him and there always has been. He just hadn’t noticed until this moment.

There’s a chemistry kit in the corner of his room. Dad had gotten it for him two Christmases ago. He’s fallen a bit out of love with it since he first got it, but he’d always thought it was cool to see what he could create.

...He doesn’t touch it.

His friends text him. Of course they do. They don’t know the reality of the situation. He stares at their messages for what feels like hours, but when he glances at the clock he realizes it’s hardly even been five minutes.

[1/7/2031 3:16 PM:] [Fumiko] I told you to text me when you got home

[1/7/2031 3:16 PM:] [Fumiko] Are you sure you’re okay?

[1/7/2031 3:31 PM:] [Makoto] Fumiko told me you weren’t feeling well.

[1/7/2031 3:32 PM:] [Makoto] Do you think you got the Flu?

[1/7/2031 3:32 PM:] [Makoto] I can make you soup. I should totally make you soup.


He clicks his tongue and gives them half-hearted nonanswers. “I’m sorry. I’m fine. I just forgot,” and “No, I don’t think I need any soup. Thank you for the offer, though.”

He briefly considers asking Makoto a question. About how he tells the difference. Between what he felt back then and what he feels now.

He tries to google Kotaro Yanagisawa, and he swears he feels a twinge of anger in his gut when he doesn’t even find as little as a Wikipedia page. All the same, he thinks he’s relieved, too. His fingers shake as he scrambles to close the page. And just for good measure, he deletes his history.

He knows no-one will check. But it just feels… dirty. And not in the fun way. Like he’s been tainted irreparably. And he’d like to leave his phone out of that, if possible.
...Makoto has a Wikipedia page.

“Korosensei (????-2015), sometimes spelled Koro-sensei or Koro Sensei, was a monster known most notably for teaching at Kunugigaoka Junior High, threatening to destroy planet Earth, and successfully destroying 70% of the moon. Capable of inhuman feats, it’s theorized he was…”

His eyes drift from the page, just like they did his book. And Kiyoshi’s head spins. He doesn’t like the way it talks about him. Monster isn’t very objective. And sure, the world didn’t know, but he was a person, too.

...He didn’t blow up the moon.

Kiyoshi doesn’t text Makoto. Won’t risk it. What if… what if if Makoto managed to guess? The thought makes him nauseous. If Makoto knew… well, Kiyoshi doesn’t know what on earth he’d do to him.

...It’s funny. Somehow, he’s actually less scared of Makoto now that he knows the truth. Less scared of Korosensei. Before… he’d seen a monster. Blood streaked tiles and a roaring pain. But now he knows the things he’d assumed are untrue. The things he’d assumed are tainted, too. Korosensei’s not a monster. In fact, just like Nagisa’d been saying this entire time, he’s actually pretty nice!

The monster who taught at Kunugigaoka Junior High. The man who’d preen your eyebrows when you tried to stab him. The victim who almost never gave up on anyone. For the most part, he wouldn’t have hurt a fly.

...No. If Korosensei hurt you, that meant you had expended his every other option. If Korosensei hurt you, that meant you had scared him. And most importantly, if Korosensei hurt you that meant you deserved it.

He’s safe… for now. Makoto’s safe. And he always has been. Kiyoshi wishes he hadn’t been too blind to see. But now, it’s a little too late. And when the truth comes out, Makoto might just stop being safe with good reason.

He doesn’t know why he feels so bad. It makes him feel worse... to carry this guilt in his chest. It’s too late, Kiyoshi. It’s too late for that to mean anything. If he’d felt guilty back then, maybe. But the story is written. The book’s long closed. And the people who’d been hurt are left with scars. At this point, all he’s doing is victimizing himself.

He doesn’t deserve guilt. He doesn’t deserve tears. He’s the monster! He’s the bad guy! He’s the wife-beater and Makoto’s torturer! He is not the biggest victim in this story! He’s the victor! He doesn’t GET to feel afraid! He doesn’t GET to feel self-pitying! All he should be feeling right now is accountable!

...But it just turns out ‘accountable’ feels pretty damn bad.

The moon rises at six. Kiyoshi tiptoes to the window, presses his hands to the glass and squints. It takes a bit, but if he looks close enough he can still see the way cracks trail down its surface. The world can pretend to have returned to what it once was, but it turns out it, too, can be broken beyond repair.

Kiyoshi closes the curtain and faces the wall.

‘What am I going to do?’
He shuts his eyes and breathes out through his nose. Balls his fist, unballs it, and thinks he might just burst into tears again. Because he’s thought it over all day, and he’s still no closer to an answer. There’s only one thing he knows for certain, and it does little to ease his nerves:

‘You don’t belong here.’

...With this family. With these friends. He doesn’t know what he’d been thinking up until now, but just like he’d seen the cracks running down the moon, the illusion’s dissipated. This doesn’t belong to him. It never has. He doesn’t deserve these things. He doesn’t deserve this... this love. He hardly even deserves to be alive!

That’s a new thought, too.

Kiyoshi doesn’t think he’s ever been suicidal before.

He’s not always happy with his life... that’s pretty much a given. But he’s never wanted to die. He knows that other people have had it way worse than him. And besides, he’s always been so scared of death. Of the idea of just... vanishing. He may know he’s not worth much, but some selfish part of him has never wanted to disappear.

He wonders what selfish part of him that’s been. A narcissist, obsessed with preserving his legacy, or simply a scared child clinging onto his oldest fears?

...Is there even a difference?

He doesn’t know. But he does briefly consider it. Dying, that is. It would certainly be the easiest on his friends. Then... they’d be safe. Then... they’d never have to know. But when he cracks open the blinds and peers at the ground below, a pit forms in his stomach, and he knows he’s still too much of a coward. Deserving of it or not, he’s never gonna wanna die, is he?


‘The world would be better off without you.’

He... he just can’t, okay!? And it’s not only cowardice! What if... what if he’s worse next time!? What if it’s some cycle that never ends!? He can’t know! And he doesn’t... he doesn’t want to hurt anyone else!

‘Worse? Who’s to say you’re not already worse,’ he asks himself. ‘Who’s to say you’re not the worst you’ll ever be? You’ll never know for certain, Kiyoshi’

He flops down on his bed and stares up at the ceiling. Feels his eyelid gently twitch, and tries to ignore the storm brewing in his chest.

‘You’ll never know for certain, Kotaro.’

...He doesn’t want to make his friends cry.

He knows he probably will, regardless. But not like that. It wouldn’t be any easier on them if he offed himself! If he left them without a reason as to why they’d think they did something wrong. And what about his family? Even if he did tell them the reason, they’d still grieve him. He can’t - he won’t do that to them. He’s already caused them so, so much hurt. He doesn’t want to make things worse! He just wants to... he just wants to...

...He doesn’t know.
The rest of the night feels like a dream, and not a particularly good one. Dad calls him down for dinner; asks him if he’s feeling any better. But he says he’s not and takes dinner upstairs. Dad doesn’t bother him again until it’s time to say goodnight. He stands in the doorway and gives Kiyoshi an awkward smile.

“Sleep well. I hope you feel better soon.”

...Ha.

Kiyoshi doesn’t sleep. He doesn’t want to. He rolls over and he thinks and he cries. Taro watches him curiously, pawing at the door and at his legs. But when he slides into bed and the dog licks his face, he only gives a discontented grunt in response. His cheery eyes and his fluffy fur: they seem to do everything in their power to say ‘I’m sure it’ll be okay.’ But Taro doesn’t understand. And he’ll never understand. So Kiyoshi flips over his pillow, huffs, and whispers “No it won’t, you dumb fucking dog.”

He stands. He paces. He reads some more, and he fiddles absentmindedly with the Verse’s joystick. He buries his face in Taro’s fur. He thinks. And ultimately, when it becomes too much to bear, he packs up the chemistry kit in the corner of his room and shoves it in the back of his closet. It won’t fix a thing, but it simply hurts too much to even see.

Ultimately, he falls asleep somewhere around 6 am. Lets his guard down for one moment, and that’s all it takes. One moment he’s staring at the LED clock blinking diligently on his nightstand, and the next his eyes are closed. He tries to fight it, but with a gentle snore, he drifts off... right on top of Taro.

...Kiyoshi doesn’t dream of horrors. He doesn’t even dream of the uncomfortable. Instead... he dreams of the mundane. Lazy college days, and the feeling of success. Somewhere, another person smiles, and Kiyoshi almost does, too, until he remembers just whomst this ‘success’ belongs to.

“Good work, Yanagisawa!”

“This could be a medical breakthrough!”

“You’re going to do amazing things one day.”

The real monster grins, and brimming with hubris, he decides ‘I think I already have.’

Kiyoshi awakes at nine. His head is pounding. His eyes feel heavy. The curtains remain closed, but he already knows just what he’d see if he dared to toss them aside.

...The result of his success. Mindless destruction, and a world changed for the worse.

Korosensei doesn’t greet him this morning. He can move his fingers. But when he pulls himself, limbs heavy, out of bed, he decides that being alone with his thoughts is somehow just as bad.

He thinks he’s made his decision.

He knows what he has to do.

If he can’t pretend… if it’d be too wrong... And if he can’t die… it would ravage too much, then there’s only one thing left for him to do. He needs to go away.

He can’t be their friend. He can’t be around these people. He needs to cut them off. And now.
Slowly, of course. Not in a way that makes it feel like it’s their fault. It’s all his. All he needs to do is pull away. Make it feel natural. Simply a side effect of growing up. He hates to manipulate them again. Hates to think he’ll cause them any heartache, but it’s the only solution he can see. They’re not safe around him, and he can’t let them know. Selfish as it is, he doesn’t want them to remember him that way.

He’d much rather be a fond memory than the monster that terrorizes their dreams.

Makoto sent him a text forty-five minutes ago. Beside octopus emojis and smiley faces, he asks if Kiyoshi is feeling any better. Does he think he can hang out today?


“Okay,” Makoto replies half a minute later. “I hope you feel better soon. Miss you!”

...Kiyoshi doesn’t respond.

He hopes it won’t hurt too much. That Makoto won’t take it personally. At the very least, he’s glad he has Fumiko by his side. She’ll get him through this. He just knows it. She’s a strong person.

(...Unlike him.)

He doesn’t know what he’ll do. Once he’s out of their lives. He’s never had much of a plan, and he has even less of one now. Maybe... he’ll just disappear entirely. Go somewhere completely alone. Just him and his thoughts. Forever. It won’t fix much... it won’t fix anything. But at the very least it’ll prevent anyone else from being harmed.

On Monday, he meets up with Nagisa. Dad asks him if he’s fine - if he really feels ready to go to school - but he reassures him with a soft “Don’t worry about me.”

He walks the long trek to school alone, and shows up early, stopping at Nagisa’s desk.

...Wonderful, kind, Nagisa. He’s going to lose him, too, isn’t he? He’s going to lose all of them. Dumb Uncle Karma... even Auntie Kayano... they’re never going to want to see him again. After everything they’ve been through...

“You said there was something you wanted to talk about?” Nagisa asks.

“Mmm,” Kiyoshi replies, and the E-Class drowns in the river. “...Please don’t tell anyone I asked this of you... but I think I’d like to have my seat moved.”

Nagisa’s eyebrows just about ascend from his forehead. “Are you sure about that?” he asks. “I mean... I thought... your friends...”


Nagisa relents. Shoulders low...he relents. Tells Kiyoshi he'll arrange it, and reminds him with a tired smile that if he ever needs someone to talk to, his teacher’s here.

“I know,” Kiyoshi says. “And I’ll consider it.”

...He won’t.

He doesn’t need - doesn’t deserve help. And he never will again. On Tuesday morning, Kiyoshi’s new seat is halfway across the room. He’s an ocean apart from the friends he once knew. The friends whom were so hellbent on helping him. And breathing deeply, eyes shut tight, he decides if
he has anything to say about this, then they’re the friends he’ll never know again.

Chapter End Notes

WWWWHHHATT a chapter. Sorry for the angst everyone, but I figured it was pretty long coming with all things considered. It's real mourning hours right now.

I'll be the first to say I took some artistic liberties with sleep paralysis. I've had it before, so I know it's not exactly your sleep paralysis demon picking you apart on a psychological level. But... this is anime fanfiction, I figured I could be a bit self indulgent. Also I figure this goes without saying, but obviously this hallucination isn't connected to the real Korosensei. It's a way of Kiyoshi's mind manifesting his anxieties as he processes the situation.

And WHAT a situation it is. Oh my oh my. Everyone knew this was coming since the end of last chapter, but holy shit is he stuck between a rock and a hard place. Even as the author I have complicated feelings about the scenario. On one hand I feel pity for him because of course I do! He's a 13 year old boy who's just more /scared/ than anything. But at the same time... he did in some ways bring this on himself. I think what's important to understand is that this isn't some foreign monster invading his psyche. This is a part of himself. This is his soul. This is his /past/. If Makoto and Fumiko are allowed to take credit for the good things they did... say "I AM this person," then is he obligated to take accountability for the bad things he did? Say "I can't escape this person?"

...As I said, it's complicated. This is his past catching up with him. There's no doubt about that. The real question on hand is if someone still /deserving/ of that after being turned into an entirely different person. Needless to say this will be explored more. A lot more. There's a lot to dissect. Although I do think something that's important to remember is that no matter how hard this is on Kiyoshi he's never going to be the BIGGEST victim here. A victim, sure, but it's a complicated situation and I don't think he'll ever be as victimized by it as he victimized his own friends. Again: /I/ honestly don't even think this character is deserving of a second chance. But that's what makes it so INTERESTING. Especially considering that person never got his head out of his own ass long enough to realize he deserved to feel guilt. He never ONCE felt bad. Kiyoshi on the other hand very much does.

Kiyoshi KNOWS he's not deserving of this chance. He KNOWS he was TERRIBLE. And he KNOWS he's not the victim. But he feels horrible and victimized anyways. This just makes him feel worse and in turn he spirals. Yeah... he's pretty lost inside of his own head right now.

Anyways I guess the disclaimer I'm trying to make is the point w this chapter wasn't "Boo hoo the poor abuser has it so hard." I know that's not true, you know that's not true, and Kiyoshi knows that's not true. The point was to ask a simple question: "What now?" The point of this arc will never once be to in any way lighten the severity of just how /abhorrent/ those actions were, but rather to ask what identity truly is and if we're capable of creating it for ourselves.

There's a bit in this chapter where Kiyoshi describes Korosensei as "never having hurt
anyone who didn't deserve it." That's a pretty bold fucking claim to make about Korosensei "The Reaper" "Murderer of Thousands" Yukimura, but sure. Whatever you say, buddy. He's not exactly thinking rationally.

With the next chapter we'll be getting a bit back more into everyone else's plots. Obviously Kiyoshi's... breakdown will return, but life doesn't revolve around him. We'll start peeking back into how Nagisa and co are doing /alongside/ Kiyoshi dissecting all this, so don't worry about the tone staying super bleak and mildly suicidal forever. This was definitely a dark chapter, and this is a dark arc, but again: I never want this fic to feel completely /hopeless./ Life will continue onwards (for better or worse) for the rest of our cast.

Some songs that helped me write this chapter were Turning Crimson by IAMX, Oh Ana by Mother Mother, Full Disclosure from Steven Universe, Saint Bernard by Lincoln, and The Draw by Bastille. The song I'd like to give a SPECIAL shoutout to however is Six Feet by Left At London. A friend of mine DM'd it to me a few weeks back like "Haha this is Kiyoshi core!" and I'm STILL mildly destroyed over that.

"Oftentimes I scare my reflection
Sometimes I don't like what it sees
I will find myself alone often
It's common I'll talk to myself
But it wasn't my own voice that told me:

"Don't scream
One word & I'll crash this car
I know that you don't know me
But I know just who you are"

"Don't cry
Weep for who I'll make you hurt
You don't get to go to hell
Till you're 6 feet in the dirt"

...Oof.

Anyways! The next chapter will be up in two weeks, and I hope you enjoyed! As usual, make sure to let me know what you thought, and see you soon! o7
Busy Bee Time

Chapter Notes

Brief trigger warning for a brief medical emergency and a mention of IVs in this chapter! Nothing I’d consider super in depth, but better safe than sorry.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

There’s a lot going on in Nagisa’s life all at once.

As usual, he’s mostly concerned with the kids: making sure they’re doing okay. The start of a new trimester is always hard, especially with the grades from finals rolling in. To destress, he lets them participate in assassination a little more than usual. They can’t go outside much, considering the weather, but there’s a spare classroom from the Kunugigaoka years he clears out to give them some room.

For the most part, they actually seem to be doing pretty well. Spirits are high, and even if he’d ended up feeling a little embarrassed about how little the kids took his ‘class election’ seriously, it does seem to have gotten their minds off of the more serious things. Friend groups are thriving, and when he brings hot cocoa in for the whole class, there’s a smile on every face.

...Almost.

More than anything, he’s worried about Kiyoshi.

He’s not entirely sure what’s going on. But alarm bells have been ringing in his head ever since Kiyoshi first asked to have his seat moved. He seems… quieter lately... close to tears. But when Nagisa tries to coax anything out of him; remind him he has someone to talk to, he clams up completely.

His friends ask why he’d been moved, of course. Nagisa shrugs and says something about how the boy he’d swapped with had been feeling a little lonely at his spot. It’s a piss poor lie, considering the back corner of the classroom is pretty much the loneliest spot on the planet, but they aren’t about to question him. He says he hopes they don’t mind too much.

“No. Of course not,” Makoto says. “We can still hang out with him.”

...He doesn’t let them. He arrives at school late and heads home early. He doesn’t come over on the weekends anymore... says he feels sick. And although his friends hate to doubt him, Nagisa can tell they’re starting to get worried, too.

He’s displaying some pretty textbook symptoms of serious depression. Nagisa wonders if it has to do with his family. Karasuma let the twenty-eight of them know that Irina was heading overseas again. Is Kiyoshi anxious? He’s always struck Nagisa as uncomfortable with his parents’ absence, (How could he NOT be?) but this is a new sort of unhappy. He seems downright tortured.

Nagisa hates the way he dodges questions. Why can’t he see he just wants to help? But the more he pushes, the more Kiyoshi closes himself off. And not wanting to overstep a line, he relents. He knows it’s hard… struggling with your family. And the worst thing is when an adult won’t let up
about your issues. There’s no forcing him. All he can do is let Kiyoshi know he’s there for him. If he trusts him, he’ll come to him when he’s ready.

In the meantime, he makes a mental note. Tells himself that he should call up Karasuma and arrange a meeting if the behavior continues. There’s some things only Kiyoshi’s parents will be able to fix. He loves his students, but there’s no replacing their family. If Kiyoshi’s still seriously worrying him in two weeks, they’re gonna need to have a joint check-in on his mental health.

Because… sure, he’s always struggled. But this is… this is new.

Nagisa spends hours searching for a counselor. It’s hard work. Typically, a teacher is expected to do those sorts of things… deal with their students’ mental health, that is. No counselor wants to work at some backwater school. Not to mention he wants to meet anyone in person and screen them pretty extensively before letting them work with his kids, which… tends to be another turnoff.

Scouring the net he manages to find one or two potential hirees. But one lives all the way over in Nishitokyo, and the other can’t meet for at least a month. He talks to the latter over phone, and gets a pretty decent impression. But he’d like to see her face to face. And more importantly, he’d like to know that this busy schedule is a temporary thing. If she’s getting the job, he wants his kids to be the top priority.

...His pride’s still wounded, just a little bit. That Fumiko even thought he needed this help. He knows she hadn’t meant anything by it, but is there really anything these people can do that he can’t?

“Of course there is,” Karma says with a scoff. “You’re damn good at your job, but you don’t exactly have a psych degree.”

“Maybe I should,” Nagisa admits. “Get one, I mean.”

“No. You shouldn’t,” Karma says with a yawn. “You’re stressed out enough as is.” He reaches over to pinch Nagisa’s cheek. “The last thing you need is more college on top of all that.”

Nagisa pouts. He’s not- He doesn’t - He doesn’t feel nearly as stressed as people keep implying he is. He’s fine. He’s good! He’s great, even! And so what is with that?

“You don’t need to do everything alone, anyways,” Kayano tacks on. “There’s nothing wrong with needing help. We’re a team after all, aren’t we?”

“I know,” Nagisa relents, groaning. “It just feels like… I don’t know- I’m not doing enough.”

“You’re doing more than enough,” Karma and Kayano seem to say at once. “Too much, really!” Kayano huffs.

“Why don’t you let yourself chill for once?” Karma asks.

Why can’t he chill? Why can’t he chill!? Because Kiyoshi- who’s practically family- who he should know better than anyone is on the verge of a mental break and he has no idea how to help! Because Fumiko thinks he’s not doing his job well enough! Because there’s still so much more he wants to do!

...He’s not stressed, though. Reminder: This is not stress. This will never be stress. This is diligence. This is thoughtfulness. He’s doing his job. He’s doing his job well. He’s fine! And he is the opposite of stressed.
“I still think you should consider employing more teachers,” Gakushuu interjects. “...While you’re looking for help - screening people and such, I don’t think it would take that much more time out of your already inane schedule to search for potential hires.”

“I’ve already said I don’t really want t-”

“Yes. I know. You don’t want to break your bond with them. But you’re working yourself to exhaustion. Even if you won’t consider becoming a single subject teacher like the rest of Japan, you should at the very least enroll teachers for eighth and ninth grade.”

“I like teaching them for the three years.”

“Until you start beating on yourself for all the kids you can’t manage to enroll. Please just say you’ll consider it. For me.”

“For us,” Kayano tacks on. “We’re all worried about you. And besides… it’s not like you’d have to stop teaching them. Maybe… all of you could teach a single class over a three year period! Just in the same building! It’s not perfect, but… it’d solve some of your enrollment issues!”

Admittedly, it’s not a terrible idea. An environment for teachers with the same ideals as him would be nice. But how could he be completely certain he could trust these people? His school is pretty much exclusively for vulnerable kids. He’d hate to give people who’d exploit those vulnerabilities any power.

Besides, does he really even have permission to expand the building? That’d require some massive reconstruction. And although he doesn’t completely mind the idea, it’s also not his decision to make. He may teach there, but all of the E-Class owns the building. He’d have to ask for their permission before he went making any crazy changes.

Nevertheless, he says he’ll consider it. And he means it. He may not feel particularly stressed, but he hates to make his family worry about him. And who knows? Maybe… there really are other teachers like him out there. It’s… worth considering.

After this school year is over, of course. He’d hate to spring any sudden changes on the kids in the middle of the trimester.

Kayano kisses his nose. Tells him she’s proud of him. He’s a little embarrassed to be praised for the bare minimum, but all the same, his face flushes pink when she pulls him in close.

He’ll ask the rest of the E-Class about it during the class reunion. They hold one once a year. (On March thirteenth, of course.) It mostly just started as an excuse to keep the building upkept while it wasn’t in use… cleaning and such, but after Nagisa took residence teaching there, it’s become something of a party.

They do different things every year. Once they hosted a massive game of capture the flag. Another time, Ritsu set up goddamn laser tag. And on one particularly sweltering March day they’d even thrown a pool party in the lake out back. It’s a good time... to get together and reminisce. Not everyone can always make it with work and life, and such, but they try their best. They’d hate to let this thing they have fall apart.

...God. Which reminds him: he still needs to get in contact with Megu and Isogai about what they’re doing this year. It’s early January, and they still haven’t formulated a plan. If they ever want to be on top of things, as chief party planners, the ex-class-reps, and the guy who occupies the building, then they should meet up to discuss things soon.
He shoots them a text the next day. Asks if they’re free to meet up sometime soon. It takes a bit of scrambling, but they figure out they should all be free two Thursdays from now. They briefly discuss the idea of chatting over dinner, but Isogai reminds the two of them he does have a baby girl at home. As much as he’d appreciate the break, he’s not one to shirk his responsibilities. And besides, he’d hate to saddle Maehara with all of that.

Isogai’s place it is, then! Works for them. It wouldn’t be the first time they’ve met up there. It’s a reasonable distance from both of their houses, and it’s a nice cozy little place. Besides, there is a baby on the property they need to smother in affection.

“You three wanna come with?” Nagisa asks. “When I head out for party planning, I mean.”

“I wish,” Kayano says with a laugh. “Busy shoot next Thursday. We’re finishing up things on Stray God 2: Fridge Horror. Say hi to Naoko for me, though.”

“Will do,” Nagisa notes.

“Oh man. I wonder how big she is by now. We haven’t seen her since they adopted her, yeah?” Karma asks.

“Mmm,” Nagisa confirms. “In April. Or was it March?” He squints. “...If it was March, it was definitely late March. She hadn’t factored into planning last year.”

“I think it was March, you’re right,” Kayano says. “They announced it at that reunion, remember?”

Oh. Yeah. That’s right. It had been exciting news. It seems like so many of the E-Class are settling down and starting families by now. Of course, it’s not for everyone. Terasaka and Itōna have admitted they think they’d hate having kids, but other families beg to differ. Sugino and Kanzaki are looking into adopting, too. And how old is Chiba and Hayami’s eldest now? Ten? Or is it eleven?

*Good lord!* Before Nagisa even knows it, he’ll be teaching him, won’t he?

...Crazy to think that everyone’s really all grown up.

“I’d love to consider your offer. Isogai is wonderful company,” Gakushuu says. “But admittedly I don’t think I’m the best resource for planning an ‘E-Class Reunion.”

“Yeah, right,” Karma says. “You’d probably sabotage it.”

“Damn right I would.” Gakushuu scoffs. “How about we scratch party hats and try dunce caps instead?”

“Oh, okay,” Nagisa says. “I’ll count you out, too, you menace.”

Nagisa marks off next Thursday in his planner. Right next to finishing up his lesson plan for the
next science unit and going out to grab supplies. It’s beginning to look like a bit of a cluttered mess, but Kiyoshi was right about it being helpful.

He stays up late at night, asking the E-Class if they have any suggestions for the reunion. Mulling over how he wants to go about ‘this’ or ‘that’ in class. He flips through phone books and scrolls down directories, marking off counselors to call in the morning. And he keeps a careful eye on Kiyoshi, thinking about him more and more as he ceases showing up at their house.

...It’s a Friday when he collapses.

He feels a little weird that morning, but it’s nothing out of the ordinary. He gets dressed, straightens his tie, and says goodbye to his spouses on the way out the door. He arrives at school just before seven, and starts the day with a lesson on math. He runs assassination in the backroom, and is maybe halfway through third period when he begins to feel lightheaded.

At first, he tries to ignore it. It wouldn’t be the first time in the past few weeks he’s felt dizzy. But when he steps back to continue teaching and feels a rush of vertigo, he wonders if something is more seriously wrong. Remembering Karma’s cautious words, he bites his lip and begins to make his way over towards his desk. He doesn’t stop talking. He’d hate to worry the kids. A smile still planted firmly on his face, he attempts to cross the room and ignore the heartbeat pounding in his ears. He’s sure he’s fine. He’ll feel better once he sits down.

...He makes it maybe three-fourths of the way there.

Midstep, his vision floods to black. And before he can manage to comment - opening his mouth to speak - he feels his consciousness go with it.

Kiyoshi screams when Nagisa passes out.

It’s sudden - and out of the blue. One moment he’s on his feet, and the next he crumples, collapsing to the floor. There’s a bang as he smacks his head on the desk and the sound of chairs scraping as his classmates rush to stand.

Thankfully for Kiyoshi, no-one seems to notice his outburst amidst the chaos. They’re far too focused on Nagisa’s state.

“Is he alive!?” one classmate asks, to which another smacks him upside the head.

“Of course he’s alive!” they hiss.

“Then why’d he pass out!?”

“Maybe he had a heart attack!” Minki suggests.

“Oh God!”

“No - I - uh… don’t think so-” Kiyoshi interjects. Or at least... tries to. His voice is a whisper amidst the shouting, and he feels a little lightheaded himself. His hands are shaking like hell. “A heart attack’s symptoms wouldn’t display like that. There should have been signs before he-”

“A stroke, then!”

“Ah- I don’t-”

“Heatstroke!” Another classmate suggests, only to be met with a chorus of:
“IN THE MIDDLE OF WINTER!?"

The volume is only growing. And a lump rises in Kiyoshi’s throat as each new suggestion is pitched. His knees are trembling and it takes all his effort to just not to cry. What if… what if something is seriously wrong with Nagisa? What if… what if they lose him?

(What if… what if this has to do with hi-)

No. Now’s not the time. Focus. Focus!

“Someone check his damn pulse already!” Aina demands. “How long has he been out for!?”

“Uh! T-ten seconds, maybe!?” Chiharu pipes up. “Fifteen? I don’t know-!”

Makoto’s already on his feet. Rushing across the classroom, he hauls Nagisa up by the shoulders and preps him against the desk. There’s a streak of blood running down his forehead. But Makoto wastes no time, jabbing at his throat and attempting to find a pulse.

“Let me do that!” Minako hisses, slapping his hand out of the way. “You’re gonna fucking choke him out at this rate!”

“Has… has someone called 119 yet?” Terumi asks. “I really think we should-”

“He has to go to the hospital!?” Chiharu shrieks, his voice drenched in terror.

“Maybe! Look! He’s bleeding!”

“He just hit his head!”

“That’s a bad thing!”

“On it!” Fumiko says, whipping out her phone.

“His… his pulse is fine!” Minako declares. “Or… at least, he has one? I dunno! It’s fast I think. Let me count. W… what is it? Ten seconds then triple that?”

“Six seconds then decuple it, dumbass!” Rikuto hisses.

“D-decuple!?”

“Oh God, what if he dies because we didn’t pay enough attention in math class!?” Rosey wails.

A crowd is gathering around Nagisa. It’s hard to see through the sea of people, but even then Kiyoshi can spot the way tears stream down Makoto’s cheeks. Hiccuping softly, he holds him tight and begs “Please be okay…”

…Kiyoshi doesn’t find it in himself to stand and join the crowd.

“The ambulance is on its way!” Fumiko shouts. “The- the firemen said it should be five minutes!”

She’s not crying. Not like Makoto. But from the way her voice quivers, Kiyoshi can tell she’s close to a complete breakdown as well.

“Five minutes!?” Chiharu cries. “That’s too long! How will it get up the mountain!? W-what if he-?”
“He won’t!” Makoto interrupts, voice a sniffle. “He’s fine. He’s fine. He’s gonna be fine-”

...But he doesn’t sound so certain.

The ambulance is still blocks away, but Kiyoshi swears he already hears sirens going off in his mind.

Minako’s mid-sentence when the crowd steps back and gasps. Something about his heart rate being 110. But he trickles off halfway through his words. Eyes wide, he asks “Shiota-sensei!?”

“Are you okay!?” Kiku demands. “You… you fell really hard!”

“Nagisa!” Makoto cries, his voice a sob.

“Is he up!? I can’t see! I can’t see!” Minki hisses, trying to peer over the crowd.

And neither can Kiyoshi. But as the crowd begins to disperse, and he hears Nagisa’s quiet voice, the view becomes more clear. And with it, the ringing in his ears begins to subside. He clings tight to his desk, a knot still in his stomach as he watches cautiously.

“...A… ah…-” Nagisa says, sitting up. “I’m… I’m fine. I must have just… misstepped.” He says it so nonchalantly, but his voice sounds dazed.

“M-misstepped!?” Yoshito sputters from halfway across the classroom. “You damn well passed out! What the hell are you on about!?”

“Are you sick?” Rosey whimpers, leaning in close. “If… if you’re not okay…-”

“Do you feel a cold sweat?” Misaki demands, her voice stern. “Shortness of breath? Indigestion? What about abdominal pain?”

“No. No-” Nagisa reassures, straightening himself up. Makoto is still clinging to his side like a koala bear. “I’m fine. I feel… fine. I’m sure it’s nothing serious. Please don’t panic.” He breathes out through his nose, wiping at his forehead with the back of his wrist. Emiko hurries to her feet, passing him a tissue, then ten.

...Thankfully, the scrape doesn’t seem that deep. He probably just banged himself up. It’s the sudden unconsciousness that worries Kiyoshi more than anything.

“D…don’t panic?” Kanon asks. “We’re already scared out of our minds, Shiota-sensei.”

“We didn’t know what to do!”

“You were out for thirty seconds!”

“We thought you were going to die!”

The classroom is a chorus of upset shouts and angry whispers. Wiping his face on Nagisa’s shirt, Makoto whimpers. Fumiko anxiously glances at her phone.

“It’s you who shouldn’t be panicking,” she comments. “Don’t worry, Shiota-sensei. The ambulance is on its way. I called 119 whi-”

“The ambulance!?” Nagisa sputters.

“Yes, the ambulance!” Fumiko responds, undeterred. “We had no idea what was going on! We still
“I really don’t need an ambul-”

“We’re not taking no for an answer,” Fumiko interrupts. “You can say you’re fine all you want, but you have no idea what’s going on, either, and none of us will until a doctor arrives. Shut up, shut your mouth, and cease acting like a buffoon. Otherwise I’m texting your spouses and telling them you’re ignoring a medical emergency.”

Kiyoshi’s jaw drops. Is this really…? How could…? Oh my god! The more he learns about Aguri, the more fucking insane it is to hear things like that out of Fumiko’s mouth.

Nagisa sputters gently, staring at her with these wide eyes. But Fumiko doesn’t hesitate, whipping out her phone and giving Nagisa an unamused look.

Her hand’s trembling ever-so-slightly. Kiyoshi’s not sure if anyone else notices the way it shakes as she taps the screen, but he does. And he decides that no matter how tough she acts, she’s still the same all-too-caring person she’s always been.

...There’s another knot in his stomach.

At first, Nagisa seems to think she’s bluffing. But as she brings her phone to her ear, he jolts and hisses “Hey! No! Don’t make them panic!”

Fumiko’s gaze is unwavering. She tsks gently. There’s a faint ringing on the other end of the phone. She doesn’t need to speak. Her unimpressed look says it all.

“Okay! Okay! I’ll go! Don’t tell them that! Please don’t tell them that! I’ll cooperate and go to the hospital! Anything you say! Just don’t freak out my family!”

He looks strangely pathetic for a grownass man. It turns out all it takes to shatter his stubborn demeanor is the mere threat of a chewing out by his spouses. He’s staring at Fumiko with desperate, panicked eyes. Although on second thought Kiyoshi’s not sure how much of that is normal behavior for him and how much of that is the concussion speaking.

“Very well then,” Fumiko says, lowering her hand. “That said, however, I’ll still be texting them and informing them of what’s happened. They deserve to know. I’m sure they’ll be relieved I managed to get you to cooperate.”

Nagisa opens his mouth, as if to argue, but quickly falls back. “...Fair enough,” he admits. “Please just emphasize that I’m okay. That this is a scare: Nothing more. They don’t need to scramble home from work.”

“I’ll tell them what’s occurred and nothing more. They can conclude on their own whether or not it’s a serious matter. Then, they can come to a decision on whether they want to dip out of work to check on you or not. I have a feeling I already know what their answer will be, but I’m not going to put any words in their mouth.”

Nagisa simply pouts. It must be frustrating. To know she’s so right. But Nagisa’s big enough to at least admit that. Dabbing gently at his forehead with a tissue, he sits in silence and waits for the ambulance to arrive.

Fumiko texts his family. The class murmurs softly, and Makoto remains glued to his side. Kiyoshi keeps his distance, knowing there’s nothing he can do here. Knowing he’ll probably make it worse. And in due time they receive the notification that the ambulance has arrived. Now all they need to
do is make the trek down the mountain.

“Do you feel able to stand?” Kanon asks. “I’m sure one of us can carry you-”

Nagisa’s face pales in an instant. “There’s really no need for-”

And Chiharu’s hand shoots in the air. “I can definitely carry you!”

“No. No-one needs to carry me!” Nagisa insists. Gentle of a giant as Chiharu may be, something tells Kiyoshi Nagisa wouldn’t saddle any of his students with the burden of carrying him down the mountain if his life depended on it. Slowly pushing himself up onto his feet, he balances himself against the desk and takes a careful step towards the door.

The class is quick to crowd around him. Leaning against him for support and holding his hand, they usher him across the classroom. And he turns his head, looking back at the room.

“Everyone come with,” he says. “School will… be dismissed because of this. I’m sorry I don’t have a substitute in waiting, but-”

“No,” Fumiko insists. “It’s fine. We’ll survive.”

“I’ll be back by Monday. I swear. And I’ll make sure to get you caught up on everything we misse-”

“That’s hardly the most of our concerns right now,” Minako butts in. “Just get some rest. We can worry about all that when it comes.”

Nagisa relents. And the rest of the class stands to follow him, Kiyoshi included. To be completely truthful he just wants to sit down staring at the wall for the next few hours, but he knows that’s not an option. Instead, trailing behind the rest of the class, he follows them down the mountain and tries to ignore the expanding hole in his chest.

He may not have been the one to have a medical emergency, but it sure goddamn feels like it.

Nagisa tries to give everyone a hug before he goes, but the paramedics aren’t having it. Instead, he simply has to settle for telling everyone he loves them and that he swears he’ll be fine. Then, with one final exhausted look, the doors are closed on him, and the ambulance vanishes, taking their teacher with it.

No-one moves. All is still. Surely, each of them knows that they have permission to go now. But no-one dares. Not with what just happened. It would just feel so weird… so wrong to just go home.

Terumi is the first to speak.

“...Do you think he’s really going to be okay?”

“I don’t know,” Emiko says. “I don’t know.”

Makoto’s still crying. Fumiko’s hand is on his shoulder, gently squeezing it. He looks like he wants to bury his face in her chest, but he doesn’t dare. Instead, he simply whimpers, murmuring, “I should have done something. I should have known something was wrong. Karma told me he was worried. Why didn’t I do anything? What if he’s not okay?”

“He will be,” Fumiko says, but she doesn’t sound so certain. Lip trembling, she fights back tears.

But by the time her eyes drift Kiyoshi’s way, he’s already gone.
He knows they probably need him right now. Need some reassurance or kind words. But he’s not sure what to say. He’s not sure what to do. If anything, he’s convinced that this is his fault. Reasonably, he knows it’s not-- That Nagisa hasn’t taken good care of himself for a very long time. But even so, he wonders if it was somehow fate for him to see this today.

...If this is just the beginning.

If maybe… since he doesn’t quite care for himself, that this is his punishment. Destined to see his loved ones fall apart.

\textit{(Having them taken away. Just like he’d taken so much from so many.)}

...He doesn’t know. It’s stupid. It sounds stupid. But he just can’t shake the thought.

Either way, he can’t bear to look at this for a minute longer. And like the selfish creature he is, he turns his back on the pain. Turns his back on the hurt and on his friends. They don’t need him right now. And they never will. He’s already decided that. All he’d do right now is make this worse.

They have each other. He’s sure… he’s sure they’ll be fine.

But hearing Makoto cry in the distance... remembering the sirens in his mind, he’s not so sure about that, either.

And with an empty feeling in his chest - he hopes - prays to whatever’s out there… prays to whatever did this to him that it please doesn’t hurt Nagisa. Because he… he deserves this. He knows that. But the people he loves… they never have, and they never will.

\[1/13/2031 10:32 AM:] [Fumiko] There was an incident at the school.


\[1/13/2031 10:33 AM:] [Kayano] What!?

\[1/13/2031 10:33 AM:] [Fumiko] He says he’s okay, but I’m not certain. He was shaking like hell. May have a mild concussion. He was admitted to the hospital.

\[1/13/2031 10:33 AM:] [Fumiko] I wanted to make sure you knew. Please tell your family.

\[1/13/2031 10:34 AM:] [Kayano] Of course.

\[1/13/2031 10:40 AM:] [Kayano] We’re on our way.

[Fumiko is typing…]

Nagisa manages to get himself checked in without much issue, all the while insisting he’s pretty much fine and that he’s really sorry about taking up the doctors’ time. He had a fainting spell in class and spooked his students, that’s all. Surely they get it, right?

Oh, they get it, alright. From the expression on the poor lady behind the desk’s face, something tells Nagisa she’s heard this same self-apologetic spiel a thousand times now. Nevertheless, barely masking her disbelief, she insists that it’s fine and that he has nothing to worry about.

“Even a brief fainting spell is worth looking into. We’ll-"
“Of course. I just. Wonder if it maybe wasn’t worth using the ambulance for? I apologize if I shouldn’t have used the ambulance. My kids had just already called by the time I-”

“It’s fine,” the receptionist interjects. “The doctors wi-”

“And you’re sure about that?”

“...Yes, sir. I’m sure. We have plenty of them. Now get to your room. The doctors will give you a routine checkup.”

Nagisa apologizes again for being so on edge. Jeez, maybe this is getting to him. He doesn’t usually get this antsy. Nevertheless, the doctors are very patient with him, and he’s checked into his room in no time.

They clean the wound on his head and take his blood pressure. Listen to his heart rate, and just in case stick him with the IV. When asked to describe any pain he’s in, he admits that he feels mostly fine. He has a slight headache, and has been a little dizzy, but nothing more.

The good news is it seems he hasn’t had a heart attack, stroke, or anything of the sort. The bad news is the disappointed look the doctor gives him when he tells him he likely passed out from exhaustion is insurmountably judgemental.

“Have you been resting regularly lately? Eating well? Your blood pressure is low, and your heart rate is concerningly fast.”

Nagisa hisses in through his teeth, averting his gaze. Well shit, man. He’s not gonna lie to a doctor. But it still hurts to admit.

“...Mayyybee I’ve slipped up just a little.”

His spouses seem to agree.

His phone is pretty much instantly bombarded with texts. And despite his desperate insistence that it’s not an emergency, they’re on their way before he can even beg them not to be.

Karma shows up first, tossing the door aside as he marches into the room. He rushes over, and before giving an, “Are you okay?” or even a, “So how was your day?” he demands, “What the fuck were you thinking!?”

Nagisa flinches slightly, refusing to look Karma’s way. He knows he has every right to be mad, but he feels really bad about worrying him, and also the shouting is making his probably-has-a-concussion thing worse.

“I know,” he says. “I messed up. I know. And I’m sorry-”

“Are you, though?” Karma asks, out of breath. Nagisa refuses to meet his disappointed eyes, but can still hear the way he’s pacing. “We’ve been telling you for months that we’re worried-”

“I know-”

“And I said something exactly like this would happen. But you didn’t listen to me, did you? You just nodded and said you’d take better care of yourself and then you didn’t. You just kept pushing and pushing and pushing yourself, and then you tried to refuse going to the hospital!??”

Nagisa sighs. Ah... so Fumiko... had... shared that. He supposes he can’t blame her, but it still
makes his stomach turn.

“I… did. And that was stupid-”

“Stupid!! It was braindead! Do you have any idea how hard I’m going to smack you when we get home!?"

“Please don’t-” the doctor interjects.

“Okay. Okay. Okay. I get it. You’re mad,” Nagisa says. “But maybe don’t say those things in front of the doctor. He’s gonna think it’s like -” he glances to the doctor. “It’s not like - it’s not a domestic - he doesn’t actually - he’s just like this,” he explains exasperatedly. “He just says these things.”

…”

“Not regularly, though. Only when I’m stupid. Not that he makes me feel stu- Oh my God we are making ourselves out to have a dysfunctional marriage!”

“Because we do!” Karma hisses. “What was I thinking!? I saw you falling apart, and I didn’t do anything! I should have stepped in. I should have-”

“You tried!” Nagisa interrupts. “You tried to do something. But I’m a grownass man! I can make my own decisions! You couldn’t force me to do anything! This is all-”

“Would you… would you like me to… step out for a second?” The doctor murmurs. “If you two… if you two need a moment…”

Nagisa takes a deep breath. “That would be nice,” he admits. “…How about you come back in when all my spouses arrive? You can explain the extent of my non-serious injuries then.”

The doctor seems legitimately horrified by what the plural ‘spouses’ implies when this room is already so chaotic with just one of them, but knows not to ask. Without further ado, he curtly excuses himself from the room.

Instantly, some tension seems to vanish. Nagisa’s relieved to not have to discuss their interpersonal issues in front of a stranger. Although all that tension seems to return with a flourish when he feels Karma’s gaze burning into him.

“I meant it,” he says. “That… that it’s not serious. You can ask the doctor. I mean - he just left - but you can. Exhaustion: that’s all. Exhaustion and a mild concussion. It’s not an emergency.”

“…And what about next time?”

Karma’s voice is strained.

Nagisa can’t avoid him forever. With the doctor gone, there’s very little left to look at. Sighing and biting his lip, he lets his gaze drift to Karma. And when he sees tears pricking in his husband’s eyes, he feels a lump form in his throat.

“There won’t… I mean- I don’t think there’ll be a… next time.”

He tries to sound reassuring, but he does a pretty woeful job. He can’t just lie to Karma like that. Not when he’s already so worried. He messed up, bigtime. And he… he doesn’t know that everything will be okay.
“Please tell me something’s going to change,” Karma asks, hand clutching his pant leg. “I am so mad at you. Please tell me something’s going to change. About - about your job! About your schedule! I can’t take this anymore Nagisa! Kayano called me and told me there’d been an emergency, and I really, genuinely thought you’d died! You can’t do this to me again. You can’t scare me like this again. I’m… I’m sick of it-”

He’s returned to pacing. And it’s his turn to avoid looking Nagisa’s way as he wipes at his eyes. He’s mumbling swears under his breath and growling.

Nagisa hates it. Usually, he’s… he’s just so damn good at keeping his cool. He only gets like this when he’s genuinely upset.

...Nagisa really scared him.

“It will,” he says. “I know that sounds so, so empty, but it will. I don’t… I don’t want to scare you like that again. When everyone arrives, we’ll discuss a plan. We’ll get something figured out. I swear-”

“You better… you better mean that, Nagisa,” Karma whispers. “I know you have so much difficulty giving a shit about yourself, but please - if for anyone - Mean that for us.”

...He’s still pacing when Gakushuu arrives.

He, too, seems to have entirely lost his cool.

He’s still in those formal managerial clothes of his... like he’d driven straight over from work. Knowing Gakushuu, he probably had. His hair’s neatly combed, and his tie’s tucked just perfectly into his shirt, but when Nagisa meets his eyes, all aspects of Gakushuu’s professional, collected persona seem to instantly fall away.

His face is a grimace and his hands are balled tight. He tries not to let it show just how heavily he’s breathing, but his posture is tense and his eyes are a puffy bright red.

He marches straight over to Nagisa’s bedside. Just about shoves Karma out of the way and demands “Nagisa Shiota-Yukimura-Asano-Akabane! What on earth did you do!?”

Nagisa’s face pales. Ah… so this really is going to be the rest of his day, huh? He can’t particularly fault his spouses, but oh boy is he in for a chewing out.

“Something… stupid. I’m going to admit that! Like, yes: I did something extremely stupid. And things are going to change. Plesedon’tkillme.”

“Please don’t kill you? Please don’t kill you?” Gakushuu asks, leaning down to wrap his arms around Nagisa’s shoulders. His grip is iron-tight. “Please don’t kill yourself! You are not the one who should be making requests here.”

Nagisa wilts, but leans into his embrace. “...I know…”

“What happened?”

“He passed out from exhaustion: that’s what,” Karma interjects. “Scared the bejeezus out of his class and hit his head real hard on the way down, too.”

Gakushuu hisses in through his teeth, grimacing.
“It’s not serious, though. Please don’t worry. It’s not serious,” Nagisa reassures.

“Of course you’d say—”

“The doctor told me it’s not serious. It could become serious if I continue to act this way, but it’s not. My heart rate’s fine, and I just need rest.”

“And you have a mild concussion,” Karma tacks on.

“...And I have a mild concussion,” Nagisa admits with a groan. “But really, I feel fine. A little dazed, maybe, but that’s it.”


“What!?” Nagisa asks. “Do you not believe me?”

“Of course I- of course I do!” Gakushuu responds. “But there are just… there are things we need to talk over. I need to make sure he went over all the correct procedures. That there aren’t any details he missed. I have some basic medical training, I’ll have you know. If he misdiagnosed anything, I’ll get to the bottom of it.”

“...Memorizing a med textbook during a spot of late-night reading is not the same as having professional training, Gakushuu. I’m sure the man knows what he’s doing. Please don’t argue with him—”

“I am not going to argue with him,” Gakushuu huffs. “I’m simply going to make sure he looked into your case with the most of his abilities. Anything less than perfect, and I’ll see to it that he’s swiftly punis—”

“Please don’t.”

“He’s just outside,” Karma notes. “Got freaked out by our little marital spat and asked if he could peek out. I’m sure he wouldn’t mind talking to you, however, seeing as how you’re the rational one here.”

“Damn right I am,” Gakushuu huffs, and he’s already turning on his heels; parading out of the room. “You keep an eye on him,” he instructs. “I’ll deal with the technical aspects.”

...Annddddd he’s gone.

“...Not even an ‘I love you,’ huh?” Nagisa asks. “Cold.”

He means it as a joke... something to lighten the mood. But it must not land, because Karma’s expression contorts into a grimace.

“He cried on the phone, you know,” he says softly. “When he heard the news. We were all telling him not to drive because we were scared he’d crash the damn car.” He hasn't stopped pacing in circles “I don’t blame him for being cold. You scared the shit out of him. You know he doesn’t like being caught off guard.”

Nagisa’s shoulders lower.

“...I know.”

If Karma’s usually good at keeping his cool, then Gakushuu is a goddamn expert. He’s long since mastered the art of putting on a calm face. And more often than not, that calmness is genuine. He’s
cool… calculated. He has a bearing on most situations. He understands all possible outcomes, and because of that he always seems… ready. He only gets surprised like that when something’s truly shocked him.

That’s not always a bad thing. Back during high school Karma and Nagisa would ‘take him by surprise’ all the time. He’d look at them with this wide, bug-eyed expression for just half a second, before regaining his cool and reassessing whatever stupid situation they’d put him in. It’d made Nagisa laugh: just how different he’d looked than the sort of persona he’d wanted to give off. And in hindsight, Gakushuu had admitted it was part of why he’d loved them so much. They were good at ‘keeping him on his toes.’

…But the surprise isn’t anything worth loving, and certainly isn’t anything damn funny now.

“You owe all of us a big apology,” Karma says. “…And you better fucking mean it.”

“…I will.”

They sit in silence, leaving Nagisa to listen to the sound of Karma’s anxious pacing. When that becomes too much to bear, he sits up and shakes his head.

“Where’s Kayano? She said she was on her way.”

“Picking up the kids,” Karma replies. “They’d wanted to come.”

…Ah… ah. Nagisa supposes that makes sense. He doesn’t particularly want to face Korosensei’s disapproving gaze, either, let alone Fumiko Hisakawa’s, but there’s nothing much he can do. If Kayano’s bringing them, she’s bringing them.

They show up maybe ten minutes later. At least… most of them. As Kayano, Makoto, and Fumiko come flooding into the room, he notes that Kiyoshi is still nowhere to be seen.

…Huh.

He’s given very little time to think about that, however. Makoto breaks away from Kayano and rushes to his side. Fumiko just barely manages to catch the back of his shirt before he tackle hugs him, thus sending him falling over on his face.

“Be gentle!” she hisses. “He’s sick!”

Nagisa reminds Fumiko to be gentle with Makoto in turn (Because he’s the one who’ll really be sick if he eats shit on the hospital floor again), then sheepishly holds a hand up.

“No, guys, really, I’ll be fine,” he says. “The doctor told me it was nothing more than a concussion. Give me all the hugs you want. I don’t mind. In fact, I could… really use one right now.”

Vindicated, Makoto hops back up onto his feet and scrambles over to Nagisa’s side. He wraps him in a hug, squeezing with all the damn intensity of a pressure cooker. Fumiko and Kayano follow in suit, sticking close to his side as they cling to Nagisa.

“You really scared us, you know,” Kayano whispers, sounding utterly exhausted.

“Yeah. You’re not the first person to tell me that,” Nagisa admits with a sigh. “But… this was a wake-up call. It’s not going to happen again. We’re going to make sure of that. As a family.”

Fumiko follows, awkwardly pulling away as if worried she’d dared to hug him for too long. Makoto, on the other hand, seems to show no sign of letting up anytime soon.

Nagisa wouldn’t dare make him.

...There’s just one thing that’s still bothering him.

“Where’s Kiyoshi?” he asks. “I thought he’d show up with you guys.”

Now that makes Makoto’s demeanor plummet. He falls limp on Nagisa’s shoulder, pouting.

“I dunno,” he says. “He just… like… vanished! When you got sick! And he’s not replying to my texts! It’s like he’s avoiding me!”

“He’s not avoiding us,” Fumiko interjects firmly. “He’s not. He’s just…” she drifts off. “I don’t know. But he’s not avoiding us. He wouldn’t avoid us.”

Makoto lets out a low whimper. “I know,” he admits. “...I just dunno what’s been going on with him lately.”

Nagisa places a gentle hand on his head and ruffles his hair. “I’m sure everything will turn out okay,” he reassures. “Fumiko’s right. Kiyoshi wouldn’t do that to you without a reason. He’ll open up to you about whatever it is that’s upsetting him eventually. All you can do is be there for him in the meantime.”

That seems to reassure Makoto some. His posture relaxes and he gives a firm nod.

...Nagisa feels bad for lying to him, but there’s not much else he could do. It’s not his place to tell them about Kiyoshi’s request to have his seat moved. And he does believe that he’s sure everything will smooth over eventually. He’s seen a lot of things in his time. Whatever it is that’s causing Kiyoshi to avoid his friends… it can’t last forever.

“Speaking of,” Kayano says. “Where on earth is Gakushuu? He told me he’d arrived.”

“Right outside, last I checked,” Nagisa says. “I’m surprised you missed him. He’s arguing with the doctor.”

“A- hem,” a voice interrupts from the doorway. “Not arguing. Scrutinizing. There is a difference.”

Kayano’s head perks up. “There you are!”

“What was your assessment, doc?” Karma asks.

“He passed with flying colors,” Gakushuu declares. “Or… at the very least… proved himself to be satisfactory. I’ll take his word on Shiota’s condition for now.” A… ah… so they’re defaulting to last names, now. “He let me know everything we’ll need to do for him to recover, so don’t worry about him trying to weasel out of anything.”

“W… weasel?” Nagisa asks. “I wouldn’t try to weasel.”

...Karma gives him a skeptical look.

“Three days of rest,” Gakushuu says. “No work. No school. Just rest. No… no worrying about any
of that… nonsense.”


“And I will,” Nagisa says. “I have no objection to a three day rest period.”

“Surprising,” Karma admits.

“It’s a weekend,” Nagisa clarifies, scratching the back of his neck. “Besides… if it’ll make you guys feel any better… then it’s worth it. I’m not going to fight you on this.”

“Good,” Karma says, gently punching his shoulder. “Then I’d have had to really chew you out.”

He still seems tense, but his demeanor is starting to lighten somewhat. He hasn’t let up on the stressed pacing, but at this point he just looks more upset than angry.

“They can discharge you by day’s end,” Gakushuu says. “And when we get home you’re going to bed. No ifs or buts. We’ll take care of everything else. Don’t worry about the counselor. Or the school. Or the kids. All of that can wait. For now, just get some rest, and once that’s done we’ll get the rest figured out.”

“Which is going to get figured out,” Karma says. “We’re not continuing this way. We’re not just going ‘back to normal’ and pretending nothing ever happened the moment this weekend is over. It’s time you cut this out. You’re getting a regular sleep schedule, you’re stopping with the constant planning, and you’re hiring more teachers.”

“H-hey! Wait-”

“Don’t you ‘hey, wait,’ me,” Karma says. “I’m not taking no for an answer. You can’t do this alone. And that’s fine. At the very least you’re getting an assistant! You can run them through whatever rigorous screening process you want, but you are hiring one. All of us agree on this.”

Kayano nods. “…It’s time, Nagisa. You can’t fight alone forever.”

“I… I know,” Nagisa says. “And… I’ll look into it. I’m just… scared of how the kids will take it. We’re close. They trust me. What if… what if I invite someone who’s willing to hurt them into their lives by accident?”

“You won’t,” Kayano says. “I just know you won’t.”

“Besides,” Fumiko interjects. “It’s not like you’d be handing ownership of the school over. Nothing is permanent. If you hire someone shitty, you can just fire them and try again. I’m well aware that even as class representative I can’t speak for everyone, but I think we’d all much rather deal with getting to know some new adults than see you have an episode like that again.”

Makoto nods. “You really scared us! I cried! A lot! I don’t… I wouldn’t mind.” He squeezes Nagisa. “I mean, I had help, didn’t I? Irina and Karasuma! And they weren’t perfect, but… the kids still loved them.”

Nagisa sighs. “…You’re right. I’ll see what I can do. I’ll hire an assistant, and if possible I’ll work on expanding the faculty. I’ve stressed you all out long enough.”
“You’ve stressed yourself out long enough,” Karma says. “But Gakushuu’s right. All of this should come after you get some rest. First just take care of yourself. Then we’ll worry about the nitty-gritty details.”

“And we’ll help you,” Kayano says. “We… we aren’t going to let this become just another reason for you to be stressed. We’re by your side. I promise.”

“I can help, too!” Makoto says. “I mean… I’m pretty damn good at spotting potential teachers, aren’t I? I found you! I’ll pick out all the best guys!”

Nagisa laughs softly, giving his hair another ruffle. “…Thanks. I appreciate it.”

And with that, the atmosphere in the room finally seems to lighten. Now that Nagisa’s relented, it seems his family has a whole lot less to worry about. And as concerning as the idea of change can be, that - at the very least, comes as a relief.

Their conversation even manages to drift away from the topic of the incident. His spouses are happy to be taking him home sooner rather than later, and the kids are in a good mood, too. Before they know it, an hour’s passed. It’s mid-sentence about some mindless thing, however, that the door opens, and Kiyoshi Karasuma peeks his head in.

The mood shifts in an instant. Where everyone had begun to grow relaxed, they now seem downright excited. It’s strange - They’d never realized just how much his presence would be missed until he actually up and vanished on them.

“Kiyoshi!” Fumiko says, and Makoto whirls around on his feet. His ever-fickle attention instantly torn from Nagisa, he gives a huge wave. Fumiko waves along, tacking on a “We were wondering where you were. It’s not like you to disappear.”

Kiyoshi gives a sheepish shrug. Where everyone else seems thrilled to see him, he doesn’t carry that same excitement. He’s pacing anxiously from foot to foot, and when Makoto rushes to his side to give him a bear hug, he jolts.

“A-Ah…!” he says, gently prying himself from Makoto. “No, no - I’m here. Don’t worry.” He holds a hand up and smiles. “I just… had to grab some things at home, that’s all. I wouldn’t pass up on checking up on Shiota-sensei. Not after everything that happened. Although I must admit…” His gaze briefly flits towards the wall. “I didn’t expect you all to still be here by now.”

“Of course we’re here!” Makoto says. “We were just as worried as you! And I’m not budging until Nagisa’s out of here!”

“That… may be a while,” Nagisa admits.

“No worries!” Makoto insists. “I’ve got hours to spare!”

Fumiko lets out a dry laugh. “…I’m lucky you had your little heart attack on a Friday, aren’t I? Something tells me I wouldn’t have time to spend like this on a Monday. Tutoring-free and all.”

“…Oh, right,” Nagisa says. “That is still what your parents believe, isn’t it?” He asks with his own laugh. “…I’m sorry. This probably isn’t a very productive tutoring session, no.”

“Don’t say that,” Karma insists. “You are tutoring her in something! You’re teaching her to be a responsible, healthy person when she grows up, lest she pass out and crack her skull open like you.”
It’s only then that Nagisa spots the aghast expression on Kiyoshi’s face. Staring at Nagisa with wide, horrified eyes, his mouth sits agape.

“For the record,” Nagisa clarifies. “I did not actually crack my head open, or have a heart attack! The people around me just like to exaggerate everything!”

That seems to ease Kiyoshi’s horror some. His shoulders lower as he gives an embarrassed laugh. “Of… of course,” he says. “No. Don’t worry. I wouldn’t think that. I’ve just been… worried about you. I’ve just been really worried about you.” His eyes drift towards the floor. “…I’m relieved that you’re okay. For one horrible second, I thought you might actually die.”

“Join the club, kid,” Karma says. “He scared the whole lot of us.”

“No,” Nagisa says quickly. “Of course not. I wouldn’t do that to you guys.”

“Die?” Kayano asks.

“No!” Nagisa says. “I wouldn’t die!”

“I’m really enjoying the fact that you somehow think that’s something you have any control over, but I appreciate the reassurance.”

Kiyoshi shuffles slightly. He laughs along with the cheery atmosphere in the room, but somehow it feels forced. Like he’s walking on eggshells.

“So… uh… what was the real diagnosis? Nothing serious, right?”

“No,” Nagisa says. “Nothing serious. The current opinion is that I passed out from exhaustion. Ended up getting a mild concussion from hitting my head on the desk, but honestly I’m not feeling that much.”

“That’s good,” Kiyoshi says. “That- that you’re not feeling it!” he quickly clarifies. “Not that you - Not that you got a concussion! I hope that’s obvious! I am - I am not glad you got a concussion! I would never be glad you got a concussion, Shiota-sensei!”


He’s still standing awkwardly in the doorway. Makoto and Fumiko have taken to his side, but he hasn’t made any motion to step into the room. Instead, he continues to nervously shuffle, chewing on the side of his cheek.

Nagisa wonders if he thinks it’s too crowded inside, or if the hospital environment is freaking him out somehow. Either way, he feels bad just watching the kid stand to the side. He makes a beckoning motion, glancing Kiyoshi’s way.

“You know you can come inside if you want,” he says. “The more the merrier.”

And instantly, Kiyoshi’s demeanor seems to shift. Stiffening, he shakes his head.

“A… ah, no. I’d hate to overstay my welcome,” he says. “…I didn’t want to - I wasn’t planning to stay long, anyways.” He glances over his shoulder. “In fact… I think I should go. I just wanted to make sure you were okay. I didn’t expect all this… all this…” he drifts off. “Whatever. I should get going. My father’s probably worried about me.”

“Already?” Makoto whines. “It feels like the first time I’ve seen you in forever. What’s going on?”
“Nothing!” Kiyoshi says. “Nothing’s going on. I just…” he pauses. “It’s family stuff, okay? Not… anything you did. Don’t worry about me. Everything will… everything will be back to normal soon.”

“Okay,” Makoto says. “If you say so.”

He holds his hand out for a fistbump as Kiyoshi goes. Fumiko gives a defeated wave. Kiyoshi hastily returns them, nervously tapping Makoto’s hand, and gesturing Fumiko’s way, before whirling around and peeking out of the room.

“…F… feel better soon, Shiota-sensei!” he shouts from the hallway. “Sorry I couldn’t stay longer!”

Nagisa’s eyebrows furrow with concern as he watches him go.

He’d already been worried about Kiyoshi before any of this went down, and that concern’s only doubled. He’s just acting strange. He wonders if something had actually happened with his family. Irina just went off overseas, didn’t she? Was there some sort of accident?

‘…No,’ he decides. If there had been, Karasuma would have let him and the rest of the E-Class know. Whatever this is, Irina’s not involved.

It could simply be the anxiety of her leaving, but that doesn’t seem likely. Kiyoshi’s parents have flown overseas hundreds of times before. And it had seemed like he was finally starting to do better about managing his anxieties. Why is he spiraling all of a sudden?

...Spiraling. Nagisa feels bad describing it so bluntly, but what else is there to say? He said he went home to grab some things, then said his dad would be worried about him if he wasn’t home soon like he’d never even been in the first place! This has gone beyond concerning. This is isolative behavior.

He wonders if it has to do with him. Did… did his medical emergency give Kiyoshi a panic attack?

He bites his lip. He feels bad worrying about this right now. Not when he just said he’d relax. But he has to say something first.

He stealthily retrieves his phone and opens up the family group chat. Whatever it is that’s going on, he doesn’t want Makoto and Fumiko worrying about it. This can stay between the adults.

[1/13/2031 12:43 AM:] [Nagisa]: Can one of you go check on him?
[1/13/2031 12:43 AM:] [Nagisa]: Like. Just pull him aside before he goes?
[1/13/2031 12:44 AM:] [Nagisa]: He’s acting weird and I’d appreciate it if someone made sure everything’s okay.
[1/13/2031 12:44 AM:] [Nagisa]: I’d do it, but something tells me I’m not allowed to get up right now.

It takes a second for them to notice. But after a slightly aggressive patting of his pocket, his spouses get the hint. One by one, they glance at their phones.

[1/13/2031 12:45 AM:] [Gakushuu]: Indeed you’re not allowed to fucking get up right now.
[1/13/2031 12:45 AM:] [Gakushuu]: I’ll handle it.
[1/13/2031 12:45 AM:] [Nagisa]: You sure?
With that, Gakushuu stands and stretches. “I should excuse myself for a moment as well,” he says. “I remembered I have a business call to handle. I ducked out on them when all of this went down, and if I don’t call back soon, Mitsubishi is going to have my ass. Pardon me.”

Only Gakushuu could use a conversation with one of the largest bank conglomerates as an excuse to get out of a conversation, but Nagisa supposes that’s why he loves him. Swiftly, he peeks out of the room. And Nagisa hopes he’ll manage to get everything under control.

Because he’s not sure if it’s just the concussion speaking, but surrounded by family… loved ones, having made the resolution to do better, Nagisa somehow feels like he’s at a turning point in his life. And even uncertain - even scared for the school - it ultimately feels like a good one. Like he really is about to open up new doorways for himself.

But watching Kiyoshi’s back disappear through the doorway, he’d felt as if he was watching the boy he’s watched grow up for the past thirteen years experience a turning point, too. And perhaps this one for the worse.

At the very least, there’s one thing he’s realized for certain... sitting there, wondering if he’d caused this reaction from Kiyoshi: something needs to change. And now. Because yes, he’ll never be okay unless his students are, too. But it turns out that goes both ways. And if he’s not okay, then neither will they. He will never put them through this again.

It’s time to do better. For his kids, for his family, and for himself.

Chapter End Notes

You know, it's funny. I've been describing this chapter to friends as "more lighthearted" than the last for about a week now. And while that's certainly TRUE, it's still hilarious that the chapter where Nagisa passes out and /hits his head on a table/ is more lighthearted than the last one. That says a lot about just how bleak 31 was, I guess. GFHDJHJFJDK

That said, I hope I didn't worry any of you too much. Nagisa certainly gave everyone a scare, but I'm sure he'll be fine. It's not like I'd fucken kill him. He just needed to realize there are consequences for his actions, and now felt like about the right time. I've been dropping hints for a while now that his schedule's been a mess and he's been neglecting his own health. I'm surprised he didn't pass out SOONER.

I tried not to go TOO dark w this chapter. There are certainly still jokes, and even though there was some emotional tension with Nagisa's spouses... y'know, having the shit scared out of them, there was a lot of goofiness, too. The doctor being horrified by Karmagisa's out of context conversation and the heat stroke joke were my personal favorites, as well as writing Nagisa's general... anxiety in response to everything. I'm not sure about you, but I'VE apologized to doctors about a hundred times before, too. GFHJFJFKD.

I'm sorry about Kiyoshi and his growing... complex about everything somehow revolving around him. He's having a bit of a time. And although this obviously isn't actually his fault, GOD DAMN if he doesn't think the timing is suspicious. Here's to
hoping this won't make him spiral more, but I sincerely doubt it!

Next chapter Gakushuu and he will be having a talk, so hopefully Shuu can knock some sense into him. Or at least, like, convince him the world ISN'T imploding in around him.

(Also, yes, the 3E reunion that came up in this chapter WILL be something featured in the fic eventually. I had a LOT of fun fleshing out how the rest of the class was doing, and I couldn't possibly resist letting them throw a party. I'm sure you'll see the whole gang in one room EVENTUALLY.)

Some songs that helped me write this chapter were Hurry, Hurry by Air Traffic Controller, Loose Lips by Kimya Dawson, That Would Be Enough from Hamilton, and Be Glad I Love You (Go To Bed) by Bug Hunter.

The next chapter will either be up in a week or two weeks. I'm not certain yet. But either way, as usual, I hope you enjoyed, and make sure to let me know what you thought!
...The hospital smells like sickness.

Realistically, Kiyoshi knows that’s not what it actually is... ‘Sickness.’ Described more aptly, the hospital smells like antiseptic... like 409... scrubbed clean, and like a crime scene.

He knows that’s not completely true, either. They probably have to use a lot more intensive stuff to clean up bloody murder. But he catches a whiff of that horrible chemical smell, hears a faint beeping from another room, and decides that at the very least, a hospital and a crime scene both have something to hide.

...He does, too.

He tells Nagisa he’s going to go home, but he doesn’t actually have any plans to do so. Instead, when he peeks outside of the hospital room, he takes to the hallway and leans trembling against the wall.

Home’s fine, he supposes, but it feels less and less familiar as of late. Less welcoming. Less... a place he belongs.

His house has never been much of a home. But somehow that always felt the fault of the people around him. Some perceived lack of effort on their part. This time, so uniquely, however... the blame seems to fall squarely on his shoulders. That the whole time it had been his fault, and he’d just never known.

That he hadn’t even deserved this subpar thing. He’d taken it so for granted. But knowing the things he now knows... he wishes he’d treasured it more while he still had the chance.

His hands are shaking. He doesn’t know where he’s going to go now. He’d hated seeing Nagisa like that: hooked up to an IV, and so, so pale. He’d said he was fine, but all the same it just made Kiyoshi feel crushed.

...Hopeless.

Makoto had pulled him in for a hug, and Fumiko had given him a nervous wave. Nagisa had stared at him with those pitying eyes, and they’d all told him they were worried about him.

About him. About the monster. Even with their teacher in a hospital bed - even sick themselves. If it weren’t so horrible, he thinks he’d laugh.

...He’s not sure why he came.

‘Yes you do,’ he thinks. ‘You were worried. Weren’t you? Even if you were scared, you had to make sure he was okay.’

‘You felt guilty, didn’t you?’ a quieter voice asks. ‘Like you knew it’s you who should be here.’

His head falls, and he sighs. As if on instinct, he balls his fist... slowly unballs it... and breathes. When that becomes uncomfortable to look at, however, he settles on wiggling his fingers and
staring at the blank white walls.

...They’re familiar, aren’t they?

Even when home isn’t, they are.

He’s only been to the hospital once in his life. In fourth grade he tripped and ended up snapping his ankle. He’d cried the whole way there and the whole way back. Clung tight to his mom and even tried to fight off the doctors. Ultimately, they’d had to sedate him. And although that had worked to finally get the cast on his ankle, he thinks it had somehow messed him up more than it would have had if they’d just done it without the sedatives.

Drifting in and out of consciousness… heart beating slow, and feeling so helpless… staring at - memorizing - the face of each unfamiliar doctor.

...He’d had nightmares for weeks.

But even so, the cast had been off in weeks, too. And as he’d moved onto fifth grade… sixth… he’d forgotten about the broken ankle entirely.

Now, he can’t help but remember it.

That person had spent a lot of time in the hospital, hadn’t he? That person whose name he can’t even bear to think. He remembers thinking it had been messed up, even before he’d known the truth. Even loathing that person with all of his heart.

...Two whole years.

It had been a different hospital. He doesn’t remember the name. He’s not sure he’d like to. Not that it matters much. It had felt more or less the same.

“Ultimately, Korosensei’s torturer met a quiet end,” Nagisa had explained. Back during the moon unit… before any of this had mattered. “After being propelled through the anti-sensei barrier, the nerves he’d modified were destroyed completely. Without them, he became a vegetable of sorts. Fully conscious, but unable to move, emote or speak. It’s a miracle he survived at all, but he lived for almost two years in that state, before finally passing away sometime in January 2017.”

He’d tried to state it like a neutral party. Factual. A lesson. About history, or about hubris. But Kiyoshi had caught the way his eyes crinkled ever so slightly with relief, and he’d known Nagisa had felt safer in a world without that man, too.

In January 2017, a monster died. And two months after him, Kiyoshi was born.

He wiggles his fingers once more. Taps them gently against the wall. Shifts from foot to foot, and rubs at his eyes - not quite sure if he’s trying to wipe away the tears budding in them, or just making sure he still can. Then, limbs heavy, he turns.

...He can’t stay here another minute longer.

He knows he deserves it... to think about it. The smell of sickness... the blare of a monitor... the all too ironic light flickering overhead, and the same way he’d lay still, pinned down like the victim to an operating table. But he can’t. He can’t - for another moment more - think about the bed sores or the boredom or the sheer, dawning horror when he’d been left alone with his thoughts.

He can’t - even for a second - glance at the doors trailing down the hospital hallway, and wonder
who sits behind... what monsters, or even worse - What *innocents* fighting their own battles? Can’t wonder which of them will make it and which won’t. Which of them will be afforded a second chance… to see the world through a new set of eyes, and which of them will simply wither away, only to be forgotten.

‘*Why me?*’ he asks, taking one shaky footstep. ‘*Why me? Me?* After all I’ve done? Why *am I* here? *Instead of anyone* else. Surely… there’s no way… that I’ve served my time. *That* that can be enough.’

‘*Am I… am I here because it wasn’t? Is this my punishment, too?*’

To have everything... to hold the world he’d so desperately wanted in his hands, only to have it all taken away?

...He wouldn’t be surprised.

His hands shake like leaves and his head feels light. He briefly wonders if he’s going to pass out as well, but soon scoffs at the thought. No. Probably not.

There are bigger things for him to deal with. Worse issues for the world to have him face. He would have to be out of his goddamn mind to seriously believe the possibility of passing out is the worst thing that could happen to him right now. And as such, ignoring the trembling of his lip and the stiff heaviness to his body, he leaves the hospital - and each reminder it serves - behind.

Gakushuu manages to catch him right outside the hospital.

For a second he’s worried he won’t be able to when he peeks his head out of Nagisa’s room and doesn’t catch sight of the kid. But some quick thinking reminds him that if Kiyoshi’s really absconding from the hospital, he’s gonna have to use the door sooner or later. He takes the elevator down to the ground floor and waits outside the entryway. Decides he can hover there for about ten minutes before admitting he’s probably missed the kid and will have to try a different strategy.

Thankfully, he doesn’t have to. Maybe four minutes later Kiyoshi comes out, pushing aside the heavy glass doors. His head’s low to the ground, and there’s this dark set of bags penciled under his eyes. His whole body’s shaking. There’s a stiffness to the way he walks. He doesn’t even seem to notice Gakushuu at first, staring forward blankly out into the parking lot.

To be honest, Gakushuu’s a little hesitant to even confront him. When Nagisa’d said he’d been worried, he’d thought it was mostly just a ‘the kid was spooked’ thing. (And damn, he’d felt that. Nagisa had scared him, too.) But this is something more. He looks *utterly destroyed.*

All the same, he gently snaps his fingers in an attempt to draw attention to himself. When that doesn’t work, he clears his throat, speaking up in a careful voice.

“...*Hey.*”

Even that takes a second for Kiyoshi to process. When his eyes finally drift up towards Gakushuu, they go wide and startled as he stumbles back. Quickly, he straightens himself up and brushes awkwardly at his pant leg.

“*A-ah! Asano-san!*” he says. “*I didn’t expect you to… I didn’t realize you’d-*” he fumbles over his words, nervously gnawing at his lip. “*I thought you were just upstairs. What happened?*”

He’s got this big, fake, manufactured smile on. Gakushuu’s met his mother before, and to be
honest, he’s starting to see the resemblance. She’d do the same thing, straddling herself over the table and ruining whatever family gathering she’d been invited to.

He sees no point in beating around the bush. Nagisa can use his kind, vague words all he wants. They most certainly have their place. But he knows full well a ‘I’m just checking up on you’ isn’t going to do him any good today.

“Nagisa instructed me to go talk to you,” he says. “You left his room in a quite frankly strange manner. What’s going on?”

“S…. strange?” Kiyoshi repeats, leaning from foot to foot. “...I’m not sure about strange. I mean - I was just worried - It really scared me that - I had family stuff to attend to, mostly.”

He can’t even keep his story consistent for a single sentence.

Oh, so it’s about family stuff and being spooked? Sounds likely.

He thinks that’s the key difference he’s noticed between Kiyoshi and his mother: where they both know exactly what to say… exactly what to do to cast an illusion, Miss Jelavic’s body listens. Kiyoshi’s does not.

“You’re not a particularly apt liar,” he notes, to which Kiyoshi stiffens. “Of course, I cannot force you to speak, but I would like you to know I’ve seen through your illusion. As have Nagisa... and your friends. They’re worried about you.”

There’s this guilty look in Kiyoshi’s eyes for just a second, before it fades into something more pessimistic. He scratches at the back of his wrist, grumbling. “...Ah… what does it matter? They’re going to be worried about me either way.”

