A Senseless Strike of Lightning

Summary

The organization called Claw had one main objective: to find and take into itself any espers that were not already members.

One young Shigeo Kageyama, seen levitating dogs on the playground, fit that bill perfectly.

So they took him, easily, right off the streets while he was on his way home. He was small, and it wasn't a challenge to scoop him up and spirit him away to their base where there would be no one to help him.

Except... that there was someone.
Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The walls were so white.

Shigeo trembled on his cot, arms wrapped around himself, eyes fixated on the wall directly in front of him.

He hated the color white.

When the door clicked open, electronic lock sliding away, he snapped a tendril of psychic power out to whip at whatever poor soul had been elected to check on him today. The man yelped and shied away, not seeing the energy that Shigeo was lashing out with but feeling it spike against his skin.

This Shigeo had never learned to fear his powers, had never hurt his brother or lost control. He cloaked himself in his abilities like a knight would in armor, wearing it to battle and wielding it as best as his nine year old mind could.

Unfortunately, his best was never good enough. The man, wearing terrible white in the form of a loose uniform, managed to press through the invisible tentacles and make his way to Shigeo’s bedside. He grabbed through Shigeo’s psychic resistance at one of his small arms and pulled him from the cot.

Shigeo tried to make a break for it, of course he did, he always did. A thick barrier flickered as he attempted to put it up around himself while struggling, hoping that it would push the man’s hand from its locked place around his upper arm.

It was a useless endeavor - all of the crew members who were assigned to handle him had been through this song and dance before in the weeks since Shigeo had been brought in. They all knew enough ways by now to keep their grip on Shigeo through whatever wave of psychic power he used against them, until they could slip the power dampening cuff over his thin little hand and onto his wrist.

Shigeo hated that cuff maybe more than he hated the color white. He hated it and its ugly runes, hated the way it cut his senses down to a single dimension.

“You’re going to meet someone very important today, Kageyama.” The man in the white uniform said, at ease now that the cuff was tight around Shigeo’s wrist, reducing him to the threat level of a barely normal child. He knelt and straightened the collar of Shigeo’s red shirt, smoothing the edge down before pressing out the wrinkles in Shigeo’s sleeves. Shigeo had torn the embroidered CLAW insignia from the front again, and the man tsked at this. “You need to keep your uniform nice, like how mine is, see?” He tapped at the insignia on his own chest that he bore proudly, “We’ll have to get one of your spares now before you meet this person.”

Shigeo didn’t say anything. He merely glared and curled his hands into small fists.

He was led from his room into the hallway, moving from that white bubble to a box of concrete walls and cool grey tile. A small broom closet near his room held all his extra clothing, and the man leading him kept a tight hand upon Shigeo’s shoulder as he unlocked it and fetched a new shirt from within for Shigeo to change into.
“I know you’ll tear this one too, but wait until after this meeting, alright?” The man grumbled, tossing Shigeo’s balled up torn shirt into the closet before shutting it. He tried to take Shigeo’s hand instead of keeping a grip on his shoulder, but Shigeo yanked his hands to his chest before the man’s reaching fingers could succeed in latching on. With a huff, the man’s lip curled, but he didn’t try to take Shigeo’s hand again.

They walked for quite a distance down the hall in silence before Shigeo dared to speak up, his voice softly betraying his curiosity, “Who… am I meeting?” He fidgeted with the bottom of his new shirt, “Is it the Division Leader again…?”

“No,” The man answered, and a grin which Shigeo did not like at all grew slowly upon his face, “No, you are meeting someone who is on a whole different level, a higher level.”

Shigeo didn’t like the sound of that, but he didn’t dare question further, not with how the man was grinning.

Eventually, the two of them came upon a wide set of doors. The doors were just as plain as the rest of the hall, but they were larger in size, and they felt more significant. Shigeo froze at the sight of them, as the aura of the thing within brushed against his muted senses.

Whatever was in there, whatever he was about to meet, it couldn’t be a human.

His handler tried to pull him along, up to the doors, but Shigeo stayed put. He dug his heels in and desperately tried to keep himself away.

“Kageyama,” The man hissed, grin straining as he stopped pulling at Shigeo and instead, without hesitation, scooped him up around the middle. Shigeo squirmed and kicked out, trying to catch the man in the side so he’d drop him, but he was unsuccessful.

With large hands, the white uniformed man squeezed Shigeo roughly once he’d stopped moving around so much, crushing at the sides of Shigeo’s ribs, “You are about to meet the President.” He said, with an almost threatening tone, into Shigeo’s ear, “Behave yourself.”

And then the doors opened.

Shigeo was set down and shoved inside, pushed in front of the man like a sacrificial lamb. The aura Shigeo had felt earlier swelled the further inside the room he went, pressing down on the edges of his mind with a static cling he couldn’t shake.

The room looked like… an office meeting room. Just a plain office meeting room. It had a long table in the center, with dark professional-looking chairs lining its sides.

Despite the number of chairs, there was only one person in the room. Sitting at the furthest head of the long table, shadowed away from the dull fluorescent lights; a very frightening man from whom the frightening aura stemmed.

Shigeo tried to turn around and escape, but he was forced to stay, forced to face forward. The frightening man slowly stood, his body nothing but harsh straight lines and a pair of almost neon turquoise eyes that made Shigeo feel oh so small with the way they stared.

“So, this is the one. The natural from the reports.” The man - the President - said, as he calmly walked the length of the table, getting closer with every step.

When he kneeled and took Shigeo’s chin in his hand, Shigeo simultaneously froze up and tried to shrink into himself. There was something cold to the quality of the President’s fingers, something
clinical and business-like in how he tilted Shigeo’s head and examined him.

“I’m Touichirou Suzuki. Do you know how powerful you are, boy?” He asked.

Behind Shigeo, his handler began to stutter out excuses, “We haven’t been able to run many tests yet, he’s clearly powerful but he’s very stubborn, so he tends to not cooperate.”

Suzuki let go of Shigeo’s chin and looked over his head to pin his dangerous stare on the white uniformed man. A wave of hostility radiated out from him, quieting the man almost immediately, “I wasn’t asking you.”

Then, he looked back down at Shigeo, “Well?” Suzuki prompted of him, “Do you know?”

Shigeo chewed at his lip and tried not to tremble, “I don’t know.” He managed to quietly answer.

A click.

Shigeo’s eyes snapped down to his wrist. He watched, holding his breath, as Suzuki undid the lock on the cuff, loosened it, and then slipped it off.

“Show me, then.”

Under his skin, Shigeo felt his power flare back to life, like a tiny flicker of a candle being stoked into a full burning fire. He stared at Suzuki as his aura began to curl around himself protectively, watching for any change in expression, any hint that this could be a trick.

There was no change in the man’s stony expression, no blink of his eyes, no twitch of his cheek. He was serious about this.

So Shigeo threw him across the room.

His handler jumped into action, reaching past Shigeo’s shoulder trying scoop the dropped cuff up from the floor. He barely managed to flinch before Shigeo had thrown him as well, tossing his white clothed body over his head and down the left line of chairs like a bowling ball at a row of pins.

At the other end of the room, Suzuki picked himself up, not a scratch on him. Calmly, he began walking back towards Shigeo.

Earlier when Shigeo had felt the man’s aura, it had been muffled, as if Shigeo had been underwater and trying to squint up at the sun. Now with the cuff off, and the full range of his senses available to him, Shigeo could see just how bright the sparkling and dangerous red web that was crawling towards him was.

His own aura, a gemstone shield of metallic purples and reflective blues, was not nearly as intense.

“Surely you can do more than that.” Suzuki said, halfway across the room now. He stepped over the fallen body of Shigeo’s handler as if it were nothing, ignoring the bruised, unconscious man and pushing chairs from his path telekinetically as he steadily approached.

Shigeo turned and fled.

The doors were hard to push open; heavy, and nearly impossible to move with his child-strength until he focused and pushed them with his mind. They banged open in a burst after that, crashing against the outside wall, the left one even cracking, but Shigeo didn’t have time to care. He had to get away.
The terrible thing about the division headquarters though, was that every hallway looked exactly the
same. Every corner Shigeo turned in his exhausting rush led him to another claustrophobic length of
cool grey tile floor and concrete walls, and what little stamina he had was already beginning to bleed
away from him with each step down another identical hallway. He knew that Suzuki was still
pursuing him though, and he knew that sooner or later other operatives of Claw would be filling the
halls like water fills pipes, searching for him relentlessly.

So he couldn’t stop. This was an opportunity that Shigeo knew, in all his childish hope, he had to
take.

Then he stumbled, his right knee faltered, and he crashed to the ground with a yelp.

Shigeo lay there, stunned for a moment, blood welling in the scrape on his knee and pain beginning
to throb in his legs and arms. He chewed at his lip again, biting down on the way it wavered,
clenching his fists and pushing down his emotions as he struggled to pull himself up quickly. He
couldn’t cry. He couldn’t cry. Not here, not now.

When he escaped, and was home, and was in his mother’s arms again, then he could cry.

His knee immediately wavered beneath him when he tried to put weight on it. Running wasn’t an
option anymore, but Suzuki’s aura still pricked at the edge of his awareness. Shigeo had to find
some place to hide.

