The "Five Years" Game
by SedentaryZebra

Summary

Things have finally calmed down to business as usual—as much as business is ever usual, for the Ouran High School Host Club—and Kaoru is feeling some tried and true Hitachiin-brand boredom. Seeing this, Kyoya issues an intriguing challenge: he plans on winning a certain game in exactly five years. If Kaoru wants to beat him, all he has to do is figure out the goal of the game before Kyoya wins it.

As if a tried and true Hitachiin could turn down a challenge like that.

Let the “Five Years” game begin!

Notes

This story starts one month after the end of the manga’s side story in Barcelona and continues five years into the future, overlapping/replacing the July and August 2011 specials but otherwise as canonical to the manga as possible. I want this story to be accessible to anime-only fans as well and will provide chapter notes at the end of each chapter giving abbreviated background information for any manga-specific references or characters, as well as the meaning of any untranslated Japanese (or French, in some cases!)—feel free to skip down to those notes if you want to see them before reading a given chapter! In light of those notes, however, spoilers for the entirety of manga canon will be rampant. If that is a concern of yours, then please read the manga first!
“Let the games begin.” (Christmas, Year 0)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The stage: a large, classically elegant ballroom, paneled with dark wood and padded with lush red carpet, studded here and there with cozy configurations of couches and marble-topped, garland-entwined tables where candles twinkled romantically under the regal eye of a towering Christmas tree that gleamed with lights and glass ornaments.

The actors: seven individuals of varying heights but all of a peerless grace, impeccably attired in dark blue blazers and cream colored slacks, red-striped silk ties nestled against pale blue button-downs, with slicked back hair leaving no barrier to the beauty of their warmly lit faces, each one adorned with a soft, honest smile.

Heavy double-doors swung open on this perfect holiday tableaux.

“Welcome!” chorused the voices of the seven individuals who were gathered in the center of the room, right in front of the tree.

The Ouran Host Club was open for business.

In America.

“Wowwwwww~!” came the swelling coo from the group of girls (and a few boys) congregated around the now-open doors. “How festive! How American!”

Kaoru didn’t bother trying to hide the smirking air his “soft, honest” smile had suddenly adopted.

“We told you!” he sing-songed in the direction of their club’s self-appointed King, reaching out to poke the club’s natural rookie in her cheek at the same time. Kaoru wasn’t the only one. He and Hikaru were, as always, able to speak and act in perfect harmony without even trying. Wasn’t it a saying that “great minds always think exactly alike”?

After all, the twins had both known that preppy American fashion was the path to take for this event despite all the “you just want people to laugh at my overly large forehead, you demon twins!” and the “I can’t spend that long at the tailor’s because I need to study” and the single judgmental eyebrow that had been raised upon hearing the cost of the individual suit jackets that were the reactions the rest of the club had greeted their great idea with.

Kaoru might have gone so far as to make an actual cost-benefit analysis spreadsheet to convince Kyoya, the last hold-out.

Worth it.

They all looked so good it was practically criminal, and Kaoru and his brother were unsung geniuses. The hairstyle didn’t even make Tamaki’s forehead look much larger than the average billboard, Kaoru had mock-assured their king over and over again while he had checked and double-checked the work of the only competent local tailor he and Hikaru had been able to find after their months of searching.

Ah, if only Haruhi had selected New York for her study abroad opportunity! There were plenty of Hitachiin tailoring connections in New York. There was plenty of everything in New York. Who in
the world ever went to America on a trip and chose to go to Boston? Besides the vast majority of
the students of Ouran High School, naturally, but they had only come to Boston because there was
a Host Club event being held there, and, as it was, the event was going to need to take up the entire
Christmas weekend to make it worth the trip from Japan for their schoolmates. Kaoru honestly
believed that the majority of the young men and women currently streaming into the room
probably hadn’t even heard of Boston as an actual place and not just a type of dessert before
“American Christmas: A Bostonian Host Club Extravaganza!” had been officially announced.
Some of them probably planned to head to New York the minute the event was done because,
again, who in the world ever went to America on a trip and chose to go to Boston?

Then again, Kaoru might have been projecting.

Kyoya had explained that, due to this weekend-long investment on the part of their guests, the
members of the Host Club would also not be returning to their own Boston apartment, which,
while it made no pretension to architectural magnificence, was at least beginning to feel a little bit
like a home. Instead, they’d be staying with the rest of the Ouran students in the hotel they had
rented out, a classical building that counted itself among the best that Boston had to offer despite
having architecture so depressingly dated and uninspired that both Kaoru and his brother had to
squint rather than look directly at it in order to avoid offending their fragile sensibilities.

Kyoya had waited to inform them about the plan to stay at the hotel overnight until after they had
purchased the wool for the blazers. Before they had even had time to protest this sleeping
arrangement, he had done that thing where he tilted his glasses into the glare of the nearest light
source and said, “Any objections from people who spent half of the cost of the entire hotel on an
excuse to play with expensive fabric will, of course, be ignored.”

Neither Hikaru nor Kaoru had been stupid enough to say anything at all to anyone for the rest of
the day, after that.

Basically, every single thing about Boston was a tragic nightmare, but, from the frantic fluttering of
dresses as girls surrounded the group of them like a pack of starving wolves, even the coldest,
grayest, most depressing city in America couldn't dim the appeal of the Ouran Host Club in
extremely nice jackets. The Ouran Host Club was worth any trip.

Which had to explain why Kaoru was still there, since every single other part of their Bostonian
existence made him want to start studying engineering just so he could build a machine to go back
in time and hypnotize Haruhi to choose literally any other location on the planet to study abroad in.

“Hikaru, Kaoru,” Kyoya called from where he had stepped forward to meet the tide of guests—an
incredibly debonair Moses easily parting a Red-dress-wearing Sea. “You have customers.”

Kaoru met the honey-colored eyes of his twin before matching Hikaru’s lazy smile and following
him towards the pair of familiar girls that Kyoya had pulled out of the pack.

“Hikaru-kun, Kaoru-kun! It’s really you!” squealed Kitamikado Kozue, one of their old regulars, in
delight. She had grown taller in the six months they’d been away, her hair longer.

Kozue’s usual companion, Usami Haruna, was standing next to her. Her hair was chopped even
shorter than usual, almost like she was trying to emulate Haruhi. Kaoru snuck a glance at his
brother, who didn’t seem particularly moved by this pale imitation.

“We’ve missed you so much!” Haruna cried when she saw them, clutching her hands underneath
her chin and batting her eyes at them frantically. She stopped nearly as soon as she had started,
blushing from ear to ear.
Well, well, well. Little Haruna had learned some big new moves! It was adorable—a bit like watching a kitten stretch out paws that were too large and then losing its balance and tumbling head over tail.

“We’ve missed the two of you!” Hikaru said smoothly, swooping in to take Haruna’s arm and leaving Kaoru to take Kozue’s, escorting the two young women to the couches that Kyoya had officially designated the twins’ territory during their planning session earlier in the night. “And everyone else, of course.”

“Was your flight comfortable?” Kaoru asked the pair, helping Kozue into the seat next to her friend before sitting down across from the two of them, pressing up against his brother’s side.

They hadn’t practiced the forbidden love act in ages. The Americans they’d met, even the women, seemed to feel differently than their old classmates regarding the acceptability of a pair of twins implying even normal brotherly affection for each other, let alone the Hitachiin twins’ particular brand of innuendo. The two of them only used the subtest possible version of the act now, and even then they only did it when they wanted to scare off some creep who was getting too close to Haruhi. It was super effective, since even something as simple as a little bro-on-bro cheek nuzzling was enough to send many of their classmates running with their noses in the air. Since Haruhi treated anyone who spoke about the twins with the rare undeserved negativity with a glacial chill that was impossible to overcome, it usually solved the creep problem for them.