He looks shameful to have been caught, even in such a mundane lie. Picking at his nails and blinking back tears, he staunchly avoids eye contact. He looks like a wreck. Even having never been particularly close to him, (Kiyoshi had always ‘vibed more’ with his parents’ students) it breaks Gakushuu's heart to see. Someone doesn’t look that broken… that hopeless unless they’re seriously out of options.

He sighs, and opens his mouth to speak. But Kiyoshi beats him to it.

“I just don’t know what I’m going to do, Asano-san-”

He says it quickly, hushed... like he’s ashamed. And Gakushuu’s still not sure what his dilemma is. But he’s now gotten more out of Kiyoshi than anyone else has so far. He’ll take it. He steps closer, holding a careful hand out.

“Well, I do. I have a free afternoon. Mind taking a moment to illuminate me on what’s worrying you, or are your family issues simply too pressing?”

Kiyoshi’s eyes flitter towards Gakushuu, then away, then back, as if asking ‘you seriously believed that?’ But when he meets his expression, his shoulders lower.

“...I’d hate to- Your husband is… really sick- I shouldn’t waste your time.”

“This is all my sick husband asked of me, so if you feel so sorry for his state, then why not give me a moment?”

Kiyoshi hesitates a second more, staring at his outstretched hand. But finally, he takes it.
“Well… I do think there are some things only you could get,” he admits. “Can we… can we go somewhere private?”

“Well, of course,” Gakushuu says, fumbling at his pocket with his free hand. He retrieves his keys and glances towards them, then back towards the trembling Kiyoshi. “I’ll do what I can.”

...Kiyoshi doesn’t know what he’s doing.

He doesn’t want to talk to Gakushuu. Not really. But all the same, he hates the pitying, guilty way he stares at him, and he hates the growing hole inside his chest. He hates that he’s worrying his friends, and he hates that he’s putting more on Nagisa’s plate when he already has so much to be stressed about as is. He wishes he could just close his eyes and disappear.

But he can’t. As much as he’d like to, he can’t. And if he has to speak to anyone, he thinks he’d prefer it to be Gakushuu. He won’t say those words… the ones he can hardly say to himself: “I’m that person,” but maybe he can ask, “What do you do after you’ve done something truly horrible?” and receive a genuine answer... without a risk of being caught.

Gakushuu hadn’t known him back then, had he? No... he doesn’t think so. Gakushuu had never been involved in any of that. It’s always been a sore spot for him. Up until recently, Kiyoshi had felt that. They’d been outcasts... on the sidelines... together.

...Now that they’re not, he thinks Gakushuu might just be the luckiest guy here.

Nevertheless, he’s pretty certain Gakushuu won’t catch him in the act; find out what he’s done. He has much more important things to think about than men in masked robes, and Kiyoshi can scream at the top of his lungs if he wants. Even then, Gakushuu will never put his finger on what he truly is.

Kiyoshi wonders if that’s worse somehow. If he’s taking advantage of someone who couldn’t possibly know any better. Before he can dwell on it too much however, Gakushuu clasps his hand tight, fiddles with his car keys and finally manages to get open the goddamn door. He hops in the drivers’ seat and motions for Kiyoshi to follow, patting the seat next to him.

“Unless you want to get in the back?” he asks. “I’m not sure if you’re big enough for-”

“No. It’s fine,” Kiyoshi says, sitting down next to him. “I’m fine.”

“Mmmm.”

“Sorry it’s nothing glamorous,” he admits. “The car, I mean. But I couldn’t particularly think of a better place to get some privacy.”

“No, no. It’s okay.” Kiyoshi reassures, deciding not to touch on how ‘nothing glamorous’ is a pretty ironic way to describe a goddamn Porsche. “...Anywhere’s fine.”

Gakushuu takes a moment to text his spouses. Then, pocketing his phone he asks “Would you prefer I put on some music, or is this more of a discussion apt for silence?”

Kiyoshi gives a shrug.

“I can drive if you’d like. Nowhere far, but… it might help you get your mind off of things.”

“...Do whatever you’d like.”
Gakushuu sighs and starts up the engine. Running his fingers through his hair, he’s got this deep, thoughtful look on his face. His finger taps on the wheel as he starts to drive in circles around the parking lot.

“Buckle yourself in, will you?” he asks.

Kiyoshi doesn’t particularly want to. He’d much rather go flying out the window and smash his face on the concrete in a gory spectacle, but something tells him Gakushuu isn’t going to crash the car either way, so he does as said if only to ease his nerves.

Gakushuu’s eyes are fixed in front of him, but every so often he sends Kiyoshi these concerned, tired looks, as if saying, ‘Whenever you’re ready.’

Kiyoshi doesn’t think he’ll ever be.

He hates just how hard he’s trying. He can pretend he’s not, but Gakushuu is clearly trying his hardest. Hands clutching the wheel… mouth creased back into a frown. He drives aimlessly, and he tries to look small… tries to look gentle… tries to say ‘you can trust me.’

Kiyoshi wishes he’d understand. Wishes all adults would understand, quite frankly. That… it’s not some lack of effort on their part. That it’s not something they’re doing wrong. He’s just… like this. And he can’t be fixed.

“…And so… what is it?” Gakushuu asks on their second lap around the parking lot. “If you’d like to talk about it, that is. If you’d just like a moment of silence…” his words are stiff: carefully rehearsed. “...well, that’s fine.”

He knows exactly what to say. Probably read it in self-help books and heard it from therapists. ‘This is what your father should have said to you when you felt this way.’ And Kiyoshi wishes he could appreciate the thought, but it’s just…

...He doesn’t know. It’s just hard.

When he doesn’t speak, Gakushuu’s eyes drift back towards the front window. And he simply sits there in silence, tapping his finger on the wheel.

That’s when Kiyoshi speaks up.

“...When these things happen, do you ever think it’s somehow your fault?”

Gakushuu just about crashes the damn car.

To be honest, he hadn’t expected Kiyoshi to speak at all. In fact, he was just about to ask him if he wanted to get out of the car. As much as he’d like to get to the bottom of whatever it is that’s bothering him, he’s not gonna force it out. He’d pretty much accepted silence as the most he was gonna get when Kiyoshi first opened his mouth to speak.

“...Pardon?”

“Stuff… like… what happened to Nagisa. Do you ever blame yourself?”

He’s not looking Gakushuu’s way. He’s staring out the side window, his hands folded neatly on his lap. They’re still trembling like leaves.

That said, Gakushuu thinks he’s starting to finally get the full picture. It’s not that the situation had
just scared Kiyoshi… it had made him feel helpless. Maybe he wishes he’d called the ambulance sooner. Maybe he wishes he’d done some form of CPR. Looking back on the situation, surely there’s something he wishes he could have gone about differently.

“I mean… of course,” he replies. “I think we all wish we could have gone about situations like that better in hindsight. But it’s no reason to blame yourself. It’s natural to freeze up in unfamiliar situations. Especially ones as scary as that. You shouldn’t beat yourself up ov-”

“No,” Kiyoshi interrupts. "I mean… like… do you ever worry you caused it?"

Gakushuu’s brows furrow. He squints and slows down the car.

“…I’m not sure I understand what you mean.”

Kiyoshi seems to clam up some at the rejection. His fingers interlock. He squirms uncomfortably. But there’s a resolved look on his face as he stares out the window and speaks up in a quiet, firm voice.

“Now… don’t take this the wrong way - please - but… you weren’t always a super nice guy, were you, Asano-san?”

Now that catches Gakushuu by surprise. His knuckles go white as he clutches at the steering wheel. And this time it’s his turn to avoid Kiyoshi’s gaze.

“…Ah… no. I suppose I wasn’t,” he admits in a monotone voice. “But that was a very long time ago.”

“I know! I know!” Kiyoshi quickly agrees. “And I’m not - I’m not accusing you of - I don’t think you’re still - You’re not bad. I just… heard from a friend that when you were a kid you could be pretty mean. Something about starving Isogai-san’s family?”

Gakushuu squints. A friend, huh? Unless Isogai himself had told the kid over brunch, that’s probably going to have to have been Makoto. Isogai’s no snitch. And besides, that would account for the… blatant misinformation.

“Well I’m not sure about starving,” he says, brows knit. “But… yes. I did get in an argument of sorts with Isogai back in 9th grade. It was just less starving the guy and more a form of intense, psychological warefa…” he drifts off. “Okay. No, that doesn’t matter. I’m starting to see your point. But what about it?”

“Well… uh… you did a lot of things like that, right, Asano-san? Arguing with the E-Class? Picking on them even when they couldn’t stand up for themselves?”

Gakushuu frowns, rubbing at his chin with one hand.

“Indeed,” he muses. “I’m big enough to admit that now. Is that… what this is about?”

Him? Could Kiyoshi’s issues seriously be about him? No. It’s just not likely. But… what if? Did Kiyoshi hear something about him from Makoto and get scared? He couldn’t exactly blame him, but what on earth does that have to do with him avoiding his friends? Is Kiyoshi blaming him for-?

“...If you no longer feel safe around me-”

“No! No!” Kiyoshi interjects. “That’s not it! That’s not it at all! I was just - thinking about - you… you feel bad about those things, right?”
“Of course.”

“And you’d hate it if someone treated you that way, right?”

“Mmmm.”

“Do you ever think that when… bad things happen to the people you care about… it’s somehow your fault?”

Gakushuu stops the car. He pulls into a nearby parking space and stares out the window.

“...That it’s like… your punishment?” Kiyoshi continues.

There’s… a lot to unpack there. Genuinely concerning behavior. He rests his chin on his hands, closes his eyes and thinks.

“Are you implying this is my fault?” he asks.

“No! Of course not,” Kiyoshi responds. “I think maybe… it might be…” his voice peters off. But he doesn’t need to finish the sentence for Gakushuu to get what he was going to say.

‘...Mine.’

Turning his body towards Kiyoshi, he opens one eye. Observing the quivering boy, he speaks up.

“No. I don’t think I believe that,” he admits.

“...Oh,” Kiyoshi says. “...I do. Blame myself, I mean. Not you.”

He’s still not looking Gakushuu’s way. In fact… Gakushuu’s not sure if he’s made eye contact with him once this entire conversation.

“It’s karmic retribution you’re talking about, yes?” he asks. “Bad deeds being repaid with bad, and good deeds being repaid with good?”

“...Ah… yes. I suppose it would be something like that.”

“As nice of a thought as it is to believe the world could function like that, trust me when I say I have more than enough life experience to refute it. We live in a world where terrible things can happen to wonderful people, and abhorrent people can make it off scot-free. I’ve seen it time and time again. There is little rhyme or reason to the things that happen.”

“Although I suppose this is not one of those situations. What… just happened to Nagisa was not a result of ‘karmic retribution’ or pure chance. The only reason he passed out like he did was his own stupidity. He didn’t take care of himself, and he ended up experiencing the fallout. Because unlike ‘karma,’ our bodies are very much something that definitively exist. And they’re capable of punishing us where ‘fate’ is not.”

“Of course, now that it’s happened, it’s our job to make sure Nagisa never behaves in a way that will allow this to happen to him again. If we were to turn our heads and feign ignorance, then it would become our fault the next time it occurs. But no: believe me when I say no mistake you have made forced this to happen. It’s not as if you held a gun to Nagisa’s head and told him to not sleep.”

“...I know,” Kiyoshi says. “Like… logically, I know. But there’s just this… there’s just this little part in me that keeps saying ‘you deserve to suffer. And if you won’t care when we hurt you, then
we’ll hurt the people you love instead.’”

Gakushuu frowns, eyebrows creased, and one hand still clutching the wheel. The other hangs awkwardly by his side, folded on his lap.

“It… can’t. I know how it feels to have thoughts you cannot control, but believe me when I say it can’t. Some… sense of guilt is not going to harm your loved ones. Nothing else is going to happen to Nagisa. As his husband… as the adult here, I will make sure of that. In that department… you have nothing to worry about.”

He watches Kiyoshi carefully. Observes the way he carries himself, and the way he curls one leg up by his side. There’s these dark lines under his eyes. He looks like he hasn’t slept in a week.

“But I must ask… what is it exactly that’s making you feel that way? That you are… deserving of such horrors?”

Kiyoshi’s quiet for one long moment... thinking, he stares out the window with watery eyes. And like something’s snapped inside of him, the dam finally breaks. One tear trails down his cheek, then another. He gasps for breath and bats at his eyes, quivering like a leaf. He turns to face Gakushuu and lets out a low, pained whimper.

“...I think I did something really bad, Asano-san.”

Kiyoshi hates his fucking self.

He hadn’t meant to cry. He really hadn’t. He’d just wanted to have a civilized discussion with Gakushuu… like adults. But the moment Gakushuu had started staring at him that way it had become too much to bear.

‘What did you do? To think you deserve such horrors?’ like he hadn’t already known.

...Because he hadn’t. He doesn’t. Kiyoshi had picked the one person most unsuspecting to vent to. The one person he’d known would look at him with those pitying eyes. And for what? He knows he doesn’t deserve pity! He knows he doesn’t deserve sympathy! What is he doing!?

He should be talking to Nagisa! Telling Makoto! Letting Fumiko know she’s been tricked! Not pity-mongering in Gakushuu’s van!

He’d just thought… he’d just thought that maybe Gakushuu would get it. Know what it feels like to be bad. But he’d been out of his goddamn mind. What was he thinking!? Placing a grade school bully on the same level as a wifebeater. Gakushuu is nothing like him! He’ll never get it! They’re a million worlds apart!

He’s staring at him with those same sympathetic, hapless eyes. The ones that say ‘I don’t know what to do.’ And Kiyoshi feels bad for pinning so much responsibility on him. It’s not his job to fix Kiyoshi. He doesn’t even know what he’s talking about! He just thinks some innocent little boy he’s seen grow up from an infant is breaking down for no reason. But he’s not! He’s not!

There are more reasons than Gakushuu could possibly ever understand!

He knows he’s going to ask. He knows he’s going to say it... that, ‘Well what did you do?’ and he hates it. He can’t say it! He can’t share! Even Gakushuu - the one he knows the least - is somebody he doesn’t want to resent him! The thought of that alone makes his breath hitch and his stomach turn. What if he tells them!? What if he tells everyone!? What if the truth comes out, and
all that Kiyoshi will ever be remembered as is a monster?

Asano opens his mouth to speak, but he doesn’t get far.

“...And w-”

“Pleasedon’t-” Kiyoshi interrupts. “I can’t. I can’t. You’re gonna hate me Asano-san... if you know. Please don’t ask. You’re gonna hate me. You’re gonna hurt me- I don’t wanna... I don’t wanna- I don’t know why- I didn’t wanna say that. ‘m just... ‘m just... so tired, Asano-san. I don’t know what I’m gonna do-”

Wiping his snot with the back of his wrist and his tear-stained cheeks with his elbow, he blubbers incoherently. Sobs and makes some desperate attempt to catch his breath. “I’m sorry-” he whispers over and over. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I’m sorry.” in a broken, selfish voice; one that can’t even bear the weight of ‘why?’

...Gakushuu attempts a different method. Reaching a careful hand out, he places it on Kiyoshi’s shoulder. And when Kiyoshi jumps at his touch, he doesn’t budge... just stands there, holding him.

“Okay,” he says in a calm voice. “I wasn’t... I wasn’t going to ask,” he says. “I swear... I wasn’t going to ask you what you did.”

“You weren’t?” Kiyoshi asks with a sniffle.

“...No. I’m well aware of what’s not my place,” Gakushuu says. “I was going to say... and this may sound rather callous, but... what does it matter?”

“Pardon?”

Gakushuu sighs. “I can’t claim to understand what it is you’re going through right now. I’m not sure I want to. But if you really, truly believe you’ve done something horrible, my question for you is... so what?”

“So what!? So what!?” Kiyoshi demands, tearing himself away from Gakushuu. “What do you mean ‘so what’!? I hurt someone! Like really hurt someone! And I will never be able to make it up to them! Why on earth wouldn’t that matter!?”

His fists ball, and his grief morphs to anger. He stares at Gakushuu with disbelieving, teary eyes, and clenches his jaw so tight it hurts.

“Now listen to me carefully,” Gakushuu says. “Don’t misconstrue me. I didn’t say it doesn’t matter. I would never say it doesn’t matter. I’m saying... what can you do about it now? Whatever it is you’ve done... whatever it is you’re beating yourself up for: it’s in the past. There’s no changing it. All you can do is attempt to strive for better in the future. And it’s clear from your reaction that you will.”

“This... this idea of ‘I deserve to suffer.’ ‘I hurt everything I touch’ is going to get you nowhere in life. And I know it’s quite untrue in regards to you, Kiyoshi. You’re a wonderful young man. And trust me when I say I know from years of experience that a messiah complex will do nothing to make you feel better about yourself. It’s only going to make you feel worse.”

...‘A better future.’ Gakushuu says it so confidently. But how can he know? How can he be certain? That he won't... that he won't just do it again?

“I... I know. These things you keep telling me. I know. But it just... it feels horrible, Asano-san. I
feel horrible. I don’t know if I can stop it.”

“Perhaps not,” Gakushuu says, shutting his eyes. “But even so… it’s never too late to try.”

Kiyoshi’s quiet. He wipes at his eyes and sniffles.

“Can I tell you a story?” Gakushuu asks. "...About the scenario you brought up earlier. I think it may help you understand the scope of things just a little bit better.”

“The… scenario?”

“With Isogai. I think I’d like to tell you about my relationship with Isogai.”

There’s still this gaping, horrible hole in Kiyoshi’s chest... consuming his thoughts and ravaging his being. But he figures he at least owes it to Gakushuu to try and listen. He nods, murmuring a quiet “...Go right ahead,” as he fumbles around in search of a box of tissues.

Gakushuu passes him one, gaze stern as he speaks up. “Everything Makoto told you about Isogai-san and I was correct. I was deeply cruel to him as a child… in the same way I was deeply cruel to many people. ‘Psychological warfare’ is no exaggeration. I took his insecurities… his vulnerabilities, and I exploited them: just because I could. I knew deep down that getting him expelled would in no way actually assist the A-Class. But I was angry... and I felt slighted... and I took it out on him. There is no other explanation. I did something terrible.”

He pauses, as if to let that sink in for a moment. And once he’s given Kiyoshi a chance to blow his nose... shake his head... he smiles.

“But you’re a smart boy, aren’t you? You’ve known Isogai-san and I all your life. Do you think our relationship is particularly one of strife?”

Kiyoshi bites his lip.

“No,” he admits. “Not at all.”

That’s why it had come as such a surprise, hadn’t it? When Makoto had shared that fun little factoid about Gakushuu. Sure, Isogai and Gakushuu had never struck Kiyoshi as best friends, but they got along well enough. He’d always known in some part that Gakushuu had at one time been the E-Class’s enemy, but they’ve never particularly treated him that way.

“Ex- actly,” Gakushuu says. “And why do you think that is?”

Kiyoshi gives a halfhearted shrug. “Time?”

It’s said to heal all wounds. He’s not so certain about that anymore, however. There are just some things that can’t be forgiven.

And that’s when Gakushuu laughs at him. Laughs!

“Time?” he asks. “Of course not.” He rolls his eyes. “‘Time.’”

Kiyoshi mutters, annoyed. “...What is it, then?”

“Accountability. I told Isogai I’d been in the wrong. I let myself get to know him better and I told myself I’d do better by him in the future. Then I did.”

Kiyoshi’s shoulders sink. “...Ah,” he says. “I should have guessed. I’ve been… thinking a lot about
“No. You haven’t,’ Gakushuu essays “This… whatever it is you’re doing: it’s not accountability. When you’ve done something horrible… none of that mopey, self-pitying nonsense is going to fix it. That’s not accountability. Accountability is having the guts to look someone you hurt in the eye and say ‘I was wrong.’”

And he wants to! He wants to do that! He doesn’t want to be self-pitying! He doesn’t want to victimize himself! He’s just… he’s scared! What if he only causes more hurt!? What if it’s… inevitable!? What if…

“...What if they never forgive me?”

... ...

... ...

“Then so be it.”

Gakushuu leans back, stretching his arms and splaying his hands against the steering wheel.

“You cannot expect everyone to forgive you. That’s what accountability is: taking however it is people react to you, and admitting ‘this is the consequence of my own actions.’ Not some karmic retribution, but how it affects the ties we have between others.” He sighs. “Listen. I’m not sure if you’ve noticed this, but some of your parents’ students still don’t like me. They still don’t want to be around me. And that’s fine.”

“I understand why. And I don’t blame them. That’s why I don’t show up to their little class reunions. That’s why I don’t beg to be let into their group chat anymore. I’m lucky enough to have forgiveness from the people who are willing to give it to me. And god knows there’s some people I’m not willing to forgive myself.”

“That’s what accountability is: Accepting that. The good and the bad. What more can you possibly do?”

“I… don’t know,” Kiyoshi admits, his gaze drifting back to the window. He stares out at the hospital parking lot and the cars pulling in. He still remembers when staring out a window was all he could do.

“It just… hurts, doesn’t it?” he asks. “To think… that you… that you can’t just fix it? Doesn’t that feel bad? Doesn’t it haunt you?”

“Of course it feels bad,” Gakushuu says, drumming his finger on the wheel. “But trust me when I say it’s a whole lot easier to sleep at night when you’re at peace with the things you’ve done.”

“Mmmm,” Kiyoshi murmurs, pressing his cheek to the glass. It’s only now that he seems to realize just how tired he is. All he wants to do is go home and pass out.

...Even if it means he’ll have to face that person again.

“Does it ever stop hurting?” he asks, his voice low.

Gakushuu takes a moment to mull that over. And then, reaching out a hand to place it on Kiyoshi’s
shoulder, he says, “Yeah. I think so.”

“It’s always gonna hurt a little: knowing you made the world a worse place. But all you can do is look out towards the future.” He squeezes Kiyoshi’s shoulder. “I was… pretty hopeless at your age, too. Didn’t exactly have a good relationship with my father or with myself. But… look at me now.” He scratches at the back of his neck. “I like to think I’m doing pretty alright.”

“Not what I expected, most certainly, but… alright. I’m lucky to have this family I’m so scared of losing… even if it’s made up of the people I once thought I had to fight against.” He gives a tired smile. “…Life surprises you in those ways.”

“I know it’s saccharine to hear this garbage from adults, but… you’re gonna be okay. I swear. I don’t say things I don’t believe… can’t cite. You’re gonna be just fine. I know it from experience.”

...Kiyoshi’s still not sure he believes that, but it does make him feel better... just a little. Gakushuu is an honest person. He’d never say something he doesn’t believe. There's always the possibility he could be wrong… their situations are so starkly contrasted... But…

Gakushuu's smart. Gakushuu's empathetic. It feels good to hear that from him, just a little.

“...Thank you,” Kiyoshi says. “I know this was a lot to dump on you, but really - sincerely - thank you.”

Gakushuu gives him half a smile. “No need,” he says. “Thank you for trusting me with this. I don’t think I ever would have been able to get Nagisa to sleep without bringing back some good news.”

“Sorry about that, again.”

“What did I tell you? Not your fault. There’s only one type of karma here to punish us in this life, and it goes by the name ‘Akabane.’”

Now that earns a chuckle from Kiyoshi, even as he shakes his head. “No. Not for that,” he says. “For worrying you all, I mean. Worrying Nagisa.”

Gakushuu sighs. “I’m not going to say it’s fine,” he admits. “You really have given all of us a scare - your friends especially. But there’s no need to apologize. Just… don’t be a stranger? Okay? No matter what happened, you’ll always have a home with us.” He pauses. “Or… with me, at least.”

...Kiyoshi feels his heart skip a beat at the mention of his friends. He’s still not sure what he’s going to say to them… if things ever really will be okay, but Gakushuu’s next words make his heartbeat slow, and his chest warm. He’s not sure if that’s completely true… whatever it is Gakushuu thinks he’s done is probably a lot more mundane than the reality, but it’s nice to believe for just a second.

“Thank you, Asano-san. Thank you.”

And before he even knows what he’s doing, he’s wrapped Gakushuu in a hug. He buries his face in his chest and blinks back tears, continuing to murmur all the while.

“Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.”

Gakushuu tenses some. But slowly... he relaxes. And placing a hand on Kiyoshi’s head, he gives his hair a gentle ruffle.

“...You’re not going to take any answer other than ‘you’re welcome,’ are you?”
“No. Probably not.”

“Well then. You’re welcome, I suppose.”

And for a moment, Kiyoshi’s safe. He’s not the cruel scientist sitting in the wreckage of his own hubris. He’s Kiyoshi Karasuma. And he’s happy. And Gakushuu believes in him. And he’s proud of him. And things are going to be okay.

...The feeling fades quickly as he remembers who he is. But he clings tight to it… tries to hold on to some little piece of it: a memory that may just serve as reassurance, even during his darkest days.

He pulls away and gives Gakushuu a smile.

“I should probably get going,” he admits. He still feels lethargic. Too heavy to move.

“Very well,” Gakushuu says, already reaching for the keys. “I can drive you home if you’d li-”

“No thank you,” Kiyoshi says. “No need. It’s… uh - not a long trip. I walked here. I appreciate it, though.”

“Of course.”

Kiyoshi reaches for the door and unlocks it. Hops out, and glances back over his shoulder at Gakushuu.

“...Tell Shiota-sensei I’m okay, okay?”

“I’ll tell him you’re working on it,” Gakushuu says simply.

“Mm-hm,” he pauses. “And… uh… don’t tell him I said I did a bad thing, alright?”

“Of course.”

Kiyoshi readjusts his jacket, shivering slightly as he rubs his hands against the inside of his pockets. It’s a chilly day out, and he’s not particularly fond of the wind. All the same, he doesn’t pull his hood up. He’d much rather be seen for who he is than hide his face, whatever that means.

...He thinks he’s still getting it figured out.

“And… uh - thank you... for caring about me.”

Gakushuu shoots him another surprised look. But already beginning to make his way back into the hospital, he smiles.

“...Of course. Always.”

And with that, he’s gone.

Kiyoshi’s still not sure how he feels, standing outside of the general hospital at 1:30 PM on a Friday afternoon. But as he makes his way out of the parking lot, one foot in front of the other, he decides at the very least Gakushuu has given him a lot to think about.

...Accountability, and whether he's holding it or not.
Gakushuu lets his spouses know the minute he steps onto the elevator.

He figures he could just tell them when he gets up to Nagisa’s room, but he knows how neurotic Nagisa can get. The sooner he gets good news the better. He whips out his phone, notes the time and sighs.

[1/13/2031 1:24 PM:] [Gakushuu]: I communicated with Kiyoshi.

[1/13/2031 1:24 PM:] [Gakushuu]: I think he will be fine.

[1/13/2031 1:25 PM:] [Gakushuu]: He is just going through some sort of rough patch.

[1/13/2031 1:25 PM:] [Gakushuu]: I would keep an eye on him, but it’s nothing worth stressing over right now.

[1/13/2031 1:25 PM:] [Gakushuu]: He and I had a good cry session. I think he’s feeling somewhat better.

The elevator dings and he steps off.

[1/13/2031 1:25 PM:] [Nagisa]: Cry session!?

[1/13/2031 1:25 PM:] [Nagisa]: Why was he crying!?

[1/13/2031 1:26 PM:] [Gakushuu]: He didn’t feel comfortable sharing.

[1/13/2031 1:26 PM:] [Nagisa]: ...Ah.

[1/13/2031 1:26 PM:] [Gakushuu]: I’d avoid bringing it up with his friends as of the moment. He tensed up when I mentioned them. May be related to some sort of argument.

[1/13/2031 1:27 PM:] [Karma❤️]: Let’s not jump to conclusions. Once I saw Kiyoshi cry over a Reddit thread about swans.

[1/13/2031 1:27 PM:] [Kayano]: Once I saw Kiyoshi cry because his dad wouldn’t let him dye his hair until he was 13.

[1/13/2031 1:27 PM:] [Nagisa]: ...Isn’t that the time he got you to do it because his parents wouldn’t?

[1/13/2031 1:28 PM:] [Kayano]: No comment.

Gakushuu snorts softly. It’s funny… they really have seen Kiyoshi cry a lot, haven’t they? He supposes that just comes with the territory of the boy being sensitive, but it also makes him realize just how much they’ve watched him grow up. It feels like just yesterday he called up Nagisa, a crying mess, because he’d watched an ASPCA commercial on Youtube and couldn’t help because he didn’t live in America.

...Is that really the boy who believes he’s done something evil?

To be frank, he has no idea what it is Kiyoshi could have had done to earn that sort of reaction from himself. But it must have been bad. Even in all of Kiyoshi’s crybaby life, Gakushuu has never seen him cry like that before.

It’s almost scary.
But he’s given little time to think about it as he reenters Nagisa’s room. He gives him a hug, and repeats that everything seems to have been fine.

“The business call went well,” he lies, remembering the kids are in the room. “Mitsubishi had a bit of trouble opening up to me at first, but I think I managed to break down their walls.”

He and Nagisa exchange a knowing glance. Kayano laughs slightly, and the corners of Karma’s eyes crinkle with his smile.

They check Nagisa out soon after.

The doctor reassures that he should be fine as long as he gets some rest. There’s nothing overly concerning about his health, and no reason to worry unless the behavior continues. (...It won’t.) Get him some sleep, some liquids, a good meal and he should be good as new.

They drop the kids off at their homes before arriving at their own. (Er… at least… sorta. It’s a whole debacle. They drop Makoto off at his home and drop Fumiko off a few blocks from hers because she wouldn’t wanna risk being seen stepping out of his ‘rundown vehicle’ by her parents. A notion which Gakushuu fully gets, but also… hey! Leave his Porsche out of it!)

They both give Nagisa a tight hug before they bounce. Fumiko squeezes his neck, reminding him to be careful. And Makoto stage-whispers in his ear, telling him that he better start taking care of himself, or his sensei is gonna get really angry!

Nagisa laughs softly, reassuring them that he will. And although that doesn’t seem to ease all of their tension on their shoulders, each walks home with confidence.

...They really do love him.

All of his students. Nagisa had described just how scared they’d been earlier, and it had somehow managed to warm Gakushuu’s heart and break it completely at the same goddamn time. He gives himself far too little credit for the impact he has on those kids’ lives.

They need him.

Thankfully, he stays true to his word. The moment Nagisa’s home, he’s conked out on the bed. Kayano drapes a blanket over him and Karma gives him a kiss on the forehead, murmuring “Rest well, sleepyhead.”

Gakushuu simply smiles... gazes at him a moment more… then goes.

Kayano and Karma spend the afternoon making him soup. Stumbling over each other and laughing as they reach for this or that. Gakushuu briefly considers joining in, but decides he’s had too long of a day to really give it his best effort. He may not be the guy who passed out, but he’s exhausted.

Instead, he simply perches on the couch... does some brief work, and combs through a book. Glances at his phone, and wonders about today’s events. About how Nagisa’s to behave from here on out, and if he really believes his husband is even capable of it. About tears exchanged at the hospital, and the strange incident with Kiyoshi.

It’s strange, but for once he really feels like he’d known what to say. For a very, very long time now he’s seen Nagisa as the only one capable of changing those kids’ lives... holed himself away in his room and in his books when they were over. Because he was somehow convinced he’d irrevocably harm them. That he was bad, and he wasn’t capable of getting through to them in the same way his husband was.
But this afternoon had felt different. He’d felt as if he’d really made a change. And when Kiyoshi had pulled him in for a hug, murmuring thank you time and time again, his heart had glowed.

Nagisa wakes up just past seven. And even as he insists he doesn’t need a hand, his spouses lead him into the kitchen. Kayano and Karma brag, asking him what he thinks of the soup, and he grins from ear to ear, looking just about ready to melt.

“...It feels made with a lot of love.”

He doesn’t get to stay up long. They set his curfew at nine.

“You can certainly stay up somewhat later once you’re in a better state,” Gakushuu says. “But as for tonight, you’re resting. The goal is to get you on a better schedule, after all, not a worse one.”

...Nagisa knows better than to fight it just this once.

His spouses crawl into bed next to him. Kayano nuzzles herself up against his chest, and Karma spoons him with comforting arms. Gakushuu, forced to keep his distance, simply reminds him “I love you,” before he flicks out the lights.

“I know,” Nagisa says, his voice soft. “I know.”

Gakushuu lies awake that night. He knows it’s hypocritical, but boy, what a day. His mind drifts from thought to thought as he closes his eyes, then opens them. Listens to Nagisa snore… and breathes in… then out.

He wonders if their family is dysfunctional. He doesn’t want it to be, but that’s how it must have looked to the doctors. The three of them, screaming at Nagisa, then pulling him in close, and begging him never to scare them like that again. The subtle texts, and the inside jokes that no-one else could get.

‘...No,’ he decides, remembering the soup and feeling Karma pressed against his back. ‘We’re not dysfunctional. We just struggle sometimes.’

How could they not? They all came from such hellish situations. Now those were real dysfunction. Sometimes it still feels like they don’t know how to be adults right. But that’s a flaw of them as individuals. Together, they help each other overcome those things.

...That’s what makes them a good family.

For so many years he’d worried and worried: “What if we’re broken?” “What if we can’t do this?” Isn’t that why they’d been so afraid to bring a child into the world? Scared they’d mess them up in the same way they’d been scarred?

But today, somehow even despite strife, he’d known they weren’t broken. He’d known they were closer than ever. And he’d been reminded of just how much he doesn’t wanna lose this. Listening to Nagisa snore, Gakushuu’s well aware that the rational part of him knows this will be hard for him. That rest is a process that will come with strife. But his heart, on the other hand, believes in Nagisa, and he just knows that things will be okay.

Some smaller part of that heart believes in himself, as well.

“Thank you,” Nagisa had said over dinner. “For - uh - dealing with the Kiyoshi thing.”

“It’s nothing,” Gakushuu says. “Your kids are my responsibility, too.”
Careful not to wake anyone, he slips out of bed. Silently opens the drawer, and reaches for a letter, which he keeps enveloped protectively.

...He slips it out… stares, and smiles.

Earlier, he’d had the thought that Nagisa didn’t give himself enough credit for just what an impact he had on his students’ lives. But glancing over the letter in the dark room, Fumiko tells Gakushuu that he gave her the power to believe she’ll have a bright future, and he wonders if he’s been underselling himself, too.

Never once in a life had he thanked his father. Never once had he said ‘thank you’ and meant it. These kids... what Kiyoshi had confided in him today... that required trust. To have earned that makes him happier than anything.

...Maybe he’s not so unprepared, after all.

Kiyoshi is starting to unsettle Makoto.

He doesn’t know what it is, but something about the way he’s acting is just rubbing him the wrong way. The nervous glances… the way he sticks so cautiously to his own side of the classroom. When they meet up with him on the way home from school, he walks quickly and talks little. It can take several attempts to even get his attention.

...He doesn’t show up at Nagisa’s house anymore.

“It’s family stuff,” he says. “I just don’t have the time.” Like something’s gone horribly wrong. And Makoto briefly wonders if it has to do with his mother. Did something happen to her? But when he inquires - asks Nagisa, he says he’s heard nothing of the sort. Last he’d checked, Irina was doing just fine overseas.

...Karasuma, then. Did something happen with him? Maybe the two of them got in a fight. Kiyoshi’s always seemed a little bit bitter about his relationship with his dad. But even that assumption doesn’t sit right with Makoto. When asked about his father, Kiyoshi seems nervous, but no more than he does about anything else as of late.

Simple worry, maybe. Kiyoshi had voiced a fear of something happening to his family. Even if his mother’s right as rain, it’s possible he’s just freaking himself out. All the same, though, he had seemed so careless racing home with Makoto just a few weeks ago. What had happened to reignite those fears?

...Makoto wonders if it’s just him.

He voices it one day, when it’s just the two of them... Fumiko and he. Because Kiyoshi’s halfway across the room, or having excused himself to the bathroom, or absent altogether.

“...Do you think it’s us?”

Fumiko looks up from her textbook, placing her pencil aside with a frown.

“What do you mean?”

“Kiyoshi. I mean… something’s wrong with him, right?”

“Duh,” Fumiko says.
“I keep thinking and thinking it over... why he’s freaking out all of a sudden. But no matter what I consider, it still doesn’t make sense. It’s... it’s not his mom. It’s not his dad, either. And I mean... it could be his anxiety, but he’s had it all his life, and he’s never acted this way around us before.”

“...And so you think it’s us?”

“Could be. I mean... doesn’t it sort of seem like he’s avoiding us?”

Fumiko mulls that over for a long moment, her expression troubled. She fiddles with her pencil absentmindedly, and taps her shoe on the ground.

“No,” she declares with a firm shake of her head. “He’s not. Kiyoshi... wouldn’t do that to us.”

“I... suppose not,” Makoto says, but he’s not entirely convinced.

Fumiko must sense it, because she shoots him a glare. “He wouldn’t!” she insists. “He told me himself: We’re pretty much the first friends he’s ever had. He wouldn’t just... he wouldn’t just ruin that for himself.”

But she shifts uncomfortably, scooting her chair in closer to her desk, and Makoto can tell she’s not entirely certain, either.

“He’s gotta be sick or something,” she declares another day, pointing across the room at Kiyoshi. “I mean... just look at him.”

And she’s right! Kiyoshi’s always been pale, being half-white and never going outside and all, but lately he’s begun to look pallor. There are these dark, tired bags under his eyes. And when he steps up in front of the class to give a presentation, every part of him seems to shake.

“He said he had the Flu, right?” Makoto replies.

“Oh, yeah. But that was like, two weeks ago.”

Makoto frowns. Has it really only two weeks? It feels like so much longer that he’s been acting weird around them.

“Maybe it’s something more serious.”

Fumiko skeptically raises an eyebrow. But when she speaks, she’s got a nervous quiver to her voice. “Like what?”

“I dunno!” Makoto says. “Like Cancer! Or Leukemia! Or Diabetes!”

“Okay. First of all: Cancer and Leukemia are the same thing. Second of all: I’m not sure why Diabetes is your idea of a serious illness.”

“I dunno! I’ve never been to the doctor! It just sounds serious!”

Fumiko blinks, but must decide to unpack that one later, because she quickly moves on.

“...Besides, Kiyoshi wouldn’t do that to us,” she insists. “Hide if he was dying or something. He’s not that mean.”

“...Mmm,” Makoto admits. “I know.”

Still, he wonders. And he wonders just what else Kiyoshi would be willing to hide from them, too.
He asks Nagisa if something is wrong... if he knows anything more. And he steeps his fingers, sighing deeply, and avoiding looking directly Makoto’s way.

“I think so,” he admits. “I’ve arranged a meeting with his father, but that still won’t be for a while.” He pauses. “I don’t know what to do. I hate to say this to you. I don’t want you to worry, but… no. I don’t think he’s well. He’s spiraling, and every time I try to talk to him about it he clams up. He needs serious help.”

“Maybe… it’s something the counselor can help with!” Makoto hopefully suggests.

“Maybe,” Nagisa replies. “...Here’s to hoping. And in the meantime all we can do is continue to do everything we can.”

...And Makoto is trying! But it’s like… Kiyoshi won’t let him in! When he texts him, he hardly replies. And when he approaches him, it’s worse. He sputters nervously or makes excuses or falls silent. Makoto places a hand on his shoulder, and he jumps. For a moment, Kiyoshi looks at him with sheer terror, and he wonders again if this has something to do with him.

Fumiko says it doesn’t. She believes in him. And it’s not that Makoto doesn’t! It’s just… it’s just weird. That he gets like this right as everything was changing. Maybe… Kiyoshi had been hurt by he and Fumiko’s reunion. Does he feel unneeded? Makoto hadn’t… Makoto hadn’t meant to exclude him!

“We care about you, you know,” he says one day on the way home from school. “I… hope we didn’t make you forget that.”

“No,” Kiyoshi says, his voice a whisper. “You haven’t done anything at all.”

And he can repeat that all he wants, but just as soon he’s gone... and Makoto feels his heart plummet.

He’s certainly making it feel like it’s his fault. If not the neglect thing, then what? Has Kiyoshi simply gotten bored of him? Realized how annoying he is? How passionless? Or what about just plain bad? He’d admitted it, hadn’t he? Back during the moon unit. That the things that Makoto had done had frightened him. What if… all he can see anymore is the murderer?

...Makoto certainly wouldn’t blame him.

But that doesn’t account for Fumiko. Kiyoshi has no reason to be avoiding Fumiko. She’s a wonderful, kindhearted person, and he won’t stand for her experiencing the fallout of what… whatever it is that’s wrong with him! She deserves better than this!

She tries so hard to keep faith. Even as Kiyoshi’s health plummets... fingernails bit down to stubs and eyes half-lidded... she tries to keep faith in him. She tries to keep faith in anyone she cares about. She places a hand on Makoto’s shoulder and tells him she’s sure it has nothing to do with him. But slowly, her voice begins to waver. And “he wouldn’t do that to us,” morphs into “…He wouldn’t do that to us, right?”

Two weeks turn to three, and three turns to four.

Midterms roll around and Makoto takes them, mind consumed by worry. Nagisa asks him time and time again if everything is okay, and he repeats “It’s not.” Because something is seriously wrong with his friend, and he just wishes he knew what.

Nagisa admits that sometimes there’s only so much you can do. If someone doesn’t want to talk,
you can’t make them. “Let the adults handle this, okay? I’m sure he wouldn’t want you to worry.”

But… but Makoto’s an adult, too! In… some way! He’s Korosensei! He doesn’t want to just sit around feeling helpless!

Kiyoshi fails his midterms. He sits there, looking half-ready to fall asleep the whole time. Nagisa offers to let him retake them… he’s clearly not in a well state. But Kiyoshi declines, staring absentmindedly at the paper with a blank frown on his face.

…His pencil snaps in his grip.

Fumiko’s absent two days later. It’s a Thursday. Maybe two weeks after Nagisa had passed out. She’s come down with the Flu. And for like… real. Makoto knows that much’s the truth. She’d sneezed all over him the day before just to prove it. He hopes it’s not his turn to get sick, next. Especially since he’s now been informed the whole ‘never being vaccinated’ thing is a ‘huge fucking deal.’

‘…In a good way?’

’No! Not in a good way! You’re going to get fucking Measles!’

She texts the group chat, letting them know she’ll be out. Makoto wishes her well, stating that he’d make her soup as well if he could. But with her parents’ presence looming like a set of watchdogs, something tells him that’s not going to be an option.

“That’s okay,” she texts back. “I think I’ll survive.”

But Makoto’s less certain when Kiyoshi doesn’t even give them so much as a text.

No ‘I hope you feel better soon’ or ‘that’s alright.’ Radio. Silence.

He almost wonders if Kiyoshi’s sick, as well. But when he shows up to school that day, looking unwell, but in an entirely different way, Makoto feels his fist clench.

What is wrong with him!?

He glances at his phone every so often, frowns, then pockets it. Sends Makoto a wayward, nervous glance, then breaks it the moment he’s caught. He scoots his chair in, then out, and stares down at his feet.

Does he… does he just not care!? Does he have something to prove!? Because it’s not okay! This! Isn’t! Okay! Makoto’s trying! He’s trying to care! Why won’t Kiyoshi let him!?

Fumiko texts him halfway through the day. And she admits, defeated, that maybe he was right.

“Maybe he really is abandoning us.”

…That’s the last straw. Imagining Fumiko there, lying in her bed, sick out of her mind and close to tears because she’s afraid one of the only friends she’s ever had has abandoned her is the last straw. Makoto won’t stand for it! Kiyoshi’s not the only one to consider this group his first real set of friends! All of them do! And Makoto won’t let him trash that without as much as a reason why!

He’s talking to Kiyoshi. He doesn’t care what Nagisa, or Kiyoshi, or anyone else thinks. Sometimes you do gotta be forced to talk. He knows his life certainly wouldn’t have taken the track it has if Nagisa hadn’t forced him to talk about his home life all those months ago. He’s
saying he’s sick of it. He’s putting his foot down. And he’s getting some answers.

Because not so long ago, Kiyoshi told him he shouldn’t hide how he feels. That they’re friends, and they can trust in each other. They promised they were family, and that nothing, much less some facade was going to destroy that!

He’s Korosensei, the unshakeable! The stubborn! The unkillable! He cooks Takoyaki for vindictive little pricks and shines the fuselage on fighter jets meant to murder him! If Kiyoshi thinks a cold shoulder is going to get him off his back, then… well, then… he’s a moron!

Makoto doesn’t give up on the people he cares about that easily!

The moment class is let out, he’s on his feet. Where usually he’d start up a lengthy conversation with Nagisa, he’s already heading out the door: telling him there’s something important to deal with, and that if he can, he’ll regroup with him later. He doesn’t even wait to hear Nagisa’s response. He’s out the door and onto the mountain.

Kiyoshi tries to make a quick escape like he does every day. But Makoto’s one step ahead of him. Practically barrelling into him at the lip of the forest, he grabs Kiyoshi by the hand and pulls.

“A-ah!” Kiyoshi sputters, eyes wide. “Makoto! What is it!?"

“We’ve gotta talk, Kiyoshi!” Makoto says.

And Kiyoshi pauses. Taking a moment to catch his breath... regain his balance, he frowns. “Like... now?”

“Yeah. Like now.”

Kiyoshi’s gaze flickers from the ground to Makoto, before settling back on the ground. He takes a deep gulp. “...About what?”

“I think you know what,” Makoto says, voice firm. And squeezing Kiyoshi’s hand tight, he takes a deep breath... raises his voice... and speaks.

“It's time you tell me the truth.”

Chapter End Notes

...SOOOO... cliffhangers, huh? This is the part where I'd apologize, but again: I'm not sorry. Even remotely. Trust me when I say this chapter would have reached RIDICULOUS lengths if it had featured the entirety of Makoto and Kiyoshi's confrontation. But it seems next week some secrets may finally come to light!

This chapter, on the other hand, was far more... I don't want to say /casual,/ because it was still emotional and plot-relevant, but more... small, I suppose? It focused on just a few little moments, but I feel those held an important emotional depth and wanted to give them the attention they deserved.

I've had a few readers point out that Gakushuu and Kiyoshi had some things in comment, and they were very right! Although the... scope of their crimes is EXTREMELY different, they definitely have some similar feelings, and I think it'll be
good for Kiyoshi to have heard some of what Gakushuu had to share. Now all we can do is wait and see if he'll take his words to heart. Because Gakushuu's right when he says he has experience in just about everything Kiyoshi's going through.

Kiyoshi's still definitely not doing... well, but he is doing a bit better. And here's to hoping this is the start of an upswing for him as opposed to a nosedive.

I had fun focusing on him remembering some of the fucked up medical stuff in this chapter. It's an EXTREMELY weird situation, because on one hand he deserved it Back Then, but on the other hand that's... an extremely upsetting thing for a literal child to have to remember. It's one of those things that makes you think: is it a punishment that actually doled out any justice, or was it, too, just needless hurt without making the culprit actually make any amends. On the other hand, what can you even DO if the culprit doesn't INTEND to fix any of the hurt they've caused? He clearly never would have changed back then. Was that the only option? It's genuinely possible, because. Y'know. You can't let people like that run around unattended, much less UNPUNISHED, but it's still a scarring thought for Kiyoshi.

All in all I hope this chapter wasn't too dreary, however. It's still sad, of course, but it's got this sense of... tenderness to it, and I hope that comes as some assurance to my readers seeing as how I've dragged you through the dirt for so long.

Some songs that helped me write this chapter were Rubik's Cube by Athlete, Blame by Air Traffic Controller, It's Quiet Uptown from Hamilton (You know... these bits make me sound like I like Hamilton a lot more than I actually do. I'm honestly not that passionate about it. It's just got a song for everything.) and Missing You by All Time Low. The songs I'd truly like to highlight that helped me write this chapter, however, are the entirety of Hospice by The Antlers.

The album tells the story of an abusive relationship through the metaphor of a cancer ward. And while it doesn't... entirely fit the situation Kiyoshi was in, seeing as how the singer of Hospice is the /victim/ not the abuser, the themes of abuse and horrific, slow death were enough to sell me on it as a big theme album for him, especially in regards to how he perceives himself.

Shiva in particular got to me.

"Suddenly every machine stopped at once
And the monitors beeped the last time
Hundreds of thousands of hospital beds
And all of them empty but mine

Well, I was lying down with my feet in the air
Completely unable to move
The bed was misshaped, and awkward and tall
And clearly intended for you

You checked yourself out when you put me to bed
And tore that old band off your wrist
But you came back to see me for a minute or less
And left me your ring in my fist

My hair started growing, my face became yours
My femur was breaking in half
The sensation was scissors and too much to scream
So instead, I just started to laugh

Suddenly every machine stopped at once
And the monitors beeped the last time
Hundreds of thousands of hospital beds
And all of them empty but mine"

...Shit, man.

Annnnnnyways! The next chapter will be up in a week! So I hope it's not TOO long a wait for Makoto and Kiyoshi's talk. As always, let me know what you thought, and I hope to see you then!
On one hand I should probably stop publishing these at 7AM because it's bad for my sleep schedule, but on the other hand... the instant serotonin from releasing AIS chapters gives me the power to keep going.

Warning for discussion of abuse/medical abuse, and a brief mention of needles in this chapter. As always, enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“It’s time you tell me the truth,” is the one phrase Kiyoshi least wants to hear.

He freezes in his tracks, Makoto’s grip still tight on his palm. A bead of sweat trails down his forehead, and his breath hitches in his throat.

‘The truth.’

...Does he know?

For one horrifying moment, Kiyoshi lives in that world. Heart pounding- ears ringing- he lives in a world where Makoto’s seen through his disguise. But as his eyes drift to meet Makoto’s, and he’s met with some form of annoyed pity, not the righteous anger he expects, his heartbeat slowly returns to normal.

A… ah. So he hadn’t meant that kind of truth. Of course. He’s just… talking about something else. Like a normal person.

(Kiyoshi hasn’t been able to get his mind onto anything else in weeks.)

“...The truth?” he repeats, his voice hushed. “I’m… er - not exactly sure what you’re talking about.”

The words slip out of his mouth as if they’re rehearsed. He tries gently to tug his hand away from Makoto, but Makoto's eyes narrow, and his grip only tightens.

“Y-you don’t know!?” he asks, sheer disbelief in his voice. “Oh, come on, man! Cut the crap!”

“I’m just not sure what you’re talking about-”

“You’re avoiding us!” Makoto shouts. Kiyoshi opens his mouth to speak, but Makoto doesn’t let him. “And don’t try to say you’re not! You haven’t willingly talked to us since January! What happened!?”

...J… January. Has it really been that long? Nagisa collapsed in… what? It was only a week ago! Or… two? Things have been hazy lately.

“Nothing happened,” he says with another tug of his hand; this time managing to free it. He whirls around, beginning the quick descent down the mountain. “At least… I mean - It doesn’t matter.”
Makoto follows after, a dogged stubbornness to the way he carries himself. And Kiyoshi clutches his jaw, wishing he was anywhere but here right now.

“Your mom-” Makoto says. “Did something happen to your mom? Was she hurt-?”

“No!” Kiyoshi snaps. “Nothing happened to my mom!”

“Your dad, then. Did something happen to your dad?”

“No! Nothing happened to my dad!”

“What, then!” Makoto asks. “Did something happen to you?”

“Of course something happened to me!” Kiyoshi growls. And he regrets it about just as soon as he says it. Makoto’s eyebrows furrow, and he attempts to reach out and take Kiyoshi’s hand once more. But he yanks it away, yelping, “But I don’t want to talk about it, okay!”

“Never?” Makoto asks.

“Yes! Never!”

“And so you’re never going to talk to us again.”

“That’s not what I said!”

“You’re certainly acting like it.”

“I’m not not acting like-” Kiyoshi sighs, breathing out deeply through his nose. “I’m not… I just-”

What option does he have? He knows he’s acting like a dick, but what other option does he have? He’d wanted to do this painlessly, but Makoto had caught on. There’s no drifting away subtly now. He needs to put his foot down. He’d rather hurt his feelings than hurt him! Break his heart than break his neck... rather be seen as an asshole than as the person who did that.

“No. I can never talk about it. And it’s not your fault.”

“You keep saying that!” Makoto says. “But when’s it gonna end?”


“You can’t just-” Makoto sputters. “You can’t just do that to us! To me! To Fumiko! I get it if you’re sick of us, but I think you at least owe us a-”

“I’m not sick of you!” Kiyoshi interrupts, irritation prickling in his tone. He’s not sure if he's angrier with Makoto or himself. “None of this is you! It’s all me. And it’s for your own good! I know it might hurt, but please: trust me! This is for your own good.”

His footsteps quicken. He needs to get out of here, now.

Makoto’s right behind him.

“Is it my personality?”

“...Pardon?”

“Is it me! Is it how I act!? I know I can be annoying! And stubborn! And loud! And unintelligent,
And Kiyoshi feels another pang of anger. Of sadness. Of something. His eyes narrow as his walk becomes a march.

“No! It’s not-”

**You’re not!**

“The Aguri thing. Did… did we make you feel left out, Kiyoshi? Is that it? I… I didn’t mean it when I said she was - I mean - she’s not my only best friend! It was exciting, but… you’re important, too! Have we been neglecting that?”

Maybe at one point. But that doesn’t matter anymore! If given the choice, all he’d want is for those two to be happy together! Without him!

“No.”

“Because we can try again! We… we can do better, I swear! Please don’t… please don’t go!”

*They* can do better? *They* should do better!? Don’t make him laugh!

“It’s not that!”

“Korosensei!” Makoto says, and Kiyoshi’s march becomes a sprint. Breath labored… footsteps heavy. He’ll do anything to outrun this conversation. “Is it Korosensei? Are you scared of him? Are you scared of me?”

“I would never-”

“During the sports festival! After the moon unit! You *freaked out!* When you learned I hurt all those people! You *told me* you were scared. Did it get worse? Did your parents tell you something? Is that why you don’t want to be around me?”

“No. No!” Stop thinking about it! Don’t go down that track! With every word, Makoto draws closer to the truth, and Kiyoshi’s heart pounds in his ears. Skin crawling, eye twitching, he repeats “No. No. No.”

His eyes scan the forest… assess each tree and take in every gnarled root. A bird chirps somewhere far away, and the path turns deeper into the forest. Perhaps if he takes an abrupt turn he can manage to lose hi-

“I’d get it! I wouldn’t blame you! But you can’t take this out on Fumiko!”

...And Kiyoshi stops.

“It’s… it’s *fine* if you hate me, Kiyoshi. You… don’t even gotta say why if you really don’t wanna,” Makoto admits, his voice quiet. “...But the way you’re treating Fumiko… it’s not okay. It took a lot for her to open up to you, you know.”

Kiyoshi’s still… his ears lightly ringing. Some part of him still wants to make a break for it, but his legs wouldn’t dare. Knees trembling… breaths uneven, he listens to the sounds of the forest. A bird is chirping somewhere closer now. When he’s really quiet, he can hear the trickle of the river.

“I know,” he says, defeated. “I know.” He takes one step back. “She’s put… so much faith in me
over the past year. Even more than I deserve. And I’m thankful for that. I always will be. But... something’s… changed, Makoto. And now I don’t know if things will ever be the same.”

“Yeah?” Makoto asks, taking two steps towards him. “...Well, you’ll never know for certain until you open up to us. Unless you’ve really decided you want to make that decision by yourself?”

He looks so gentle, staring at Kiyoshi with those big black eyes. He’d been angry for a moment - hurt - but now that Kiyoshi’s opened up, he just seems disappointed. He takes another step closer, hand reaching up to take Kiyoshi’s. But it stops midway, lingering in the air as if saying ‘It really is up to you.’

That feels like too much power for someone like him to wield. And so much risk for someone so scared to take. Is it really his place to crush Makoto’s dreams? To tell him his trust’s been undermined? And is it really in his heart to rob himself of that reassuring gaze?

“...You promised, Kiyoshi. Promised you’d be there for her. Promised you’d protect me. Are you really going to give all that up without so much as a reason why?”

And that’s when his hand starts to tremble... hanging out by his side in the late winter chill. Another moment passes, and his voice starts to crack. He sniffs once, then twice, and before he knows it, the facade is broken. Tears trickle down his cheeks.

... This is the only choice he has. He can’t keep running... From Makoto... from himself. That’s not accountability. And this is going to hurt… this is going to hurt more than anything he’s ever done, but nothing - even seeing those eyes stare at him with such hatred - could possibly be any worse than seeing them look at him with heartbreak.

‘What if they never forgive me?’ he'd asked, voice quivering.

Gakushuu had gone quiet, eyes serious. ‘...Then so be it.’

He needs to let go of this… of this gentle thing he’s found. Of this gentle thing he’s never deserved. And he needs to say why, or that sacrifice will never mean anything.

He just hopes it won’t hurt too much. For Makoto, or for him.

Finally, he takes his hand... clings to it tight and stares up at Makoto. Slowly, the shaking of his hand subsides, and Makoto’s hurt, angry tears dry. He gives Kiyoshi a bittersweet smile, and he just about feels his heart split in two. But for one single moment, he stands there, clasping Makoto’s hand, and takes in those wonderful, compassionate eyes. Resigns himself to the fact that this may be the last time he ever sees them look at him this way… and lets go.

“No,” he says. “I won’t. You’re right. That’s… not fair to you.” It’s his turn to tremble. “...I... can’t protect you anymore. That much is true. But… you deserve to know why.” He turns. “...I’ll tell you the truth.”

He can still hear the river running its way down the mountain. He wonders if it’s the same one connected to the pool Korosensei built all those years ago. He still remembers what he’d done.

He remembers most everything.

“...I have a past life, too,” he says.

And. Everything. Stops.
The forest falls silent. The cicadas hush... and the river runs dry. A leaf blows by Makoto’s foot, and only then does he come to the realization that maybe it isn’t the forest that’s come to a standstill, but the heart inside his chest.

...Shock. That’s what he feels: shock. Complete and utter shock. But as he meets Kiyoshi’s eyes, and sees an all-too-serious resolution in them, his disbelief dissipates; falls away and lands at his feet. Makoto takes one step forward, then two. And as he rushes to take Kiyoshi’s hands, that shock morphs into ecstasy.

“You - you have a past life!?” he asks. “Who is it!? Why would you feel bad about that!? Is that what you’ve been avoiding us over!? Why!? Were you afraid we would think you were copying us? Because we wouldn’t! That is so cool, Kiyoshi!”

Kiyoshi tears his hand away, looking almost repulsed. He backs away slowly, eyes narrowing just some. “No. It’s not,” he says, wiping his hand on the side of his pant leg. “It’s… really not. Trust me, Makoto.”

And Makoto pauses... frowns deeply.

“...Why?”

“It’s… it’s not some cool, accomplished past life like you guyses. It’s… I”

“That’s okay!” Makoto insists. “It’s okay if it -” he shakes his head. ”You don’t have to have done anything special! As long as you-“


And Makoto pauses... wrinkles his nose. “...Like what?”

Kiyoshi eyes flit towards the ground. He shifts uncomfortably... bites his lip... hesitates.

“...Like… like…” his voice is strained. “Do things. To hurt you. To… betray you. Betray everyone. Korosensei… Shiota-sensei… even... even…” His voice peters off. “...Well, you know.”

And Makoto stares. Stares at Kiyoshi, with his head hung low, and lip quivering... stares at the way he restlessly scrapes the back of his shoe on the ground, and stares at the tears prickling in his eyes.

...Betray him. Hurt him. It… it can’t be…

It… it has to be.

Irina and Karasuma’s son. The boy who’s just wanted to be noticed all these months. Third wheel. Second fiddle. Wonderful, and brave, and woefully unappreciated. His best friend. The person who’s been by his side all this time.

...Damien?

It… it has to be! Who else could he possibly be talking about!? Who else has suffered like they have!? Who else would have every reason to hate Korosensei? To hate him? But as he steps forward - attempts to take Kiyoshi’s hand once more - he can’t find it in himself to be hurt. To be angry. At the very least, that means he’s alive!
He’s still not entirely sure how any of this ties into avoiding Fumiko, but... but...!

“...That’s... that’s wonderful!”

Kiyoshi stumbles backwards, eyes wide. “No! No, it’s not!”

“What are you talking about!? Why wouldn’t it be!?" Makoto follows after, bouncing from foot to foot.

“I... I did so many awful things! How can you say that!? After the way I treated your students! After the way I treated you!”

“I treated you worse, first!” Makoto insists. “I... I...- I’m sorry.”

“You... you what!?" Kiyoshi asks. “You should not be apologizing to me!”

“Yes! I should! It’s all I’ve wanted to say for so long!” Makoto draws closer, opening his arms. “...I’ve felt so bad! You looked up to me! I took advantage of that! And I will never, ever forgive myself for that.”

...And Kiyoshi stops.

“Looked up to you? Sorry?" And recognition dawns in his eyes, as if something clicks, and he finally understands what Makoto is talking about. “You really don’t get it, do you?”

He says it so bitterly. So exhausted. He finally looks up at Makoto, a half-sympathetic, half-sardonic expression on his face.

And all of a sudden there’s this discontenting, wrong feeling in Makoto’s gut. He frowns... stares blankly, but doesn’t dare move.

“Get what?”

...Why is his voice trembling? No. He’s not... he’s not scared. He’s supposed to be happy right now. Right now’s a happy moment.

“You have the completely wrong idea," Kiyoshi says. “You think... you seriously think - No. I’m not your apprentice. I’m sorry to break it to you, but I’m not... not... I’m not that person-”

Makoto’s mouth feels dry.

“...Because you... because you... abandoned that title, right?”

He knows he’s grasping at straws here. But he doesn’t want to think about... can’t think about...- Kiyoshi doesn’t mean...-

“No! Oh my God, Makoto!” Kiyoshi hisses, voice strained. “No! Because you... because you cared about that person! Because you found peace! Because he was just a kid! I don’t... I don’t have that excu- because I’m-!” Kiyoshi freezes, staring at Makoto with angry, wounded eyes. “...I’m bad...”

His voice sounds quiet. Defeated. He scratches at the side of his arm, blinking back tears.

“...Because Damien was good. There was something good inside Damien. And, well... there wasn’t. Inside me.” He sighs. “I’m not your student. I’m sorry... that I got your hopes up. I wish I could be. That would have been nice. But... uh... I’m a lot worse-”
He sounds so resigned. So certain. And it sends Makoto’s thoughts racing. He steps forward instinctively, but his legs feel stiff. His heart pounds. Sirens are blaring in his mind.

Who else…- who else…? there’s no-one else left, is there!? Kiyoshi wouldn’t…- Kiyoshi’s not- He can’t seriously mean-

“I… uh… think I’m just gonna say it on three, okay? I really don’t wanna, but I think I have to. You deserve to know… why I need to go away now. I think you’ll agree.”

W-what!? He would never-! He doesn’t need t-

“…Three.” Kiyoshi’s voice shakes as he speaks, and the wind has resumed. Makoto can’t tell if the forest’s unfrozen, or if he’s only now processing just how terrible it is outside.

“…Two.”

**Wait! Stop it!**

His whole body’s trembling, on second thought. Is it the chill, or the terror? That’s what he’s looking at Makoto with, after all, isn’t it? **Terror.** He’s afraid. Of his reaction, or of **him**? All the same, he seems resigned… ready. There’s no stopping him now.

“…One.”

Wait. **Waitwaitwait. No! NO!**

Makoto rushes forward, hand outstretched, as if to scream ‘no. not yet.’ But it’s too late. Kiyoshi flinches back… meets his eyes. And his next words are all it takes to break the news to Makoto once and for all.

...Tell him what they both already know.

“I’m Yanagisawa,” he says, in a voice almost too quiet to hear, and Makoto’s world comes crashing in.

...His reaction’s pretty much instantaneous.

Makoto’s reaching out towards Kiyoshi when he finally spits the words out. To hug him or to smack him, Kiyoshi’s not quite sure. But all that vigor fades in an instant when he seems to process what Kiyoshi’s said. Tearing himself backwards - stumbling over himself - Makoto pulls back, eyes wide and horrified as he finally looks at Kiyoshi with the revulsion he deserves.

His posture shifts. His shoulders stiffen. And his eyes pierce Kiyoshi as he stands there, struggling to catch his breath.

“...W… what did you say?”

“You heard me.”

“N… no- I’m not- I didn’t…” Makoto drifts off, voice cracking. “...I had to mishear you.”

Kiyoshi’s not entirely sure what he’d expected, but he thinks it was anger, mostly. Righteous, horrible, anger. Gouged out eyes and years spent a living corpse. That’s what Korosensei had always rewarded him with in the past. A comeuppance for his own rage. And he’d come to accept that as his fate. But Makoto doesn’t look angry. He just stands there, trembling… **heartbroken**...
and Kiyoshi decides this is so much worse.

“Please, Kiyoshi,” he repeats. “Just... say it again. I... I didn’t hear you right. Say it again. Say something else... please.”

Kiyoshi still remembers looking at himself in the mirror after he’d first woken up from that sleep paralysis nightmare. He’d looked so tired, with those scratchy black bags under his eyes... arms shaking like hell. Had trouble catching his breath. So frightened - so convinced the beast was coming for him... to deliver retribution once and for all.

Eyes wide. Face pale. Tears streaming down his face. And even then, he’d looked nothing like this.

Makoto is staring through him. And not with an expression that regards him as that of an enemy - but that of a monster. Tears pricking at the corners of his eyes. Body rigid. Mouth agape as he mumbles, begging desperately for any other explanation.

“I don’t wanna...- You’re not...-”

Oh, but he is. Kiyoshi frowns, unable to tear himself from Makoto’s disappointed gaze. Makoto murmurs, and Yanagisawa chuckles lightly as The Reaper hacks up his guts onto the pristine laboratory floor.

“I’m curious,” he asks soon after, peering absentmindedly at his own intestines streaked across the ground. He regards them as one would any minor disturbance, a single eyebrow cocked. He doesn’t appear to be in pain now that the moment’s passed.

“I don’t intend to humor you.”

“No. Just hear me out. I have a question for you.”

“...”

“Now I’m no scientist, but I gotta ask: Why people? Wouldn’t it be much easier to experiment on, say... mice?”

Yanagisawa scoffs, but doesn’t give him an answer. Not until later that day, when Reaper’s strapped firmly to the operating table. His skin’s writhing, and the bitch is scrambling to take notes. Yanagisawa smirks.

He still shows no outward signs of pain, even as his hands bubble- split into ribbons. But Yanagisawa has read the test reports. Can spot the subtle way his eye twitches. Despite any brave act he tries to put on, he knows the subject must be in extraordinary pain right now.

“That’s why,” he admits, reaching for another syringe. “I’d never use mice, that is.”

Reaper snorts, unintimidated. Now that only makes Yanagisawa want to see him hurt more. “Hm? What? Too cruel?”

“No. Of course not,” Yanagisawa retorts, bringing the needle to his arm. “Quite the contrary, guinea pig.”

The antimatter enters Reaper’s bloodstream, and his veins glow red. His arm twitches, thumping unconsciously against the back of the operating. And still, even then, his face doesn’t contort.

“You can’t hear a mouse scream.”
He never did get to hear Reaper scream for mercy. Not once. He saw Reaper fight back with all he had, and he saw Reaper grow vicious. But he never - not once - saw Reaper afraid.

...Not until now.

Makoto looks at him with those wide, petrified eyes, and Kiyoshi thinks he’s going to vomit.

It’s silly, really. That he was ever scared of this person. He was always the one in control, wasn’t he? He was always the one causing harm.

He takes one step forward, and Makoto takes one step back.

“Kiyoshi,” he repeats, and he sounds like he’s going to break.

Just as Kiyoshi’d predicted, the warmth is gone... replaced with terror - with heartache. Their friendship’s ravaged - lacerated just like the Reaper’s flesh. And everything - everything is over.

“You heard me,” he says after what feels like forever. “I’m Yanagisawa. Kotaro. Shiro. Whatever you’d call him.” He pauses. “...The bad guy. And I remember all of it. The… the stuff I did to you. To Itona. To Kayano.” Routine tests, and relentless abuse. Even years later he can still see the scars. “...To Aguri.”

...Makoto doesn’t respond.

Slowly, Kiyoshi turns.

“I’m not telling you this because I want you to feel bad... or scared… or hurt. I hope you know that I mean that. That even now, I don’t want you to feel bad.” He can feel Makoto’s stare on the back of his neck. “...I’m just telling you because you deserve to know. Because you asked. And… because, well… I’d wanna know, if I was in your shoes. I’m sorry it took me so long to say anything.”

...Silence.

“I didn’t know… for most of the time. I wouldn’t have become your friend if I knew. Not that - not because - not because you’re bad. Or… or don’t deserve it, or that… I’m angry. I’m not angry. At least, I don’t think I am. I just… wouldn’t have wanted to put you through that. That’s not fair. I’m sorry I didn’t figure it out sooner. Maybe then we could have prevented all of this.”

...“I don’t want you to worry. I mean, I can’t blame you if you do… I would worry, too, but...” Kiyoshi laughs dryly. “It’s over now. I swear. I’m... I’m not planning anything... or... or... scheming, or... I dunno. You’re safe. That’s what I’m trying to say. I’m going away now, and you’re safe. I promised I’d protect you. And I meant that, even if I probably shouldn’t have. Even if that means protecting you from myself. You’re safe now. And I’m gonna go away. And everything’s gonna be okay.”

Kiyoshi stares up at the treetops, and Makoto stands speechless. He wipes at his eyes and sighs. “If you don’t believe anything else I tell you today, please believe that. You’re gonna be okay. You’ve... you’ve got Fumiko. And you’re the strongest person I’ve ever met.”

“I was lucky to get to know you. And I’m sorry. For everything. This was… nice while it lasted. I enjoyed it, really.”
Limbs heavy, Kiyoshi finally starts to go. Takes one step… then another from the life he’s come to love.

“Goodbye, Makoto,” he says, heart heavy. “And thank you. For everything.”

He forces a smile, takes one step more, and then freezes at a crunch of the forest underbrush.

Leaves rustling, and the sound of heavy footsteps. Something rushes at him, and Kiyoshi just barely manages to whirl around as Makoto *lunges*.

Leaps at him like a predator. Reaches out one violent hand, then another. And as Kiyoshi shrieks at the top of his lungs-

...Wraps him in a hug.

Kiyoshi’s scream peters off. He just barely registers Makoto’s arms wrap around the back of his neck. He goes stiff as Makoto lets out a low whimper and clings tight to his shoulders.

It takes Kiyoshi a moment to even respond. Blinking slowly, he asks. “What… what are you doing? Let go, Makoto.”

Makoto doesn’t budge.

“This isn’t… you can’t do this, Makoto! I… I need to go away now-!” Kiyoshi insists, gently trying to pry him away.

Makoto’s trembling… letting out these soft, defeated hiccups as he holds Kiyoshi tight. His hands are stiff- digging into the hem of his shirt… And as Kiyoshi attempts to step away, he feels something warm and wet seep into the fabric of his clothes.

...Tears.

Kiyoshi freezes. But irritation rising in his voice, he soon returns to attempting to push Makoto away. “Makoto!” he repeats. “Stop it! You can’t do this!”

...Makoto doesn’t respond. Just stands there, trembling. Though as Kiyoshi grabs his shoulder - gives it a firm shove - even that begins to subside.

“This - this isn’t how you’re supposed to respond! You’re supposed to be *mad* at me Makoto! You’re supposed to be *upset*! You’re supposed to want to hurt me! I was *terrible* to you, Makoto! Why are you…? Why are you…?”

He looks down at Makoto’s head burrowed in his chest... feels those desperate, reassuring arms clinging to the back of his neck… and chokes back a sob of his own as he feels Makoto’s tears soak his shirt.

“...*Why are you still being so nice to me!*”

Even as his voice rises, Makoto doesn’t flinch. He simply stands there, grip tightening as he whispers under his breath.

“...’m finally not alone.”

Kiyoshi finally manages to tear away from Makoto. He stares at him with wild, disbelieving eyes. Sputters- genuine offense seeping into his voice as he speaks.
“What are you talking about!?” he demands. “Alone!? You’ve never been alone! You have Fumiko! What!? Unless she’s suddenly not enough for you!? Unless… unless you need some trashbag!?”

Makoto’s expression falls. Tears still in his eyes, he insists “No! Of course not! Fumiko’s - she’s - she’s like me - but she’s not just like me! I’m - I’m so happy she’s here! But she’s not - she wasn’t - yes! Trashbag! That’s it! That’s exactly it!”

“I- what!?"

“Aguri! She was… she was good! She was perfect! She helped all those people! But I wasn’t… - I didn’t… I didn’t do that. Everyone seems to think I did, but I didn’t. I was really bad, Kiyoshi.”

Makoto shifts slightly, rubbing at his arm. He takes a small step back. “…You think you did bad things? That’s gotta be a joke. I’ve… I’ve got these memories I can’t even bear to think about! People running for their lives! Begging for mercy! And me listening to none of that! I’ve… I’ve killed innocents. I’ve killed children. I’ve had people depend on me, and I’ve failed them extraordinarily. I killed a boy’s family, and when he came to me, wrecked by nightmares, I told him to just grow up and deal with it. I am not some… some just hero, Kiyoshi! I was a trashbag!”

“Why am I being so nice to you!? Why am I being so nice to you!? Why are you being so nice to me!? You’ve known! For months now! Just how terrible I am! Nagisa got up there in front of class and shared it! I killed hundreds! I kidnapped a child! And I loved it! I loved hurting people! It was my living! How can you even bear to look at me!?”

“Because- because you’ve changed!” Kiyoshi sputters. “You changed! Even - even back then! You became kind! You- you made the world better! I… I don’t know!”

“And you haven’t?” Makoto asks.

“No, I most certainly haven’t!” Kiyoshi responds. “Just look at that!” he demands, pointing up at the sky. “On what fucking planet have I made the world better!?"

“Changed! I’m talking about change!” Makoto says. “Just look at yourself! You are so different. I mean - I never would have guessed!”

Makoto’s gaze is piercing, and his words are a command. Kiyoshi glances downwards… stares at his hands, and wonders if Makoto is right. If he’s changed, it’s in a different way. Not like Korosensei, who spent the last year of a mostly terrible life nurturing broken children. He’s changed, alright. But he’s changed too late. And that… that doesn’t mean anything. He may as well have been factory reset.

Just listen to him! Screaming at Makoto! Is that change, anyways? If you ask him, he’s just as bad as ever.

Makoto must notice his troubled expression, because he softens just slightly. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to shout at you,” he says. “I’m just… I’m just really stressed. And… I really don’t want you to go. I’ve been thinking about this for such a long time, Kiyoshi. And I’ve had… no-one to talk about it with. But maybe… maybe if you’re there for me, then…”

He pauses. “I’m sorry. I don’t want to - my intention isn’t to use you. What I’m trying to say is… I… I believe in you! You just said all that stuff, and I still… I still look at you and see something good. You’ve been so nice to me over the past year. Maybe… maybe if even after all that I can still believe in you, then… well, then maybe I can start to believe in myself a little, too.”
Kiyoshi’s ears are ringing. There’s a lot to dissect there, but he can only pick out one bit.

“You… you believe in me?” he asks, voice shaky.

“Of course!” Makoto responds. And it is *instant*. He steps forward, takes Kiyoshi’s hand, and clutches it tight. “…Listen. I’m not saying - I’m not saying it’s some **good thing** you’re Yanagisawa. But… I know you can’t change that. I know that’s not your fault. You never… you never asked to be born! Neither did I! But… but here we are! And if… if things don’t have to be like that anymore, then… then… I want to be there for you.”

“I know just how much it hurts. To think about that stuff. To… to just have to stand there and watch all the **bad stuff** you did without being able to change it! It **sucks**! And I’m sure… I’m sure you must have felt really alone. But you don’t have to be alone anymore! We can… we can fix things! Together!”

His eyes look so bright. Cocking his head just slightly, he grins, and Kiyoshi feels his heart stop. That fear… that hate… it vanished so quickly. Only to be replaced by kindness… by compassion… by **trust**.

...Kiyoshi thinks he’s going to cry.

How? How can he move on so quickly? How can he **understand**? It’s… it seems impossible! But even so, Kiyoshi never doubts it, not even for a minute. Standing there- Makoto clinging tight to his hand - he feels **safe**. He feels hopeful!

He can see it in Makoto’s eyes. Glowing, and radiant, and what he’s needed for oh so long.

...An, ‘I believe in you.’

Can he believe in it, too? The world Makoto imagines? He’s not quite sure. It can’t be that easy. Not for him: the monster. But all the same, he hears Makoto say they’ll face this together, and he wants to live in that world, even just for a moment.

He takes those hands, holds them close and asks, “…How can you be so certain? I’m… I’m so **different** from you, Makoto. What if… what if you’re wrong? What if… I really can’t change this?”