A door down the hall, thankfully not too far from him, caught his eye. Hoping against hope that the
room would be empty, Shigeo staggered over and yanked the door open with his power.

When he saw that no one was inside, Shigeo wasted no time in falling into the room and shutting the
door behind him. He crushed the knob and lock as well, condensing it into a misshapen,
unidentifiable mass of metal with a twist of purples and blues. Then, he turned to look around the
room.

It was small, and looked like a break room of some sort, and Shigeo noted with dawning despair that
there were barely any places to hide. He trembled there in front of the door for a moment, clutching
at his leg as he tried to decide where to go. File cabinets and boxes lined one wall, a table with a few
chairs sat in the middle, and a counter with cabinets underneath it lined the other wall; the only real
options he had now were to either get in a box, empty a file cabinet and get inside, or squeeze
himself into one of the cabinets beneath the counter.

None of these places would keep him safe. They’d be great if he was playing hide and seek with
Ritsu or Tsubomi or some of the other neighborhood kids, but to avoid Suzuki…?

In the hallway he’d just left behind, the shrill spiking sound of an alarm burst forth. Shigeo froze,
breath stuttering to a halt in his chest as he heard it. He looked down, between his feet, and saw the
red glow from the alarm lights peeking underneath the door frame, reaching for him.

His luck and his time had run out. Now everyone would be looking for him.

The looming presence of Suzuki’s aura became too strong to ignore, swelling with the sound of the
alarm and pressing even closer than it had before. Panicked, Shigeo scrambled to a hiding spot,
barely thinking as he began to push through the boxes. It only took a second for him to find a box
large enough for him to fit in, and he hurriedly packaged himself safely away inside.

He huddled there, curled into a ball with his barrier pressed tightly against his skin as a thick layered
shield, for what felt like hours, aware of every inch of ground that Suzuki’s aura gained in the man’s
steady approach.

It was almost impossible to hear through the volume of the alarm, but still, Shigeo managed to hear when the door to the room clicked, thudded, and then creaked open.

The broken lock had done nothing to keep Suzuki out.

“You are rather powerful,” Suzuki said, as he stepped into the room. The door shut behind him. Shigeo didn’t dare to breathe, “But you’re also rather bad at concealing your aura.”

A hand plunged into Shigeo’s box, grabbing the top of his head and pulling him roughly from his hiding place by the hair. Shigeo shouted and thrashed, clawing at the man’s hand while his powers went wild, tearing the boxes up and throwing files from the file cabinets into the air in his panic.

Through it all, Suzuki remained unmoved, his hand on Shigeo’s head a fixed point that the chaos revolved around.

“You need discipline,” Suzuki said, as he lifted Shigeo higher, his own barrier of red circuitry bouncing back Shigeo’s feet when Shigeo tried to kick him, “And training. One day you could be a great asset, but right now… well, right now, you’re nothing but an emotional child.”

He threw Shigeo then, like the boy had thrown him earlier, sending Shigeo’s small body back against the file cabinets. They dented beneath him, crunching and cracking as the round curve of his barrier caught him just in time and collided with them with all the force of a speeding car.

“If I had been the one to find you, things would’ve been different.” Suzuki continued, talking casually, as the cardboard of the boxes shredded themselves around him. He peeled Shigeo from the wall with just a look, not even needing to raise a hand to gesture, “However, I do like your potential.” Then he slipped the dampening cuff back onto Shigeo’s wrist.

Shigeo moaned as he felt the cuff click back into place, and he slumped down against Suzuki’s arm before sliding from it and falling limply, the fight draining from him and soreness settling into his small bones. His eyes fluttered with the sudden exhaustion, but Shigeo’s fast-beating heart forced them to stay open.

“Get up.” Suzuki demanded, standing over him.

Shigeo shook, knees and palms pressed to the ground. A hand gripped his hair again, and he was powerless to stop Suzuki as the man dragged him to his feet.

Those terrible eyes were on him once again, pinning Shigeo in place.

Suzuki raised a hand over Shigeo’s head, and let his power sharpen the angles of it.

“This is your first punishment. Do not attempt to escape while being tested again.”

Shigeo shut his eyes as the man’s hand descended.

There would be a new order put into place.

Now, not many of the people at the 3rd Division were qualified to take care of a child, or monitor scientific experiments concerning ESP, or both. Many of the members were powerless cult-followers, following Claw for the benefit of being a part of the organization that would one day be taking over the world, but just as many were weak espers genuinely addicted to the power. They
were not strong enough to be in the first or second division, but still not so much without potential as to be shunted off to the further away Divisions. The rumors of the newest Division, the 7th’s, ragtag group of rebellious Scars, who had been displaced from the main headquarters and left alone to govern themselves, were passed around almost like ghost stories. A warning to grunts and lower espers of the fate that would befall them if they dared to go against the President’s word.

And the President’s word was this: Train Shigeo Kageyama, monitor his improvement, and report back with results regularly.

So that was what the Division set out to do, practically ripping up the foundations of their hierarchy so it could be restructured around the lone little boy that had been found by chance, levitating dogs off in some distant city that no one cared to remember the name of.

In the corners of the Division many speculated on what had really happened that day when Shigeo had managed to slip away for awhile before being brought back to his room over the President’s shoulder. Whatever the President had seen in Shigeo upon their meeting - whatever psychic power Shigeo had displayed - had somehow impressed the very hard to impress man. Now, the President clearly had a future use in mind for the boy, and although they could whisper and gossip about what it could possibly be, none of his followers were going to question him on it.

The new routine was strict and serious. Before, in their lack of guidance when they’d just been trying to hold Shigeo there, there had been a small team set aside to monitor Shigeo, who played rock-paper-scissors before pulling on the costume of professionalism to check on him. Now, there was an official “scientist” of sorts, someone well-versed in the realm of parapsychology and able to quantify it, always accompanied by an esper strong enough to hold the child back whenever they entered his room. Shigeo would be tested twice a day, through different activities, to gauge the strength of his telekinesis and if there were any other latent abilities he had. If there were no training exercises scheduled for the day after those tests, then the rest of the time he was mostly left in his room, as the Division still largely had no idea what to do with a child - nonetheless a child so full with animosity towards them.

“I don’t know why we don’t just curse your room already,” the scientist grumbled as she entered with her esper escort of the day. She was a woman with the last name Inaba, but Shigeo liked to mentally call her Plant-Hair, because of the way her hair stuck up awkwardly from the bun on the top of her head, sprouting out in chunks as if it were a tiny aloe plant. He knew it was rude to make fun of people’s appearances, his mother had always taught him so, but in this place… Shigeo felt as if he was allowed to be mean to the people holding him captive. “You cause so much trouble every time.”

Shigeo, true to form, continued to cause trouble. He hadn’t tried to run or escape since Suzuki had punished him for it, but his stubborn attempts to hold off the tests and inconvenience the Division remained. He’d erected a wall of psychic power that morning, trying to keep them away without lashing out, but already his stamina was wavering as the nameless esper - a short man with a Scar wrapped around his left arm - at Plant-Hair’s side continued to apply his own psychic pressure.

“I know you don’t want to have your powers cut off completely, right Shigeo?” Plant-Hair threatened nastily, “Wouldn’t it hurt to be separate from them for so much longer than when you just have the cuff on?”

Shigeo’s concentration wavered in surprise at the thought, and the barrier flickered just long enough for the esper to brutally force a hole through it. It collapsed around the structural gap, and Plant-Hair walked through to Shigeo’s bedside unhindered.

“You really need to stop fighting us every day,” Plant-Hair tsked as she pulled over the small table
and chair that were beside Shigeo’s cot, readying her supplies, “Or the Boss will come back and punish you again.” She aimed a pointed look at the gauze that was wrapped around Shigeo’s head, threaded through his choppy black hair.

Shigeo couldn’t help but flinch, but he managed enough self-control to stop himself from reaching up to press his fingers against the cloth over his scarring wound.

Seeing him effectively intimidated now, Plant-Hair smiled at him, a thin and cruel mockery of a comforting gesture that Shigeo took no comfort from at all, “You just have to be good. Now, for today, you don’t have any major tests right now. There’s one later, but this is just a check up.”

It was easy to zone out during check-ups, they didn’t require him to strain his mind or body. Shigeo allowed himself to drift and tolerate the impersonal way Plant-Hair checked his heart rate, looked into his eyes, took his blood, and only tensed when she reached to unwrap his bandages to see how well the cut down the left side of his face was healing.

“I don’t know why they make me do this.” She grumbled, as she pulled the white cloth away, “I’m no doctor.”

The wound was healing as well as a jagged slash on a small face could heal. It cut raggedly over Shigeo’s cheekbone and down the side of his soft cheek, looking like a single bolt of lightning, one that would be there upon his face forever.

And the worst part about it? Shigeo had felt how Suzuki had held back.

Carefully, Plant-Hair smoothed a thumb across the unruined skin beneath Shigeo’s cut, stretching it and seeing how the cut reacted. No new blood sprung up, and she nodded, satisfied, before reaching for a less-severe looking patch of gauze that could be taped down over his skin rather than needing straps be wrapped around Shigeo’s head. She stuck it on and pressed the tape over it roughly, before standing and brushing down her uniform.

“Someone will be back to get you in a few hours for your test.” She informed Shigeo, as if time meant anything to him in his room without a clock or windows, before turning to leave. Her Scarred esper followed dutifully, only tossing one poisonous glare Shigeo’s way before the door shut on them both.