One day Haruhi was going to catch on that, since the twins were attempting to cause them on purpose, the negative comments from the creeps weren’t actually entirely undeserved, but it was a lot of fun for right now, at least!

But it was even more fun to lean against Hikaru’s shoulder, the wool of his brother’s jacket so fine that it felt like silk against his cheek and the smell of his special event cologne so familiar that it barely tickled his nose, and wait for an opening to start a play that they would finally have a willing audience for.

“We were so excited when this event was announced!” Kozue was busy enthusing when Kaoru started paying attention again. Her smile really was nice to see. He’d missed the honest, unabashed excitement of the girls who visited the Host Club. It was warm and refreshing after so much Boston cold.

“School’s not the same without you all,” Haruna added, sounding distraught. “Did you hear? The Black Magic Club won the Central Salon for the cultural festival.”

Kaoru couldn’t help a laugh at that, and Hikaru’s own laughter rumbled underneath Kaoru’s cheek.

“Maybe you two would have enjoyed it,” Haruna admitted, pouting a little. “But it was terrible! My mother actually bought one of those cat charms they make. She thought it was ‘cute.’”

“That sounds like it would’ve been interesting, though!” Hikaru said. “Aren’t you glad your mom enjoyed it?”

“The Host Club would’ve been better,” Haruna said firmly.

“What do you miss the most about Japan?” Kozue asked.

“What don’t we miss?” Kaoru and Hikaru chorused. Kaoru thought he had probably let a little more heat slip into that comment than Hikaru had, but Kozue and Haruna wouldn’t notice, so no harm done.
“Everything’s different here,” Hikaru continued alone. “Sometimes it’s tough to think about everything we left behind back at home.”

It was a decent opening, as far as they went.

“Hikaru!” Kaoru cried, pushing his bottom lip out dramatically and twisting his body to clutch helplessly at the arm he had just been resting against. “How can you say that you miss ‘home’ when I’ve been here by your side all along…?” He turned away, holding his hand to his own chest as though Hikaru’s jacket had burned him, blinking away imagined tears. “I thought… I thought I was enough…”

It turned out that their brotherly love act was a lot like riding a bike. Or so Kaoru assumed, of course. Riding a bike was a plebeian waste of energy, so he had never actually bothered to learn.

“Kaoru,” Hikaru breathed and immediately wrapped his arms around Kaoru from behind, resting his chin on his shoulder.

Lazy ass. He definitely knew their faces were too thin and pointed for that kind of thing to be comfortable. Kaoru couldn’t really blame him, though. Their jackets were just that silky smooth.

“Kaoru,” Hikaru repeated, turning his head so that his voice was a murmur pressed into Kaoru’s neck. He was definitely only doing that to hide a smirk. “You’re not just my ‘home’… you’re the entire world to me.”

Wow. Nice line, Hikaru!

“H-Hikaru…” Kaoru managed to say, voice trembling with emotion as he turned to press their foreheads together.

“Kaoru,” Hikaru breathed back, a gleam in his eyes as their gazes met.

Kozue squealed, her face bright red, and Kaoru watched from the corner of his eye as she pulled a handkerchief up out of seemingly nowhere to cry her tears of *moe* into. Haruna clutched Kozue’s shoulder, urging her not to look away, not to miss a moment.

Yeah, they still had it. Kaoru knocked the tips of his and Hikaru’s shoes together in a subtle low-toe-five as they beamed at each other from inches away.

The hum and familiar beats of the host club operating all around them were like music to Kaoru’s ears. Even the reveal that Haruhi, who was stationed at the cluster of couches across from them, was actually a girl and not just a remarkably accomplished cross-dresser (or, rather, actually a girl and *also* a remarkably accomplished cross-dresser) had apparently not dimmed the ardor of her fans, who were now asking her question after question about how she had wound up in that position in the first place, what the other hosts were like behind the scenes, and how her relationship with Tamaki was going.

They all seemed *very* interested.

Poor Haruhi.

From the quick glances Kaoru was able to send her way in between entertaining his and Hikaru’s own guests, it looked like she far preferred the awed questions about cooking and housework from back when everyone had assumed she was a boy. Kasanoda was hovering in the wings, at least, and good on the little *yakuza* lordling for staying true after all this time. Haruhi would probably appreciate the break from the girlish squealing when it was finally his turn.
Still, regardless of Haruhi’s best attempts to sink into her couch and disappear, the girls were clearly having a good time. Even Haruhi seemed to be managing a small smile underneath her deep blush. Kaoru couldn’t help his own matching smile, even though it was probably too soft-looking on his devilish face. The whole situation just felt amazing. It was like, for at least a little bit, they were playing his favorite game, a comfortable, familiar game, a game that only they could play, and, even then, could only play when they were all together.

Sure, it was a game that was technically for profiting at the expense of incredibly rich and bored young women with some rather specific fantasies, but still... a game! A fun, community-building, only slightly exploitative game!

Kaoru wondered if this was how poor little commoner children felt when they played kick-the-can with their friends.

“I can tell when you’re thinking something offensive, you know,” Haruhi muttered as she wandered past for a quick bathroom break.

“Haruhi!” Kaoru breathed, honestly delighted. “I would never!”

He winked at their current guest and tugged Hikaru up with him, not that Hikaru needed much encouragement. They draped themselves over Haruhi, assuring her of the purity of their every thought and deed as they patted her cheeks, tucked stray hairs back into her slicked-back bun, straightened her jacket, and just generally prevented her from getting her rightfully-earned break.

“Free her, you devils!” Tamaki shrieked from across the room, flipping over the back of his couch to run to them. The couch, not used to this sort of treatment, flipped with him. Tamaki skidded away on his knees dramatically, as though it had all been intentional, leaving Mori-senpai to materialize and right the furniture before dematerializing to return to his own guests.

“Make us, **tono**!” Kaoru said, Hikaru once again speaking with him in perfect unplanned tandem as Tamaki bounded to his feet and hurried over to them.

“Now, now children…” Haruhi murmured, and Tamaki, still several feet away, wilted back down to his knees.

“**Children?**” he cried, but then he brightened. If he were a dog, his tail would have been wagging. Kaoru and Hikaru exchanged entirely entertained grins. **“Yes, children! Those childish troublemaking twins are like our children, dear Haruhi! I must remember to treat them with proper discipline so that they grow up properly! This way I can practice for... for... for... for...”** His face turned red from the bottom up, as though he were slowly filling up before he volcano-blasted blood all over the room. **“For... for... for... our own... for... for our own... for... for...”**

“Ah, he’s broken,” Hikaru observed, squatting down and poking Tamaki’s shoulder. Haruhi had escaped to the bathroom at the very beginning of Tamaki’s stuttering, but at least she had left them with a new toy. **“Where’d we install the factory reset button, again, Kaoru?”**

“**Hm...**” Kaoru slid down to Tamaki’s other side and poked the opposite shoulder to match his brother. **“I don’t remember. I guess we better check everywhere!”**

Devilish golden eye met devilish golden eye and, without further conversation, they began poking Tamaki **everywhere.**

With special focus on the most ticklish spots, of course.

Tamaki immediately imploded, crumpling in on himself. **“N-no!”** he cried weakly, giggling so hard
he was practically in tears. “S-s-stop, you f-fiends! N-no…”

“Don’t forget about your guests, gentlemen.”

Kyoya’s voice floated over them, and Tamaki sprang to his feet and out of their reach without any difficulty because he was a crazy hosting machine.

“My princesses!” he cried as he practically flew back to his table.

Ah. There was that warm, bubbling, comfortable feeling again.

There was nothing else quite like this.