“*You already have, silly!*” Makoto insists. “You’re not gonna stab me in the back! You wouldn’t be telling me any of this if you were! Bad guys… they don’t… they don’t worry about being bad people! They don’t care! You **care**! We care! We’re going to be fine!”

“Even though-?”

“Yes, *even though!*” Makoto interrupts. “Even though you beat the piss out of me or pissed on the moon or **whenever**! It doesn’t matter!”

“I **what** on the moo-?”

“It’s in the past! It’s **over now**! And that’s… that’s fantastic! You’re fantastic! You’re proof! That… people can change! Do you realize how **extraordinary** that is?” Makoto shifts slightly, still bouncing from foot to foot. “There’s… uh - this thing Nagisa told me. Way back when. When I was upset about all this stuff. He said that… it’s really cool… when a bad person becomes good, because it means they **chose** to.”

“A lot of people are born into goodness, or whatever. Like Aguri. And they’re amazing. But there’s
something amazing to be said about being able to take a step back and realize ‘I was wrong,’ too! To be able to wake up one day and say ‘I’m gonna do better than the day before.’”

He pauses. “At least… uh - it was something along those lines. I’m really bad at paraphrasing. You… you get my point, yeah?”

Kiyoshi frowns. “…Yeah. I think so.”

“…And you have: for the record. Done better, I mean,” Makoto says. “I mean… just look at you! My best friend! You helped bake me a cake! You let me pet your dog!”

“I’m not sure those are really any consolation for-”

“You’ve been my group partner on so many projects! You made me feel cool and confident during the sports festival! You were nice to me, even when you thought I was just using you for your mom and dad. You’re being nice to me now! Even when I, like, ripped out your eyeballs! You stepped out of class during a lesson you were really interested in just to comfort me… and you crouched down to my level and told me everything was going to be okay until I really believed it! You helped reunite me with Aguri! You are an awesome person, Kiyoshi!”

Kiyoshi takes a shaky gulp. Blinks back tears and whispers “…You really think so?”

“Of course I think so, dummy!” Makoto replies. “…You’re my friend. Why wouldn’t I think so?” He pauses, taking a step back as he finally lets go of Kiyoshi’s hand. “If you still want to be, I mean.”

Kiyoshi sputters. “Of- of course I want to be! Sort of! I mean - you’re - you are the best person I know. You make me so happy. I’m just still not sure if - that’s a good idea. I - I don’t want to hurt - I guess - as long as you’re okay with it. I wouldn’t want to overstep any…” he drifts off, eyes flitting towards the ground “…- boundaries.”

Makoto goes quiet, letting out an unimpressed ‘tsk.’

“…You really are a weirdo, aren’t you?” he asks, stifling a laugh. “Of course I’m okay with it! You may be a trashbag, but you’re my trashbag. You’re not gonna manage to get rid of me that easily.”

He gives another smile, before opening his arms. He meets Kiyoshi’s eyes. “We may be trashbags, but it’s not too late to be trashbags together, at least.”

Kiyoshi hesitates, staring at his open arms. Can he really…-? Should he-?

“Come on!” Makoto chides. “Don’t be distant! Bring it ‘ere, dork! Unless you’re too scccaaarrorreedd?”

Kiyoshi huffs, shaking his head as he leans into Makoto’s embrace. “No,” he grumbles. “Of course not.”

Makoto grins, pumping one fist in the air as he chants “Trashbags! Trashbags!”

Kiyoshi rolls his eyes. “Okay, before you end up seeming like the world’s biggest littering fan, how about you start saying ‘recyclables,’ instead?”

Makoto pauses, mulling that over, before letting out a tiny scoff.

“…Okay. Recyclables it is,” he says. “Here to make the world a better place, one non-
biodegradable plastic bottle at a time.”

Despite himself, Kiyoshi scoffs, too.

...He doesn’t know how long it’s been since he’s heard himself laugh.

And before he even knows it, he’s crying again.

He doesn’t mean to, but he just can’t hold back the tears. Standing there holding Makoto... he just can’t believe that he’s this person. That he’s in this situation, and that he feels okay. One tear falls, then another. And in an instant he’s sobbing.

Makoto jolts, letting out a panicked shout as he slaps Kiyoshi’s back. “Hey! Hey! Don’t cry!” He begs. “It’s fine! I swear! Everything’s fine!”

“No, no-” Kiyoshi hiccups, reaching up to wipe at his nose. “I’m not- don’t worry - I’m aware- it’s not…” He pauses. “...It’s not a bad cry. I’m not…- you didn’t make me cry. I’m just… overwhelmed, I guess. I never thought I’d get to talk about any of this.”

His true words go unspoken: ‘I never thought you’d accept me despite it.’ But Makoto smiles... rubs little circles in Kiyoshi’s back... and Kiyoshi thinks he’d still somehow managed to get the gist.

“...Well, you’re getting to,” he reassures, his posture relaxing. “So savor it, buddy. I’m here for you. I’m listening.”

Now that only makes Kiyoshi cry harder. Murmuring incoherently, he buries his face in Makoto’s shoulder and sobs. “I’m so lucky,” he whispers, wiping his nasty tear gook all over Makoto’s shirt. “You make me feel so lucky-”

If Makoto has any objections to his shirt being desecrated, he certainly doesn’t voice them. Instead, he simply rocks Kiyoshi back and forth, smiles, and whispers “Let it all out. It’s over now.”

...He keeps repeating that: ‘It’s over,’ like a broken record... as the wind howls and the leaves rustle and Kiyoshi sobs into his chest. “It’s over,” and “It doesn’t matter.” “It’s in the past,” and “everything’s okay.”

It’s so optimistic. So juvenile. But all the same, it’s so Makoto. And that alone makes it a nice thought.

“I’d like that,” Kiyoshi whimpering, over and over. “I’d like that so much.”

They stand there for what feels like forever. And Kiyoshi thinks he could stay there forever. But abruptly, Makoto jolts. And his hand freezes in its place on Kiyoshi’s back, as if he’s musing over something.

For a second, Kiyoshi’s scared he’ll pull away. But he doesn’t. Instead, simply speaks up, a curiosity to his voice. “You know... when I was freaking out - all those months ago - there was this thing you told me. Or - uh… guess you told me to do. You told me to listen to the birds. And to feel the grass. And then look at you. And I’m not really good at that psychology stuff like you are, but I was wondering... could you try something for me? Something like that?”

Kiyoshi pauses, but shrugs. “...I don’t see why not.”

“Okay,” Makoto says. “I want you to step away from me for a second. I can hug you again if you
want right afterwards - but… step away for just a second, okay?"

Kiyoshi hesitates, but does as told. He hopes Makoto doesn’t notice just how gross and puffy his eyes are.

“Alright. Now I want you to look at me. Just look right up at me. Meet my eyes.”

Slowly, Kiyoshi obeys. His gaze drifts up towards Makoto.

“Okay. Good,” Makoto says, his smile unfaltering. “Now I want you to tell me what you see. It can be anything. Just… tell me what you see. I think it might make you feel a bit better.”

Kiyoshi’s quiet, looking him over. At first, he’s not quite sure what to comment on. What exactly is it Makoto wants? Something objective? The black locks of hair falling over his face, or the way he fidgets from foot to foot? Or is it something more… metaphorical? ‘I see someone I trust’ or ‘I see what gives me hope?’

Maybe it’s a trick question. Is there something else Kiyoshi’s supposed to be looking for? Maybe there’s, like, a black bear looming over his shoulder right now, and Makoto’s just surprised he hasn’t noticed. Do black bears even live in Japan? Kiyoshi can’t quite remember. He feels like he should know this. What is it, again? Black, fight back… brown, lay down…

“Come on, dude! It’s not that hard!” Makoto interrupts, derailing that train of thought entirely. “Just tell me! What are you looking at?”

“I- uh-” And suddenly Kiyoshi’s terrified of having the wrong answer. What if Makoto wants something, like, super sentimental, and he comments on the fact that his shirt is soaking wet? “Dunno- I’m just - you need to be more specific. I’m not really sure what kind of... answer you’re looking for.”

Makoto looks almost irritated for a second, but it quickly subsides as he stifles a laugh. “You are totally overthinking it, dude. Me! The answer is me!”

Kiyoshi blinks. “...Oh. I didn’t realize it was that simple. I thought you were - like - trying to trip me up.”

“I just told you I’m bad at that physiology stuff. Do you really think I’m capable of that?”

“It’s - uh - psychology. For the record.”

“My point proven,” Makoto says. “But I guess what I’m trying to say is… things are different now! You couldn’t have seen me back then! I mean - you could have seen me, but not seen me, you know? We’re different people now. I’m me! You’re you! We’ve got nothing to worry about. Because! We’re really different guys! I’m Makoto! Himura! And you’re Kiyoshi Karasuma! And we’re pals! And nothing’s gonna change that! Isn’t that… really cool? Or reassuring, at least?”

“...Yeah,” Kiyoshi admits. “I guess it is.”

‘I’m me.’

What a simple, but freeing thought.

“Now are you feeling better or what?” Makoto asks. “Need another hug? To be smacked to your senses? Or do you think you’re finally ready to come home?”
Kiyoshi pauses... opens his mouth to speak. But Makoto doesn’t wait for a response. He takes him
by the hand, and starts leading him down the mountain: a skip to his step, and a brightness to his
eyes.

“Now *that* was the trick question!” he says. “And there’s only one correct answer. Option A): It’s
time you stop feeling bad for yourself. We’re gonna be okay: *I promise.*”

And while some part of Kiyoshi still wants to debate that: to scream out ‘there’s so much left for
me to confront,’ he silences that for now. Because Makoto swings his hand back and forth and he’s
*safe.* He looks over at the being he’d once thought he *hated,* and decides ‘maybe I really *am* lucky
to be the person I am today.’

‘...To be *here with him, at the very least.*’


“After this, everything goes back to normal,” he rambles. “You’ve got *nothing* to worry about. You
start coming over to Shiota-sensei’s again, tell Fumiko you’re sorry for ignoring her texts, and you
buy me a milkshake as an apology for avoiding me, *not* for pumping my veins full of
megacocaine.”

Kiyoshi opens his mouth to discuss that... statement, but freezes up and just about slams his face on
a tree branch when he remembers there are much more important things to talk about.

“Shit!” he says. “What am I gonna tell Fumiko!?”

Makoto pauses. “What do you mean?”

“About! All this!” Kiyoshi says. “I... I mean... should I text her? No- that feels way too informal.
Shiota-sensei’s place? Oh god, though - what if Shiota-sensei overhears? Or... or Yukimura-san?
They’ll... they’ll *flip.* Maybe I should arrange a meeting. If I tell her to meet up with me after
school would you be willing to be there with me as I explain to her? You - you don’t need to if you
don’t want to, but it’s such a scary thoug-”

“Dude,” Makoto interrupts. “You are *way* overthinking this.”

“Pardon?”

“Who said you even gotta tell her?”

Makoto steps over a branch, his smile never faltering he speaks.

“I... I dunno, Makoto. That seems... wrong?”

“Why? She’s not gonna care!”

“What if... what if she doesn’t feel safe around me?”

“Why wouldn’t she?” Makoto asks, his voice incredulous. “You’re not *dangerous,* Kiyoshi.”

“I know - I know-” Kiyoshi responds. “I just... worry? I mean... I did some *super* horrible stuff to
her. She deserves to know the truth.”

“Oh, *come on-*”

“I’d want to know if I was in her shoes. I’m not going to deprive her of that right.”
Makoto sighs, and stops in place. “Listen. Let me try putting this a different way: If she won’t hate you for it, then it doesn’t matter. Nothing’s going to change. And if she will hate you for it - which she won’t, for the record - then it’s not worth bringing up. It’s just going to make everyone upset.”

“I don’t think it’s a matter as simple as ‘hate,’ or ‘not hate!’ It’s about being able to keep herself safe-!”

“From what!?“ Makoto asks, throwing his free hand in the air. “Some thirteen-year-old little boy who’s afraid of the toaster!? You couldn’t hurt a fly if you wanted to!”

“Okay, first of all, I’m not afraid of the toaste-“ There are more important things to be discussing right now. “Nevermind. What I’m saying is it should be her decision.”

“And I’m not disagreeing with you!” Makoto insists. “What I’m trying to say is there’s no winning in this scenario, for you or for her. Either everything’s going to stay the same, or it’s not. And… well… I don’t want that to happen. I don’t think Fumiko does, either.” He pauses… stares at the ground for a moment. “Listen: This whole thing: It’s clearly been troubling you. Do you really want it to trouble her, too?”

“She’s happy here. With me! With you! After a lifetime of strife, and stress, and being too afraid to stand up for herself, she’s finally happy. You’re - like- the first friend she ever made. I don’t want her to have to lose that…”

He’s got this deeply troubled look on his face. Eyebrows knit. Lip bit. “I know it’s wrong, but… maybe this should stay between the two of us. Just for now. I’d hate to be the reason she cried. I don’t want to make her lose this thing she has. Not when it just started getting good.” He pauses, tilting his head towards Kiyoshi. “You get what I’m saying, right?”

Kiyoshi hesitates. “...Uh… yeah,” he admits. “Of course.”

He hates to say it, but Makoto has a point. Fumiko… is at a turning point in her life. She’s dealing with so much family stuff it’s almost insane. She’s- like- working on plans to emancipate herself. Does he really want to dump this revelation on her on top of all that? She’s gotta be stressed out of her mind! They’re the one good thing she has!

...Is he really cruel enough to take that away from her?

“Great! Because that’s why I’m saying - and just for now - maybe she doesn’t need to know! It’s not lying to her. It’s not like she’s gonna ask- I mean! She would never even guess! It’s … protecting her! So just, like… put it in your pocket, and work on being the best person you can now. That’s how you’ll make it up to her, not by causing some big fight.”

“I… guess that makes sense,” Kiyoshi says. “I mean… as long as you keep me in check. Make sure nothing happens.”

He knows it’s going to destroy him from the inside out… to act like nothing’s happened. But… Makoto’s right. She needs him. He’s not going to prioritize his shitty guilt complex over her wellbeing. He already ruined her life once! He’s not going to do it again.

...Besides, isn’t this the happiest ending for everyone?

Fumiko can live the life she deserves, and he and Makoto can work on righting their wrongs. Things can get… better! He can feel happy! More than anything, he just wants to be able to envision that for himself.
And a world where Fumiko hates him… well, that’s just not one he can see himself being happy in.

“Keep you in check?” Makoto asks, waving his hand. “Pssh! About what? Are you afraid the big bad Yanagisawa’s gonna come out of you like a werewolf?” He puts on a fake-panicked voice “‘Oh shit! The not-full moon’s out! I’m changing! My bones are rearranging! I’m going to say a slur now!’ ”

Kiyoshi’s cheeks flush red. “N-no! I didn’t - that’s not-”

Makoto laughs, smacking his back. “You’ve got nothing to worry about, dude. You’re not going to just ‘slip up.’ There’s not some bogeyman hiding inside of you. You spent the past thirteen years becoming this person. You know him well enough to know he won’t do that.”

“Mmm,” Kiyoshi admits. “I know.”

It just sits there nevertheless, gnawing at the back of his mind. What if one day he just… loses his temper? Does something he regrets? He’d never be able to forgive himself.

...But at the very least Makoto doesn’t seem to think it’s a concern.

“Fine,” he says. “I’ll do it. Keep it a secret... for now, I mean. And... and for her sake! Not mine. But I could... I could always change my mind. If she asks, I’m not gonna lie to her.”

“Of course not,” Makoto says. “It’s like I said: we’re not lying. We’re... protecting her. Nothing more, nothing less.”

Kiyoshi’s still not sure this is a good idea, but Makoto squeezes his hand, and he decides to repress his doubts for now. It’s not right, but... it’s the best option. And besides, this is the first time he’s felt okay in weeks. He’s not going to dwell on it and end up sending himself spiraling again. Not after everything Makoto did just to get him to calm down.

“I’m - uh- gonna shoot her a text,” he says. “Not about any of that. The- apology. For avoiding her,” he specifies, wishing desperately that was the only thing he had to apologize for. “Give me one sec.”

Kiyoshi whips out his phone, opening Fumiko in his contacts.

“Good luck getting a signal out here, dude,” Makoto jeers.

“I’ve got a bar, don’t worry,” Kiyoshi reassures. He’d much prefer three bars, but he’ll take what he can get seeing as he’s halfway down the hill of some out of the way school surrounded entirely by thick forest.

He stops, pausing to look at their texts. Their last conversation was a week ago. Fumiko’d asked him what he was doing over the weekend. He’d given her some nonanswer.

‘Uh, hey,’ he types. ‘Sorry about avoiding you lately. It’s not something you did. I was just being stupid and insecure as usual. You know how it is. But Makoto knocked some sense into me, and... things are going to go back to normal now, so please don’t worry.’

‘Hope you’re not too mad at me, ahahaha… dunno what I’d do if you hated me,’ he tacks on, before quickly deleting it. No... now’s not the time.

‘I just want you to be happy?’
No. Too weirdly sentimental. She knows that. *(Thinks it, at least.)*

‘Hope you feel better soon,’ he settles on. ‘Didn’t mean to give you my Flu. 😄.’

He sends the text and pockets his phone before he can overthink it any further. What does it matter, anyways? She’s never going to know what he *really* has to apologize for.

He doesn’t have time to dwell on it long. Makoto doesn’t let him. He walks him home, a skip to his step. And that optimism he displays never once vanishes. Joking the whole way, he pats Kiyoshi on the back and reminds him that he treasures him.

...By the time they’ve arrived at his place, his heart feels just a little lighter.

“Everything’s gonna be okay, alright?” Makoto reminds him, stopping just before just driveway. “Try not to worry about it too much. We’re always gonna have each other.”

“...Even though we’re trash?”

Makoto shakes his head and holds his hand out for a fist bump. “...Recyclables, remember? We’ve got this under control.”

Kiyoshi bumps his fist, before pulling him in for just one more quick hug. “Thank you,” he whispers. “For being there for me today.”

“It’s nothing,” Makoto says. “You’ve been here for me all year, after all.”

Kiyoshi nods, pulling away. “Uh- see you tomorrow, okay?”

“Of course.”

And with that, he’s gone. He speedwalks towards his house, quickly unlocks the door, and heads up towards his room. He passes his dad on the way, who asks how his day was.

“Good,” Kiyoshi admits, and he doesn’t even need to think it over. He doesn’t need to lie, and he doesn’t need to hide it. He says “My day was good,” and he means it. And knowing that much… even exhausted… even with worries still swirling in his mind… Kiyoshi finally lets himself do something he hasn’t done in a very, very long time.

...Kiyoshi smiles.

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**Ho-lee shit.**

Makoto thinks he needs to - *Makoto thinks he needs to sit down.*

The moment Kiyoshi turns, shuts the door, and clicks it behind him, he releases a bated breath. Whirling around, he hurried down the street and turns into the first alleyway he can find. He plops down against the wall and lets out another sputtery, relieved sigh as he attempts to find his bearings.

He’s not sure where he’d expected that conversation to go, but that was *not* it.

Not that - not that he’s upset! He’s *not* upset! He *meant* all those things he said to Kiyoshi! He just... *woah, man.*

And he’d gotten his hopes up that he was *Damien!*
In hindsight, that was really stupid. But he’d just heard the words ‘betrayed you,’ and, like, blacked out. What else was he supposed to think!? He wasn’t just going to assume his friend was Yanagi-

When Fumiko told him she had a past life it was a good thing. He wasn’t going to jump to the worst conclusion in regards to Kiyoshi! He doesn’t do worst conclusions!

...Not that… not that this is the worst conclusion!

This is… a wonderful conclusion, actually! This is fine! This is great! This will give him the closure he needs! This will remind him of what he needs to believe about himself! There is nothing wrong with this situation. There is nothing for him to worry about.

Sure, is he a little disappointed he hasn’t been reunited with his sweet baby boy of an apprentice turned monster? Of course! But that doesn’t mean… that doesn’t mean this is worse somehow. It’s not Kiyoshi’s fault he put expectations on his shoulders.

It’s not Kiyoshi’s fault he’s that terrifying… horrible… soul-sucking-

No! Don’t think about it that way! ‘Don’t do this, Makoto!’ he reminds himself. Kiyoshi is none of those things, and so it shouldn’t matter that he was in the past. In fact, that only makes him more wonderful! Look at how much he’s improved! Makoto is fine. He’s fine. He’s just… overthinking it.

Is he terrified of Yanagisawa and that diabolical cheshire grin? Maybe just a little! But he’s not going to let that affect how he acts. He’s not going to let that affect how he treats Kiyoshi!

He meant it! He cares about him!

Kiyoshi is… Kiyoshi is one of the best things to ever happen to him. Kiyoshi is supportive… thoughtful… intelligent. Kiyoshi is the son of the two people he trusts most in the world, and Kiyoshi makes him laugh every day. Kiyoshi is his best friend! He is not letting something beyond his control… c… color his perception of him!

(Even if he… even if he… experimented on…-)

No. Don’t think about that. He won’t think about that. It’s not fair. Kiyoshi never asked for any of this! He never asked to be born! And it was a good thing he was born, anyways, so drop it! He’s clearly going through enough guilt as is. Makoto’s not gonna worsen that by letting it slip that he’s nervous. Because he shouldn’t be! Kiyoshi is fine. They’re fine.

He just needs… time to process this. That’s all. Then everything will go right back to normal. No, actually! It’ll go back to better than normal! He and Kiyoshi are going to make a change! Prove to the world that their fates aren’t just some prophecy set in stone. They are going to end the legacy of hurt they caused, and everything’s going to… everything’s going to be okay.

There is absolutely nothing to be worried about.

Makoto shifts slightly, practicing one of those deep breathing techniques Kiyoshi taught him. It’s funny - usually, he’s not the type to overthink things like this. Kiyoshi must be rubbing off on him in more ways than one.

He’d seemed so terrified - so grief-stricken confiding in Makoto. Like he’d thought this was the end of the world. Screaming- shaking- sobbing as he tried to tear Makoto off of him. Demanding, ‘why won’t you just let me go?’

It’d be hard not to be worried after having to see that.
But what’s important to remember is that Kiyoshi wasn’t right. Those things he’d called himself - monster… deserving of it - none of that is true. His world isn’t ending... it’s only just beginning. That fear he’d felt… it wasn’t coming from a legitimate source. It was coming from that dumb voice in the back of his head! And that’s where it’s coming from for Makoto, too.

(That smug, singsongy chide of The Reaper, who seems to say ‘you’ll be proven wrong like you always are.’)

...He’s glad Kiyoshi had agreed to not tell Fumiko.

It’s not that he doesn’t trust her - he trusts her! More than anything! It’s just… it’s hard to think about? He doesn’t want her to have to-

She’s defensive. She’s temperamental. She knows how to take care of herself. What if she just… what if she just jumps to a conclusion, and decides to not even give him a chance? He doesn’t want to have to see Kiyoshi go through that. He doesn’t want to have to be expected to choose between them...

...They’re both his friends.

It’s just easier to ignore the scenario entirely. Because... hey! It doesn’t matter! So she has no reason to go and have to worry about it. It’s for the best. It’s saving her grief. It’s protecting her.

Not that she needs to be protected from - not that Kiyoshi is dangerous! The only thing he’s protecting her from is paranoia! That’s it.

(His veins throb, and his fingers spasm. Makoto suppresses a shiver and shakes his head)

...He doesn’t want her to have to deal with this… this whatever it is. She needs Kiyoshi, and she needs him. He’s not going to let some dumb thing that happened sixteen years ago ruin that for them. He’s not going to let it ruin that for her.

Because that’s what this is about. This is for her wellbeing. Nothing more, nothing less.

(Makoto’s not being self-centered! He’s not!)

The monster laughs knowingly at him, and Makoto stands. Whatever. He doesn’t wanna think about it. And he did mean it; that Kiyoshi’s confession had eased his nerves some.

That he truly, really believes it’s over. And that he truly, really believes the past is behind them. That Kiyoshi can prove himself... do better now.

Because if he can... well, then, maybe there’s a chance one day Makoto can put to rest both the monsters haunting his own consciousness. The man with needles who victimized him so, and ever more presently: the creature with writhing tentacles, who loved to make decisions only benefitting itself.

Nagisa gets the good news a little past five.

He’s actually just getting ready to head out to Isogai and Maehara’s place at the time. The fateful Thursday’s rolled around, and it’s time to discuss the class reunion. At first his spouses had voiced their worries, suggesting that maybe he should put it off, but seeing as he’s been doing so much better over the past week, they’d eventually caved. He got a full eight hours of sleep last night, not to mention actually eaten a meal before getting prepared.
“I’ll be home before nine,” he promises, slipping on his coat. “Don’t even worry about it. I’d be surprised if it even goes until eight. It’s usually a pretty brief discussion.”

“Of course,” Gakushuu says. “Do be careful if you end up driving that late, though. It gets dark out.”

“He’ll be fine,” Karma says. “He can actually see the road at night, unlike someone.”

Gakushuu lets out an annoyed ‘hmph.’

“Remember to say hi to Naoko for me!” Kayano pipes up.

“Of course-”

“Do say hello to Megu and Isogai for me personally,” Gakushuu says. “I’m well aware a baby’s mental processing ability isn’t yet refined enough to acknowledge my regards.”

“No comment on Maehara?” Karma asks.

“I’d sooner categorize him as closer to the fourteen-month-old than to an adult. I know what I said.”

Nagisa snorts, but decides not to comment on the sharp jab aimed at his ex-classmate. “I should really get going now,” he repeats. And three quick kisses later, he’s on his way. He shuts the door behind him and heads out towards the car.

His phone buzzes as he hops in.

He decides he can give it a quick glance over while the engine starts up. After all, if it’s from Maehara, Isogai, or Megu, he’d hate to show up if there’d been some sort of change of plans.

It’s not, however. In fact… It’s from Karasuma.

For a brief moment, Nagisa feels a pit of dread in his stomach, wondering if something had happened to Kiyoshi. But as he actually opens up the text, he feels all that fear dissipate.

[1/19/2031 5:07 PM:] [Karasuma] Brief update on Kiyoshi.

[1/19/2031 5:07 PM:] [Karasuma] I believe he is doing somewhat better today. He came home humming today. That Himura boy walked him home.

Nagisa lets out an audible sigh of relief. He knows one day is just one day, but all the same, Kiyoshi’s father knows him better than anyone. If he thinks this is a good sign, then it probably is.

‘That’s good,’ he texts back. ‘Let me know if there’s any other changes, okay? And thank you for looking out for him.’

He doesn’t wait for a response. He already knows what it’ll probably be. An ‘of course,’ coupled with one of those emojis only old people use. He turns the keys and backs out of the garage. Puts on some corny music and lets his shoulders relax as he turns out of the driveway.

He’s been feeling a lot better lately; emotionally and physically. And more than any saccharine tune blaring over his car radio, it’s music to his ears to hear that Kiyoshi is finally getting some of the help he needs too.

...Maybe he won’t need to stage an intervention after all.
...So...? Whaddya think?

I know I probably struck fear into a lot of people's hearts with that last chapter's ending, but that didn't go as poorly as ya'lld thought it would, did it?

As a few of my readers guessed, Makoto took it surprisingly well. He ultimately does have complicated feelings on the matter, but there's no way he could hate Kiyoshi. He's his best friend. And he RELATES. He's done some nasty shit, too. But something tells me he's bottling his feelings about the situation just a little, and the entirety of their peace may not be found yet. Hey, at the very least they're on the right track, though!

...Mostly.

The decision they made in regards to Fumiko is, needless to say, an EXTREMELY stupid one. Kiyoshi's opposed to it internally, but Makoto convinced him. And Makoto has good intent, but... wow. Is he really doing this because he thinks it's for the best, or just because he wants to avoid conflict? And how on earth will Fumiko react if/when the truth comes out to /her?/

There's no telling, but either way: I have a feeling it might not be pretty.

I enjoyed writing Kiyoshi and Makoto's contrasting perception of the situation. In particular I really liked briefly writing Makoto misconceiving Kiyoshi's intent and believing he was Damien for half a second. But it turns out he's stuck with THIS trashbag instead. That's not too bad, is it?

(Probably.)

In general I didn't want to make this feel like a band-aid fix. What happened back then isn't something that can be fixed easily, and I hope the remaining faultlines indicate that. However, maybe things are finally on the right track. Here's to hoping, at least.

Next chapter we'll be (mostly) taking a brief break from Kiyoshi's drama, and focusing on Nagisa visiting Isogai and Maehara's house to discuss the upcoming class reunion. It's a (mostly) chill chapter, so I hope you'll all be able to relax a little. For once nothing explodes.

It'll be up in two weeks. On the thirteenth, that is! And the chapter after that will be coming a week after. Believe it or not, the 20th is Kiyoshi's birthday. So here's to seeing how the chapters released on Assclass Day and Kiyoshi Day respectively turn out!

Some songs that helped me write /this/ chapter, however, were A Born Coward covered by Rachie, For The First Time In Forever (Reprise) from Frozen, No Way Out from Brother Bear, Disappear from Dear Evan Hansen, The Seraph from 35mm, First Day of My Life by Bright Eyes, Under My Skin by Jukebox The Ghost, and Brand New By Ben Rector. The song in specific I'd like to highlight for this chapter, though, is I'm Glad You're Evil Too covered by Rachie.
"Though both of us will die one day
Though this life is useless anyway
When you’re here by my side, you make me feel like it’ll be okay
And yet we laughed despite it all
At this life which has no meaning at all
Two lonely and broken souls leaning on each other’s sides
I’m glad that you’re you, that I’m me, and for us two
I’m kinda glad that you’re evil too"

'I'm glad you're evil too,' indeed.

As always, I hope you enjoyed, and make sure to let me know what you thought. See you soon!
Nagisa arrives just past six. He pulls into the Isogais’ driveway, flicks off his music, and shoots them a text letting them know he’s arrived. Noting their idyllic little flower garden and what appears to be a swing out back as he marches up the doorstep, he smiles.

He doesn’t need to knock twice. Isogai’s already waiting by the door for him, baby in arms. Though… on second observation, she’s not such a baby anymore. Clinging tight to his shoulders and staring at Nagisa with grumpy eyes, little Naoko must have doubled in size since he saw her last.

Isogai takes a step back, beckoning Nagisa in with his free arm. “Hey!” he says. “Welcome. Come right in. Hiroto and Megu are in just the other room.”

Nagisa nods, carefully removing his shoes, before taking a step inside. Naoko lets out a low babble.

“That’s uncle Nagisa,” Isogai says, tone soft and patient. “Do you remember uncle Nagisa? He came to visit you when you were just born.”

Naoko eyes Nagisa suspiciously, but doesn’t say much more.

“Now there’s no need to be rude,” Isogai reminds her, gently rocking her back and forth. “Say hi to him for me, okay? Pretty please?”

Naoko looks up at Nagisa with big, wide eyes, and opens her mouth to speak… before promptly tugging on Isogai’s collar and grumbling, “dada.”

“Okay, okay,” Nagisa says with a laugh, placing his coat on the rack. “I see how it is. Fine.” He smiles, taking a step closer to her. “Auntie Kayano did tell me to pass on my regards, though. Are you more interested in hearing hello from her?”

Naoko seems to mull that over for a second, before absentmindedly sticking her tongue out.

“I’ll take that as a yes,” Nagisa says. He doesn’t think he’s ever met a baby who didn’t like Kayano. Except maybe Kiyoshi, but even he’d warmed up to her in time.

“Well, I wouldn’t want to keep the others waiting too long,” Isogai says. “C’mon!” And with another warm smile, he’s off. Nagisa follows after, keeping with his gentle pace.

He can’t help but note just how nice their place is. It’s a tad small, but he supposes you don’t need a lot of room with a family of three people. Picture frames decorate each wall, and each desk is neatly kept. The orange light of sunset filters in through the windows.

It’s… homely. That’s the word. Modest, but homely.

Maehara gives him a wave as he steps into the kitchen.

“Ayyy! Nagisa. ‘Bout time you showed up,” he says.

Nagisa gives an embarrassed laugh. “Yeah, sorry about that,” he says, scratching at the back of his
“It’s a long drive.”

“Don’t even worry about it,” Maehara reassures. “I get it. We’re a little out of the way. Besides, Yuma and I got some much needed catching up with Kataoka—”

“Did you know she’s got a dog now?” Isogai excitedly pipes up.

“That’s what you’re fixated on?” Maehara asks with a snicker. “She’s got a dog, sure. But more importantly: she’s got a ladyyy!”

“I- ah- I honestly thought everyone already knew…” Isogai admits, face flushing pink. “Do they not?”

“I can speak for myself, you know, boys,” Megu reminds them, a snideness to her voice.

“S-sorry ma’am!” they all seem to say at once. Nagisa’s not entirely sure what he’s apologizing for- he’d hardly spoke- but he hears her firm tone and it comes to him on instinct.

Megu laughs, rolling her eyes. “Yes, I’ve got a lady,” she says. “We’re keeping it on the down-low for a little bit, but we actually just got together a month or two ago. Hanako’s hers. Not mine.”

“The dog?”

“Yeah. I’ve just been keeping her at my place for a bit because she’s been picking fights with her cat. I don’t mind too much. It’s nice to have a little company. And don’t tell anyone this... but I’ve been letting her swim in the pool.”

Maehara blinks. “...The dog, or your girlfriend?”

“Why would I-? Need to-?” Megu sputters. " Why would I need you to keep it a secret that I’m letting my girlfriend swim in my pool? ”

“I don’t know!” Maehara says, covering his head with his hands. “You just said you’re keeping it on the down-low!”

“Shhhh,” Isogai reminds everyone. “You’re going to freak out Naoko.”

Now that shuts up everyone in an instant. (Bar Nagisa, who’s literally just been standing here.)

“Yes, I’m letting the dog swim in the pool. I know that’s disgusting- probably the most unladylike gesture I can perform, but she just looks at me with those big brown eyes when she sees me practicing and I have to relent. I don’t want my girlfriend’s dog to hate me!”

“Can your girlfriend swim?” Maehara asks.

“No. But she can pick me up like a sack of potatoe-”

“We’re getting off track here,” Nagisa murmurs.

“Oh- yeah,” Maehara says. “Where were we?”

“Class reunion,” Isogai reminds them. “We were meeting up to discuss the class reunion.”

“Aah- yeah,” Maehara replies. “You should probably get to that. Want me to take Naoko off your hands for a minute so you three can get to work?”
“Oh, no… you don’t gotta if you don’t want to,” Isogai says, cradling her in his arms. “I’m sure she won’t cause much of an interruption.”

“Okay. Let me rephrase that,” Maehara says. “I’m not good at this party planning stuff anymore because most of us are ‘too old’ and ‘too married’ for spin the bottle or Strip Twister. So how about you three put your heads together and hand the baby over to me so I can have someone to spend time with while you plan a rational adult meet up.”

Isogai laughs, shaking his head. “Fair point,” he says. “You can watch her. I’d hate to leave you lonely.” He smiles. “Though, for the record: I think your ideas are wonderful.”

“Even the inappropriate ones?” Maehara asks, his voice an exaggerated falsetto.

“Even the inappropriate ones,” Isogai confirms, leaning over to give him a kiss, before handing off the baby. “Try not to have too much fun without us, okay? And if she starts crying, her teddy’s in her room.”

“Sir yes sir!” Maehara replies, taking a step back, and giving Naoko’s hair a gentle ruffle before making his way from the kitchen.

There’s a gentle babbling from the other room as Naoko murmurs. But Maehara hushes her, promising daddy will be unbusy soon. How about until then, she hangs out with him, okay? He’s pretty fun, isn’t he? They can keep chipping away at that coloring book they were working on. Oooh! Ooooh! Or would she rather play with blocks?

...She quiets down in no time.

Nagisa stares in amazement. It’s crazy to think that Maehara of all people makes such a good father. It’s not that he ever doubted him… Maehara’s his friend, after all. But he had been a debauchery, immature tramp during his youth. He’d once heard the man say it was his goal to have sex with every girl in the school, but in, like ‘a respectful, feminist way.’ When had he become such a mature person?

It amazes him. Just how much they’ve all grown. He wishes he was even close to being that good with kids!

Isogai stares at the doorway for just one moment, a goofy, lovestruck smile on his face.

“...I gotta be the luckiest guy on earth,” he says, pulling out a chair and sitting down. “Dunno what I’d do without him.” It takes him a moment, but eventually he does manage to snap out of his trance. “Feel free to sit down. Make yourself comfortable. And I apologize for the mess.”

Nagisa glances around in search of the alleged mess... but there’s none as far as the eye can see. Not a plate in the sink or a hair out of place. Unless Isogai’s idea of mess is simply having a high chair in the room, he’s being modest as always.

“Don’t sweat it,” he says, taking a seat across from Isogai. Megu plops down next to him, one leg crossed over the other.

“And just let me know if you two need anything. Snacks… a pillow… I can adjust the temperature if you’d like.”

He’s talking about it like they’re going to be here for the next week, not the next hour! G... gah... so friendly... so... good of a host. It’s apparent Isogai is as much of an ikeman as ever.

Isogai gives a bright smile!

Megu whips out her phone. “I can jot down notes on any ideas we have,” she says. “So you two don’t need to worry about that. What are we thinking about for this year?”

Nagisa mulls it over. Huh… he’s dedicated a lot of thought to that, hasn’t he? But they’re running out of new things they can try. They’ve already done laser tag, and the pool party is gonna have to be a no go after the time Yoshida almost split his head open on a rock. Potluck, maybe! Or they could always retry the ‘commemorative baseball game’ idea...

“Well, this may sound a little boring…” Isogai says with a laugh. “But… I was thinking something pretty simple for this year. I know we’ve had some big events in the past… but sometimes it’s good to just spend time together, you know?”

Megu gives a firm nod. “I was thinking the same, actually. Just last year we had the fifteenth anniversary. And as fun as it was going all out… I’m not sure I can deal with Karma attempting to break Terasaka’s nose over a game of Just Dance ever again.”

“Hey-” Nagisa interjects. “He wasn’t trying to break it, for the record. Just… give him a bloody nose.”

“I’m not sure I can deal with your delinquent husband engaging in acts of senseless violence ever again. Is that better?”

“…Much,” Nagisa admits with a laugh. “Though I’m not sure anything, even the guise of a casual get together will be able to keep him from throwing a punch if the going really gets tough.”

“If ‘losing a game of Just Dance 2 to Boney M.’s Rasputin’ is that man’s idea of a tough time, then I do have to pass on my sincerest apologies to you and your family.”

“Thanks,” Nagisa says. “We appreciate your condolences.”

“Let’s not shittalk Karma!” Isogai pipes up. “So we all agree something smaller is for the best?”

“I think so,” Megu admits, glancing his way. “Nagisa?”

On one hand… Nagisa’s slightly opposed. He hates to let this thing they only get once a year go to waste. But on the other… there’s no such thing as a bad time as long as he’s around his friends. And he promised he’d be taking better care of himself lately. Ashamed as he is to say it, he can’t go planning the next Coachella.

“Sounds good to me,” he says. “Something small. Maybe we can just plan a sleep in?”

Isogai claps his hands together and softly gasps. “Oh! Like a slumber party!?”

“Yeah. Exactly,” Nagisa says. “Something a little more interesting than a simple get together, but nothing that would require too much planning. We could just set up an event or two… maybe play a round of truth or dare, and focus on catching up with each other. What do you think?”

“I’m certainly not opposed,” Megu says. “Sounds… casual. Though I do worry about us managing to get any sleep. As much as I’d love to stay up all night with you, I’m a 31-year-old woman. I typically pass out at 9 PM. What do I do when it’s 2 AM and we all just want to go to bed, but two or three certain drunk toddlers won’t shut up?”
“Drunk toddlers?” Isogai asks.

“I’m not naming any names.”

“If you’re worried about Karma…” Nagisa says, aptly guessing that his husband is one of the aforementioned drunk toddlers. “He typically goes to bed at, like, eight. You’ve got nothing to worry about. As for the others… I suppose we could always kick them outside.”

“In -12 degrees celsius!?” Isogai sputters. “Are you out of your mind!? They’ll freeze to death out there! What? Just sleeping on the concrete-”

“I’m joki-”

“Like that weather could possibly kill Nakamura,” Megu interjects.

Okay... so that’s another drunk toddler namedropped.

“I’m joking,” Nagisa reiterates. “I trust our class enough to be considerate of each other. And if they’re not…” He pauses, mischievously rubbing his chin. “Well, I’m sure we can find a way to make them shut up. We’re an innovative bunch. I must have some duct tape or superglue stashed away somewhere in my classroom. We just have to be careful not to cover the noses.”

“...Brutal,” Isogai comments.

“But a necessary evil, perhaps,” Megu argues.

“Again.” Nagisa says. “I’m sure it won’t come to that... probably.”

(...Something tells him Karma would never forgive him if he tied him, Nakamura, and like half of the Terasaka gang up at 2 in the morning and left them to rot in the spare classroom until they could go to bed like the rest of society.)

Staunchly opposed to dwelling on the concept a moment more, Isogai tries his best to change the topic. “Okay. So what is it we’d need to prepare? I can bring snacks, if everybody’d like. Or would we all be eating dinner in the classroom?”

“Oh jeez...” Nagisa says. “I doubt it. I’d hate to ask that of Hara on such a short notice. I think snacks will work. Everyone can eat dinner with their families before we meet up.”

“What time do you think would be good?” Megu asks.

“Eight, maybe?” Nagisa poses. “Though on second thought, maybe that’s way too late.”

“Yeah. It’s pretty pitch black out by then,” Isogai says. “Not sure I wanna make that drive in the dark...”

“I just wanna make sure I give everyone time to show up,” Nagisa admits. “I know some of them live pretty far away. Speaking of - have we gotten confirmation from everyone?”

“Yeah. Think so,” Isogai replies. “Nakamura’s already told me she’s flying over from England, and Sugino doesn’t have any games scheduled until late March.”

“What about Fuwa?” Megu asks. “Last I heard she was swamped with work.”

“Fuwa? Missing?” Nagisa asks. “No way. She’s got way too many cryptic comments to share. Knowing her, if she’s really busy, she’ll just show up work and all... pen and paper in hand.”
“Maybe she can make an anthology about the reunion!” Isogai says.

“That would be nice,” Nagisa admits with a smile. “Though last I checked she was still working on the manga about the demon detective.”

“Ohh, yeahhh,” Isogai says, scratching at the back of his neck. “Jeez… I need to catch up. I feel so bad.”

“What about Karasuma and Bi- … er… Jelavic-sensei?” Megu asks. “Have we heard anything from them?”

“Not yet,” Nagisa says. They’ve shown up a few years in the past, but things have been tumultuous with their schedule in between raising their son and fighting overseas. “Jelavic-sensei should be back from her mission in March, but I don’t know if Karasuma-sensei has anything planned.”

“I’ll have to ask,” Megu says. “…Though we’ve gotten quite off track. We still need to decide on a time.”

“Ah- shit,” Nagisa says. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to derail the conversation.”

“It’s fine,” Megu reassures. “Perhaps… seven fifteen? Not too early, but not too terribly late, either. Of course, I’m sure some people will be showing up a little bit earlier. And if anyone falls a bit behind, that’s not an issue, either.”

“That’s good for me!” Nagisa says.

“Same here,” Isogai agrees. “Though - uh… I do still have one question?”

“Mmm?”

“Are we meeting at seven-fifteen on the thirteenth, or on the twelfth? I mean - thirteen sounds like the obvious answer, but if we’re meeting up then… well, most of the reunion won’t even be on the right day.”

“Oh shit, you’re right,” Nagisa says. “Uh… either works for me, really.”

“I believe the twelfth will suffice,” Megu says. “While it’s not worth worrying over too much, there is something almost sweet in the fact that when we first celebrated Korosensei’s birthday it was on the eve between the twelfth and the thirteenth as well.”

Isogai’s mouth widens into a little ‘o’ as he nods. “I’ll mark my calendar, then!”

“That means we have a time, a date, a place and a plan,” Nagisa says. “Almost a full attendance list, too. What else do we need?”

“I think we’re just about done,” Megu admits.

“Isogai, you said you’re bringing snacks?”

“Mmmhm!” Isogai proudly replies. “Though, of course - if someone else wants to bring- like-cookies they’re always welcome.”

“I can bring blankets,” Nagisa says. “Though if anyone wants a sleeping bag they’re probably gonna have to bring their own.”

“Pillows, too,” Megu adds on.
“Right. We should probably make a list to send everyone.”

“Already on it,” Megu says, typing away at her phone.

“...We’re good, then!” Nagisa says. “At least... I think so. Any other concerns?”

“Don’t think so,” Isogai replies.

“Awesome.”

And with that, Nagisa stands. Isogai follows soon after, stretching and giving a yawn as Megu finishes up her text.

“Good work, everyone,” she says, pocketing her phone and standing to give Nagisa a firm pat on the back. “That didn’t take nearly as long as I thought it would.”

“Ha... yeah,” Isogai admits. “Guess it makes sense. This time we didn’t have to plan out an entire complicated assassination tourney and frat party. That lightens the load somewhat.”

Megu rolls her eyes. “I swear to god... never again. I had to bust my ass off last year.”

“You say that now...” Nagisa snickers. “But who knows what we’re gonna do for the 30th anniversary. For all we care, it could be ten times worse.”

Megu rubs her temples. “Don’t say that,” she begs. “By that point we’ll be going on fifty. I don’t think I’ll be able to handle Yada full-body tackling me and pressing a knife to my throat again at that age.”

“...Fair point,” Nagisa admits with a laugh. “And I presume that means Just Dance is off the table, too?”

“Oh, Just Dance is already off the table long before we’re 45. That is the one thing I’m putting my foot down on after last year.”

Isogai takes a step back from his chair, carefully pushing it in. “Do you really think we’ll all still be meeting up in fifteen years?” he asks curiously.

“Of course,” Nagisa replies pretty much instantly. He hates to admit it, but there’s this sort of defensiveness to his tone. “Why wouldn’t we?”

Isogai must catch it, because his shoulders sink. “I mean - don’t get me wrong, I’d really like to, but... we are all getting older. Having families and stuff. Do you think we’ll have the time?”

Megu shrugs. “I don’t know if that makes much of a difference, quite frankly,” she admits. “I mean... half of us are already pretty much settled down, and we’re still meeting up this year. You’ve got a baby girl at home... Sugaya just got engaged... The Chibas have kids in elementary school. I can’t see anything getting much more complicated than all that.”

“If anything,” Nagisa says. “I somehow feel like things will get less complex when we’re older.”

Isogai smiles. “Well... I’m glad you both think so. That’s a reassuring thought. I really care about you guys, you know.”

“And we care about you too,” Nagisa replies. “You’re not getting rid of us that easily. I dunno about everyone else, but... personally? I’m not gonna stop celebrating this day with you all until the day I die myself.”
“Well, then,” Megu says. “It seems we’ve got a long list of parties still to plan, then. Til’ death do us part.”

Isogai raises a fist. “To celebrate our Sensei’s life, and our own.”

Nagisa can’t help but smile a bit at his comment. At least… not until it makes him just a little bit sad. As much as the 13th is a day of celebration for them, it’s a sad day, too. It’s the anniversary of possibly the most painful thing they’ve ever experienced. Everyone is bound to carry a little bit of individual baggage in regards to it… and he can hear it in their voices… in the way Megu shifts just slightly at sensei’s name.

He wishes he could tell them… about everything that’s happened over the past year. With his class… with Makoto. It wouldn’t fix everything… he still feels like there’s a gaping hole in his chest more often than not… but he thinks he is doing better… and he thinks he has getting to see that reassuring smile again to thank for a lot of that.

It’s just… how? To breach the topic? It had been so hard confiding in Kayano, Karma, and Gakushuu… and they’re the people he knows best. He doesn’t know exactly how to break the news to everyone in the E-Class… and if he screws it up… well… he’s scared of severing this unbreakable bond they have.

He opens his mouth to speak - say something about the coolest boy in his class this year, but Megu beats him to it.

“You know…” she says. “It was nice. To plan something simple this year. As fun as big flashy parties are, I think these little moments will always be the things we remember the most.”

“…Yeah,” Nagisa agrees, and he decides Makoto can wait. He is big. He is flashy. He’s world-changing and an emotional rollercoaster to even look at. Nagisa’s not ready to let this thing the twenty-eight of them have go… not yet. He’s sure the secret will come out when the time is right. For now… he’d like to let himself have this.

“Let’s not get our hopes up for too simple, though,” Isogai reminds them. “We can plan and plan all we like, but there’s no accounting for what the others are going to bring to the table. Don’t tell anyone I said this, but last I heard Takebayashi and Okuda were planning some sort of surprise…”

“Good lord,” Megu says, breathing out through her nose. “Tell Takeyabashi that if he causes a riot, I, personally will beat his ass.”

“Not Okuda’s?” Nagisa asks.

“Nagisa… I’d sooner tear down the stars and set fire to the heavens than lay a hand on Okuda. She is maybe the sweetest person I know.”

“Which is why I’d try not to get too worried about it,” Isogai replies. “Whatever it is… if Okuda’s involved, it can’t possibly be bad. I’m sure they just, like, found the cure for cancer or whatever.”

“Wouldn’t that be a miracle?”

Making a mental note to grill Takebayashi about that later, Nagisa takes a step towards the living room. Not before a voice can shout from within, however.

“You all finally done in there?” Maehara asks. “Naoko’s getting rowdy!”
Isogai laughs. “Yeah! We’re just about done, honey!” he shouts, cupping his hand around his mouth. “Be right in!”

With that, he turns to Megu and Nagisa. “Well, you two ready to regroup?” he asks.

“Of course,” Megu says. Nagisa nods, and with that, they’re on their way.

Maehara and Naoko are seated on the ground by the living room table. Naoko sits on Maehara’s lap, scribbling away in a coloring book. Isogai marches over towards them, plopping down and asking “So where’s the restlessness here? Is she actually being rowdy, or did someone just miss his husband?”

Maehara rolls his eyes. “As much as I appreciate the opportunity to let things get hot and heated in front of our friends, she keeps trying to eat crayons, so probably the former.”

“A-ah!” Isogai sputters, gently lowering a crayon clenched fist that seems to have been sneaking towards her mouth. “You can’t do that, sweetie… it’ll make you really sick. No. No.”

“Maybe she wants something to chew on,” Maehara says. “Can you grab her teething ring? I would have, but I didn’t wanna leave her alone, and I’d have hated to interrupt her artistic process.”

“Of course,” Isogai says. “It’s right in there. I was actually just looking at it. Give me a sec.”

He retreats into the kitchen, a skip in his step all the while.

Megu crouches by the table, leaning down to look at Naoko’s latest work. Nagisa sends a glance over as well, noting that it appears to be Sailor Moon: bright red, and of course: colored all outside the lines.

“Did you do that yourself?” she asks, her voice slipping into babtalk.

Naoko takes a moment to mull it over, before nodding. Something tells Nagisa she didn’t do the linework in a licensed coloring book, but considering she’s like two and also probably didn’t understand a word Megu said in the first place he’ll let it slide.

“Awesome work!” he comments. “Maybe one day you’ll grow up to be an artist!”

As if she’s finally warmed up to the ever-detestable Nagisa some, Naoko claps her chubby palms together and giggles.

Nagisa can’t help but smile. A dorky, enamored look on his face, he tells her that whatever it is she does, he’s sure it’ll be awesome. Maehara gently ruffles her hair, and as Isogai returns to the room, teething toy in hand, Nagisa finally reaches for his coat.

“I should probably get going,” he admits. “I’d hate to intrude on your family time. It was nice to see how well you three are doing, though.”

“Oh, no! You don’t need to go,” Isogai insists. “You’re not intruding at all. If you want to stay for a few moments… catch up… you’re more than welcome!”

“Yeah! Don’t go bailing on us that quickly,” Maehara chimes in. “The night’s young! You guys got finished early! Let’s hang! Don’t you have a baby you want to spoil rotten? Don’t you have a particularly handsome and charming friend you’d like to catch up with?”

“…Aw!” Isogai says, his face flushing red. “Thank you!”
“Oh,” Maehara says. “I was actually talking about myse-” he pauses. “...No. You’re right. That one’s actually more aptly suited for you. My bad.” He laughs, cupping his mouth and stage-shouting. “Hey! Nagisa! Get over here! You’ve got a prince charming to hang out with!”

Nagisa glances at his watch, noting that it’s only 6:45. “Fine,” he says, placing his coat back on the rack. “But I can’t stay for more than an hour. I promised my family I’d be back by nine.”

“Oh, course,” Isogai says. “No worries. It is a long drive. We’re just happy to have you over, even for a little bit!”

He spends the next little while fawning over Naoko and catching up with his friends… hearing her full vocabulary of five words and learning all about Megu’s new girlfriend. It’s only when Isogu and Megu retreat to Naoko’s room for a full-scale tour of her bedroom, however, that Maehara hops to his feet and glances down at Nagisa.

“Hey,” he says. “You’re looking a little pale. Wanna step outside for a moment? Grab a drink? I can give you a tour of the garden. Otherwise something tells me you’re gonna be bored out of your mind. Those two could be a while. Prince Charming loves to gush.”

“Uh… sure,” Nagisa says. “Nothing alcoholic, though. I do need to dri-”

“Oh, oh- of course,” Maehara interrupts. “Shit. Sorry. I worded that poorly. Believe it or not, we actually don’t have a single alcoholic drink in the house right now. Baby girl and all.”

Nagisa stands. “That’s fair,” he says, walking over to the side door and slipping on his coat. “You two were never really heavy drinkers, anyways.”


Nagisa rolls his eyes. “You’re always horny. Don’t blame that on the beer.”

“Hey!” Maehara defensively hisses, holding up his hands. “His words! Not mine!”

“Whatever you say, dude,” Nagisa replies, stepping outside.

Maehara crouches down near a cooler they’ve got sitting on their porch. He digs through the ice for a moment before asking “Root Beer or Gatorade?”

“...You guys don’t even have water?”

“We’ve got what we’ve got. Root Beer, Gatorade, or bust.”

“Uh… Gatorade,” Nagisa says, because Root Beer is the worst and literally everyone he’s ever met hates it. “...I guess. Red one, please.”

Maehara smirks, dramatically handing over a bright red Gatorade. “One Fruit Punch coming up!”

Nagisa stares in befuddlement at the bottle. You know… usually when old bros have these sentimental conversations at each other’s homes, they, like… crack beers. Not… drink Gatorade. Oh - also… usually it’s summertime. Not late winter. But he supposes their little posse has never exactly been ordinary. They’re the E-Class, for christ’s sake! If they did anything the way he expected them to, he’s pretty sure he’d think he was dreaming.

Maehara cracks a root beer for himself, smiling in satisfaction at the fizzle. With that, he takes a
It’s a nice place you’ve got here,” Nagisa admits. “It’s so… cozy. And I mean that in the best way.”

“I know, right!?” Maehara asks, grinning proudly. “We’ve mostly got Yuma to thank for that. I mean… it was nice when we bought it, but he did all of the fixing up to get it to this point. Recarpeted the living room… built the swingset… even baby-proofed the house! I mean - I helped a bit, of course, but I’m more of a trophy husband.”

“Don’t say those things,” Nagisa replies. “I’m sure you do more around the house than you’re giving yourself credit for.” He pauses, mulling that over. “Did you two actually have to go all out baby proofing?”

“Oh yeahh,” Maehara says. “Like - weeks. I’m not sure if you know this, but babies are suicidal freaks. Before we even picked her up we had to triple check everything just to make sure it was safe, lest she stick her finger into an electrical outlet. We’ve got everything baby proofed. The cabinets… the beds…- seems like the crayons need to be, apparently. It’s a new discovery every day.”

Nagisa laughs. “Sounds exhausting. You doing good?”

“Good as I can,” Maehara replies. “It’s still a constant battle, but it’s worth it. I see her smile, and my heart just melts. It’s… it’s crazy to think I have this thing in my life. That I’ve settled down with this… wonderful family.”

“…Ha. Yeah. Look how far the Casanova's fallen. Next thing we know we’ll catch you with one of those baby carriers strapped to your chest.”

“You will!” Maehara shouts. “You will! Mark my goddamn word! I’ll wear one baby carrier! I’ll wear two! I’ll get a dad bod! I listen to Jimmy Buffet now, for fuck’s sake! Just watch me.” He holds a finger up accusingly, before leaning over onto the railing with a snicker. “...I mean it, though. It’s not even just that: that I was such a playboy back in the day. It’s just that… I never envisioned a future for myself where I was this happy. That anyone possibly could be this happy. But then… shit, man. Here I am.”

Nagisa smiles, taking a sip of his insanely out of place Gatorade. “...Yeah. I get what you’re saying,” he says. “It makes me happy… that we’ve all come so far.”

“I think that’s gotta be my favorite part of those little reunions you three put together. None of the… shenanigans... as fun as daring Okajima to strip naked and battle Takebayashi was-”

“I still can’t believe they did that.”

“I can. You’d get it if you were ‘a horny bitch,’ too.” Maehara pauses, shaking his head. “But it’s not… it’s not any of that. It’s just seeing how everyone’s doing. I mean… of course we keep up in the group chat, but there is nothing, and I mean nothing like stepping up there in front of your best friends in the world, and letting them know that your life is finally on the right track, mostly ‘cause you got the chance to know each other.”

He grins for one long moment, looking decidedly proud of himself. Finally, he shakes his head, straightening himself up some. “I’m getting off-topic, though. Can’t go getting all soft and sentimental. Where was I?”

“Naoko,” Nagisa says with a snide smile. “Something about how you haven’t slept in a week, but
she makes every exhausting moment worth it?"

“Pssh,” Maehara says. “It’s not that bad. Not that you could make a comment, even if it were, Workaholic-san.”


Needless to say, he’d told the E-Class about his incident. He’d briefly wondered if he even should, but inevitably he came to the conclusion that it was for the best he did. He loves them… he knows they’ll support him through whatever it is he’s going through. And besides, if anything really did happen to him, he’d want them to know why.

“Things are actually a lot easier lately, if you ask me,” Maehara admits. “I mean… don’t get me wrong, she’s still a constant commitment, but she cries a lot less lately, at least.” He snorts. “When we first got her that shit was nonstop. I swear we didn’t sleep through the night for a solid year.”

“Oh, trust me: I remember,” Nagisa says. “You two spammed the group chat about it. Woke us all up at damn 3 AM as well.”

“What else were we supposed to do!? We had to cry for help from someone!” Maehara wails. “Some days she’d be fed, changed, well-rested, and free of everything else our baby websites told us could possibly be the fucking problem! We had to come to you guys for suggestions, if not emotional support!”

“‘You say that,” Nagisa replies, taking a sip of Gatorade so smugly Maehara might just damn well knock his teeth out. “But I’ll have you know the Chibas never once flooded our phone like that, and they have three.”

“The Chibas are aliens!” Maehara refutes, tossing his hands in the air. “They never speak! I’d be surprised if their offspring cried at all! What need would they have for it, anyways, when they may as well all communicate telepathically!?”

Okay, so everyone has thought at least once that Chiba and Hayami’s children remind them a little bit of those kids from The Shining, but there’s no need to say it out loud...

“Excuses, excuses.”

Maehara rolls his eyes. “I’ll stand by it, though: that we’ve gotten to the easy part. Everyone goes on and on about the terrible twos, but I will take everything, and I mean anything over the constant crying.”

“Even your daughter trying to eat crayons?”

“Even my daughter trying to eat crayons. That’s child’s play, dude. We’re in the easy street... at least for now.”

Nagisa wonders if there is an easy part. With kids or with life. There are always new things to face… new problems to adapt to. From the loud, exhausting stage that’s infancy, to the self-loathing spiral that’s teenagerhood, and the quiet sadness that’s growing up. The whole thing’s a learning process. And he supposes while that’s a little scary, that’s part of what makes it so fun, too.

“I’m happy for you,” he says. “You’re doing an awesome job.” He pauses. “Like… I’ve jested, but I mean that! I see the way you guys interact with her, and I’m just... amazed. You’re like naturals!”
Maehara snorts. “I dunno about that, but thanks. We’re trying our best. It’s hard work... like I said, but...” He falls silent, glancing back over his shoulder and into the house through the window. Somewhere further inside Naoko lets out a giggle. “…Like I said: all worth it.”

Nagisa nods, taking a sip of his Gatorade. Maehara’s eyeing him carefully.

“You know,” he says. “I’m sort of surprised we beat you to it.”

Nagisa just about spits out his damn drink.

He leans over the railing and coughs his lungs out, choking desperately for breath. Maehara slaps a panicked hand against his back, profusely apologizing as he shouts “SHIT! There were probably better ways to word th- I’m not talking about your sex life-! We didn’t even make that! I’m just surprised we beat you to- the kids! Adopting a kid!”

“I didn’t think you were talking about my sex life!” Nagisa wheezes, hacking and wheezing. “We don’t all think like y-” Okay. No. That’s mean. Use your kind words. “You just- gah! You caught me by surprise!”

“That’s- that’s incredibly... that’s fair-” Maehara sputters. “I probably shouldn’t have even made a comment - that was crossing a line- I-...” He drifts off. “Do you need... like... the Heimlich maneuver?”

“No. No,” Nagisa insists. “I’m fine. Just... give me a second.”

A few well-timed coughs and another minute of keeling over on Maehara’s railing later and he’s feeling good as new. God damn it. He should have known better than to let himself drink when listening to anything coming out of that dude’s mouth.

“Yeah. I’m sorry,” Maehara says. “That was intrusive.”

“No,” Nagisa admits. “It wasn’t. I mean- okay - I guess it was. Like. Super intrusive. But I don’t... I don’t mind it from you guys. You’re my friends. And it’s... a fair question. I know I seem like the type to have eighty kids by now.”

“And you’ve got none,” Maehara says. “Why? If you don’t mind me asking, I mean. Not that - not that anyone needs them. Your family is plenty complete the way it is. So if it’s just - if it’s not an interest, then that’s cool, but you always struck me as a little obsessed with them... owning the school and all.” He pauses. “Is it one of the others? I mean, I guess that’s fair. I wouldn’t wanna trust Karma with a child, either, but-”

“Nah,” Nagisa says with a sideways smile and another cough. “It’s... it’s me, mostly.”

Gakushuu hadn’t exactly been in on the whole kid-having plan, either, but he doesn’t feel comfortable disclosing that to Maehara. Besides, he always got the impression that it was his freaking out that really scared Gakushuu out of it. If his husband didn’t believe in himself, then what did that mean for him?

“We... uh - actually considered it a few years back. But I backed out before we started really planning anything.” Needless to say he’s not going to discuss his wife’s abortion with Maehara, either. “I just got... scared, I guess.”

“Of what?” Maehara asks.

“I... I dunno. Just... screwing it up,” Nagisa admits. “…It’s not that I don’t like kids. I love them.
But… tutoring kids and raising them is so different. I already feel like I’m not doing enough when it comes to my students. I can’t imagine what it’d be like to have a kid depending on me for their whole life. What if I’m… what if I’m just not cut out for it?"

He raises a hand. “And I know that’s ridiculous. But don’t give me any of that ‘I’m sure that’s not true’ garbage. I’ve heard it from people way closer to me, and it just doesn’t seem to sink in. Because even if there’s just a .01% chance I’m not good enough for this, that’s still too much. Because a student who doesn’t like me can move schools; can graduate in three years. But if I have a kid… adopt a kid… whatever, that’s permanent. They’re stuck with me. Forever.”

“I wouldn’t wish that on - on anyone,” he says. “Because what if… what if I end up just like my family?”

People can call him gentle and kind all they want. But he still knows he’s got his mom’s blood running through his veins. He’s predisposed to the same mental issues she faced. He had horrible intrusive thoughts and ‘bloodlust’ all throughout his youth. That alone took years of therapy to work through. He has no idea what kind of person he’ll be in the next five years! In the next ten!

Maehara bites his lip. Leans over next to Nagisa and stares out at his backyard. He’s got this perplexed expression on his face.

“...Most of us had shitty parents, you know,” he says. “I mean, don’t get me wrong, some were definitely worse than others, but they were all willing to send us to that draconian hell school. If even 10% of us had a good relationship with our parents, I’d eat my damn shoe.”

“I know-” Nagisa says. “And I’m not-... sorry. I’m not trying to make it a competition. I’m not trying to downplay what you went through. I just-”

“And I’m not saying you are,” Maehara interrupts. “What I’m saying is you care about the rest of us. You believe in us. Way more than you’re ever gonna believe in yourself. So if you wanna keep faith, then how about you just look out at us?” He pauses, taking a sip of his root beer.

“Hayami’s mother was never around, but her kids are growing up with her as an active figure in their life. Justice’s dad was arrested for, like, 800 things, but he’s the most just guy I know. Hazama’s mom would scream and cry and go apeshit at her pretty much every day. But have you ever once seen Hazama react like that? Fuck no! She works in a library for Pete’s sake. She’s quiet, and patient, and can deal with more crying kids than any of us combined.”

“When she’s not the one making them cry with her scary stories-”

“Besides the point!” Maehara says. “What I’m saying is she’s doing better. Maybe because she went through that. Which - god - isn’t me saying we’re lucky we got treated like dirt. That shit sucked. But at least we know how to treat people.” He sighs. “My relationship with my parents wasn’t the worst... not by far. But even the littlest thing could hurt sometimes.”

“They’d make these little jabs- these little jokes about how all I thought about was girls. About how I never tried- could only think with my heart. And it was true, but you have no idea how terrible that was to hear when I was already in an environment where I was being told I was stupid every day. It isn’t that- it isn’t that I wasn’t trying. But that school was intense.”

“Could you blame me for wanting to look for a distraction? Yeah, I’d much rather have dedicated my time to spending time with some girl. I… uh… honestly didn’t take it too badly. I was a pretty chill guy. But I figured maybe some people out there were taking that stuff a lot more harshly. That it’d be nice to have someone by their side. And I could be that someone!”
“I’d make a girl laugh, and I’d just feel warm inside. Because flirting was fun and flirting was mindless and who knows the last time she’d gotten to laugh? It’d make me happy… and then I’d come home and just get told ‘stop wasting your time.’ ‘You need to try harder.’ ‘Your future is on the line.’”

“It’s not like I didn’t know that. I-” Maehara shakes his head. “Whatever. I guess what I’m trying to say was… my parents weren’t bad by any extent. We still get along. They love my daughter and my husband! Come over for every birthday and holiday. I’m sure they don’t even remember saying that stuff to me. But what matters is that I do. And… well, I’ve already made this promise to myself that I am never going to make Naoko feel like that.”

“I am never going to make her feel like her interests and relationships are flippant or unimportant. I am never going to tell her that her failures are all her fault. Whatever it is she does - however it is she spends her time- unless she hurts someone, then I will always support her. If she wants to spend her teenage years mashing faces with girls too, then so be it!”

“We’re given this - this chance to make sure they don’t feel the same way we did. To protect them. Even from… even from things that weren’t other peoples’ fault.” He’s quiet, for a long moment, fiddling with his drink. “…Yuma’s parents were awesome. I mean… he died when he was young, but I still have the best memories of Isogai’s father. And his mother was a saint. If I have a good relationship with my mother, then I fucking worship Yuma’s. She is maybe the best lady I have ever met.”

“But Yuma… he… grew up in an environment no-one should have to. Shit - I… almost feel weird talking about it. But you know how it was. Through no fault of his or his mother’s, he had to spend his teenage years working his ass off at some minimum wage job just to keep a roof over his head. He had to fight for everything he has. And as inspiring as that sounds, he was thirteen when they first foreclosed his home. He started working full-time at fifteen!”

“Yuma went through so, so, so much shit. And I love him… respect him… was there for him through all of it. But I am so thankful his daughter is never going to have to go through any of that. That she will always have food on her plate and electricity in her home and clean, warm clothes. That, god forbid - if anything happens to us - she has a support system in you guys where I know she will never end up homeless.”

“I’m thankful my husband can give my daughter a better life than he had! That has to feel so… empowering! Being able to… make a change like that. There was a time when all of us felt so damn hopeless. You know that. But now… now we can raise families who will be happier than we were.”

Nagisa blinks. He hadn’t even realized it until now, but he’s close to tears. He wipes awkwardly at his eyes, admitting “…Shit, Maehara. That’s insightful.”

Again: Not to stereotype, but he’s not used to hearing this sort of stuff from Maehara. He’s more of the bubbly blond-headed bimbo type. It’s not that he’s not capable of saying some truly incredible stuff, but… he’s also not usually the tangents sort of guy.

...This must be something really near and dear to his heart.

“…Yeah,” he says. He’d seemed so stoic during his speech, but now he looks almost embarrassed. He scratches awkwardly at the back of his neck. “I guess Naoko’s just given me a lot to think about lately. Hope it’s not too jarring.”

“Nah, man,” Nagisa reassures. “…That was… actually really nice to hear.”
“...For the record, whether you decide to have kids or not, you’re not like your mom. You can worry about that .01% all you want, but the people who know you know that’s just not who you are. Sure, you’re her kid. And I’m sure that means you’ve got some of the same issues. But you know what you’ve got that she didn’t?”

Nagisa’s silent.

“The kindness and experience to deal with them.”

...Nagisa feels his hand shake slightly. Standing there... clutching the railing on his old classmate’s front porch, he blinks back tears. He shakes his head and murmurs a quiet “You really think so?”

It’s not that that’s not something he hasn’t told himself before. Hasn’t heard from a thousand mouths and seen in a dozen kind eyes. But even so, it’s nice to hear said so outright like that.

“Of course, man,” Maehara says. “Everyone does. You’re, like, the hero of the E-Class. You’re the one carrying on that thing we had. You can get down on yourself all you want, but I think to the people around you and to the kids you’re teaching, you’ll always be a really good guy.” He smiles. “I’m lucky that my daughter is gonna get to grow up with you and the rest of the E-Class in her life. Hell, I’d love to enroll her in your school if you’re still teaching ten years from now. And, well… if I’d trust you with that, I’d trust you with anything.”

...The most important thing in the world to him. He’s been entrusted with that. Something gentle… and soft… and oh so fragile. In the same way he’d been entrusted with Kiyoshi. In the same way he’ll be entrusted the Chiba-Hayamis, and has been entrusted a hundred kids before them. From scared… or trusting… or undeserving parents, and from the children themselves, desperate for help.

Who don’t see the boy with the dangerous eyes... with the racing thoughts and the blade in his hand, fearful for life and pulled in by his pigtails... who don’t see the boy screamed at and smacked across the face... who’s violent... who’s dangerous... who’s stealthy. A ticking bomb. An accident waiting to happen. The reprise of a violent legacy that’s been lived a thousand times before.

...They don’t see the boy forced to kill the only adult he’d ever loved.

They see the trustworthy man with the gentle voice and the kind eyes... who knows exactly what to say, and tries his hardest whenever he’s given the chance.

Because that’s who Nagisa’s always strived to be.

...Maybe even who he’s managed to become.

He lets out a deep shaky breath, apologizing for the strong reaction. He just hadn’t expected tonight’s conversation to get so deep.

“It’s fine,” Maehara says with an awkward pat on the back. “I... uh... probably shouldn’t have made it so philosophical. Mighhhhhhttt have overstepped a boundary there.”

“No, no,” Nagisa reassures. “It’s fine. Honestly... I really needed to hear that. I’m... uh... still not sure if kids are really my speed. I’m busy enough as is. But... you’re right. If I don’t want to have them, that should be because I don’t want to. Not because I’m afraid I’m some... monster in waiting. Not because I’m scared I’m going to screw it up beyond belief.”

“Ex -actly,” Maehara replies. “You’re a good guy, Nagisa. And you’ve got nothing to worry about. Don’t spend the rest of your life stressing over nothing.”
With that, he straightens himself up and finishes his root beer... (Which is still an incomprehensibly disgusting task to Nagisa) Stretches, crushes his can, and tosses it back in the garbage. (Where it belongs.) “But I guess that’s all besides the point. I... uh... didn’t mean for this conversation to get so dreary. We should probably get heading back in. I hear my baby crying, and you’re gonna need to get ready to head out soon if you wanna make it back to your place in time.”

“Ah... yeah,” Nagisa admits, finishing up his Gatorade and tossing it into the trash can in a significantly less cool manner. “That would probably be for the best.” He pauses. “Although - I-uh... do have to ask. Did you bring me out here just to talk about that?”

“Eh?”

“The fact that I don’t have kids. Or that you thought I needed a pep talk or whatever. Did you drag me out back to your porch just to talk with me about it?”

And recognition dawns in Maehara’s eyes. “Aw - hell no!” he says, dismissively waving a hand. “For a second I didn’t even understand what you were talking about. I am way too ADD for that shit.” He smirks. “Flattered you think I’m capable of planning a coup like that, but I legitimately just wanted to have a root beer with you and brag about the cool swing my husband built.”

“I still don’t get how you can drink that crap,” Nagisa admits. “I think I’d throw up.”

“Root beer?” Maehara asks. “Eh... it’s an acquired taste. Isogai doesn’t like it either.”

“...Is that who the Gatorade’s for?”

“That’s who the Gatorade’s for.”

“...You two have to be the two weirdest people I know.”

“Bold words coming from the guy married to Karma Akabane, mate,” Maehara snarks, slamming the cooler shut with his foot and prying open the glass sliding door. “Now get inside before you can shit-talk me in response to me building you up any more. I’ve got stuff to do.”


“Mmm?”

“How did you know you were ready? Like... for Naoko. That you’d come far enough? That you were able to give her a life better than the one you had?”

“Oh,” Maehara says. “Now that’s an obvious answer.” He pauses for a long moment, one foot in the doorway as he seems to stew in the melodrama. “...I didn’t. And you won’t, either. Doesn’t make it anything less than the best decision I’ve ever made.”

And without another word, he steps inside, waving over his shoulder. “Now grab your coat before you get a damn cold.”

The rest of the evening goes by without much eventfulness. Nagisa talks with Megu and Isogai for maybe ten minutes, before glancing at his phone and noting that he should probably go. Maehara slings an arm around his shoulder, and Isogai gives him a glass of water for the road. Megu says she should probably get heading out as well, and reminds him to watch out for deer on the way.

Before he goes, however, he takes one last moment to glance over his shoulder... gazes at the idyllic little place the Isogais call their home. And then, with that, he starts up his car. Not before
flipping on the music and glimpsing at his phone one last time, however.

[1/19/2031 7:47 PM:] [Nagisa ] On my way back now.

[1/19/2031 7:47 PM:] [Nagisa ] Planning went well.

[1/19/2031 7:47 PM:] [Kayano ] Oh! That’s good to hear!

[1/19/2031 7:48 PM:] [Karma❤️] We hope to be seeing you home by your curfew, mister.

[1/19/2031 7:48 PM:] [Karma❤️] Not a minute later. Otherwise you’re grounded.

[1/19/2031 7:48 PM:] [Kayano ] Oh, lay OFF.

[1/19/2031 7:48 PM:] [Karma❤️] >:3c

Nagisa rolls his eyes and smiles fondly at his phone. “I’ll try my best,” he texts back.

And with that, he’s off! The drive home is mostly uneventful. The roads are a ghost town, because… y’know, he lives in fucking Japan. And despite receiving numerous warnings about the deer around here, he doesn’t encounter a single one on the way back. Instead, hands tight on the wheel, and phone softly buzzing on the passenger’s seat, he’s left alone with his thoughts.

As always, this sort of thing has given him a lot to reflect on. Not in just the direction his classmates’ lives are taking, but his own as well. Maehara had really poured his heart out there, hadn’t he?

...He’d seemed so happy.

Of course, Nagisa’s happy, too. He’s happy with what he has. Wonders if it’s a case of the grass being greener on the other side. He’s not sure, but as he pulls into his driveway and steps out of the car, he sees an eye peek its way out from behind the curtain.

‘I’m home,’ he texts. ‘Though I’m sure you three already know that. Is Karma seriously spying on me from the window?’

‘He’s hunched over on the couch like a gargoyle,’ Kayano texts back. ‘Gakushuu and I tried to tear him off, but he’s surprisingly strong when he’s particularly attached to a stupid idea.’

‘I’m not surprised,’ Nagisa admits, remembering the ‘civil war incident.’ He marches up to the doorway. Needless to say, he doesn’t need to knock. Before he can even motion to, the door swings open and Kayano wraps him in a hug.

“How’d things go?” she asks.

“Well!” Nagisa says. “We’re planning something a little bit smaller. Megu will probably text the full plan to everyone in the group chat sometime tomorrow.”

“Does that mean no Just Dance this year?” Karma asks, sauntering over to Nagisa with all the smoothness of a man desperately trying to pretend he wasn’t just ‘gargoyled’ over on the couch.