Leaving Shigeo alone again.

He curled back up, as he always did, dragging his limbs to him and leaning against the wall his cot was next to. His face began to ache and itch as he leaned there, and he pulled his knees to his chest so he could squish his hands between the bend of his legs to keep himself from scratching at the new bandage.

Waiting for the tests was never fun. It made anxiety buzz within Shigeo’s chest as he tried to predict what Plant-Hair and her associates would have him do. Everyday it seemed like it was something new, designed to get him to strain himself and use his powers when he didn’t want to.

But he always ended up breaking and using them anyways.

Allowing the train of thought to guide him, Shigeo, very carefully, very slowly, wondered to himself if one day his powers would be strong enough to bring the whole room down around him.

Right now, he didn’t know. He knew his powers were still developing, his capacity and weight limit growing with each passing day that he was forced into tests, but bringing down a room? A building? He could throw a human body in a fit of adrenaline, could lift a dog, could open a door, but those
were all different from pushing walls like dominos, or turning the ceiling to rubble... weren’t they?

His young mind couldn’t fathom it.

All he knew, was that his room remained uncursed for a reason. The Division, full of espers, full of Scars, felt as if they had no serious reason to fear him. He was just a child, as Suzuki had said.

Shigeo hated it. He just wanted to go home.

“When I’m older…” He whispered to himself, curling up tighter with tension and crushing his fingers, “When I’m older… I’ll be the strongest esper in the world. No one will be able to take me away ever again.”

Chapter End Notes

me: ok im gonna think of a good shoumob au im gonna do it and its gonna be good
me: *accidentally knocks over the box labeled ANGST and it all pours into the idea mix* oh NO

so anyways uh!!! hope you all enjoyed this first chapter! this fic will probably update kinda slowly, bc ive been really busy with school and my brain is so scattered when it comes to how many fic ideas ive suddenly got lately, but I'd love to hear your thoughts and feedback!

also feel free to talk to me about mp100 and my fics on tumblr @ghoststrawberries!
Chapter 2

It was a week before something in the routine changed.

That day, the tests had been pushing the non-physical side of his ESP. A table of face-down cards had been placed before Shigeo, set up in another white empty room like the room he stayed in. He’d sat there, shifting restlessly and sweating, for nearly an hour, while Plant-Hair and a few other Claw members demanded he pick certain symbol cards for them.


He’d heard Plant-Hair mumble, as she shoved Shigeo back into his room and locked the door, that Shigeo’s success rate had been even worse than a blind dog’s.

Needless to say, it seemed Clairvoyance wasn’t his specialty.

Still jittering with restless energy, rather than return to his cot, which had been making him feel sore and numb lately, Shigeo began to walk the perimeter of his room in circles. He trailed the tips of his shaking fingers along the smooth planes of the walls, and tapped out a soft rhythm on his side with his other hand as he went, trying to fight back any boredom before it could set in.

He was a little marching band of one, performing for no one.

Or at least Shigeo thought, until he turned at a corner and met eyes with a little face peeking at him through the barest open sliver of the door, the door that Shigeo had known for a fact had been shut and locked behind him.

The face had turquoise eyes; bright and wide, just like Suzuki’s.

Shock jolted through Shigeo and rooted him in place, questions overwhelming his thoughts and becoming tangled up before he could follow any of them. Who - what - how? Who was this kid, where had he come from, how had he opened Shigeo’s door and what did he want?

“Woah… cool scar… Are you an esper?” The boy gasped excitedly. He was quiet, as if he wasn’t supposed to be there and knew that, but was opening the door wider with ease, as if he didn’t know he wasn’t supposed to be opening Shigeo’s door at all. Vivid orange hair stuck up energetically on his head, and there was a faint smattering of freckles across the slightly foreign looking bridge of his nose. Oddly though, he wasn’t wearing a red Claw uniform like Shigeo was forced to wear, instead wearing a striped sweatshirt and jeans.

Shigeo didn’t look at the boy for long though - at the motion of the door his eyes were drawn from the boy to the emptiness of the hallway over his head. He stared through the open gap, fixated, the possibility of escape suddenly huge and real in front of him again.

A throb of pain from his recently healed cheek had him looking away quickly, staying firmly still, and firmly silent.

Pouting at being ignored, the boy pushed the door open further and began to enter, but stopped when Shigeo took a step away. He looked at the space between the two of them almost too intelligently,
before he pulled himself fully into the room and left the door wide open behind him. “Aw c’mon, I’ve been explorin’ all day and you’re the first other kid I’ve found in this place,” The boy pleaded, “You gotta talk to me, please?”

Stubbornly, Shigeo shook his head, but it got the boy to smile anyways.

“So are you an esper?” He asked again, as he began to wander around Shigeo’s room, “And man, what a bad room they gave you. This place is super boring!”

Shigeo watched him go, not knowing how to stop the boy or get him to leave - but... did he want the boy to leave? Finally, here was someone who wasn’t an apathetic adult face, and he didn’t seem to want to hurt Shigeo. This encounter should’ve been a breath of fresh air.

This boy was a kid, just like him.

Just like him.

The realization hit like a baseball to his gut, and he blurted out, “Are you an esper?” Before smacking his own small hands over his mouth.

The boy hopped up onto Shigeo’s cot and stood on top of it - with his shoes still on, Shigeo noted with a frown behind his hands - and then turned to grin victoriously.

“I sure am!” He answered, striking a pose, before deflating ever so slightly, losing a bit of his posture but not his proud tone, “Or, well, I kinda am. I can just make small things move right now, like soda cans and rocks, but I’ve been training, and working my way up, and soon I’ll be the most powerful esper ever!”

Eyeing the open door carefully to make sure no one would come by and catch them, Shigeo carefully let his hands drop from his mouth, “That’s my goal, too.” He admitted softly, as if sharing a secret.

Those turquoise eyes lit up, “We can be the best espers together, then.” The boy said, with nothing but sincerity. He hopped down from the cot and caught himself with telekinesis just before hitting the ground, only able to hold himself in the air for a split second, but it was enough to lessen his impact and let his feet land quietly. Shigeo would have to remember that trick... “What’s your name?”

His name?

Shigeo put his hand to his chin, thinking.

Giving his first name felt so… real and vulnerable, and too many of the Claw members knew his first name already. Giving his last name felt the same way, but his last name seemed far more important. It was a reminder of the family that he’d one day be getting back to, something he wanted to keep close to his heart and for himself.

But Mob … a simple nickname given to him by the neighborhood kids due to his plain appearance, and how he would stand to the side and watch quietly when he couldn’t understand the games they’d play… Mob was safe to give.

“But Mob…” He said, with a small nod of affirmation, something that was more for himself than for the other boy, “My name’s… Mob.”

“Mob?” The boy wrinkled his nose, but shrugged, “I guess that’s a name. My name’s Shou!”
Ah, no last name either. Maybe Shou was actually the same as him? Shigeo didn’t want to hope for it, didn’t want to imagine another kid in his trapped position, but he couldn’t help it, “Nice to meet you, Shou.”

Shou began to wander the room again, trailing his fingers along the walls as Shigeo had been doing before. While Shigeo had steadily marched, Shou was skipping, hopping on the balls of his feet and swinging his other hand out, carefree. “So what do you do in this place? Do they let you watch movies? Oh, oh, what’s your favorite type of movie, I like action and wrestling ones.”

The door was still open, so Shigeo was still nervous, but he very slowly began to walk with Shou. “Ah, I like action movies too. I like all the,” He paused, then tried to imitate an explosion with his hands, “Pchschoom - the cool stuff. They don’t let me watch movies here though.”

“What?” Shou gasped, “That sucks. I can only watch movies sometimes, when my dad’s not around. He’s on a trip right now though, which is why I went exploring, cause he doesn’t usually want me to explore either.”

Shigeo frowned, “Your dad seems really strict.”

Shou pulled away from the wall with a shrug, “It’s just what happens cause he’s super serious all the time, and he wants me to be super serious too. Says I need to start learning about reponsibly. Responsibility?” Then, with a sudden gasp, Shou spun towards Shigeo, a gleam in his eye, “Hey, you wanna come exploring with me?”

The open door behind Shou’s head loomed again, like a monster trying to bite down on them both, overwhelming his attention, and Shigeo flinched away immediately, “No- no I can’t-”

“Hey! Hey hey,” Shou rushed to his side, crowding into Shigeo’s space to pat heavily at Shigeo’s shoulders. The motions were clumsy and awkward, as if Shou wasn’t really sure if it was what he was supposed to be doing, but it broke Shigeo out of his spiral all the same, “No need to freak out,” Shou frowned, “I just thought it’d be fun with a friend, but uh,” He stopped patting, but kept his hands on Shigeo’s shoulders as he made a face at the room, “We can… stay here if you really want.”

Shigeo risked another look at the open door. At any moment someone could come along to get him for another test and notice it open… Then they’d both be punished.

“No... you should leave.”

Shou tilted his head, confused, and looked back at Shigeo, “What? But it’s no big deal.”

“It is a big deal though.” Shigeo said, meeting Shou’s eyes. He tried to keep his stare as serious as he could to get Shou to understand, complete with a furrowed brow that was childishly pushed to its maximum. All too quickly though, the uncomfortableness of the eye contact forced his eyes away, like magnets rejecting each other.