Hikaru and Kaoru’s next customer was a nervous little first year that Kaoru vaguely remembered as one of the girls who had confessed to them interchangeably in middle school. Good on her to power through the embarrassment and request them as hosts! Hikaru seemed to be holding the grudge a little bit more strongly than Kaoru was, hands gripping his knees tightly under the table. Kaoru gently laid a hand on top of the closest of Hikaru’s, softening his grip. They had found people who recognized them for them. What did the rest matter?

Plus, the girl actually asked about the fashion choices for the event, which Kaoru had spent many, many hours planning and then many, many hours implementing, and she seemed to be actually appreciative of his efforts, like all the rest of them should have been, so Hikaru could just shut up and let Kaoru brag for a little while.

The rest of the night proceeded in the same vein. Hikaru and Kaoru showed that their skills at selling their forbidden romance were not at all rusty, Haruhi managed to persevere through the sudden onslaught of “girly” questions, and the visiting girls (and handful of boys) all seemed suitably charmed by the American version of the Host Club’s hosting, even if they were in Boston of all places.

Kaoru felt exhausted by the time the night was over. He also felt better than he had felt in a very long time.

“Goodnight, ladies,” Kyoya dismissed the last of their guests. “Please don’t forget to sign up for the tour of Boston with the host of your choice in the morning. Take note of the time each tour leaves, and feel free to sign up for more than one experience. There’s a discount on the full set.”

The door closed behind the last guest, and the members of the Host Club were once again alone with one another.

Hikaru immediately let out a long, gusty sigh. “That’s more tiring than I remember it being!” he said, keeling over sideways on their couch and draping his legs over Kaoru’s lap.

“You’re heavier than I remember you being,” Kaoru said, making a face and pushing his legs off. “Don’t, my legs hurt.”

“Like you were the one carrying me around for half the night.” Hikaru stuck his tongue out at him.

“I don’t know. I think I missed it a little,” said Haruhi, standing from her own couch and brushing down her jacket. “It’s good to see that everyone is doing well.”

Hikaru poked Kaoru’s side and Kaoru grinned back at him, reading his mind. They immediately sprang off their couch, throwing themselves forward and draping themselves over their best friend.
“Haruhi,” they whined in stereo, hands linked behind her back. “Carry us!”

“I decline,” Haruhi said immediately, letting them slump to the ground as she ducked out from underneath them.

“Booowoo,” they chorused. They got up and bracketed her in again anyway, Hikaru reaching down to ruffle her hair. She sighed and begrudgingly pulled them in the direction of the tree in the center of the room, where Tamaki was bobbing around Kyoya like an incredibly well-dressed kite.

An incredibly well-dressed kite with a totally normal-sized forehead. Not that Kaoru was going to tell Tamaki that.

“I think it was a lot of fun, wasn’t it, Takashi?” Hani-senpai was saying meditatively as he skipped over to join them, one hand dragging his stuffed bunny and the other dragging his girlfriend. “Didn’t you think so, Reiko-chan?”

“I… it was a tolerable experience,” Reiko said, cheeks bright red under her dark bangs as she let herself be pulled along. “You looked… tolerable.”

“Right?” Hani-senpai said, beaming back at her.

“Mm,” Mori-senpai acknowledged, looming up behind the two of them.

“Right, right?” Hani-senpai said, sparkling.

Kaoru tried to swallow down a snicker with mixed success. Hikaru met his eyes and smirked.

More evidence for the classic 'Hani-senpai is actually an energy vampire' theory!

“Haruhi!” Tamaki cried when their group reached the tree, immediately plastering himself to his girlfriend’s side like a magnet, somehow squeezing Kaoru out of the way before he even realized that he was being moved. “Good, you’re all here! It’s time for the family to exchange gifts!”

Hikaru cheered, dragging both Tamaki and Haruhi down to the floor with him in a heap.

“Yay! An American Christmas!” Hani-senpai cried, dragging Reiko, Mori-senpai, and his stuffed bunny down as well.

Kaoru sat down in the middle of the two piles, closing the half circle.

“I guess that makes you the present distributor then, Kyoya,” Kaoru said, leaning back on his hands and smiling up at their Shadow King. “Last man standing has to pass out all the gifts. It’s an American Christmas tradition.”

“America is going to sue you all for libel if you’re not careful,” Kyoya said, with his voice implying ‘and I will finance them in that attempt,’ but he started picking up the presents they had stacked underneath the tree and passing them out anyway, because, when it really came down to it, he was weak for them.

Well, weak for Tamaki and possibly Haruhi. Maybe occasionally slightly wobbly for the rest of them.

Kaoru winked when Kyoya met his eye, to show that he could see through his uncaring facade, and Kyoya raised the same eyebrow he’d raised back when he’d first seen the estimated cost of the suit jackets, to show that he could probably figure out a way to sell Kaoru’s soul to the highest bidder if
Kaoru crossed him.

Kaoru didn’t take it personally. Kyoya could probably sell anyone to anyone, if he really wanted to.

It was hard to buy gifts for their friends, since most of them (excepting the adorable commoner, naturally) just bought whatever they wanted whenever they wanted it. Because of that, they had all agreed on keeping the price of the gifts for their American-style Christmas celebration at less than ten American dollars each. After all, when was the last time any of them (again, exempting Haruhi) had bought anything at all for such a paltry sum of money?

Now they had the fruits of that challenge in front of them, and they didn’t waste any time before tearing in.

Haruhi had given each of them an envelope with a cute little hand-written coupon for homemade cookies—“I was going to make it coupons for homemade meals, but then I realized that I already cook for all of you anyway,” she said, matter-of-fact attitude as adorable as always—and Hikaru had gotten Kaoru a hilarious bottle of fake-fart smell spray, which was, coincidentally, the exact same thing Kaoru had bought for him, along with other silly prank-like gear for their other friends. The rest of the presents were equally as predictable: Tamaki had gotten each of them a matching kitschy keychain of the Boston skyline that he seemed enamored with and that Kaoru was definitely going to throw away as soon as possible (except probably not because he, too, just like all the rest of them, was weak for Tamaki), Mori-senpai, a recently-converted baseball fan, had gotten each of them a different piece of Red Sox team paraphernalia that he’d bought from an off-brand stand, and Hani-senpai had gotten them all slices of cake from his favorite bakery in the city.

Surprisingly enough, Kyoya seemed to be the one who had put the most thought into all of their gifts. He had bought Tamaki a small jigsaw puzzle version of Camille Monet and Child in the Artist’s Garden in Argenteuil, Tamaki’s favorite painting from the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, and, for Haruhi, a mug version of Hopper’s Lighthouse and Buildings, her favorite painting from the same museum. For Mori-senpai, he had actually bothered to buy some Red Sox paraphernalia of his own, a worn-looking baseball cap that Mori-senpai immediately pulled on over his slicked-down hair, not appearing to care that it clashed with the rest of his carefully-designed outfit. For Hani-senpai, Kyoya had bought a small cake plate from the bakery he loved, and, for Hikaru, a poster from Boston’s Museum of Bad Art, which Hikaru and Kaoru had been trying to drag the rest of the group to see for ages, only to have something mysteriously come up whenever the group was finally going to make the trip.

Kaoru had expected a second copy of the poster in the envelope that had been near the bottom of his own pile, but instead his gift from Kyoya appeared to just be a slip of paper that said, “We’ll talk later.”

Maybe Kyoya really was planning to sell him.

“Reiko-chan, I saved one last cake for the night in my room. Would you like to share it with me?” Hani-senpai said to his girlfriend from the nest of torn wrapping paper the club had created, blinking innocently up at her from where he had nestled himself against her side. She looked at him, long dark hair sweeping down too slowly to hide her smile.