“Yes, that means no Just Dance this year,” Nagisa says. “...Probably. We’re sticking to something a little less big. Having a slumber party… maybe playing a few drinking games- just gonna catch up. It’ll be nice.”

“Thank hell,” Gakushuu admits. “I’d rather prefer to not have to nurse Akabane’s bruised ass back
to health this year. Do watch his drinking, however. I don’t particularly want to deal with him hungover, either.”

“Pah,” Karma says. “Like I need you. I can take care of myself hungover just fine.”

“You say that,” Gakushuu replies. “But I once saw you rip a toilet lid off of its hinges.”

“I was 21, for fuck’s sake! And everything hurt! Cut me some slack!”

“Absolutely not.”

Nagisa snorts, hanging his coat on the rack. Admittedly, as nice as it was taking a glance into a different sort of life, he likes what he has here. It’s chaotic, but it’s his. He wouldn’t trade it for the world.

He settles into the imprint in the couch, still warm from where Karma was sitting... receives an elbow to the gut as he’s accused of stealing a spot. Nevertheless, Karma soon settles down next to him, and they talk for what feels like forever, settled just like that.

Soon after, they prepare for bed. Gakushuu adorns his sleep mask, and Kayano pushes the beds in close- having nearly fallen through the gap last night. They brush their teeth and refluff their pillows and straighten their blanket. Then, when they’re ready, they hop into bed and wrap each other in an embrace.

...Admittedly, Nagisa’s still not very sure how he feels about what Maehara said to him earlier. But he is sure about one thing... that Maehara was right when he said that if he doesn’t want his life to take a turn in that direction, it should be because he just doesn’t want it to. Not because of some preconceived notion that he’s bad, much less unready. There are a lot of things about Maehara and Isogai’s little idyllic future he doesn’t understand... in the same way he’s never lived Megu’s ‘dog in the pool,’ or been in the shoes of any of his other classmates... and that’s okay...

Because there is one thing that Maehara had brought up earlier, that he really, truly gets.

...That feeling of ‘I don’t think I could possibly be any happier.’

Nagisa at fifteen. Hell- even at twenty - had been such a scared, unsure person. He never would have anticipated ending up here... nestled in Kayano’s arms... head pressed against the back of Gakushuu’s shoulder.

He doesn’t know where he’ll be in another five years... in another ten. But he knows wherever he ends up heading- whatever decisions his family decides to make - they’ll be happy as long as they’re facing it together.

After all, if he was any bit as dangerous as he’d been worried he was when he was just a kid, he wouldn’t have been blessed with this wonderful thing.

For once in his life, Nagisa falls asleep in no time.


[2/8/2031 3:41 PM:] [Karasuma] Still hesitant to speak much, but when is he not?

[2/8/2031 3:41 PM:] [Karasuma] He’s shy... I try to give him his space. But he’s spending more
time out of his room.


[2/8/2031 3:42 PM:] [Karasuma] How are things on the school end?

[2/8/2031 3:42 PM:] [Nagisa] Good! He still hasn’t asked for his desk to be moved back, but he’s talking with his friends again.

[2/8/2031 3:43 PM:] [Nagisa] Maybe we won’t need to have that meeting after all.

[2/8/2031 3:43 PM:] [Karasuma] That’s a relief. I must admit I’ve been busy as of late handling Irina’s mission overseas.

[2/8/2031 3:43 PM:] [Karasuma] Can I free up my Friday?

[2/8/2031 3:44 PM:] [Nagisa] Go right ahead. I’ll let you know if anything changes, but for now…?

[2/8/2031 3:44 PM:] [Nagisa] I actually think he’s doing really good.

For the first time in a long time, Kiyoshi has hope.

Of course… it’s uncertain. Weak… fragile… easily crushed. When he awakes in the dire hours of the night, heart pounding- knuckles still bruised- it withers in his chest. But all the same, it returns each morning- strengthening just slightly with the sight of a smile… and Kiyoshi comes to the shocking realization that his hope is no thing, but rather a person.

The one- the only… Makoto.

He greets him each morning with a smile… waves his hand over the crest of the mountain and shouts. He reassures him. Reaffirms him. Rebuilds him up when he’s fallen down. And as Kiyoshi starts to realize that very little has changed about their relationship since he’d told him the truth, his heart glows bright.

He’d been so scared of being rejected... abandoned... hated. He’d certainly have deserved it, but he’d feared that possibility with every fiber of his being... would have done anything to prevent it. And as that grinning face consoles him each morning, he thinks he finally knows why.

...Makoto’s become his rock. Now, more than ever. And he’s thankful… that not even this could change that.

Some things are different. But they’re not bad. Makoto calls him late at night, telling him he’d had another bad dream.

“What is it you remembered this time?” Kiyoshi asks, trying to keep his voice gentle. It’s only afterwards that he realizes he was trying to imitate his friend.

Makoto details hurting people. *Good* people. Maiming them in gruesome, brutal ways. He slits a pregnant woman’s throat, and leaves a thirteen-year-old boy to die. His voice quivers and his whimpers turn to sobs.

“You don’t think it’s too late for me, do you?” he begs. “You don’t think I’m bad, right?”

...He never used to talk about these things with Kiyoshi before.
Shaking thoughts of maimed bodies and mangled corpses from his mind-Kiyoshi shakes his head. “No. I don’t,” he says, trying with all his might to focus on that reassuring smile. “…I would never.”

In light of the truth, sometimes it feels like all he has.

Three days later Kiyoshi remembers smacking him upside the forehead. It’d been some time shortly after he’d first brought him in. He’d made some smart-ass comment, and he’d just lost his temper. The Reaper had blinked- surprised. It’d been the first time Yanagisawa had laid a hand on him.

...And then he’d laughed.

“If you think I can be swayed by those sort of actions,” he’d said. “Well, then I think you’ve surrounded yourself with the wrong sorts of people. I’m not some quivering, fragile thing. Maybe you’ve gotten me confused with your meek little trophy wife?”

And looking into his eyes, Yanagisawa knew it was the truth. That this man wasn’t scared of him.

...He hated it.

That day, he’d doubled the dose of antimatter. His underlings had raised eyebrows, asking if that risked the integrity of the experiment. But Yanagisawa had raised a fist, and they’d done as told. Physical torment may not have worked on The Reaper, but watching him writhe on the floor in pain two hours later… Yanagisawa decided that was much more satisfying, anyways.

He brings it up when it’s just the two of them. Figures he has to. Something to do with being completely honest or whatever. Makoto shifts slightly as he speaks, his lips drawn back into a frown.

“...I… uh… ‘m not sure if you remember that, but… you’re not still mad at me about it, right?” Kiyoshi asks. “I mean- I’d completely get it if you were, but-”

Makoto places a hand on his shoulder, gripping tight as he speaks. “No. Of course not,” he says. And that sense of unease fades. His smile returns. “...It’s in the past. We’re recyclables, remember?”

“...Yeah.”

Some part of him is still worried that this thing they have is going to collapse. That one minute memory will finally be the straw that breaks the camel’s back, and that Makoto will give up on him. Kiyoshi supposes that’s why he tells Makoto about the bad things he remembers doing to him. To Aguri, too. As a reminder that it’s not too late to turn tail and run.

...That, and that each time Makoto grabs him by the shoulder and says ‘I would never,’ it eases the guilt in his chest just a bit.

He still sees the demon at night sometimes. It doesn’t talk to him. Most times, he simply can’t move. There’s no Korosensei. No Reaper. No Makoto. Just Kiyoshi… alone with his thoughts.

He dwells on them for just a moment. Reminds himself he’s accepting what’s coming to him. And then… he wakes up. Focuses on slowly wiggling his fingers, and uses the anxiety calming techniques his parents taught him. There’s still this little voice in the back of his head telling him he doesn’t deserve it… this peace he’s found. But all the same, he hears Makoto’s voice, too, and it
says- defiantly- “you do!”

...It’s a step by step process.

Things are still weird with Fumiko. He thinks they both know that. She may not know the truth about him - but she does know that he’d hurt her feelings. She’s cold with him for maybe a week. But sooner than later, her walls collapse, and she buries her face in his shoulder - wrapping him in a hug.

“...I missed you,” she says. “Please never do that again.”

Kiyoshi’s hands drift up slowly, settling on her upper back. They shake as he remembers how quickly they could go from caressing that neck to strangling it.

“...Yeah,” he says, reminding himself he’s not the victim here. That this is his burden to bear, and he won’t dare complain. “...Missed you too.”

Slowly but surely, things return to normal. Or at least some semblance of it. She jokes with him, and he returns said jokes, assuming a smile. She walks to school, a skip in her step, and proudly tells him about her plans to break away from her parents.

“I just feel like… my life is finally coming together!” she says, fists pumped. “Do you ever feel that way, Kiyoshi?”

...He pauses.

“Yeah. Of course.”

He doesn’t have much time to think about it… how dubious this thing they’re doing is. Whenever he begins to grow uncertain, Makoto’s there to remind him that they’re doing the right thing.

“I mean… just look at her!”

Kiyoshi’s gaze drifts to her blissful, unaware smile, and he knows he’s right. He remembers those eyes staring at him with heartbreak… just how sad of a person she’d become by the end there. He doesn’t want to cause that ever again.

Besides… she turns to him, and meets his eyes... greets him every morning, and walks him home at the end of the day… thanks him one evening for everything he’s done for her, and admits she doesn’t know if she’d have gotten this far without him… and he knows: she’s his hope, too. The both of them… they’re all Kiyoshi’s ever had. He teams up with her during assassination and they manage to down Nagisa. She rushes past him and slaps his hand so hard it aches.

For just one moment, he feels confident.

...He doesn’t want to lose this thing they have, either.

He tells himself it’s not selfish. He doesn’t believe it, but what else can he possibly do? This friendship the three of them have… it’s already on such shaky footing. Maybe it’s better to let sleeping dogs lie. There’s no changing the past. All he can do now is make it up to those two in the present. And this is… simply a part of that.

(They need to do it, okay!?)

“There’s nothing to worry about,” Makoto says. And Kiyoshi believes it. Because he’s wanted
something to cling to for so long.

It’s a slow process: recovering, or whatever this is. But Kiyoshi thinks he’s doing well. Not *great*, but… well. He can finally sleep through the night. Sometimes his thoughts still go off-kilter, but at least they’re not violent. A reminder of what he’s done sits there - gnawing at the back of his brain, but at least they don’t make him spiral. At this point, all it is is a sort of quiet inevitability. Something he’ll never escape, but something he’s getting used to, whether that’s by covering his ears or not.

He’s not quite happy… and he’s *definitely* not confident… but at the very least, he’s alive. And most importantly: he feels seen.

It’s been four days without a single nightmare when he comes home exhausted. School had been awesome. The weather’s getting just slightly warmer out, and they’d studied outside for the first time in months. Admittedly his legs feel like jello after how intense his latest 'assassination attempt' had gotten, but he’s in a good mood.

He hasn’t been thinking about Yanagisawa as much lately. Of course he’s still there… in the back of his mind like a constant reminder. But at least the things he’s remembered lately have had nothing to do with hurting people. They’re stupid things… first science project… buying copious amounts of mice… learning some dumb magic trick just so he could mansplain it to the first person he met. He still doesn’t like them... they’re reminders of *that person*. But he’d take that person doing something mundane any day over him hurting his friends.

He gingerly places his book bag on the ground. Taro rushes over, shoving his nose in Kiyoshi’s face. Where a few weeks ago he’d have ignored him, Kiyoshi takes the time to pet the dog, savoring just how soft the fur feels caught between his fingers.

‘I’m allowed to have this,’ he reminds himself. ‘I’m still allowed to have these little moments.’

He’s been looking up therapy techniques a lot more recently. It’s not that he doesn’t think he could manage to go to an actual therapist if he asked, but… what therapist would possibly believe him? Sure, he’s always had mental issues, but as of late they feel so intricately entwined with the occult bullshit that’s become his life. There’s no explaining why he hates himself without explaining what he did back then.

Not that… not that he hates himself! Working on that, remember? Just appreciate the little things. How soft the dog feels... how nice the wind is outside… how much his friends love him, even when he’s caught up in a web of lies.

He straightens himself up, making a conscious decision not to think about that. Instead, he pats the side of his leg as he smiles at the dog. “C’mon, bud. You wanna go upstairs? I’m feeling all conked out.”

(The reality is he still doesn’t want to be left alone with his thoughts, but he won’t admit that. He’s not - *he’s learning, okay*? He’s not depressed or self-pitying. He’s tired. That’s all.)

He doesn’t even need to ask. Taro crouches and taps his front paws against the carpet, bouncing from foot to foot. Then, like his shadow, he tails after Kiyoshi, his tail wagging all the while.

It’s only as he begins the trek up to his room, however, that Kiyoshi realizes he hasn’t seen his father. Frankly, that’s nothing abnormal. But as he passes by the kitchen… and overhears his father’s voice, he feels a sense of unease wash over him.
“Yes. I’m aware.” he says, this shaky irritation to his voice. “But you are not giving me the information I need- I am listening! This is just… this is a deeply important matter to me, and I’d appreciate it if you.”

He cuts off, hissing in deeply through his teeth. And as Taro edges closer to the doorway, letting out a concerned whimper, he says “Okay. Yes. I will listen. Please. Just. Repeat yourself.”

Kiyoshi pulls Taro back by the scruff of his neck - too nervous to let out a sound. Because he knows his father, and this is not him. His father is a cool, collected, emotionless man. Never once in his life has he heard his father angry, much less his voice crack.

Something serious has to have happened.

...Mom?

His mouth goes dry.

No. He refuses to even humor the thought. It’s not- it wouldn’t be- nothing’s happened to her. Who… who cares if she’s in a danger zone overseas? It’s not- it wouldn’t be - it’s just not, okay!? It doesn’t matter that there is pretty much nothing else that would earn a reaction like this from his father. (Nothing else he loves.) It’s not her. She’s not hurt. She’s not dead. She’s fine.

He edges in closer to the doorway, pressing his back to the wall. Whispers for Taro to get into his kennel immediately. He has… he has some listening in to do.

Taro hesitates, staring up at him with big eyes and letting out a low whimper. But when Kiyoshi hisses in through his teeth, demanding “Kennel. Now,” he obliges- retreating back to his cage with his tail tucked in between his legs. In any other situation Kiyoshi’d feel bad, but now is not the time for this.

There’s a long, drawn-out moment of silence. And for one terrifying second, Kiyoshi fears he’s been caught. But when his dad finally speaks up- what feels like minutes later- it’s in a weighty, half-composed tone.

“Mmmmmhm,” he says. “Yes... I understand.”

His voice cracks just slightly as he speaks.

...Okay. The phone. He’s talking over the phone. Kiyoshi wishes he could make out a response, but he guesses he’s going to have to try his best to gauge the scope of the emergency from his dad’s end alone.

Emergency? When did it become an emergency!? He still doesn’t know it’s a-... nothing’s happened. What is he getting so worried about? This is just his anxiety going off like always!

Maybe… maybe it’s not his mom! Maybe something happened at the school! Right after he left! Maybe his dad doesn’t know he’s okay? That’s all-

‘No,’ he decides, hearing Karasuma take a deep, panicked breath. ‘I doubt it.’

...After all, when has he ever earned this sort of reaction from his dad before?

One of the E-Class members, then. Shiota-sensei. Or… or Kayano. Uncle Itona… maybe Miss
Nakamura. What if something’s happened to one of them? There’s always a risk with gymnastics… or what about Yoshida-san? Hasn’t he always been a motorcycle enthusiast? What if he crashed and burned?

No. Nononono.

“...And… you’re certain,” Karasuma says. “That she’s not going to…” his voice falters. “That no-one has died.”

He’s quiet for another long moment, and Kiyoshi’s stomach does flips. ‘She’ he says. ‘Her.’ That cuts him out of the equation. Shiota-sensei, Karma, Itona, Yoshida and the rest. The possibilities narrow, and his eyes well with tears. ‘no-one’s died?’ his father asks, sounding so uncertain, and Kiyoshi decides this has to be an incident where a lot of people were hurt.

A place… like… a secret missio-

No. No. It’s not that, okay!?

“Yes! I’m aware it’s a situation where no-one can know for certai-” Karasuma snaps, his voice petering off with irritation “It’s very soon after the incident... I know. But surely the doctors must have at least some information. Some estimate! All I need you to do is tell me what the current status report is. And do not tell me there is none!”

His voice raises, and he slams a palm on the table. Kiyoshi blinks back tears and brings a finger to his mouth. He bites down hard as he can, just in some feeble attempt to prevent himself from letting out a whimper.

Taro barks in the other room. But if Karasuma notices, he doesn’t react. Instead, he just stands there, arguing on the phone as Kiyoshi notes he’s never once seen him this way before. ...Not even with his students.

Years ago, when Kiyoshi had been really young, one of them had swerved off the ice. He can’t quite remember who at this point, but it had been a really serious thing. When the rest of the E-Class had been told about it, it was an epidemic. But even then, his dad hadn’t sounded like this. He’d just paced in circles, this perturbed look on his face as he went dead quiet.

Mom had been worried, too. But all the same, she’d placed a hand on his shoulder and reassured him that she was sure everything would be okay. “Those kids are just about damn invincible,” she’d commented. “They’ve faced off against trained assassins. Battled literal monsters. Took down your weird buff ex-military bunkmate. You think a little car crash can take one of them out?”

...Karasuma’s expression had softened.

“No,” he’d admitted. “...I suppose not.”

Even stressed out of her mind, Kiyoshi had remembered thinking his mom had sounded so gentle at that moment. A lot of the time she was over the top... or trying to get on his dad’s nerves. But when they’d faced problems together like that, it had always been so comforting.

They’d found out that the student was okay in no-time. Nothing more than a few broken bones. Kiyoshi’s family had rejoiced. And his Mom had ruffled his hair, admitting for just once that she was so thankful.
Karasuma had shaken his head later that night… took a deep breath… apologized for losing his cool. That had been his idea of losing his cool. Mumbling and pacing in circles a little bit.

“I am not behaving irrationally!” Karasuma growls, his voice genuinely distressed. He seems so much more broken than the man Kiyoshi had known back then. “Yes, we were aware of the risks. And yes, I’m aware there is only so much you can know at the moment, but I think I at the very least deserve to be passed onto the doctor! It’s clear you don’t know what you’re talking about. Now do what I say, before I raise a fucking complaint to headquarters about you! Need I remind you this is my wife we’re talking about!?”

And that’s all it takes. That simple… innocuous word. Kiyoshi falls to the ground- back still pressed against the wall, and lets out a silent, defeated sob. Because he finally knows for certain: that the worst possible thing has happened.

His mom… she might go away now.

He’s not talking about her like he’s dead. At least… he doesn’t think so. His head is spinning. What is it Dad said? ‘No-one’s died?’ Or had that been a question? He’s talking about her in present tense, isn’t he? It’s hard to make out. Kiyoshi just can’t focus.

She’s… she’s not dead. But is she dying? They’re talking about her like she’s dying. Karasuma’s voice wavers, and Kiyoshi becomes certain of that. Nothing else could earn this reaction of sheer terror from his dad.

...Everything feels light.

“...Good,” Karasuma finally mutters. “Yes. Thank you.” He’s quiet for a long moment. “Hello? Is this… Doctor Moriyama?”

Doctor. Doctor. Yeah. Dad had mentioned a doctor. Is she hospitalized? Wh… what happened? Did someone shoot her down? Did she get in a fight? W… what’s going to happen to her!?

“Yes. This is Agent Karasuma’s husband. Tadaomi... Tadaomi Karasuma,” he recites. “I’m here to get a status report on her condition.”

His words are fading in and out. Kiyoshi’s head is pounding. Has his voice dropped to a whisper, or is Kiyoshi simply too distracted by his own heavy breaths? Shit. Shit! Stop breathing so hard! He’s going to hear you, dumbass!

He reaches up to cover his mouth with trembling hands.

“Mmmhm. Mmmhm. I see,” Karasuma’s voice is stiff. Rehearsed. “And what are the extent of the damages?”

Damages. Damages. Oh god. What happened to her? Is… is she in pain right now? Kiyoshi feels tears well in his eyes.

Karasuma’s breath hitches just slightly. It’s split-second. Blink and you’ll miss it. In an instant, he’s back to that monotone. “...Okay,” he says. “Okay. I… I understand. Do you have any idea of… how long she’ll… be out for?”

Out for. Out for? Is she under anesthetic? Does that mean… does that mean she’s not in pain?

...Does that mean… she might die… without Kiyoshi ever getting to talk to her again?
Karasuma’s quiet for longer this time- leaving Kiyoshi with the deafening silence. Tears spill down his cheeks, but he makes no effort to wipe them. He’s too busy doing everything in his power to hold back a scream.

“...I see. Okay,” Karasuma says, his voice empty. “...And what are her vitals? Her heart rate?” He pauses for one long moment, voice hushed just slightly. “...What are her chances of survival?”

Whatever answer the doctor has for his father, Kiyoshi doesn’t hear it. Instead, he’s left to wonder… as his dad lets out a defeated sigh and says. “...Okay. I understand. I believe that’s all I had to ask.” He mumbles a thank you, but Kiyoshi can gauge he doesn’t mean it. “...Call me if there are any further updates. And let me know when she’s awake.” He pauses. “...Mmhmm. Goodbye.”

There’s a beep as he hangs up the phone. But Kiyoshi doesn’t hear him motion to move. The chair doesn’t budge. There’s no tell-tale sign of footsteps padding against the kitchen linoleum. The world goes quiet- leaving only Kiyoshi with his panicked whimpers, and the deafening sound of silence.

His father has never been a vocal man. But this… this is different.

A minute passes, then two. At least… Kiyoshi thinks so. He’s not keeping track. His head spins. His breath goes ragged. His chest starts to ache, and his dad doesn’t move.

...Despite himself, he peeks around the corner.

It’s hard to see from his place on the ground. His father’s back is turned to him. But he’s hunched over, shoulders tense as he stares down at his phone. He doesn’t shake. He doesn’t speak. He doesn’t even move. He simply sits there, hands clasped as he blinks down at the ‘call ended’ receiver.

...He’s not crying.

There’s a lump in Kiyoshi’s throat. Even sitting on the ground, his knees feel weak. He pulls his head back into the living room and stares blankly at the wall. He wonders why this had to happen now… after everything. He was finally… he was finally getting…-

...Better. He was finally getting better.

He guesses he should have known better than to get his hopes up.

Finally, Karasuma stands. There’s a scrape of the chair against linoleum and Kiyoshi jolts. He bolts to his feet, trying desperately to look like he hasn’t been listening in. He takes one step back, then another, and bats away his tears with a panicked hand.

...He does a pretty poor job of it. He’s caught standing there in the middle of the living room, looking rather like a deer in the headlights. But if his dad cares, or even notices it, he doesn’t seem to voice it.

“...You’re home,” he says blankly. “...How long have you been?”

“A… uh… few minutes,” Kiyoshi lies. It feels like it’s been an hour. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to- I wasn’t… listening in. I just… uh… I overheard something was going on.”

Karasuma’s expression hardens. It’s impossible to make out what he’s thinking. “...Indeed,” he admits. “Sit down. We need to talk.”
“About… about what?” Kiyoshi asks, like he doesn’t already know.

“There was an incident. In Ukraine. With your mother,” Karasuma says blankly. He’s staring into Kiyoshi’s eyes. If he squints, he can make out his own reflection in them. He looks exhausted. Broken. So small.

He wonders if his dad is asking himself ‘Is this all I’m left with?’

‘Is this all that’s left of my wife?’

Heart sinking, he asks himself ‘am I all that’s left of my mother?’

And as Karasuma’s next words hit him, Kiyoshi’s not even sure he processes them. Because something inside of him withers up and dies.

Chapter End Notes

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...  

...So... I meant it when I said this chapter would be MOSTLY chill, and MOSTLY free of Kiyoshi bullshit drama?

Happy March 13 everyone! To celebrate, I put your favorite MILF in critical condition!

I'd almost feel bad for baiting and switching ya'll like that... getting you to put your guards' down with this chapter, but... I don't. That's just the way the cookie crumbles with fanfiction.

The actual details of what happened will be revealed next chapter. But in the meantime I genuinely say I don't want anyone to get too anxious over this. I know I probably don't need to say this because you've read the fic up to this point and must trust me if you've gotten this far, but I SWEAR everything will turn out okay. In fact: I'm going to be completely transparent about this: no-one's going to die. I tussled with myself for a long time over whether or not to state that outright, but I decided to just in case. Making sure my readers feel at ease comes first. That said, whatever it is that's happened to Irina, I'm sure she won't come out of it /unscathed/ either. We'll have to wait and see.

And trust me when I say this isn't just angst for the sake of angst. Not only will this be a tipping point for Kiyoshi, but will serve as a turning point for Irina's arc in this fic (As small as it is), too. Everything has a purpose. I promise.

If you're getting tired of the constant doom and gloom, try not to worry too much. I'd say the next four to five chapters will be the darkest point of the fic, but after those it'll start to take an uphill climb. All you have to do is wait. These characters are near and dear to my heart too. I wouldn't just destroy them purposelessly.
That said, however: yes: do expect next chapter to be EXTREMELY upsetting. Sorrynotsorry.

On a MUCH less dark note, I thoroughly enjoyed writing Isogai, Megu, and Maehara. Admittedly I don't feel I have them down as solidly as the protagonists of this fic, but it was nice to have Nagisa catch up with some of his old friends. I wanted to show that they're all at different points in their lives and heading in completely different directions, but that that's okay. I'm extremely excited for the class reunion chapter so I can get to do that with EVERYONE.

(Also... can I just say I had NO idea what to address Maehara by? That's NOT his name anymore. He's an Isogai. But I didn't know if Nagisa was on close enough terms with him to refer to him as Hiroto. As such, not wanting to address two fucking characters as Isogai, here we are!)

For the first time in a long time, the topic of kids came up again. As a few people have guessed by now, the whole Whether To Raise A Family Or Not is a big part of Nagisa and co's arc. But I never wanted to make it seem like that's because their family is somehow incomplete without it. NO-ONE is obligated to have kids. The issue is that they clearly want to, but are too damn afraid. If anything, I'd say Nagisa's arc is more about accepting himself despite his past, and that that's just a small part of it.

(Also! Small fun fact! Root beer is pretty much UNIVERSALLY disliked in Japan. THAT'S why I had Nagisa shitting on it the entire time Maehara was drinking it. It represents no strong feelings I as the author hold towards root beer. In fact, I don't think I have much opinion on root beer either way)

I know I said last time the next chapter would be up on the 20th and for Kiyoshi's birthday, but now I'm not entirely sure. The next chapter ended up getting a LOT longer than I expected, and I may have to make it a two week gap in between this and that chapter as well. If so, I'm EXTREMELY sorry for leaving you on this cliffhanger for so long, and I hope you can forgive me. (Hey! Try not to think about it TOO much. The 20th IS National Animal Crossing Day. Pick up New Horizons and let all your worries vanish with it. Quite frankly, it was narcissistic of me to assume anyone would have time to read a new chapter on the 20th, anyways. We'll all be in the furry capitalism zone for a SOLID WEEK at the very least)

Some songs that helped me write this chapter were Twinleaf Town from Pokemon DPPT, Firebird by Owl City, Ready Set Not Yet from Beetlejuice, Sincerely Me from Dear Evan Hansen, Yo Girl from Heathers, Oh Ana by Mother Mother, and My Mom by Kimya Dawson.

As usual, I hope you enjoyed, and I'll see you soon! Make sure to let me know what you thought!
“There was an incident with your mother,” Dad says, and Kiyoshi feels something inside of him crash and burn.

His dad looks so tall, standing there- shoulders stiff. There’s this blank look in his eyes. He can’t tell if he’s staring at him with disappointment or pity.

“...An… incident,” Kiyoshi repeats, making his way over to the couch. His legs feel stiff.

“Yes,” Dad says. He doesn’t follow Kiyoshi. “An… incident.” He’s quiet for a long moment. “She's not dead,” he admits. “...We know that, at least.”

He says it awkwardly... as if offering up some sort of reassurance. And briefly, a weight lifts from Kiyoshi’s chest. But quickly it peters off, and he hears the flinch in his father’s voice. She’s not dead… yet? She’s not dead, but there are things worse?

(His mind flashes back to those years in the hospital and his heart catches in his throat. No. Nononononono. If it’s anything like that he thinks he’ll... he’ll...-)

“W… what is it, then?” he asks, panic in his voice. ‘What happened to her!? Is she going to be okay!?”

Dad’s expression remains unreadable. He shifts slightly, keeping his voice in monotone. “...They still don’t know,” he says. “She and a few other members of her group were traversing through dangerous territory. They slipped up for just a moment, and…” his voice peters off. But just as soon, he returns to that emotionless drone. “They set off a landmine. She took the brunt of the explosion.”

Kiyoshi’s heart catches in his throat.

E… explosion.


She had to be...- she has to be in so much pain.

He turns his head, unwilling to let his father see him cry. “...W… what condition is she in?” she asks. “I mean- I know you said you didn’t know, but- is she… is she okay!? What’s hurt!? Do they think she’s gonna make it!?”

“They believe…” Dad pauses. “…They believe your mother will make it. But there’s no knowing for certain with these sort of things until they observe her condition further. She’s lost a lot of blood.” He shakes his head. “Right now she’s in a medically induced coma. She’s not in any pain. They’re still trying to get a full assessment of her injuries, but I’ve been told… I’ve been told they may not be able to save her leg.”

He says it so blankly- staring not towards Kiyoshi, but at the space beside him. He feels his fist clench… his teeth grit. How can his dad say that so emotionlessly!? His wife could be dying and he… he…-
Gah. Kiyoshi knows he’s being unfair to his dad. But it just hurts. It hurts more than anything he thinks he’s ever faced.

He bolts to his feet. Dad steps closer to him, murmuring a firm “Kiyoshi,” but he’s taking none of it.

“I think I’d… I think I’d like to be alone right now.”

Dad looks like he’s going to refute it for one moment, but his expression quickly falls. “…Okay,” he says. “Let me know if you need anything. And… I’ll keep you updated.”

“Mmhm,” Kiyoshi says, but there’s no tenderness to it. Knees shaking- eyes watery- he marches up towards his room. He slams the door behind him, flinching at the noise, before sliding back down against it and covering his face with his hands.

He’d gotten on his dad’s case for pretending to take this better than he really was, but he may as well be a damn hypocrite, too... because the tears don’t really start to fall until he’s sitting there alone. Choking back sobs, he crumbles to the ground and lets out a scream.

...Why!? Why now!? He’d just finally started to get his hopes up! That things were going to be okay! That there was still a chance for him! But if... but if his mom doesn’t come home, he doesn’t know what he’s going to do from here.

There’s this rotten, bitter thing inside of him… this beast that’s wanted to emerge all his life. And he hates it. He’d do anything to suppress it. But lying there, screaming at the top of his lungs… clawing at the carpet, he swears he hears it. And that just makes something inside of him crumble further.

( ‘That thing… that person. He’d never screamed in grief, had he?’ he asks himself... but just as soon he knows it’s a falsehood. He’s in a ravaged lab, and Aguri’s body is still warm. He crawls towards it on hands and knees... lets out an ear-piercing shriek. At the time, he’d thought it was mourning. But now he’s not so sure. Maybe he was just a toddler throwing a temper tantrum because his favorite plaything had been taken away.)

(...Some part of him wonders if he’d only loved his mom for what he could use her for, too.)

He thinks about the kind things she’d say to him... the soft way she’d ruffle his hair and the dumb, unprofessional inside jokes. He thinks about never getting to experience those things again and he lets out another horrified shriek.

He wonders if his dad can hear him from downstairs. He wonders if he’s ashamed of him. Or he wonders if his dad is simply sitting there... head in his hands and staring at the phone in the same way he had before he’d told his son the news.

It pierces his mind again… that nagging thought. He remembers what Gakushuu had said… but all the same, he can’t help but wonder if this is just somehow what fate had set out for him from the beginning.

Maybe this is his punishment, not Nagisa.

“The world simply doesn’t work that way,” Gakushuu had said. And he’d sounded so certain. But there are a lot of things he doesn’t know, too. Up until now, no-one had thought the world reincarnated sick fucks into the bodies of 13-year-old little boys, either, but here they are. What is this, if not to make him suffer?
...What is this, if not telling him, ‘You shouldn’t have tested your luck?’

He drags himself towards his bed... flops down onto it, and buries his face in his pillow. He curls up sideways, then turns over. There’s a twitching in his leg. He just can’t still his quivering body.

He fumbles for his phone. He knows it won’t help, but he feels obligated in some fashion to share the news... as a plea for help or a responsibility he’s not quite sure, but he knows his dad must be downstairs texting the E-Class right now. He needs to tell Makoto. If he doesn’t, no one else will.

He stares blankly at his phone, holding it out in front of him with limp arms. His grip feels weak. He’s not sure what to say. His breath hitches once more, and tears spill down his cheeks.

[2/9/2031 4:21 PM:] [Kiyoshi] my mom

He knows it’s incoherent, but it’s the most he can get out. His fingers tremble. His eyes water. He chokes back another sob and covers his eyes, unable to look at the screen.

[2/9/2031 4:23 PM:] [Makoto ] What do you mean she’s dead!?
[2/9/2031 4:30 PM:] [Makoto ] Are you okay!?

His messages grow more frantic with each passing minute. But as Kiyoshi stares at the screen, the most intelligible answer he can muster up is ‘I don’t know.’

[2/9/2031 4:31 PM:] [Kiyoshi] her misssion overseas. it got messed uo
[2/9/2031 4:31 PM:] [Kiyoshi] she stepped pn a landmine
[2/9/2031 4:32 PM:] [Kiyoshi] they dont know if s hes gonna be okay or if shes gonna wake up or what to do
[2/9/2031 4:34 PM:] [Makoto ] I’m. I’m so sorry.

He thinks some part of him had come to Makoto looking for reassurance. Makoto had given him hope even in the face of the darkest adversary he’d ever faced. But now that he’s talking to him, he thinks he just feels worse than before. Because Makoto’s just as helpless as he is, and there’s nothing he can do to fix this.
‘I think this is my fault,’ he starts to type, but quickly backtracks. He just can’t do it. He just can’t explain that to Makoto. At best, he’ll think he’s a paranoid freak. At worst, he’ll think it was his fault, too. But he… he didn’t have any ill intent in… in accepting Kiyoshi. In telling him to lie. He just wanted to do what’s best for Fumi-

...Is that what this is about?

‘No,’ Kiyoshi reiterates. ‘That’s not what Gakushuu said.’ This isn’t because… this isn’t because he’s some… beast. This is because - it’s not because he needs to be punished! Parse it rationally, goddamn it!

This is because there are landmines left over from the remnants of a war. This is because they’re difficult to remove, and his mom’s job is risky. There is… no proof… no rationality behind it being his… his fai-

Stop making it about you, goddamn it!

He clutches his head and shrieks. His mom is dying in some hospital bed a hundred worlds from him, and he’s thinking about karma!? What the hell is wrong with him!? It’s not her fault she gave birth to some… some pathetic narcissist! She never asked for this! Shut up, Kiyoshi! Shut up!

The world doesn’t revolve around you! You’re not some… you’re not some most wanted! You’re pathetic! You’re invisible! It’s already forgotten about you! Everyone has! Because you’re unremarkable! Unrememberable! Not enough! And that’s your real punishment, not…-

...Not your mom being taken away.

He curls his head and lets out another breathless sob.

‘Why not both, huh? Why not both?’ he asks, clenching his fist tight. ‘You’d certainly deserve it, wouldn’t you!? What else could you have possibly done to deserve this!?’ But he shakes his head. Desperately shakes it, and claws at his pillow. Gakushuu said… Gakushuu said-

...Gakushuu knows nothing.

No. Seriously. What the hell does he know!? Gakushuu’s not some monster! Gakushuu’s never laid his hands on an undeserving person! Gakushuu’s some petty, desperate for attention, ex-high school bully! He’s fucking clueless! He has a good life! His parents haven’t died!

...Hell… he’d be happy if they did!

(Kiyoshi almost feels bad at the thought . ‘But it’s true, isn’t it?’ he asks himself. He’s heard Gakushuu talk. It’s nothing but a goddamn fact!)

Gakushuu has no idea what he’s going through. He has no right to leave his input on the matter! Gakushuu’s successful! Gakushuu’s loved! Gakushuu was a sweet boy in a rotten situation- lashing out in the only way he knew how. But Kiyoshi? He’s nothing like him. He’s masquerading. He’s sobbing. He’s shrieking at the top of his lungs. He wants to throw his phone through the window and upturn every table in his room. Because everything he’s ever loved has blown up in his face, and he’s fucking... he’s so fucking sick of it!

His mom is dying! Painfully! Abruptly! Never getting to see him again! What is that, if not his punishment!? That can’t just happen randomly! It can’t! He refuses to live in a world where that’s untrue! A world that cold! A world that uncaring and unfair! These things don’t… they don’t just happen to good people! They don’t! He feels like shit because he deserves it! That’s all! The world
wouldn’t just-

...Take a perfect person’s life.

He lets out another sob. Kicks his phone away, and screams at the top of his lungs. ‘Please don’t take it away,’ he begs. ‘Anything but this.’ ‘I’m sorry.’ *Please don’t take her away.*

Beg all he wants, however, he receives no answer.

One hour passes, and then another. Dad awkwardly peeks his head into his room every so often, offering up a glass of water or a disheartening update. “She might be in a coma for up to three weeks,” becomes, “She might be in a coma for up to six.” “They might not be able to save her leg,” becomes, “They might not be able to save her legs.” And this turns ruptured* or that* infected. He wonders when, “They might not be able to save something or other...” will become, “They might not be able to save her at all.”

Dad brings him up dinner a little past seven. A warm scent wafts through the room as he cracks open the door.

“...I figured you wouldn’t want to eat downstairs,” he says, making his way over to Kiyoshi’s bed. He plops down next to him- the bed sinking in as he sits. “I’m not sure if you’ll feel up to eating, but I got you something just in case.” He coughs awkwardly. “It’s homemade.”

Kiyoshi takes the plate carefully, placing it on his lap. True to his father’s word, it’s homemade. Unevenly fried fish, with rice on the side.

“Thanks,” he says in a voice that feels small. “...I’ll... uh... try my best to get something on my stomach.”

He has a feeling it’s a pointless endeavor, but he at least wants to seem like he appreciates his dad’s effort. This isn’t the sort of thing he does for him very often.

Dad sits there quietly for just one moment, as if hesitant to stand. He keeps his hands folded over his lap; expression vacant.

“...Any other updates on Mom?” Kiyoshi asks. “Or do they still not know?”

Now that makes Dad stand. Quietly, he rises to his feet. “...No. I’ve told you everything they know right now.” He pauses. “You should... try to get some rest once you’ve eaten. Things will look better in the morning.”

He doesn’t sound so sure, but Kiyoshi gives him an empty nod anyways. “...Okay,” he says. “I’ll try.”

Dad makes his way towards the door. He looks back over his shoulder for one long moment- eyes fixed on Kiyoshi, but he doesn’t speak. He just stands there- looking the most helpless Kiyoshi’s ever seen him.

...He doesn’t hug Kiyoshi. Kiyoshi doesn’t ask.

Finally, he just sort of says “...Your mother will be okay. I’m sure,” before stepping out of the room and closing the door behind him. Kiyoshi stares blankly at the wall, tears prickling in his eyes as his breath goes ragged once more.

He manages to get in maybe three bites of food before the nausea overtakes him. Part of him
knows that must be in part because he skipped lunch, but he just can’t rid himself of the feeling. Awkwardly he sets his plate aside and hopes his dad won’t be too mad at him for squandering his gesture.

He lies down for a little while, but to no success. Explosions ring out in his mind and shadows dance in the corners of his eyes. His phone buzzes a little bit past eight, and it’s only then that he becomes aware he has upwards of 30 missed messages.

2/9/2031 4:40 PM:] [Shiota-sensei] Your dad told us the news.

2/9/2031 4:40 PM:] [Shiota-sensei] I understand if you can’t come to school tomorrow.

[??/??/2031 4:41 PM:] [Shiota-sensei] I can send you any make up work, but please feel in no rush to finish it.

2/9/2031 4:41 PM:] [Shiota-sensei] Take all the time you need.

2/9/2031 4:41 PM:] [Shiota-sensei] And let me know if there’s anything I can do to help.

2/9/2031 4:50 PM:] [Auntie Kayano] ...Ohhh, Kiyoshi… I’m so sorry.

2/9/2031 4:50 PM:] [Auntie Kayano] I wish there was more I could do.

2/9/2031 4:51 PM:] [Auntie Kayano] No-one deserves to go through that.

2/9/2031 4:52 PM:] [Auntie Kayano] I’ll keep your mother in my thoughts.

2/9/2031 4:58 PM:] [Uncle Karma] You feeling okay, bud?

2/9/2031 5:00 PM:] [Uncle Karma] Ah. Sorry. That was a stupid question.

2/9/2031 5:01 PM:] [Uncle Karma] Nothing I could say can help much, but I’m always here if you need to chat.

Kiyoshi texts them back. Awkward ‘thank you’ s and ‘I’ll keep that in mind’ s. They don’t help any, but he knows they’re just trying to show they care in the only way they know how.

It’s not just Nagisa’s little posse, either. He receives messages from family friends he hasn’t talked to in years, each as worried as the last.

2/9/2031 5:34 PM:] [Sugaya-san] We got the news. I can’t imagine what you’re going through right now. I’m sorry.

[2/9/2031 5:55 PM:] [Yada-san] Your mom’s one of the strongest people I know. She’s taken WAY worse. This isn’t gonna keep her down.


[2/9/2031 6:43 PM:] [Itona-san] These gestures don’t tend to do anything.

[2/9/2031 6:44 PM:] [Itona-san] But everyone is really worried about you.

[2/9/2031 6:44 PM:] [Itona-san] Just text back if you can, okay?

Kiyoshi does as told. He wouldn't want to make any of them panic more than necessary. At first their sympathy feels patronizing- pitying- but Kiyoshi swiftly reminds himself that his mother was their confidant, too. They’re in just as much pain as he is.

‘Yeah. I’m alright,’ he texts, despite being anything but. ‘I’ll try not to worry.’ ‘I’m sorry too, I think.’

His most recent text is from Fumiko. He hesitates to open it for just one moment, but steels himself. He’d already told himself he’s not going to avoid her again. He doesn’t have any right to break her heart, regardless of what he’s been through.

[2/9/2031 8:02 PM:] [Fumiko] Makoto shared the thing about your mom.

[2/9/2031 8:02 PM:] [Fumiko] He says he hopes you won’t be mad, but he was getting worried about you.


[2/9/2031 8:04 PM:] [Fumiko] ...Are you going to be okay?

...He can’t lie to her. She’s the one person he can’t. Not when there are already so many things she deserves to know.

[2/9/2031 8:06 PM:] [Kiyoshi] i dont know.

[2/9/2031 8:06 PM:] [Kiyoshi] i really dotn know.

[2/9/2031 8:07 PM:] [Kiyoshi] i feel so sick and scared and angry and i just cantn stop shaking. i don’t know what im gonna do, fumiko.

[2/9/2031 8:08 PM:] [Kiyoshi] if she dies, i dont think ill ever fogrive myself.

It takes Fumiko a few minutes to respond.

[2/9/2031 8:12 PM:] [Fumiko] ...It’s not your fault, Kiyoshi.

[2/9/2031 8:13 PM:] [Fumiko] I know it might feel that way, but it’s not.
Kiyoshi hesitates.

[2/9/2031 8:14 PM:] [Kiyoshi] You really think so?

[2/9/2031 8:14 PM:] [Fumiko] Of

[2/9/2031 8:14 PM:] [Fumiko] Of course I think so!!!

[2/9/2031 8:15 PM:] [Fumiko] And I’m here for you, alright?

[2/9/2031 8:16 PM:] [Fumiko] We’re family, remember?

‘Yeah,’ Kiyoshi texts back, a heavy feeling in his chest. 'Family.'

He texts with her for a little bit, before telling her he thinks he's gonna sign off for the night. He turns off his phone and places it in his bedside drawer. Then, left alone in the dark of his room, he stares up at the ceiling.

Taro doesn’t come to join him that night. He wonders if he’s staying with Dad. He wonders if Dad needs that comfort right now, too... if he’s crying, alone in his room, or if he’s simply too strong for that.

Either way, he decides to let him have the consolation. For all he knows, he’s hurting, too. And hey... whether forced to play the role of a social butterfly or not, Kiyoshi Karasuma will always know that the role he plays best is that of someone who’s left alone.

A little past 3 AM, he finally passes out. And Kiyoshi sleeps, but doesn’t dream.

[2/9/2031 4:29 PM:] [Karasuma-sensei] Hello. I am sorry to interrupt, as I know I’m not particularly active in this chat, but I have an unfortunate announcement to make.

[2/9/2031 4:29 PM:] [Karasuma-sensei] As some of you know, Irina has been overseas for the past month and a half handling a mission in Ukraine. It was a run of the mill operation, and one we believed would pose no risk.

[2/9/2031 4:30 PM:] [Karasuma-sensei] However, there has been an emergency. And that’s why I regret to inform you all that she is currently in critical condition.

Nagisa knew something like this had to happen eventually, but that doesn’t make it hurt any less.

They’re getting a little older each day... a little more fragile, and a little more impulsive. They’re not old... Not yet. But they’ve firmly segued themselves into adulthood. And with each individual decision they make... each path they turn down, he supposes there’s an aspect of risk.

Back when they were twenty or so, Mimura had skidded off of the ice and given the whole E-Class a real scare. Another time, Okano had caught a virus so severe she’d had to be hospitalized. Every day Okuda works with chemicals that could blow up in her face and Yoshida drives into work on a motorcycle that could crash and burn. Politicians have enemies, and actresses have stunt
accidents. In adult life, everyone’s always a little surrounded by death. That’s just a risk that they accept.

...But this… feels worse, somehow.

When Nagisa was young, he’d thought adults were infallible. Karasuma had effortlessly knocked a blade from his grip, and Irina had looked so confident… strutting into a foyer and placing herself down to play the piano.

Korosensei had put an end to that. It’s funny... With a name like 'unkillable teacher,' you think he would have done the opposite. But on that quiet March night, Nagisa had seen the truth. His teacher had faded into stardust... and with it his faith. He’d known for certain adults were just as capable of being weak as the rest of them.

...Just as capable of being temporary.

He’d have thought that losing so much at such a young age would make him get used to death... but it certainly doesn’t feel like it. If anything, he thinks he’s just more scared. He remembers the immeasurable, bottomless grief that had wracked his whole being, and decides if possible he’d never like to feel that again. Never like to live in a world so unfair, and never lose another person he looks up to.

Turns out… he’s not in control of that. Never has, never will be. He should have known, seeing as how the Korosensei situation had gone. But he supposes some part of him had thought he was stronger now... more capable of making a change.

...Irina’s not dead. Not yet, at least. That’s what Karasuma had said. ‘

They don’t know. But I’ve been told there… is a chance she may not make it.’

It’d been impossible to gauge his tone over text, but Nagisa couldn’t help but imagine Karasuma crying just a little. Karasuma never cries. He hadn’t cried, even when Korosensei had died. But this is different. More personal.

He’s not doing too much better, himself.

The news hit him like a bus. His knees feel weak, and his face pallor. Kayano’s weeping, rubbing little circles in his back like he’s the one who needs them, and Karma’s pacing around the kitchen, his footsteps heavy on the floor.

“I can’t deal with this shit,” he mumbles. “I can’t. I fucking can’t-”

Gakushuu’s got this indecipherable expression on his face. Something tells Nagisa he wants to say ‘don’t worry yet.’ ‘You don’t know she’ll die,’ but his sensibilities prevent him. And he’s thankful for that. Right now, he honestly doesn’t want to hear it.

Instead, Gakushuu simply rubs his temples and says “Kiyoshi isn’t going to take this well. He isn’t going to take this well at all.”

They’ve all already texted him, but haven’t gotten much of a response. ‘You don’t need to come to school tomorrow.’ ‘If you need someone to talk to, I’m here,’ he’d said, but he wonders if that’s not enough. What can you possibly say to someone in a situation like that?

He alone already feels so rotten… so sick and so hopeless. He can’t imagine what Kiyoshi is going through right now.
...He and Karasuma are going to need to re-discuss that mental wellness checkup.

It’s not fair... that when he’d finally started doing better, the world just had to throw this at him. It’s not that he doesn’t think Kiyoshi is strong enough to get through this… Kiyoshi’s every bit as strong as the 28 of them were back then. But no-one - and that means no-one - deserves to go through what they went through all those years ago.

...Irina had just finally been starting to do better, too.

*She’d* had a childhood more complex than any of them. More than generalized anxiety, or even the burden of grief… *she’d* grown up in a war torn world. Irina didn’t have *bad* parents… Irina had *none*. She weaponized her body from the time that she was a little girl, and grew up with explosions ringing in her ears. Even as a kid, Nagisa had understood that there was something deeply *appalling* about the way she’d lived. And as he’s gotten older and older, the horror has only grown.

*Twelve*. *She* was *twelve* when she became an assassin. A *seductress*. Even *they* hadn’t been twelve when they’d first picked up a blade. Twelve is so small… so fragile.

...Half of his students are twelve.

Their relationship with Irina had always felt a little different from their relationship with their other teachers. If Karasuma was a distant father and Korosensei an overbearing mother, then Irina was their *equal*. She’d used their slang and shared their jokes and looked not all that different from them. In hindsight, she hadn’t even been a decade older.

...But it was a little more than just simply her age. Irina was missing pieces of herself... pieces that made her a functional adult or even a ‘normal’ person. And *despite all that*, they’d loved her. She was the first adult they’d ever seen that was maybe a little broken in the same way they were... and as much as they teased and teased, she made them feel seen.

It’d taken them a long time to realize that. Nagisa thinks the first time they’d realized they and Irina were so much one and the same had been during the incident with the imitation Reaper. She’d done something stupid, and haughty, and *hurtful*... but so had most of them. Days considering making the move up to the main campus, and deals with masked men to take out their octopod target, even at the risk of their classmates’ lives. Secret ambushes, and jumping off a roof so hastily as to snap an old man’s back.

They knew just how that felt, didn’t they? Seeing Irina, looking so small, and crushed under the rubble, they’d seen themselves, and all of their mistakes. But more importantly... they’d seen the incomplete, broken person she was. The twelve-year-old girl who did what she *had* to to survive, and the twenty-one-year-old assassin who more than anything just wanted to be loved.

...He wonders if she feels that small now.

She’d gotten *better*... she’d grown into a person who could smile. She’d seemed so happy with her family. This peaceful world… her husband and her son… they were filling in her missing pieces one by one. She had all but moved on from the horrible world she once lived in. This can’t happen *now*... not when things were finally going so perfectly for her.

Because twelve is a pretty young age, sure... a young age to face down ravenous men and the face of death. But thirty-seven is young, too. And if she dies *then*, after finally just getting to start to live, then… Nagisa...

...Nagisa doesn’t think he’ll ever forgive that.
He stares absentmindedly at his phone. He knows she won’t respond, but he feels the need to say something anyways.


[2/9/2031 5:36 PM:] [Nagisa] I know you’re not gonna get this, at least for a few weeks, but...

[2/9/2031 5:37 PM:] [Nagisa] Please be okay, alright?

[2/9/2031 5:37 PM:] [Nagisa] We need you. I know we didn’t always give you as much credit as you deserved, but we need you.


[2/9/2031 5:38 PM:] [Nagisa] Thank you for everything you did for us when we were stupid little brats. And thank you for being our friend.


[2/9/2031 5:39 PM:] [Nagisa] If you let this take you out, I hope you realize we’ll never stop making fun of you.

[2/9/2031 5:40 PM:] [Nagisa] (JOKING.)

[2/9/2031 5:40 PM:] [Nagisa] Seriously, though. Don’t go dying on us. I know you’ve been through a lot, but there’s still so much left for you to experience.


His heart feels heavy. He closes his DMs with Irina, and messages Karasuma instead.

[2/9/2031 5:42 PM:] [Nagisa] Sorry to bother you now of all times, but we need to talk about what we’re going to do with Kiyoshi.

[2/9/2031 5:42 PM:] [Nagisa] I know we just called off the meeting, but I figure this warrants a change of plans.

[2/9/2031 5:43 PM:] [Nagisa] Are you free to meet up and discuss his mental health sometime this week?


It’s a few minutes before Karasuma responds.


[2/9/2031 5:49 PM:] [Karasuma-sensei] I understand why you’d want to talk.

[2/9/2031 5:50 PM:] [Karasuma-sensei] I’m going to be busy sorting all of this out tomorrow. Does Friday work for you?

The rest of the night goes by in a haze. He and his spouses cook dinner together, but it’s easy to tell it’s less than their usual caliber. Makoto calls Nagisa up a little past 8, sounding worried.

“Do you think Bitch-sensei’s gonna be okay?” he asks, voice quivering. “Irina, I mean. I told Kiyoshi she was going to be okay, but now she might not be… and I feel really sick. I’m scared, Nagisa.”

“I’m… sure she’ll be fine,” Nagisa reassures, voice empty. But five minutes of condolences and an ended phone call later, he still doesn’t feel so sure. Karasuma doesn’t update them about her condition, but they can gauge from the radio silence that it’s not good.

Nagisa tucks into bed early that night. And voluntarily, for once. His spouses join him soon after- Karma falling asleep the minute his head hits the pillow and Kayano turning over anxiously in her sleep.

Gakushuu sits awake, reading a book by nightlight. He runs his free hand through Karma’s hair, as if offering up some sort of comfort he’s not willing to with Karma awake. Nagisa considers starting conversation, but decides against it. He’d hate to wake the others up. And besides… when he opens his mouth to speak, it simply feels dry.

“Love you,” he settles on instead.

“...We know,” Gakushuu says, glancing his way as he flips his page.

Nagisa pulls his blanket up just a little. Karma snores and Kayano kicks him gently with her foot. Somewhere not too far from here, Karasuma lies alone in bed… not a sound to lull him asleep. And even lying awake, mind swirling with worries, Nagisa decides that at the very least he’s lucky to have this.

In due time, he finally falls asleep. He listens to the sound of his lovers’ collective breathing, and slowly but surely drifts off. His own heart slowing, he pulls them in close and savors the feeling more than he thinks he ever has.

Fumiko and Makoto stop by Kiyoshi’s house late Thursday afternoon. It’s the day after he first got the bad news, and he’s in an indifferent daze when he gets a text from Fumiko.

[2/10/2031 5:07 PM] [Fumiko] Hey. We’re coming over to your house.

[2/10/2031 5:08 PM] [Fumiko] You don’t need to invite us inside if you don’t want to, but we made something for you in light of the news.

[2/10/2031 5:08 PM] [Fumiko] …We noticed you didn’t come to school today. Figured you could use all the pick-me-up you could get.
Kiyoshi sighs. He’s hardly in the mood, but he’s not going to tell them to fuck off. It’s clear they’re just trying to show they care. He pushes himself up from his bed and shambles over to his dresser. He slips on his clothes, combs his hair in a desperate attempt to look passable, and is halfway through brushing his teeth when he hears the doorbell ring downstairs.

Heavy footsteps ascend up the stairs. His dad peeks his head into his room, and then- when that fails- his bathroom, murmuring a firm “Your friends are over.”

“Ohay!” Kiyoshi says. “Tell them I’ll be right down.”

He finishes brushing his teeth… staring at himself in the mirror for a long moment, before turning and making his way downstairs. Fumiko and Makoto are standing in the doorway, each holding a tin of something sweet-smelling.

“Brownies,” Fumiko says, giving a wave. “We’re well aware they won’t exactly fix much, considering your situation, but…” she pauses. “We agreed you could use something sweet right now.”

“They’ve got chocolate chips in them!” Makoto proudly exclaims, holding out his tin of brownies. “Like- they’re totally already chocolate- but… y’know! It gives it the extra oomph!”

Kiyoshi gives a blank nod. “…Yeah. Makes sense,” he says, reaching out to grab one tin, and then the other. “…Thanks, you two. You didn’t need to do this for me, you know.”

“…You don’t need to thank us,” Fumiko says. “It was just the right thing to do.”

Makoto nods. “You’re going through a lot right now.”

...Ha. That’s putting it lightly. He feels just about ready to collapse right here and now. He hurries to place his brownies on a nearby table. If his knees are gonna end up giving out on him he’d hate to come tumbling to the ground and ruin all of his friends’ hard work.

(He still can’t gauge why they did this for him. Makoto should get that this is his fault, at least, shouldn’t he? Why doesn’t he see it? Is he just refusing t-)

“Can we come in?” he asks, leaning from foot to foot. “Unless, like- you want us to buzz off. That’s cool, too.”

“We would one hundred percent get it ,” Fumiko reiterates. “Your mother’s in critical condition. If you don’t want us here…-”

‘...Critical condition.’

Yeah. That’s right. The way they talk about people who are going to die in the movies... unstable heart rate... unfavorable outcome. Fumiko gives him a tentative look, and he remembers seeing her a few minutes past critical condition, too. Is that what his mother looks like right now? Or is it somehow worse?

“You can come in,” he says in almost one breath. “You… yeah. You can come in.”

He takes a step back, motioning for his friends to enter. What else does he possibly have to lose? He’d already told them he wasn’t going to avoid them anymore. He’s not going to tell them to fuck off just because his mom is dying. That’s not… that’s not their fault.

Besides… he doesn’t want to be alone with his thoughts right now.
Makoto and Fumiko step inside. He asks them if one of them can get the brownies, which Makoto does gladly.

“It’s not that I don’t- I really appreciate them, but I… like… don’t wanna drop them,” Kiyoshi explains. “I have felt- uh- super unwell lately.”

“Understandably,” Fumiko says.

It kills him a little inside to hear how patient she is with him… even when he’s leading her right into the lion’s den. But he tries not to dwell on it too long. He has enough to think about right now. He doesn’t have time to think about the… the way he treated her. His mom is dying! He needs to think about mom! Shut up about yourself for five seconds, Kiyoshi! Just think of your damn mom!

Makoto must notice how unsettled he looks, because he places a hand on his shoulder as they make their way up the stairs. “Deep breaths,” he reminds him. “Everything’s going to be okay.”

“...Yeah,” Kiyoshi says. “I know.”

He leads them into his room... flinches a little at just how terrible it looks, but flops down on the bed anyways. Makoto flops down next to him, staring up at the ceiling.

“You wanna do anything? Or you just wanna sit?” he asks.

“...I think I just want to sit,” Kiyoshi admits. “Sorry if that’s not- like… super exciting. If you want, you can… like… use my Verse, but I think I’m just gonna lay here.” He pauses. “…Honestly, I’m just thankful you two showed up at all.”

“Of course,” Fumiko says, placing herself down on the opposite side of the bed. “You need us right now. We weren’t going to bail on you.”

Makoto nods. “We don’t gotta do anything. Sometimes it’s nice to just be with the people you care about.”

He shifts slightly as he speaks. He says that, but Kiyoshi knows this sort of thing is hard for him. He hates to sit still. He really appreciates that Makoto would be willing to do this for him.

“So you want to talk?” Fumiko asks. “About what happened? Or…?”

“Not really,” Kiyoshi admits. “I think about it and I just get so sick. Even talking about it now, I feel like I’m going to throw up.”

“Sometimes it can help to get it off your chest,” Makoto admits. “Even if it hurts.”


Fumiko shrugs. “That’s okay, too.”

He does almost feel safer… with them there. It’s stupid, but they feel like home. Makoto picks at his fingernail and Fumiko scoots just slightly closer onto his bed, and he thinks that maybe things will be okay. They won’t, but his friends are good at making him feel like they will be anyways.

...He wonders if they’ll be hurt because of him, too.

He instantly resents the thought. ‘Stop it,’ he reminds himself. ‘That’s not true. You’re just. Being. Irrational.’ Literally why would the people he hurt be punished for his sins!? That’s fucking retroactive! This is just. Him. Making things about himself again. It always is. But it won’t just
stop nagging at him.

‘Irina didn’t deserve it, either,’ he tells himself.

‘Which is why none of this has to do with you!’ he refutes. ‘This is not your- your doing! You’re not being punished! You’re just dealing with the inevitable fallout of… of a terrible life!’

‘Your life’s not terrible,’ he argues. ‘Who cares if you’ve never had a support system, and your parents don’t love you, and your mom is dying? Your life is still so much better than you deserve! Don’t you fucking complain, Kiyoshi. You should be dead in a ditch right now. You’re lucky to be loved at all.’

“...You alright?” Makoto speaks up. “You seem irritated.”

“Yeah,” Kiyoshi replies. “Just getting myself in a bad mood.”

Makoto frowns, before sitting up and sliding the tin of brownies his way. “Have a brownie,” he says. “Might help a little.”

Kiyoshi’s hardly sure he can stomach one, but then again… skipping dinner last night is finally starting to catch up with him. Fine. Whatever. He’s not going to turn down Makoto’s offer, even if he ends up vomiting it back up into the toilet later. He sits up, carefully removes the lid, and grabs a brownie.

...They’re sweet.

“It’s good,” he says. “Did you two make this all alone?”

“Mmmm!” Makoto brags.

“Technically we used Nagisa’s kitchen,” Fumiko interjects.

“Okay! So technically we used Nagisa’s stuff,” Makoto admits “But we did it all by ourselves! Whaddya’ think?”

Kiyoshi gives him a halfhearted smile. “I just told you... they’re good.”

Makoto pumps his fist excitedly, whispering something along the lines of ‘success!’ under his breath. Fumiko’s reaction is much more subtle, but a smile tugs at the corners of her lips, and for just one second Kiyoshi feels warm.

...He’d been wrong… thinking he doesn’t have a support system. That’s not true. He’s always had a support system! Nagisa-sensei and the rest… he’s sure even Mom and Dad care in their own ways. But Makoto and Fumiko are his real support system. He’d never felt as seen as he did when he first met them. He depends on them. That’s why he wonders… he wonders…-

‘No! Stop that!’ he reprimands himself like a misbehaving dog. ‘They are doing everything in their power to cheer you up! Stop! Spiraling!’

He flops back onto bed after two brownies. “Thanks,” he says. “But I don’t think I can stomach any more.”

“That’s okay,” Makoto says. “Who knows? Maybe they’ll last you for weeks!”

Okay. So maybe it wouldn’t be fair if they died… if they were punished… if they crashed and burned in the fallout of his ever-worsening life... but it still feels like something should happen.
That they should spit in his face and tell him to kill himself. Now that’d destroy his support system without a single shred of harm to the real victims here.

Makoto’s already refuted the idea foolheartedly. ‘You’re good, Kiyoshi! We’re good!’ But sitting there, staring up at his blank-white ceiling, he wonders if Fumiko would think the same.

He knows that’s not the sort of person Aguri was. But Fumiko’s not the kind of person Aguri was, either. And besides… what did he ever really know of her? She was his punching bag! His hatesink! Maybe she did loathe him. He was just too self-absorbed to notice. It’s a real possibility, isn’t it?

(She wraps her arms ‘round his shoulders and cradles him tight. “It’s okay,” she says with a laugh. “I’m the one who made a mistake! Really!”

Makoto hugs Kiyoshi tight and tells him that none of that matters anymore. He can’t help but note just how much his smile resembles hers as he says it.)

...Things would certainly be easier if she had.

He wishes she’d run while she still had the chance. She could have lived a great life. She could have done great things. But instead she bled out, feeling almost completely alone… and now here she is sitting with him.

He wonders if this is her chance to get away while she still can.

Part of him wants to take her by the shoulders. Grab her and shake her and scream 'Go!' 'You’re not supposed to be here!' 'I’m only going to hurt you!'

Fumiko passes him her scarf when she notices him shivering, and he doesn’t.

“Probably won’t help much,” she admits. “But you seemed cold. Even if most of it is probably just nerves… its winter. You need to stay warm.”

Kiyoshi takes it and wraps it carefully round his neck.

“You sure?” he asks. “I know you get cold easily-”

Fumiko shrugs. “I don’t mind. You need it more than me right now.”

It’s warm and soft to the touch. Fumiko gives him a kindhearted smile, and as Kiyoshi’s heart sinks... he decides maybe Fumiko and Aguri aren’t that different after all.

...She’s better at hiding it… having learned to ‘know better’ by her parents or her past... but she’s every bit as gentle and kind-hearted as she was sixteen years ago. Maybe… maybe she won’t run… when she learns the truth.

(If she learns the truth.)

...Kiyoshi can’t tell if he’s relieved or petrified by the thought.

He really does feel okay… as long as he has them by his side. Sitting here with her scarf around his neck, he forgets about his mom for just one second and he knows that. He never wants to give this up. Because after a lifetime of strife… after a lifetime of self-loathing and anxiety, he finally feels good about himself. And they’re his reason for that! Doesn’t he… doesn’t he deserve to keep that?

...But all the same, he thinks about how poorly he’d treated his saviors back then, and in an instant
the scarf around his neck feels rather like a noose.

...Who is he kidding? His feelings don’t even matter in this situation. They’ve never been rational or right. Despite himself, even back then... he’d mourned her for months. Despite treating her like garbage the entire fucking time she was alive, he’d sobbed and sniveled and held her clammy corpse tight. Even now... thinking about it, he remembers how tiny her body had looked and shivers. He wonders if that’s Kiyoshi’s grief, or Yanagisawa’s.

The thought alone makes him angry. ‘You don’t get to grieve,’ he growls somewhere in the back of his mind. ‘You don’t get to mourn! You’re the one who fucking killed her!’

...It’s as his fist clenches, and his breath hitches, however, that he remembers they’re one in the same. Kiyoshi’s grief is Yanagisawa’s grief. When he feels bad... it’s simply that monster wanting to, or pretending to. Because something sick and sadistic is all he ever has and ever will be.

He wonders if he’s allowed to mourn his mom, either.

‘Of course you are!’ he instantly refutes. ‘Not that you need to! Because your mom’s not dead! She’s not going to die! Shut up, Kiyoshi! Shut up! Stop thinking about it! Besides! This is different! It’s not like you killed your mom!’


‘Is it really so different?’ the monster snarls somewhere in the back of his mind. ‘You didn’t technically kill Aguri. You just berated her and beat her and broke her until there was nothing left of her... until she had no reason to live. She killed herself because you weren’t good enough! She killed herself because you were less than garbage!’

‘I know,’ Kiyoshi tells himself. ‘I know.’

It takes everything in his power to resist at clutching his own forehead. No. Not in front of Makoto and Fumiko. He just needs to stay calm. He just needs to stay calm-

‘And so you don’t need to kill your mother, either. Maybe you just have to be enough of a disappointment! Maybe if you’d been a better son, she’d have quit her job. Maybe she’d have stopped risking her life overseas. Surely she would have had if she really cared about you. But she didn’t. You. Weren’t. Good enough. And now your mother’s going to die!’

...She’s not! She’s not!

‘Your friends are all going to leave you, and your mother’s going to die! Admit it!’

Stop- stop. He’s spiraling. He’s getting lost in his own thoughts. He needs to redirect this- now.


“I... I…” ‘I’m scared,’ Kiyoshi wants to say, but that’s not right. ‘I’m angry?” ...No. ‘I have no idea what’s going to happen right now, and I need you here more than anything.’ No. No. No! Shut up! Compose your thoughts! Stop! Freaking! Out!

“I... don’t know.”

“You don’t know?” Fumiko asks.

“I just… I just keep thinking about the worst things possible and what’s going to happen to my
mom and what’s going to happen to me. I try to get my mind off of it but then it goes right back and I think about just how much pain she must be in right now and I want to throw up and I feel so sick and I feel so unsafe. Because there’s just this - there’s just this little voice in the back of my mind telling me I could have changed this somehow and I didn’t - I couldn’t - and it’s too late now- which means… which means I failed her. I failed everyone-

It all comes out in one breathless sentence. Shoulders shaking and lip quivering, Kiyoshi reaches up to cover his face with his hands.

“…Kiyoshi…” Fumiko says. “I’m sure you didn’t-…”

“Yeah! This has nothing to do with you!” Makoto reassures. “Your mom… she’s… she’s always been in dangerous situations.”

“Then why didn’t I- I should have tried harder to change that!? It’s like… it’s like I didn’t care. And now it’s too late to-- And I can’t fix things-- And it’s all over. I’m a bad son and a bad person and… and a bad friend, and… and-…”

He doesn’t even realize he’s crying until he feels something wet trickle down his finger. But then-like a dam’s burst- he lets out an utterly incoherent whimper and sobs into the back of his wrist.

“Kiyoshi-” Makoto says. “You are… you are the furthest thing from a bad friend. And you’re not… you’re not a bad guy, either! Or a bad son! You are so… you are so good. You just… you just feel…- you’re just going through a really bad time right now! And that’s okay!”

He says that so confidently, but his words feel empty. Is he saying that because he really believes it, or just because he thinks that’s what Kiyoshi needs to hear?

“I’m - I’m so scared that something’s going to happen to everyone I care about-” Kiyoshi snivels, refusing to meet his eyes. “I’m so scared this is just- this is just the beginning- and that… that just makes me feel worse because maybe that means I don’t feel bad enough and I don’t care enough but I care so much- I want to care so much and this already feels like the end of the world to me and I don’t know if I can take a thing more-”

Makoto rushes to his feet. “I’m- I’m gonna get tissues-” he says. “Fumiko- can you… can you comfort him?”

Fumiko gives a firm nod.

“Okay. I’ll be right back-!”

And with that, Makoto rushes off, diligently sprinting down the hallway. Which… in turn, only makes Kiyoshi weep harder. How… how can he be so dedicated? When he knows what he knows? Shouldn’t he see this is Kiyoshi’s fault, too-?

(When is he finally going to fucking snap!?)

Fumiko scoots in closer to him, offering up a hand. “…Would… would a hug help right now, or would it just make things worse?”

Kiyoshi stares at her outstretched palms through the gaps in his fingers… eyes welling with tears… because where Makoto knows, and is choosing to act so irrationally anyways, she doesn’t. She has no idea. She stares at him with those pitying eyes and that kind smile, even as he wails like a baby and wipes his nose on her scarf.
...She has no idea what he’s done to her…

He’s manipulating her. Plain and simple. Manipulating. And lying to. And mistreating. And when she learns the truth, she’s finally - finally going to leave him too.

He wishes they’d just… they’d just get it over with! They’d just leave already! There is no way his life is going to be one with a happy ending. What happened to his mom is already more than enough proof of that. Why won’t they just… why won’t they just give up on him!? Why won’t Makoto turn tail and run? And why won’t Fumiko follow him?

“I… I… don’t know,” he murmurs. “I want a- I mean I’d like a- but… but…” he lets out another whimper. “I can’t accept that from… - it’s too unfai-” he chokes on his own words, shaking his head and batting at his eyes. “Oh my god- I think I don’t deserve it, Fumiko-”

His words come out a plea. ‘Tell me I’m wrong,’ he begs somewhere underneath that quivering voice. ‘Tell me it’s not too late for me. Please. Please. Please.’

And Fumiko answers. She wraps her arms 'round his shoulders and pulls him up into a hug. “Fucking nonsense.”

Kiyoshi collapses into her embrace.

“None of this has to do with you, Kiyoshi. Why the hell would you think you don’t deserve compassion!? You’re going through more than anyone right now. You… you need support! It’s not like you’ve done something to ‘disearn’ it! No-one has!”

She says that so confidently, but Kiyoshi shakes his head with another hiccup. She really doesn’t know, does she? He doesn’t even cross her mind. If she knew the truth… oh, if she knew the truth… how quickly she’d refute that statement.

“But it’s like- but it’s like-” he sputters, sobbing into her shoulder. “I don’t know! Everyone acts like I’m so good, but I’m not, Fumiko! I’m judgemental and I’m mean and I’m selfish. I’m- I’m- I am so much worse than everyone seems to think I am! That’s why everything’s happening! To… to- to mom… and… and… and-” he struggles for breath. “…I just wanna be happy, Fumiko. But I don’t think I get to be- I wanna be good! I wanna be happy! I don’t wanna be alone, Fumiko! I don’t want my mom to die!”

“I know,” Fumiko says. “…I know. You’re scared, and you have every right to be. But you’re not alone. You are never going to be alone.” Her voice wavers as she speaks, but it’s increasingly clear she’s trying her hardest to sound calm. “No matter what happens to you… to your mom, we’ll be here for you. We’ll help you get through it.”

Her grip tightens on his back. Kiyoshi lets out another sob. He wants to believe her words- he really does. But how can he believe that without proof? How can he let her make such a weighty decision without giving her the facts? That’s not what a good friend does… that’s-

...He should really just say it. He knows now’s his chance. Makoto’s in the other room, and they’re alone. If she wants to push him off the bed and kick his skull in, now would be her best chance. But when he opens his mouth to speak nothing comes out. He’s just not ready yet. He’d like to be held, even for a moment more.

“Promise,” he says instead, clinging to her shoulders so tight it hurts. “Please… just promise me that.”

Fumiko pauses for a long moment, before sighing. “…I didn’t think I had to say that, Kiyoshi,” she
admits. “Of course I promise. We will always be here for you.”

And some of that weight lifts from his shoulders. He knows it’s superficial- manufactured, but it’s what he needs to hear right now. And when he sees Fumiko look at him with those worrying eyes, he tells himself maybe a condolence for him can be a condolence for her, too, even if he hardly believes it.

She walks him through those same anxiety calming techniques he taught her all those months ago... has him count down from ten, and rubs little circles in his back. Slowly but surely, his breath steadies. And although there’s still this rotten, nagging hole in his gut, he does manage to dry his tears.

“We’re here for you,” she repeats again and again. “We’re here.”

Finally, Makoto comes running back in, brandishing a box of tissues over his head. He rushes over to Kiyoshi’s side, practically flinging the tissues at him.

“H-here!” he says. “Sorry it took so long! Your house is a mess! Not that - not that I’m insulting you! I’m honestly just wondering if your dad ever cries!”

‘No,’ Kiyoshi thinks internally. ‘The answer is no.’ But he doesn’t say it aloud. Instead, he simply wipes at his eyes, and blows his nose so loudly Fumiko jumps.

“...’o need to apologize,” he says. “If anything, I’m the one who should be apologizing. ‘m sorry for dumping this on you two all of a sudden…”

“Hey… it’s okay,” Makoto replies. “You’re going through a lot lately. We couldn’t blame you for getting stressed.”

“...Yeah,” Fumiko says, being careful with her words. “Your mom had a serious accident. If you weren’t at least a little torn up about that…” she pauses. “Well, I’d be concerned. You have a good relationship with her, Kiyoshi. I’d be scared out of my mind too.”

“Mmm,” Kiyoshi says, crumpling up a tissue and tossing it into the trash can. He reaches for another, dabbing at his eyes. “...Yeah. I know this reaction is normal. At least, I think so. I guess I just feel…-

Abnormal in everything he does? Exempt from feeling this way because he deserves it? Guilty because there’s a lot more on his mind than just his mom’s suffering right now? And guiltier, because Fumiko doesn’t even know about it? Wondering if he even has a good relationship with his mom at all, and just a little sick to his stomach?

“...Confused. I think that’s what I feel right now. Just confused.”

“Well…” Fumiko says. “I’m pretty sure that’s normal, too.”

In hindsight, he’s glad he hadn’t told her. He’s becoming increasingly aware he’s going to have to break the truth to her sooner than later if he ever wants to come out of this with his sanity. But if he’s going to do it… he wants it to be in a situation where he’s not already sobbing all over her scarf. He doesn’t want pity. He doesn’t want to guilt her into having sympathy for him. If she sees him… he wants it to be for the person he is, good or bad, not for the terrible shit he’s going through.

If she just pretended... grit and bear it - the abuse she’s been through - just because some shitty dude’s mom was dying, then Kiyoshi doesn’t think he’d ever forgive himself. He’s already put
enough evil into the world. He’s not going to make her life worse, too.

(‘You’re putting it off,’ the voice in his head says. ‘You’re rationalizing it. You’re rationalizing **lying to her.** You’re doing what you’ve always done—’

‘No,’ Kiyoshi responds. ‘I’m not. I swear to fucking god, I’m not. I’m just doing what I think is right for her.’

‘You’re doing what’s easiest for you. Because you think you can’t handle it. And you know it. You’re using her for what she can give you. You’re using her for unconditional support. Just like you always have. Just like you used your mom. And if you don’t man up and say the right thing to Fumiko soon, she’s going to **fucking die**’

‘No. Nonononono.’ Kiyoshi refutes. He’s not going to think about that right now. Not even a little bit. He has better things to worry about. He’s not going to get irrational. Even if… even if…-

Even if the sight of his friends leaves a gaping hole in his heart.