It seemed Shigeo had made his point though. Slowly, as if realizing it as he spoke, Shou said, “Can you… not leave?”

“They won’t let me.” Shigeo admitted, as he pulled Shou’s hands from his shoulders. “But you- you can leave? So you should.”

Shou was frowning when Shigeo looked back at his expression. Worried that he’d upset the other boy by taking his hands away, Shigeo quickly reached out and gripped one of Shou’s hands within
his own.

As if jolted back to life, Shou’s gaze snapped down at their clasped hands. He lifted them and stared with eyes that once again seemed far too intelligent and sharp for an eight year old.

Abruptly, Shou brought his other hand up, shocking Shigeo by capturing Shigeo’s one hand between his two with an audible clap, “Now that I know you’re here, I’ll come visit you as much as I can!” Shou whispered, determined and as intense as he could be, as he squeezed Shigeo’s hand, “I promise.”

They’d only just met, but Shigeo… trusted him. He trusted him in that easy and simple way that children were able to.

“Okay.” He answered, quietly, not sure what else to say.

After Shou waved a small goodbye while shutting the door, and after Shigeo heard the lock slide mechanically back into place, he looked again at the white walls that surrounded him.

They had already felt so small, but somehow, they now felt so much smaller than before.

He felt so squeezed in by the room, his attention span having moved on long ago, that he forgot to keep wondering about how Shou had been able to open his door.

---

It was three days before Shigeo saw Shou again.

He hadn’t been counting, hadn’t wanted to, but that didn’t change the fact that three days passed before his door was opening up and Shou was sneaking his way into his room again.

Shigeo didn’t move as Shou approached. He was curled angled away from the door, unable to see the bright sneakers as they squeaked across the floor, so he had no idea that it was even Shou. Not that it really mattered to Shigeo, at the moment. He’d been aiming to stubbornly stay in his place beneath his cot no matter who came in. The darkness was soothing, a little oasis in all the white, and Shigeo had been there for hours already after how disastrous his training of the day had been. At some point he’d zoned out, and was just rhythmically running his fingers through the jagged ends of his newly cut hair.

“Hey,” Shou asked, crouching down to look under the cot at Shigeo sideways, “What’re you doin under there?”

Blinking, coming out of his daze, Shigeo turned to stare at Shou with his fingers still tangled in his own bangs, “You… really came back.” He couldn’t help but say. He’d trusted Shou, of course he had, but he still didn’t really know the boy - didn’t know where he’d come from or where he’d gone to.

Shou frowned, “Of course I did, my mom told me to never break promises, and I promised, di’n’t I?”

Slowly, Shigeo nodded. Shou had, indeed, promised.

“Then there ya go. Are you gonna come out?”

Again slowly, Shigeo shook his head, not ready to leave his newfound safe place. Shou hummed in thought, straightened up to set something on the cot, then without another moment’s hesitation he crawled into the tiny dark space next to Shigeo.
“This is pretty nice, I get why you don’t wanna come out.” Shou said once he’d settled in next to Shigeo, flashing a bright grin and revealing a few gaps of fallen out teeth in the side of his mouth. Shigeo was turning away though, trying to cover the mess that was his hair before Shou looked too closely and- “Hey, what happened to your hair?”

Shigeo ducked his head, turning it down and pressing his forehead to the ground, boxing the worst of the terrible cut in with his hands, “It was getting long...” He mumbled, ashamed. “I couldn’t see during the test today so they…”

Back at home, his mother had always cut his hair, trimming his and Ritsu’s side by side while they sat on small stools in the bathroom, giggling and kicking the fallen chunks of black at each other. This had been nothing like that. It had been rough, as Plant-Hair held him still and an assistant of hers with a fat nose snipped his thick, flat hair away in uneven patches.

“There you go.” Fat-Nose huffed, crossing his arms with the gleaming scissors still held in his hands. He looked at Shigeo while Plant-Hair manhandled his head to different angles so they could check the length, ignoring the pained whimpers Shigeo was letting out, “Now we don’t have to report this complication to Suzuki. We’ve taken care of it. We’ll just have to make sure we cut this kid’s hair sooner next time before it interferes again.”

“They cut it.”

Nudging against him, Shou gently pulled at some of the bits of Shigeo’s hair that stuck up unevenly on the side, “That was mean.” He said, suddenly quiet.

Then, he was leaving, scrambles out from under the cot to grab whatever he’d set on top of it before returning again to Shigeo’s side an instant later. Curiously, Shigeo turned his head just enough so that he could peek at what Shou had brought.

In his hands was a little pink Nintendo DS.

“One of my dad’s buddies gave this to me.” Shou said, “Said he had no use for it, cause he’s always got his eyes shut, which I think is kinda silly. But I wasn’t gonna tell him he could just open his eyes to play with it.” He flicked the button on the side, turning the game system on, letting the screen light up their dark little under-cot fort. Without even noticing he’d moved, Shigeo found himself leaning closer, intrigued.

He’d never had a DS. Ritsu had one, a black one that he’d won for free from a school fundraising event. Their mother was against it at first, not wanting them to “rot their brains” so early in their lives with video games, but she had begrudgingly let him keep it in the end after their father had told her she should let them have fun. You only grow up once after all. Shigeo never got to play, Ritsu’s tiny hands far too possessively tight on the toy for him to let his older brother take a turn, but Ritsu had let Shigeo watch him play games over his shoulder as they sat together on his bed.

Assuming things would work similarly to how it had been with Ritsu, Shigeo pressed himself as close to Shou as he dared, ready to watch Shou play whatever game the other boy had. So when Shou shoved the device at his face, he was surprised.

“I’ve got Animal Crossing.” Shou said, smiling and shaking the DS for Shigeo to take as Shigeo stared at him, stunned, “It’s really fun, and it always makes me happy. You can make your own person and we’ll share the house.”

Shigeo took the DS into his hands and simply held it for a moment, letting the Animal Crossing play screen croon its gentle tune at him. On it, a tiny round-headed person wandered between apple-filled
trees, a bug net in hand.

“Do you not want to play? It’s okay if you dooo-oi hey hey don’t cry.”

“I’m sorry,” Shigeo sniffed, as tears dripped down his face, “I told myself I wouldn’t cry till I got out.” He scrubbed at his cheek with a fist, then set the DS on the ground so he could press both hands against his eyes. Unseen by him, the short choppy chunks of his hair began to lift, surrounded in a soft purple light, “I’m s-sorry.”

Shou was quiet again when he huffed, “Why’re you sayin sorry s’much?” He began to pat at Shigeo like he had when they’d first met, trying to comfort him. This time his patting migrated to the top of Shigeo’s head, then to his back, until finally Shou was throwing his short arms around Shigeo’s thin quivering shoulders.

“Sorry…” Shigeo said reflexively, eyes still wet. “I-d-do want to play.” He continued, but his hands were trapped against his face now by Shou’s arm around him. “Shou… you can let go now.”

“Nah. Your hair’s still doin the floaty thing so I think this hug’s gotta be longer.”

Shigeo tried to look upwards. He rolled his eyes as far as they could go, but only could just barely see the tips of his hair as they floated, “Oh.”

“What’d you mean by ‘get out’?”

Shigeo stiffened, “… He wiggled in Shou’s hold a bit, pushing his arms out from under Shou’s arm so he could grip at it instead, “I’m gonna… get out. I don’t wanna be here, I don’t wanna be a part of Claw.”

At this, Shou pulled away, and looked - shocked? “Why?! Claw’s the best!”

His powers reacted before Shigeo could do it himself with his own hands, pushing Shou away with a jerky shove until the other boy was pressed against the two far legs of the cot, “They’re not,” Shigeo said, crying again despite how much he was trying not to. Suzuki’s terrible eyes and his terrible aura flashed through his mind - how could Shou think that that man and all he was doing was great? “They’re not, why do you think th- why do you- they took me.”

Shou watched him with wide eyes, not fighting the psychic power that kept him pinned far away from him, “Took you? Is- is that why you can’t leave this room?”

It was getting hard to breathe around the sobs that he was trying to swallow down, so Shigeo just nodded.

“Hey, I’m sorry- I- I didn’t know.” Shou whispered, looking to be on the verge of tears himself. He sounded like he was telling the truth though, so Shigeo’s telekinesis backed off, releasing him bit by bit until Shou was able to crawl back across the floor to Shigeo’s side again. Carefully, slowly, he put his arms once more around Shigeo, “I didn’t… know.”

This time, it took a little while for the both of them to calm down. At some point Shou’s DS had gone dark while waiting for them, and without a word Shou woke it up and slipped it right back into Shigeo’s hands.

“It’ll be alright.” Shou said, his shoulder flush against Shigeo’s as Shigeo numbly began to make his villager, answering Kapp’n’s questions while the sound of the rain hitting the taxi windows soothed him, “I really didn’t know. But I’ll make it right. I’ll help you out, Mob.”
It was nice of Shou to say such things to make him feel better, but Shigeo was already so tired. Too tired to say anything in response, even to tell Shou that he didn't have to try and take the responsibility. He stayed silent, watching as his little person stepped out of the taxi and turned to reveal his sleepy eyes and flat hair. The rain continued to fall around him, plinking against the stone, as Kapp'n drove away.