“Is it cursed cake?” she asked, quiet but hopeful. “I’ve heard there’s an American legend of a cursed Christmas cake…”

“Mitsukuni,” Mori-senpai admonished, looking up from where he was neatly plucking both his and Hani-senpai’s assorted presents from the wrapping debris and packing them into a bag.
“It’s Christmas, Takashi!” Hani-senpai reminded him, standing and slowly but surely dragging his girlfriend in the direction of the hallway. “Normal rules don’t apply on Christmas! Especially American Christmas!”

That seemed to be enough for Mori-senpai, who just nodded and went back to bagging. Maybe American Christmas had a special holiday superpower to make him weak to bad logic.

“I bet the cake’s just cursed with deliciousness!” Hani-senpai was saying to Reiko as the door closed behind them.

Kaoru sighed at how some things never changed and got to his feet, stretching out legs that were more than ready to be under a nice heavy American comforter for the night. Curling up on a couch for hours at a time might make him look like a proper *uke*, but it was killer on his knees and thighs.

“I’m surprised Reiko could afford to fly all the way out here just for this event,” Hikaru said, leaning back on his hands. “Her family doesn’t have enough money to throw it around *that* freely, do they?”

“He did,” Mori-senpai confirmed, nodding.

“Ah, he wanted a couple’s Christmas, even though we were in America.” Kaoru eyed the door the couple had walked through with renewed interest. “That’s cute.”

Speaking of cute things, Haruhi was standing several feet away, blinking up at the giant tree in the middle of the room.

“An American Christmas, huh?” She looked thoughtful for a minute before brightening slightly. “Ah. It’s Christmas.”

“You forgot?” the twins chorused, bemused.

“You forgot!” Tamaki exclaimed, horrified, and Kaoru would’ve bet several million American dollars and also his own brother that there was a beautiful white Christmas cake waiting in Tamaki’s assigned hotel room for he and Haruhi to share as they celebrated their first Christmas together as an official couple. From the look in his eyes, rose petals and candlelight were probably waiting in there too. Maybe a very small parade. With Tamaki, a person could never really know.

“I guess this was a Christmas event, after all…” Haruhi nodded to herself. “I must have gotten distracted by the event and forgotten the occasion.”

“That’s fine, Haruhi,” Hikaru said, suddenly jumping to his feet in order to take her hand and smile terribly at Tamaki over the top of her head. “I’m willing to celebrate with you!”

“What?!” Tamaki cried. “I… no… couple cake… Hikaru, you devil!”

Kaoru rolled his eyes and sat down heavily on the couch where Kyoya had sequestered himself with his record book. Balancing his cheek on curled-up fingers, he watched as Tamaki and Hikaru treated Haruhi like the rope in a game of tug of war. At this rate, she was going to abandon both of them and go eat cake with Hani-senpai and Reiko. Mori-senpai had already disappeared, probably also to have cake with Hani-senpai and Reiko.
Ah, Kaoru was already bored. Hopefully tomorrow would be fun again.

“You looked like you were enjoying yourself, this evening,” said Kyoya, and it took Kaoru an embarrassingly long moment to realize Kyoya was talking to him specifically and not just to the room at large.

“Hm?” he murmured, turning slightly to glance up at his second-scariest senpai (after all, the demon king wasn’t quite as bad as the demon beast). “Ah,” he said, noticing that Kyoya was looking at him out of the corner of his eye, dark eyes still sharp even through the barrier of his glasses. “Yeah, I did. I think everyone did.”

“I don’t think I’ve seen you smile like that since we first came to Boston,” Kyoya said like he was remarking on the weather.

Kaoru blinked at him. He realized he probably looked a little bit like Haruhi suddenly remembering that it was Christmas. A short, unexpected laugh escaped at the thought. He muffled the sound with his hand, a little self-conscious and very tired.

“I guess I haven’t,” he admitted, relaxing back into the couch and stretching out his legs in front of him. “School here is just… boring.”

Boring wasn’t a strong enough word. It was the kind of boring that crept under a person’s skin and stung, little prickles under every inch of surface area. The kind of boring that fried a person from the inside until he slowly but surely turned hollow.

The kind of boring that killed the soul.

He couldn’t imagine a worse school system than the one they had here. Here, students, not teachers, were forced to move for each of their classes, which meant he wasn’t with the same carefully selected batch of students all day, the way it was back home. He only had one class with Haruhi, and she was so focused on succeeding that he honestly felt bad distracting her. He had zero classes with Hikaru, which admittedly had led to several entertaining encounters at the beginning of the school year, before everyone else had realized that they were a pair of twins and not just one single Japanese exchange student with an extremely heavy course load and magic color-changing hair. Rather than with friends, his classes were instead filled with an interchangeable assortment of stuffy, privileged faces, bragging about their families’ possessions and accomplishments but not actually bothering to apply themselves to anything meaningful.

It actually felt a lot like Ouran once had, in that gray time before the Host Club, only worse. At school here he was truly alone, deprived even of his brother for most of the day.

Kaoru knew he could probably reach out and make some friends if he really wanted to. From eavesdropping on his classmates’ conversations, he thought all he had to do was mention the family yacht and he’d have an automatic in. But he had never been interested in making friends that way, not even at Ouran. And Haruhi wasn’t really making many non-creep friends either. Kaoru had a strong (and incredibly hypocritical, he was aware) feeling it was because the classmates at their illustrious American private school were judging her for her background and lack of concern about brand-name goods, and that made him want to make friends with them even less.

“The people are boring, the school is boring, this place is boring,” Kaoru summarized, leaning back and scowling up at the ceiling, squinting against the light of the chandeliers. Huh, he must’ve been holding on to even more anger about the situation than he’d realized.

“So it wouldn’t be a stretch of the imagination to say that you’ve been bored, then,” Kyoya said
Kaoru moaned and slid down to the floor, flopping the top half of his body across the table in front of them in agreement. He rubbed his cheek against the tabletop. The marble felt nice, at least.

One point for nice things in Boston. One single, solitary point.

“You okay?” Hikaru’s legs appeared around the corner of the couch and folded down, his face popping into Kaoru’s tabletop-based line of sight.

“Tired,” Kaoru said, pouting at his brother. His cheek stuck to the marble a little bit. Gross. Boston couldn’t even have a nice thing for five minutes before it ruined it. “Bored.”

“Hm. Me too.” Hikaru collapsed where he had been leaning. Now he was also half-lying on the marble tabletop, blinking at Kaoru slowly from only a few inches away. “Our favorite toy went to have Christmas cake with tono.”

“Mm,” Kaoru acknowledged, and lazily reached up to poke Hikaru in the cheek. “Stealing our favorite toy on American Christmas. Tono has no shame.” Hikaru didn’t even smile. “Would it make you feel better to share some Christmas cake with me?”

“Nah.” Hikaru sighed and closed his eyes. “It’s late. Just want to sleep.”

“It looks like both of you should go sleep somewhere else—ideally somewhere with a bed.”

Kaoru turned over onto his opposite cheek like meat being flipped on a grill. Kyoya was peering down at the two of them from his seat on the couch, eyes hidden behind the glare of the chandelier lights reflecting off of his glasses.

“Wait! Not yet!” Kaoru sat up straight as he remembered. The change in angle ruined the glare of light that Kyoya had been going for, and his eyes were visible once more. He looked oddly expressive, clearly startled by Kaoru’s sudden movement. “You said we’d talk about my present!”

“Hmmm?” Hikaru leaned over Kaoru’s shoulder to look up at Kyoya as well. “Present?”

“Kyoya said he’d talk to me about my Christmas present later,” Kaoru explained.