“…You guys should probably get going,” he admits. “I’m not a lot of fun to hang out with right now, and I think I could use some alone time.”

Makoto’s brow furrows with concern. “Are you sure?” he asks. “…I mean - we don’t care about **fun.** But if you want us to go, we’re not gonna bug you. We just wanna make sure you’ll… like… be okay first.”

‘No,’ Kiyoshi thinks. But he’s never been. And there’s nothing he can do to fix that. They gave him what comfort they could. He’s not going to drag them down with him.

“Yeah,” he says. “I’ll be fine. Thank you for coming to check up on me, and thank you for the brownies… but… I think I need some time to think.”

“Okay,” Makoto says, shoulders wilting. “See you tomorrow?”

“We’ll see,” Kiyoshi replies. “I still don’t know. I’ll text you either way.”

“I’ll bring you your make up work if you can’t end up coming to school again,” Fumiko offers. “Shiota-sensei said you could turn in everything late.”

“Yeah. I know,” Kiyoshi replies. “And thank you... again.”

“No need,” Fumiko says, hopping off the bed. Makoto follows after, hesitating in the doorway as he pauses to look back at Kiyoshi.

“One more hug? Before we go? Just for the road?”

Kiyoshi lethargically pushes himself up onto his knees. “I don’t see why not.”

Makoto rushes over to wrap him in a bear hug. Fumiko hesitates, but follows soon after, giving him a careful squeeze.

“I hope your mom will be okay,” Makoto says, burying his face in Kiyoshi’s shoulder.

“I hope you’ll be okay,” Fumiko adds on. “We need you, you know.”

“…Yeah. I know,” Kiyoshi says, pulling away. “I’ll… be fine. Try not to worry about me too much.”
“An impossible task…” Fumiko admits. “But we’ll try our best.”

And with that, they’re gone; leaving Kiyoshi alone with the brownies. He reaches for one, a sinking feeling in his gut as he takes a bite.

Because he knows he doesn’t believe that, either.

The rest of the day goes by in a dreary haze. Dad peeks his head into Kiyoshi’s room soon after his friends leave, awkwardly asking how it went, but Kiyoshi doesn’t have much of an answer. He asks if there’s any more news about Mom, but there’s not. Instead, Dad just stands there in the doorway with those dark eyes... and says he’ll let Kiyoshi know when he has more information.

Kiyoshi hears him later that day arguing over the phone. He rolls over and tries to cover his head with his pillow. When that doesn’t work, he attempts to give napping a go, but it’s no use either. His thoughts are simply too clouded, and he’s got this restless bouncing in his leg.

Makoto texts him memes of cute kittens. Fumiko tries to make small talk. Nagisa’s family reminds him that they’re there for him, and Karasuma reassures him with those awkward eyes.

...None of it helps.

The bad news comes at about evening. It’s just before dinner, and Dad’s downstairs cooking something when the phone rings. Kiyoshi hears him stop everything, before speaking up in an indecipherable murmur.

“I see,” is all he can make out. “...Okay.”

There’s the creak of heavy footsteps as he ascends up the stairs. He opens Kiyoshi’s door just a crack- announcing that they’ve finally gotten some news.

Kiyoshi feels his heart catch in his throat.

Dad must spot the sheer panic in Kiyoshi’s eyes, because he says “...Your mother’s not dead,” for the second time in the past 48 hours. Pretending that’s any sort of assurance, he marches over towards Kiyoshi’s bed and places himself down next to him.

“They… believe she’s in the process of recovering,” he says monotonically. And although Kiyoshi wants to believe him - take the good news and run with it - Dad’s empty tone seems to imply a ‘but.’

“However...” He sighs. “...They are still dealing with a number of complications. The damage from the blast ended up becoming too severe, and they were unable to battle the infection. They had to… they had to...” he pauses, shaking his head. “...Your mother lost her leg.”

Kiyoshi freezes, clutching at his pant leg. He’s silent for a long moment, but finally says “...Oh,” when that seems to sink in.

“...They don’t know if they’ll be able to save the other yet. Either way, your mother will be... released from the Ministry of Defense. She’s no longer able to fulfill her duties.”

Kiyoshi wants to take him by the collar and shake him. ‘Able to fulfill her duties!?’ ‘Able to fulfill her duties!?’ What the hell is wrong with him!? His wife could be dying, and that’s how he chooses to word it!? Who cares about her job!? What about her!? What about what she’s going through right now!?
“...Oh,” he says instead. Too damn afraid to stand up for her, or too damn afraid of punching a hole in the wall, he silences that sadness. “I… I see.”

He hates his father so much, but here he is using the same empty words.

It takes all of his effort not to cry. But he won’t- not right here - not right now. Not in front of dad. If… if dad won’t show vulnerability, then neither will he. He’s… he’s not weak.

( ‘You don’t deserve it’ the voice in the back of his head repeats. ‘You don’t get to feel sad. You never cared, anyways.’ )

(...Kiyoshi doesn’t refute it.)

“Mmm,” Karasuma repeats, before falling silent. He sits there for one long moment, before finally standing, and admitting he should go. “...I have people to talk to. Let me know if you need anything.”

“Of course,” Kiyoshi says.

...He won’t.

Instead, he just stares at the imprint Karasuma left in his bed.

‘I just want to care’ he thinks. ‘That’s all I want to do. I just want to care.’

...But he doesn’t sob into his pillow. He doesn’t throw punches, and he doesn’t scream. Instead, he simply turns over in his bed and wraps himself in his blanket. He’s used all the tears he could possibly muster for today.

Karasuma comes in maybe a half-hour later. He says dinner is ready, but Kiyoshi admits he’s not hungry.

“I think I’m just going to sleep.”

“...Okay,” Karasuma says. “I’ll turn out the light for you.”

He leaves dinner on the bedside table, just in case Kiyoshi ends up wanting it. But the scent of the sweet meal only makes his stomach turn. He stands to place it on the drawer across the room, if only to give himself some distance. He stares at himself in the mirror- face distorted in the dark- then turns back around, and tosses himself into bed.

Slowly but surely, he drifts off... deeper and deeper until the darkness consumes him.

...That night, Kiyoshi sees him again.

At first he doesn’t notice him… lurking in the corner of his room. He groggily peeks open an eye, and notes that it’s still dark out. Ah... so he must have been unable to sleep through the night. He can’t say he hadn’t expected that, and so he’s not entirely upset. But when he attempts to turn over and finds himself unable, a cold atmosphere takes over the room, and Kiyoshi catches a glint of sharp teeth.

He’s perched on the foot of his bedpost, one leg crossed over the other. His body shivers and morphs. One moment Kiyoshi makes out the killer, and the next the beast. He sees no sight of Makoto, however, watching him with those curious eyes.
He doesn’t jump on him… not like last time. He doesn’t growl, and he doesn’t claw at Kiyoshi’s eyelids. Instead, he simply lets out a quiet tsk, and asks, “You know what you need to do, don’t you?”

Kiyoshi’s quiet. Despite himself, he wants to wiggle away… press himself up against the bedpost and cover his eyes. He knows he has no right to be the one who’s afraid here, but all the same, he catches sight of that too-wide, mutated grin, and feels his stomach do flips.

‘I think so’ he replies, completely unable to move. ‘It’s about Fumiko, isn’t it?’

Even he’s sensible enough to know that the beast that stalks his dreams isn’t the real Korosensei. The real Korosensei is somewhere across town doing sick flips or smacking his head into a wall or whatever it is Makoto’s up to today. This… this thing… this disgusting creature, with the pulsing veins and jagged teeth is no more than a manifestation of his fears. If he’s been thinking about something, then he knows that’s what it’s up to as well.

Korosensei doesn’t humor him with a response. He simply watches him with those piercing eyes.

‘I know. I need to tell her,’ Kiyoshi admits. ‘And I will. I don’t think I’ll ever forgive myself if I don’t tell her the tru-’

“Tomorrow.”

Kiyoshi’s heart skips a beat.

‘Pardon?’

“You heard me,” Korosensei says, hopping off from the foot of the bedpost. He stalks over Kiyoshi’s way from the side of the bed, a horrible wet noise emanating as he drags his tentacles across the carpet. “You’re to tell her. Tomorrow.”

Kiyoshi stares as the beast edges in closer. If this were any normal situation, he swears his jaw would drop. Instead, he simply gazes up at Korosensei, sheer horror dawning in his eyes.

‘I- I can’t do that,’ he thinks. ‘I’m sorry, but I can’t. That’s not fair to her.’

Korosensei lets out a breathless, wicked laugh. He leans over on the bed, face dangerously close to Kiyoshi as he struggles to catch his breath.

“Not fair to her!?” he asks, disbelief in his voice. “Oh, but lying to her is!?"

‘It’s-’ Kiyoshi finds himself at a loss for words, even here in his dreams. ‘It’s not lying to her.’ he decides on. ‘You’re the one who told me that. I’m… just protecting her. And I’ll tell her eventually. But not right now. She has too much sympathy for me. She… she knows what happened to my mom! I don’t want her to- I don’t want her to shove her feelings aside because of that!’

“A noble enough reason,” Korosensei admits, straightening himself up. “But is it the truth, or it simply what you tell yourself so you can sleep at night?”

‘Of- of course it’s the truth!’ Kiyoshi refutes. ‘I just want what’s best for Fumiko!’

“Like you know what that is, Yanagisawa,” Korosensei spits, his words dripping with venom. “Last I’d checked, your idea for what was best for Fumiko was putting her head through a wall.”

Kiyoshi’s shoulders wilt. He shuts his eyes, unable to meet Korosensei’s gaze. ‘I don’t have to
discuss this with you,’ he thinks. ‘You’re not real. Leave me alone. Leave me alone.’

“You can pretend I’m not here all you want, but I’m never going to leave you, Shiro,” Korosensei chides. Kiyoshi feels something press against his wrist—grabbing his hand and squeezing tight. “Just like you can tell yourself you’re always doing the right thing. Like you can always make up some new excuse. You can put it off as long as you want… ‘Oh… she’ll sympathize with me too much right now.’ ‘Oh… I wouldn’t want to ruin her good mood.’ ‘Oh… she needs me in her future.’ You can make it all about her. But I’ll always be here to remind you that it’s really about you, you, you.”

Kiyoshi shuts his eyes tighter, using all his effort just to hold back tears. ‘No,’ he replies. ‘No. No. No. It’s not! Shut up!’

But Korosensei doesn’t listen. He grips Kiyoshi so tight it hurts, and leans in to whisper. “All because you’re scared… scared of being abandoned, and you’re willing to do anything to prevent it, even hurt people all over again.”

‘I’m not!’ Kiyoshi wants to say. ‘I’m not scared! I’m not selfish! And I’m most certainly not unaware of what I deserve!’ But he feels Korosensei’s breath hot on his face, and he knows he is. This… this thing is all in his head. And it knows exactly what he’s thinking.

...It can see right through him.

‘Can you blame me?’ he settles on instead.

“Can I blame you?” Korosensei repeats.

‘Yes!’ Kiyoshi cries, eyes snapping open. ‘I don’t want to be alone right now! I don’t want to lose this support! I’m scared! Scared as I’ve ever been right now! But my mom could be dying! I need you! I need Fumiko! Let me be selfish, just this once!’

Korosensei tsks, dropping Kiyoshi’s wrist as if he’s almost disgusted. He wipes his tentacle on the side of his patient’s gown, giving an unamused sneer.

“I’m not sure why I’m surprised by this,” he says. “Selfish is all you’ve ever been. Of course you’d make this decision. You are the same person at heart, after all.”

‘No. No I’m not!’ Kiyoshi wants to shriek. ‘Is it really so bad!? So evil!? To want companionship!? To be loved!? I won’t screw it up this time, I promise!’

“Fine, then. If you’re so willing… so ready to hurt the people I loved, then let’s talk hurting people. What is that you mentioned earlier?” Korosensei asks. “Something about… your mom?”

Kiyoshi’s blood runs cold. Eyes wide… heart pounding… he stares out at the beast, alarms blaring in his mind. ‘No. Nonononono’ he begs, sputtering for breath. ‘Not that. Anything but that-’

Korosensei’s smile widens. His eyes narrow, and he lets out a low, amused laugh. “Now that earns a reaction, doesn’t it? And here I was thinking you didn’t care…”

‘I care! I care!’ Kiyoshi cries out, tears welling in his eyes. ‘Please! Believe me I care!’

“But I’m afraid that caring means nothing,” Korosensei tsks, leaning in close… right down to Kiyoshi’s eye level. At first glance, his eyes are white and glossy. But when Kiyoshi blinks, they shift to be bright red. Veiny, and far too human. “In fact… if anything, all it’s done is spell her demise.”
‘No! Shut up!’

“That’s why I had to do this, isn’t it? Because you wouldn’t listen to me… because you wouldn’t hold yourself accountable for the atrocities you committed… Now your mother’s dying, alone and unloved, like a filthy animal… like you deserve to.”

‘No. Nononono. That’s not true! That’s not true!’

“Isn’t it, though?”

‘You didn’t… you didn’t do this! You didn’t blow my mom up! This only happened because she… because she was somewhere unsafe! Because I wasn’t good enough for her! You have nothing to do with this! You don’t! You don’t!’

“You sound uncertain,” Korosensei chides, cocking his head. “...You can refute it all you like, but I know you believe me. After all… you’ve become all bark, no bite.” He chuckles, taking Kiyoshi’s head and wrenching it upward. There’s this sudden aching in his neck. “I’m more powerful than you could ever imagine. Whether you’ll admit it or not, we both know I’m responsible. And we both know I won’t hold back if you don’t choose to do what’s right.”

‘Stop. Stop it! You’re not even real! You can’t hurt anyone!’

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‘Stop. Stop it! You’re not even real! You can’t hurt anyone!’

“I’ll take the other leg… and then I’ll take her life. I’ll make sure she sees every bit of it… hears the dwindling heart monitor and feels her own weakening pulse. Remind her she’s never going to get to see her family again, and that that’s maybe not such a shame after all. After all… she did dedicate her life to a husband who doesn’t love her, and a sniveling wretch of a son. Is that what she’s dying for? I’ll make her regret it… a lifetime soaked in pain… she’ll die unaccomplished and unfulfilled, just. Like. I did.”

‘That’s not true! That’s not true!’ Kiyoshi wails, tears streaming down his face. ‘You didn’t die alone, and you didn’t die unloved! You died surrounded by people who believed in you! Don’t talk about it like that!’ He struggles for breath, eyes narrowed, and breaths heavy. ‘My dad loves my mom! And I love her too! So did you! That’s why I know you wouldn’t hurt her! Mom was your friend! You’d hurt me, not her!’

‘You cared about her! And you cared about Dad! You supported them in everything they set out to do! That’s why I know you’re not real! Not because you’re being mean to me! I deserve it! But because I know you’d never hurt my family!’

That genuinely seems to give Korosensei pause for a moment. He drops Kiyoshi’s chin… takes a step back, and mulls that over.

“You’re correct,” he says. “I did love your parents. You’re right about that much.” He pauses. “...Some of my fondest memories are of teaching with the two of them... pestering your father, and flirting with your mother. They, too, were my supporters through almost everything. I believed in them up until the end… both in their relationship and as individuals. They were brave, kind, and diligent.”

“...However,” he says, inching in closer. “...There’s one important part of this equation you’re forgetting… do you know what that is, Yanagisawa?”

Kiyoshi’s quiet for a long moment.

‘No,’ he finally admits. ‘I don’t.’
That’s when Korosensei grabs him by the shoulders and grips him tight. Teeth bared and skin a charred black, he growls- utter vitriol seeping from his tone.

“Maybe I hated you even more than I loved them.”

“You, who ruined my life,” he says, words ablaze. “You, who killed the one I loved and endangered my children dozens of times. You, the selfish, and abusive, and cruel. Do you know what I’d do just to see you suffer? You are less than dirt, and I would do anything to make you feel what I felt!”

Kiyoshi struggles to wriggle away, but it’s no use. He’s still unable to move. Korosensei stares him down, gripping his shoulders so tight he thinks they may just shatter and spits his wrathful words. He inches in closer and closer, veins bulging… writhing as he comes to deliver his recompense.

‘Haven’t I suffered enough?’ Kiyoshi wants to ask. ‘What else could you possibly do to me?’ He thinks of two years spent in a hospital, and the life of an unloved child. But somehow even that’s not enough. He remembers shattered rib cages, and kicking others when they were down. He remembers the way Aguri cried when she was alone in her room, and the way Reaper covered his mouth desperately when he spat up his own blood. And he knows without a doubt that nothing Korosensei could ever do to him could possibly be enough.

Even so, he’s scared! He's so fucking scared! He can't lose her! Not like this! 'Please!' he cries. 'I'll do anything!'

Korosensei pauses. "Anything?" he asks, cocking his head. "...I suppose I am a merciful guy. I forgave all sorts of atrocities, didn’t I, Yanagisawa? I wanted to believe anyone could redeem themselves. Even scum like you." He seems to think it over. "I’ll cut you a deal… if you really want to save your mother’s life… and you’re too cowardly, too pitiful to tell the world the truth… then why don’t I just end it all for you here instead?"

Kiyoshi’s heart stops.

“I could make it quick… but of course I wouldn’t. You don’t get afforded that.”

His blood runs cold. Sweat drips down his temples, and his eye twitches gently. No. No. N- not that either!

‘Why not?’ he asks himself. ‘You’d certainly deserve it, wouldn’t you?’

‘No! No! I’m not ready!’

Korosensei grins, lifting one knee and then the other. He hauls himself up onto the bed and plants himself firmly on Kiyoshi’s chest- the sheer weight crushing his ribcage.

Kiyoshi tries desperately to push him off, but it’s no use. His limbs simply won’t move. Tears welling in his eyes… 'stop it!' he shrieks. 'Wait! I’m not ready! I don’t want to die! I’m still scared!'

The Reaper’s claws drift closer towards his throat.

‘...I’d take my time… make sure you suffer. Gouge out your eyeballs and claw into your chest. Savor every damn scream. Finally you’re the one I can do anything I want to. Just like how you treated me...’
His grip tightens... and Kiyoshi struggles to breathe. Has... has he worked himself into an asthma attack? ‘I need to wake up!’ he pleads, but it’s no use, and he wonders for just one horrified second if this is the truth. If Korosensei’s come back to ravage him, and this is the way he’ll meet his end.

“I’ll watch you choke on your blood and struggle for breath. Chip away at you bit by bit until there’s nothing left. I want to hear you scream.” Korosensei chuckles. “Don’t you think that’s only fair, Yanagisawa? You relished in my suffering.”

‘That’s- that’s not my name,’ Kiyoshi wants to cry. ‘That’s not my name,’ or at the very least ‘I don’t want it to be.’

“Really, it’s the happiest ending. Your friends will finally be safe, and they’ll never have to know. Wouldn’t you prefer that, coward!? To be remembered as some pathetic, mundane thing!? It’s everything you ever wanted! They’ll think you’re innocent! Perfect! And you’ll never have to tell them the truth! All you have to do is give up!”

‘No! No!’ Kiyoshi chokes.

“Why? Because you’re somehow still a stupid, self-pitying thing who believes you deserve to be in this world, or because you know I’m right? That the truth has to come out sooner or later, whether you like it or not?”

‘I... I don’t know!’ Kiyoshi says. ‘Just let me go! Let me go! Please!’

And Korosensei’s grip tightens into a chokehold. Claws digging into Kiyoshi’s throat... eyes glowing in the dim light, he looms over him with that unwavering grin. Kiyoshi struggles to kick - to scream- but it’s no use. He’s stuck - paralyzed - utterly helpless. He chokes- sputters - begs for breath.

‘I’ll do anything!’

“TELL HER!” Korosensei roars. “TELL AGURI THE TRUTH! TELL EVERYONE! LET THE WORLD KNOW WHAT YOU’VE DONE!”

‘I’m scared!’ Kiyoshi cries, tears streaming down his face. ‘I’m sorry! I know that’s selfish! But weren’t you scared, too!? Surely you never wanted your kids to know!’

Korosensei’s veins throb red. His face goes dark, and his tentacles writhe. “Don’t you dare place yourself on the same level as me!” He hisses. “We are nothing alike! I loved my students! More than anything! But this thing you have! It’s no more than an illusion!”

‘That’s not true!’ Kiyoshi weeps. ‘It’s not!’

“ISN’T IT, THOUGH!?” Korosensei demands. “Give it up already! They don’t love you! They will never love you! You’re nothing more than the monster that haunts their dreams! Stop pretending! Stop hiding away! Let them know what you are! Before I take it all away!”

‘No! No! You’re not real!’

“I’ll kill you! I’ll kill your mother! I’ll make sure you suffer! I’ll give you every rotten thing you deserve! I’ll make damn sure of it! Don’t you doubt me! I’ll end you right here!”

Kiyoshi shuts his eyes tight, feeling his face go pale as the grip on his neck only tightens. ‘I just want to be happy!’ he begs. ‘I want to live! With my mother! With my friends! Please! Tell me it’s not too late for me! Tell me I can still be happy!’
“YOU CAN’T! YOU’LL NEVER BE! You’re nothing more than a beast! A mockery of goodness! A sociopath desperately trying to pretend to be anything he’s not! But I know the truth! And I know you’ll never live anyways! No matter what you do! No matter if I kill you right here - right now - or you finally kill your damn self. This thing you’re doing! YOU’RE NOT LIVING! YOU’RE GUILTY! YOU’RE HAUNTED!”

‘I thought I was getting better!’ Kiyoshi whimpers. ‘I really did! But then... then that just had to happen to Mom! I don’t know if I’m ever going to be okay, Korosensei’

“EVERY HORRIBLE THING THAT HAPPENS TO YOU. IT WILL ALWAYS HAUNT YOU. IT WILL ALWAYS BE YOUR FAULT. UNTIL YOU SCREAM THE TRUTH FROM THE ROOFTOPS, YOU’LL NEVER KNOW PEACE. EACH WAKING MOMENT - EACH UNRELATED BURDEN WILL BECOME YOUR DAMNATION! YOU MUST TELL THEM THE TRUTH, OR YOU’LL NEVER DAMN LIVE!”

“YOUR MOTHER! SHE’LL COME HOME TO NOTHING! IT’S KILLING YOU SLOWLY! CHIPPING AWAY AT YOUR HEART AND AT YOUR SOUL! I’M KILLING YOU! YOU’RE KILLING YOU! YOU’RE KILLING YOURSELF!”

His shadow looms larger and larger. The weight on Kiyoshi’s chest grows. He peeks one eye open, but notes vision fading to black. He can’t breathe. He genuinely can’t breathe!

‘It hurts!’ he chokes. ‘You’re hurting me, Reaper! Stop it!’

“THAT’S ALL I WANT,” Korosensei snarls. “I want to see you suffer! I want to see you die!”

‘That’s not who you are!’ Kiyoshi refutes. ‘I know it’s not! You’re not some monster! You’re not bad! You wouldn’t want to hurt me! You wouldn’t!’

“How do you know that!? How do you know what I think!? The serial killer!? The monster!? The harbinger of your condemnation!? You couldn’t understand me if you tried!”

‘But I do!’ Kiyoshi whimpers. ‘I do!’

“NO! YOU DON’T!” The shadows writhe, and Korosensei’s claws pierce his skin. Warm blood drips down his throat. “I’ll kill you! I’ll kill you both!”

‘No! No you won’t! You’re good! You’re good, Korosensei! You’re right! You’re good! Unlike me!’ he wails. ‘I’ll tell them! I’ll tell them everything! Even if I’m scared, and pathetic, and I deserve to die! But not until you let go! Not until you let me breathe!’

“AND WHY ON EARTH WOULD I DO THAT?”

‘Because you don’t hate me, Makoto!’

Kiyoshi’s chest rises and falls with each heavy breath. He stares down Korosensei, eyes narrowed into little slits. Even with his vision fading to black… with claws wrapped round his throat and a horrible sinking feeling in his chest, he’s so certain of that that it hurts. He wants to ball his fist... scream... but instead, he simply glares with those defiant eyes and says it again, quieter this time.

‘...You don’t hate me.’

Makoto had told him that himself. And he’d put so much faith into it. His future… his hope for himself as of late… it’s felt like it’s hinged on Makoto’s belief. Those words he’d said with such
conviction... ‘You can still be happy.’ ‘You can still do the right thing.’ ‘It’s not too late for you. I promise...’ they’ve been all Kiyoshi’s had!

Now that gives Korosensei pause.

He doesn’t release his grip on Kiyoshi’s throat… but it loosens, just slightly. He stares down at him with curious eyes.

“You really believe that?” he asks.

“Yes! I believe that! More than anything!” Kiyoshi says. ‘And don’t you dare refute it! I know you can’t! Because I believe it! With every fiber of my being! I know I’ve done the wrong things… I know what happened to my mom might even be my fault, but please… don’t say it’s too late for me. You’re all I have. You’re my best friend, Makoto.’

He struggles for breath, tears pricking in his eyes. He chokes on his own words. ‘Please.’ he thinks. ‘Please. Please. Please.’

Finally, Korosensei releases his throat. Tentacles morph to hands, and as Kiyoshi gasps for breath, it’s Makoto left there sitting on his chest.

He’s quiet for a long moment, thinking over Kiyoshi’s words. And when he finally speaks up, it’s in a quiet voice. “...A touching notion,” he admits. “It would be sweet if we truly did live in a world like that. But how can you be so certain? Aren’t I someone infamous for hiding my feelings? What if I’m just burying it? The ways you’ve hurt me? You know I’m willing to.”

His words are malicious, but the way he says them isn’t. If anything, he just sounds genuinely curious, looking down at Kiyoshi with those big black eyes.

...Kiyoshi doesn’t have a response.

“...But… okay. Let’s pretend, sure. Let’s say I don’t hate you. I’m not hiding anything, and I don’t want to hurt you. We can keep on being friends, and nothing will ever happen between us. Even then… I’m still not sure this is such a happy ending for you.”

Kiyoshi says ‘why?’, but he already knows. Somewhere deep in his heart… alongside the increasingly sinking feeling in his stomach, he knows.

“...Because even if I forgive you. I support you in everything you do, and believe in you up until the very end…”

Makoto’s smile is just a little too wide. He hops off the bed and from Kiyoshi’s chest. Turns his back to him and marches towards the door - his foot just barely brushing by something Kiyoshi hadn’t noticed before.

“...She certainly won’t.”

The scent of death overtakes Kiyoshi. Blood seeps into his carpet and his breath hitches in his chest as he makes out the figure lying there on his bedroom floor. Not glaring… not taunting… and not monstrous as Korosensei, but rather just… still. Pale… sickly, and still covered in bruises as she stares up at him with unfocused, glazed over eyes.

...Aguri.

‘Makoto!’ Kiyoshi cries, but he’s already gone. The monster’s vanished, and he’s left alone with
his own guilty conscience. Tears spilling down his cheeks… the scent of blood making him choke and gag… Kiyoshi stays, unable to move, and simply stares at her dying corpse.

More than anything, he wants to help. Rush over there and apologize. Seal her wounds and perform CPR. But not even a finger lifts to move. And as he cries out in his mind ‘Wait! Please forgive me!’ ‘I didn’t mean to, I swear!’ somewhere not so long ago, Yanagisawa takes Aguri by the throat and chokes her until she’s sputtering for breath.

“I’m- I’m sorry!” she cries, stumbling back and pressing herself to the wall. “I didn’t mean to - I shouldn’t have- I’m sorry!”

‘You’re sorry!? YOU’RE sorry!?’

Aguri bleeds out onto his floor, and even then, somehow, she looks meek. Stares up at him with those big, glassy eyes and a smile still on her face, as if saying ‘Sorry. I really screwed this one up, didn’t I?’

‘No! No! It wasn’t you! It wasn’t you!’ Kiyoshi wants to shriek. But as he bolts to his feet, finally freed from the grips of his nightmare… he barrels off the bed and onto the floor, only for his hands to grasp nothing. Aguri’s gone, and with her the scent of blood… leaving Kiyoshi alone in his room.

He reaches up with shaky hands to touch his throat... finds no sign of bruises, claw marks, or handprints. Slowly but surely catches his breath and wipes at his teary eyes.

‘...Ah. So it really had been a dream.’

He doesn’t motion to get off of the floor. Simply sits there, staring up at his ceiling fan as he remembers what Korosensei had said to him.

...Aguri’s face is still so fresh in his mind.

He fumbles for his cell phone... snatches it off of his bedside counter and opens his texts. The bright light burns his eyes in the dark, but he supposes it doesn’t matter. He’s not going to get back to sleep tonight, anyways.

...He knows what he has to do.

He doesn’t know why. Maybe because he owes it to her, or maybe because he wants to save his mom, or maybe because he just wants to finally breathe. Whatever the reason is, he’s taken this thing as far as it can go.

It’s time he finally takes whatever it is that’ll come to him.

...He just hopes Makoto won’t be too mad.


[2/11/2031 3:32 AM:] [Kiyoshi] Can we talk about something after school today?


He feels sick to his stomach, but there’s no backing out now. He tosses his phone across the room and curls himself in up to his knees. Trying his hardest not to cry, Kiyoshi does all he can do
now…

...Wait for the end to come.

Chapter End Notes

Happy AIS time, everyone! This is where I'm gonna apologize just a little for the angst... but only just a little bit. I had a TON of fun writing some in-depth, fucked up and legitimately /raw/ reactions to bad news, and I hope it managed to make everyone's heart ache just a little.

That said, however, hopefully things won't remain dark for too long. Right now we're starting to get into the saddest portion of AIS, but I swear the sun will show again eventually. Even if the characters don't know if Irina will survive, she will. And even though Kiyoshi doesn't know if he'll be okay, he probably will be.

Right now he's just going through a lot of complicated emotions and conflating things that aren't really conflated in the first place. The truth is the mindset he was starting to get into was more of a band-aid than anything, and this has reminded him of the truth of his situation. Now he's left to wonder if bad people are allowed to feel bad about things that are their fault, or even things that/aren't./ It's not like being sad suddenly excuses anything, right? So he feels like he shouldn't feel sad at all. It's not that easy, however.

Speaking of trying not to feel sad, let's talk a bit about Karasuma. In having him come off rather cold in this chapter my intent is definitely not to make it seem like he doesn't care. I think not only is Kiyoshi being a slightly unreliable narrator towards him, but he's someone who's emotions are stunted. It's not that he's not upset about what happened. It's that he'd never show it in front of anyone - much less his own son.

I know it was a small bit but I had a fun time getting into Nagisa's psyche currently and his thoughts on Irina's childhood. I have a lot of feelings about both topics, so the whole thing made me pretty weepy.

As did the sleep paralysis thing in an entirely different way. While I had a lot of fun writing the horror, my favorite part was Kiyoshi 'fighting back.' I'm not sure how many of you know this, but breaking out of sleep paralysis can actually be connected to having a strong conviction or belief something will protect you. Many people invoke their religion or other similar things to get out of it, as it's something that makes them feel safer. That means for it to break him out, Kiyoshi really, truly did believe Makoto cares about him, and in the light of so much awful stuff in this chapter... I think that's really sweet.

Next chapter will be when the truth comes out to Fumiko, so I hope you're all looking forward to that! It'll be up exactly a week from now, so there's not much longer to wait!

Some songs that helped me write this chapter were Night Will Come from Groundhog Day, How To Never Stop Being Sad by Dandelion Hands, It's Quiet Uptown from Hamilton, What Sarah Said by Death Cab for Cutie, Small Hands by Radical Face, Invisible by Dandelion Hands, I Will Never Forget by Kimya Dawson, Girl With One
Eye by Florence and the Machine, and Confrontation from Jekyll and Hyde.

As usual, I hope you enjoyed, and I hope to see you next week! Make sure to let me know what you thought, and try not to beat me up too much for ripping Irina's leg off.
[2/11/2031 2:31 PM:] [Nagisa] You still good to meet up today?


[2/11/2031 2:36 PM:] [Karasuma-sensei] I may have to take a phone call or two during that time, but otherwise I’m unoccupied.


[2/11/2031 2:40 PM:] [Nagisa] Are you still sure about the location?

[2/11/2031 2:43 PM:] [Nagisa] Not that I mean to offend. But this is a really serious topic. We’re discussing your son’s mental health in the wake of his mother having a serious accident? Are you sure this is the most… appropriate?

[2/11/2031 2:45 PM:] [Karasuma-sensei] If you can think of any other vacant public places in the area, then be my guest.


[2/11/2031 2:50 PM:] [Nagisa] Shit. The kids are finishing up their group work. I gotta go.


By the end of the school day, Kiyoshi’s surprised to have made it through in one piece.

In all honesty… he’s still not really ready for school. He hadn’t gotten a wink of sleep last night, and his legs shake every time he thinks of his mother… but he hadn’t known what else to do. He wasn’t going to tell Fumiko the truth over text, and it’d have felt unprofessional to let her know at his place. After all, what if she let his dad know? What would he do to him? And… and it doesn’t matter, anyways! He’s already sent the text. There’s no going back now.

Fumiko met up with him this morning on the way to school... paused and said, “You said you had something you wanted to talk about?” but Kiyoshi’d shook his head.
“After school,” he’d insisted. “It’s. Uh. A big thing. I’d hate to distract you from your studies.”

She’d looked troubled, but known better than to press. “Okay. After school it is.”

Some part of him wonders if that’s just him trying to push it off again… formulate any excuse to prolong this moment of peace he’s found. But he’s not given much time to think about it. The school day flies by, and by the end of it, he’s left to realize either way that extension hadn’t been so long after all.

Nagisa packs up his books and folders, dismissing class with a smile. He stops by Makoto’s desk and lets him know that he won’t be at his house today. “I have a meeting with one of my parents. Feel free to still stop by, but I won’t be getting home til’ 5 or 6.”

“That’s okay!” Makoto says with a salute. “Kayano, Karma, Asano-san and us can still do all sorts of hanging out. Right, Fumiko?”

Fumiko shrugs and says “Yeah. That’s right.” But she sends a concerned glance across the classroom and watches Kiyoshi gnaw on his lip.

She wastes no time in meeting up with him. She taps his shoulders in the doorway and asks, “You good now?”

“Uh… yeah,” Kiyoshi says. “Let’s… step outside, though. I’d like some privacy for this.”

There’s this horrible sinking feeling in his gut. ‘I don’t want to do this,’ he begs. ‘Please. Anything but this.’ But he steadies his resolve and shakes his head. He’s fine. He’s numb. There’s no going back now.

Makoto catches up with them half a second later. His eyes light up at the sight of Fumiko and Kiyoshi making small-talk. “You feeling any better?” he asks. “If you wanna hang out with us today, you totally can.”

“There’s - uh… actually this thing me and Fumiko have been meaning to talk about,” Kiyoshi says. “Maybe we can still hang out… but… let us get this out of the way first, okay?”

Makoto’s brows furrow with concern.

“A thing?” he asks. “...What sort of thing?”

“Uh… you’ll see,” Kiyoshi says. “...Actually… you mind coming with? I think… it might ease my nerves a little to have you there.”

Makoto still looks troubled, but nods. “Of course I can come with!” he says. “Whatever it is you have to discuss, lessgo!”

He really has no idea, does he? Kiyoshi hopes he won’t be too mad at him for telling Fumiko the truth, but… it had to come out. It was driving him mad… hurting his heart and his loved ones. He couldn’t stand it a second more. Surely Makoto will understand just how much it hurts to pretend?

...Besides, even if he does react poorly, there’s no getting Makoto to go away now. At the very least… it makes Kiyoshi feel just a little better to think he’ll have Makoto backing him up. Maybe if Makoto can get across just how much he believes in Kiyoshi… then… well, Fumiko will believe it too.

(‘Who are you kidding?’ Kiyoshi asks himself. ‘Don’t push your luck.’)
His legs feel heavy as he steps outside. Fumiko takes the lead and takes a sharp turn to the right, guiding them to somewhere a little off the side of the building.

“This private enough?” she asks. “I mean… we could always head further out and into the forest, but most of our classmates will be out that way for a little while. I think sticking close to the building is our best bet for getting some privacy.”

...She’s so sweet, asking him what he thinks is good. Of course he thinks this is good! He thinks her talking to him at all right now is good! Hell, she could punch him in the face and he’d thank her! This isn’t just private! This isn’t just good! It’s...

“It’s. Uh. Perfect,” he says. “You’re right. I don’t think anyone will bother us here.”

“Awesome,” Fumiko says. “...So what is it you wanted to talk about?”

Kiyoshi pauses, staring at the ground for a long moment as he briefly considers plopping down on it. He ends up deciding against it, however, when he remembers just how pitiful that would make him look. He doesn’t want to guilt Fumiko. He’s been cruel enough to her as is. He just… he just...

...Wishes this could be easier.

But it’s not. And it never will be. There’s no backing out. If he ever wants to save the things he cares about, then now’s the time to speak. He just… hopes at the very least this won’t be too hard on her, even if it is for him.

Bracing himself for the worst, he stands tall… takes a deep breath… makes himself look as big as he can, and prepares to unmask himself for the second time this month.

“...It started a little after the class election.”

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Nagisa makes it to the meetup spot just before four. Having walked there, he’s still shivering as he steps in through the door. But bright, artificial lights greet him, and he’s soon bathed in the warm scent of the restaurant he’d subsisted pretty much exclusively on in high school. The one... the only: WcDonalds.

He removes his coat at Karasuma motions him over, then slides into the booth across from him.

“Hello,” Karasuma says, fingers clasped as he carefully watches Nagisa.

“Hey,” Nagisa replies. “Uh- sorry about asking you to meet up on such short notice. It’s just… important.”


His voice is surprisingly cool for the situation he’s in. Nagisa’s not sure what he’d expected, but… it hadn’t been this. Karasuma’s expression is blank… emotionless. He wonders if it’s an act, or if there really is nothing going on up there.

( ‘Okay! Well. Don’t say that,’ he reminds himself. ‘I’m sure he’s upset… but he has a composure to keep up around us. He’s a professional, Nagisa. He’s known you since you were a preteen. He’s trying to keep you calm.’ )

Maybe it’s just the choice of location that’s bothering him. It’s not that - it’s not that he doesn’t respect Karasuma’s creative ingenuity as a hardened military veteran who just heard his wife blew
up - but is a *WcDonalds* really the best place to discuss how that’s affecting his son!?

...No. That shouldn’t matter. Sure- the WcDonalds is *woefully* inappropriate, but what location *wouldn’t* be? Irina’s in the ICU right now. They could be in the fucking E-Class building right now, and even *that* would feel wrong. He needs to brush the whole ‘fast food restaurant’ thing under the rug and focus on what’s important right now.

...Even if... he hasn’t eaten anything since 12 PM... and the Big Wac... smells increasingly tempting right now.

’No! Kiyoshi needs you! Keep your head on straight!’

“So… uh… we need to talk about what the plan is from here on out,” Nagisa says. “Because… I’m genuinely worried about Kiyoshi. And I’m sure you are too.” He pauses. “He came in to school today, but I was concerned for him the whole time. He’s not his usual self.”

Karasuma frowns. “How so?” he asks.

“Lethargic. Emotional,” Nagisa admits. “He kept drifting off during class, and he’s gone from an active participant to dead quiet.”

“To be fair,” Karasuma admits. “It has been an incredibly short period of time. I’m sure he’ll open up in time.”

“I know…” Nagisa admits, gnawing on his lip. “But…”

Is ‘he’s been displaying these symptoms since even before the incident’ really the right thing to say right now? Kiyoshi’s breakdown from a month ago is still eating at him, but he’s still not sure it’s really connected to how he’s behaving now. Has whatever’d happened back then been handled by now? Or had he simply buried it, only for it to resurface with the incident about his mother?

“...I don’t want to take any risks. He’s going through an extremely tumultuous period of time right now. Middle school is hard for *any* kid. But for one with self-esteem issues like his? For one going through such a traumatic event? I can hardly even imagine… he has to be under a lot of stress right now, Karasuma.”

“I know,” Karasuma says, the expression on his face still perturbed, but otherwise unchanged. “...And that’s why we’re discussing this. I’m sure we’ll find a way to get this under control.”

Nagisa sighs. “I know, I know…”

At least… he thinks he does. It’s hard to tell whether or not he’s overthinking in situations like these. On one hand… it’s a nice thought to think everything will turn out okay in the end… but is it really realistic? What if something goes horribly wrong? If he doesn’t do everything in his power to prevent it, then he’ll never forgive himself.

“...Admittedly I’m… not sure a school environment is the best space for Kiyoshi right now,” he says. “He’s a smart kid, and he’s a wonderful presence in class. But I’m so worried about giving him extra stressors he doesn’t need right now. I don’t want him to think I’m pitying him or ‘going easy on him,’ but I’m not going jump down his ass about tests right now. He has *much* bigger things to be worrying about…”

“I don’t want to put him on a forced leave. That’s the worst possible thing I could do right now. He needs the routine… the support from his friends. But I don’t want him in a place where he feels obligated to come in right now. Of course, I’ve told him that… but there’s no knowing if he’ll take
that to heart. I’m in a bit of a corner right now, Karasuma. Maybe... you should talk to him about it. He’s a bright kid... he has a bright future. I don’t want him to fall behind.”

“Of course not,” Karasuma agrees. “And I’ll reiterate that he’s not under any obligation to do anything. He’s more than welcome to do things at his own pace until things smooth over. But I’m hardly sure how much he’ll listen to me on the topic.”

His eyes flicker towards the ground for just one moment, but soon he’s returned to meeting Nagisa’s eye. There’s these heavy, dark bags under his eyes. Nagisa wishes he could say they were an unfamiliar sight, but now that he thinks about it, Karasuma always looks this tired.

‘Until things smooth over,’ Karasuma says, but Nagisa wonders if they ever will. Kiyoshi’s life has been hectic for a very, very long time now. What if this is the incident that sends him spiraling off the edge for good?

“...Anything’s worth a shot,” he says. “You’re his father. Anything he needs to hear he’ll want to hear from you.”

Quite frankly, sometimes he worries Kiyoshi doesn’t hear enough from Karasuma.

He’s always been a distant man. And his students have never once minded. But the role of a father… it’s an entirely different scenario. And Nagisa wonders if the cold resolution Karasuma faces the rest of the world with is part of why Kiyoshi’s grown up the way he has.


Nagisa doesn’t want to think about it right now. It’s not - it’s not something he can just say! Not without the risk of causing permanent harm. ‘I think you’re a sub-par father’ is not something you say to a man you look up to. Not that-! Not that Karasuma is sub-par... he just… wonders if he doesn’t try hard enough sometimes.

(Kiyoshi’s age ten, and he spends more time over at Nagisa’s house than his own parents’. When asked why, he frowns deeply and admits “It’s just a lonely place sometimes.”)

“How’s he doing at home? Is it any better than his behavior at school, or is he doing just as unwell?”

Karasuma sighs. “It’s just as worrying. He’s isolating himself… holing up in his room. He’s not sleeping well, and when he does sleep it’s at abnormal, prolonged times. He doesn’t even want to be around the dog.”

...Ah. That’s about what Nagisa had expected. He’s in a bad place right now... of course home wouldn’t be much better. But it still breaks his heart to hear.

“I see,” he says. “That’s worrying. What are you doing? To try and help him through this, I mean-”

Karasuma’s expression shifts just slightly. He frowns. “…I’m doing what I can,” he says. “But... that’s not much. The most I can do is give him updates on Irina’s condition. But there’s no comforting him for real until both of us are certain that she’ll be okay.”

He’s got one leg crossed over the other... fingers clasped. His foot taps sporadically against the ground. His expression remains unchanged, but it’s easy to see he’s restless if you know where to look.
“Of course,” Nagisa says. “...You’re in a precarious situation. You can’t make any promises until you’re certain you can keep them. Let me rephrase that: What are you intending to do after?”

Karasuma blinks.

“Pardon?”

“Once your wife’s come home safe. The scars on Kiyoshi’s psyche are bound to remain. Trauma doesn’t just vanish, even when removed from the situation. When there’s less on your plate, what do you plan to do about him? He needs support right now, Karasuma.”

“And I’m not disagreeing with that,” Karasuma says. “Don’t put words into my mouth. We’re going to see about getting him into a therapist as soon as possible. He’ll be given the tools he needs to work through this.”

“And that’s a fantastic start!” Nagisa says. “But I must admit I’m still worried. There’s only so much talking it out can do when you’re still in an actively stressful situation. What else about your lives is going to change from here on out?”

He doesn’t mean to push... but something about the way Karasuma speaks leaves a bad taste in his mouth. Like... the bare minimum. Surely there has to be something else to try!

“Well… Irina is to be discharged from the Ministry of Defense, if that’s what you’re worried about,” Karasuma admits. “Her injuries have reached a point where…” he hesitates. “...She’s no longer able to successfully fulfill her duties.”

Nagisa stares, a horrible sinking feeling in his gut.

“...Shit, Karasuma. I’m sorry. I didn’t realize.”

Karasuma shakes his head. “...There’s nothing that can be done about it now. I’m worried as to how she’ll take it, but that’s a conversation for another day. Right now we’re here to talk about Kiyoshi.”

“Of… of course,” Nagisa says. “Where were we?”

“Our future plans as a family,” Karasuma says. “As for me… I don’t intend to make any major changes. Of course, I’ll do everything I possibly can for my son, but my job in the Ministry of Defense is to remain. I’m sure everything will return to normal by years’ end.

Nagisa frowns. He doesn’t mean to, but he just can’t rid himself of the nagging feeling that ‘normal’ for the Karasumas is less than comfortable for Kiyoshi.

Karasuma must notice his change in expression, because he glowers right back.

“Surely you understand that,” he says rather sternly. “This is my livelihood. You can’t expect me to give up on that.”

“Of course! I would never!” Nagisa reassures. “I’m just not sure Kiyoshi’s in a place where it’s healthy for him. You encounter dangerous things every single day. Surely there’s some sort of change you can make to put yourself in a safer position. To spend more time with him-”

“In an ideal world, yes,” Karasuma says. “But I serve as needed. If the ministry needs me, then I’ll do what I can. It’s not dangerous in any other situation. What happened to Irina was simply a freak mistake - the result of a coworkers’ blunder-”
“A freak mistake that can happen to you too,” Nagisa interjects. “I know you think you’re invincible Karasuma, but you’re not. No-one is. Even if nothing is going to happen to you, Kiyoshi is going to worry about your safety for the rest of his life. And if something does happen to you—god forbid—he’ll have to grow up without a father!”

Karasuma looks genuinely wounded for just one moment, but just as soon his expression returns to that of a neutral one. He crosses his arms, staring down Nagisa from across the table.

“...I’m well aware. And that’s a conversation we’ve had long before now. Irina and I understood the risks when we decided to have our son. We understood he’d grow up in a life with a possibility of loss - but seeing as how there’s no life free of loss we agreed on that. We agreed it would be worth it, even despite the risk.”

“Which is all fair and good, but Kiyoshi didn’t.”

Karasuma’s expression falls. But as he opens his mouth to speak, Nagisa beats him to it.

“He never agreed to this life. He never asked to be born into this. I’m not asking you to quit, Karasuma! Shit, that would be the most selfish thing I could possibly do. But I want you to at least look at this from his perspective. He is scared out of his mind right now. If you can't change anything, you need to at least talk to him about i-”

“He’ll heal in time, Nagisa. Irina is going to come home. The doctors believe she is going to make it. It’ll take months of physical therapy, but I believe everything will be fine. She’s going to recover, and so is Kiyoshi. He’s a strong boy.”

“...Why don’t you seem to get that this is only the straw that broke the camel’s back?” Nagisa asks. “This is not the only issue in Kiyoshi’s life. He’s always had deeply troubling paranoia and self-esteem issues, and they’re getting worse by the day. It’s not even just the danger you two are in. It’s the isolation, really! You two are never home!”

He doesn’t mean to sound accusatory, but that’s just how it comes out. Shaking his head, he spits “I can’t possibly imagine how lonely that is.”

Karasuma’s quiet for another long minute. But finally, he speaks up, his voice unrelenting. “With all due respect, he’s a teenage boy,” he says. “Of course he has issues. When I was his age I was much the same; overthinking everything. Constantly worrying. But I turned out okay, didn’t I?” He shakes his head. “What he needs more than anything is time. He’ll turn out fine.”

He says that so confidently, but staring down the brave and oh so unafraid Karasuma, Nagisa wonders if he’d turned out so okay after all.

“You don’t know that,” Nagisa says. “Aren’t you worried?”

“Of course I’m worried!” Karasuma replies. “But he doesn’t want my support, Nagisa. He pushes me away whenever I try. I don’t want to end up making things worse than they already are.”

“Oh. And so now you’re afraid? That’s why you’re letting him face this on his own?” Irritation prickles in his tone. He knows it’s unwarranted, but he just can’t stand it. Karasuma is the strongest adult he’s ever met. He should be able to fix this! And so why? How can he just stand b-?

“I am not afraid!” Karasuma spits. “He is just in a fragile place right now. He thinks I’m patronizing him when I attempt to reach out-”
“Because you’ve alienated him!” Nagisa interjects. “All of his life you’ve made it this weird, special occasion whenever he receives praise from you… because you are hardly a part of it! He is desperate for attention, but doesn’t know how to react to it. You cannot run away right now!”

“I am not running away,” Karasuma growls. “I am attempting to juggle my work life, my son’s mental health, and taking care of my dying wife. Do you blame me for not knowing what to do?”

“I’m telling you what to do!”

“And you could be wrong!” Karasuma warns. “I came here to discuss the options with you, not receive unwarranted hostility. I understand this is a thing near and dear to your heart, Nagisa… but it is to me as well. I don’t want anything bad to happen. You need to think this through from a reasonable standpoint. What if your plan goes off the rails? What if he doesn’t take it well? I don’t know what to say to him during a time like this. There are no words.”

He motions to stand. He slides out of the booth, eyes narrowed all the while. “I’m well aware my son has issues, and has had them for a long while. But-”

“You’ve just decided to do nothing about them?”

“No!” Karasuma refutes. “And I resent the implication! You have no idea what’s going on in my son’s life. You have no idea what he’s going through. So don’t you come in here and-”

“No! Shut up! Neither do you! You are never around for him! It breaks his heart, Karasuma!”

Karasuma twitches, grimacing for a brief moment. But soon his expression returns to normal, and he says in a calm, unagitated voice “…I don’t see when you became such an expert on the topic, Nagisa.”

Nagisa balls his fist. He hadn’t meant for this to become so argumentative, but there’s no going back now. It pisses him off! Just how much Karasuma can act like he doesn’t care! Who cares if he really does deep down!? How is his son supposed to know that!? His thirteen-year-old, spiraling, self-loathing boy!?

He’s terrified of what fallout this will cause. He’s terrified of what bridges he might burn, or how the rest of the E-Class will react if they hear he cussed Karasuma out. But he’s even more afraid of something terrible happening to Kiyoshi. When he agreed to become his teacher… he agreed to stand up for him no matter what. Always do what’s best for him, and protect him through thick and thin. That’s the promise he made to Karasuma and Irina, and that’s the promise he made to Kiyoshi himself. He’s not going to back down on that now, even if that means he has to stand up to his own teacher.

“When I taught him for the whole damn year!” he shrieks, lunging towards Karasuma. “When I was there for him because you weren’t, and because I’m constantly afraid he’s going to kill himself! You have been absent all of his life, and you’re afraid to even talk to him? It’s him! He should be afraid! He just about lost his damn mother! Are you really willing to let him cave in!”

And before he even realizes what he’s doing, he smacks his palm upside Karasuma’s face. Heart pounding… breath heavy… he stares, glares, and realizes what he’s done. He stumbles back, horrified, and acutely aware of the fact that he’d felt it for the first time in a long time today.

...Bloodlust.

Karasuma’s staring at him, eyes wide.
“I-” Nagisa freezes. “...Listen. Shit- I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to- I shouldn’t have- I shouldn’t have touched you. But you get why I’m worried, right? Please tell me you get it-”

Suddenly, he feels every eye in the establishment on him. Terrified of being WcEvicted from the WcDonalds for WcAssaulting a customer, he takes a shaky gulp.

“It’s-”

“No,” Karasuma says, his expression finally softening. “...I get it,” he says.

“Are you sure?” Nagisa asks. “I- I didn’t hurt you, right?”

Of course... Kiyoshi still comes first. But there’s no getting through to Karasuma by slapping him in the face. And there’s no remaining his son’s teacher with a fucking assault charge.

Karasuma’s hand drifts up to his cheek. He touches it and frowns.

“No,” he repeats. “...You didn’t even manage to leave a mark.”

Nagisa’s expression pales. Ah... so it seems the snake’s been defanged with age.

On second thought, he’s rather thankful Karasuma is taking this relatively well. He’s 5’3, and Karasuma breaks necks for a living. If he wanted he could snap him like a damn toothpick.

“...You did scare the shit out of me, however.

“And I’m sorry. You’re right. I shouldn’t have leapt at you.”

“No. Not that,” Karasuma says. “You kids grew up assassins. Violence is how you show your conviction. That’s why...” he pauses, fiddling with his tie as he slides back into his seat. “...I need to ask. Did you really mean those things you said? About me not doing my job as a father? About Kiyoshi...-”

He can’t finish the sentence.

Nagisa suddenly feels ashamed. For the first time in a long time he catches sight of genuine worry on Karasuma’s face. Did he seriously just tell a guy he’s afraid his son is going to commit suicide?

“I...” his voice falters. Now’s not the time to lie, but at the same time is that something he can just say? It’s inconsiderate. It’s cruel. It’s terrifying.

“...Yes,” he finally says, awkwardly sliding back into the booth. “I meant everything I said. And I’m not just saying that to scare you,” he shakes his head. “I hate to say those things. I really do! But Kiyoshi has shown signs of severe psychological distress pretty much his entire life. And it’s getting worse. It’s getting so much worse. I’m scared one of these days you’re just going to come home and he’s going to have...-”

‘Gotten too scared.’

‘Finally given up.’

‘Killed himself.’

...Turns out Nagisa can’t quite say it either.

“...Going to have done something bad. I’m sorry. I know that’s worrying to hear. But I do think that
Karasuma. And it 

scare

es me. I never want to lose a student like that. And I never want you to go through that. I’d do… I’d do anything to prevent that.”

Where his voice had been so firm- so harsh a second ago, now Nagisa just feels it falter. That anger’s faded into helplessness, and with it all his conviction’s vanished. He doesn’t feel brave... he doesn’t feel like a protector... he just feels scared!

“...As... as would I,” Karasuma says. “I’m... sorry if I made it seem like I don’t care. I do care... more than anything. He’s my boy.”

“I know,” Nagisa says, voice quiet. “But that doesn’t prevent you from making mistakes.”

“...I... shouldn’t have argued with you,” Karasuma relents. “I’m sorry if I seemed defensive. Or apathetic. I guess it’s just... hard for me. I hear you say those things and I... I don’t want to believe them. They scare me.”

“And they scare me too, Karasuma,” Nagisa says, an exhaustion to his tone. “But they had to be brought up sooner or later.”

“Do you really believe I can fix this? That I can help? I’ve... never been an open man. Showing these things... talking about what scares me... it’s hard. What if...? What if it’s too late for me? What if I do it wrong? What if I just make things worse?”

“...You won’t know until you try,” Nagisa says. “Listen: of course I’m not saying this is going to be the end-all of Kiyoshi’s problems. He has a severe chemical imbalance in his brain, and his mother just got mutilated overseas. But yes, I do think it would help him if you started to spend more time around him. Yes, I do think his anxieties about your work would lessen if you genuinely discussed them with him. And yes, I do think he’d start to feel better about himself if he heard you say something nice about him once in a while. He thinks he’s not good enough for you, Karasuma.”

Karasuma’s face falls. Brows furrowed... eyes wounded, he says “...No. No. Of course he’s good enough. He-” He takes a moment to regain his composure, but even then his voice still quivers as he speaks.

“He’s kind... and empathetic... and gentle. He’s smart - way smarter than me or his mother, and when he’s truly confident about something he runs with it. He’s creative... and funny... and far better with people than he gives himself any credit for. He’s... he’s everything I wish I could have been as a boy, and he makes me proud every day.”

It’s only then that Nagisa’s expression finally softens as well. Of... of course he shouldn’t have been afraid of losing Karasuma over lashing out at him. He really does want what’s best for Kiyoshi deep down. He just... doesn’t know how. It’s not that he hasn’t been paying attention. He just...

...Doesn’t know how to reach out.

Of course... there are still issues with that. It doesn’t lessen any of what Kiyoshi’s been through. But a parent who’s trying... a parent who’s willing to step back and say “I want to do better from here on out...” well, that’s better than a lot of parents out there. Karasuma still has a long, long way to go, but Nagisa knows this has to be the reason he’s respected him this long.

Clueless, but not cruel... willing to do anything to prevent the atrocity they both see coming.

“Go home and tell him that, Karasuma. Exactly what you said to me. Tell him you’ve been
afraid… and tell him you haven’t known what to do… and tell him that you’re sorry. If he knows… if he knows you’re scared too… if he knows you’re capable of being fallible, as opposed to this figure looming over him… well, then… I think he could finally start moving forward at least a little.”

Karasuma nods as he speaks. And finally, when it’s his turn to go, all he has to offer up is a quiet voice.

“…And you’re certain this will work?”

“Of course not, Karasuma! Being a teacher… being a parent, it’s just throwing things at a wall until they stick. You can never be certain. But that’s no… that’s no excuse not to try. Sometimes you just have to do all you can.” He waves his hand. “…You should get going. Trust me when I say I really do believe it’ll help. And… trust me when I say I’ll handle things on the school side. You just go home and tell your son you love him.”

Karasuma pauses. “…That’s all you had to discuss?”

“Yeah. I think so. At least for now. I’ll text you if I have any other concerns. Just let me know how it goes, okay?”

“…Okay,” Karasuma says, starting to stand. “Thank you.”

“No need,” Nagisa says, making no effort to follow him. “…And… good luck.”

“What about you?” Karasuma asks. “Do you plan to stay here?”

“Ah… not for long,” Nagisa says. “I might just grab a meal, then I’m gonna head home. I’ll be rooting for you, big guy.”

“…Ah… thank you,” Karasuma repeats, this blank, awkward expression on his face. It’s easy to tell he doesn’t know quite how to react to the reassurance. But Nagisa thinks he’s okay with that.

“See you around?”

“…Yeah. See you around.”

With that, Karasuma turns to leave. Stops to stare at Nagisa for one moment over his shoulder, before heading through the glass push-doors and disappearing from his sight.

Nagisa really hopes he can handle this. For Kiyoshi’s sake, and for his.

’...It started a little after the class election.’

“Now… I suppose that’s not really what spurred it, but - uh… that’s how I’ve remembered it. It was just after you two won. I was… I was really happy for you. And I was trying my best to celebrate, too.”

Fumiko’s eying him curiously, but she doesn’t speak. She just stands there, nodding along to his words.

Makoto looks confused too, but in a different way. He teeters from foot to foot, an uneasy look on his face. But when his eyes flicker towards Kiyoshi, as if asking ‘you’re not talking about what I think you’re talking about, are you?’ Kiyoshi doesn’t have it in him to give him a response.
“But then… this weird thing happened to me. It was just that night, actually. I fell asleep thinking about you guys, and I had the strangest dream.”

That’s all it takes. Makoto steps forward, holding an arm out as he inserts himself between Kiyoshi and Fumiko. Little beads of sweat are dripping down his forehead.

“Maybe- maybe now isn’t the best time to talk about this, Kiyoshi!” he begs.

“I have to, Makoto,” he replies, eyes locked on the ground.

“I’m just- I’m just not sure it’s relevant to-”

“Relevant to what?” Fumiko interrupts, a defensive edge to her voice. “What’s he talking about? What are… what are you two talking about?”

“I didn’t mean to hide it from you,” Kiyoshi says. “I guess I just got… scared. I don’t really have any right to be, but I’ve always been a selfish guy. It’s always been about ‘me, me, me.’ But… uh- I don’t think it can be anymore. I think if I don’t tell you this, something really bad is going to happen to you. Or to my mom. Or to me.”

Makoto’s sputtering. “Your mom!? What does any of this have to do with your mom!? What does - what does the trashbag thing got to do with your mom!?”

Fumiko’s staring. “The trashbag thing!?”

“Because I think-” Kiyoshi doesn’t mean to raise his voice. He supposes he just hates the way Makoto’s looking at him with those pleading eyes.

His shoulders sink.

“Because I think… she’s being punished because of me. And if I don’t do something now… well… it’s gonna get worse. A lot worse.” He pauses. “Or, at the very least, I’m never gonna be able to live with myself.”

“This isn’t going to fix anything, Kiyoshi. This is going to make things worse. So much worse.” He sounds close to tears.

“At least let him talk,” Fumiko interjects, a tenseness to her voice. She turns to Kiyoshi. “...Go on.”

She’s staring him down with those piercing eyes. They’re scary when you look at them close. But she doesn’t look hurt… not yet.

“...I dreamt about… terrible things. Death and destruction. Things that scared me more than… more than I can even say. But - uh… it wasn’t just one bad dream. I thought it might be at first, but it wasn’t. I kept having these dreams… over and over again.”

“Kiyoshi-” Makoto repeats.

“There was… uh… only one conclusion I could draw from these dreams after a while. And that was… uh…”

“Please!”

“...That I have a past life too.”

Fumiko’s expression shifts slightly. She takes a step back, although Kiyoshi’s not sure if it’s
entirely consciously.

Makoto’s covering his face with his hands.

“...Okay. Go on,”

Her hands are shaking just slightly.

“And - uh… I guess some people here would think that’s something to celebrate. But… it’s not. It’s - er… it’s one of the bad ones. It’s…”

...Fumiko takes another step back.

“...One where I remember hurting people. A lot of people. I feel bad about it now, but I guess back then it didn’t really matter to me.”

’Or maybe you reveled in it,’ the voice in the back of his mind chides.

...Kiyoshi doesn’t say that out loud.

“Whatever it is you did back then… it doesn’t matter, Kiyoshi!” Makoto repeats. “It’s in the past! It’s-”

“No. Let him speak,” Fumiko growls.

...Another step back.

“Because… I was a bad guy. A really bad guy. And… I wasn’t just hurting random people. I was… uh… hurting people I know and care about. People who have cared about me… supported me through thick and thin. And that’s why I need to say this now- because otherwise I don’t think I’ll ever be able to make up for that.”

“Hurting people… how?” Fumiko asks.

She’s trying so hard not to let her voice shake.

“...Berating them sometimes. Telling them they’re worthless… stupid. Other times it was more in-depth. I’d manipulate them… tell them things they thought had happened really didn’t, or raise my voice when they disagreed with me. Scare tactics, I guess. It was really bad stuff.” He hesitates.

“Sometimes I did even worse.”

“H… how?”

“Just-! Just quit it, Kiyoshi! I told you myself! None of that matters now! You’re not like that anymore!”

“But aren’t I!?” Kiyoshi snaps. “How long did I lie to her for!? In what world is that not manipulation!?”

“How did you do even worse!”? Fumiko demands, her voice a roar.

...Kiyoshi feels small.

“Sometimes I’d hit them.”

Fumiko’s eyes widen, before narrowing into tiny pinpricks.
"Shut it, Kiyoshi!" Makoto cries. "None of - none of this is relevant anymore. All you're going to do is freak Fumiko out. And so-

"No," Fumiko interrupts. "Tell me what you were going to say."

Kiyoshi sputters. "I... I-

"You don't gotta if you don't wanna, Kiyoshi! You shouldn't force yourself! It's not-"

"You should go," Fumiko snaps. "Whatever it is Kiyoshi has to say to me: It’s important. I don’t want you silencing him."

Makoto hesitates. "...But-

Kiyoshi leans awkwardly from foot to foot. "...Fumiko’s right. You should... step out. I’m sorry for asking you to listen to this." He pauses. "Don't worry about me. I'll be fine."

Makoto hesitates for a long moment, but finally turns. "...You sure?" he asks.

"Yeah. We're sure," Fumiko answers sternly. Makoto gulps, but does as told.

It’s a long moment before she speaks again. But when she does… her voice is quiet.

"...This isn’t funny, Kiyoshi."

“I know it’s not,” Kiyoshi says, this heaviness to his words. “But it’s the truth. I’d yell at people... and I'd hit them. Because I was angry... or I was frustrated... or just because I was bored and there was nothing better to do. They never fought back. Sometimes ‘cause I was just in control of them, I guess. They couldn’t do much without losing their jobs. Other times they said it was ‘cause they believed in me.”

“They’d say ‘I believe in you,’ over and over again. ‘It’s not too late for you. There’s something good inside, I promise.’ And I’d just keep hurting them. In some ways, I think stuff like that just made me more mad.”

Fumiko takes another step backwards.

"You don't mean-"

It’s almost sad just how quickly her demeanor shifts. Before she’d been looking at him with apprehension, if not concern. Now Fumiko looks a bit like she’s staring at a stranger.

Kiyoshi takes a step forward.

“I do,” he says in a tiny voice. “I don’t want to, but I think I have to.”

Fumiko’s blinking fast. She takes another step backwards, but stops herself halfway, heel digging into the dirt.

“No. No. You said you’d be there for me!”

“I know.”

“You said you were my family!”

Kiyoshi lets his hands fall to his side.
“...I really thought I could be.”

“K… knowing what you knew… you just… just let me say those things to you? You just… played with my feelings?”

Her voice is quivering with anger, but she doesn’t budge from her spot. She stands there, staring him down with accusatory eyes.

“I didn’t know,” Kiyoshi says. “I really didn’t.”

Fumiko’s fists ball. “Give me one damn reason I should believe that!”

Why is it that even now he can read her expression so accurately? There’s an anger to her words, but behind her eyes he just sees heartbreak. She’s biting down on her lip… hand shaking as she speaks. It must be taking everything she has not to cry.

...Kiyoshi’s pretty close to crying as well.

“You know I can’t do that,” he admits. “Nothing I say could - would... would fix it. I’ve hurt you beyond repair.”

He can’t. He won’t. It’s not fair to her. He won’t let her look at his weeping face and see pathetic, weak little Kiyoshi. That’s not the man who hurt her. That’s just preying on her good nature… the good nature he knows she still has. The good nature who will view him with pity - with sympathy. He knows that’s not what she wants!

(...He knows that’s not what he wants.)

“I hate this, Fumiko. I don’t want to be saying this to you either. But I have to. And... if there’s anything I can do to make it up to you... please... just let me know. I... I care about you! I do! And even if I don’t deserve it, you’re still someone I want to have in my life.”

Another step forward.

Fumiko steps back.

She has to think it over for a second, staring at him with those shell shocked, teary eyes. But finally her head lowers and her eyes narrow. She grits her teeth so hard he can see her jaw shake.

“I’m someone you still want to have in your life!? What!? Because you feel entitled to it!? Because I enable you!?”

“No!” Kiyoshi says. “It’s n-”

“Because I poured my heart out to you, and it made you feel good!? Because I told you everything about me, like some clueless moron, and you took advantage of that!?”

“No!”

“All because you wanted to feel good about yourself! All because you wanted to pretend to be some hero to me! Someone… someone capable of fixing my problems when you’re the one who caused half them!?”

Her voice goes from an accusation to a shriek. There are tears prickling in the corners of her eyes, but if she notices them she doesn’t bother to do anything. Instead, she just stands there… letting them trail down her cheeks as she clenches her fist so tight it shakes.
“I didn’t- I didn’t mean t- I didn’t want t-” Kiyoshi struggles to find his words. Stumbling over himself, he murmurs “I didn’t want to- I never feel good about myself! I really wanted to help you! You’re… you’re important to me!”

“So important to you you lied to me for months on end. So important to you because you’re only telling me this now because you’re afraid of being punished!? Not because you feel bad!? Not because you’re sorry!?”

“I am sorry!” Kiyoshi cries. “I- It haunts me, Fumiko! I haven’t slept in months! All… all I want to do is take back the way I treated you!”

“Well,” Fumiko says, her voice icy. “You’re right: you can’t. You treated me like less than human. And if you think some.. Some…” she chokes back a sob. “Some innocent act… some… some pretending to to be my friend will make it up to be, then… well… you’re the stupid one now!”

She reaches to wipe at her eyes. Eyes still narrowed… mouth still a snarl, she bats at her eyes and sniffs.

“I… I…”

No. This isn’t what he’d wanted! He’d just… he’d just wanted to fix things! Why can’t he- why can’t he just make it right!? This is exactly why he’d held off in the first place! He hadn’t wanted to make her cry! He’d just wanted her…-

...He’d just wanted her to be safe.

“It wasn’t pretend. Please believe me, Fumiko. You can hate me! You can want me dead if you want! But please believe me! It wasn’t pretend! I… I… really was your friend.”

He meets her hateful gaze, and feels his heart sink in his chest.

“...At least I wanted to be.”

She seems to consider that for a moment, but soon turns around. “Fuck you,” she says, voice low. “Fuck you... if you think you can take advantage of me and my feelings, then you’re wrong. I know who you are, and I’m not stupid. I’m not vulnerable, and I’m not gonna just sit here while you tear my life apart again. Tell me whatever the hell you want, Kiyoshi, but I am finally happy. And I am never going to play the role of the victim again.”

“...So this is it?”

Fumiko gives him an utterly disgusted look. “...Yeah. This is it.”

She turns her back to him. “Don’t contact me again. Stay away from me, and stay away from Makoto. If you ever-”

“He said it was okay…-!”

Fumiko’s expression contorts. “And he’s… he’s-” she sputters. “Well, we need to have a talk.” Her fist clenches once more. “But as for you, I never want to see you again. And I hope you... I hope you…-” She pauses, voice quivering as she speaks. “...I hope you never forget what you did to me here, Kotaro.”

With that, she’s gone. One heavy footstep after the other, she turns her back to him and starts to
vanish. Scarf fluttering… tears trailing down her cheeks and caught shimmering in the sunset, she leaves. She abandons him. She gives up on him, and says it’s too late.

‘I don’t trust you, and I’m never going to.’

...Because he’s the monster. Because he’s her beast. Because he told her the truth, and this is how she’s going to remember him for the rest of his god damn life.

‘No! No! Anything but this!’

It had gone so differently with Makoto!? Why!? Had he said it wrong, or is it simply an unmendable transgression? He’d known from the start that this was the most likely outcome, but even so it sends his stomach turning and his knees close to collapsing. He’d gotten his hopes up, hadn’t he? That there could still be a happy ending for him. Why!? Why!? Why!?

How stupid could he be!?

Makoto’s watching them from fifteen-something feet away. But the moment Fumiko turns, he’s darting their way. There’s this sheer terror in his eyes… a ‘wait, what happened?’ ‘this can’t be it!’

...This is it. This is all they’ll ever have.

Kiyoshi feels his heart catch in his throat.

This is it. This is the end for him. The person he’d harmed the most… she loathes him. She knows what he’ll always be. And no amount of care for her will ever change that. He’s stuck... with himself... with this monster he’s created. And all he’ll ever be is cruel. Wrong. Bad.

“Wait!”

He doesn’t know why he reaches his hand out. He supposes he’s just scared... scared of being trapped in this legacy. Scared of being remembered that way. Scared of the way she sees him, and scared of the way he sees himself. He’d do anything to change it!

His hand wraps round Fumiko’s wrist, and he begs- screams at the top of his lungs.

“Please! Tell me it’s not too late for me! Even if you hate me! Even if you never want to see me again! Please! Tell me I can still be goo-!”

That’s when she socks him in the face.

Kiyoshi hardly processes what’s happened at first, stumbling backwards before crashing into the dirt. But as she stares down at him with tear-filled, outraged eyes, he feels his world begin to spin.

“Don’t fucking touch me!” she demands, her voice now quivering with not heartbreak - but sheer wrath. “Don’t come near me, and don’t you dare lay a fucking hand on me! I will fucking kill you!”

Kiyoshi falls silent, hand quivering as it drifts up to touch his eye. He’s met with a subtle throbbing, and the sharp pain of a sucker punch.

“I... I...”

Makoto’s drawing closer.
“I didn’t mean to try to intimidate you-- I didn’t mean to try to scare you-- I…-” He’s at a complete loss of words.

“Yes, right.”

“…I’m sorry, Aguri.”

“Don’t call me that name,” Fumiko spits. “And for the record: no. I don’t think you can change. You’re just gonna have to live with that.”

With that, she’s really gone - sprinting away as fast as she possibly can. By the time Makoto’s reached Kiyoshi’s side she’s already halfway over the hill, heading down the mountain and far, far away from him.

“W-what happened!?” Makoto asks, holding a hand out to try and help Kiyoshi to his feet.

Kiyoshi doesn’t take it. Just stares at the ground… and then towards his knees. Still doing everything in his power not to cry, he gives a defeated shrug and grumbles “…She hates me. What else?”

“I- I- I…-” Makoto looks panicked, anxiously kicking at the dirt as he speaks. “Are you alright!? She didn’t hurt you, did she!?”

“No, she didn’t hurt me!” Kiyoshi snaps. “She’s not the bad guy here! She just - I just-...” he drifts off. “…I scared her.”

Makoto’s silent for a long moment, glancing at Kiyoshi, then at the forest, then back towards Kiyoshi. He takes a few hurried steps away, then stops in place, dragging his heels in the dirt.

“I- uh! I’ll be right back!” he says. “I’m gonna- I’m gonna make sure everything’s okay with her! Just-! Just stay right here! Everything will be okay! I promise!”

But as he turns his back on Kiyoshi as well… hurries into the forest and after their friend, Kiyoshi knows he’s wronger than he’s ever been. Because he remembers the way Fumiko had looked at him - sheer hatred, and worse - terror in her eyes… and he will never, ever be able to burn that image from his mind.

Still on the ground… left alone with his throbbing eye and his thoughts, Kiyoshi finally does the only thing he can think of.

…Hangs his head and sobs.

Makoto’s life is falling apart in such a short span of time.

Goddamn it! He’d known telling Fumiko was a bad idea! And so why!? Why had Kiyoshi felt the need to share!? Something to do with his mom? But that doesn’t make any sense! He’s spiraling! Acting really weird! Weirder than usual! And that’s saying a lot, because he’s that guy! Gah! They’re gonna have to talk later! But now’s not the time! He needs to… he needs to…-

He needs to look for Fumiko.

“Fumiko!” he shouts. “Wait! Come back! Where are you!?”

Shit. Shit. Shit. He knows he shouldn’t have stepped out of the conversation. He could have mediated this. Kiyoshi had just seemed so desperate... And Fumiko so mad! Plus, it’s not like he’d
been prepared to talk about this. Kiyoshi had put him on blast! What else was he supposed to do!?

There’s no sight of her. She’d just bolted into the forest so quickly. By the time he’d made sure Kiyoshi was okay, she’d already been long out of sight. But she couldn’t have gotten far! She has to hear him right now! Is she just ignoring him, then!?

“How about this!” he repeats, cupping his mouth with his hands. “Come on! Please! Just hold up a second! I know you’re scared, but we can talk through this! I promise!”

...Silence.

Gah! She’s not thinking straight! She’s freaked! But he can’t - he can’t just let her run off like this! He doesn’t even know where she’s going! Home? To Nagisa’s? What if she ends up tripping and hurting herself!? No-one will be able to find her out here!

He briefly considers dialing Nagisa, but feels panic grip his chest at the thought. He can’t… he can’t just explain what happened to him! What if he freaks out too!? What if he gets mad at Kiyoshi!? That’s not… that’s not what Makoto wants! He just wants to make sure Fumiko’s alright!

“You’re really scaring me! Please! Just come back! We can talk about this, I promise! So please! Stop running! I don’t want anything to happen right now!”

Heart pounding, head dizzy-- it’s hard to think straight. But he swears he hears the stomping of footsteps a little to his left. He catches sight of something bright pink and makes a run for it - reaching out to grab at Fumiko. She jolts at his touch, but doesn’t push him away, even as he speaks up in a panicked voice.

“...There you are, Fumiko! I was worried about you! Scared you were going to, like, trip down the mountain or sprain your ankle! You really shouldn’t be out here alone!”

She doesn’t give him a response; simply stares at him with piercing eyes. Makoto has to do a double-take. Why does it… why does it suddenly feel like she’s mad at him?

“Listen! I know you’re upset, but now’s not the time to behave irrationally! Kiyoshi hasn’t - he didn’t mean to do any of that stuff! He’s not a bad guy! We just need to sit down and talk this through! This is all a big misunderstanding! As soon as you-”

“How long have you known about this?”

Makoto takes a step back, mouth hanging open even as he clings tight to Fumiko’s hand.

“...H… huh?”

“How long have you known about this!” Fumiko demands. “That he’s Yanagisawa!? He talked like he’s been going through this for months! Have you… have you been in on this!”