Chapter End Notes

they've met! and wild world was my first animal crossing game :') so i thought that it'd be an appropriate nostalgic and soft game to have mob and shou play while trapped in a terrible situation beyond their control.

alright though, finals+graduation stress is killing me so this might be the last update for all my fics for awhile (unless i continue to unwisely throw myself into fic writing to cope) !!!!!

but thank you everyone for the great response to chapter 1... I'm glad you're all here with me in shoumob and in this au. id love to keep hearing your thoughts so keep commenting + leaving kudos! the feedback keeps me alive in these dark dark times
Whenever they lead him to the testing rooms, Shigeo noted the hallways.

Getting lost when being chased by Suzuki had been his downfall, and he never wanted to let the monotonous hallways tangle him in their trap again.

He wasn’t as smart as Ritsu was already shaping up to be, and he knew that, but even he could remember when a hallway diverged into another, or when he was led up or down a stairway, or whenever there was a tiny window set into a far off wall.

“Moss only grows on the north side,” Ritsu had said once, “And the sun always sets in the west.”

So Shigeo watched the sun, and he remembered.

“Shou, where’s your room?” He dared to ask one day, looking out the open door while Shou bounced a ball against one of his walls. They’d been playing together, but Shigeo had long since given in and let his mind wander, and Shou had picked up the slack eagerly by bouncing the ball at a faster and faster pace and catching it with his telekinesis whenever it would try to spin out of reach or almost escape out the door.

Shou always left the door open when he visited Shigeo. Always.

“I dunno, it’s pretty far from yours though.” Shou answered with a shrug, catching the ball a moment before it could hit Shigeo in the side of his face. Shigeo didn’t notice, and probably wouldn’t have even cared if it had hit him. His face was already bruised, a nasty fall during testing if he could move himself with his powers resulting in a purple mark painted across his cheekbone, over his scar. Shigeo had let himself drop, preferring to be bruised rather than throw up from motion-sickness.

“How far?”

Shou eyed him with those sharp blue eyes, and a spark of something lit inside, “Upstairs. Other side of the building I think. It’s not much better than yours. Why?”

“Do you ever see Suzuki on your way here?”

The ball bounced past him, left to go astray. Shigeo turned and followed it with his eyes as it rolled to a stop against the opposite wall. Then, he turned to look at Shou.

Shou had frozen, “Who?”

“Suzuki,” Shigeo repeated, as he went to go pick up the ball, “He’s the President, and he’s… powerful.” He said, as if that would provide Shou with all the information he needed to be able to identify the man.

Shou took the ball from Shigeo’s hands and turned it over in his own, the spark gone from his eyes, Shigeo not knowing what he’d said that had snuffed it out. “I haven’t seen him.” a pause, “I haven’t seen him in awhile.” he corrected.

Before Shigeo could reply, Shou blurted, “I usually try not to see anyone though, cause I kinda
guessed from the first time that you weren’t allowed visitors so I’ve been sneakin’ around all secrety.”

And Shigeo, mustering up any courage he could still find in his little body, turned to Shou and said, “Do you think you could help me be sneaky too?”

Three right turns, up a stairway, down a long side hallway past thin windows that all burned red with the setting sun, only one close call when a Scar had come around a corner before entering a room and shutting the door, and then they were at Shou’s room.

It was smaller than Shigeo’s, but not as empty. It looked like a comfortable guest room, rather than the clinical prison of Shigeo’s white box. A bed instead of a cot. A bedside table with a lamp. A small closet. A window with curtains.

Shou was being treated well by these people, and Shigeo didn’t know what that meant.

“We made it, Mob!” Shou breathed, before scooping up Shigeo’s hands and yanking him into an excited, hopping dance. “We made it!”

Shigeo let himself be pulled, unable to stop himself from smiling, absorbing and reflecting some of Shou’s happy energy.

It felt good to have some of his freedom back; to move without being guided by uniform wearing espers or ugly adults. His parents had let him be independent, had let him and Ritsu walk to the playground or forest on their own, and Shigeo had almost forgotten how much he missed feeling like a person who could make his own choices.

“Whaddya wanna do now that you’re here?” Shou asked, pulling Shigeo towards the bed, forcing them both to flop down onto it.

Shigeo tried to sit himself back up almost immediately though, “I don’t think I should stay long.”

He desperately wanted to hold onto the freedom, to hold onto the happiness, but the threat of someone finding his door open and room empty hung over him. The tension and the tight knot in his stomach felt the same as when once, a year ago, he had chugged the last of the milk in the house straight from the carton in an impulsive rush, and then had hidden in his room under his futon in immediate regret, waiting for his mother to inevitably find the empty carton and scold him.

No, actually, it didn't feel the same. It felt worse.

Shou pouted at him, “So we go through all this trouble gettin’ you here, and you don’t even want to stay?” He asked.

“I do want to,” Shigeo said, turning to look out of Shou’s window longingly, “But I just… I don’t want to get in trouble.”

A pillow hit against his natural barrier and bounced away, and Shigeo spun quickly to see Shou gearing up to swing again, a dangerous grin on his face, “Don’t worry about it, right now, defend yourself or else!” and he swung again, aiming for Shigeo’s gut.

Gripping the second pillow on Shou’s bed with his telekinesis, Shigeo shoved it in front of himself, just in time to intercept Shou’s pillow. Shou was undeterred though, and he leaned all his weight
forward, crushing both pillows and Shigeo into the bed with his body as he flopped down over them, laughing.

Shigeo wasn’t laughing though, “Shou,” He gasped, trying to roll out from under his friend, “Shou I don’t- What if Suzuki-” His worry was beginning to overwhelm him now, no matter how much he tried to fight it down. This had been a bad idea after all, he should’ve never left his room, “I don’t want them to think I-” He cut himself short.

“What, tried to escape?” Shou peeked over the pillows and looked down into Shigeo’s eyes, “Isn’t that what you want to do though?”

“I…” He did want to escape, he did want to get away from Claw, but…

“You can’t ever leave Claw if you don’t leave your room first,” Shou said, as if it were just that simple. He crossed his arms over the pillows, settling in and laying fully over Shigeo, pinning the other boy down, “And what’re they gonna even do, you’re a super cool esper! You’re better than them.”

“But I’m not,” Shigeo said, “Please, let’s just go back.”

Shou frowned at him, eyes sharp, “Why’re you bein so cowardly all of a sudden?”

And that... hurt. Shigeo felt as the tension in his stomach solidified into a cold rock in his chest, “I’m not a coward,” He said, pushing against Shou’s weight, trying to get him off. “Don’t call me a coward.”

“But you are! You’re bein really weird. First you wanna leave your room, and now you wanna go back. Soon you’ll be saying you don’t really wanna leave Claw.” Shou said, waving a hand around. Shigeo wasn't very good at reading people, but it felt like Shou was being almost purposefully mean now, poking at something that he knew was upsetting for a reason Shigeo couldn’t understand or see. It was working, too, as Shigeo felt his emotions begin to build, “You said they took you, but you’re still here-”

Shou’s back hit the wall, and then he dropped to the ground with a heavy thud.

“... Shou?” Shigeo whispered, eyes wide and horrified, as he sat up on the bed. Shou didn’t move.

He hadn’t meant to throw him. This was nothing like when he’d been trying to defend himself and had tossed Suzuki. This was accidental, imperfect, an emotion-filled shove across the room that had too much force behind it.

“S-shou,” Shigeo scrambled off the bed, and went to his knees by his friend, “I’m sorry.” Shou’s eyes were open, but he looked dazed, his gaze a thousand miles away. Carefully, like when Ritsu had once tripped and bumped his head and their mother had checked over him, Shigeo mimicked the movements he could remember her doing, and threaded a small hand through Shou’s hair at the back of his head, “P-please be okay.” He could already feel a lump forming under Shou’s bright orange hair.

Slowly, Shou’s hand came up and rested on Shigeo’s wrist, bringing his checking-over to a halt. When Shou’s eyes refocused, he looked up into Shigeo’s face.

There were stars in his eyes, “You’re so strong.”

“W-what?” Shigeo gasped, taken aback. He’d expected Shou to be upset or angry at how Shigeo had thrown him, not impressed.
“You’re so strong!” Shou repeated, louder, as he pushed himself with his other hand into a position better than a slump against the wall, “I didn’t expect that at all! It was so cool! You didn’t have to concentrate or anything!”

Unsettled, Shigeo pulled his hand away from Shou’s head and sat back on his heels. Shou continued to gush about Shigeo’s powers, but Shigeo had tuned him out now, and simply ducked his head and pulled his shoulders in the more Shou praised his telekinesis.

It took awhile for Shou to notice Shigeo’s silence, “Mob?” He asked, crowding close to Shigeo’s face, “What’s wrong?”

Shigeo kept his eyes pinned firmly on the ground, and clenched his hands into fists against his knees, “Let’s just go back, please.” He whispered.

He didn’t see if Shou made any kind of expression in reaction, but he hoped Shou recognized he’d lost this battle. After a beat, Shou wormed a hand under one of Shigeo’s own and gripped tightly around Shigeo’s clenched fist.

“Well… alright.”