“Oh, right. Thanks for my Christmas present, by the way, Kyoya. It’s nice to see pictures since you all won’t let us go see the real thing.” Hikaru stuck his tongue out at their upperclassman before pushing himself away from Kaoru’s back. “Well, I’m going to bed. Tell me about it in the morning, Kaoru.”

“Night, Hikaru!” Kaoru called after his brother’s retreating back before readjusting himself, turning to face Kyoya fully and leaning back on his hands to get a better angle from his place on the floor. Kyoya was a slippery guy, and Kaoru wanted to make sure he didn’t slip away. He was actually pretty curious about this gift that involved talking. Even if Kyoya really was getting ready to sell him, it’d probably be a pretty interesting experience.

Kyoya smiled, the specific small curve of his lips that implied that someone somewhere suddenly had a bank account several million yen short of what they’d had a few minutes ago.

“I was wondering if you were going to ask,” Kyoya said, tapping his pen against the notebook on his lap. “I was thinking that it has been a while since the two of us had an intellectual diversion, so I decided that, for Christmas this year, I would offer you a game.”
Kaoru perked up immediately, sitting ramrod straight and giving Kyoya a thumbs-up. “Already the best non-fart-related gift I’ve gotten tonight. I always knew you were my favorite senpai.”

Kyoya gave a short chuckle and turned to a new page in his record book. “Oh, have I earned the honorific back?”

Kaoru gasped in mock hurt, clutching a hand to his chest. “Whatever America makes me say out loud, the honorific is always here, Kyoya. In my heart.” He leaned his cheek against the velvet cushioned seat of the couch, batting his eyes up at his upperclassman in the most innocent way possible.

“America’s greatest achievement has been in making the two of you even more comfortable and casual than you already were.” Kyoya neatly picked his pen back up to write something long and scrolling on a new page, turning it slightly so that Kaoru couldn’t see what he was writing. “Though I notice you keep the formal terminology for Hani-senpai and Mori-senpai.”

“Ah ah ah.” Kaoru wagged a finger at his upperclassman. “Don’t be jealous, Kyoya! It’s only because I never see them in the wild of American high school. Also, they could both bench press me one-handed, probably. But forget about them! You promised me a game.”

“I suppose I did.” Kyoya neatly tore the page he had been writing on in half, folding one half and slipping it into the inner breast pocket of his jacket before passing the other half down to Kaoru, who finally lifted his head off of the couch cushion in order to focus on it.

“‘The ‘Five Years’ game,’” Kaoru read out loud. It was all the paper said. He turned the scrap over, but there really was nothing else there. “… I don’t get it.”

“Exactly as it says.” Kyoya capped his pen and closed his record book. He touched his jacket pocket lightly and said, “I have a game that I am already playing. I plan to win exactly five years from today, on Christmas Eve.”

“Congratulations,” Kaoru said. “How exactly is this a game for me, Kyoya-senpai?”

“The game for you is this,” Kyoya continued, smile widening slightly at either the honorific or his own capacity for diabolical evil, it was tough to say. “If you can figure out the goal of the game I am playing, the answer to which is written on my half of that paper, before Christmas Eve five years from now, then you will have beaten me.”

What a stupid game.

Kaoru wanted to play it so badly.

“What does the winner get?” Kaoru asked in spite of himself. It was so, so stupid. It wasn’t even a real game.

“Ah ah ah,” Kyoya said, wagging a finger down at him in a mirror to what Kaoru had done at him mere moments ago. “You’re fishing, Kaoru. I will not tell you what I will win in the main game, of course. But, for the game between the two of us… let’s see. How about a simple penalty game? Nothing dangerous, of course. What about this: the winner can ask one single question, any question he wants, and the loser must answer with complete honesty. And, naturally, bragging rights will be on the line.”

Kaoru groaned and pulled his knees up, hiding his face in them. “… I hate that I’m honestly curious, you know.”
“I know,” Kyoya’s disembodied voice floated down to tell him.

“And that this game sounds really stupid,” Kaoru continued, pressing back against his closed eyelids. “And mostly sounds like an excuse for you to avoid spending ten dollars on my Christmas present.”

“I know.” Kyoya’s disembodied voice was sounding more entertained by the moment.

“And I definitely want to play,” Kaoru finished.

“I know.” Kyoya was practically laughing at him, in his understated Kyoya-like way.

Kaoru felt the warm pressure of a hand on his shoulder for barely a moment. Then the half paper was being pulled from his hand and deftly tucked into the silk pocket inside the front of his blazer, the warmth of that same hand barely brushing against his chest before it was gone. Kaoru finally pulled himself away from his knees and smiled up at the guy who had always kind of unarguably been his favorite senpai.

“You’re an ass,” he said fondly. “I’ll be very disappointed if I don’t get at least ten American dollars’ worth of enjoyment out of this. Try to make it a bit of a challenge, at least.”

“Oh, I’ll do my best,” Kyoya told him, smile so wide it was actually crinkling the corners of his eyes. He offered a hand down for a formal shake. “Merry Christmas, Kaoru. Let the games begin.”

Kaoru took the offered hand and shook it with over-the-top seriousness. “Merry Christmas, Kyoya. You’re on.” Kaoru grinned up at him over their still-joined hands.

Finally, something to do in Boston that seemed like it might be a little bit fun.

Chapter End Notes

Manga Background Notes for Chapter 1 (warning, spoilers follow!):
- The manga ends with Haruhi accepting a study abroad opportunity in Boston. The entire Host Club follows her to America for the next academic year, where they all live in the same apartment building. Tamaki and Haruhi start officially dating shortly before the trip to America begins.
- The rest of Ouran realizes Haruhi is a girl right before she leaves for America.
- Kanazuki Reiko (a first-year in the Black Magic Club) and Hani-senpai start dating before he graduates high school.
- When they graduate, Mori-senpai makes Hani-senpai promise to eat 90% less cake for the sake of his own health.
- When the twins’ interests start diverging, Hikaru dyes his hair brown, making the two of them more easily distinguishable.

Foreign Language Notes:
1. [kun: an honorific used to refer to young men]
2. [moe: feelings of strong affection, often towards fictional characters]
3. [yakuza: an organized crime syndicate]
4. [senpai: an honorific denoting an upperclassman or mentor]
5. [tono: an honorific meaning “lord” or “milord”]
6. [chan: an honorific used to refer to children, close friends, and lovers—usually used
for someone the speaker finds endearing]
7. [uke: a term for the person who is the “bottom” in a gay relationship; a stereotype associated with certain more submissive character traits]

I apologize to the city of Boston, which doesn’t deserve the vast majority of the hate Kaoru gives it.
“My friend will just be so distraught if he misses his tour today,” Kaoru said to the middle-aged woman working at the front desk, his eyes as big and wet as he could make them, which, thanks to all the extensive uke practice, was really big and wet. Babies and small woodland creatures? Nothing compared to these doe eyes. He had also twisted his accent slightly British. Extended observation had shown him that American women had a particular weakness for a good British accent. “This is the only time he’s ever going to be able to make it to America, what with the cancer,” a sad sigh, a tragic glance down, careful not to oversell it, “and he was so excited to see Boston, I would just hate for him to sleep through it…”

Kyoya’s first mistake had been in not setting down any ground rules.

He was playing against a Hitachiin, after all. Really, he had no one but himself to blame. The solution to the game they were playing was being kept in his jacket pocket. He had practically emphasized that fact. That was the same as an engraved invitation to break into his hotel room, as far as Kaoru was concerned.

“That poor dear,” said the front desk woman. Her name was ‘Lisa,’ according to the tag she was wearing. Her accent was very, very Bostonian.