“I-in on this?” Makoto asks, shaking his head. “No- no! You’re getting the wrong idea! This isn’t - this isn’t some scheme! He was just scared! He knew you… he knew you wouldn’t take this well. He didn’t want to hurt you!”

Fumiko’s hand drifts up to grab his wrist. She stares at him with serious eyes. “How long have you known about this?” she repeats, voice quivering.

“I- uh… a little under two months, I guess.”
Fumiko’s gaze hardens. Although it quickly softens just as quickly. Her shoulders go tense.

“How did he get you to agree to this?” she demands. “What did he say to you? Did he threaten you? Manipulate you? Don’t tell me he laid a hand on you—”

“E-eep! No!” Makoto exclaims. “He didn’t - it’s nothing like that! We both agreed to do this! It - shit! Don’t blame him! It was my idea!”

Fumiko’s grip tightens and her voice goes rigid.

“What was?” she asks, a suddenly accusatory air to her tone.

“I… not telling you!” Makoto says. “It wasn’t some - it wasn’t some malicious thing! I just… I knew you’d freak out. He’s been stressed enough as is lately, Fumiko. Like complete self-loathing depressed! I didn’t want him to have to… I didn’t want to have him—”

“Deal with me?”

“No! It’s not - it has nothing to do with that! I just knew it wasn’t good for you, either! I knew you wouldn’t take it well! I didn’t want you to go through that! Kiyoshi’s- Kiyoshi was - he was your friend! I’d never want you to lose tha-!”

“He was only my friend because he was lying to me!” Fumiko interrupts. “What don’t you get about that!? If I’d known - if I’d known he was that person then I never would have trusted him! I never would have - I never would have spent time with him, I never would have told him those things I did. I… I… I-” She’s struggling to catch her breath. “Oh my God. He knows everything.”

“He knows about - he knows about my parents. About… about all my worst fears. He knows exactly who I am, and you… you deliberately hid that from me? You - you let him hide in plain sight?”

Her breaths are heavy, but her grip doesn’t loosen. She stares at Makoto with petrified, teary eyes.

“I wasn’t - it wasn’t - deliberate isn’t-” Makoto sputters. “It- it really doesn’t matter, Fumiko! You need to think this through, Fumiko! This is… this is Kiyoshi we’re talking about! He’s not going to use that against you!”

“I know - I know nothing about who he really is!” Fumiko gasps. “This is - this is Yanagisawa we’re talking about—”

“Not- not anymore!” Makoto refutes. “He’s… he’s different now! He wants to do better! I know he does!”

Horror seems to dawn in Fumiko’s eyes. She takes one step back, then another, and tears her hand from Makoto’s grip.

“...And you’ve taken his side over mine.”

Makoto sputters. “Hey! Wait! There’s no - there’s no sides! I just - I get why you’re afraid, Fumiko! I really do! But you can’t - you can’t take that out on him! He didn’t ask to be born! I just… I just think it’s not right to ditch him over this!”

“Even after everything he did!?” There’s a building anger in Fumiko’s voice. Her fist quivers as she speaks. “After the way he treated you… You still think his feelings come first!?”
Makoto pauses, but shouts “...Y... yes! I do!” As he stands his ground. “Those... those things I went through...” Horrible experiments and a year full of torment. “...They don’t matter! I know Kiyoshi can still do good! And I’m not going to let my - I’m not going to let my fears get the best of me during a time like this! He needs me! And my friends’ feelings come first!”

Fumiko’s silent for a long moment, eyes locked on the ground before flickering up towards Makoto.

“...Mine, then.” Her voice is hushed, but no less hostile. “If you really don’t care what you’ve been through - the things he did to you... then what about what he did to me? The beatings. The abuse. The constant beratement, and even getting me killed in the end. The buying me- yes, fucking buying me at age twenty-three and slowly chipping away at me until there was nothing left to salvage. Is that just okay with you now!?”

“Of course not! Fumiko - I-”

“No. Let me finish. If your friends’ feelings come first, then what about mine? Did my feelings matter to you when you decided to hide this from me, or was I your second priority? After everything we’ve been through together... everything we’ve faced... you STILL think he deserves a second chance?”

“I...” Makoto hesitates. There’s a fire burning behind Fumiko’s eyes, and it scares him. But worse... what really gets to him is the terror... the way her voice shakes, and the subtle way she bats at her eyes just to keep the tears at bay. Is that really what he’s willing to stand for?

Years of abuse... a legacy of cruelty. Human experimentation and reckless disregard for the people they loved. Psychological torture... constant terror... writhing flesh... and Fumiko - Aguri - cowering in the corner, covering her forehead with her arms.

“...Yes,” he says... and he says it firmly. “I’m not saying the stuff he did was okay! But I’m not gonna back down, either! Kiyoshi’s good! He can... he can still fix things! It’s not too late for him! I just know it! Because...-”

He drifts off.

Because, well, if it’s too late for Kiyoshi... then just how late is it for Makoto?

“Because?” Fumiko asks, an edge to her voice. “Because what!?”

“I don’t know!” Makoto replies, throwing his hands in the air.

“Because you’re stupid!? Because you’re soft!? Or because you just don’t care!? Is that it? Do you just not care anymore!?”

“Of course I care!”

“It was us against the world! Us against him! That’s why we bonded, isn’t it!? Because we were victims! Because we understood each other! All I had was you! I trusted you with my life! I died for you! And now you’re taking his side!?”

“I’m not-” Makoto takes a step back, suddenly feeling terribly sick to his stomach. “I’m not taking SIDES! I don’t think it’s alright, Fumiko! The way he treated you! And if you’re angry, then so be it! But I won’t let you step all over him! In fact, I don’t want to have a stance on this at all! I just wanna - I just wanna help you two talk to each other! Like- a neutral ground! Isn’t that okay!?”
“No! That’s not okay!” Fumiko hisses. “You can’t just ‘take a neutral ground’ on whether or not beating the shit out of me is okay!”

He hates the way she says it. He hates the way her voice raises and the hatred seeded behind those words. No. No. Don’t say it like that! That’s not what he’s doing, okay?? It’s not!

“He’s not the one who abused you!”

Fumiko stares. She takes another step forward, but Makoto moves first, tearing himself back.

“He’s not! He’s not - he’s not that person anymore! It’s not fair to hold him accountable for something he did a lifetime ago. K… Kiyoshi- he’s different from Yanagisawa. He hasn’t hit you once!”

Fumiko’s eyes narrow. Her expression contorts into a sneer, and she brushes a strand of hair out of her face as she speaks. “Is that the stance you’re taking now?” she asks. “Okay then… then you didn’t raise the E-Class. We never knew each other, and I never died in your arms. You did nothing for Nagisa, Karma, or Akari, and you don’t deserve to talk to them under the pretense of ‘I was such a good guy back then.’ Do you even hear what you’re saying?”

“That’s- that’s different-!”

“How!? If we’re allowed to take credit for the bonds we forged back then, then he has to take accountability for the things he ruined! Just because it happened a ‘long time ago’ doesn’t mean it’ll ever stop mattering! And it certainly doesn’t mean it’ll ever stop hurting!”

“I… I…” Makoto has no argument. He can’t just - he can’t just say they’re not those people anymore. He knows who he is! But… but-!

“…Aguri wouldn’t have wanted this.”

“Pardon?”

“You heard me,” Makoto says. “Aguri wouldn’t have wanted to do this. And I know you don’t either. Aguri- she-! You always believed in second chances! You believed in everyone no matter what. And you believed in him… up until the very end! Are you really going to give up on him now after he’s finally become the person you knew he could b-?”

“MAYBE AGURI WAS STUPID!” Fumiko interrupts, her voice a shriek. Fists balled… shaking with rage. “Maybe Aguri had no fucking idea what she was talking about, and maybe her ideals got her killed! Maybe Aguri was wrong, and maybe I was a big stupid moron too, seeing as how I ever trusted you! But I’m not going to be! Not anymore! And if this is really the decision you’re going to make - if you’re really going to stand by him… then so be it. You can do it alone.” She turns her back to him. “As for me, I’m not getting murdered again.”

Makoto stares, a pit in his stomach. He holds a hand out, begging “Wait!”

Fumiko pauses. “Okay,” she says, voice empty. “…What is it? What else do you have to say to me?”

“I…-” Makoto drifts off. She stands there… waiting for him to find something to say. But try as he may… as hard as he fights to find anything to refute her… all he’s left with is silence.

Fumiko scoffs. “It’s funny,” she says, fiddling with the scarf around her neck. “When I first told you who I was, did you know what you said to me? You said you’d protect me. No matter what…
from anything. That’s not a promise that lasted very long, now is it?” She shakes her head. “...I guess I should have known better.”

“I... I will protect you!” Makoto refutes. “Even if you - even if you hate me - even if you’re mean to Kiyoshi. I’m not going to... I’m not going to let some terrible thing happen to you again, okay!”

“You already have. You made no effort to protect me from-”

“You don’t need protection from Kiyoshi!” Makoto’s voice is a shriek- tears pricking in his eyes as he speaks. “Why won’t you just get that!?”

“Because you are going off of nothing! You are just taking his word for it! Yanagisawa’s word. I do need protection, Makoto. And the good news is I’m finally able to provide that for myself. So I don’t care if you think I’m being ‘mean.’ Because we have no way to know if we are safe around that man.”

No. Nonono. They’re safe. They have to be! Kiyoshi’s safe! Makoto’s safe! He’s not going to hurt anyone... he’s... he’s-

“That’s not true! I know he won’t hurt us!”

“How!?”

Because he’s not a murderer! He doesn’t want to hurt anyone anymore! Why would Kiyoshi!? There has to be a way to escape it-! That legacy! They can’t just be trapped in it forever!

“I just do, okay!?”

His voice quivers with conviction, but Fumiko’s hardly shaken. She shoots him a wounded glare, before taking a step back. “…Yeah. I’m sure you do,” she says. “Just like you knew I was going to get impaled by a missile going at 200 miles per hour. There are some things you can’t just ‘know,’ jackass. But thanks for reminding me you still don’t understand how your actions affect others. I think I needed that.”

Makoto’s jaw drops. Hands reaching up to cover his stomach, he suddenly feels like he’s been impaled by a twenty-foot pole. ‘She can’t possibly mean that,’ he thinks, blinking back tears... but looking into Fumiko’s resolute eyes he knows she means that... and he knows she means it more than anything.

‘You really did let me die.’

He takes a shaky step forward, but Fumiko’s far ahead of him. She removes her scarf and gingerly hangs it on a tree branch. “I’m not talking about this any more. I’m going home.”

“...You don’t mean that. You don’t mean that, Aguri. You’ll change your mind eventually. I know it-”

“If that’s what you need to tell yourself,” she replies. “But I don’t intend to change my mind. And I don’t intend to be there for you to pick you up off of the ground again when that man leaves you in ruin. Goodbye, Reaper. And thanks for...” she pauses. “Well, thanks for not that much at all.”

She says it so emotionlessly, but her hand shakes as she speaks. Without another word, she turns her back to him and resumes storming down the mountain. He wants to follow her... but suddenly his knees feel weak, and by the time he’s returned to his senses, she’s already left... taking fifteen
years of memories and then one with her.

Makoto collapses to the dirt, weeping in his hands. Shaking, sobbing and whimpering. "Wait! Aguri!" "Please, come back!" he cries, but it’s too late. There’s no response. He’s left alone with his thoughts… alone with the fact that she hates him.

‘No! Don’t think that!’ he hisses. ‘She doesn’t - she doesn’t… hate you.’

She just… blames him for letting her die young.

Somehow that one’s worse.

He hadn’t meant to - he didn’t even betray her! He just… he stood for what he believed in! Is there really something so wrong with that!? He does think people can change! Plenty of people have! K… Karma! Gakushuu! What about Damien?

(...Then again… plenty of people haven’t. He thinks of Gakuho… Hiromi… and feels a pit in his stomach.)

Kiyoshi’s been there for him! Kiyoshi’s been there for Fumiko! He wasn’t - he wasn’t just going to spit on that! He doesn’t regret what he said! Or what he did for that matter! So why!? Why’s there such an aching feeling in his chest!?

(Because you already took everything from her! Why can’t you just do right by her for once!?)

No. No. This is right. He won’t back down on that. He’s good… he’s good… he’s still good. No matter who he’s killed - what blood he has on his hands - there still has to be a chance for him! And there still has to be a chance for Kiyoshi! He won’t even conceive the alternative!

...Kiyoshi. Oh god… Kiyoshi!

Makoto’d promised he’d be right back. How long has it been now? Is Kiyoshi still up by the school building crying his eyes out? Shit! Shit! How stupid can he be!? Kiyoshi needs him right now! He needs to… he needs to-

It takes all his effort just to get to his feet. He supports himself against a tree, grabbing Fumiko’s scarf while he’s at it, and shakes his head, wiping tears from his eyes.

He can’t cry! He can’t cry right now! Not when Kiyoshi needs him! He can’t - he just has to stop thinking about how everything’s falling apart! Because it’s not! It’s just fucking not, okay!?

Fumiko will come to her senses eventually. She’ll realize she cares about Kiyoshi and she’ll admit he was right. She’ll… she’ll see how good he is! She’ll see how good they are! She has to!

Or else… or else…

No! Don’t think about it.

He folds up the scarf with shaking hands… places it in his pocket, and then makes a run for it. Heart pounding… breaths ragged… he rushes up the mountain… bursts through the underbrush and holds his arms out wide. ‘It’s okay!’ he tries to say. ‘I’m here for you! I’m good, and I’m the hero of this story. It’s not too late for me to fix things!’

But his heart plummets when he reaches the side of the building, and he’s met with what he already knew he would find.
...Nothing at all. Kiyoshi’s long since turned tail and ran.

Chapter End Notes

...So I know I say this a lot... but... I'm sorry?

Okay, no. I'm not. Even remotely. This is a chapter I've been looking forward to writing since I first conceived this fic. That said, however, I AM sorry to put you all through it, and I'm sorry to break any hearts. But this is where shit hits the fan, and it's about damn time. Willingly or not, Kiyoshi's been lying for far too long.

When I first watched Assclass a little over a year ago, I got to the Civil War arc scene and just sorta threw my hands in the air in complete and utter disbelief, because I could not at all understand where Karma and the rest of team kill were coming from in wanting to get rid of the only adult who'd ever loved them. Looking back on that feeling as I first started planning AIS, I knew I wanted there to be a 'Civil War' of its own, with not only the same high tensions and resentment, but understandable motives from both sides. The sort of scenario where the reader will have trouble picking a side, because no-one is even 'right' or 'wrong.' All just miserable and hurt.

I hope I've managed to succeed in that! But if you DO have a side, then you should let me know. Are you Team Blue: Redeem Kiyoshi, or Team Red: FUCK THAT, ACTUALLY?

(As a sidenote w/ Fumiko punching Kiyoshi out: that's definitely not intended as some ~cycle of abuse~ or ~he was the one to hurt her, but now SHE'S the one hurting HIM~ bullshit. That was someone lashing out in a way she felt necessary. Nothing more. Nothing less. It's obviously not right... but it's not abuse, either. It'd be different if she was like repeatedly attacking him. But she didn't. So try to cut her some slack for that one, okay? It's about damn time she fought back)

They're in a super sad reality of a situation right now, and bound to face a lot of strife. That said, thankfully this chapter wasn't ALL suffering (even if it mostly was.) I hope you all also enjoyed the scene between Karasuma and Nagisa. I know it might have felt a little mood whiplashy, but I've been told I'm known for that, and also I felt like it was an important fact to get through Karasuma's thick head, especially just now as shit is hitting the fan.

Something I wanted to emphasize about Karasuma in the world of anime, where there are often only Perfect or downright abusive parents is that sometimes there's just normal, flawed folks too. He really does love Kiyoshi and want what's best for him, it's just that he doesn't know how to give him that, and hasn't for years. But hopefully he'll finally manage to make a breakthrough as Kiyoshi faces his darkest hour.

And by darkest... I mean DARKEST. I've been saying this about this for a while now: but this arc and in particular next chapter are what I'd consider the most upsetting/most angsty part of AIS. Be braced, folks. But not too braced. I keep saying this too: BUT I REALLY DO SWEAR THIS FIC ACTUALLY HAS A HAPPY ENDING.

Some stuff in my schedule's shifted around, and because of that I've decided I'm moving updates back to Wednesday. Next chapter will NOT go up the next immediate
Wednesday, but the one after that, on the 15th. Sorry if that's a bit of a long wait, but I promise it'll be worth it! :D

Some songs that helped me write this chapter were To Break In A Glove and In The Bedroom Down The Hall from Dear Evan Hansen, The Pants Song from Be More Chill, Mole by The Mountain Goats, Words Fail from Dear Evan Hansen, Someone Gets Hurt Reprise from Mean Girls, Good For You from Dear Evan Hansen, Congratulations and First Burn from Hamilton, Icicles by The Scary Jokes, and I Knew You Once by Dodie.

The song I'd like to highlight in particular is actually I Hate You from If/Then, however.

Namely because... I did an animatic of it! A few months back! Of one of the scenes from this chapter! Enjoy! :D And as always, see you next week.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oKIPJUxwR9c
As usual, tread carefully. Warnings for discussion of abusive behavior, a whole lot of angst, and suicide ideation. I'd consider this the heaviest chapter of AIS, so do with that what you please.

The worst part is Fumiko can’t even cry.

She wants to… and she does, just a little. But she knows she has to stop before she gets home. And so she cries her heart out confronting Kiyoshi, and then Makoto... she weeps and sniffs and screams running down the mountainside, and then, with eyes wet, she breaks through the underbrush and back into the real world.

...The real world... where she’s expected to be home in thirty-something minutes now.

The thought scares her… going home now of all times. Her head is spinning and she just can’t stop shaking, but she knows she doesn’t have much of a choice. If she bails on her parents now, who knows what kind of trouble she could get in?

(‘Your whole life… everything you’ve worked for… it could all fall apart,’ she thinks, before remembering the way Kiyoshi had looked at her, and wondering if it already has.)

She knows they’re going to make it worse. She knows they’re going to make her more upset. But there’s nothing she can do! If she runs off to Nagisa’s place now, she’s never going to be able to do it again. She… she needs to be strong. She needs to protect herself.

...She needs to stop crying.

And… she’s trying! It’s just so hard! She’ll manage to collect herself for a brief moment, but then it hits her like a truck again and again. ‘Yanagisawa-’ she thinks, sputtering for breath. ‘He’s Yanagisawa. The one who loathed you.’

(The one she loathes right back.)

She - she never would have thought - it’s inconceivable!

Kiyoshi… he’d seemed so gentle - so kind. He was the first one she’d opened up to! Before even Makoto! She’d fought by his side… confided in him - trusted his word! She would have done anything for him! And he’s… he’s that person!? He’s known it!? For months!? Taken advantage of her and preyed on her belief!? For what!? Because he’s insecure!? Because he’s a coward!? Because he’s selfish!?

He should have let her know the first damn moment he figured it out!

She won’t - she just can’t bear to be around that person! She thinks about what happened to her and she feels sick to her stomach. Yanagisawa raises his hand to strike her and she cowers in fear - begging for someone - anyone to help.
...This time Korosensei doesn’t come to her aid.

‘That’s fine,’ she thinks, fist clenched even as she tries to hold back another sniffle. ‘I can protect myself. I can do this all on my own. I don’t need traitors. I don’t need Makoto. And I don’t need Kiyoshi. I just need… I just need…’

She just needs to stop thinking about it.

She can’t - she can’t afford to right now. Her parents are waiting on her! She is not going to get treated like shit by another person in her life today. She is going to hold her head up high and she is going to get out of here before those two can possibly fucking follow her.

Her legs feel heavy, but she marches… one foot in front of the other. She keeps her gaze locked on the sidewalk and tries to fight the dizzy feeling that bats at her each time she wheezes for breath. ‘I will not cry,’ she tells herself. ‘I will not cry over the people who have hurt me. They have no power over me anymore. I am not afraid, and I will not cry.’

One tear after the other drips down her chin… landing on the sidewalk and leaving little splatters in their wake.

She thinks about her parents seeing her like this and feels a tightness in her chest. It just makes her feel so much worse! ‘You have more important things to worry about right now!’ is what she tries to tell herself ‘Your fucking parents? Seriously? Yanagisawa’s right here!,’ but she knows deep down what she wants to say is ‘…You’re not as strong as you think, and you are oh so capable of being hurt.’

That’s why she needs to get out of here, okay!? Not just away from her family! Away from her friends! They’re too dangero- she’s too sensitive! She’s too weak! She just. Can’t. Take it. She’s played the victim for two whole lifetimes now. If she has to bear it a minute more, she thinks she’ll fucking explode!

She needs to calm down. Right now. Even if she’s heartbroken- even if she’s pissed... if she shows weakness to these people, that’s vulnerability. And if she lets her parents get on her ass right now - lets them ask ‘why the hell are you crying?’ in those voices filled with chagrin, then she’s only letting Yanagisawa hurt her further. She cannot - she will not let the way he’s taken her heart and shredded it into a million fucking pieces hurt her an ounce more.

She takes a sharp turn towards a local department store and heads inside, keeping her head low to the ground. She marches towards the bathroom, shutting and locking herself inside… before staring up at the mirror and meeting her own gaze.

‘Stop it,’ she thinks, staring at her reddened eyes . ‘Don’t you get it!? Even if you stop crying now, you’re going to look like you got hit by a bus when you get home! What will your parents think!? Get yourself together! Splash some water on your face! Get over it! It doesn’t matter, okay!? This is what you get for trusting them!’

‘...This is what you get for being a naive, directionless, and gullible bitch.’

She shakes her head, but doesn’t move to splash water in her face. In fact… she doesn’t even turn on the faucet. She just stands there… staring at herself… and wonders why this suddenly feels so hard.

She’s been good at hiding it all her life, hasn’t she? When she’s upset… when she’s angry. She’s never had issues making herself stop crying before now. And so why? Why all of a sudden can’t
she just turn it off?

(‘You know why,’ that little voice inside of her head says. ‘They gave you a taste of freedom, and it was a lie. Of course it hurts to go back’)

They’d just… they’d just… made her feel so safe…-

The way Makoto would smile at her when they first met up at the school every morning… Kiyoshi’s reassuring, all-too-certain words… the way Makoto'd picked her up and spun her in circles, laughing at the top of his lungs when she’d first told him the truth. It had felt… so like… so like a home… had it really all been a lie?

(‘Of course it had!’ she hisses. ‘Just remember the way that person treated you. Don’t fall for it. You’re not that stupid, are you?)

...Terrible people are plenty capable of pretending to be better than they really are.

She still remembers the first time she met him… all those years ago. It had been on the college campus. It was her fourth and final year in education, and she was making good progress… at least… for the most part. The school year had just begun and she’d taken a wrong turn, only to end up stumbling into the wrong classroom. Panic had overtaken her as she realized she might be late to her first class of the semester and end up making a bad impression. She’d rushed out of there, books in hand as she desperately tried to find the right place, only to end up falling on her ass.

That’s when she'd heard a laugh. She’d whipped around- almost offended as she scrambled to grab her things, only to be met with sight of another student. A strange-looking man… definitely a few years older than her… maybe working on some sort of master’s degree? (She couldn’t tell. He had to be at least early thirties, though.) He was staring down at her with a curious eye, but made no motion to help her grab her things.

She hadn't complained. She just wasn’t that sort of person. Instead, she’d finished scooping up her books and stumbled to her feet, asking him if he knew where class 413 was.

He’d scoffed, hands still in his pockets as he exclaimed “Of course. It’s just by the west wing. You don’t know that?” He’d squinted. “Are you new here?”

“A-ah- no,” she’d replied, eyes flitting towards the ground. “I’m - uh - in my fourth year. I’m just a bit of a klutz.”

“I can see that…” the man had commented. “I’m curious… what are you majoring in? I feel like I’ve seen you around somewhere before… but I just can’t place my finger on it.”

“Uh- education!” she’d clapped her hands together excitedly. “I wanna be a teacher! I start my internship next year!”

“I see,” the man had said, eyebrows furrowed. “I must have been mistaken, then… unless…” he paused. “Have I gotten your name, actually?”

“Uh- Aguri! Aguri Yukimura. You probably haven’t-”

“I have, actually.”

Now that’d given her pause. “You have?”

“Believe it or not, when I’m not participating in this institution I’m already employed in my field of
expertise. I-

“Without a degree?”

She’d seen something flicker behind his eyes back then, but she hadn’t recognized it as annoyance… not at the time. “Don’t interrupt me, will you?” he’d asked, arms crossed. “Yes, without a Masters’ degree. I’ve long since already obtained my Bachelors.” He’d paused. “Besides, I’ve been told I’m somewhat of a prodigy.”

“...Wait. Really? That’s awesome! But what does this have to do with me again?”

“I was actually just getting to that. I’ve become a rather major figure at my place of work… Yukimura Pharmaceuticals. I’m a close affiliate with the CEO there. Tomohiro Yukimura?”

“Oh! That’s my father! Yeah!”

“Thought so. He’s mentioned you once or twice. Although I never expected to run into you here.”

“H-hey!? What’s that supposed to mean!? Has he really never mentioned we’re going to the same college!”?

“I suppose he simply didn’t think it noteworthy.” He brought his hand to his chin, stroking it absentmindedly. “...That, or perhaps he’s not proud of you.”

It’s only when her eyes went wide and she took a step back that’d he’d let out another bark of a laugh. He’d shaken his head, giving her a mischievous - almost malicious grin. “Joking, of course,” he’d specified soon after, but she couldn’t help but dwell on just how seriously he’d said that. Had… had he actually considered that as a possibility?

‘No. Of course not,’ she’d quickly told herself. It’s rude to assume such things of a stranger!

“Well,” she’d said with an awkward laugh. “I’m not that remarkable. My little sister’s more of the superstar of the family. I’m just trying to find something I’m passionate about and get by.”

“Something you’re passionate about?” the man had asked. “You love teaching?”

“Ah! Yeah! It’s what I’ve wanted to do pretty much all my life! I grew up tutoring my sister, and I found out I’m actually pretty good at it!”

“Interesting,” the man had said, but hadn’t commented further. In hindsight, it had felt more like an observation than a reply. “Well… you’re certainly not what I expected Miss Yukimura, but I’ll take that as a pleasant surprise. However, you should be on your way. If you’re that invested in your future career, I’d hate for you to miss your class.”

“A- ah! Right! Crap!” She’d said, whirling around. “I need to go! You said west wing, right?”

“Just past the stairs. Across campus. Keep heading west and you’ll find it.”

“T-thank you! And sorry if I wasted your time mister… mister-” she pauses. “Oh! Gosh! I never even asked for your name!”

“Yanagisawa. Yanagisawa Kotaro. Science major. Remember the name… because I’m going to change the world.”

Admittedly, she thought it was a little bit of a ridiculous thing to say… but who was she to step on his confidence? “Okay, then!” she’d admitted with a laugh. “I’ll remember the name! And good
She’d felt his eyes on the back of her neck the entire time she’d retreated, but quickly forgotten any feelings of unease as she arrived at the correct class.

After that, she started seeing him pretty regularly. They didn’t share any classes, but they’d pass each other in the halls every now and then. Each time he’d make sure to stop by for a moment and have a quick chat. They were never anything too intense… if anything, he’d just seemed interested in her future career.

...That… and himself.

It had taken a little while to notice, but sooner rather than later she’d learned he had a strange habit of making every conversation topic eventually drift towards himself. She’d tried not to mind too much, however. Confidence was a trait to strive for, wasn’t it? And when someone was as skilled as he was, she supposed they had earned the right to brag.

Besides, he seemed nice enough. She got to learn about him… how he majored in pharmaceuticals and minored in ‘more fruitless endeavors.’ (Something about illusions? She hadn’t entirely gotten it, but at the very least he’d seemed well-read on the topic.) She noted his behaviors… his little (unnerving?) quirks and the way he’d storm out of college on some days, screaming at the top of his lungs.

“How… how can he get away with that?” she’d whispered to another student. She hated to gossip, but… “It seems like he should have gotten a stern talking to- or at least some kind of councilors appointment by now.”

“How’s he done it?” An onlooker had butted in, keeping his voice low. “He’s - like - a household name. One of the highest-scoring students in the country. They can’t kick him out… if they did their reputation would sink.”

“Besides,” the original student she’d pulled aside had commented. “It’s college. Who doesn’t want to behave like that most days?”

“I suppose…” she’d relented, wholly aware of the fact that she’d been in college for four years now and had never wanted to throw a book at anyone’s fucking head.

Outbursts aside, she’d have considered them… if not awkward friends, friendly acquaintances, at the very least.

...That’s when he bought her.

Fucking. Bought her. Not wooed her... not asked her out... Bought her. In the good lord’s year of 2013, he blackmailed her father and bought her. Even thinking about it now it makes Fumiko quiver with anger.

It had been so rotten… so vile… so violating. This person she’d hardly known - considered a barebones acquaintance at best demanded she dedicate the rest of her life to him. And on what!? Some sick whim!? What sort of needy, violating pervert does that!?

...Of course, that’s not how he described it. He hadn’t ‘bought her…’ he was just ‘taking pity on her.’ She needed him, after all, didn’t she? ‘Teaching doesn’t pay much, you know. You’re gonna need someone to take care of you.’ ‘I didn’t force your father to do anything… this was his decision, really. He was simply rewarding me for all my hard work… don’t you think I deserve
something good after all I’ve been through?’

And to think… she’d thought he was nice! Charming, even! In another world bumping into him could have been the start of a beautiful friendship! But no. They couldn’t have that. He. Fucking. Bought her. He violated her trust - her privacy and he’d decided he needed to own her.

(He’s watching her closely as he speaks… eyebrows creased and fingers steepled. Somewhere a lot less long ago Kiyoshi cries into his hands… curled up on his bed as he makes her promise she’s never going to leave him.

“Of course not,” she’d replied. “Why would I ever do that?”

...Those words still feel heavy on her tongue… a promise he knew she couldn’t keep. He really hasn’t changed a bit.)

Of course… that’s not how Aguri had seen it, either. Even stressed… even confused… she’d tried to put faith in his words. Maybe he really did mean that… that he thought he was doing what was best for her! Maybe… they didn’t need to be enemies. She could have sympathy for him… or at the very least… she could try!

“Who cares if I’m not attracted to him?” she’d asked, prepping herself in the mirror. “I - uh… he’s very smart! And besides! Maybe I don’t need to be. Maybe… he’s just lonely. Maybe he just wants a friend…”

...That hadn’t been it either. Soon after their arranged proposal the illusion had fell apart entirely. No longer an intriguing, if troubled person… he became temperamental at best and violent at worst. It’s funny… to think that he ever struck her as anything but.

For a guy who minored in magic tricks, she supposes it was only fitting for that kindness to have been nothing more than a sleight of hand.

She still saw it pop up now and again… but never towards her… that way he pulled the wool over others’ eyes. Polite calls with businessmen and a professional, almost charismatic demeanor when he felt he had something to win. Yanagisawa knew he was rotten… bitter… ugly inside and out… he had to if he was well aware he had to hide it. That’s… that’s why…-

“...You’re doing it again, aren’t you?”

She stares at herself in the mirror… glares and snaps the faucet on. Running her hands through the cool water, her thoughts run wild.

(Kiyoshi makes her promise to never leave him, and gently consoles her when she weeps in his hallway. He tells her he believes in her, and he tells her they’re family. ‘We’re always gonna need each other,’ he reiterates so patiently… but suddenly something so violent - so manipulative - seems to lurk behind that innocent smile.

‘I pitied you. You’re the one who’s benefiting from this, not me. You’re depending on me.’)

“I’m not going to fall for it,” she growls, dabbing water on her wrists and trying to still her quivering hands. “I’ve seen who you are. I’ve seen what you can do. And I am never going to believe in you again. Because you know what, asshole? You think you’re so foolproof - you think you’re so innocent... but the only thing you’ve actually gotten any better at is acting.”

She resents herself for not seeing through it sooner. She should have known better than to just trust strangers… especially with people like that out there… hiding under confident grins and kind
smiles. Anything he says he is - kinder, smarter, sorry- she has no way to verify that. No reason to believe it! Not when… not when…-

…Not when she’s already been burned before.

She wonders what he’s going to do to her. He’s not the sort of person to take these defeats lying down. He hates the word ‘no.’ He’s going to want revenge. She’s already confided so much in him… what if - how long until he uses those things against her?

And in an instant, it’s hard to breathe. No - she doesn’t want to - she can’t think about it! Her hands drift down towards the edge of the sink and she clutches tight, knuckles going a ghostly white. She struggles for breath. No - she can’t hyperventilate. Focus her thoughts- you can’t cry right now!

‘You’ve broken away, but what will that do!?’ she thinks. ‘That’s not going to - that’s not going to undo the things you told him! What if it just makes him angrier!? What if you've just gotten him to turn against you!? Even if he’s small-! Even if he can’t lay a hand on her-! He still has a chokehold on her life! What if - what if he tells her parents about her plan to break away!?"

She’s spent the last three months formulating a plan… incessantly blabbering about it to anyone who’ll listen! What if… what if he renders all that effort useless? What if he ‘takes revenge!?’ What if he ruins her future no matter what she does!?

He… he wouldn’t do that… right? Kiyoshi… with the kind smile and the stutter as he speaks… he wouldn’t send her back to her abusive family, right? Right?

(Shere members Yanagisawa’s manic grin and feels a cramp in her stomach. Who is she kidding!? He’d - he’d do anything to make her suffer! It’s all over!)

She… she needs to talk to someone. To Nagisa - or! Or to Akari! They’ll know what to do… right? Then again… she remembers the disappointed look Makoto had stared at her with and starts to shake. What if… what if they take his side?

Nagisa - Akari! They believe in Kiyoshi! They’ve known him so much longer than they’ve known her! He’s - he’s got this mask of innocence! They’ve watched him grow up! Of course they won’t turn against him! They’ll tell her she’s crazy! Just like Korosensei did! Even when she’s panicked and scared out of her mind! No! No! They can’t know! She can’t take another goddamn betrayal!

…She’s really in this alone…

Fine, then. It’s not like she has any other option. She can’t confide in her teacher… she can’t risk losing her sister… and she is never again going to risk trusting her ‘friends.’ She’ll do this on her own. And she’ll be strong. Not scared - strong. She’s not the same quivering coward she was sixteen years ago. Her enemies may have gotten better at acting, but she’s gotten better at things too. This time she’ll be prepared.

She won’t be frightened… she won’t be heartbroken… and she certainly won’t hesitate. She’s going to be what Aguri never got to be… she’s going to be angry. And she’s going to stand up for herself. And she is not going to let this man destroy her future a second time.

She tries her best to still her shaking hands… runs them under water and splashes it in her face. She counts down backwards from ten and dabs at her eyes with a wet rag. She remembers not that long ago it was Kiyoshi who taught her these techniques, and feels her heart in her throat… but quickly banishes it. Who cares what he taught her? That doesn’t mean she can’t use it. It just means… it just means… she’s using his own tactics- his own hubris against him.
It takes five minutes just for her to look like she hasn’t been hit by a bus. Her eyes are still a puffy red, but she figures there’s not much more she can do at this point. She needs to get heading home. She just… has to… not start crying again the whole way there.

‘You won’t,’ she reiterates. ‘You’re not going to sit around and cry about your problems. You are going to be proactive. They can’t fucking hurt you.’

She sincerely doubts that as she peeks out of the bathroom and then the convenience store, legs shaking like goddamn leaves.

She still can’t believe Makoto. When her mind isn’t wandering back to Kiyoshi - it’s to him. And somehow that feels even worse. She’d been so certain… so sure that Korosensei - that Makoto was her ally… and he’d abandoned her… for what!? Some guy he just started getting along with? He’d been her rock! He’d been Aguri’s reason to live! He’d seen everything she went through, and he still had the audacity to take his enemy’s side!?

(She remembers Korosensei ravaging the lab all those years ago… even as she begged him to just wait- to listen to her. Dozens had died… her among them. She supposes she really hadn’t been enough for him after all)

Even up until now… she’d thought them birds of a feather… all each other had in the face of suffering. But it turns out… it turns out that was wrong. He’s still as shitty as he’s ever been. She supposes she’s glad she figured that out sooner rather than later, at the very least.

(She almost hopes it’ll backfire on him. That Kiyoshi will hurt him… but just as soon retracts the thought. No… no… she doesn’t - even if he’s abandoned her, she doesn’t want to see him suffer! She just… she just…-

...Wishes he’d want the same for her.)

She quickly buries the aching feeling in her chest. No. Now’s not the time to be heartbroken. She doesn’t need him, and she certainly doesn’t need to dedicate any thought to him. She needs to figure out what to do with herself first and foremost.

She’s not given much time to sort it out. She arrives home before she knows it - breaths still heavy, but her eyes dried. She unlatches the door and steps inside, keeping her head low to the ground as she heads straight towards her room.

“How was school, Fumiko?” Mother calls in from the other room. “Did you behave yourself?”

“Of course, mother!” Fumiko chides in falsetto, pretending she didn’t just sock a classmate in the face. “Things went wonderfully! I’m making excellent progress in my math scores! I can’t wait to show you what I got on midterms!”

...BLEGH.

With that, she arrives upstairs and shuts the door behind her. She briefly considers locking it… but soon decides against it. There’s no risking it. She can’t be caught behaving abnormally… not when she’s so close to freedom.

(Not when she’s so close to losing it.)

She briefly considers texting Kiyoshi- warning him that if he dares to speak up about this she’ll ruin his life in return - tell his parents or whatever… but she quickly shoots that idea down as well.
She doesn’t want to give him any ideas. Besides… she sincerely doubts Mr. ‘I’m Going To Change The World’ cares what Tadaomi and Irina Karasuma think about him anyways. All he cares about is himself.

She settles on blocking his number, before tossing her phone aside and staring up at the ceiling. Her fan’s spinning in lazy circles. She can’t help but note just how cold it feels… hands drifting up to cover her neck. But free of her scarf and free of any sadness, she doesn’t give herself time to think about that, either.

Instead, she simply commits herself to loneliness… reminds herself of the feeling of palms wrapped ‘round her throat… and slips into another, much worse time.

[2/11/2031 5:01 PM:] [Makoto] Where are you??


[2/11/2031 5:02 PM:] [Makoto] Are you okay?

[2/11/2031 5:06 PM:] [Makoto] It’s okay! You can talk to me!

[2/11/2031 5:07 PM:] [Makoto] It hurt my feelings too! But I’m sure she’ll come around.


[2/11/2031 5:17 PM:] [Makoto] Please just message me back...


[2/11/2031 5:25 PM:] [Makoto] You don’t gotta talk if you don’t want


[2/11/2031 5:28 PM:] [Makoto] You are okay?

[2/11/2031 5:29 PM:] [Makoto] Right?

[2/11/2031 5:36 PM:] [Makoto] ...Kiyoshi?

[2/11/2031 5:45 PM:] [Makoto] Fumiko I think there’s an emergency

[2/11/2031 5:45 PM:] [Fumiko] From 3401, the recipient you are sending to has chosen not to receive messages. Msg 2905

[2/11/2031 5:45 PM:] [Makoto] Fumiko unblock me, please!!!

[2/11/2031 5:45 PM:] [Fumiko] From 3401, the recipient you are sending to has chosen not to receive messages. Msg 2905


[2/11/2031 5:47 PM:] [Fumiko] From 3401, the recipient you are sending to has chosen not to receive messages. Msg 2905
Makoto’s on the brink of complete and utter panic.

Things had seemed so fine just a few hours ago! What was Kiyoshi thinking!? And how had a few simple words been enough to tear this thing they had apart!? They’d… they’d been so close! Everything was perfect! But now…

...Now…-

Everything’s falling apart.

No. Don’t think about it like that. It’s - it’s not the end! Who cares if Fumiko has his number blocked and Kiyoshi won’t message him back? They’re in the middle of some pretty crazy stuff themselves. It doesn’t mean- it doesn’t mean that they hate him … or that… they’re in danger…! It just means… that this is a bump in the road.

...That’s right. That’s all it is. There’s nothing to worry about. Not yet.

He doesn’t head home… and he doesn’t intend to. By now his dad’s used to him coming home during the evening, and something tells him even if he stays out a bit later than that he won’t particularly notice or mind. The last thing he wants right now is to be in that environment.

He doesn’t run towards Nagisa’s place either, however. At first he’d been inclined to… surely Nagisa would know how to fix this! But then he’d reconsidered. It’s not like… it’s not like Nagisa would really get the whole situation. He’d just be mad that Makoto lied! And besides… he doesn’t wanna risk making Nagisa hate Kiyoshi too. What if he gives up on him? Expels him from the school? That’s the last thing Kiyoshi needs right now!

Why does… why does no-one else seem to see it? That he’s… that he’s good! He just had an… upsetting past! He doesn’t want to hurt anyone…

Makoto takes a sharp turn into an alleyway. Whatever… it’s been a while since he’s traversed the city anyways. He’ll just… explore. He doesn’t gotta go home and he doesn’t gotta go to Nagisa’s… not when his eyes are all teary. He’ll just look around. Who knows? If he’s lucky, maybe he’ll find another stray cat!

He ducks past a garbage bin and stares at his feet as he walks. His gaze flickers left, then right as he observes his surroundings. Nothing interesting… not yet.

He doesn’t get why everyone’s acting like he’s been lying, anyways. He hasn’t - he never once told Fumiko anything that was untrue! Kiyoshi is her friend, and he is safe to be around! He knows that! He’s certain! He’s…

...Remembering that thing she said to him… about how he hadn’t known she was going to die back then, either. It had taken him by complete and utter surprise… and even now when he thinks about it he feels his stomach twist in knots.

He hadn’t wanted to - Aguri dying was the last thing Korosensei wanted! It haunted him up until the moment he died and a little bit after! It had broken him… served as his inspiration for becoming a teacher… Fumiko implying that it was somehow his fault… that he somehow didn’t care enough - it stings more than anything.

He’d cared. He’d cared so much. And he still cares! It’s not like he wants Fumiko to suffer! He
just- he knows she's behaving irrationally! They know Kiyoshi! They’ve seen his room… his
dumb manga collection and the way he jolts every time the fire alarm goes off. He is the least
dangerous guy Makoto knows. He wouldn’t - he wouldn’t put so much faith in this if he wasn’t
certain!

(‘Constant beratement,’ Fumiko had claimed, tears in her eyes as she spoke. ‘Abuse. Getting me
murdered. And you’re taking his side? After everything he did to us?’

‘…I thought we were two birds of a feather.’)

And he is certain! He’s not going to take his word back on that! Kiyoshi had seemed so… so
heartbroken… so terrified of himself confiding in Makoto! He’s not going to turn his back on him
and say ‘you’ve been bad the whole time, actually!’ Who cares about human experimentation!!
Who cares about sharp words!! And… and who cares about the stuff he did to Fumiko!! He’s a
new guy now! He deserves a second chance!

(...Just like Makoto wants... just like Korosensei was lucky enough to earn.)

He’s right! He’s not going to change his mind about that. Fumiko… she’s hurting. But hurt is
temporary. Once she calms down… has the time to think things through… she’ll get what he was
saying! She’ll think about Kiyoshi and all he’s done for them and realize everything he said he was
is the truth! That he really is the guy that he’s ‘pretending’ to be! That… that Makoto’s not ‘taking
sides.’

...That Korosensei would never abandon her.

Sure… he’s a little upset with her… at least he thinks he is… but he doesn’t want to give up on her.
He just wants her to come to her senses… he just wants her to be his friend again. There’s nothing
really so wrong with that, is there?

(‘But thanks for reminding me that you still don’t understand how your actions affect others,’
she’d spat, in a voice that seemed to imply ‘you really haven’t changed that much at all.’ And
remembering the way she’d stared at him… Makoto wonders if the real monster she’d discovered
today wasn’t Kiyoshi, but rather her oldest friend.)

He’s not… he’s not a bad guy! Sure, he was - but… that doesn’t mean he is anymore! Aguri was
the one who convinced him of that! Surely… surely she should be able to extend the same
kindness to Kiyoshi! She’d stood by her principals so staunchly! Don’t tell him… don’t tell him
she’s willing to give up on them now!

(Don’t tell him she’s taking back her ‘you can do it,’ too.)

No. He won’t consider it. He won’t. He takes another turn and heads further into the alleyway.
There’s some little antique shop back here… and next to it a grocery store that looks like it hasn’t
been visited in months. He loves the city. There’s always some new thing to discover.

(...Always some dark underbelly to find.)

He’s not a bad person, okay?

Sure, he hid things from Fumiko. And sure, she can call that lying if she really wants. He killed a
lot of people a long time ago, and he thinks Kiyoshi Karasuma deserves a second chance. But none
of that makes him bad! Even if… even if the rest of the world disagrees with him! He doesn’t want
to hurt anyone! He just wants to make sure everything’s okay!
(...He just wants to make sure everything stays the same.)

Korosensei… Korosensei honestly grew up with a pretty bad life. But Makoto’s life was…
different. Sure, the beginning had been a bit rough, but things were good. It’s… it’s everything he
ever wanted! Happiness, with the people he’s always wanted to be surrounded by! He can’t… he
won’t lose that now!

...He’ll make sure everyone sees his perspective.

Not because - not because he’s selfish! Because he’s right! There is nothing selfish about thinking
- about thinking that everyone deserves a second chance! Regardless of what they’ve done! After
all… he was given a second chance… and it did wonders for him. And besides! Aguri believed in
second chances! Just because she doesn’t now… that doesn’t mean that makes the old Aguri
selfish, does it?

(...If anything, he thinks Fumiko is being a little selfish.)

There’s still no signs of a wild cat, or even a wild dog. Gosh darn it. Why can’t he just find
something interesting out here? Something to get his mind off of all of this nonsense. If Fumiko
will come around in due time, then there’s no point in thinking about it. He has… he has better
things to worry about.

A raindrop comes down and lands on his nose.

Okay… so that’s not what he was hoping for, but he’ll take it. He just hopes it doesn’t start to
shower. If it’s a light drizzle he can hop around in puddles, but if it starts to pour he’ll have to take
shelter in a building.

For now he just peeks under an underhang and continues to prowl the city. For a rainy day it
doesn’t look particularly cloudy. If anything, in fact… the sky almost looks peaceful. Makoto
thinks that’s silly… for there to be such a nice sky on such a bad day. These sorts of sights should
wait until they’re friends again.

(' If we’re friends again,’ Makoto thinks, but shakes his head. No, they will be. And besides… it’s
not a bad day…

Just… a tough one.)

Kiyoshi’s come a long way since then… that time Fumiko can’t seem to get her mind off of.
Thinking about the way he acted then and the way he acts now, Makoto can hardly even process
them as the same person. Kiyoshi’s kind… Kiyoshi’s gentle. Kiyoshi crouched down on the grass
and talked to Makoto softly until he finally felt safe. How could he hold something from so long
ago against him? How can Fumiko? It’s not like… it’s not like Kiyoshi is evil.

...Maybe… he just needed a little love. Maybe that’s all he wanted, even back then… family.
Friends.

(“I try…- I try so hard to support him,” Aguri had said, her head low to the ground. “I don’t get
what I’m not doing right… why does he still hate me?”

Reaper had squinted, thinking it over. He’d watched this woman pour her entire heart and soul into
someone who clearly didn’t give a shit about her.

“Well… I think sometimes no matter how much support you give someone, they might never
change.”}
Makoto sighs. If not love, then what? Reaper’s right. Chalking it up to just kindness feels ingenious. Aguri had given him plenty of love. So why now? What changed? Is it the family…? The way he’s been raised? The things he’s learned or those he’s been taught? Makoto supposes he doesn’t know. Perhaps it’s just the aftereffect of someone being reborn at all. After all… he and Fumiko are plenty different. Whatever it is that’s changed him, it shouldn’t matter much, however, should it? What matters is that he has changed.

...What matters is that he has become good.

(“She deserves to know the truth,” Kiyoshi had mused, walking home with him through the forest that day. “...What if... what if she doesn’t feel safe around me?”

“What do you mean?” Makoto had replied. “Of course she’ll feel safe around you! You’re her friend, dude. You don’t gotta share.)

...He wonders if he’s good, too.

He quickly shakes the thought. Of course he’s good! Just like… just like Kiyoshi is. And just like Korosensei was, too.

(Just like Reaper wasn’t.)

He pulls his phone out and tries to send his friends a text again.

[2/11/2031 5:57 PM:] [Makoto] I dunno if you’re getting these, but you didn’t mean that thing you said earlier, right?
[2/11/2031 5:58 PM:] [Makoto] I didn’t wanna hurt your feelings. I hope you know that.
[2/11/2031 5:59 PM:] [Makoto] But I wasn’t gonna let you become someone mean. I know that’s not in your heart.

..."From 3401, the recipient you are sending to has chosen not to receive messages. Msg 2905"

...He’s not sure what he’d expected.
[2/11/2031 6:00 PM:] [Makoto] ...Uh… it’s okay if you don’t wanna talk right now.
[2/11/2031 6:00 PM:] [Makoto] And I’m sorry for spamming your phone
[2/11/2031 6:00 PM:] [Makoto] But please be okay, alright?
[2/11/2031 6:00 PM:] [Makoto] And… don’t take what Fumiko said to heart
He doesn’t get a response from Kiyoshi, either. He stands there… staring at his phone as the rain starts to come down harder, but doesn’t even receive a notification his message has been read. He sighs and pockets his phone, but keeps his ears perked just in case he finally gets a call back.

...Silence.

Kiyoshi’s starting to scare him. It’s not like him to ignore his messages entirely. Did he lose his phone somewhere along the way? He hopes he hadn’t dropped it when running away. He briefly considers paging Kiyoshi’s home phone, but decides against it. He doesn’t even know Kiyoshi’s home in the first place. After all… he’s not.

He wonders again if he should call Nagisa. If Kiyoshi’s really in danger, then Nagisa should be able to fix it. He starts to overthink it too much however, and feels his stomach churn. What if Nagisa just makes it worse? What if he asks too many questions and gets to the bottom of things? What if Nagisa hates Kiyoshi? And what if… what if…?

What if Nagisa hates him?

(He’s not being selfish. He’s not!)

...He’s sure Kiyoshi will be fine. Kiyoshi’s strong. Kiyoshi’s brave.

(And Makoto doesn’t know what he’d do with himself if he wasn’t.)

He’s coming up towards the end of this alleyway by now. He ducks out from under the overhang and steps into the rain. It’s ice cold, and splatters on his skin, but he tries not to mind much. About now he’s ended up in a wing of the city he’s not too familiar with. He quickly gets his bearings, however, as he spots a convenience store somewhere across the street. He decides to step inside… grab a slushie and some snacks, if only as an excuse to get out of the rain. He pays for it in cash of course, with money Nagisa and Co gave him for helping out around the house. Now that puts a smile on his face.

He remembers a time not so long ago when he’d just have snatched this shit. But now… he’s better than that! That’s proof he’s improving too, isn’t it?

(‘Killed me,’ Fumiko growls, and the Reaper kills a thousand others.)

...Maybe there are some things paying for a slushie or teaching a group of kids just can’t make up for.

He doesn’t stay in the convenience store for long. There’s a weird atmosphere in there, and besides… his thoughts are all out of wack. He supposes he should start heading home about now. He’s not particularly fond of the idea, but it’s clear the city has nothing to offer him today. And if exploring won’t get his mind off of things, then surely taking a nap will.

...He’s sure when he wakes up this will all feel like just a bad dream.

“I’m good,” he repeats to himself under his breath, stepping out from inside the sliding glass doors. “We’re good. Everything’s gonna work out. And everything’s gonna be okay.”
...Even if Kiyoshi won’t respond to him, and even if Kiyoshi’s a monster. Even if Fumiko looked at him with those hateful eyes, and even if she’s scared out of her mind right now. Even if he’s a little afraid Nagisa might be mad at him, and even if he’s a little afraid he did the wrong thing.

Because… it’s okay to not know how things will turn out, isn’t it? All he has to do is have faith they’ll be alright.

...Korosensei seemed to have faith in that, at least. Even when he was uncertain… he always found the right thing to do at just the last moment. Because he was smart... and he was skillful... and most importantly, he was optimistic. Makoto just supposes he has to believe in that Korosensei... that he has to believe in that Makoto.

And that he might just have to believe in a pretty similar Aguri, too.

...But remembering each and every time he’s screwed up, and knowing Korosensei never quite forgot them either… Makoto wonders if he really had been clueless sometimes. And even worse, he wonders if there are scenarios with no right solution after all.

“No,” he repeats again and again. “I’m right. I have to be. Otherwise… I don’t think things will ever be okay.”

But right or not, Makoto still walks home alone in the rain.

Kiyoshi doesn’t remember walking home, just that he’d had to.

It had hit him like an instinctive urge. ‘Get out of here, now.’ With tears running down his face and body shaking so hard he’d convulsed, he’d pulled himself to his feet and stared down at the forest like a deer caught in the headlights. He hadn’t been able to make them out, but he’d heard Makoto and Fumiko screaming. And eyes wide… hands quivering… he’d whipped around and made a run for it.

‘Out. Now.’

He couldn’t bear to hear it a moment more. Their cold voices and the way they shrieked at each other. He couldn’t sit there and wait… to meet Fumiko’s relentless gaze or once again hear Makoto’s empty words. ‘You’re good,’ he’d say again, like a delusional madman. ‘You’re perfect. You’re making up for it.’ over and over again like a mantra. But Kiyoshi doesn’t want to hear it! He can’t a single time more!

Because he’s not!

Whatever it is Makoto’s convinced him - none of it is true. And now… the illusion’s finally crumbled.

...Leaving Kiyoshi all alone, and running for his life.

Quite frankly it’s a miracle that he makes it home at all. He’s crying the whole way there, and suddenly it’s difficult to even breathe. By the time he reaches his doorstep he’s in hysterics, fumbling for his key and dropping it twice before he even manages to wrench the door open. He yanks himself inside and slams it behind him, jumping at the noise, before shaking his head and stifling a sob as he remembers it hardly even matters.

...It’s not like anyone’s home to hear it anyways.
Ignoring a twinge of irritation in his gut (Outrage- is it outrage at how he’s been treated?) he rushes towards his room. He can hear Taro barking down the halls, but he wants no part in it. He doesn’t want to see Taro right now, okay!? Taro wouldn’t get it! He’d just look at him with those same gentle, big black eyes that seem to say ‘what is it? What’s upsetting you so much? Let me try and fix it!’ but there are some things you just can’t fix, and he doesn’t want to be around a single living thing right now.

Taro tries to beat him to it. He’s waiting by Kiyoshi’s doorway, head cocked sideways. But as Kiyoshi steps inside and he tries to follow, he’s shoved aside and has the door slammed in his face.

“Now’s not the time, okay, Taro!?” Kiyoshi shouts, sliding back against the doorway and collapsing to the ground. “I’m not in the mood!”

Taro scratches stubbornly, claws raking against the door. But Kiyoshi pounds his fist against it, screaming at the top of his lungs.

“Go away! I don’t deserve to be around you! So… so leave me!”

Taro yelps, but that seems to shut him up. There’s a gentle click of claws against the hardwood floor as he retreats. Kiyoshi almost feels bad… and far lonelier than before, but he reminds himself that it’s before the best.

Because even if ‘I don’t deserve you’ is what he says, ‘I’m scared I’m going to hurt you’ is quite frankly what he means.

He feels ready to fucking implode… hyperventilating and clutching at his head. But somewhere underneath that sheer panic he swears he feels anger… and that terrifies him. Why!? Why is there a sense of self-pity!? Unfairness!? Why is he still thinking about himself!? What on earth is wrong with him!?

Struggling for breath, he lowers his head to the ground.

If… if he hurt someone in a state like this… he doesn’t think he’d ever forgive himself.

(Ha. What a sick fucking joke. Why doesn’t he seem to get it!? He’s already never going to forgive himself! He’s already hurt people! And in far more morbid - far more brutal ways than he could ever possibly hurt the damn dog.)

...Fumiko had looked just so damn afraid of him.

She hadn’t had the courtesy to hide it. She’d stared at him unabashedly with those terrified, indignant eyes… spoke the words she’d been keeping inside for so long, and told him “Fuck you.” Again and again. “Fuck you. Fuck you. You’ve hurt me irreparably. And you are never going to fix that.”

“You are never going to be good.”

...Kiyoshi’s eye aches.

He’s never been in a fight before. He’s not the type. He’d never realized just what a black eye feels like. It’s surprisingly worse than he’d expected.

He wonders just what a face full of bruises feels like.

“Goddamn it,” he whispers, sobbing incoherently. He claws at his carpet with hands so stiff they
ache. “Goddamn it. Goddamn it. God- fucking-damn it!”

He can’t blame her for hitting him. It’s not like the way he’d hit her. After all… he’d been the one reaching out- and after a pattern of violence at that… but it still makes his heart ache. Self-defense… that’s what it is she utilized. Had she really felt the need to defend herself from him!?

(‘Of course she had!’ some part of him screams. ‘Just look at you! You’re a fucking monster!’)

He… he wants to think he’s safe… he wants to think he’s good.

He wants to think… he’d been there for Fumiko. But that’s not what she’d said. She’d said he’d hurt her… she said he lied to her. And so… if that’s the truth… then why does it hurt just so damn much!? To be rejected by her!? To be seen as someone to fight back against!?

(‘You’re not hurt. You’re not. You don’t get to be. Your feelings- they aren’t valid. You not sad you lost a friend. You’re frustrated your scapegoat finally learned to stand up for herself.’)

No… no… he doesn’t want to think about it like that.

He wants to be… he wants to be-

‘No! You can’t!’ he thinks. ‘Just accept that! You’re bad! You’re evil! That’s all you’ll ever be!? ‘

But then what’s the goddamn point!?

He doesn’t want to hurt people. He won’t… at least… not intentionally. And so… if he can’t be good… if he can’t fix the things he’s done… but he can’t play the role of the monster either, then what’s his purpose? Is he really here just to suffer!? Or is he just here to screw things up whether he wants to or not!?

He has made everything worse, hasn’t he? In fact, there’s no reason he’s here! Everything that’s happened this year… they could have done it without him! Fumiko and Makoto could have become friends on their own! They could have learned about their pasts! His classmates could have thrived, and no-one would have noticed his absence. His entire life he’s been a figure in the background… unnoticeable at best and a nuisance at worst. There really is…

…There really is no reason he’s alive.

It’s a thought that makes his stomach do flips, but he pounds at his head. ‘It’s true, isn’t it!?’ After all, Fumiko and Makoto would still be friends if it weren’t for him!

‘Don’t say that,’ he begs. ‘Don’t say they’re not friends.’ But he remembers the way they’d screamed at each other, and he knows deep down that’s not how friends talk to each other. Whatever it is they had… he’s torn it apart… destroyed it like everything he’s ever dared to touch… and now… soulmates-

Well… they’re not so much soulmates anymore, are they?

(‘Isn’t that what you wanted, Yanagisawa? You were jealous, weren’t you? You should be glad they hate each other! After all, you resented their bond!’)

Shit. Shit!

He’s destroyed everything! And for what!? Because he was afraid!? Of what!? His mom dying!? Like this is going to help her! None of it matters! He’s not going to save her life! She’s either going
to die, or she’s going to wake up and he’s still going to be this. Her family’s still gonna suck, and everything will still be wrong. She’ll be left to deal with his burdens!

...To think… he ruined the one good thing he ever had over sheer paranoia.

(‘You had to!’ he tells himself. ‘You were scared! Besides, you were going to have to say it eventually! Honesty matters, doesn’t it?’

‘NO!’ Kiyoshi roars. ‘Not if it feels like this!’

He stumbles to his feet and staggers over to the bed. Head spinning he tries to reassure himself... say ‘it’s not really over,’ but he knows deep inside it is... and it rakes at him like hot coals. He collapses onto his mattress, screaming and pounding his fists on the blanket.

‘Just listen to yourself!’ he thinks. ‘You’re throwing another temper tantrum! You’re the same! You’re the same! Fumiko was right about you!’

‘It just feels so bad!’ he refutes. ‘I’m allowed to feel bad, aren’t I!?’

‘No! Of course not! Never! You deserve whatever it is that comes to you!’

Burying his head in the covers, he pulls at his hair and lets out another ragged shriek.

And boy will it come for him. Fumiko… Makoto… someone… they’re going to tell everyone. Shiota-sensei… Karma-san… even Auntie Kayano. And what then? This is just… this is just the tip of the iceberg. They’re going to tell everyone...

(...What if they tell his parents?)

He wonders if they’ll be afraid of him too, or if they’ll just be angry. He couldn’t particularly blame them, but all the same the concept puts a knot in his gut. He just… he just wanted them to be proud of him… but now they never will...

...Not after all he’s done.

Creating Korosensei… attacking the E-Class… abusing Aguri! His dad will… his dad will never be willing to look him in the eye again once he learns he beat a helpless woman! And his mom - his already traumatized mom - she’s going to wake up to this horrible thing… this horrible scenario… this horrible son!

As if… as if he hasn’t made their lives miserable enough as is! As if he hasn’t been a burden his entire goddamn life! Now this? No… no… nononono. He can’t handle it!

(Korosensei was right! He really is never going to feel alive!)

...They’re going to know everything. They’re finally going to have an actual reason to resent him! They’re going to see it… every mistake he’s made! And they’re going to loathe him… like he’s always been so scared they would… all because they finally see what sort of pathetic creature he really is.

He needs to remember… now. Everything! If… if not to prepare himself for the fallout, then to punish himself. The experimentations… the beatings… the reckless violence… it’s terrible! But surely it’s not all! Surely it’s not the full extent of his sins! What else lurks below the surface, just waiting to lunge at him!? What else will the rest of the world see when they look at him!?
The man who drowned the E-Class… the villain in their story. The brutal avenger and the one who cut their last moment with their teacher short. The man who hit Aguri… the murderer, who drove her to suicide, and built the damn trap she did it with! The surgeon, who strapped The Reaper down and never once let up until he’d become something unrecognizable… none of that’s a harsh enough descriptor! It’s just the tip of the iceberg, isn’t it?!

He’s the man who rushed towards Aguri’s corpse… held it tight and wept. He’s the man who felt no accountability! He’s the man who started a witch hunt and got a hero killed! He’s the man who felt rather like a corpse himself for two years straight, and he’s the man who died alone… unloved… the man who knows all too well the sensation of beating someone senseless, and the man who remembers a rumble in his throat as he watched his prisoner vomit blood. He’s the man who left a scared teenage boy alone to die and he’s the man his friends and family have only discussed in whispers for the past fifteen years.

The one who fought with Aguri… strangled her until she was breathless, and still somehow told her she was lucky to have him. The one who preyed on Damien… had him attack innocent children… and the man who stood by - encouraged it even! - when Akari Yukimura - a grieving 14-year-old had implanted herself with tentacles.

...Akari… Akari-

Why even now does it feel like there’s something he’s forgetting?

(A burst of crimson, and his vision goes to red)

Of course…-

HE’D KILLED HER!

How had… how had he managed to forget!? That was - that was the last piece of the puzzle he was forgetting! Auntie Kayano! The last remaining piece of the Yukimura legacy! He’d murdered her! He’d been so fucking certain of it! He’d laughed about it! Commented on her going out in the same damn fashion as her beloved sister! And so how… how? How is she still here today!?

No - what does that matter!? Whatever it is - whatever miracle that salvaged her - he so distinctly remembers commanding the beast to slaughter her… the gaping hole left in her chest. The wonderful adult she’s managed to grow up into today… that’s no thanks to him. In fact… he’d nearly destroyed that!

He thinks of a life without her and feels his heart spike into his throat… thinks of a life without his dumb family friend’s jokes, and thinks about just how incomplete Nagisa’s family would be without her… thinks about how he’d almost made that future a reality, and thinks about just how much Fumiko would loathe him now if she learned about that…

If she learned that he’d dared to place a hand on the one thing she’d treasured most!

He buries his face in his pillow and screams. It really is true - he destroys everything he touches… doesn’t he? He remembers laughing at what he thought was the end of her life and wants to claw his damn eyes out! Shaking… shuddering… he drags himself up onto his knees and shrieks for dear life.

Why!? Why does he have to be this person!? Why does he have to be Yanagisawa!? Why does he have to be Kiyoshi! And why does he still have to be here at all!? He doesn’t want to remember these things! He wants to be happy! He doesn’t want to feel guilt! He wants to disappear! He wants...
to stop hurting people! He wants to… he wants to…-

**He wants to just go away!**

He grabs at his pillow and smacks it against his bedpost… takes his covers and casts them aside. Sobbing… weeping… he drags his nails across the wall and begs for something - *anything* - to make it let up… this pain he feels… complete and utter despair… hopelessness! *Sheer self-loathing!*

(A complete fear of what he can do.)

He wants to stop desperately… knows he’s overreacting… but he *can’t*. He thinks of it and his whole body convulses. Even though he never asked for this - *even though he never asked to be alive* - he’s always going to hurt people, and he’s *always* going to be miserable! He’s never going to get his happy ending! His friends! His family! They’re all going to hate him… no! They already do! And they’re all *right!*

It makes him hopeless! It makes him hysterical! It leaves him petrified, and it leaves him gasping for breath. He wanted to be happy! *He really did!* But that’s *Yanagisawa* talking, isn’t it!? Of *course* he’d think he deserves to get off scot-free! But he *doesn’t!* *He doesn’t!* *He’s a monster, and that’s never going to change!*

He slams his fist into the wall with a shriek.

...At first… he hardly processes it… simply stares… trembling… at his own outstretched hand. He hadn’t managed to do anything… the wall still looks good as new, but all the same, he feels his stomach turn inside out.

He’d… he’d really…-

...He *acted out violently*. There’s no other word for it… *no other explanation*. Here he is… throwing a temper tantrum… pounding his fists against the wall… and for what!? Because he’s scared!! Because he’s angry!! Because he doesn’t know how else to behave!?

His gaze slowly drifts to the rest of his room. His covers are haphazardly tossed to the side, and pillows litter the floor. There’s a spot on the ground that still has his imprint… reminding him that not that long ago he’d been sobbing onto the carpet. Suddenly he feels horribly empty… and horribly frustrated, too. Is *this* how he reacts to getting what he deserves? With *outrage*?

*(He’d never destroyed anything that was his… not back then, at least. But all the same, their house tended to end up looking like this. Couches flipped over and plates thrown through windows. He remembers the way he’d looked over it after he’d finally calmed down… if not at least a little satisfied by the sheer destruction, relieved he wouldn’t have to be the one to clean it up. She’d learnt by then that if she didn’t, it’d be her head through the window next.)*

...*Of course it is.*

Who has he fucking been kidding? Of… of course he’s terrible! And of course he ruins everything! That’s who he really is inside! And it makes him angry! Not at his friends! Not at his family! And not even at the world! At himself, and himself alone. Because he doesn’t wanna be this person… he doesn’t wanna be scary, and he doesn’t wanna be mad. But he *is*. He’s angry that he’s scared, and he’s angry that he’s alone, and he’s angry that no matter what he does it *aches.*

*He’s angry that he’s fucking angry in the first place!*
Before he even knows what he’s doing, he’s slamming his fist into the wall. Pounding again and again until his knuckles feel ready to bleed. But he doesn’t let up, no. He just sits there… aching… sobbing… screaming at the top of his lungs until he hears a snap. Because he can’t stop! He shouldn’t stop! *He doesn’t want to stop!*

*He wants to be allowed to be mad!* He wants to be allowed to be angry he was born into this life, and he *wants* to be allowed to be angry he just lost the one good damn thing he ever had! He wants to be allowed to be angry his mom is dying, and he wants to be allowed to be angry his father’s never once been there for him! He wants to be angry he’s scared, and he wants to be angry he’s hurt! But he’s not! *He’s fucking not!*

*He’s not allowed to feel this way! He destroys anything - everything when he does! And that fucking sucks!* *He feels miserable - and he deserves to - but that doesn’t make it any more damn bearable!* He thought he could be happy! He thought he was! But he’s not! *HE’S NOT!*

“AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!”

**CRACK.**

There’s a sharp pain and a cloud of dust as he rears his hand back and puts it through the wall. A long moment of silence… before the dust settles, and he’s left staring at his own fist through the drywall. It aches slightly. He distantly wonders if he’d sprained it… but somehow that’s the least of his concerns. Slowly… he retrieves his hand… and as all that vigor fades from his body in an instant. He lowers his head… clutching at his throbbing hand for dear life.

...*What the fuck is wrong with him?* What had he been thinking? He doesn’t feel any better. He just feels hopeless. Sitting there… nursing his hand… staring up at the big black hole in the wall… he feels his lip quiver. He takes a shaky breath and bats at his eyes… sniveling into his hands and weeping.

It’s over. It’s all really over. He’s just as bad as he’s always been, and his dad’s gonna have to come home to *this. Just like always, someone else is going to have to clean up his mess…* and Kiyoshi’s not going to fix it… just sit there and feel bad about himself. Because he’s helpless… because he’s selfish… and because he’s goddamn *evil.*

Before he’s even fully aware of what he’s doing, he turns himself sideways and hops off the bed. Trudges over to his vanity… and looks up at himself in the mirror.

He’s got a different face now… softer… kinder… with baby blond hair and eyes so doelike he could almost pass them off as innocent. But noting his bright red cheeks… the puffiness around his eyes, and the way snot drips down his chin… he thinks he almost sees what Fumiko saw. Not just something pathetic… but something a little bit *ugly* at that.

He wonders if it’s about time he puts some of that violence to good use.

There’s a bottle of Xanax on his bedside table. He takes it whenever he gets scared. His bedroom’s up on the second story, and just above the driveway. He’s sure his dad has weaponry stashed somewhere or another. It’s not typical of where they live, but… y’know: Ministry of Defense.

It’s certainly a nice thought… to think that he could just put an end to all of this. At least then it wouldn’t hurt anymore. He doesn’t know where a person like him would go…but maybe at the very least it would make the world a better place. Then Fumiko wouldn’t need to worry about anything. He’d be gone for real this time.
...He wonders if she’d blame herself.

Who is he kidding? He’s certain she would. She can pretend not to be that person all she wants, but she’s still Aguri. She’d think ‘I wish there would have been a different way,’ and she’d cry. Some dark, twisted part of him is almost satisfied by that. At least then she’d miss him.

...At least then she’d admit he could have been good.

He feels an utter disgust at himself - at the thought - feels his hand twitch slightly, and looks down on his own reflection. He can’t just - he can’t just do these things because he’s selfish. He can’t just do these things because he wants attention. It’s wrong!

(That’s selfish? Dying is selfish? Who is he fucking kidding? It’s being alive that’s selfish.)

He wonders just how hard Makoto would take it. He’d probably blame himself, wouldn’t he? The thought alone makes Kiyoshi feel sick. He’s hurt Makoto so, so, so much as is… there would have to be something seriously wrong with him to put another damn burden on that boy’s shoulders. Even if it hurts… even if he feels helpless- he can’t just take away his best friend…-

He just can’t do that to Makoto!

(WHY!? WHY WON’T MAKOTO JUST GIVE UP ON HIM!? ALL OF THIS WOULD BE SO MUCH EASIER IF HE WOULD!)

And he can’t just do that to Fumiko, either! Even if he’s hurt, even if he’s angry, he still just wants her to be happy! He knows that woman! And he knows she’ll never forgive herself if she drove him to off himself!

(He knows he certainly hasn’t forgiven himself for doing the same to her.)

(‘Stop, Kiyoshi,’ he thinks. ‘That’s not the same. Don’t put her on your level. All she’s done is lash out at you once. All she’s done is give you what you deserve. All she’s done is told you there’s no hope for you. You should be thanking her!

You deserve to have your heart smashed into a thousand tiny little pieces!)

He wonders for a second if Dad would even care… and just as soon resents himself for it. Of course Dad would care! Who - who cares if he’s never once told Kiyoshi he’s proud of him in his entire damn life? That doesn’t mean he wants him dead! If he… if he came home to something horrible having happened to Kiyoshi, he’d be scarred. He’s already in hysterics over Irina! If he lost his son in the same week, he’d fucking snap.

...Kiyoshi has to be a monster to even consider it.

(Is he going to hate himself no matter what he does!?)

He’s just… so tired! He’s just so sick of it! Being terrified of himself, and looking out towards the future only to see nothing. Is this what his destiny is? Only to keep living on not because he wants to, but because he’s afraid of causing even more harm? What sort of life is that? Surely not one that ever feels any better than this…

He wonders if any of that is really what matters to him… this idea of ‘harm…’ Hurting his friends and family… is it that, or is he just afraid? Afraid of what it’d be like to die, and afraid of what would happen to someone like him after…?
(He remembers it, just barely. He doesn’t want to, but he does. It’s an average day… then his heart starts to falter. There’s no-one in the room, and he can’t scream - can’t speak. Even somehow amongst the motionless monotony, he’s afraid. Life has become misery, but the idea of death is worse. He’s not ready yet. Wait- please.

...For the first time in his life, Yanagisawa’s afraid.)

That’s what it has to be.

Even now… he’s making this about himself. This isn’t about his friends… his family… is it? This is about his fear. Plain and simple, Kiyoshi doesn’t want to die. And plain and simple he’s afraid of his legacy vanishing. There’s so much he hasn’t gotten to do yet - so much he hasn’t gotten to try. But as he reiterates that… meeting his own eyes from across the glass, he feels his heart grind to a stop.

...So much he hasn’t gotten to destroy.

‘Stop being selfish,’ he thinks. ‘Even if it would hurt you, that’s good… isn’t it? You should be afraid. Who cares what you want?! It’s about what the world needs! And who cares if it’ll hurt them. Surely it won’t hurt as much as you staying here will. It’ll hurt for a little bit, and then they’ll move on. They’ll forget you! Like they should have! A long long time ago!’

Kiyoshi takes a step back, knees terribly weak.

‘I-I’m not ready. They’ll… they’ll be sad. I just know it’

‘Will they?’

His own reflection in the mirror looks awfully harsh.

...His face doesn't shift. He's in the world of the waking. All the same, those mismatched doe eyes suddenly look violent. He's seen that expression before, albeit never directed at himself. Does that make it okay, somehow?

...He doesn't know.

‘I… want to think they will.’

‘You want your friends to be sad?’

‘No! No!’ That’s not it… he just… he just-

...He just wants to be needed.

‘You can make it about them as much as you want! But you know the truth! You always will! And you’re a selfish asshole! So just do it already! The world would be better without you! Why don’t you just get that!?’

Because… because…-

**Kiyoshi Doesn’t Know!**

All he knows is that he’s scared! Scared of himself, and scared of dying, and scared of never feeling loved ever again. But he has to face that! And that’s what his punishment is! And so meeting his own eye- facing down the monster in the mirror- and letting out a scream of
frustration for what feels like the hundredth time today, he rears his fist back and **smashes it**…
collapses to the ground as glass shatters around him, and sits… **knees beside the broken glass.**

...His hand is bleeding.

Some faraway part of him notes that he's lucky not to have severed a tendon. Then he'd **really** be in trouble, wouldn't he? There's this sharp stinging feeling in his hand. When he glances towards his knuckles, he catches sight of little glass pieces embedded in them and feels his stomach do flips. But he doesn't motion to remove them… some part of him’s still convinced he deserves this. Even if he can’t die, he can treasure this, at least.

And finally… Kiyoshi doesn’t scream. Simply curls up into his knees and weeps. All of the frustration… all of the defiance seeming to have flooded from his body in an instant… all he is is scared… scared of what he’s done here, and scared of what that means for him in the future.

...Scared, because he doesn’t want to die, but he doesn’t quite want to live, either.

One hand bloodied, and the other hand bruised… Kiyoshi hiccups- sputters for breath - and lets them ache… cries so hard his head pounds… and begs for something - for anything.

For help. For an ‘I believe in you,’ or some form of redemption.

...That's when the door creaks open, and a panicked voice speaks up.

“A voice he hadn’t expected to sound like that in a thousand years.

...His father’s.

Chapter End Notes

So... **THAT** was a chapter, huh?

...Yeah. Like I said. It's heavy.