They stood together and quietly slipped out of Shou’s room, leaving the chaos of strewn pillows and messy bed sheets behind them. Back down the long hallway, back down the stairs, three left turns now.

Shigeo stared at his door as they came up to it. No one had noticed Shigeo’s absence, the open angle of the door hadn’t shifted in all the time he’d been away. Shou didn’t say anything about it, and didn’t force him to go in, he simply held his hand. Together they both stood there, frozen in time, just two kids in the gut of a facility far larger than them, that had swallowed them whole.

Then, Shigeo’s eyes fell to the electronic lock, and the moment shattered.

“How do you keep getting into my room?” Shigeo remembered to ask.

“I have a code for it.” Shou answered, “I’ve got a code that goes to most of the rooms.”

The nice bedroom. The high opinion of Claw. Now this, a code to every room. Shigeo’s mind whirled, young enough to have trouble putting the pieces together, but aware enough to see that Shou was a puzzle with so many more pieces than what he had in his hands.

With wide eyes, Shigeo turned, trying to get himself to say something, ask anything. He moved his mouth open and shut without words, until he finally was able to get out a soft, “Why?”

Shou didn’t answer; he shrugged, lips pressed tightly together.

It was Shigeo’s turn to recognize that this wasn’t a battle he could win, not today. He let Shou’s hand drop from his and stepped across the threshold, back into his white room.

Shou didn’t follow.

Chapter End Notes

thank u again to everyone reviewing and following this fic..... i appreciate yall so much
and ill reply to ur comments one day haha :'

this chapter was kind of a bridge chapter to show a little bit more of shou and mobs friendship being developed, a little bit more of their differences beginning to clash. next chapter though.... Shou And Mob Plan Some Crimes, like Arson, and also How To Evade The Cops (aka Claw members)

also! im gonna work on trying to make the chapters longer, so idk how long it will be till the next update (also idk how long it will b since im still kinda uhhhhhh in the middle of finals n graduation im just bad at Not Working On My Fics)

but yea! drop a comment, kudo, and dont forget to hmu on tumblr if u want @ghoststrawberries :)

“I won’t do it.”

Plant-Hair looked murderously angry, “You will.” She insisted.

Shigeo stared at the tank of water in front of him. It was a large and terrifying thing, like something out of a science-fiction story. Cylindrical in shape, clear glass all the way around, it waited in the center of the new testing room he’d been lead to. Gathered around it, two Scars, Fat-Nose, and one other unknown Claw member stood, ready to force Shigeo into the tank if necessary. Usually, only one esper was required, but today was special; the Division Leader had stopped by to observe.

Ebiwara watched with drooping eyes from the side of the room, sitting on a small black chair. It had to be uncomfortable, from the way the man kept shifting, his arms crossed over his fuzzy sweater and his legs crossed at the ankles as he tried to appear both intimidating and casual.

But aside from the large, X shaped Scar beneath his left eye, Ebiwara was, unfortunately, not as intimidating as he’d like to be. None of the people in this room truly frightened Shigeo, which was why he was even daring to put his foot down now.

He thought of all the tests he’d put up with so far, all the poking, all the prodding, all the card flipping and flying and floating and weight tests and damage tests. He’d given in and used his powers for everything that this Division had wanted him to do, out of fear, out of self-preservation. He had almost let Claw win that way.

And then he’d thought of Shou, calling him cowardly, with those intense eyes pinning him in place.

“You can’t ever leave Claw if you don’t leave your room first.”

This sensory deprivation tank, this test of his mind and body by isolating him off even more thoroughly from the world than he already was, this was where Shigeo put an end to it.

“I won’t.”

“Inaba,” Ebiwara said, as he ran his fingers through his fluffed up brown hair, the picture of a perfect apathetic and uninterested Division Leader. He spoke as if this was a waste of his time, as if he’d rather be watching paint dry than be here, “Is there a problem?”

Plant-Hair grit her teeth, and her nails dug into Shigeo’s shoulder, “No.” She answered Ebiwara, as she dragged Shigeo closer to the tank, “No problem, Shigeo is just being a bit childish.”

“I won’t go in.” Shigeo said, almost tempted to stomp his feet, show these people how childish he really was.

“You will,” Plant-Hair pulled him closer with another jerk, “Don’t make me call Suzuki here.”

It was a frightening threat, one that might have cowed Shigeo back into submission had it been anything but empty.

Suzuki was nowhere near the 3rd Division building anymore. Suzuki could no more come into that
room and punish Shigeo than Shigeo could sprout wings and fly away. Shigeo was completely sure about this, because after Shou had said he hadn’t seen the man in awhile, he had checked.

In his still uncursed room, after Shou had shut the door, Shigeo had sat against it and spread his aura out as far as it could go past the room’s borders. Admittedly, this wasn’t very far, but still, not once had the crackling, dangerous aura of the President tripped over his awareness.

Of course, the man could just be hiding his aura, tucking it away like he’d said Shigeo was bad at doing, but Shigeo was feeling reckless, and willing to bet on the man’s absence.

“Go ahead.” He said, feeling anger beginning to bubble up in his gut, bringing heat to his cheeks.

This was the last time Shigeo was planning to use his powers in front of these people, so why not go all out?

He glared at the tank again, at the people around it all trying to control him, and then, impulsively, Shigeo shattered the glass.

It wasn’t a quick shattering; Shigeo didn’t hit the tank with a concussive force. As much as he hated it, he did have better discipline over his powers now than when he’d been using them for fun tricks on the playground.

He started by gripping the tank in a tight clutch with his telekinesis, and then, after finding a weak point in the glass, he shredded it in splinters from the top down, letting the glass crack and break into fragments when it resisted curling like a banana peel.

The people in the room ducked and yelled in shock as the water rushed out, scattering shards and chunks of glass over them. Shigeo shielded himself with a barrier, and he saw Ebiwara pull one up just in time to avoid being crushed by the wave as well, but Plant-Hair and the others did not escape so cleanly.

“How dare you?” Plant-Hair hissed when the water settled. She was sopping wet, bleeding from a small cut across her nose and a few on her hand. Her talon-like grip had gone from Shigeo’s shoulder to cutting off the circulation in his upper arm, while with her other hand she fumbled at her uniform pockets. “Someone get me the dampener cuff!” She shouted, shaking in fury and cold.

Fat-Nose appeared at her side and presented the dampening cuff to her, all while sending a disgusted, angry look Shigeo’s way. A sizeable shard of glass stuck out of the top of his arm, and had stained the sleeve of his white uniform red. Shigeo stared at the wound, unfazed. He’d seen worse on the ghosts who hung around in the alleys of the city, on the days when his mother would take him out with her while she shopped.

As Plant-Hair tightened the cuff on Shigeo’s wrist to the point of pain, Ebiwara began to clap. The sound was harsh and sudden, over the quiet dripping of the last few drops of water from the broken edges of the tank.

“Oh, excellent.” The man said, voice flat, almost sounding sarcastic, but with just a touch of genuine excitement curling the edges of his words, “I’m glad I finally got to see why the President has been keeping this boy around as his little pet project.”

Bristling at being called a pet project, Shigeo shoved his powers against the confines of his skin, letting them swell with pressure behind the runes of the dampening cuff. The cuff held him back, as it always did, keeping him muted and restrained, but an unmistakable crackle of static electricity around him had everyone freezing. Even Shigeo found himself paused by the reaction of the cuff,
and he watched with wide eyes as the final lingering spots of his aura fizzled out into the air in front of him.

*That* was new.

“Hm,” Ebiwara hummed, lips pressed in a smirk as he scanned Shigeo with fresh intrigue, “If his room is still not cursed yet, you might want to think of doing so now.”

“O-of course.” Plant-Hair stuttered in deference to Ebiwara, but she stared at Shigeo while she did so, a new paleness to her face.

Shigeo hit his powers against the cuff again like they were a battering ram, feeling vicious. He wanted to see how many sparks would get her to let his arm go, wanted to see how many sparks would get her to scream.

They went off like small fireworks in the space around his arm; bursts of blue and white that popped and crackled dangerously before fading as they spiralled out. It only took a second for the sleeve of Plant-Hair’s shirt to get singed by a stray psychic ember, which was *far* too close for comfort for the woman, and that was all that was needed to get her to let go and leap away with a yelp.

She wasn’t a psychic, after all, just someone very knowledgeable about them. With Shigeo’s powers finally pointed at her, however dull now in their chains, her arrogant act and all the authority she had held over him was folding and crumbling like a stack of cards.

“Restrain him.” Ebiwara said, smoothly stepping into the place of command that Plant-Hair had vacated when she’d shown weakness.

The two Scars crowded close, trying to intimidate Shigeo through the size they had over him alone. For a moment, Shigeo could imagine himself dodging between them, running from the room, heading all the way up the stairs and down that long hallway to Shou’s room. He’d take Shou’s hand, and they both would escape out of Shou’s window into the empty hills and forests beyond the headquarters, never to be found by Claw again.

It was a nice daydream, but reality wasn’t about to be so kind to him.

Shigeo *tried* to dodge the Scars, putting all his effort into ducking and weaving through the gap between them, but he hesitated just a split-second too long before making the attempt. One of them caught him around the middle with a tree trunk of an arm, halting him in his tracks and jerking him back roughly. Shigeo struggled against that arm only enough that he began wheeze, until foreign telekinesis locked his hands behind his back and held him still.