“It’s fine, Ms. Lisa,” Kaoru said, hopeful face falling dramatically. “I understand. You have no choice. Really, really, I understand. I don’t blame you. I wouldn’t help me either, in your shoes.” Another sigh, a slumping of the shoulders. “My poor friend… what will I do…? Maybe if I just… keep knocking… Maybe, eventually… I’ll keep it up all day, if I have to… He has to wake up soon, he just has to…”

Lisa melted like a fine piece of Gruyère cheese. “Oh, you poor, poor boys!” She nearly knocked over the stack of key cards in her haste to pick one of them up. “Well, it’s just this once. And everyone in the hotel right now is your friend anyway, right? I’m sure it’s fine.” She ran the key card through the machine, programming it with the code necessary to access Kyoya’s room. “Here you are, dear. Go wake up your friend.”

“Thank you! Oh, I can’t thank you enough!” Kaoru beamed at her and clutched the key card like the holy grail it was. “I’ll go wake him right now!”

Ha. Only if he had a sudden death wish.

In fact, Kaoru kept himself as quiet as possible as he let himself into Kyoya’s hotel room. Sure, it would probably take multiple movements of an entire orchestral arrangement of slamming doors to wake Kyoya up before noon, but there was no harm in being careful. The terrifyingness of a just-awoken Kyoya really could not be overstated. Kaoru was rather fond of the lime green skinny jeans he was currently wearing; he had no desire to soil them in fear at nine in the morning.

The hotel room was dark when he let himself in. Kaoru felt his way over to the curtains and twitched them open, letting sunlight filter in far enough that he could see what he was doing.

It looked pretty much identical to the room Hikaru and Kaoru had shared last night. A king-sized
bed dominated the space and a cozy working nook with a couch and a table was situated next to the bank of windows. Through the gap in the curtains, Kaoru could just barely make out the sights and sounds of a bustling Boston morning. He leaned against the wall next to the curtain that he’d inched open, resting his fingers on his lips as he waited for his eyes to adjust. He smiled behind his fingertips as he listened to the sound of Kyoya’s deep, rhythmic breathing, which was just faintly louder than the sound of traffic below.

Tsk, tsk, *senpai*. Sleeping on the job.

If Kyoya had honestly expected this game to last long enough to be a worthwhile Christmas present, he should have remembered who he was dealing with.

As his eyes adjusted, Kaoru was able to make out the roughly Kyoya-sized lump under the blankets, the source of those sleepy sounds. He was not, however, able to see an extremely fashionable blazer conveniently draped over the back of the couch or left on the dresser or folded next to the television.

The closet. Had to be.

Kaoru pushed himself away from the wall and crept across the room, careful to give the bed a wide berth. The door to the closet opened noiselessly, and there, just as Kaoru had expected, hung the blazer and slacks Kyoya had worn the night before.

“Game, set, and match,” Kaoru said quietly to himself, reaching into the jacket’s breast pocket, the sounds of violins and trumpets swelling triumphantly in the background of his mind as the end of the game drew near.

Kaoru blinked.

Kaoru withdrew his hand, staring dumbly at it for a moment or two, not quite believing his senses.

His hand was empty. His fingers had encountered nothing but silk and air inside the blazer.

Maybe he had missed the pocket and just brushed his hand down the inner lining of the jacket. That had to be it.

Reaching into the closet once again, he carefully slipped his hand down the inside of the jacket, tracing the silk lining with his fingertips until they slid back into Kyoya’s pocket.

Silk: check.

Air: check.

Pocket: check.

Half sheet of paper: no check.

Kaoru once more withdrew his hand, confusion and a growing sense of despair slowing his movements. The paper wasn’t there. How was the paper not there? Where was the paper?

He quickly reached into the pockets of the pants Kyoya had been wearing. Nothing. He crouched down and peered inside first one dress shoe, then the other.

No paper. No paper anywhere.

Where else could Kyoya possibly have hidden it?
The bathroom! It was right next to the closet, a convenient place to store away a piece of paper that a person had taken out of his pocket but didn’t have any other place for. Kaoru slipped inside the bathroom through the partially-open door, squinting in the deeper shadow within.

No good. No paper in sight, though Kaoru was going to need to have words with Kyoya about his skin care regimen. Kaoru wouldn’t wish that brand of face wash on his worst enemy. It was far too abrasive.

Right, the paper. He had to find the paper. Where could it be?

The trash?

A quick inspection revealed that both the bin in the bathroom and the two bins in the main room were entirely empty.

The safe in the room?

Open and empty.

The... mini-fridge?

Filled with snacks and bottles that Kyoya hadn’t touched, but absolutely not filled with anything resembling a game-winning half sheet of paper.

A dark, scary idea was slowly growing in Kaoru’s mind. But Kyoya wouldn’t have… he couldn’t have…

Kaoru stood from where he had crouched in front of the mini-fridge and slowly, so slowly, turned to face the bed.

Kyoya knew they were all (rightfully) terrified of his demonic low-blood-pressure early-morning persona. Could he have expected Kaoru to try something like this? To break into his room while he slept? Could he have counted on the fear of a sleeping Kyoya to keep Kaoru away from the prize, once locks, doors, hotel security, and basic human decency had all failed?

Could he be sleeping with the paper?

Kaoru took one step towards the bed, then another. The lump under the covers didn’t move. Soon, Kaoru was standing right next to the edge of the bed, gazing down at his sleeping upperclassman. Kyoya’s glasses were folded on the end table. His arms were curled up next to him like he’d fallen asleep immediately after taking his glasses off, so quickly that he hadn’t had enough time to bring his arms all the way back to his body. His face, nestled against his pillow, looked oddly naked without his glasses on. Sleep gentled all of his features, made him look deceptively sweet and innocent.

Mr. “Deceptively sweet and innocent” here was absolutely going to murder Kaoru if he made even the smallest wrong move. He pursed his lips in indecision.

Was this really worth it? All for the sake of winning a silly game?

Yes.

It absolutely was.

Kaoru reached down to gently lift the corner of the pillow underneath Kyoya’s head.
It turned out that Kaoru’s first mistake had been to forget he was playing a game with Kyoya.

“Please. You think I would be foolish enough to leave the prize unsecured? Is your opinion of me truly so low?”

Kaoru made an extremely inelegant noise and jumped back from the side of the bed so quickly that he tripped over his own feet and wound up sprawled on the floor, which, as it turned out, was the worst possible angle from which to view Kyoya sitting up in bed. Kaoru hadn’t realized that there existed varying levels of badness in the viewing angles for this specific situation, but he had definitely just found the worst one. With blankets bunched around his waist, the demon king scowled down at him over the bridge of his nose and reached over to the end table to pick up his glasses.

“It’s not what it looks like!” Kaoru said from the floor, which… was a stupid thing to say. How was he even supposed to defend that?! What excuse could he possibly have for illegally breaking into his upperclassman’s hotel room and sticking his hand underneath his pillow while he slept that was not even worse than ‘I was trying to win that one game we were playing’?!

“As soon as you went to your room last night, I had the solution to the game sent to an Ootori family safety deposit box back in Japan.” Kyoya slid his glasses on and glanced down at the clock on the bedside table, scowl deepening as he noticed the time. “It won’t be there yet, but my instructions to Hotta were explicit. There will be no time or opportunity for any interference before the paper is safely stored away for the next five years.”

“Well, there goes that plan,” Kaoru admitted, sitting forward and wrapping his arms around his legs. At least he hadn’t soiled his pants. Now that the worst had happened and he couldn’t do anything further to stop his imminent doom, he was actually feeling rather zen about the whole situation. “When you kill me, please be gentle. Start with my head so that I’m not conscious when the rest of it happens.”

“Shut up,” Kyoya grumbled, swinging his legs out of bed. “I assumed this would happen. I had actually assumed you would be here even earlier, so I don’t have as much time as I had anticipated I would have to prepare for my tour. I’m going to be late.”