I wanted to get into how every one of the trio is taking this personally. All of them are suffering, and I hope that shows. In particular I got a few people last time who didn't really understand where Fumiko was coming from, so I hope the look into her head helps everyone who didn't really empathize with her before at least get why she's behaving the way she is. She's not just angry, and not even just sad. More than anything she's *downright terrified.* She has no way of verifying the sorrow Kiyoshi's displaying is real, even if we, the reader do. 😊😊😊

That doesn't make the 'opposing side' (BLAH. What a term) any less well-off, however. Makoto and Kiyoshi are both SPIRALING. Makoto is someone who has A TON of empathy and care for other people, but he doesn't tend to understand that his experiences aren't universal, and why someone would be sad if the same situation didn't make HIM sad. Right now he's in a place where he's convinced himself he's right no matter what, and that certainly isn't gonna help his case. But ultimately he's not ACTUALLY being selfish. He just legitimately wants to do right by everyone, and that might not be possible.
As for Kiyoshi... HOOOOOO BOY, Kiyoshi. He's the main reason I described this as
the darkest chapter in AIS. He's having a complete mental break. I wanted to capture
not only his sadness, but a fragment of that all-too-scary rage as well. Anger and
sadness are emotions that are very much connected, and whether Kiyoshi wants to
admit it or not he feels scorned and wounded. No amount of 'I deserve it' will ease
that. In fact... it'll just make it worse. He's in a place where he's frankly terrified of
himself right now. And because of that, he acted out.

At the very least... no-one got hurt. Except his hands. Those are pretty damn fucked up
right now. But even those could be worse. Either way, poor kid. He really does just
want to eventually get to a place where he'll be happy, and right now that feels like
something that's IMPOSSIBLE for him... something that will never be 'right.'

It seems next chapter he'll be having a conversation with his father, so here's to hoping
that helps some. No promises, though, however! Even if this was the darkest/saddest
chapter in my opinion, that doesn't mean EVERYTHING is smooth sailing from here
on out. It'll take a lot of effort on Karsasuma's part to get through to Kiyoshi when he's
in a state like this. We'll just have to see if he can succeed.

Next chapter will be up either in a week or in two weeks. It depends on how long the
one after that gets. It's a LENGTHY chapter- coming in at a whopping 15k, so I want
to make sure it doesn't put me too much behind schedule. Either way, it's an awesome
chapter, and I can't wait to share it with you!

As for THIS chapter, some songs that helped me write it are Because Of You by Kelly
Clarkson, Listen To Me by Human Petting Zoo, Fate of a Coward by Days N' Daze,
How To Be Alone by Allison Weiss, Monster by Dodie, Intro III by NF, and the Guide
To Success from things to ruin. The song I'd like to highlight, however, is Like A
Staring Contest by the Future Kings of Nowhere

"I've been going through the records
We're not getting any better
Maybe I'm just getting bitter
I don't really care, whatever
I'm so tired of open warfare
When the point of this was to be best of friends

We've been going 'round in circles
Like a plane without an engine
As we spiral down the slipstream
Of our quickly-sinking friendship
It's a train wreck of an ending
It's the same as if we'd never even met

And now, I'm going through the motions
Like a drunken ballerina
Who's too tired to dance
But keeps on getting up to see if
Anybody stuck around to see
A show that has been over now for days
And I know that they're gone
But I keep checking anyway"
As usual, I hope you enjoyed, and I hope to see you next time! Sorry for the Pain, but make sure to let me know what you thought. I promise things will hurt a little less soon.
For coherency’s sake I should clarify something about the first section of this chapter. There’s a flashback to when Kiyoshi was a kid. I’m not sure how many of you know this because it hasn’t come up a ton during the story, but Kiyoshi’s a trans dude. I decided this because the Karasuma family has a daughter in canon and I wanted to stay true to canon without giving up the baby boy I’d already schemed up. Because of this, however, I didn’t really know how to handle the topic of when he was a kid and didn’t know that yet.

I decided since the flashback is from his perspective and he knows he’s a boy, I’d use the correct name and pronouns. (Plus... it’d just feel cruel and even transphobic not to.) That said, however, I didn’t want to ‘posthumously’ edit dialogue, so there are some bits where his deadname would be. I say WOULD because it’s been replaced with blocks of black text. I do not plan to and will not share his deadname. That’s not okay even remotely. I just wanted to explain why there are like three redacted words at the start of this chapter. Those are censored mentions of it.

Secondly, as usual: have content warnings for this chapter: namely that the topic of hospital trauma (but not needles/IVs) is gotten into, and also that glass getting embedded, then removed from someone’s skin is gone into pretty in depth. A sewing needle is briefly mentioned being used to work it out of the skin. As always, please tread carefully! There’s some squicky topics this chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

He’s a little over three years old, and he’s burning ants with a magnifying glass.

He doesn’t really know why. He supposes he’s just bored. Mom and Dad are discussing boring adult stuff inside, and he’s looking for an excuse to mess around with the tools he got for his birthday, anyways.

He hadn’t received a ton of other stuff, seeing as how he’d gotten a puppy as his 'main' gift... but the puppy’s tearing up the backyard right now, and it’s a good time to see what the more ‘minor’ stuff he’d got can do.

He’s always been told he’s a smart kid... curious, quick-learning. He doesn’t really get it, but it feels nice to hear. He supposes that’s why he’d asked for a set of handheld tools for his birthday - well... tools and a puppy. But that’s besides the point. The puppy is eating their flowerbed, and he doesn’t make Kiyoshi very smart, anyways.

His smarts do. And that’s why this feels so right in his hands.

It’s a sunny day out. Hot little beads of sweat are dripping down his forehead. That’s how he’d gotten the idea! He’d tried hovering the magnifying glass over his own skin to see if it could help give him some shade, and realized pretty quickly it did the opposite. He hadn’t been too torn up over it, however, and quickly his attention had shifted as he noted little ants marching alongside the driveway. He’d hopped to his feet and rushed over to meet them.
Quite frankly, he’d been curious to see if ants can get hot too.

He’s never seen an ant sweat… or any other animal, for that matter. In fact, he’d tried to hold the magnifying glass over Taro, too, but that’d been no use. He’s simply too fast, too energetic, and too silly. That’s okay, though. Ants will do. They can’t move as fast as Taro can, and they’re much grottier looking, anyways.

At first he thinks it’s a fluke. The ants don’t seem to notice much, and he starts to lose interest. But he reminds himself a lot of things can take a super long time - like waiting for rides at the amusement park! And decides to hold out for a little while longer. After all, he’s a smart kid, and smart kids are patient.

Slowly but surely, they start to waver. He’s not sure how long it takes… but as he keeps the magnifying glass focused on one group of ants they crawl to a halt. Slow down… stagger, and then collapse.

He smells something bad. Feels his nose wrinkle… but he doesn’t let up. He pokes an ant with his pinky, wondering if it’s still alive… but it doesn’t move, and more than anything he just sort of accidentally crushes it.

Okay, so that settles that, then. But it doesn’t quite mean he’s done, either. He’s heard you should always double-check your work, just to make sure you’re right! And besides, he’s not really sure what he’s supposed to have learned yet. He’ll try it out with a few more ants just to make sure.

Still on his knees, he follows their trail to somewhere over in the grass. At first he considers shining the glass there, but quickly decides against it. He remembers the bad smell the ants gave off, and the time he left a stuffed animal on the lamp only for it to catch on fire. Something tells him if he shines the glass on the lawn, then something not too dissimilar to that will occur.

(So they’re burning then? Curious!)

Besides, he’s found something much more interesting than ants crawling on the grass, anyways: a little mound of dirt… piled up almost too small for him to see. He’s watched Animal Planet before! He knows this must be their home! Perfect! There should be a lot of ants here.

He rips out every bit of grass nearby, careful not to touch the ant hole itself, before scooting in close and holding the magnifying glass up with pride. Before he gets a chance to smell that nasty burning scent again, however, he hears footsteps behind him, and a stern voice speak up.

“… what are you doing?”

Kiyoshi whips around, eyes wide as he gawks up at his inquisitor: A massive, stern man… one who towers over him… with tired eyes and gentle hands.

...Dad.

Kiyoshi thinks it over for a moment, meeting Dad’s concerned gaze, before turning back around and giving a shrug. “Studying,” he decides on. “With the tools you and Mom got me!”

Dad crouches down to get a closer look, eyebrows furrowing as he watches Kiyoshi hover the magnifying glass over the ant hole.

“…I see,” he says in a voice that seems to imply he does not 'see' even remotely. “Studying what, if I may ask?”
“Ants!” Kiyoshi declares proudly, pointing to where one has begun to keel over. “I don’t think they like the magnifying glass very much!”

Dad cocks an eyebrow. “I can see that,” he notes, scratching at the back of his neck. “Though I am… a little confused as to why you’re doing this if you understand that.”

Kiyoshi tilts his head. “Huh?”

“█████, sweetie… you do realize that hurts them, right?”

Now that gives Kiyoshi pause. His hand lowers to his side, and he lets the magnifying glass rest against the grass.

“Oh,” he says. “I didn’t know that.” He pauses, looking up at his Dad with big, watery eyes. “I didn’t make a mistake, did I, Dad?”

“No,” Dad replies. “Of course not. I simply-”

“Cool!” Kiyoshi interrupts, scrambling to hold the magnifying glass up once more. “I can keep doing it then, yeah?”

Dad sputters. “Well I didn’t- that’s not what I said.”

“Why not?” asks, huffing. “You said you don’t care, and Mom hates the ants! She’s always bitching about them. ‘Oh! They make the place so dirty!’ ‘Oh-’”

“Okay. So.. first of all, don’t use words like that to describe your mother,” Dad says.

“She says it’s fine!”

“And she’s out of her mind. Second of all: just because I’m not going to punish you for it doesn’t mean it’s okay.”

Kiyoshi pauses, before giving another shrug. “Well, that doesn’t make any sense. They’re just ants. You smoosh them all the time. And it’s not like they’ve got feelings.”

“That’s true…” Dad admits, watching Kiyoshi roast the ants. “But all the same…” He places a hand on his hand, and slowly guides it away from the ant hole. “Well- it’s not particularly even about the ants.”

“What’s it about, then?”

Dad pauses. “Well… think about it this way: you’re right. I don’t really care about the ants… and I do ‘smoosh’ them all the time. But… this is different. They’re not in our house. They’re in their own. And you’re breaking in and hurting them. For what?”

Kiyoshi takes a moment to think that over. “Curiosity, I guess,” he decides on.

“Which is… fine. But there are better ways to expel that energy. You wouldn’t like it very much if someone broke into your house and did that to you, would you?”

Kiyoshi sticks his tongue out, shaking his head with a pout. “Well, yeah,” he admits. “But no-one can do that to me, silly!”

“You say that… but…” Dad reaches over to grab Kiyoshi’s arm, giving him a firm pinch.
Kiyoshi yelps, yanking his arm away.

“Hey!? What was that for!?” He demands.

“To show you there are still all sorts of ways you can be harmed,” Dad says simply. “You’re right: no-one can come into your house with a giant magnifying glass and burn you up. But you are bound to meet stronger and scarier people than you in your life. And some of them aren’t bound to be very nice. That’s why…”

“Why?”

“That’s why you shouldn’t be one of them,” Dad decides on. “I plan to teach you everything you’ll need to know. About how to protect yourself… how to stand up for yourself against people like that. But I need you to make me a promise first… that you’ll never use those skills against someone who’s not quite as strong as you. You don’t want people to see you as a bully, do you?”

Kiyoshi shakes his head, giving Dad a stunned look. “Of course not!”

“Because that’s what this is: bullying. And while it doesn’t particularly matter when done to ants… I don’t want you to grow up to be someone who does that to people. I’ve... seen people like that. And they’re never happy. They’re deeply insecure, cruel people, and they scare everyone around them. That’s why… when you meet people smaller than you. People who you think are weaker, you gotta protect them. Not hurt them just because you can.”

“Even if they’re just ants?”

“Even if they’re just ants.”

“And even if I’m curious?”

Dad’s quiet for a long moment. “...Even if you’re curious.”

“Okay,” Kiyoshi finally says. “I’ll stop.” He’s still not entirely sure he gets it… but… he loves his dad. He doesn’t want to upset him. And besides… when he thinks about the sort of people his dad described… those insecure, cruel people, he has a feeling Dad’s right about just how lonely they are.

“Good,” Dad says. “Come on. Let’s use that magnifying glass on something much more producti-”

“We should give them fruit!”

“...Pardon?”

Kiyoshi pumps his little fists in the air. “Y’know! To make it up to them! Ants like fruit, right? So we can give them some. Then they’ll be less sad about the fact that I started hurting them.”

“Well…” Dad scratches at the back of his neck. “I’m not sure Mom will like that idea very mu-”

“Mom doesn’t gotta know!” Kiyoshi declares, leaping to take Dad’s hand. “C’mon! Pretty please?! Just this once! I won’t do it again! I promise!”

Dad looks close to arguing, but he takes one long look into those puppy dog eyes and relents. His shoulders fall and he admits “Okay. Just this once. Let’s give the ants fruit... as a peace offering.”

They retrieve watermelon and blueberries... anything that they can leave out in the backyard without the risk of Taro accidentally poisoning himself. They break it into little pieces and leave it...
...It really is sorta cool what the little guys can do when they work together sometimes.

In due time, Dad returns inside. He leaves Kiyoshi alone to his devices... and he leaves Kiyoshi alone to try and ride on the dog like a horse. But before he returns inside for dinner that night, Kiyoshi sends a glance towards the ant hole one last time, and notes where the charred corpses of the ants he'd burned still lie.

He pauses… wonders if there’s only so much you can make up for, and if that’s the reason he shouldn’t be a bully. He’s not certain… but he hopes the ants will be able to forgive him one day.

After all, if there’s only one thing he can do... he thinks he'd like that to be to grow up into a person his dad will be proud of.

Karasuma's staring through him as he lies on the floor... knuckles bloodied, eye still freshly bruised. It’s indecipherable… the expression he’s looking at Kiyoshi with now… but he knows one thing for certain:

It's not pride.

He starts to take a step forward, but Kiyoshi stops him: speaking up in a trembling voice.

“Don’t. ‘ts dangerous in here. You don’t wanna step on the glass.”

Karasuma’s eyes drift towards the ground... and widen slightly as he notes the shattered mirror. He takes a step backward, reaching his hand out to block where the dog had been following him.

“Taro. Stay,” he commands, shutting the door behind him. There’s a persistent scratch on the door outside, but Karasuma doesn’t seem to note it. His gaze is fixed solely on Kiyoshi.

It’s not that long ago that Kiyoshi had noted he’d never seen his dad afraid. But the expression his dad is looking at him with right now… it seems pretty close.


His mouth hangs open for a moment after he speaks. He doesn’t dare take another step closer, but his hand’s stiff as a board.

Kiyoshi feels a twang of shame at his father even seeing him in this state. He scoots backwards… careful to avoid sliding against the glass, and shakes his head.

“I… I can’t- it- it doesn’t matter-” He sputters. There’s too much to explain. Too much that makes him want to bow his head and shriek. Too much he knows his dad would be ASHAMED of him for. He can't breathe a word of it.

“What happened to me… it- it doesn’t matter. I just want to know about mom-”

“What?” Karasuma asks, eyes wide as saucers

“I said it doesn’t matter! So just tell me about mom! Is she okay now!? Is everything finally alright!?” Kiyoshi’s struggling to breathe. “Please… tell me I finally fixed things. Tells me she’s
She has to. She has to be alright. He has to have fixed that. Even if he can’t fix what he did to Fumiko… even if he can’t fix himself. Please- tell him Mom’s okay. He’ll do anything!

“Kiyoshi, that has nothing to do with-” Karasuma sputters. “You have nothing to do with what happened to your mother! What are you talking about?”

Of… of course. Of course he wouldn’t get it. He looks at Kiyoshi with those clueless eyes, and he feels his gut fucking twist. Just stop it!

“Just tell me. Please. It’s all I want-” Kiyoshi gasps for air. “Mom. Did I fix it? Please. Tell me I fixed it. Dad- I need you to-”

Karasuma’s gaze flits from Kiyoshi’s black eye to his bloodied hand… towards the shattered mirror, then to the hole in the wall.

“Kiyoshi… there have been no updates. I don’t have any news about your mother’s condition-”

“No! Come on!” Kiyoshi shrieks. “Why?”

“Kiyoshi-!”

“I ruined everything for nothing!”

“What are you-?” Karasuma freezes, eyes locking onto Kiyoshi’s punctured, bloody hand. He shakes his head. “No. We don’t - we don’t have time for this,” he sputters. “We need to… - I need to get you to the hospital!”

Kiyoshi’s reaction is instantaneous. He kicks himself backwards, glass shredding through his pant leg as he presses himself back up against the wall. He covers his face with his good hand… struggling for breath.

“No. No. I can’t-” he whispers, heart pounding in his ears. “… I can’t go. My friends will find out… they’ll… they’ll…”

His head starts to spin. They’ll blame themselves. They’ll think he’s guilting them. They’ll know he had a mental break! They’ll… know he can’t take ‘no’ as an answer! They’ll see everything! He can’t -! he’s not ready to-! he doesn’t want to-

**HE CAN’T GO BACK THERE!**

“Kiyoshi!” Karasuma cries, rushing over to his side. But Kiyoshi’s having none of it. He kicks. Screams. Does anything he can possibly think of to keep himself away from that place. He knows his dad could overpower him in an instant… but he can’t - he won’t allow it. He fights with everything he has, and when his dad takes him by the shoulder- saying words as empty as “everything will be okay,” Kiyoshi claws at him. Sobs. Scratches. Begs!

“I’m scared- I’m scared- Don’t take me there, please-!”

“You’re injured!” Karasuma stammers, eyes wide and face a grimace. “You’re… you’re bleeding. You might have severed something. We need to… we need to get you help. They’ll know what to do.”

“I don’t care!” Kiyoshi sobs, still thrashing. “It doesn’t matter! Nothing matters! Don’t- I don’t
wanna-! I’m not ready-!”

“I…-” Karasuma stares. “I can’t just do nothing! Come on, Kiyoshi. We need to do something. I know you’re afraid, but-…” He tugs at Kiyoshi’s good hand… pulling him to his feet. “That’s okay. I’ll be here for you… I’ll-”

Kiyoshi grabs at the windowsill with his bad hand, blood smearing across the wood as he clings to it for dear life. He feels the glass shards dig deeper into his palm. “

NO!” he shrieks, desperately trying to rip his other hand from Karasuma’s grasp. “NO! ANYTHING BUT THAT! YOU WON’T! YOU CAN’T! IF YOU MAKE ME GO, I’LL NEVER FORGIVE YOU!”

Now that gives Karasuma pause. His grip goes slack, and his hand releases from Kiyoshi’s palm. It’s hard to make out his expression through eyes clouded by tears, but when Kiyoshi turns his head over his shoulder to stare at his father… he swears he spots genuine helplessness in his eyes.

Karasuma… who always knows what to do. Karasuma… who’s never been afraid. Kiyoshi did this to him…

(About time he actually gives a shit)

NO. NO!

“What are… what are you going to do?” Kiyoshi asks, voice quiet.

Karasuma’s silent, as if asking himself the same question.

“I don’t know,” he finally admits. "But… I won’t take you to the hospital if you really don’t want me to. Just come over here at least. Let me get an idea of your injuries-”

“I… I can’t. I shouldn’t. You should get out of here-” Kiyoshi whispers.

“Kiyoshi! I can’t do that!”

“It’s… it’s fine. I’ll be fine. I just… I just threw a temper tantrum. Nothing bad happened to me. I did this to myself. I’ll be fine. Don’t worry about me.”

“Kiyoshi-! I couldn’t do that if my life depended on it. Right now you’re-”

“Fine! I’m fine! If anything you should be worried about the house… the dog! Make sure I didn’t break anything beyond repair! Hurt anyo-”

“None of that matters right now!”

Kiyoshi finds himself genuinely stunned by the way his dad raises his voice. He only notices it just now… but it seems like Karasuma’s quivering, too.

“The dog… the room… none of that matters. Taro is fine. I saw him right outside your door. You didn’t do anything to him. And as for the room, there are more pressing matters right now. You’re clearly not doing well, and you need someone by your side right now. I’m not going anywhere, so come over here before I have to beg.”

...Beg. Beg. What a powerful word. Tadaomi Karasuma doesn’t beg. He bows to no-one. But even so... he looks down at Kiyoshi with these blank, narrow eyes... and Kiyoshi spots a sense of
desperation in them.

Karasuma - who’s never cared. Karasuma- who should really just go. He stands there… voice
strained, and he says ‘nothing else matters right now.’ 'I want to protect you.'

...Somehow, Kiyoshi thought this moment would have felt more fulfilling. Karasuma's finally
looking at him like he matters. But instead of fulfilled, he thinks he just feels sad. He thinks he just
feels tired. And more than anything, he thinks he just feels bad for pushing such a strong person to
this point.

Feeling terrible or not, however, there’s no holding the tears back for a moment longer. All of the
apprehension seeming to flood from his body, Kiyoshi lets out a sob and stumbles Karasuma’s
way.

“Okay,” he says. “Okay. Okay. Okay. I’ll let you help.” Even though it makes his heart ache and
his body tremble. Even if he doesn’t deserve it, and even if he’s scared. Because he can’t stand to
see his Karasuma look at him that way for a moment longer. “Please - please help. I’ll do
anything-”

...It’s only now he realizes just how badly his hand hurts.

Karasuma is careful as Kiyoshi staggers towards him. He places a hand on his back, but doesn’t let
doesn’t let Kiyoshi do the same. He tells him to let his arm go slack… asks him if he’d gotten
anything embedded in his leg… and carefully guides him towards the bathroom.

“I… ah…- okay-” Kiyoshi says, letting his arm hang by his side. “I don’t think I hurt my leg…
but… but… I’m not sure- It’s hard to focus - I can’t quite-”

“That’s okay,” Karasuma interjects. “I’ll check.”

He’s professional about it first and foremost. He retrieves tweezers from the upper cabinet and
slowly helps wedge the larger pieces of glass out from between Kiyoshi’s knuckles. He doesn’t
speak… simply stands tall with an all too steady hand… and gives Kiyoshi a quiet look.

Kiyoshi averts his gaze… eyes drifting down towards the plain white tile. He feels something drip
down his index finger, and wonders just how much he’s bleeding.

“Let me know if it hurts,” Karasuma says.

“It doesn’t,” Kiyoshi replies. “At least… uh… not much.”

“Do you think you severed anything?”

“I’m not sure.”

“If you did, we will have to get medical attention. I can take care of this… but my training doesn’t
cover injuries that severe. I don’t want you permanently damaging your nerves.”

...Kiyoshi shifts uncomfortably.

Karasuma places an awkward hand on his shoulder. “...If we have to, I’ll make sure you’re ready
first. I’ll be there with you the whole time. Okay?”

Kiyoshi’s not entirely sure he believes that, but he’s hardly in a position to fight.

“...Okay,” he says “Sounds good.”
Karasuma must note the tension, because he changes the topic quickly.

“Did you get this from the mirror?” he asks, starting to prod at the deeper shards with a needle.

It takes all of Kiyoshi’s strength not to wince. But he does feel some relief as yet another splinter works its way out of his finger.

“...Yeah,” he says. “I don’t think it went deep, though. I don’t throw a good punch.”

Somewhere not too long ago, his fist goes through the wall effortlessly. Aguri cowers in the corner, and he feels close to on top of the goddamn world.

...He wonders how long that weakness will last.

“What about the bruises?” Karasuma asks, plugging the sink. He lets warm water run, but wards Kiyoshi’s hand away from it. “On your eye and your other hand.”

“I punched a hole in the wall,” Kiyoshi admits, shuffling uncomfortably. Who is he kidding? ‘Can’t throw a good punch?’ He can be downright scary when he wants to.

...He doesn’t mention the black eye.

Dad doesn’t push. He pours baking soda and soap into the sink.

“Soak your hand,” he instructs. “Try not to move it too much. It might embed deeper.”

Kiyoshi does as told. He stands awkwardly... submerging his hand in the water. It stings to the touch.

“Sorry,” he says. He’s not entirely sure what for.

“Don’t be,” Karasuma says, crouching down. “I’m going to look at your leg. You skid across the ground pretty hard earlier. I want to make sure you didn’t shred it up.”

“Okay,” Kiyoshi says, watching blood pool in the water.

Karasuma runs his hand carefully across Kiyoshi’s pant leg. He brushes shards of glass off into his own palm, then tosses them into the trash. When that’s done with, he rolls Kiyoshi’s pant leg up in search of wounds.

“You shredded yourself up pretty bad,” he states. “I don’t see any glass still caught in there, but there’s a massive cut on your right thigh.”

“Sorry,” Kiyoshi repeats.

“Don’t say that,” Karasuma replies, standing and taking a quick glance towards the sink. “Remove your hand for one second. I’m going to wet a rag.”

Kiyoshi nods, lifting his hand from the soapy liquid. Karasuma retrieves a rag from the cabinet, running it under warm water for a long moment before lathering it in soap and turning his head back towards Kiyoshi.

“Okay. You can soak it again,” he says. “I’m going to take care of your leg. Let me know if it stings.”

There’s a sharp pain as Karasuma dabs the rag to Kiyoshi’s skin. But Kiyoshi doesn’t complain.
Instead, he simply stands as still as he can and stares at himself in the mirror.

After what feels like forever, Karasuma finally stands. He instructs Kiyoshi to remove his hand from the sink once more.

“How does it feel?” he asks. “Does anything still hurt? See if you can still move it. I’m going to grab bandages. Stay right here.”

Some part of Kiyoshi wants to run… flee from the compassion and the shame as his dad turns and shuts the door behind him. But there’s nowhere he could possibly go. He’s stuck here with this person and this feeling... with blood trickling down his hand… and with a heart so heavy it aches.

(He remembers Karasuma’s steady hand, and thinks ‘maybe I wouldn’t run, even if given the chance.’)

...He’s not sure.

Karasuma returns in due time, bandages in hand. He doesn’t speak… simply crouches down and wraps them firmly around Kiyoshi’s leg. He asks if anywhere else hurts... if there’s anything else he should bandage up.

“No,” Kiyoshi admits. “I don’t think so.”

“How is your hand?”

“...Better, I think.” It still aches with each movement, but it’s hard to tell how much of that is glass and how much of that is simply the wounds.

“I’m going to bandage that as well. Let me know if you feel anything sharp. I don’t want to have missed anything,” Karasuma says. Then… carefully, he takes Kiyoshi’s hand and wraps it… tight.

“Does it feel okay?”

“...Yeah. It feels just fine.”

“Just in case, we can keep soaking twice a day. That should work any remaining shards out. If it starts to look infected, I’ll alert the hospital. Flex it real quick. I want to make sure you have a full range of movement.

Kiyoshi does as instructed. Karasuma watches carefully, then nods... letting out a small sigh of relief. “…Everything looks good. At least for now,” he admits. “It seems you were right. The glass didn’t go in deep.”

Kiyoshi nods back, but doesn’t speak. He awkwardly meanders from foot to foot, unsure of what to say.

‘Thank you?’ …Is it time for that? Or… or… something else? Karasuma is still staring at him so intently. He wonders if he should apologize again.

“We should go,” Karasuma says. “The bathroom is no place to discuss these things. How about we go back to your room?”

“I’d like that,” Kiyoshi says, stepping out of the bathroom. He tries to keep his distance… hovering a few feet from Karasuma, but Karasuma closes the gap. He wraps a firm arm around Kiyoshi’s shoulders, clinging to him like he’s afraid he might collapse.
Kiyoshi feels half ready to collapse. He falls down onto his bed with a heavy ‘thump.’ Karasuma watches him carefully... but doesn’t move to speak.

“...You can go now, if you’d like,” Kiyoshi admits. “You… uh… you fixed everything.”

Karasuma shakes his head, lowering himself onto the bed beside Kiyoshi. He stares at him for a long moment.

“...Something tells me I didn’t.”

“Listen… I’m... thankful. I really am. But... you did everything you can. You should go. You shouldn’t... w-worry about me. You can’t... help me with the rest of this.”

“Kiyoshi,” Karasuma says. “You are my son. I’m going to worry no matter what you say. You just... you just went through a complete mental break, and I still don’t even know what happened to cause it. Even if I can’t fix it... please... at least let me know what you’re going through.”

Kiyoshi scoots away slightly. Karasuma frowns, but doesn’t follow after. Simply sits there... arms crossed over his lap.

“...Did you get in a fight?” he asks.

“I don’t know,” Kiyoshi answers.

“Are you stressed about Mom?”

“Of course I am.”

“...Did someone hurt you?”

Kiyoshi’s silent.

“Your eye. It looks like someone punched you. Are you getting picked on at school? Did someone try to attack you? Whoever it is- just let me know. I won’t... I won’t let them lay a hand on you-”

“I tried to hurt someone else.”

He can’t stand it - Karasuma talking to him so delicately… with compassion. He doesn’t get it! He’s WRONG, okay!? Kiyoshi’s not some - he’s not some victim. He’s-!

“...Oh.”

‘Oh,’ is damn right. The shock to Karasuma’s voice is palpable. It makes Kiyoshi’s hands shake and his heart ache... but at the very least his father finally seems to get that he hasn’t raised some innocent little baby. Unable to meet his gaze, Kiyoshi curls up into his legs and buries his face in his knees.

(Disgusting, isn’t it?)

“...Do you want to talk about it?”

Kiyoshi freezes.

“I can’t force you to if you don’t want to. But I know… you wouldn’t just hurt someone for no reason… and if it’s really weighing on you, then you can always talk to me. I’m not going to judge you.”
‘You should,’ Kiyoshi thinks, biting down on his lip.

“And if you don’t want to talk about it… then that’s okay, too. I’ll just sit here with you. I’ll just sit here with you until it feels a little less heavy, or until you’re ready to come to me. Is that… is that okay with you?”

There’s a weight in Kiyoshi’s chest. Even as he avoids meeting Karasuma’s gaze… he can feel those warm eyes locked onto him. He can hear the way Karasuma steadies his voice… even though he’s scared, and the way he tries to say ‘I’m dependable. You can come to me.’

...Where was this person all those years ago?

Where was this Karasuma when he was twelve years old, and he was scared he was never going to have real friends? Where was this Karasuma when he was nine, and he’d have panic attacks so violent he’d convulse? Where was this Karasuma when he was seven? Five? Three? Thirteen!? Where has this person been all his life!?

Why now? Now of all times?

...When he already hates himself…! When all he wants to hear is ‘she was right about you...!’ When he knows the way his parents treated him all these years was justified because he’s a monster… and when he’s decided it’s already far too late for him! Because he’s Yanagisawa! Because he’s bad! Because it’s too damn late, and all he wants to hear is… is…-

“No. It’s not okay with me.”

Karasuma freezes.

“None of… none of this is okay with me! You’re using those compassionate words, but you’re wrong, okay!?! I would hurt someone for no reason, and I have! Just now! Today! ‘Tried’ to hurt someone!? Who am I kidding!? I did hurt someone! And really bad-!"

“Kiyoshi-”

“No! Don’t ‘Kiyoshi’ me! This isn’t some - this isn’t some little misunderstanding! You have no idea! I got in a huge fight with one of my friends! And you know what I did? I- I hurt them! I - started arguing and I just - I got mad... and I got scared... and I... I...-"

"I hit them, okay!??"

He's not even sure what he's saying. But he's not sure what else he's supposed to say. He didn't hurt anyone today. Not physically at least, but his dad won't believe him if he tells him he's some long-dead sociopath! He has to earn that scorn in the only way he knows how!

(Besides. It feels like just yesterday he did those things, anyways.)

"Not just a little, either! Like really bad! They didn't even - they didn't even try to fight back! But I didn't care! I was just so - so angry and wounded I just kept and kept attacking them. They were... they were on the ground and they couldn't get up and I couldn't stop! I didn't want to stop! There is something seriously wrong with me!"

“I think I... I think I enjoyed it. Hurting that person. Even for - even for just a brief moment. And that... that scares the shit out of me! That means there is something so, so wrong with me. The first thing you ever taught me when I was a little boy was to be compassionate with people, and I'm not! I've never been! E... even if you can't see it, I can! And... I... I'm capable of really hurting people
weaker than me! *I'm a terrible person!*"

Karasuma’s staring at him with an indecipherable expression. Kiyoshi doesn’t even realize he’d started crying again until he feels snot drip down his lip. He bats at his face to wipe it away, then covers his eyes with his hands… far too ashamed to meet that gaze for a second longer. *He’s sorry-!* *He’s sorry, okay!?* But what else is he supposed to say!?

“…Has this... has this ever happened before now?” Karasuma asks.

“I mean... sort of-! Yeah!? It's complicated!”

“...I've never heard about this.”

“It doesn’t - I - I've gotten away with a lot of shit you haven't heard about, okay?”

“Have you talked to Nagisa about this?”

“...No.”

“Have you talked to anyone about this?”

“...No.”

There’s a patience to Karasuma’s voice. It’s impossible to deny he’s concerned... _apprehensive_, even… but as he speaks a steady sense of sympathy remains in his tone. Something about it makes Kiyoshi’s hand twitch. Why? Why _now_ of all times won’t he tell him he’s disappointed in him? That he’s mad? That he’s ashamed? He’s resented Kiyoshi for pretty much all of his life…! And so why? Why won’t he just _say_ it?

It’s almost like…

“...*You don’t believe me, do you*?”

Karasuma’s eyes widen.

“You don’t think I’m capable of it! You think I’m - *you think I’m making it up!* Exaggerating!”

“Kiyoshi. I would never-”

“Yes you would! How else can you talk to me like - *how else could you be okay with this!*? **How else could you be okay with me!?** The first thing you ever taught me was to be kind! And now that I haven’t been, you won’t even believe me! Because otherwise it wouldn’t mean anything! If you believed me, and you _still_ didn't care, it would mean you just told me that for _nothing_!”

“Kiyoshi-”

“Well I’ll prove myself to you! I’ll prove I’m bad! And I’ll prove I’m capable of hurting people! I-I- I-!”

Before Kiyoshi even realizes what he’s doing, he’s sent a fist flying towards Karasuma. Karasuma catches it in midair, however... staring down at him with piercing eyes.

Kiyoshi closes his eyes and whimpers. “Shut up! Stop trying to stop me! I’ll show you I’m someone you shouldn’t care about! *I will!*”
He draws another arm back. Sends it flying into Karasuma’s chest. He doesn’t block it this time, but all the same, he doesn’t budge. Sniveling... growling, Kiyoshi pounds his fists into Karasuma’s chest time and time again… each to the same effect. With each swing he feels some of that strength... that anger seep from his body... and before he even knows it, he’s simply just tapping his curled fists against Karasuma’s chest with a desolate sob.

“...Do you feel any better yet?” Karasuma asks.

The way he says it makes Kiyoshi want to punch him again. But something tells him it wouldn’t be to much effect.

“No,” he growls instead. “I don’t.”

“Didn’t hurt very much.”

Kiyoshi curls himself back in up to his knees and scoots away slightly. “Mmm… yeah. I know.”

He’s silent for a long moment.

“...Okay. So yeah. Whatever. Maybe I can’t really hurt people yet. Maybe you’re right. But I really did want to hurt someone today. Is that suddenly okay with you? What about when I’m older? What about when I’m stronger? What if one day I still want to hurt people, and I really can? What then? Are you still not going to do anything? Because then it may as well be your fault.”

He doesn’t mean that. He could never. No matter what happens in the future, he’s always going to blame himself for it. But he just wants to say something - anything to make his dad realize how serious this is.

“...For the record,” Karasuma says. “I do believe you. That you got in a fight, and even that you seriously wanted to hurt someone. I’d never doubt you saying that with such sincerity. But I’m still not worried about your future, Kiyoshi. Because you know what I don’t believe you on? That you enjoyed it.”

“Right now… you were just making the most horrible face. Tearstained… miserable… distraught... that’s how you looked trying to attack me. I’d bet my life you made that same face when you got into a fight with your friend.”

Karasuma shakes his head. “We wouldn’t be having this conversation right now if you hadn’t. You wouldn’t have wrecked your room, and you certainly wouldn’t have started crying like this. You’re an honest boy, Kiyoshi. You wear your heart on your sleeve. You wouldn’t start crying like this if you didn’t feel guilty.”

“And so it’s just okay, then? It’s okay that I beat someone up because I feel bad about it!?”

“Of course not!”

“How do you know I won’t do it again!? And how do you know I won’t feel bad then, too!? What does it matter!? As long as I’m hurting people, then how I feel about it doesn’t mean shit!”

“Yes it does! It means you’ll be more hesitant to behave the same way in the future! I’d know. Everyone makes mistakes. Everyone does things they regr-”

“Some mistakes are worse than others!”

Karasuma is silent for a long moment. Finally, he breathes in through his nose, then speaks up in a
calm, collected tone.

“...I never said they weren’t,” he states. “I never said what you did was right, and I never said I was okay with it. I’ll tell you I’m disappointed in you, even, if that’s what you really want. But I am never going to give up on you over it. Because I know that’s not who you are. You are my son, Kiyoshi... I know you don’t like hurting people. And if you’re afraid you do, then I’ll be here to stop you.”

“I’ll be here to make sure you can become someone you’ll be proud of.”

Karasuma doesn’t smile, but all the same there’s a warmth behind his eyes. A steadiness to his tone- and a promise in his words... the words that make Kiyoshi want to jump in his arms and accept that embrace. Karasuma - who believes in him. Who wants to see the best in him.

...There’s only one issue with that.

“Like hell you will.”

Kiyoshi doesn’t mean to say it with such vitriol. But the moment the words leave his lips, he knows they come from the heart.

“...You keep saying these things - but what do you even know about me!? You have never been around. You don’t know I’m kind! You don’t know I’m compassionate! You don’t know I even feel sorry! You don’t know me at all! You hardly fucking talk to me! Why are you suddenly so certain I’m a good person!? Because it makes you feel better about yourself!?”

(‘Because it makes you feel better about raising a monster!’)

It’s only then that Karasuma’s expression really seems to fall.

Kiyoshi almost feels bad... at least until he realizes it’s the first time he’s ever earned a reaction like this from his dad. Not just during this conversation - but ever! The knit-back, guilty eyebrows and troubled frown. Where has this reaction been all his life!? Does his dad only care now because he’s shitty!?

“Of... of course no-”

“No! Don’t try to stand up for yourself! You know I’m right!” Kiyoshi refutes, irritation prickling in his tone. “You know you don’t know me! And you know it makes me feel like you don’t care. But you don’t care about that, do you!?” He turns slightly, leaving his back to face Karasuma. “Otherwise you would have done something. Otherwise... otherwise...”

(...Maybe he wouldn’t feel like such a shitty person right now.)

“Well... otherwise you would have at least bothered to say ‘I love you.’”

Karasuma stares for a long moment.

“I do love you-!”

“Since when!?” Kiyoshi snaps. “You have never said that to me! Once! In my entire life I cannot recall a single time that you’ve told me that! That you love me! That you’re proud of me! Anything! Every time I’m stressed you do nothing. Every. Time I have an issue you just sit there!?
Why!? Because I deserve it!? Because I’m not good enough for you!? Or because you just don’t give a shit!?”

“Who am I kidding!?” he says, throwing his hands in the air. “It’s all three! I am shitty! AND I don’t deserve to have a good family! Because I’m not a good person! I deserve to have a mother who’s dying, and I deserve to have a father who doesn’t even love me! Who’s so aloof - so above it all when I’m not. When I’m anxious, and pathetic, and everything that could bring shame to him! I don’t blame you for being - for being disappointed- but I wish you’d at least pretend to give a shit!”

“If not me, then about Mom! You have not cried once since she had her accident. Do you even care!? Or does that not matter to you, too!? Is this just another little inconvenience for you!? Are you too tough to give a shit!? Or have you just never cared!? You never told her you loved her, either! And now she’s going to die feeling alone- and shitty - and unloved- and like she wasted her life. All because… all because…-

He struggles for breath. “…All because she got stuck with you. And you never once let her know you cared.”

Karasuma falls silent. Kiyoshi feels horrible pretty much instantly for saying it, but all the same… he means it- doesn’t he!? He’s been thinking about it for weeks! Months! Years, even! How fucked up his family is! That anger… that sadness… it’s real, isn’t it? He just… he just…-

...Doesn’t know what to do.

He refuses to meet Karasuma’s eyes... simply stares down at his quivering, bandaged hand, and takes one ragged breath after the other.

“...I can see what you’re doing, you know.”

Karasuma’s voice is tiny. Tinier than Kiyoshi’s ever heard it. But as he reaches out to place a shaking hand on Kiyoshi’s shoulder, he knows it’s a voice brimming with honesty.

“These… these things you’re saying about me… you don’t mean them, do you? I’m sure… I’m sure I have hurt you in many, many ways… that much is true. But you know I love your mother, and you know I love you. That’s why… I won’t let you do this.” His grip on Kiyoshi’s shoulder tightens. “...You’re trying to push me away, aren’t you?”

Kiyoshi blinks. He hadn’t entirely realized it up until he’d heard it from Karasuma’s mouth, but… it’s true, isn’t it? It’s not that - it’s not that he’s not mad at Karasuma. Sometimes he thinks he hates him more than anything. But if there’s one thing he hates even more than his father, it’s himself… and he can’t bear the weight of support right now.

...Kiyoshi doesn’t respond.

“You keep saying these things- about being terrible- about not deserving help. And maybe you couldn’t prove yourself to me about that through your fists, so you thought you might be able to do that with your words. That if you said something hurtful enough… you could demonize yourself... Scare me away. After all… it’s worked in the past, hasn’t it?”

“You’re right, Kiyoshi. I… haven’t been around for you. And part of that is because I’m afraid I’m not good enough for you. I am so- so scared of failing you. But… that’s no excuse. And I can see now… I already have. But this time… no matter what you say to me, I’m not going to run away. No matter how harshly you resent me… reject me… tears me to shreds- I am not going anywhere
right now Kiyoshi.”

“...Because I know you need me.”

It’s only then that Karasuma does something he hasn’t done for a very long time. He leans in and wraps his arms around Kiyoshi’s shoulders… pulling him into his chest and hugging him tight.

At first- Kiyoshi resists... kicking- writhing- doing anything to fight back against the affection he’s so certain he doesn’t deserve. But just as soon... all the strength seems to seep from his body. He collapses into his father’s embrace, and finally - finally accepts what he’s wanted for years now. ...That ‘I love you.’

He can’t hold back the waterworks a second more. He buries his face in Karasuma’s- no… in Dad’s chest and wails.

“I'm sorry!” he cries. “I’m sorry! I’m sorry! I shouldn’t have said those things! I know you- I know you- you just did so much for me... you just cleaned up my whole mess. And I had the audacity to talk to you like that!? What’s wrong with me!?”

“Nothing,” Dad says, holding him tight. “There is nothing wrong with you. Please… believe me when I say that. Everything you said to me… you have every right to feel that way. But please… just know that no matter what - no matter what you do- I will ALWAYS care about you. That’s the one thing I never want you to doubt.”

“You are not a burden, and you do not deserve to be going through this. I’m sorry if I made you feel like you do. You are kind… and empathetic… and so, so smart. And I wish you’d give yourself more credit. You could change the world if you wanted to. I know I maybe don’t have the best perspective to say these things, but I’m still certain of them. I’m your father. I’ve watched you grow up. And I know you’ll just manage to become someone I can be proud of.”

He pauses, hand hovering over Kiyoshi’s back. “...Hell… you already have.”

Kiyoshi struggles for breath, nails digging into the back of Dad’s suit. “Promise me,” he begs through sobs. “Please. Promise me you mean that. Promise me you’re proud of me. Promise me you’re not just saying that to make me feel better. And promise me you’re still going to love me… even if I screw up.” He whimpers. “Even though I already have-”

“I promise,” Dad says, voice firm. “I promise you. I’m not - I don’t tell white lies. You should know that. I have trouble speaking from the heart... but if I say something, I mean it. And I’m always going to. I’ll always tell you what you need to hear, and I’ll always tell you what I believe.”

Kiyoshi sniffs, wiping his face on Dad’s shirt. He hiccups and gasps, murmuring “Thank you,” over and over and over.

“Just… please. Make me a promise, too.”

Dad’s hand drifts up towards Kiyoshi’s head, palm resting snugly in his hair. There’s a rigidity to the way he moves.

“...Today… Shiota-sensei and I talked about some things. About what happened to your mother, and about what’s happening to you. And Shiota-sensei said… he was worried about you. He told me he was scared you might hurt yourself, or even do something worse. And something about that… well, it terrified me. I’d never thought about that as a possibility before. But I came home
today, and I saw you beat up - covered in blood- and for one horrible moment I thought I was too late. I’d really thought I’d maybe lost you.”

He runs his fingers through Kiyoshi’s hair, other hand pulling him in closer to his chest. “Please. Promise me you’ll never do that to me.”

“I know I’ve failed you. And I know… I know you have issues. But please… I want to do better. No matter what you do- no matter how you feel about yourself - I will always want you in my life. And so… please… just promise me you’ll be careful.”

His grip tightens. His breath hitches and he lets out a low wheeze.

...That’s when Kiyoshi feels something wet slowly drip and land on his forehead.

His body goes stiff. A sudden sinking feeling in his gut, he whispers “You’re… you’re-”

Dad nods, dabbing awkwardly at his eyes. It’s hard to spot, but one tiny tear after another runs down his face. He seems embarrassed, almost… this apprehensive, insecure look on his face.

“I’m… crying,” he admits with a sigh. “You said earlier you’ve… never seen this from me before. That you haven’t seen me cry since what happened to Mom… and maybe that you’ve never even seen me cry at all. That didn’t sit right with me.” He pauses. “These things are… these things are very hard for me. I want to be strong for you. I want to be someone you can look up to. But I also don’t want you to think I… to think I’m someone above it all. And so… I’ll grit and bear it… face what’s hard for me, and let you see this side of me.”

“...I’m scared too.”

His voice quivers as he speaks.

“I’m scared of what happened to your mother, and I’m scared of what happened to you. I’m… scared I’m going to lose everything that I’ve worked so hard for… everything I never realized I was so lucky to have. Your mother and you… you two changed my life. I cannot lose that. I know… it might seem like I don’t care sometimes. But… I do. I care. And I didn’t realize just how content I was with the life I led until… well…”

“Until I almost lost it all.” His shoulders sink. “...Listen. I don’t know what’s going to happen to your mother. And I don’t know what’s going to happen to me. But please… promise me at the very least that you’ll manage to be alright. I don’t think I could ever forgive myself if something happened to you because of me.”

Kiyoshi sniffs. “...’ts not your fault. Not really,” he admits. “...There’s a lot going on in my life right now. I’d probably be screwed up whether you were around or not.”

“Doesn’t make it okay,” Dad says. “...I’m your father. It’s my job to protect you. And I can see now that in all my effort to do so… well, I haven’t really. I’m sorry.”

“...’ts okay.”

“I love you.”

“...I know.”

“I hope it’s not too late for this dumb old man.”
“It’s not.”

“And… I hope you know it’s not too late for you.”

Kiyoshi still remembers Fumiko’s words. ‘You’re never going to change…’ How badly they’d stung. But lying snug in Dad’s arms… somehow they feel far away. And for the first time in a long time, he thinks she might just be wrong.

“You’ve got your whole life ahead of you. Things are going to get better. I promise. And… whatever happens next, we’ll face it together.”

“…Even if something else terrible happens to Mom?”

Dad’s silent for a long moment.

“…Even if something else terrible happens to Mom.”

“And even if my friends never forgive me?”

“Even if your friends never forgive you,” Dad says simply. “I know… that doesn’t make it any easier. Whatever you’re going through… it’s clearly taken a toll on you. But let me… let me do what I can. I will always see the good in you. And as long as you always want to do what’s right, then you don’t need to worry about me ‘forgiving’ you. Because I am never going to lose faith in you in the first place.”

“I… hope to make that more apparent from here on out. So that this… well- so that this never happens again.” He pauses for a long moment, before shaking his head. “No. I will make that more apparent,” he decides on. “Starting today. I’ll do better. I promise.”

“Then I promise… I promise…-” Kiyoshi mulls it over. “Well… I can’t promise I’ll be okay. But… I promise that I’ll do my best. And… I promise that I won’t hurt myself again. I’m… ’m sorry for scaring you like that.”

“It’s okay,” Dad says in a voice utterly exhausted. Usually Kiyoshi’d feel bad for pushing him to this point, but… not today. Now’s not the time to feel guilt. Besides… something tells him they’re feeling a pretty similar exhaustion right now, anyways. “You were just scared. That’s okay. It’s okay to be scared.”

He sounds uncertain, but his grip tightens. He pulls Kiyoshi in once more and holds him - firm. Even with both of them so unsure of so many things, Kiyoshi decides he means his words, at the very least.

He… won’t hurt himself. Even if he’s stressed, and even if he’s scared… he’s not going to give up. Because that’s not a fair way to treat Makoto, and that’s not a fair way to treat Fumiko. Because the thought scares his dad, and because the thought scares him. Because there are a million things he’s yet to do- and if even one of those things can change the world for the better… then… then…

...Then maybe this will have all been worth it.

He’s still not sure his life can be happy. He’s still not sure it’s supposed to be. But he knows he has Tadaomi Karasuma backing him up at the very least. And even if someone like him isn’t supposed to thrive, he thinks that’s all he’s wanted for a long, long time.

(It seems to say ‘Even if things aren’t okay today, maybe they will be one day. All you have to do is wait. All you have to do is tough it out.’
‘...All you have to do is believe.’

Suddenly Kiyoshi feels exhausted. Dad doesn’t speak, and neither does he. Limbs heavy… he simply leans into his father’s embrace and wonders what comes next.

Dad must notice his change in demeanor, because he shifts slightly, a concerned look on his face.

“What now?” he asks. “If there’s anything else you’d like to talk about, I’m here. But if you’re tired of this… then…”

“I think I’d just like to rest,” Kiyoshi admits with a sigh. “...it’s been a long day.”

Dad thinks that over for a long moment.

“I’d hate to leave you alone…” he says, scratching at the back of his shoulder. “I don’t mean to seem overbearing, but you really did just scare me. I want to make sure… I want to make sure everything’s okay for certain before I leave you unsupervised.”

“No,” Kiyoshi replies. “That’s not overbearing at all. That’s… that’s fair.”

“...Mind if I stay for company?”

Kiyoshi freezes. He blinks- dumbfounded. “...Like… with me?”

“Yes, with you,” Dad says, equally dumbfoundedly. “What other son do I have?”

“Well- I mean - of course I’m your only - I just-! I don’t want to be a bother. I’m sure you- I’m sure you have things to do. What about cleaning up the room? Or- or your job? I’m sure there are some very important people waiting on updates from y-”

“They can wait,” Dad says. “Any updates about Mom will come to me on speed dial. As for everything else, that’s not important right now. The room… the ministry… the dog. All of that can wait. You can’t. And so what matters right now is making sure you’re safe.”

He says it so blankly. So matter-of-factly. Backed up with facts. It’s clear that as the minutes pass, Dad is beginning to regain his composure. Kiyoshi doesn't find himself minding too much, however. In fact, it almost warms Kiyoshi’s heart to think his dad's decided so objectively he needs help.

“...I wouldn’t mind that one bit.”

Dad lets out a sigh of relief. With that, he finally releases his grip on Kiyoshi and edges away.

“Okay,” he says. “Get some rest, then. I’ll be here for you when you wake up.”

Kiyoshi feels awkward lying down. But his Dad places a hand on his back and he eases up slightly. He takes a deep breath and closes his eyes. He tries not to let his thoughts wander. He’s been through a lot today. But he thinks all he wants right now is just to get some rest.

Thankfully for him, his dad will make sure that happens.

In due time… Kiyoshi drifts off. And before he even knows it, Dad joins him… letting out a gentle snore as they fall asleep together… father and son.

[2/11/2031 5:37 PM:] [Karasuma] I’m not sure if you’re aware of what happened today, but I must
kindly request you don’t expel Kiyoshi for his outburst.

[2/11/2031 5:37 PM:] [Karasuma] I’m aware of the behavior and intend to punish him appropriately if it continues. What he did is in no way acceptable. But I’m sure you know as well as I do that he doesn’t have a mean bone in his body.

[2/11/2031 5:38 PM:] [Karasuma] I sincerely doubt this will occur again.

[2/11/2031 5:38 PM:] [Karasuma] As always, thank you for understanding.

The first thing Kiyoshi notices when he awakes is that it’s dark out.

He can’t see a thing in his room, and it seems his night light’s gone out. He stretches slightly, rubbing at his eyes, before discerning the second thing of note:

...He feels like he’s been hit by a bus.

There’s this puffy, swollen feeling to his eyes. His head pounds slightly in that true-blue ‘post-breakdown’ fashion. His hand aches as he flexes it... and he soon remembers that he’d shattered a mirror. His heart plummets and he remembers his confrontation with Fumiko.

...The third thing he notices is that his dad’s here.

It all comes rushing back to him... their argument turned heart-to-heart. There's still a slight aching feeling in his chest as he hops out of bed, but it eases some listening to his dad snore.

He fumbles for his phone… trying to remember where he’d placed it in the midst of his breakdown. It’s only hitting him now that he has his head on somewhat straight, but his messages must be lit up like a goddamn Christmas tree. He hopes Makoto isn’t too worried about him. He hopes Fumiko hasn’t passed on the news to the rest of the family. (He thinks about it for just a minute and feels sick - struggles to breathe. The thought of Shiotasei… Yukimura-san and such shunning him… it’s too much to bear. But he quickly steadies himself. ’No. Now’s not the time for this. Just look for your phone, Kiyoshi.’)

He finds it discarded in a corner. There’s a crack he doesn’t remember giving it... but then again - he doesn’t remember a whole lot from this afternoon. He boots it up, giving it a precursory glance just to make sure it still works, before checking his texts.

...He has 103 missed messages from Makoto.


[2/11/2031 9:13 PM:] [Makoto ] And... uh... hope you’ll be down to talk soon.

[2/11/2031 10:04 PM:] [Makoto ] It’s getting late. You should be getting to bed by now.

[2/11/2031 10:06 PM:] [Makoto ] I hope you didn’t lose your phone

[2/11/2031 10:12 PM:] [Makoto ] If you did... just meet up with me at school tomorrow, okay?

If you’re not at school tomorrow I might have to tell Nagisa what happened

I don’t want to, but if you’re not okay, I want someone to help you.

And. Uh. I don’t know if I can.

...Please be okay.

And sleep well.

There’s an instant ringing in his ears. He clenches his jaw, hissing in through his teeth. Shit! He really had left him on radio silence, hadn’t he!? The hell’s wrong with him? He’d been so caught up in how bad he felt that he hadn’t even bothered to stop and give Makoto an ‘I’m okay.’ He must be scared out of his mind!

I’m fine

You don’t need to tell Nagisa

I’m

And I am SO sorry for scaring you

I didn’t even think about-

Holy hell, Makoto

I’m sorry.

His message is marked as read pretty much instantly. ‘Makoto is typing’ pops up on the screen, before faltering… then popping up again. He wonders if Makoto is shaking on the other end of the line. He has to have been hovering close to his phone to see his message instantly. Just how long has Makoto been worrying about him!?

(He does the mental math and feels his stomach do flips. He confronted Fumiko a little after three. It’s eleven now. That would mean… that would mean…

...Eight hours)

OHMYGOD

Thank FUCK dude

You have nbo idea how bad you scared me

What HAPPENED?

Are you hurt?
Kiyoshi mulls it over for a second.

[2/11/2031 11:07 PM:] Kiyoshi I mean… nothing bad at least
[2/11/2031 11:07 PM:] Kiyoshi Me and my dad had a talk. But it wasn’t
[2/11/2031 11:07 PM:] Kiyoshi It wasn’t like a stressful thing
[2/11/2031 11:07 PM:] Kiyoshi It was pretty nice, actually…

Kiyoshi feels a wave of embarrassment wash over him. He probably shouldn’t have brought it up… he doesn’t particularly want to admit he had a mental break to Makoto. But all the same, he’d wanted to be honest. It’s white lies that got them into this mess in the first place.

[2/11/2031 11:10 PM:] Kiyoshi I. Uh. Just threw a bit of a temper tantrum
[2/11/2031 11:10 PM:] Kiyoshi After what happened
[2/11/2031 11:10 PM:] Kiyoshi Wrecked my room and threw some stuff
[2/11/2031 11:11 PM:] Kiyoshi Just… punched the mirror.
[2/11/2031 11:11 PM:] Kiyoshi Not the mirror.
[2/11/2031 11:12 PM:] Kiyoshi …I hope that’s not scary to you.
[2/11/2031 11:12 PM:] Makoto Why would that be scary to me??
[2/11/2031 11:12 PM:] Kiyoshi It’s like… y’know.
[2/11/2031 11:13 PM:] Kiyoshi I dunno. I just feel guilty about being angry right now.
[2/11/2031 11:13 PM:] Kiyoshi It’s not like I’ve been wronged. I kinda deserved this.
Kiyoshi sends a glance over towards his dad, lying exhausted on the bed, and wonders just how true that is.

Kiyoshi scratches at the back of his neck. He’s not so certain about that, either. She’d seemed really hurt earlier. And with good reason!

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Kiyoshi scratches at the back of his neck. He’s not so certain about that, either. She’d seemed really hurt earlier. And with good reason!
Kiyoshi bites his lip. He… he thinks he’s better at least. But all the same… he’s not sure he can agree with Makoto. Being a ‘good dude’ now doesn’t take that sort of hurt away. Even if Fumiko really, really wounded his feelings, he’s sure she’s hurting a lot right now in her own right…


[2/11/2031 11:20 PM:] [Kiyoshi] I dunno. Just try to give her space for now, okay?


It’s a long moment before Makoto responds.


[2/11/2031 11:23 PM:] [Makoto] She said I took your side over hers, and that really made me mad.

[2/11/2031 11:23 PM:] [Makoto] I don’t WANT to take sides. I’m just trying to do what’s right…

[2/11/2031 11:23 PM:] [Makoto] And this IS what’s right. I’m certain of it. You need me right now. So even if she thinks you’re some big bad monster, I’m not going anywhere, ‘kay?


[2/11/2031 11:25 PM:] [Kiyoshi] But listen. I think I’m gonna hop off. I haven’t eaten since I got home, and I’m honestly pretty lightheaded. I just wanted to make sure you knew I was okay first.

...He doesn’t have the energy to argue with Makoto right now. He’s already had a long enough day. The last thing he needs is to piss off the one friend he has left.

He motions to pocket his phone, but hesitates; deciding to send a text Fumiko’s way first, just in case.

[2/11/2031 11:25 PM:] [Kiyoshi] I dunno if you’re gonna get this, but I just want you to know I don’t blame you for how you reacted earlier today. I know Makoto might try to say some stuff about how you’re doing the ‘selfish’ thing, but I don’t believe any of that. You’re just trying to keep yourself safe, aren’t you? I just want you to know there are no hard feelings, and that whatever happens next, I really do wish the best for you.

[2/11/2031 11:25 PM:] [Fumiko] From 3401, the recipient you are sending to has chosen not to receive messages. Msg 2905

...That’s about what he expected.

He sighs and places his phone in his pocket. Whatever. He’s not going to bother her if she clearly doesn’t want to be contacted. He stumbles to his feet and takes a step towards the door. That’s when he hears a faint shuffling from his bed, and an ‘mrrmph,’ as Dad returns to the world of the waking.

He seems confused for a moment… eyes adjusting to the dim light. But recognition quickly dawns in them as he meets Kiyoshi’s gaze. He pushes himself up onto his knees, glancing around
“You’re awake?” he says.

“Just got up,” Kiyoshi admits. “Sorry. Didn’t mean to make it seem like I was sneaking off. I just didn’t want to wake you.”

Dad’s brow furrows as if he’s just now realizing he’d fallen asleep in the first place. A slightly embarrassed expression overturns his face.

“...Ah. It’s fine. I hadn’t even realized I’d drifted off.”

“I was gonna get the broom and vacuum, then start cleaning up the floor. After that I was gonna get started on dinner… if that’s okay, I mean. It’s late, but I’m starving.”

“That’s just fine,” Dad says, hauling himself out of bed. There’s a tired heaviness to his motions. Nevertheless, he trods over to Kiyoshi’s bedroom door and places a hand on the handle. “...I can grab the supplies. You stay here. Make sure the dog doesn’t come into the room.”

Kiyoshi does as instructed. Carefully he holds a hand out, warning Taro not to step into the room even as Dad steps out. He seems to have been lying against the back of the door for a long while now... just waiting for them to exit. Kiyoshi almost feels bad, but reminds himself he’d hardly been in a position to take care of himself at the moment, much less the dog.

“...Hey. It’s okay,” he whispers, placing a hand on his fluffy head. “We didn’t mean to ignore you. It’s just not safe in here. I’m sorry, buddy…”

Taro lets out a low whimper, but nestles up into Kiyoshi’s arms. Tail thumping gently, his blank expression seems to say, ‘I’m just glad you’re okay now.’

Dad returns in due time. He carefully steps around Kiyoshi and the dog... broom in one hand and dustpan in the other. Kiyoshi almost thinks he’d forgotten the vacuum, but he returns to the hallway, rolling it in in quick succession. He points a thumb at Kiyoshi.

“I can take care of sweeping up the larger pieces. After that you run the vacuum over the area. You may want to grab shoes. I’d hate for you to injure yourself.”

Kiyoshi nods, retreating to grab his shoes. By the time he’s back his room is already looking worlds better. He runs the vacuum over the carpet- jumping initially as it lets out the worst sound he’s ever heard. His dad places a hand on his shoulder, however, and tells him to go on.

...Before they know it, they’ve got the whole mess cleaned up.

Or- at least... most of it. There’s still the ruined mirror itself, the hole in the wall, and the copious amounts of blood to deal with, but Dad says that can wait. They’ve gotten the immediate danger taken care of.

They head off into the kitchen. Dad gets started on dinner and instructs Kiyoshi to inspect his wounds. Remove the bandages and make sure they don’t look infected... make sure he still has a full range of motion in his hand. Then, clean them thoroughly and rewrap them.

“The gauze should still be in the bathroom. Let me know if you need any help.”

Kiyoshi feels a little bad letting Dad get started on dinner without him, but does as told. He doesn’t want to put him through any more stress than he’s already been through. Taro sticks close to him
the whole time he’s in the bathroom, quietly sniffing at his bandaged leg. But Kiyoshi doesn’t complain… simply washes it, then gives Taro another firm pat on the head.

The moment he returns to the kitchen, he pours him dinner.

“You haven’t eaten since this morning either, have you?” he asks.

Taro cocks his head and whimpers.

Kiyoshi feels another pang of guilt, but tries not to focus on it. Now’s… not the time. He can’t risk spiraling again over something as small as his mental break being inconvenient for the dog. Plus, something tells him if Taro could understand him, he wouldn’t exactly hold a grudge.

“I’ll toss some beef aside for him,” Dad says. “Don’t let his crocodile tears fool you. He’s already more than well-fed.”

It’s about halfway through making dinner that Dad’s phone starts to ring.

He’d left it in the other room. On Kiyoshi’s bedside table. He glances back then forth, sending Kiyoshi a worried look.

“Can you watch the stove? I’m going to grab that. It might be about Mom.”

“Of course,” Kiyoshi says, voice wavering just slightly. “Go ahead.”

Dad returns in what feels like the blink of an eye. Holding his phone up to his ear he hesitates... then puts it on speaker.

’It has to do with her,’ he mouths, holding a finger up to his mouth. ‘Be quiet.’

…Kiyoshi nods.

There’s a professional sounding voice on the other end of the phone. Doctor, probably. He asks “Is this Tadaomi Karasuma?”, a certain tenseness to his tone.

“Ah… yes,” Dad says. “That would be me. Do you have any further updates on Irina’s condition?”

“Indeed,” the doctor says. “We have… good news and bad news, whichever you’d like to hear first.”

Dad’s silent… mulling that over. He sends a wayward glance over towards Kiyoshi, as if asking for advice.

’Bad news,’ Kiyoshi mouths, a sinking feeling in his gut. He has a feeling he’ll quickly regret it, but for now he’d like to rip the band-aid off first if possible. Whatever it is… no matter how bad it can be- at least there will be something good coming after it.

...At least it means she’s alive.

“I’d… like to hear the bad news,” Dad says. “Just get that out of the way. Whatever it is… I’m prepared.”

“Of course,” the doctor replies. “...As I’m sure you’re well aware, we’ve been battling infection in her lower right leg since the incident occurred. Even with the shrapnel thoroughly removed, however, it’s continued to progress to a worrying degree. Today we made the decision to remove that as well before the infection could risk spreading to the upper leg or body.”
Dad’s breath hitches. He pulls Kiyoshi in close, and squeezes his shoulder so tight it hurts.

“The good news, however… is that she seems to be making a full recovery in all other departments. Since the procedure, her vitals have stabilized, and the rest of her body is looking healthy. The injury to her hand has healed up cleanly, and any damage to her hearing is estimated to be minimal. Not only do I fully believe that your wife is going to survive, but that we’ll be able to awaken her within the next week.”

And Dad’s breath releases. He manages to steady himself... stands straight.

“...Okay,” he says. “That’s… a relief.”

“Of course… there are still multiple hurdles for her to face. Once she’s conscious she’ll have to get through the strain of physical therapy, as well as deal with the psychological repercussions of her incident. Those are all worries for another day, however. As for now, I’m confident in informing you that I believe your wife will make a full recovery. I’m sorry for the scare, and I hope this can ease some of the stress on your family at the moment.”

“Of course,” Dad replies. “Thank you for…- thank you for letting me know. Is that all?”

“That would be all.”

“Very well. Please contact me with any further updates. And… thank you again. For everything.”

“Of course. I’ll get in touch with you again soon.”

There’s a faint beeping on the other end of the line. Dad reaches to pocket his phone, a haziness to his motions. He turns towards Kiyoshi, an indecipherable look on his face.

“Did you hear all that?”

Kiyoshi nods, but doesn’t respond.

“...How are you feeling? Are you… are you alright?”

Kiyoshi cocks his head.

“Are you?”

Dad doesn’t respond. Simply pulls out a chair and plops down on it. The stove’s still sizzling, but he doesn’t pay it any mind.

“Dad,” Kiyoshi insists, tailing him. “Are you okay?”

Dad’s shoulders sink. “...I’m not sure.”

Kiyoshi pulls up his own chair, legs dangling as he places himself down next to his father. “Me neither, then, I think.”

It’s hard to tell how he feels. His head’s still sort of spinning... like he can’t entirely process what he’s heard. Her right leg? *But she’s already lost her left- that would mean…*-

“...I’m glad she’s coming home, at least.”

Dad blinks, but slowly nods.
“As am I. For a moment there... for a moment there... I...” he pauses. “Well, I worried she might not make it at all.”

“Yeah...” Kiyoshi says, remembering the way his thoughts had scrambled. He’d been so, so scared she was going to die, and he’d been so certain it was going to be all his fault...

“When she gets home,” he says. “I’m gonna hug her. So tight. And tell her... and tell her to never do anything like that again.”

Dad shifts slightly, but doesn’t respond.

...They’re ignoring the elephant in the room.

“She’s going to hate this... isn’t she?” Kiyoshi finally admits.

“She’s going to be mad out of her goddamn mind,” Dad confirms. “Do you know just how much that woman hates asking for help?”

“Oh, I know alright,” Kiyoshi responds, awkwardly hopping to his feet. He reaches to turn the stove off. Something tells him if he doesn’t do it now, they’re gonna end up burning the whole goddamn house down.

“And that’s not getting started on... what she’s already been through before this.”

Dad doesn’t extrapolate, but he doesn’t need to. Kiyoshi knows... all about the way his mom grew up in a war-torn world. She was surrounded by this sort of stuff ever since she was just a little girl. This is bound to bring back some pretty horrible memories.

(...He wonders if she thought she was going to die.)

He paces back over to Dad... but his father’s stiff as a board. It seems he’s having a particularly intense staring contest with the floor.

“...It’s okay to cry, you know,” Kiyoshi whispers. “I mean... you don’t gotta if you don’t wanna. But you don’t need to be strong around me, either.”

Dad shrugs. “...I know,” he says, sounding defeated. “...But... I’m not sure I’m ready. That’s okay, isn’t it?”

Kiyoshi shrugs right back. “That’s okay, I think. I’m not sure I’ve processed it enough to cry, either.”

He thinks he should be happy right now. Happy that she’s - like - gonna be alright. But this doesn’t feel happy. It’s not like her making it out of this alive somehow makes what she’s been through any less horrible.

“...I’m the one who got her this job, you know,” Dad says.

There’s a sense of shame to his tone.

“That’s not a bad thing, is it?” Kiyoshi asks. “I mean...- it was your way of giving her a chance to redeem herself after she did so many screwed up things. You wanted to show her there could be a better life. You didn’t know this would happen.”

“But it was my job to, wasn’t it!” Dad replies, voice strained. “As an executive of the Ministry of - as her boss - as her husband- I was supposed to protect her! I should have known this mission was
a bad idea! I should have sent out someone else! But I… but I…"

...His hand is shaking.

Kiyoshi leans on his side. “There’s no going back now.”

Dad’s hand falls limp. “...I know.”

“You shouldn’t resent yourself for it. She wouldn’t have wanted you going easy on her. You just… treated her like you would have treated anyone else. And she just ended up being the one to take the bullet.” Er- well - landmine. But he thinks if he says that he’ll projectile vomit. “…It was bad luck, nothing else. But there’s no reason to regret it now. She loved her job… more than anything.”

(And now… she’s going to lose it.

But neither of them dare to say that.)

Dad stands up rather abruptly… brushes himself off.

“I’m sorry,” he says. “I shouldn’t be putting this all on you. You’ve had a hard enough day as is.”

Kiyoshi gives a sardonic, exhausted laugh. “…That’s why it can’t get much worse,” he admits. “…It’s fine.”

“It’s not fine,” Dad replies. “You are my son. It’s not your job to play my therapist. I hope you know that.”

“…Yeah,” Kiyoshi says. “I know that. But I think just this one time it’s okay. Besides…” He pauses. “It makes me feel a little bit better. To know that… like… you worry about these things too.” He hops to his feet. “Not that - obviously I’m not happy you’re suffering! I would never thi- That is NOT my intention! I just worry I overthink things, and maybe if you overthink things too, then there’s not something so wrong with m-”

Dad places a hand on his head. He ruffles his hair gently. “Don’t worry,” he says. “…I got it.”

Kiyoshi gives an awkward smile. “…Ah. Good.”

Dad turns the stove back on. “I suppose all we can do now is wait. Whatever happens happens. We just have to vow to be there for her through it.”

Kiyoshi nods.

“Of course.” He shifts slightly, watching his father cook. A homely scent wafts throughout the room. “…You should tell her that to her face, you know.”

Dad pauses. “Hm?”

“That you’re gonna be there for her, I mean-” Kiyoshi says. “I’m sure she already knows… but… I bet it’d mean a lot to hear it from you. In fact…” he shakes his head. “You should tell her everything. About how worried you were about her. And about how you’re scared it’s your fault. You said it yourself… yeah? You’re not really good with these things. I bet if you opened up to her anyways, it’d cheer her up a little. Show her just how much you care.”

He shrugs. “Then again… what do I know? I might just be projecting. If you don’t have to you don’t want to, but-"
“Kiyoshi,” Dad says. “The moment your mother is home, I’m telling her *everything*. You said earlier that it seems like I don’t care. I don’t want her to think… I don’t want her to think…” he sighs. “I don’t want her to think I wouldn’t have cared if she died here. She’ll know. I promise.”

“...And you’ll tell her that you love her?”

Dad nods.

“I’ll tell her that I love her.”

The rest of the night goes by quietly. There’s an awkward tension to the room, but for once it’s not a bad thing. They face uncertainty together. Dad finishes up dinner and serves it with pride. They don’t particularly talk much as they eat, but Taro paws at the sides of their chairs, and Dad lets out a low scoff.

Kiyoshi ends up conking out a little past one.

He’s aware he’s hardly been awake, but… Dad’s right. He’s had a long day. As such, he lets Dad guide him up to his room. And when he flops down sideways on his bed, he finally feels ready to rest for real.

“I’m taking it you won’t be going to school tomorrow?” Dad asks from the doorway.

“Probably not,” Kiyoshi admits. “If– if that’s okay, I mean. I’m really tired, and there’s somebody I… I’m not sure I’m ready to face yet.”

“...That’s okay,” Dad says. “I’ll let you sleep in. Do you want the dog? He hasn’t slept with you in a few nights.”

“I’d like the dog,” Kiyoshi admits softly.

Dad nods and whistles. It takes two or three tries, but eventually Taro trots up to his side before meandering into the room. Kiyoshi pats the mattress, and with an excited wag of his tail, Taro hops up on the bed. He winds up in circles, before falling over with a lazy ‘boof.’

“Watch him for me, okay, Taro?” Dad instructs. “Make sure he doesn’t get up to anything. And if you keep him up, know that’ll be three-hundred push-ups for you in the morning.”

Kiyoshi snorts.

“...I don’t think he can do push-ups, Dad.”

“Well if he bothers you, I’ll damn well make him try,” Dad huffs, before taking an awkward step out of the room. “...And… uh… that’s all I had to say, I suppose. Sleep well.”

Kiyoshi nods. “You too. If you can, I mean.”

“I’m sure I will.”

Dad takes another step back, but doesn’t motion to close the door quite yet. He stands there… awkwardly, before speaking up in a hushed voice.

“Wait. One more thing. Before I let you get some rest.”

Kiyoshi blinks. “Hm?”
“I hope this doesn’t come off as stupi- this is going to sound awkwa- *I’m not sure how to word this,* but… earlier you said it felt like I was never proud of you. And I’ve been thinking about that. A lot. So I think… I think I’m going to try something. Even if it sounds ridiculous, and even if it makes you a little embarrassed. Because… I want to try to ease that. Make sure you never feel that way again.” He hesitates for a long moment. “If you’re okay with that, I mean.”

Kiyoshi shrugs. “…What is it?”

“I’d like to tell you… something I’m proud of you for. And… I’d like to tell you every day.” Dad averts his eyes, a sheepish look on his face. “So… you always know. And so you know… that I’m… that I’m… trying to pay attention.” He shifts from foot to foot. “I mean - er - if it’s not too late. If you’re not too old for that, that is.”

It’s Kiyoshi’s turn to avert his gaze next. He pulls the covers up over his face, if only to hide the fact that he’s close to tears. He doesn’t want his dad to see him cry. Not for, like, the hundredth time today. But all the same…-

“I’d… I’d really like that, actually,”

...Maybe then he could finally believe there’s something in him worth saving.

“Okay,” Dad replies in a voice that says ‘I didn’t expect to get this far.’ He clears his throat.
“Today I’m proud of you for… I’m proud of you for standing up to me like that. For… having the bravery to tell me just how badly I was hurting you. I know that must have been very scary. But… I think it was an important milestone in our relationship. And… I hope it means things will be better from here-on-out. That we can finally be honest with each other.”

He coughs. “I hope that’s… I hope that’s a good enough thing to be proud of. And I hope… that doesn’t sound ingenuine. Because I mean it. I really am proud of you.”

...For what feels like the first time in his life, Kiyoshi can finally reply “I know.”

Dad flashes him an awkward smile, before whirling around… shoulders tense. “Goodnight Kiyoshi. Please sleep well.”

“I’ll try my best.”

“And… ah…” Dad’s hand catches in the doorway, and he pauses one final time. He turns back to look at Kiyoshi, a careful apprehension in his eyes.

“...I love you. I hope you know that as well. That’s all.”

As he turns to go… finally shutting the door behind him, Kiyoshi speaks up in a loud shout. Cupping his hands to his mouth, he makes sure to reply “Love you too!” before turning over his bed and closing his eyes… finally at something close to peace.

Because while he’s sure there’s still much for him to face tomorrow. He knows at the very least his dad loves him. And he knows that since he first said that this afternoon…-

...Kiyoshi hasn’t once had the time to think about Yanagisawa all evening.

Chapter End Notes
WOOOOAHHH this tidbit got long. To be honest I didn't expect or intend Karasuma and Kiyoshi's talk to get nearly as lengthy as it did, but here we are anyways. Because of it's... length I decided to dedicate the entire chapter to the topic. Originally I intended to get into more in this chapter, but if I'd done that it'd be like 25 fucking thousand words long, and quite frankly that's ludicrous. So we'll get back to how the rest of the cast is doing with Solitude Time/Period 2 next time. For now... our special boys deserved a moment.

And a MOMENT they GOT. But before I get into any of that I'd like to briefly get into the topic of nature vs nurture. For the record Kiyoshi doing something cruel like burning the ants and generally being all around a brat as a kid wasn't meant to say 'he did those things because he had a secret evil lurking inside of him.' (Although I suppose that was part of it, as an influencer on his behaviors.) But more than anything the point of the scene was to show that kids need to be taught empathy, and it's parents' jobs to do so. Kiyoshi... learned important things as a kid he didn't learn as Y*nagisawa. And that's part of why he's a better person now. He didn't pop out of the womb a redeemed, perfect person. He's become the person he is today because his parents, despite all their flaws, raised him with kindness and empathy.