“Is there a spare room he can be held in until the walls of his are finished being carved by our curse specialist?” Ebiwara asked, looking to Fat-Nose, “After seeing what he did to that glass,” The man whistled lowly, “I don’t want to see what he can do to our walls.”

“We have… cells… in the basement?” Fat-Nose chanced.

“Not good enough,” Ebiwara shot the suggestion down.

“There are a few rooms similar to his, on the same floor. They were being used for storage but… we can easily empty one.” Plant-Hair suggested, stepping up beside Fat-Nose, now hesitant rather than brash after the shame she’d been dealt, “And we can put two cuffs on him, if necessary.”

*Two!*
Shigeo had thought there was only one. He’d felt *comforted* by the thought that there was *only one*. The idea that there were *two* of the cursed cuffs opened up the terrible Pandora’s Box of possibility that there were even *more* beyond that. An inescapable endless stream of cursed cuffs could be out there, with one always adjusted to his wrist size no matter how much he grew.

Before Shigeo could come out of his shock to protest or renew his struggling in earnest, Ebiwara was hand-waving the idea away, “No, no, I think the one is enough for now.”

Plant-Hair’s brows furrowed, “But you just said-”

“Don’t question me.” Ebiwara said pleasantly, eyes squinting up into crescents, “This cuff is enough for now.”

Retreating immediately, Plant-Hair nodded, “Yes, of course sir.”

Without another word, only a spin of his finger, Ebiwara directed the Scars holding Shigeo out of the room. They set him on his feet when they reached the hallway, but held his hands behind his back still, making him feel more like a prisoner than ever as he was frogmarched back to the floor that his room was on.

Further down from Shigeo’s room, past the small closet where his spare uniforms were held, was the room that their group finally stopped at. It didn’t have a special lock on it, but any normal lock and bolt would be just as effective in keeping Shigeo inside as the electronic lock was, what with the cuff still stopping him from using his powers. The unknown Claw member and Fat-Nose busied themselves with shifting the odd boxes and weird pieces of unknown machinery that occupied the room to one side, then one of the Scars left to retrieve and drag Shigeo’s cot in.

Shigeo frowned at the cot as it was jammed crudely and uncaringly into a corner of the room, something sour curling in his throat. Shou wouldn’t be able to find him here in this new space; this space that felt even more unwelcoming than the room he’d grown used to.

He hoped he wouldn’t have to stay there for very long.

“How strong do you want the runes?”

At some point, Shigeo didn’t notice when, a mousy woman with long black hair braided down her back had entered. She was standing beside Ebiwara, but watching Shigeo critically, and their eyes met when Shigeo turned at the sound of her voice.

“As strong and *effective* as they can be.” Ebiwara responded, shooting a self-satisfied grin Shigeo’s way when his cuff sparked at the words. The Scar still holding him gave his small head a rough shove, as if to tell him to ‘*quit it!*’

The woman - she must have been the curse specialist - took an involuntary step back, but her eyes were wide now with understanding, “Ohhh I *see*. It might take me a few days to carve them deep enough, if that’s alright?”

“Take all the time you need.” Ebiwara granted, with a wave of his hand.

*All the time you need* ended up amounting to three days.

Three days with the too-tight cuff chafing his wrist, three days of being watched more closely than before. Shigeo couldn’t stand it. He felt restless and small.

Being allowed to return to his usual room was almost welcome when it happened, until he actually
Shigeo felt the effects of the runes long before he saw them. His cuff had been taken off before he'd been guided inside, and there was only a blissful second of time between those moments in which he was in touch with his powers. They had zapped through his body, reconnecting all his nerves and refilling the pathways that had been shriveling from the drought of them, and had made it down his arms and into his hands before they were taken from him again.

The lingering echo left in their absence, just the barest buzzing tingle at the tips of his fingers, became Shigeo's world as the rest of existence was cut and butchered brutally away.

This was... so much worse than the dampening cuff. If the cuff was a pool he'd been treading in, this was a tsunami, crashing over Shigeo's head and grinding any facet of himself that had been connected to his powers against the dirt with pressure until they were worn away.

It took the curse on the room no time at all to accomplish this. It felt nothing as the child sacrificed to it found himself halved at its feet.

"Please let me leave." Shigeo heard his own voice say, far away and hollow.

Ebiwara, observing from the safety of outside the cursed room, grinned, "Feeling regretful now that you're facing the consequences of your actions?"

Shigeo didn't regret what he'd done, so he didn't lie. He didn't want to say please again either. He wanted to be angry, to lash out, but those emotions felt so out of reach to him now.

At Shigeo’s lack of reaction, Ebiwara’s grin lost it’s edge. It became uncomfortable, forced, as Ebiwara watched Shigeo disconnectedly sway. The group gathered behind him in the hallway - Plant-Hair taking notes, the Curse Specialist itching at the plaster dust from the wall that still clung to her knuckles, a few other assistants - all seemed uncomfortable as well. All the horrific things they’d seen and done, and what finally managed to shake them was how quiet and ghost-like Shigeo had gone.

“... Consider this your time out.” The Division leader said, his final words to Shigeo before he shut and locked the door.

Closing the circuit made the curse of the room more effective, but it was a drop in the bucket at this point. Staggering, no goal able to form in the fog that had descended on his mind, Shigeo crossed the floor to the nearest wall. When he reached it, he immediately slumped, leaning his whole weight through his right arm braced against it. His left hand free, he brought his fingers up and gently, unthinkingly, pressed them into the divots and carved out edges of the runes that spanned the room in a band just slightly above the height of his head. He could barely feel the rough, chalky texture of the shaved down tile and cement.

Some of the runes were unrecognizable; completely foreign to Shigeo who knew nothing formal of psychic power or the supernatural beyond the spirits he’d encountered as a much younger child and the powers he had himself. Others looked as if they could have once been kanji or katakana, but then they had been liquidated and reformed into a character just slightly off enough to not read correctly.

He followed the runes, letting his fingers run along the curves and swirls, letting them lead him to his cot. The thing had been returned to it’s place in his room before he had, but had suffered a few scratches and a dent to one leg - probably as whatever espers had been tasked with moving it likely dropped it, when they were forced to carry it under their own muscle power upon entering Shigeo’s room.
Maybe he should start working on building his muscles up himself, Shigeo thought idly, numbly, as he lowered his body down onto the cot. He didn’t enjoy feeling weak and empty like this without his powers, and if he was strong in his body as well as with his esp, maybe he’d feel a little more secure if he was ever cut off from the psychic side of himself again in the future. All this time he’d been exercising his powers, expanding them, honing them, but it was so easy for them to be rendered unreliable. This was proving to him that psychic powers weren’t everything.

At least becoming physically strong didn’t need any psychic ability.

Shou found Shigeo in exactly the same position he’d let himself fall in, sprawled belly-down on his cot, eyes half-lidded and staring into space. It wasn’t that he couldn’t move. He knew he could. It was just that he didn’t want to. An intense apathy had taken root in the carved out hole left behind by his emotions, so Shigeo had given into it for the time being, and had been letting himself rest without thought or care.

“They cursed your room.” Shou said, sounding weak as well, but still able to stand on his own two feet and still with enough emotion that Shigeo could tell Shou wasn’t feeling as affected by the room as he was. He stood near Shigeo’s head, and slipped a hand into one of Shigeo’s own limp ones, holding it even when Shigeo didn’t move to hold on in return, “I’m sorry I left you for awhile. What’d you do that pissed them off so much?”

“You must be cold-blooded,” His father had joked once, ruffling his hair, “The rest of us, we can keep ourselves warm, but you’re just going to be a little ice cube forever!”

Oh. Maybe this wasn’t just his body’s natural tendency to run cold, then. Maybe this was something
“It’s probably the room.” He said softly, finally curling the fingers of the hand Shou held, trying to offer reassurance, “I’ll be fine when I’m not… in here.”

“It’s not hurting me this much.” Shou said, “I just feel dizzy I guess? Why is it hurting you so much?”

Shigeo didn’t have the answer to that, but he also didn’t want to examine too closely how deep his powers ran in his veins compared to Shou’s, “I don’t know.”

Manipulating his grip on Shigeo’s hand, Shou twisted and turned it, using it to pull Shigeo up by his arm. It was tough work, getting Shigeo to assemble his knees under him so he could sit up, but eventually it was accomplished. Shigeo didn’t move much further than that though, and he stared blankly at Shou as the other boy shifted and watched him worriedly.

“Suzuki’s in America.” Shou blurted suddenly, “It’s a place that’s really far away. He hasn’t been here for weeks.”

That was a relief. Shigeo had known in the back of his mind that he’d been right when he’d determined that Suzuki was absent from the 3rd Division, but having it confirmed settled the churning anxiety that his heart had been holding onto for the three days between his little act of rebellion and now.

“The 3rd Division is kind of a mess without him,” Shou carried on, almost sneering, almost sounding _judgmental_ of the 3rd Division at first, before his voice lowered into something more serious, “All the Divisions kind of are. I... I used to think they were cool but... now I’m seein’ that they’re maybe not that great.” His eyes drifted, almost without Shou himself noticing, to the runes of Shigeo’s room. When he looked back at Shigeo, he looked uncomfortable, “HQ is the nicest, but everyone there still doesn’t really get along.” He bit his lip, then shook his head, shaking away the thoughts and memories that had been worming their way into his mind before Shou could get his mouth to move and dare to pick at them with questions, “... Let’s go to my room again?”