That… wasn’t what Kaoru had expected. “And this is my fault?” Kaoru clarified. He began to smile, a small, small smile as he realized that he was not, actually, about to die. His heart rate began to tick back down to its normal levels and his deathly grip on his legs loosened. “You planned on my breaking and entering to be your alarm clock?”

“Yes,” Kyoya said, frowning as he stood and looked down at Kaoru on the floor, a bug underfoot. “I once told you that nothing else matters so long as the people that we care about most are able to understand us.”

“You know, it’s even cuter when you say it looking like you’re two seconds away from squashing me,” Kaoru informed him, smile reaching true grin proportions. Once the danger of imminent dismemberment was removed, Kyoya was actually pretty adorable like this. A myopic tiger with blunted claws and button-down pajamas. “You’ve pretty much hit peak tsundere. I bet we could market this.”

“Shut up,” Kyoya repeated. “I’m giving you a hint, you infuriating, trouble-making brat.”

“A hint?” Kaoru said, thinking back over what Kyoya had just said. As the truth dawned, his grin leveled up yet again, to the point where it would best be described as ‘face-splitting.’ “Kyoya. Kyoya. Are you telling me that my hint is that I can win this game most easily by understanding
Kyoya blinked slowly. “Get out of my room,” he said.

“Are you saying that I am one of the people that you care about most?” Kaoru asked, words practically tripping over each other in his glee.

“Get out of my room immediately,” Kyoya said.

“I love this so much,” Kaoru breathed, bounding to his feet, smiling so hard it was practically an impediment to his vision. His eyes were squinted nearly shut with joy. “This is the greatest Christmas present ever. You need to change your face wash, that brand you have is terrible.”

“Out,” Kyoya ordered, and Kaoru went, still smiling. Out in the hallway, he pressed the button for the elevator and leaned against the wall, waiting and thinking.

’Nothing else matters so long as the people that we care about most are able to understand us,’

hm...?

It was supposed to take five years for Kyoya to win, so it couldn’t be something easy, or even something that most other people would consider hard but that would be easy for someone as competent as Kyoya. It had to be something really, truly, astronomically difficult.

Also, since Kyoya was secretly as soft as a marshmallow on the inside, it probably had something to do with helping their friends, not actually Kyoya himself.

So: a goal that would help out their friends and was difficult enough that it would take even Kyoya five years to accomplish.

As the elevator dinged its arrival, Kaoru concluded that he might not know the solution to this particular puzzle off of the top of his head, but at least he had a solid starting point.

He might’ve suffered a minor setback this morning, but he still returned to his hotel room feeling like he had this game in the bag.

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… Maybe a very large bag, he admitted to himself as month after month crawled by after the “American Christmas: A Bostonian Host Club Extravaganza!” without the slightest sign of something that might be considered a further step towards an answer to his and Kyoya’s game.

Kyoya just acted the same as always, polite and opaque at their stupid American high school and snarky and hard-working at their cozy American home, entirely as though there weren’t a game on the line. Occasionally he missed their nightly “family dinners,” as Tamaki insisted on calling them, but Kaoru had tailed him once and realized that he was just taking some sort of extra class at Harvard. When Kaoru had asked him about this class directly, Kyoya had openly admitted that he was trying to earn an accelerated Master of Business Administration degree despite not having graduated from high school yet, which, while ridiculous, was also within the realm of expectation, for Kyoya.

So, nearly a third of a year later, Kaoru was still at the starting gate of his brainstorming: a plan that was five years’ worth of difficult and would help out their friends.

“Maybe he’s planning on assassinating all of our parents so that we can just take over our family businesses immediately,” Hikaru suggested, leaning against Kaoru’s side to peer through the
window as their plane taxied towards their arrival gate at Charles de Gaulle. It was spring break for American schools, and the Host Club was taking the opportunity of a joint week off to visit Paris together. Haruhi had balked at the idea of using one of the families’ private jets, so they had just bought out first class on one of the commercially available planes instead. It was fine, if a little cramped. “It seems like something he’d think was good for us, right? More importantly, I can’t believe we missed Fashion Week by a month.” Hikaru was still staring out the window eagerly despite his complaining tone. “American schools have no sense of timing.”

“He’s not planning to assassinate our parents,” Kaoru said, elbowing his brother in the side. “You’re the one who wanted the aisle seat, stop crushing me.”

“You’re not even appreciating the view,” Hikaru said, elbowing him back.

“What view? The airfield?”

“Now, now, you two,” said a voice from the row behind them. “Behave yourselves or I might have to assassinate you.”

Kaoru turned in his seat to look back at Kyoya, leaving Hikaru free reign of the window. “I’m right, right? Assassination doesn’t seem like your style.”

“Are you asking because that is an official guess?” Kyoya asked, raising an eyebrow at him. He had a glass of sparkling water in one hand and a French textbook in the other, looking like the perfect frequent flyer.

The perfect frequent flyer who also contracted hit men…?

No way.

“No,” Kaoru said out loud. Whether or not Kyoya would hire hit men was a moot point, actually; that process still wouldn’t take five years. Another idea occurred to Kaoru, though, and he asked, “What if it were an official guess, though? You never said I couldn’t make more than one guess.”

“I suppose I didn’t,” Kyoya responded, swirling his water like it was a glass of wine. Pretentious dork. He made it look good, though. “But it also wouldn’t be fair for you to just rely on guessing at random until you guessed correctly. Let’s see. Shall we have a penalty game for incorrect guesses?”

“That works,” Kaoru agreed, reaching a hand back between his and Hikaru’s seats. Kyoya put his book down on his knee and shook the offered hand.

“This is such a weird Christmas present,” Hikaru said from Kaoru’s side. “I don’t get it at all.”

“Don’t be jealous,” Kaoru teased, turning back to his brother. “Don’t worry, I’ll make sure to share my prize with you. You can help me brainstorm the most embarrassing possible question to ask when I win.”

“Done,” Hikaru agreed immediately. “Now that you mention it, I think I’m starting to see the appeal of this present.”

“So much confidence,” Kyoya said. Kaoru twisted back to see that he was smiling over the top of his French book. The look was rather shark-like. “Remind me again, how far have you gotten in your investigation?”

“We’re here!” Tamaki squealed from the row in front of the twins. The “fasten seatbelt” light
turned off and their fearless leader bounded up from his seat, unable to contain his excitement.

“France! Ma patrie!”

“Tamaki, you’re really sure your grandparents want us all to stay at their house?” Haruhi asked, standing as well.

“Oui, mon amour!” Tamaki assured her, taking her hand and smiling down at her with the gentle, honest, dopey smile that always reminded Kaoru why he would follow this stupid man literally anywhere. “With Mother moving to Japan, grandpère and grandmère have more room than they know what to do with. They were begging me to bring you all to visit.” Tamaki blushed brightly, crushing Haruhi to his chest and hiding his face in her hair as though to muffle the addition of: “They especially, especially want to meet you.”

“Oh,” Haruhi said, voice softened by Tamaki’s hug. “I’m looking forward to meeting them too.”

“Too cute,” Hikaru announced, standing and pushing the pair of them towards the exit. “Save it for in front of the family; you two are going to give the rest of us a toothache.”

“It’s been a while since we’ve been to France,” Kaoru mused, pulling down his and Hikaru’s bag from the overhead compartment as his brother escorted Tamaki and Haruhi off the plane. “We’ll have to stop by the Rue du Faubourg Saint-Honoré at some point. I don’t know what our agenda is supposed to be, but our mother will disown us if she hears we visited Paris and didn’t stop in to say hello to Dominique Sirop.”