There are a lot of just... the worst, shitty abusive parents in this narrative. And they have their place. But in regards to Karasuma I wanted to firmly establish him as a bad dad, but not an UNLOVING one. There's still time for him to mend his relationship with Kiyoshi in ways a lot of these families can't, and that in itself is an indicator of him being a pretty decent person. Obviously they still have a long way to go, but I do believe they can fix things, and that's good, because Kiyoshi needs a pillar of support right now more than anything.

Of course, I tried to keep a sense of awkwardness and unsureness to his advice and even to his affection. This is all... very new to Karasuma. I didn't want him to become the perfect parent right away because of just one pep talk. He's got a lot of work to do. But he's TRYING, and that's what matters, even if it means there's a sense of awkwardness to his new attempts at showing he cares.

Full disclosure what happened with Irina in this chapter is the last of the injuries I'll be giving her. She'll recover... mostly. She's got a long way to go too, but ya'll know I wouldn't wreck her forever. She'll adapt.

As will Kiyoshi. This chapter is the start of some recovery for his mental health. Obviously he still has issues- especially between his friend group- but he finally has one thing to genuinely cling to, and that's important. Even if it's a slow process, I promise things will start to go uphill from here. And not just for Kiyoshi. For everyone.

Next chapter will be up in two weeks because it ended up being Long. The chapter after that however will be up in the week immediately after. Something tells me you'll thank me for not making you wait too long for that one. Next chapter ends on... a pretty big cliffhanger. 😊 But for now I just wanted to give you this peaceful moment.

Some songs that helped me write this chapter were Dear Theodosia from Hamilton, Monster By Dodie, To Break In A Glove from Dear Evan Hansen, The Things I Never Said from First Date, Kings of The Past from The Lion King, and Heroes Don't Wear Capes by Owl City. The song I'd like to specifically highlight however is So Big/So Small from Dear Evan Hansen.
"And I knew there would be moments that I'd miss
And I knew there would be space I couldn't fill
And I knew I'd come up short a billion different ways
And I did
And I do
And I will

But like that February day
I will take your hand, squeeze it tightly and say
There's not another truck in the driveway

Your [dad] isn't going anywhere
Your [dad] is staying right here
Your [dad] isn't going anywhere
Your [dad] is staying right here
No matter what
I'll be here

When it all feels so big
'Til it all feels so small
When it all feels so big
'Til it all feels so small
'Til it all feels so small"

...As always, I hope you enjoyed. Make sure to let me know what you thought, and I'll see you next time!

EDIT: OH! YEAH! I ALMOST FORGOT TO MENTION. There's an AIS Discord now! So please hop in if you'd like to discuss the fic! :D https://discord.gg/wKW3pzQ
“...Hey Nagisa? Can I ask you a sort of weird question?”

“Of course,” Nagisa says, thumbing through his worksheets. “What is it?”

“What did you and your friends do when you fought? Like… when you were my age, I mean.”

...Nagisa’s had the feeling that something was wrong for a while now.

He pauses, giving Makoto a glance over. It’s eight in the morning... a solid half-hour before class starts-- and he’d strutted up to Nagisa’s desk with an awkward, troubled expression. He teeters from foot to foot, looking up at him with these big, curious eyes.

“When we… fought?” Nagisa repeats. “You mean like… Karma and Kayano and I?”

Makoto shrugs. “Yeah. You and everyone, really. You had to get into some scuffles back in the day, right? I mean - you’re on good terms with everyone from back then, and that’s... like... a feat. Karma was the craziest guy on the planet, and Asano-kun was practically your mortal enemy! You couldn’t have gotten along right away, right? What’d you do when there were bumps in the road?”

He frames it as a very casual question… jokes the whole time. But there’s this sense of desperation to his voice, and Nagisa can sense it.

It’s been a little under two months now since Kiyoshi started displaying his strange behavior. Soon after he’d stopped showing up at their house. For a little while, things had seemed to cool over, and he’d even briefly returned! But it’s three or so days ago that things started getting weird again. Pretty abruptly Kiyoshi had disappeared off the face of the earth, and this time Fumiko had followed suit.

At first, Nagisa had wondered if it were a mere coincidence - after all, three days is nothing in the grand scope of things... and it is Flu season. But Karasuma had called up Nagisa, confirming there’d been an ‘incident’ with Kiyoshi and he wouldn’t be at school for the next few days. And after that Fumiko had approached Nagisa and asked to have her seat moved somewhere ‘far away from Makoto.’

Nagisa’s not sure what happened between the three of them, but whatever it is, it must have been ugly.

(‘People that close… they don’t just ghost each other without warning, do they?’)

...His mind wanders back to that second year of middle school.

“Okay… so first of all; Gakushuu is not and never was my ‘mortal enemy,’ so I’m not sure where you’re getting that from…,” Nagisa says, shaking his head. “But before I share anything with you about how I handled those sorts of things as a kid… I do gotta ask: what’s going on? You three have been acting weird lately. Did something happen?’

Makoto tenses slightly. Although just as soon as it shows, all signs of tension vanish. He gives a lazy shrug. “Sorta,” he admits. “But it’s nothing big. It’s not - like - a huge deal. Don’t get worried
about us or whatever. I’m just curious, mostly.”

Nagisa doesn’t believe a word of that, but he doesn’t push. He knows Makoto’s not someone who takes well to forced confession. Unless he believes it’s an emergency, there’s no reason to make him talk right now. If Makoto really wants, he’ll come to Nagisa in time.

“Well… when we had small arguments, you’d help us talk through them, mostly,” Nagisa admits. “We were fifteen, so we weren’t always the best with our words. It could be nice to have a mediator.”

“You’d urge us to express our feelings in unconventional ways… battling people we didn’t get along with in the classroom, and encouraging us to find ‘unique solutions’ to convey that people were bothering us… like taping up the robot that kept interrupting our class time. It’s the sort of thing that made confrontation… having ‘clashing opinions’ a lot less scary. But honestly, I can’t talk about it too much. I don’t actually have a ton of experience. I got into one or two scuffles back in the day, but I wasn’t really an argumentative guy.”

And that’s… technically true! He only had one big fight over the course of the entire school year. (That is unless you include the various and intense brutal fights he had with the malevolent adults constantly swarming to their doorstep, but those don’t count.)

“Ah…” Makoto says, tilting his head. He keeps his good-natured smile up, but it’s impossible to mask the disappointment in his tone. “I don’t know why,” he says with a laugh. “But for some reason I assumed you were a quarrel-magnet. Must’ve been the badass energies.”

“B-badass?” Nagisa sputters. “Well, I’m not sure I was badass. But thank you for the compliment.”

Wait. This is way besides the point. “I mean- uh - where were we?” He shakes his head. “I’m sorry. That probably isn’t the answer you wanted to hear. That I got most of my conflict resolution skills from you… but it’s true. I guess what I’m trying to say is having a supportive adult can help. I’m no Korosensei, but if you ever need someone to help you talk things out or offer up a solution, you know I’m always here for you.”

Makoto smiles for a moment, but quickly steps backwards. “Yeah. Yeah. I know…” he says, shifting from foot to foot. “And I appreciate it. You’re the best. But… uh… I think this is one of those things you can’t really help with.” He holds his hands up defensively. “No offense! It’s not that - it’s not that you’re not good enough. It’s just… it’s… weird.” His gaze flits towards the ground. “…This is one of those things… that… it’s one of those things that I don’t know if it can be talked out at all.

Nagisa frowns.

“…That doesn’t _sound_ like nothing,” Nagisa says. “Are you sure you don’t want to talk about it?”

‘A gentle nudge,’ he reminds himself. Offer up support if Makoto wants it. If he doesn’t, that’s okay too.

Makoto seems to think it over for a moment, but soon shakes his head. “…I’m sure,” he says. “I just want advice. And stories. If that’s okay, I mean. I don’t think I’m ready to talk about it yet.”

“…That’s more than okay,” Nagisa says. “What else do you want to hear?”

Admittedly he’s worried. But if Makoto isn’t ready he isn’t ready. All Nagisa can do is keep a careful eye on him and the other two until one of them is willing to open up. He wonders if the counselor would be able to help… or at least speed up the process, but it seems like that’s a
“Well… I guess I’m trying to ask what you did during big fights- the class as a whole, I mean, if you were never in any. Stuff that wasn’t just… little misunderstandings.” He scratches at his arm. “Y’know… like… when someone argued against something near and dear to your heart. Something you weren’t gonna budge on. What’d you do then? If you didn’t think you’d ever see eye to eye? There had to be some things you couldn’t talk out.”

Now that sends Nagisa’s mind wandering. He believes there are very few things in life that can’t be talked out. And he believes there are even fewer beliefs Makoto holds that he and his friends would even argue about. What is it he holds so close to his heart that they wouldn’t be able to see eye to eye on? He can’t even begin to fathom it.

(He supposes there’s no use dwelling on it now. Makoto’s looking for advice. He can try to get to the bottom of… whatever it is going on later.)

“...Huh. Well… we weren’t in a lot of situations like that, but I guess once or twice we did have slightly bigger fights.” Nagisa admits, scratching at his chin. “There’s - uh… one time I can think of. But I’m not sure how much detail I should go into about that.”

Makoto leans forward over the desk. “Huh? Why?” he asks. “Is it something I wasn’t there for? Don’t tell me you’re embarrassed to let me know. Did you do something naughty?”

“Ah-! No!” Nagisa replies, quickly putting to rest any budding assumptions that he’d gotten into a huge pissing match with one of his friends over whether or not to rob a bank, smoke marijuana, or anything else of a similarly criminal caliber. He is a good boy, and he will not have his name dragged through the mud by his sensei! “It was nothing like that- it was something you were there for.”

...The class civil war.

He still remembers it like it was yesterday… how quickly the tensions had risen. With a few simple words, the bond they’d built over the year had come crashing down in an instant. The topic they’d all been dreading - what to do with Korosensei - finally breached... only for them to find out that their classmates- who they’d trusted more than anything- didn’t see it the same way.

(“We need to save Korosensei!”

“Why!?”

“What do you mean why!?”

“This is what we’ve been training for all year! You expect us to toss that all out the window over his ‘tragic backstory!’”

“He’s a human being!”

“And he could still end the world!”

“We don’t know that! We could change it!”

“No! We can’t. I know you think you’re so capable, so gifted at everything, but you’re just privileged. We’re kids. What can we change? Besides, even if you’ve hardly had to try to become a
good assassin, some of us have been working our asses off. Does that mean nothing to you?”

“Of course not! I- I- I-”

Nagisa shakes his head. It’s best not to think about it too much. Sometimes it still makes his blood boil.

“Well if I was there for it… why can’t you share?” Makoto asks. “I’m sure it’s nothing that embarrassing.”

“It’s not embarrassing,” Nagisa replies quickly. “It’s… it’s not like that, either.” He shakes his head. “It’s… personal. I’m not sure if it’s one of those things that will hit too close to home for you or not.”

After all… they were discussing whether or not to murder him.

...In hindsight, it’s pretty obvious Korosensei hadn’t particularly minded dying. There’s a reason he hadn’t taken sides during the civil war, and there’s a reason he hadn’t tried harder to escape the Shield of Earth. All the same, however, Nagisa’s not sure he’s comfortable discussing that with Makoto. He’s just 13. And he knows he’s bound to take it personally. This is effectively discussing whether all the adults he trusts were okay with killing him off or not.

“Too close to home?” Makoto asks. “Well… taking it you were arguing about me, then.” He gives a dry laugh. “I wouldn’t worry about it. I had a feeling you guys got into a big argument about me at some point or another. Can’t remember what it was about… but something happened to you and Karma, yeah?” He cocks his head. “...Whatever is, I’m sure you can just tell me. I’m bound to remember it eventually, and besides: I’ve had a pretty terrible week as is. I’m sure it can’t get much worse. What happened? And more importantly: What’dya do? You and Karma clearly don’t got any bad blood now.”

“Well…” Nagisa’s eyes flit towards his desk. Makoto’s right… but all the same, he feels weird just saying it. What if Makoto… what if Makoto ends up resenting Karma and the rest because of it? That’s not what he wants. Karma… Nakamura… Itona and everyone else… it’s not that they’d hated Korosensei…. and it’s certainly not that they hadn’t wanted him around. They’d just wanted to preserve that special bond they had. They feared that if assassination was removed from the equation, things would never be the same.

...Do you remember that we stopped assassinations for a little while?” he settles on. “In late February? Early March? Do you know what happened to cause that?”

“Now that I think about it…” Makoto muses. “No. In fact, I didn’t realize you guys ever really stopped. I’ve got a few memories where you weren’t trying to off me, but it’s hard to place a date on a lot of that stuff.” He cocks his head. “What happened?”

“Well… uh… a little bit after Kayano revealed her secret identity, we all learned the truth behind where you came from. The stuff with you being The Reaper… what Yanagisawa did to you, and the promise you made to Yukimura-sensei. It was a lot sprung on us all at once, and so we didn’t know how to process that information. Because of that… we got in a pretty big fight over it.”

Makoto shifts slightly, albeit Nagisa can’t tell at what. The idea of them fighting… or the stuff to do with his past? Either way, it makes him feel pretty uneasy. He has to be careful to word this delicately.

“You see… up until that point you had put on a very deliberate sort of act in front of us. Did
everything in your power to make sure we regarded you as goofy, eternally-optimistic, and
downright bizarre... all because you wanted us to have an easier time ‘killing’ you. If we learned
the truth about your past, you knew we’d have doubts. And sure enough, when the truth came out,
some of us did.”

“We realized you were a person... just like us. And a person who’d suffered a lot, at that. We were
horrified at the idea of taking another human’s life, and thought that maybe if you’d been made
that way through science, there was a way to reverse it. Some of us - well - er... I - pitched the idea
of saving you. And a good amount of the class was on board!”

“But some of the class... some of the class felt very insulted by that. It wasn’t that they didn’t care
about you, and it wasn’t that they didn’t want you to be happy. But they’d spent all year training
for this. And you’d spent all year hyping it up for them. Our bond was... primarily built through
the art of assassination, and they feared that if killing you was removed from the equation, then
what we had would suddenly fall apart.”

“Of course... for some of them, it was a lot more personal than that. One or two people were just
pissed at me- but that was the general gist of it. Like I’ve told you before... assassination was the
first thing a lot of us felt actually good at, and some people had worked really hard to get to that
point. They didn’t want to go back to feeling defenseless.”

...They’ve talked about it pretty in-depth over the years. For a long time the class civil war was a
sore spot... an open, undiscussed secret among the E-Class. But as they’ve gotten older... as
they’ve gotten wiser, and able to understand where other people are coming from a bit better...
they’ve managed to open up. All of them were going through a pretty hard time, and had a real
conviction in what they said... even if at the time Nagisa had resented them for it.

“Of course, I didn’t really get this,” Nagisa admits, scratching at the back of his neck. You were -
like - the first adult who’d ever told me you were proud of me. I was terrified of losing you. And
more than that... I felt like I owed it to you... after everything you’d done for me. I wanted to ‘save
you’ too.”

Makoto cocks his head, thinking that over for a long minute. He doesn’t frown, but he does look
deep in thought.

“The rest of them didn’t?”

“No! Don’t take it that way,” Nagisa replies quickly. “All of them loved you. I can say that without
a doubt. And they felt they owed you, too. They just expressed it in a different way. They felt they
owed you the respect to give you what you wished for. That if they backed down, they’d not only
be disappointing you, but failing you.”

Makoto scratches his chin. “...I see.”

“I wasn’t willing to budge on my perspective, however. And neither was anyone else backing me
up. We wanted there to be a way to find a happier ending, and we weren’t going to let our
classmates rip that away from us just because they were ‘selfish,’ or ‘bitter,’ or ‘didn’t understand.’

Nagisa smiles. “Do you see what I’m getting at?”

Makoto shrugs. “Not really.”

“What I’m trying to say is neither of us were willing to budge - but neither of us were really wrong.
We were just fighting for what we believed in... what was near and dear to our hearts. At the time
we thought the other side was selfish - that they were acting out for no reason, but the reality of the situation was they had the interests of the same exact person in mind… they were just expressing it in a different way."

“Of course… I’m not telling you to approach every situation in life with that sort of attitude. There are plenty of people in this world who have genuinely cold-callous opinions, and there’s a point where you need to stop considering their side. People like… Takaoka… Yanagisawa… Gakuho… hear them out. See if you can find anything worth learning in what they’re saying, and then shut them down when they don’t have others’ best interests in mind.”

“But when you’re fighting with someone you really care about… someone you know is good… and when you can’t understand where they’re coming from or why they’d say what they’re saying, try to consider what they’re going through. The truth is the more empathy you show in considering how they feel about the situation, the more likely they’ll be to consider how you feel, too. People don’t like to be made out to be the bad guy, especially when they’re just doing what they think is right.”

Makoto seems to give that consideration, but quickly shakes his head. “But what if - what if they’re not right?” he asks. “What if they’re doing something really bad, and they’re doing something that’s gonna hurt other people? I can’t just - I can’t just meet in the middle on that!”

“And I’m not expecting you to,” Nagisa says. “If you think any of your friends are displaying legitimate cruelty, or you think anyone’s in genuine danger: then just let me know. I will take care of it. But no-one- and I mean no-one on the planet- is going to change their opinion over being told ‘you’re wrong.’ That makes people feel defensive. That makes them dig their heels in further. Especially coming from someone they care about.”

Makoto huffs.

“…it’s not like they care about me anymore.”

He says it with an irate sense of brattiness… but there’s a certain loneliness to his voice. He can pretend to be fed-up all he wants, but the truth is he just sounds hurt.

“I’m sure that’s not true, Makoto…” Nagisa replies. “People can say… people can say very hurtful things when they’re angry.”

(Karma accuses him of not caring and slams his back down across the dirt. He’s the one who doesn’t care!? He’s the one who’s pretending to be something he’s not!? It’s Karma who left!)

“But that doesn’t mean… that doesn’t mean they actually believe those things. And if they do believe those things, then… I’m sure you’re capable of proving them wrong. Whether that be through your spirit or through your kindness, I know you’ll find a way.” He pauses. “I know that might be annoying to hear right now-” he admits.

“It is,” Makoto interjects.

“But I mean it. And I believe in you. If you try your hardest, I just know you’ll make it through to your friend.”

Makoto huffs. “I mean - you keep saying this stuff… about how perfect I am, how I can do anything if I just try… but it doesn’t feel like that a lot of the time. I am trying my hardest! I did! And it didn’t work! In fact… I’m pretty sure I just made things worse. What do I do then?”

“Then…” Nagisa pauses. He wants to give Makoto advice, but he also doesn’t want to be rash with
Makoto’s not crying. Not yet, that is. But all the same, he looks like a kicked puppy.

Nagisa steps away from his chair. He makes his way over to Makoto’s side and places a careful hand on his shoulder. It shakes as he squeezes it.

...Some part of him is almost tempted to be mad. He’s not sure which of Makoto’s friends did this to him… they’ve both been staying away… but he’s this close to resenting them. ‘How dare you break Sensei’s heart? ’ he thinks. ‘How dare you make him cry?’

At least until he stills himself… and remembers that they’re good kids, too.

Fumiko… Kiyoshi… both of them are compassionate, kind people… the sort of people who would never lash out without reason. On the opposite end of the spectrum, Makoto is an impulsive wreck. He’s got a heart of gold, but he’s overconfident… petty… and stubborn as all hell. Whatever it is he’s hearing here… he’s sure it’s not the full story. He needs to remember to have compassion for whatever it is they’re going through, too.

And so… instead of looking angry, Nagisa tries his best to look gentle. He pulls Makoto in for an awkward hug and says “...I know you do. But you know what else I know? I know they must miss you too right now. More than anything. I’m sure as long as you’re compassionate… as long as you’re kind… as long as you do your best to understand, they’ll be able to understand you too, eventually.”

Makoto leans into his hug, clutching at Nagisa so tight it hurts.

“Promise me,” he begs. “Promise me everything will be okay.”

“...Makoto,” Nagisa says, shaking his head. “...You know I can’t do that. I can’t make promises. I’m not all-knowing. If I’m wrong… I don’t want you to resent me for that. And if you think I’m right… then I don’t want you to not try because of that. Repairing relationships takes a lot- and I mean a lot of work. It’s not the sort of thing I can guarantee you a fairytale ending for.”

“But what I can do is tell you what I’ve experienced. And what I’ve experienced is… yes, these things work out in time. Sometimes they don’t work out prettily. They can be messy… and sad… and violent. But when you have a friend like that… someone you want to keep by your side forever, it’s likely they feel the same way about you. And if they don’t make it up to you… then they’ll always have to live with that: feeling a little bit lonelier... a little bit emptier. No-one wants to have to live with that.”

“And so… no, I won’t promise you. But I will tell you what I think is likely. And I think… things will be something close to alright one day. Just trust me on that, okay?”

“Okay,” Makoto relents, clutching Nagisa’s shoulders. “But you- you gotta trust me too, alright!!
That I- *that I'm doing the right thing.* ‘m really scared they’re gonna come to you… that they’re gonna make me out to be the bad guy. And that you’ll think I was so mean you’ll hate me. Or that… that you’ll hate someone else who didn’t do anything wrong. I’m not trying to be mean, I promise. I just wanna protect the people I love…”

“Makoto…” Nagisa replies. “I could *never* hate you. And I *know* you’d never hurt anyone on purpose. No matter what they tell me, I am *never* going to be mad at you, and I am *never* going to yell at you. You don’t have anything to be afraid of.” He shakes his head. “If you’ve really hurt someone else’s feelings… of course I’ll consider that. And I might even be disappointed in you… *temporarily.* But that is *not* the same thing as being mad.”

“If I think you’ve done something mean, all I’ll do is let you know. Because I believe you when you say you don’t wanna hurt anyone, and it’s my job as a teacher to help you do whatever I think is right. And if I *don’t* think you’ve done anything wrong, I’ll make sure to let them know that… help you explain your side. I never want you to feel defenseless.”

“But until that time comes… until one of you is ready to open up to me, there’s nothing more I can do than be there for you… which I will. If you ever want to talk like this again… or even if you just want a hug: *I’m here for you.* And when you’re ready to tell me what happened, I promise I’ll be there for you as well.”

He pauses.

“I know I just said I don’t make promises - but that’s… uh- the exception. It is the promise I made when I took up this job, after all.”

Makoto laughs softly, giving a hesitant nod. There’s still a certain tension to his posture, but he relaxes ever so slightly... finally releasing his iron grip on Nagisa's back.

“Thanks, Nagisa,” he admits, awkwardly stepping away. “I dunno what I’d ever do if you were mad at me. But it helps… to think you’ll be backing me up.” He scratches at his arm. “Things have been hard lately... lonely, too. But I’ll try my best to do what’s right. And I’ll try my best to make you proud.”

Nagisa places a hand on his hair and ruffles it gently. “I just know you will,” he says. “Good luck, Sensei.”

Makoto starts to turn around... but pauses. “Wait... one more thing- before I get out of your hair-”

“Don’t word it like that,” Nagisa insists. “I just told you. I’m always happy to talk to you. What is it?”

“You said this sort of stuff could be ugly. And - uh - you seemed to be speaking from experience. So I just gotta ask- that’s not how *you* resolved it back then, is it? Just… talking it out? All nice and polite?”

Nagisa scoffs, shaking his head. “Of course not,” he exclaims. “*God forbid* - we beat the shit out of each other in the woods. But *please* don’t follow my lead on that one. As well as that can work out for more minor arguments like whether or not to kill your teacher, it didn’t *really* help with Karma and I’s interpersonal issues. We thought it had been an end-all solution at the time, but ultimately we ended up getting most of our issues worked out face to face in high school and college.”

“So… uh. Just take it from the adult. *Don’t* do what we did. We were some *damn* stupid kids.”

“Noted,” Makoto says with a laugh. “I’ll try not to get into any brawls! No promises, though.
Seems like you guys had some fun.”

“Well… I dunno about that,” Nagisa says, waving his hand back and forth. “But I did learn Kanzaki could annihilate up to three of my classmates at a moment’s notice, so it wasn’t a total loss.”

Makoto snorts. Despite his sense of awkward sadness, a spark of mischief returns to his eyes. Nagisa lets out a sigh of relief, before pointedly holding a finger up.

“Again! Though!” he reiterates. “Seriously! No hand to hand combat! I’ll put you both in damn detention. We had blast-proof combat armor back then. You kids don’t. If one of you ended up breaking some bones, I don’t know what I’d do.”

“Don’t worry,” Makoto says. “I’m just razzin’ ya’. I wouldn’t do that. I’ve put you through enough stress as is.”

And before Nagisa can even refute it, he’s whipped around. He hurries to return to his desk, waving a hand over the back of his shoulder.

“Thanks for the advice, Nagisa! I’ll make sure to keep it in mind! And I’ll remember! No fights!”

“That’s good!” Nagisa shouts back, cupping his mouth with his hands. Admittedly he’d have liked to talk to Makoto more, but he’s not going to test his luck. Besides… the rest of the class is beginning to show up by now. Something tells him Makoto doesn’t want to draw any attention to himself. As such, for now, he’ll let Makoto retreat… and simply remind himself of all he can do:

Be here for Makoto as much as he can in the upcoming days.

...Because something tells him a storm is about to hit.

Kayano’s surprised Fumiko takes her up on the offer when she asks her out to lunch.

According to Nagisa, Fumiko’s been reclusive as of late… asked to have her seat moved away from her friends, and stopped showing up to their house pretty much entirely. She’s seemed quiet… defensive… and when he manages to get her to talk, he’s met with brief, crabby responses. She’s closing off again, and neither of them know why.

“…I wonder if she’s fighting with Makoto,” Nagisa had mused. “Yesterday he approached me and asked me what I did when I used to fight with my friends. He’d refused to name any names, but who else could it be? Kiyoshi is the least confrontational person I know. It’s gotta be her.”

“But what would they even have to fight over?” Karma’d replied, dangling upside-down off of the couch. “Those two never bicker. They’re, like, fucking soulmates.”

Now that had made Kayano scoff. He had no idea.

Nevertheless, she’d decided to try and get to the bottom of it. Even if she can’t manage to deduce what it is going on between Fumiko and Makoto, she’d at least like to let Fumiko know she’s there for her. They’re sisters, after all. If Fumiko’s going to be willing to talk to anyone, it’s her.

And Kayano is more than happy to offer support.

She’d texted her that Friday. Offered up a quick ‘Hey. I’ve noticed you haven’t been stopping by the house lately. Is something wrong?”
Fumiko’d texted back ‘Of course not,’ But that wasn’t going to get Kayano to budge.

‘Okay,’ she’d texted ‘That’s good to hear. I miss you, though. Wanna hang out sometime? I’m free this afternoon, and I’d love to meet you for lunch.’

It had been a long moment before Fumiko had replied. But finally she’d texted back, saying ‘Sure. I’ve been pretty bored lately. It would be nice to see you.’

‘Really?’ Kayano’d asked. ‘That’s great!’

‘Really. I wouldn’t wanna make you worry. Besides… you’re right. It’s been a long time since we’ve hung out. Let’s meet up.’

Kayano’d picked her up directly from school that afternoon… meeting with Nagisa in the doorway.

“Have fun, you two!” he’d instructed, honestly just relieved to see Fumiko opening up at all.

(“You were always better with her,” he’d whispered that morning, a gentle chuckle to his tone. “I’m glad you managed to get her to agree. She really trusts you, you know.”

Kayano had nodded, whispering back, “Oh, I know.”)

Fumiko had insisted they get away from the campus quickly. She’d pegged it up to simply being hungry - wanting to get on her way- but something tells Kayano it had been a little more than that. She hadn’t even gotten time to greet Makoto, and Kiyoshi had still been jarringly M.I.A.

Either way, they’d wasted no time. They’d scurried off to a local restaurant - deciding to go for something more casual this time. Fumiko’s had a lot of high-end food, but she experiences a certain delight trying ‘normal people stuff,’ and Kayano almost swears she catches a smile creeping up her face as she picks away at her ramen.

Just as quickly, however, her smile fades. She seems to note Kayano staring at her... shuffling awkwardly and placing her hands in her pockets, before returning to a nervous, dour expression.

...She looks like she hasn’t slept in a week.

There are bags penciled in under her eyes... and an awkward sort of tension to the way she gnaws on her lip. Her hands never once stop moving, and as she reaches up to scratch at her collarbone, Kayano notes she’s missing the scarf that’s been her trademark all year.

...She wonders what had happened.

She doesn’t breach the topic immediately. That’s only rude. She asks Fumiko how her day was. Did Nagisa teach any fun lessons? She’d love to hear how it went.

Fumiko gives her halfhearted, closed-off responses.

“School was fine,” she says, turning her noodles with an absentminded boredness. “…We’re learning about exponents. That, and some grammar in Language. It’s nothing particularly interesting.”

More than closed-off, however, her answers are quiet. She speaks... voice a murmur, like she used to months ago... like she’d spoke before she’d known she could trust people... and like she spoke before she felt safe with their family. She avoids eye contact… crosses one leg over the other, and
takes a shaky gulp.

...Somehow she looks so much older.

There’d been this sort of girlish charm to Fumiko up until this point. Of course she’d always been cynical… thorny and slow to trust, but she’d always looked like a child. Meeting Fumiko’s blank, passionless eyes from across the table, however, Kayano can’t help but note her current expression much more resembles that of Aguri’s… or at least what it had become later on.

An expression that says, ‘I’m afraid.’

“Well… even if it’s boring, I’m sure it’s important work,” Kayano says. “If you ever need tutoring... I’m happy to help. I know it’s more of Nagisa’s job, but you did tutor me a ton as a kid. I figure it’s the least I could do to repay you.”

Fumiko lazily shrugs.

“That could be nice,” she admits. “Though I’m not particularly falling behind right now.”

“Well… that’s good,” Kayano responds. “You’ve improved a lot over the course of the year, you know.”

“Mmm,” Fumiko responds. “I know.”

...Her tone seems to imply she doesn’t believe it very much.

Kayano scratches at the back of her neck, running her nails across the decade-old burns. She swears she feels a slight stinging sensation, but is well aware it’s nothing more than her imagination. Her scars healed a long, long time ago.

“Are you finished with tutoring?” she poses awkwardly, still tracing her burns. “I noticed you stopped coming over. It’s great if you don’t need academic help anymore, but what about your parents? You haven’t canceled their arrangement with Nagisa, have you? I mean… I thought you were trying to-”

“I haven’t,” Fumiko interjects, shaking her head. “I’m still technically under Shiota-sensei’s tutelage. It’s just… well…” she pauses. “Things have been weird lately.”

Kayano’s quiet, taking a bite of ramen. She notes it’s saltier than she usually likes it. But she’s not going to send it back in now. Whatever. She’ll cope.

“...Do you want to talk about it?”

Fumiko gives another shrug. “...Not really,” she admits. “I’d hate to stress you out.”

“Fumiko...” Kayano replies, shaking her head. “Don’t say that. You could never. At least let me know where you’ve been hanging out. If you’re not coming to our place, and you’re not going home… what are you doing on tutoring days? Are you somewhere safe, at least?”

“I’m safe,” Fumiko reassures. “I just hang out by the school, mostly. I wait until it’s time to go home, then I pack up my stuff and leave. Don’t worry about me. I’m not participating in any unruly activities. I just… sit by myself and wait.”

Kayano’s quiet for a long moment… mouth opening, then closing. She stares at Fumiko with a troubled expression.
“...Do you not feel safe at our house, Fumiko?”

“It’s not li- it’s not anything you did.”

“No. Seriously. If Karma or Gakushuu did anything to scare you or make you uncomfortable... if they picked on you an ounce, then you just let me know. I will set them damn strai-”

“It’s not them either.”

There’s a genuine strain to Fumiko’s voice. She clutches at the table... shaking her head.

“...They didn’t do anything. None of you did. Akabane-san... Asano-san... Shiota-sensei... all of you have treated me like true family. Please don’t doubt that. I appreciate what you’ve done for me more than almost anything. What’s... what’s become of me is something beyond your control.”

“What’s - what’s become of you?” Kayano asks, shaking her head. “No matter what the reason is, it’s unacceptable for you to feel unsafe in our home. You’re one of us, Fumiko. And we’re worried about you. Whatever the reason is... you know you can tell us.”

“I’m well aware,” Fumiko admits. “But I suppose I’m just afraid you...” she pauses. “I suppose I’m just afraid you won’t take my side.”

Kayano’s quiet for another long moment. She brushes a strand of hair out of her face... lingering on the touch of her own skin.

“Did something happen between the three of you?” she asks, her voice quiet this time. “Makoto? Kiyoshi?”

“It doesn’t matter,” Fumiko responds. “Trust me when I say it’s all nonsense. And that... and that it’s stuff you shouldn’t have to think about. Not as my baby sister.”

“...I’m not such a baby anymore,” Kayano says. "Whatever it is you’re going through - if one of them is being mean to you - then you just let me know. I will stand up for you no matter wha-”

“Even if your Sensei will hate you? Even if you’ve known Kiyoshi for thirteen years?”

Fumiko’s question lingers for a long moment.

Kayano opens her mouth to respond, but Fumiko beats her to it. She turns slightly, scratching at the back of her wrist.

“I’m well aware I’m not the only important thing in your life. You’ve only known me a year, and I’m nothing like I used to be. I don’t want you to make promises like that for a person you hardly know.”

“... Fumiko-” Kayano insists. “I do know you. And you’re not that different... really! I know you’re still a kind, sensitive soul, and I know you need someone standing up for you. Besides... all this stuff about having to ‘take a stand against Kiyoshi,’ or worry about ‘Sensei hating me...’ You know those things wouldn’t happen. You know they’d never want you to feel alone...”

“Wouldn’t they, though?” Fumiko snaps. “...Trust me when I say they’ve already made me feel that way plenty.”

Kayano’s breath hitches. Her eyes narrow into tiny slits, and she feels anger rise in her chest as she speaks.
“How!? What are they doing to you? If they are doing anything to make you feel like a bad person, then you just let me know. Because I don’t care if they’re my sensei. I don’t care if they’re a family friend - it’s my job to stand up for you. I’m not going to screw this up again, Aguri.”

She doesn’t even realize how tense her has tone become until she sees Fumiko freeze up. She shakes her head slightly... shoulders lowering as she looks at Kayano.

“I... know,” she says. “It’s... just - gah. It’s complicated. I’m not trying to make it seem like I don’t believe in y- it’s not some fault of yours. It’s... it’s me, I think. Or... them. I don’t know. But I can’t just - I can’t just say it to you. It’s this f*cked up thing - more than you could possibly even imagine, and I know if I tell you it will destroy you inside. You have this - you have these preconceived notions about these people - who they are, and trust me when I say none of it is true. I’m not - I’m not putting that on you.”

“And so you’re facing it alone?” Kayano poses, twirling her fork. “Trust me when I say I’m speaking from experience: that doesn’t work. You need to rely on your friends.”

“I don’t have friends,” Fumiko replies.

“I’m your friend, aren’t I?”

That gives Fumiko pause. She’s quiet for a long moment, before nodding.

“You are,” she admits.

“Then you can talk to me.”

“I’m not ready to.”

“Okay, then.”

“Again: it’s not - it’s not you. It's not like you’re not good enough.”

“I know, Fumiko.”

“It’s - there’s just something wrong with me in the head... and I’m bitter and I’m cruel and it is so hard to trust people right now. That’s why I- it just feels weird to - gah.”

Kayano’s quiet. “Take your time.”

“...Can you make me a promise instead? Instead of... like... talking? I still think it would help me. Maybe more than talking can.”


“Promise me that... that you’re not gonna go. That you’re not gonna get sick of me. That you’re not going to accept me as this person - your sister - show me... show me what having a family is like, only to take that away. Because I said the wrong thing or had the wrong opinion and suddenly that means that thing we had didn’t matter. That... that all we went through back then was for nothing. Because then we only have now, and I-... I’m not happy now. I’m not. I don’t know what I’m going to do if I lose you.”

Her voice cracks and that irritable, distant facade falls apart at the seams. She still doesn’t cry... simply sits there with a quivering lip and stares at the linoleum floor... but somehow that last piece of the tough act only makes the emotion behind her words all the more heartbreaking.
“...I don’t know what I’m going to do if you choose something else over me, too.”

She says she’s making a plea, but seems to have no faith in receiving an honest answer. She’s resigned herself to her fate… and she’s already given up on being someone’s ‘most important thing’ a long, long time ago.

Kayano slides out of her seat. She pushes her ramen to the side and makes her way over to Fumiko… sits down carefully next to her and places a steady hand on her shoulder.

“I won’t,” she says. “I won’t. I don’t know what you’re going through, Fumiko. And as such, I don’t know how I’m going to handle it. But there’s one thing I know for certain, and it’s that I am never going to abandon you. What we went through… it’ll always mean something to me. You made me into the person I am today, and I am never going to give up on you just because it’s ‘inconvenient,’ or ‘difficult’ or ‘different!’”

There are so many promises she can’t make. She can’t say she’ll always take Fumiko’s side. And she can’t say she’s just going to give up on Makoto and Kiyoshi just because they got in some serious fight! It’s her job as Nagisa’s wife to display more consideration than that! To treasure his students as her own! But god forbid she tell that to Fumiko right now! That’s not what she needs to hear! She needs to hear ‘I’m here for you,’ and that is a promise she’s certain she can keep.

“I’m not going anywhere. As long as you need me, I’ll be right here.”

“Okay,” Fumiko relents. There’s an emptiness to her tone, as if she doesn’t fully believe Kayano. But all the same, she doesn’t motion to pull away. She leans in for a hug… clinging to Kayano’s shoulders, and burying her face in her chest.

...She still doesn’t cry.

They’re quiet for a long, long moment. But Fumiko doesn’t move to break the hug, and so neither does Kayano. She sits there, quietly running her fingers through her hair, and praying she’s doing something - anything to ease that heartbreak.

“Can I ask you another question?” Fumiko finally asks, her voice almost dry. “About back then?” She pauses. “It’s important to me.”

“Go right ahead.”

“...You might think it’s offensive.”

“That’s okay too.”

Fumiko’s quiet for another long moment.

“Do you… do you think Aguri was stupid?”

Now that catches Kayano by surprise. She stiffens slightly, her nails digging into Fumiko’s shirt. Fumiko’s voice falters. “I told you you wouldn’t like i-”

“No! No!” Kayano quickly insists. “I’m just… curious… as to why you would ever think that.”

Fumiko takes a second to mull it over. She pulls away slightly, retreating from Kayano’s now tense embrace.

“...The way I treated people,” she finally admits. “I’m starting to think… it was stupid.” She
scratches at her shoulder before sending a dejected glare towards the table. “Like… really stupid.”

Kayano’s brow furrows. She attempts to scoot further into the booth.

“Now that’s not true…” she says. “You were… you were wonderful to people. I know it’s easy to be hard on yourself- to look back on your mistakes...- but there’s no need for you to do that! You were easily the kindest person I ever me-”

“Exactly.”

Fumiko’s response is curt… fed-up. She doesn’t look Kayano’s way.

“I think maybe… I was too kind.”

...

“Oh.”

Kayano doesn't have much of a response.

“I know that sounds selfish to say. And... and it is! But it’s true, isn’t it? I was - _there was something seriously wrong with me_. I was _obsessed_ with other people. I’d give them chance after chance after _chance_ to redeem themselves and they’d _just keep taking advantage of me_. I was so certain it meant something - that I was _in the right! That I was changing the world!_ But now I just look back on the way I acted and I think ‘You’re out of your mind.’ ‘You’re going to get hurt.’ ‘I don’t know what you’re doing this for.’”

“Do you know how much that stings? To look back on these things you used to hold so near and dear to your heart and _just not - just not care anymore?_ To look back on yourself and think ‘I don’t know this person?’ ‘Everything you did with your life: it’s worthless?’ ‘You suffered for nothing, and you didn’t fix anything?’”

“I-” Kayano shuffles, eyes wide. “Of course I don’t, Aguri. I have no idea what you’re going through! But I want to. And I don’t - _I don’t think what you did was pointless at all._”

“I was naive-”

“And I’m not denying that,” Kayano replies. “But you… you put some good in the world.”

(Shewon't- she refuses to believe anything else! What Aguri fought for- even if it was flawed-! It was in no way worthless!)

“Like _what_?” Fumiko snaps.

“...You raised me.”

Fumiko's eyes widen.

“That’s - _that’s different, okay?”_ She insists. “That wasn’t - _that wasn’t blind optimism_. That was my duty as - _I was your sister!_ Of course I had to take care of you!”

“That doesn’t mean it was any easier on you! You were just a kid!”

Fumiko doesn't respond.
“Reaper, then,” Kayano says.

“...Reaper?”


Fumiko glowers, but still doesn’t speak.

“You changed his life, didn’t you?” Kayano continues. “You took this- this washed-up, terrible person, and you taught him what it was like to care about people. Not through some grand gesture, but through simply being yourself. That’s a feat, isn’t it? He saw you… the way you lived your life… and he decided ‘this is exactly the sort of person I want to be.’ You did that… to a murderer. To this person everyone thought unsalvageable. You didn’t just change his life. You changed him.”

She places a hand on Fumiko’s shoulder. “...Are you telling me you’re not at least a little bit proud of that?”

Fumiko’s eyes water. She brings one knee up onto the seat, wrapping her arm around it. “I mean- I want to be!” she says. “But I’m not - I’m not even really so certain of that anymore. Did I change him, Akari? Did I? Really? Up until the end I thought we were these best friends - these soulmates. But he got me killed!”

“...He didn’t set up that tentacle mine, Fumiko.”

“I know! But so what!? He still - I told him Yanagisawa was going to kill him because I cared about him, and you know what he did? He destroyed the entire lab… with all these people inside. With me inside, too! As I told him to stop- wait up - reconsider… that I needed him, and I was sure there was a way to work through this together, he let everything go up in flames. Went right back to the person he’d been before this had all begun.”

“Standing there… watching him… this thing he’d become, I remember thinking ‘he’s going to kill everyone.’ Not just the people at the lab - everyone. I knew that he’d go out there and he’d take the rest of the world down with him. Because he was going to die, and that meant everyone else needed to, too. He was going to kill my friends - my family - my students - my baby sister.”

“At the time I told myself ‘I can’t bear to see this person I love turn back into that.’ That’s what I thought, stepping forward. ‘He’s never going to be happy again.’ ‘He was so close to becoming something better than this. ‘This can’t be his ending. It can’t.’”

“But looking back on it… I wonder if I also stepped forward because I knew it was the only way to salvage everything else. To maybe get through to that psychopath and save the world that never once gave a damn about me.”

She’s quivering as she speaks.

“When I was dying… he looked at me with this heartbreak in his eyes. And I finally knew he loved me. That this had all been worth it. I’d changed him. And so who cared if I disappeared? At least I’d done something with my worthless life. But now I just think back to that moment… and how happy I was… and I think ‘why couldn’t he have cared about me before I was already gone?’”

“Aguri…” Fumiko says. “I’m sure- I’m sure he did. He just expressed it in his own w- and I’m not saying it’s okay! None of what happened to you was okay! But I can promise you he cared about you! He grieved you up until the very end!”
“And so did Yanagisawa, I’m sure,” Fumiko snaps. “I’m sure he felt so bad! SOOOOOO depressed! But do people like that really care about losing people like me? Or do they just care about their actions having consequences?”

Kayano shifts slightly.

“...You shouldn’t compare Korosensei to him.”

(At least Korosensei had had regrets. She remembers visiting the hospital... grabbing that rat bastard by the collar and begging for some sort of explanation. “Why!? WHY did you do that!” at the top of her lungs. But up until the very end, he’d looked at her with those defiant, guiltless eyes.)

“Mmm,” Fumiko admits, looking uncomfortable. “...Either way, ’m not sure I changed Korosensei very much at all. Maybe he saved you guys... and I’ll always be thankful for that. But I think... maybe it wasn’t worth dying for. And I think... deep down he’s just as selfish, cruel, and sick as he’s always been. In fact... I don’t think he cares about me one bit.”

She says those things about Korosensei... but it’s not hard to tell she’s actually talking about Makoto. It’s glaringly obvious... in the way she bites her lip, and the way her hands hover up by her collarbone, fiddling nervously with where her scarf once sat. She scoots away, eyes still locked on the table.

(Again: Kayano’s left to wonder... what the hell is it Makoto even did? To hurt Fumiko this way? To make her react like this? He’s not... he’s not that sort of person...-

...Is he?)

“Well... I do agree it wasn’t worth dying for,” she admits, absentmindedly tracing her burns. “Most things aren’t. I don’t think anyone should ever look back on their death as ‘worth it.’ That’s... I dunno. That’s self-deprecating at best. But I don’t think it’s fair to say he doesn’t care about you, either.”

“I know him better than you,” Fumiko insists. “Trust me. He doesn’t.”

‘Do you?’ Kayano thinks.

Fumiko knew Reaper for a year. And she’s known Makoto for a little less. But Kayano... Kayano got the chance to know Korosensei. In fact... he’d saved her life. And more than once, at that.

The second time he’d stitched her up gently... placed her on the ground, and told her she’d been impaled. But that she was okay now. He’d fixed it.

“H-how!?” her classmates had demanded- utterly astonished. “You can’t just- what!??”

“Well... about a year ago,” Korosensei had mused. “...I made a very fatal mistake. And because of that, I lost someone I loved. But ever since then I’ve been training... preparing myself to make sure that sort of thing never happens again. To make sure I don’t lose a single one of you students. And it seems that’s paid off.”

He’d chuckled gently. This sad, bittersweet sound.

“You can never go back and change your past. But what you can do is learn from it.”

...It’s a story Kayano’s not willing to repeat. She knows it might help, but Fumiko’s in a bad enough mental state as is. She doesn’t need to hear about her sister dying in the same way she
doesn’t need to hear about her sister going on a goddamn crusade over her death. What she needs to hear is some honest advice. And what she needs is to be told how to do what’s right.

But is there really a right in situations like this?

“Well… I don’t think that’s true,” she admits. “I think Korosensei loved you up until the very end. And I think Makoto loves you, too.”

“You’re doing it-” Fumiko grumbles.

“I’m n-”

“You’re taking his side.”

“I’m not,” Kayano reiterates. “I’m not saying - look - clearly something happened between you, and that’s not okay. If he hurt your feelings, I’ll kick his ass my damn self. But you can still hurt people you love. If Makoto wronged you, then I will always take your side. I never want you to feel alone. But I don’t want to hear you say Korosensei didn’t love you, either. You put a lot of faith in that…”

“Yeah. Well, I put a lot of faith in a lot of things I don’t believe anymore.”

...The table falls silent.

Fumiko grunts slightly, gently flopping over to lean on Kayano’s side.

“...I’m sorry-” she says.

“Don’t be.”

“You just sounded so disappointed in me saying that. But I believe it. I really do. More than anything.”

“And that’s heartbreaking,” Kayano replies. “I’m not - I would never be disappointed in you. I’m scared for you, Aguri. You don’t deserve to think people you care about don’t care about you back. That’s the most miserable feeling in the whole wide world. I’m not trying to tell you you’re wrong. I’m trying to tell you you’re loved.”

“...I know.”

“You can’t doubt everyone. And not for their sake - for yours. Assuming everyone is out to get you… that’s miserable. You can’t put everyone on the same level as people like your parents-people like Yanagisawa. Some people really do want to change.”

Fumiko freezes slightly at the mention of his name. Scooting in closer to Kayano, she shuts her eyes tight.

“It’s not my job to help them with that.”

“No. It’s not,” Kayano agrees sternly. “It’s not your job to be anyone’s savior. You’re allowed to be hurt. You’re allowed to be angry. But you’re allowed to believe you’re cared about, too. And you’re allowed to say ‘I believe you really do love me,’ but still turn around and go. It’s okay to want an apology.”

“...And it’s okay for an apology to not be enough?”
“Of course. There are some people I know I’d never forgive.”

“I guess those two ideas just have trouble lining up in my brain,” Fumiko admits. “Like… believing in people and believing in myself, too. I’m scared the moment I’m vulnerable is the moment I’m gonna get hurt.”

“…It’s a fine line,” Kayano admits. “Sometimes you need to let others get hurt to protect yourself. And sometimes you need to get hurt to protect others. But you should never let one or the other get destroyed.”

“That’s what I did back then, isn’t it?” Fumiko asks. “…Destroyed myself?”

(Kayano remembers the way Aguri had faded away. The way bags grew under her eyes and the way exhaustion crept into her laughter. It’s sad to say, but Fumiko looks a little bit like that Aguri now.)

“…I don’t think it’s fair to put it all on yourself,” Kayano says. “A lot of people ‘destroyed’ you. And you just… you didn’t know how to ask for help. But things are different now. You can ask for help. At least… I hope you feel like you can.”

“I think I can,” Fumiko admits. “…I don’t know. It’s still complicated.”

“That’s okay,” Kayano says. “…These things tend to be.”

“Sometimes it just feels like - like I either deserved it, or I brought it on myself—”

“You did not deserve it,” Kayano interjects. “If you take nothing else out of this conversation, I want you to know that you did not deserve the way that that man treated you. No-one does.”

“It wasn’t just him,” Fumiko admits with a shrug. “I mean… he was the worst. But I think I was surrounded by people like that my whole life. Everything that happened with Dad… being employed by Asano-sama… even just how Reaper regarded me in the beginning. When stuff like that happens to you over and over and over again, you start to think you’re the issue.”

“Or… at the very least, you do when you look back on it, and you know that until the very end you wanted to see the best in people like that.”

“There’s a… fine line between these sorts of things,” Kayano admits. “But… I still don’t think that makes you the ‘issue.’ You can’t rely on ‘common denominators’ when it comes to the topic of people taking advantage of you. That’s not your fault. You were just standing up for what you believed in.”

“And if I don’t believe in it anymore?” Fumiko asks, voice small.

“Then that doesn’t make you the issue, either,” Kayano reassures. “…Besides, I’m not sure I believe that all that much… that you don’t believe in that… that you don’t believe in people. Maybe you’re just finally learning how to stand up for yourself.”

“…I’m trying,” Fumiko admits, shifting slightly. “But it’s hard. It’s… really hard.”

“I know,” Kayano says, placing a hand on her shoulder. “…I know. Like I said… there’s a fine line between kindness and naivety. And there’s an even finer line between doing what’s right for yourself and what feels like ‘revenge.’ There’s no grand distinction. No end-all answer. But… I do believe it’s possible to see the very best in people… and still know when it’s right to pull away. I believe in you. And I’ll be here for you until you feel ready to make that distinction for yourself.”
“...Okay,” Fumiko says. “...Okay. Just… promise.”

“Of course,” Kayano replies, carefully running a finger through Fumiko’s hair. She pulls her in close and squeezes. “I promise. As long as you need me… and as long as you let me, I’m here. You’re going through something I can’t quite understand. And it’s clear you’re still not ready to talk about it. But if *nothing else*, I’m here. And I hope… we can keep meeting up like this in the future.”

“If you don’t feel safe at home right now… if you don’t want to talk to Makoto or Kiyoshi or anyone else, then just let me know next time you’re lonely. I will drop *everything* to come and spend time with you like this. You don’t have to talk about what’s bothering you… you don’t have to talk about anything at all if you don’t want. I just want to make sure you never feel alone.”

“And… I don’t,” Fumiko admits. “At least I think I- *no*. I don’t,” she reiterates. “...I know you’re here for me, even if no-one else is. Thank you, Akari…” she tears up- batting gently at her eyes as she speaks. “*Thank you.*”

“No need,” Kayano replies. “...It’s only the right thing to do. Besides… you’re my sister. I don’t want to lose you.”

“And I…” Fumiko pauses for a long moment. “...I’m making sure you won’t, okay? I know things might be confusing right now… and I know I seem exhausted. But I promise you: you won’t. I am *never* going to let anyone take me away from you ever again... no matter how hard they try.”

There’s a staunch conviction to her voice. A defensiveness Kayano’s still not sure she likes. A tone that seems to say, ‘I’m still fighting against anyone - everyone with all I have.’ But all the same… there’s a truthfulness to it. And Kayano appreciates that. She’ll… get to dealing with whatever it is that happened between Fumiko and her friends later. For now… she’s just glad Aguri finally feels ready to be here to stay.

“...Okay,” Kayano says. “Just remember to let yourself rest every now and then, okay? There’s more than one way to fight too hard, you know.”

Fumiko’s shoulders lower slightly. And in an instant, all that conviction seems to fade from her frame.

“Mmmm…” she admits, scooting away slightly. “...I know. I’m just… doing what I think I have to. But… I’ll be careful. For your sake.” She prods nervously at her collarbone. “Because you’re right. Even if I’m not what destroyed myself last time, I don’t want to be the person who does it this time, either.”

She must notice Kayano's troubled expression, because she does say "You should probably get back to your food. It has to be getting cold by now. I'm sorry for distracting you."

“Don’t be,” Kayano replies, shaking her head. “I can always replace my lunch. You, *however*, I can’t.”

Fumiko nods firmly as Kayano stands. She makes her way back over to her side of the table and prods carefully at her now-cold ramen.

“Can I ask you one more thing, actually?” she admits. “Before I… shut up about all of this? It’s the last thing I’ll make you worry about, I swear.”

“Go right ahead. And don’t worry about worrying me. I'm sure I can handle it.”
Fumiko fiddles with her food for a long moment… hesitant. But finally, she speaks up, an uncertainty to her voice.

“...If... my parents ever found out... about my plans... about the person I’m becoming... you’d help me run away, right?”

Kayano freezes. Eyes wide... voice apprehensive she asks,

“Wait. Why are you worrying about that?”

“L” Fumiko seems to stiffen slightly, arms going down by her side. “It’s not - don’t get the wrong idea! I don’t- I don’t think that’s actually going to happen. But just - like... theoretically. You’d... protect me, right?”

She frames it as ambivalent… an unimportant rhetorical question. But there’s this sense of desperation hidden under the surface of her words that makes Kayano shudder.

“You... you don’t have to if you don’t want to-” Fumiko insists. “I wouldn’t - I wouldn’t take it personally! I know you have a persona to keep up. And it’d really damage your reputation if anyone found out you helped a girl like me get away from her esteemed family. But I was just wondering - in case you- in case it ever comes up.”

Yes. Yes. Of course the answer is yes! But why on earth is she even considering getting caught as a possibility!? They’ve taken careful precautions to ensure every step of this process is kept a secret. There’s no way it could get out!

...Unless.

“Did Makoto or Kiyoshi threaten to tell on you!”

Fumiko recoils slightly, but shakes her head just as quickly.

“N- no! Of course not,” she insists. “They would neve- it’s not like that.”

“No. Seriously,” Kayano insists. “If they said anything to you - you just let me know. I’m not willing to risk this. I know you care about them. And I know you want to protect them. But if that’s the reason you’re fighting… then I don’t want you to hide it for a moment. I will talk to them. And I will make sure they don’t-”

“No! Don’t talk to them!” Fumiko yelps, throwing her hands in the air. “Believe me! Or don’t! I don’t care! But whatever you do, do not talk to them about this!”

There’s a sense of sheer desperation to her tone. She scoots in closer, leaning over the table.

“I... they don’t- that’s not why we’re fighting,” Fumiko clarifies. “It’s... got to do with something else. Something worse, honestly.” She scratches at her elbow. “But... they’re mad at me. Really mad. And I guess I’m scared that if they get mad enough they’ll want revenge on me. After all... they do have the power to destroy my future with a few words.”

Kayano sputters. “Have they- have they talked about wanting revenge on you?”

And what could possibly be worse than the possibility of telling her abusive parents she’s making plans to break away!?

“Well... no. Not exactly. It’s... complicated,” Fumiko admits. “...I know it’s possible I’m just
overthinking it. But if they really do want to hurt me now… I don’t want to give them any ideas. Please don’t breathe a word of this to them.”

...H… hurt her?

The phrase makes Kayano recoil. No. Surely that can’t be a possibility. Makoto… Makoto cares about Fumiko. And Kiyoshi wouldn’t hurt a fly. Nevertheless… Fumiko pleads with a sense of desperation. Where she’d seemed indignant - angry throughout most of this conversation… calling Korosensei a monster, and accusing Kayano of being over-eager to take his side, now she just looks scared.

Whether or not Fumiko’s actually in danger is still uncertain. Kayano’s inclined to doubt. She knows those two just as well as she knows Fumiko, and she knows they’d never wish harm upon her. But all the same… she wonders if that’s that over-eagerness taking form now, and feels a sense of unease wash over her.

Either way… one thing is certain.

...At the very least, Fumiko certainly believes she’s in danger.

“I won’t,” Kayano reassures. “I… won’t say anything. I’m sorry. I misinterpreted the situation. But I won’t let them know about this.”

“Don’t let… don’t let anyone know,” Fumiko tacks on. “Not just those two, I mean. Shiota-sensei… Asano-san… Akabane-san. Just as much as I don’t want those two to use this against me… I don’t want you all to worry. I’m… sure things will be fine. And… I’m sorry for putting this on you at all. I’ve just been… stressed, lately.”

“The answer is yes, for the record,” Kayano says. “If it really does come to that, I mean.”

Again… her fingers drift up to that spot on her nape.

“Here’s to hoping it won’t. And… I believe it won’t. I’ll do everything in my power to make sure that doesn’t happen, Fumiko. But if something happens and you believe your old plan won’t work out… or something happens and you believe you’re in danger around your parents- around anyone, for that matter - then you can always come to me. I’ll shelter you… no matter what. Even if it gets me in a little bit of trouble. Even if it’s really hard to bear.”

“...I’ve already failed you once,” she says. “I don’t intend to do so again.”

In an instant, a weight seems to lift from Fumiko’s shoulders. She lets out a deep sigh of relief.

“T… thank you,” she says. “That’s… reassuring. I… hope it won’t come to that, either. But just in case it’s… nice to know I have someone backing me up.”

“Always.”

Fumiko smiles slightly. It’s an awkward and tired thing. There’s still a sense of exhaustion to her eyes, but as she meets Kayano’s gaze from across the table, somehow she looks just a little less weary.

“You know,” Kayano says. “...Our food’s cold by now. That’s nothing for a growing girl to eat. Why don’t we ditch this place and go somewhere else? Somewhere you can really get a treat?”

“Like where?” Fumiko asks.
“Well… it’s hardly proper, but there’s an ice cream place a few blocks from here. I figure we could get some soft serves and a pretzel.”

“I dunno…” Fumiko muses. “Sounds unhealthy.”

“Just this once,” Kayano insists. “You’ve had a long day. Why don’t you get your mind off of all that nonsense for just one second and spend a nice afternoon with your sister? You know you need it.”

Fumiko’s already pushing her plate aside. “That’s right,” she admits. “It seems I do…”

They pay their tab and head out towards the streets. Grab a frozen treat, and a little something extra at that.

Fumiko seems to loosen up slightly. She laughs at Kayano’s jokes, and devours her soft serve before coming back for seconds. She gets a bit of ice cream stuck on her lip, and rolls her eyes when Kayano tells her she looks like a goofball.

...By the end of their little afternoon together she still looks tired. There remains a heaviness to her steps and a certain unease to the way she moves. But as she hugs Kayano at the end of the day… pulls her in close… Kayano feels her relax just slightly, and breathes her own sigh of relief.

Because while she still doesn’t know all that’s going on in Fumiko’s life, much less how to fix it… she catches Fumiko thank her and smile at the end of the day.

It’s a start.

...Yeah. It’s a start.

Kiyoshi has a weird week.

After his incident he doesn’t return to school. He’s just not ready yet. He’s all sorts of fatigued… and when he thinks about the idea of meeting up with Fumiko again his head starts to spin. His Dad’s surprisingly okay with it, however: saying it’s for the best he takes some time off for himself. And besides… maybe it’ll give them an excuse to hang out a little more. Who knows?

Things are still weird between the two of them. You don’t fix a relationship that strained in a single night. But Dad checks on him every morning… and tries to surprise him with homemade brunches. They keep a careful eye on Kiyoshi’s healing wounds, and when they receive news about Mom they receive it together. Dad gives him little chores to do around the house… lets him feel helpful, and when they fix up the hole in the wall, somehow it's much less scary than Kiyoshi’d thought it would be.

Dad stays true to his promise. Every night he stands there in Kiyoshi’s doorway and notes something he’s proud of him for. Some of them are more awkward than others… but it’s evident he’s trying.

...Besides. ‘I’m proud of you,’ is all Kiyoshi’s ever really wanted to hear.

Things with Makoto are weird in a much less comforting way. Where Kiyoshi and Dad fumble awkwardly - stepping on each other’s toes in a desperate attempt to resemble something like a family again - at the very least it’s reassuring. The sense of weirdness between him and Makoto, however, lands somewhere much closer to unnerving.
Makoto stops by his house every other day, dropping off his make-up work. He bounces up to Kiyoshi’s doorstep and greets him with enthusiasm, asking him how he’s feeling today.

“Better… I think,” he answers, but the sense of unease in his voice soon betrays the fact that he’s hardly sure.

“That’s good!” Makoto declares, teetering from foot to foot. “I’m doing pretty awesome too!”

...If Kiyoshi’s telling white lies, then he’s putting on a whole damn facade.

They don’t mention it. What happened with Fumiko. Kiyoshi tries, but Makoto brushes him off every time.

“It’s not worth worrying about,” he says dismissively, sliding a stack of papers into Kiyoshi’s hands. “She’ll come around eventually.”

“I dunno…” Kiyoshi admits, placing them on a nearby desk. “...She seemed pretty mad.”

“She always seems mad. I know her better than you do, and trust me when I say she’ll be over this in a week.”

“If you say so…”

“I know so. And besides… even if she doesn’t, who cares what a person like that thinks about you, anyways?”

He says that nonchalantly. And for a second Kiyoshi almost believes he doesn’t care. But then he catches the slightest twitch of Makoto’s hand and he sighs.

...Act or not, Korosensei’s insecure to be scorned by the person he’d tried to live up to, too.

“How is she?” Kiyoshi asks another day. “Is she getting any better?”

“Pah. Nah,” Makoto huffs, rolling his eyes. “She’s still giving me the cold shoulder. She won’t even hear me out when I try to explain what I-“

“No. Not that. I figured that much,” Kiyoshi interjects, holding a hand up.”How’s she doing? Does she look well? Happy?”

Makoto’s nose wrinkles. “Well… no. Of course not. She looks like she hasn’t slept in a week.”

Kiyoshi sighs. “Dammit.”

“I don’t get why you care so much,” Makoto admits. “It’s not like she cares that you haven’t been to school in a week. You could’ve disappeared for all she cares, and she wouldn’t even know.”

“Doesn’t matter,” Kiyoshi says. “I - listen. I really don’t care what she thinks about me. She has every right to be mad at me.”

“She doesn’t-“

“She does. And she clearly wants to. I’ll let her. That doesn’t matter to me,” he lies. “But I just hope… I just hope…“

“Mm?”
“...I just hope I don’t end up ruining her life a second time.”

He hears more about how she’s doing. She’s showing up to class later, and she hasn’t been to Nagisa’s place in a week. She hasn’t asked for her scarf back, and Makoto swears to god she’s going back to isolating herself from the rest of her classmates, too.

It breaks his heart just to think about it.

He doesn’t know what he’s supposed to have done. He couldn’t have not told her. She’s made that much very clear. But in telling her… Kiyoshi’s a little scared he might have broken her trust forever.

...Some days he wishes Makoto had taken her side. It’d have broken his heart, but at least she’d have someone. She deserves at least a little support. He thinks about her all alone and rolls over in his bed.

(Maybe he should come back to school, soon. Then he can see it for himself.)

(...No. He’s not ready yet)

Dad buys him a new nightlight and checks on him when he swears he hears something in the night. He bundles Kiyoshi in a blanket, and gives him some imitation of a warm smile when he admits, “You look unwell.”

...Fumiko doesn’t have someone like Dad.

Maybe that’s why he feels so bad for her. Maybe that’s why he wishes Makoto had stood by her. Her parents hate her. Even if Kiyoshi didn’t have any friends… at least he’d have this.

Makoto refutes the notion. When Kiyoshi confides it in him one lazy afternoon he shakes his head firmly.

“Dude. I don’t want to take her side. Even if she’s my friend, I’m not gonna just give up on what I think is right.”

All the same, a loneliness rings out in his voice. And Kiyoshi’s certain… if they really wanted to, Makoto and Fumiko could have forgotten him with ease: grown up happy together. But each other? Good lord, no.

...They’re never going to forget how much this stings...

He doesn’t think about her every day… the turmoil she must be going through. In fact, some days are almost something close to good! He’s told Mom’s making a steady recovery and he cooks dinner with Dad. Taro curls up at the foot of his bed, and when he whistles trots up to snuggle into the crook of his side. He rests well. And when he wakes up to see sunlight filtering in through the window he thinks things might almost be okay.

It’s a slow process. He’s not sure if he’s ever going to be alright. He sincerely doubts he’ll ever fix things with Fumiko. He’s not even really sure if he can fix things with Makoto. But Dad believes in him, and he has fewer and fewer of those ‘temperamental’ moments. If anything they’re merely replaced by a steady sense of melancholy.

The nightmares don’t vanish entirely. They return every so often - forcing him to confront the ghost of what he’d done. He bites his nails down to stubs and observes the dark bags penciled under his eyes.
He’s not doing well. That much is obvious.

But at the very least he’s alive.

...Yeah. He’s alive.

One evening he notes that his dark roots are showing again. He’d hardly noticed it in between everything else - but now that he thinks about it he hasn’t dyed his hair in two months, has he? Kayano used to help him do it.

(...It’s been two months since he last talked to Kayano.)

He briefly considers asking his dad to help him dye it... but just as soon he decides against it. He doesn’t know why, but it feels disingenuous somehow.

(...Maybe he’s okay going back to black.)

He wonders if Kayano knows by now. It feels like she should, but if she has... she hasn’t said anything. That leaves a weird taste in his mouth. He’d sincerely expected Fumiko to tell her before anyone else. But the more days that pass without his father receiving some sort of unfortunate call, the more he becomes certain she hasn’t told anyone at all.

...Why?

Could it be? That she still cares about how he fee-?

No. There’s no use in getting his hopes up. He’s sure she has her reasons. And he owes more to her than to psychoanalyze her for it.

He just… hopes it won’t hurt too much when the truth inevitably does come out.

He… thinks his dad will be there for him no matter what. Mom, too. If anything, they probably won’t believe it. But the rest of the E-Class? Hoo boy. They’ll react like Fumiko did. They’re not blind optimists like Makoto is. And they’ve been seriously hurt by him to boot. Nagisa will probably expel him. Hara and Yada will stop sending him sweet birthday messages every year. Karma will beat him up for sure.

...Blegh.

He is so screwed.

‘But at least Dad loves you,’ he reminds himself. ‘He said he’ll be there for you no matter what. At least you have that. At least you have that.’

...Some people don’t.

Mom is starting to get better. They’re planning to wake her up tomorrow. Kiyoshi’s nervous and relieved all at once. He can’t wait to see her again… Dad says they should probably be able to video call her, but all the same, he wonders how she’s going to take this.

She just - like… nearly died. He’ll be stunned if she doesn’t come out of this with at least a few issues. Is she going to be scared about what happened to her body, or is she just going to be relieved to be alive at all?

He supposes there’s no knowing for certain until she’s awake. Either way, it’ll be a while before he can see her in person. She still has a lot of recovering to do, and they haven’t flown her out of
Ukraine yet. Until then they’ll have to rely on video calls. That, and a lot of texting.

(‘I’ll make sure to give her support,’ he notes. ‘She probably needs it.’ And who knows? Maybe she can give him some much-needed support too right now.)

...He wonders how she’d react if he told her that he thought this entire incident was his fault for a little bit.

She’d probably grab his cheek and call him a dumbass. ‘What do you have to do with any of this? You’re not powerful enough to take out your mom, are you? Last I’d checked you were still 4’9!’

He smiles slightly. It reassures him to think about. He can’t wait to hear her voice again.

He’s thinking about that and everything else on a Sunday afternoon. Dad asked him to run some errands, if only to give him an excuse to get out of the house, and Kiyoshi had gladly obliged. He’d run out to grab groceries and pick up some supplies. He’s on the way back home thinking about Mom, about his friend group, and about everything else when he realizes something’s out of the ordinary. At first he doesn’t quite pick up on it, but when he does he skids to a fucking halt.

...He’s walked past his house.

His face flushes red. He’d known he was absentminded, but this is a new low! He looks at his surroundings, desperately trying to calculate just how far off the mark he is when he spots it...: a mansion just over the hill. And a familiar one, at that.

Fumiko’s place.

Shit! He’d known it was close-! They walk the same route home from school. But he hadn’t meant to - he should not be here right now! He starts to whirl around, only to grind to a halt for a second time as he catches sight of something purple.

...Fumiko’s out there. On the lawn.

She hasn’t noticed him yet... thank god. If she did he thinks he’d have a goddamn heart attack. Instead, she sits with her back turned to him, staring out at the lake that overlooks her property. She reaches out for a rock that sits nearby, before tossing it with a frustrated grunt and watching it skip across the lake.

Even from a distance it’s easy to tell she’s disheveled. She sits with shoulders low, and Kiyoshi remembers the way Makoto had described her...: like she hadn’t slept in a week. He wonders what she’s thinking about right now. He wonders if she’s thinking about him.

He knows he should go. It’s not fair for him to sit in on this moment, and if she catches him he’s dead. But all the same… he looks at her sitting there… seeming so small, and he feels his heart catch in his throat.

...He did this to her.

Before he even knows what he’s doing he takes a step forward. He has to. He thinks about how his mind hasn’t gotten off of it once all week and he feels sick. He stares at her shivering in the February wind and knows she probably doesn’t feel too dissimilar. He thinks back to that night at his house... how she’d cried alone in the hallway... and he thinks about just how much she looks like that Fumiko now.

He knows she doesn’t want to see him. And he won’t force her to talk if she doesn’t want to. But
she’s had a week to cool down. To think... to wonder ‘why?’ ‘how could this happen to me?’ And he feels like... he owes her some answers. He owes her some closure about what happened. Because if they really leave that as their last conversation, something tells him they’ll never stop thinking about it for the rest of their goddamn lives.

...He wants to do this right this time. He wants to ease her pain, even just a little.

He doesn’t know how this will end. For all he cares he might end up getting socked in the face again. But if he can just manage to say something other than that empty ‘sorry...’ say ‘I think you’re the one in the right,’ then maybe... maybe...

Maybe he can ease some of the uncertainty Fumiko is facing. And that alone would make this all worth it.

He reaches for his phone... opens his texts with his dad, and stares at the screen for a long moment.


[2/17/2031 5:11 PM:] [Kiyoshi] I might be a little late getting home today.

[2/17/2031 5:12 PM:] [Kiyoshi] But I’m okay. Please don’t worry about me.

[2/17/2031 5:12 PM:] [Kiyoshi] Something just came up and I need to take care of it or I’ll never forgive myself.


[2/17/2031 5:12 PM:] [Kiyoshi] And I’ll text you when I’m on my way home.


[2/17/2031 5:13 PM:] [Kiyoshi] And please... give me the courage to be brave.

With that... he pockets his phone. He considers putting his groceries to the side, then decides against it. He takes a deep breath... steels himself as much as he can... and then Kiyoshi does the only thing he can think to possibly do.

...Step forward.

Chapter End Notes

New chapter! New chapter! All around one that tackled quite a few different scenes/topics, but I wanted some conversations between the adults (mildly rational) and the kids (much less so) to occur before the plot progressed any further.

I had fun writing the Makoto and the Nagisa scene. I have a lot of feelings about the Civil War, and I'm not entirely sure if I can articulate them... but I certainly tried my best! I'm really proud of Nagisa for how proudly he worded it and how he managed to share the story without either scaring Makoto or turning him against the Red Team.
What he and Karma did back then was EXTREMELY stupid, and I'm glad he's managing to pass on some of that wisdom to hopefully prevent these two from taking the same path. No promises, however. I never did say Fumiko and Makoto have braincells.

Fumiko and Kayano's talk was also very nice to write. A lot more bittersweet or even outright sad than Nagisa and Makoto's chat, but comforting in it's own way. If I have 'a lot' of feelings about the class civil war, then I have a NOVEL'S WORTH of feelings about Aguri and her life. And letting Fumiko look back on it and analyze it was both satisfying and broke my heart. Aguri's mindset was both an admirable one and a dangerous one, and she's still trying to figure out how she feels about it, especially in light of the deep fear of being abandoned or replaced.

Andddd Kiyoshi. HOO boy, Kiyoshi.

He might be making a piss poor decision here. But the truth is if SOMEONE didn't step forward they were never going to talk, and Fumiko didn't have the will to. They need to rip off the band-aid and discuss things sooner or later. Whether or not Kiyoshi will tackle that with grace, however, is still unclear. Will he really manage to give her some of that closure he so desperately wants to, or will he just make things worse?

Who knows! I suppose we'll just have to find out next week. And whether or not it still seems we have SOME bright things to look forward to. Irina should be waking up within the next few chapters, and the class reunion creeps ever-closer. Things to look forward to! But for now... worry, because Fumiko and Kiyoshi are about to have a heart to heart(?)

Some songs that helped me write this chapter were Beware The Dog by the Griswolds, Street Fight by Smallpools, Drift Away from Steven Universe, She Used To Be Mine from Waitress (Recurring Fumiko song haha), Nightclothes by Radical Face, Transit by Jasper Sloan Yip, Devil Town V.2 by Cavetown, and Mr. Blue by Catherine Feeney.

As always, I hope you enjoyed! Make sure to let me know what you thought, and I'll see you next week!

End Notes

Here we go, boys! My first long term fanfiction project in years. I’m so excited to buckle down and attempt this, and I’m so glad Assassination Classroom inspired something like this from me.

I suppose I shouldn’t go into exactly why I wrote this fanfiction yet, since that would entail quite a bit of spoilers, but trust me when I say tons of heart has gone into it and its planning. It’s a story at its heart about Nagisa, the people who have molded his life, and the way he can mold the lives of others. And I hope that shows.

And, of course, it’s a fanfiction about second chances. We haven’t quite gotten into the meat of things yet, but if the description has tipped you off any, things are about to get
fishy around here. (Well. Octopussy? Hm. Now that I’ve typed that, I don’t think I enjoy that phrase!)

I hope the inclusion of Nagisa and his convoluted polycule isn’t a huge turnoff for anyone. I couldn’t quite decide what ship I wanted to go with, if any, for Nagisa’s future. So I just went with just about everything I shipped! Because the world needs more wholesome poly relationships. I would not describe this as a ship fic even remotely, but his relationship with his spouses certainly does play a part in the plot, and I have my fingers crossed that even if your eyebrow is raised right now I can sell you on this nonsense by the end of the fic. Don’t worry. I WILL explain how they ended up in this situation sooner or later. Because HOO boy they didn’t expect this either.

As a note they are not all dating. Nagisa is with all three of them, and Karma and Asano are with each other. Kayano is not involved with those two. That said, the ones who aren’t involved are all still close friends, and consenting to this entire ordeal. They have fun here.

I ended up going with Constellate Junior High for the name of his school, but it was HARD to decide. Because how on earth do you get something cooler than fucking Paradise!? There’s simply no improving on that. That said, I tried to stay with a sort of celestial/space theme. I was going to go with something based on the moon, but figured that would be a little bit too on the nose. So I went with Constellate! A word defined as “form or cause to form into a cluster or group; gather together,” which I think is sweet for him trying to nurture a bunch of misfits, while also sounding like constellation, which is always a plus..

Sorry for bombarding so many students on you in a single chapter, by the way. If it makes you feel any better: I’m just gonna say it here and now that the only ones you really need to pay any attention to are Makoto, Fumiko, and Kiyoshi. And I hope I’ve made that clear. The rest are all just to. Y’know. Have an actual school and not Nagisa teaching three children in a void. They’re a… Interesting trio, alright. And I can’t wait to delve into how they interact.

Music is a big thing that inspires my writing, and I can’t help but give it some credit. This fanfiction itself is named after The New Pornographers’ “Adventures In Solitude”, and the reason why will become pretty apparent PRETTY quickly if you give it a listen. I’ll probably end up listing off some songs that I listened to while I wrote every chapter, just because I love music like that. Some big influences for this one were Pokemon Mystery Dungeon’s “Goodnight”, Dear Evan Hansen’s “Does Anybody Have A Map”, Bastille’s “Lethargy”, Air Traffic Controller’s “Hurry, Hurry” and The White Stripes’ “We’re Going To Be Friends”.

And with that, I hope you’ll all enjoy Adventures In Solitude. Because I have a LOT planned, and you’re in for a wild ride.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!