Anything to get out of this cursed room. Shigeo didn’t think twice on the subject change, letting all thoughts on what Shou had been saying fall from his attention as he nodded and pushed himself forward on the cot, towards the edge. His mind had narrowed down to a single goal in the instant that Shou had suggested it, his fading connection to his powers itching at the back of his skull, desperate to be free again.

All other consequences be damned.

He stumbled a bit as he tried to get off the cot, but Shou caught him easily. He was a bit smaller than Shigeo was, but unexpectedly strong. Even as they wavered together for a moment, Shou wasn’t going to let him fall.

“There wasn’t anyone guarding your room when I came around a little bit ago,” Shou said in a hush, as he supported Shigeo from the side, wrapping an enthusiastic grip around his back, “Like I said, they’re a mess. They must’ve thought you’d be out for awhile. C’mon, let’s go quick, I’ve got somethin I wanna talk to you about when you’re not a zombie.”

Stepping out of the room, disappointingly, didn’t result in an immediate reaction. Shigeo had almost hoped that it would. With the cuff it was quick; the cuff was just a small boundary holding his powers just a few inches out of his reach, and it was always easy for his powers to erase the gap between them when the cuff was taken off. So Shigeo had been bracing himself as best he could
beneath his muted emotions for the overwhelming surge of his powers coming back to him, thinking it would be the same.

It wasn’t. This process was slow, but it didn’t hurt aside from a familiar, almost electric buzz that shot through his system, clearing the way for his psychic powers to reinsert themselves. Shigeo’s senses returned to him in spots and pulses, his apathy fading and each emotion slotting back into place with a careful consideration that felt alien in his own head. His powers felt like a physical presence, and they were slipping his skin back on like a man slipping a suit on for an extravagant evening.

Then, when Shigeo finally blinked, he was whole again, and standing in front of Shou’s bedroom door with no recollection of the journey they’d taken to get there.

“Mob?” Shou was saying, shaking him gently by the shoulder, “Mob, you okay?”

Shigeo took a gasping breath, “I’m okay.” He said, and he meant it. He was okay. He felt fine, now that his powers were back. He’d thought being so thoroughly cut off from them would make it more noticeable when they were present, but Shigeo just felt… normal. There was nothing notable about the way the energy felt as it thrummed in time with his heartbeat, just as it always had since he’d been born; it was almost ignorable, unlike its absence was.

Shou's room felt like a sanctuary when they entered, and once inside, Shou wasted no time in grabbing his DS and shoving it into Shigeo’s hands again. Distracting him with little games, with the repetitive motions of his fingers, was a tried and true tactic in cheering Shigeo up that Shou had discovered the power of and then never forgot.

Shigeo took the DS from Shou, but exhaustion, although no longer being forced on him, still clung heavily to his bones. The DS remained unopened, and drooped in Shigeo’s grip as Shou pulled him to sit down on the bed. Getting distracted with a game wouldn’t be helping this time. It wouldn’t make his problems go away.

“I want to get out.” Shigeo said suddenly, intent deep in his tone, present in a way it hadn’t been before when he’d thought of breaking out of Claw. He stared down at the shining DS case; its pink top glowed almost white in the afternoon sun, “I could destroy your bedroom wall right now.” He continued, not looking up, “We could just leave.”

It would be easy. Shou had done so well at making sure no one knew he’d been sneaking in and out to visit Shigeo over the past couple of weeks. Even now, there they were, with Shigeo completely absent from his room, undetected and with Claw none the wiser.

Although he hadn’t been confident in his ability before, when he’d only been with Claw for a short time, Shigeo knew now that he was strong enough to topple the stone and bring the entire room down around them. Maybe even the entire building. At this point, it would certainly be deserved.

Cursing the room to keep him numb and defenseless, pushing him just a little bit further over the edge, was a mistake that Shigeo would make Claw regret.

“We can’t.”

Shigeo slid his eyes dangerously slowly to Shou, and Shou, just as seriously, grinned at him like an eager young wolf about to go on his first hunt, “Not yet at least.”

A little intrigued by Shou's words and the way he grinned, Shigeo set the DS aside, and turned his body to face Shou fully, “... What’re you thinking?”

Shou repositioned himself, pulling his legs onto the bed and crossing them so he could brace his
hands on his ankles and lean in. His eyes sparkled with promise, “We train.”

Immediately Shigeo recoiled, mind flashing with images of Zener cards laid out on a table, of tall glass tanks of water, “No.”

“No like how Claw’s been training you,” Shou leapt to amend, “They’ve been doing really bad at it. You’re already so strong, and I wanna get strong too, so I thought if we figured out our powers together, it’d give us more power. I can help you with this, I’m really good with figuring out people’s strengths n’ weaknesses.”

Shigeo frowned, “Why can’t we do that after leaving Claw?”

It was a reasonable question, but something in Shou’s expression shuttered away and closed off, “We just can’t,” Shou said firmly, “If we try and just break out of here with your strength, you’ll get caught again super quick."

“But Suzuki isn’t here.” Shigeo whispered, “He’s the only one that could… could catch me. Even if I fought really hard, he’d get me.”

Shigeo knew this from experience. He knew intimately how it felt for Suzuki to hunt him down and carry him back to his cage. That creeping, smothering aura and steady pursuit was an inescapable nightmare, one that Shigeo never wanted to live through again. If Suzuki was anywhere near the 3rd Division, then Shigeo would not be attempting to escape during the time frame in which Suzuki was there, so the news that the man was in an entirely different country was an opening to an opportunity that Shigeo didn’t want to waste.

Shou’s face pinched at the mention of Suzuki, “Unless we do this with a plan, it won’t matter if he’s here or not, you’ll just end up with more problems! Listen to me, Mob,” He reached up and poked at Shigeo’s forehead, “Use your head. They’ve been taking notes on you, right?"

Slowly, Shigeo nodded, and as he did so, he realized just what it was he was nodding along to. Horror bloomed on his face with a gasp, “They know- they’d be able to find me again, wouldn’t they?”

They probably knew his address, knew the names of his family members, maybe even knew what school he’d been going to before they’d taken him. And now they had notes on everything he could do, on everything he’d let them see, on how to counter anything Shigeo might do by using their cursed cuffs and carved white walls.

Pale, Shigeo looked desperately to Shou for a solution, and Shou, thankfully, moved immediately to receive Shigeo’s dismay and reassure him. The finger that had poked at Shigeo’s head traveled to Shigeo’s shoulder, transforming on it’s way into a firm and comforting grip of solidarity. Shigeo wasn’t alone in this, Shou was making sure of that, “That’s why we’ve gotta do some secret training. Get some cool abilities that even Claw won’t know about, and then, we destroy their notes n’ anything else they've got, and I’ll get you out.”

“O-okay,” Shigeo answered, trying to breathe and stay calm, using Shou’s hand on his shoulder as an anchor. He understood Shou’s reasoning behind this plan, and so he tried intensely to shove aside any thoughts about how it meant he’d have to go back to his cursed room, or how it meant he’d have to stay under Claw’s thumb for just a little longer. It’d be worth it, in the end, when they were both out, Shigeo just had to keep telling himself that, “Okay. Should we start… now?”

At that prompt, it was as if a switch had flipped, and finally, finally, Shigeo was allowed to see Shou’s aura. It bled into the atmosphere around the boy, and had Shigeo holding his newly calmed
breathing still. He hadn’t known he’d been waiting for it, hadn’t known he’d even wanted to see it, but it was beautiful; all soft pinks and liquid shades of orange and fire-light. Warm, with canyons of potential and power threaded throughout it’s depths.

For a moment, Suzuki’s aura imposed itself, unwanted, over the sight. As the only other psychic aura Shigeo had ever seen, and with a similar - though far more intense and saturated - warm color scheme, it was natural for him to compare and contrast it with Shou’s. Shou’s aura was vastly different though; it was fluid where Suzuki’s was rigid, iridescent like a soap bubble where Suzuki’s was pixelated like a circuit board. Most importantly, it didn’t strike fear into Shigeo’s heart. Shou’s aura was comforting, even as it cast deep shadows over the angle of Shou’s nose and cheekbones.

It suited Shou.

“Yeah,” Shou smiled, turquoise eyes lit up in gold, “Why wait?”

Chapter End Notes

gonna let yall in on a secret i chose to put mob in the 3rd division bc Ebiwara is the only division leader i thought wasnt ugly. its really just that deep.

so anyways, Shou and Shigeo didn't quite get to the actual planning of arson + their escape in this chapter but its coming soon! my outlining system for when i write is less "heres what will happen per chapter" and more "heres the plot of the story + what i want to have happen in the beginning, middle, and end, but whatever happens when i write it happens" so somehow this chapter expanded into like 5000+ words when i wasnt looking. i /am/ striving to write longer chapters though so i guess this is good progress!

also i suddenly started having a /lot/ of fun with this fic. i mean i already was having fun but gosh i keep developing plans for future stuff that will hopefully be Really Great and get some interesting reactions >:)

dont forget to leave a comment or kudo! or just hmu on tumblr @ ghoststrawberries!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!