“There isn’t a firm agenda, as far as I know,” Kyoya said, hoisting his own travel bag over his shoulder. “Though, knowing Tamaki, I am sure there will never be a quiet moment. Let me know when you plan on heading to the Rue du Faubourg Saint-Honoré and I’ll accompany you. I’d like to stop by and speak to the ambassador. I hear there have been some obstacles with the French-Japanese coordination for distribution of the systemic lupus erythematosus cure.”

Kaoru paused. ‘Obstacles with coordination.’ What did that even mean?

Wait. Five years. A plan to help out friends.
A plan to meet with the Japanese ambassador to France.

The beginnings of a theory started winding its way through Kaoru’s head, but he strangled it for now and just said, “I will. Did someone wake up Hani-senpai?” He stepped forward, but Hani-senpai and Reiko were already gone from their seats. “Huh, guess so.”

“Mori-senpai took care of it while Tamaki was having his moment,” Kyoya said.

“Do you ever feel like the Host Club could be divided exactly in half between adults and children?” Kaoru said, finally making his way off the plane.

Kyoya neatly fell into step next to him. “Only if you count Haruhi as one of the adults and yourself as straddling the line, at best. But yes, I’ve noticed. There’s a reason I stopped protesting being called ‘mother,’ you know.”

“Ah, right.” Kaoru grinned over at him. “I had nearly forgotten about that, ‘mom.’”

“Be careful who you antagonize, ‘son.’” Kyoya responded, smirking back at him. “I would hate to suddenly find reason to make this trip busy enough that you miss your chance to greet Dominique Sirop and give your real mother a reason to disown you.”
“You wouldn’t!” Kaoru gasped in mock offense, a hand fluttering to his chest. “Not to your favorite son!”

“Kaoru, hurry up!” Hikaru called from further down the exit ramp. “What’s taking you two so long?”

“Coming!” Kaoru called back. His theory wound its way around his brain and squeezed, leading him to say, “Hey, Kyoya, it was your idea to make this trip, right?”

Kyoya’s shoulders shifted in a casual shrug. “I suppose you could view it that way, if you wanted to. Tamaki wanted us to travel somewhere together this week. A repeat of our Thanksgiving trip to Barcelona, I suppose. I just happened to mention a delicious toasted sandwich I’d had in Paris at a time when Haruhi just happened to be listening.” Kyoya pushed his glasses up his nose. “A fortunate coincidence.”

Ha. ‘Fortunate coincidences’ didn’t happen around Kyoya.

Kaoru was definitely on to something here.

“Yeah, like I said, your idea,” he said, choosing not to give himself away. With a smile and a jaunty salute, he ran to catch up with his brother.

Something that would take five years. Something to make his friends happy.

Kyoya had manufactured an excuse to visit France.

Kyoya wanted to visit the Japanese embassy while they were here.

All the pieces were falling together.

Kaoru had this in the bag, and he hadn’t even needed to cheat and see the paper with the solution written on it. He would take a couple of days to observe—with four years and eight months left on the clock, he had plenty of time to confirm his suspicions. He would just wait and see how this visit played out.

“Grandmère! Grandpère!” Tamaki cried in delight as soon as the group made it through customs. “Tu n’avais pas besoin de venir toi-même!”

“René!” called an elderly gentleman with a smile that was a carbon copy of the soft, sweet smile Kaoru had just seen Tamaki direct at Haruhi on the plane. The man was stouter and broader than Kaoru had been expecting, welcoming in a tweed jacket and with wide open arms. “Of course we would come!” His Japanese was accented but clear, like he was comfortable speaking it. Kaoru supposed he must be. For Tamaki to arrive in Tokyo only a few years ago with no accent to speak of, his grandparents must’ve spent a long time making sure that Japanese was just as familiar to him as French was.

The woman standing next to him also looked kind and welcoming, and it actually explained a lot about Tamaki that these had been the people who had raised him for most of his life.

There was a flurry of introductions, though evidently not everyone was as unfamiliar with each other as might be assumed.

“Ah, Kyoya,” Tamaki’s grandfather said when they had gotten around to him in the rundown. “It is good to see you in person. Thank you for all you have done for our grandson and our family.”
"We cannot thank you enough," Tamaki’s grandmother said, her accent slightly heavier than her husband’s but all the more charming for it.

Kaoru didn’t think he was actually going to need several days to confirm his solution to this puzzle.

He actually made it until just after the limousine ride that took them to the de Grantaine estate in Barbizon.

To be fair, he had known for a long time that patience was not one of his many virtues.

As soon as they were all led to the guest wing and left to unpack, he ditched Hikaru with a quick “make sure to have an idea for an embarrassing question ready!” and burst into Kyoya’s assigned room.

“The ‘game’ you are playing is to bring Tamaki’s family together,” Kaoru announced, confident in his conclusion. “You’re trying to bring Tamaki’s French grandparents to Japan so that he can finally have his entire family together for good. It takes five years for a person to become a Japanese citizen. We’re here so that you can convince them, which shouldn’t be too hard, seeing how devoted they are to Tamaki, and you have some plan to meet with the ambassador to ease the process.” Kaoru wondered if he should bow at the end of this explanation. It felt like he should bow. Sometimes his genius impressed even himself.

Now all that was left was for Kyoya to own up, admit his failure, and let Kaoru help with the rest of this ‘game,’ because, honestly, it did sound like something that would make Tamaki really happy.

Kyoya looked surprised but not defeated, a shirt and a hanger resting forgotten in his hands. He didn’t look like a man who had just lost a game.

“Oh, that’s a good guess,” Kyoya said. He didn’t sound like a man who had just lost a game, either. He slid the hanger into the shirt, the pieces no longer forgotten. “It’s wrong, but it’s an excellent guess.”

Kaoru suddenly felt like a deflating balloon, all his victorious adrenaline running down his body and seeping away. “What? That can’t be true. What did you say?”

“I said it was a good guess,” Kyoya said, smiling at him, clearly enjoying the look of failure on his face. He stepped back and stowed the shirt in the armoire with a final-sounding ‘click.’ “But it’s wrong.”

“It can’t be! Everything fits!” Kaoru argued, and why was he even bothering to argue this ridiculous situation? If Kyoya said that wasn’t the goal of the game, it wasn’t the goal of the game. There was no benefit to Kyoya in lying now and then embarrassing himself when the five years were up and Kaoru had been right.

But how could he have been wrong?

“I think I’m flattered,” Kyoya said, musing, pulling a second shirt from his suitcase. “You have a very selfless idea of me.”

“I have a very accurate idea of you,” Kaoru said firmly. Even if he was wrong about this specific guess, he had no doubts about his evaluation of Kyoya’s overall character.

Kyoya seemed surprised and maybe a little bit touched by his vehemence. “I… thank you.”
Were... were his cheeks actually a little bit flushed? Was he actually blushing? The very, very slight pink dusting his cheekbones darkened even further and Kyoya cleared his throat. Kaoru tore his gaze away from the shocking cheek flush and noticed that, when he took in his entire face, Kyoya actually was looking a little bit uncomfortably flustered.

By something Kaoru had said.

The rush of power the sight gave him was invigorating and a little surprising. Kaoru couldn’t remember the last time he had seen Kyoya not entirely, almost robotically in control of himself. The realization that he, Kaoru, had managed to wrest that control away, even for a subtle, tiny moment...

Kaoru felt jittery all over, like he was itching to do something with this newfound power, but he had no idea what.

Kyoya looked away. Kaoru had caused Kyoya to look away. “Be that as it may,” Kyoya continued, cheeks still visibly pink, “I regret to inform you that your guess was incorrect. The actual game is far more complicated and selfish than you seem to believe it is.”

“If you say so,” said Kaoru, who highly doubted it. Well, he didn’t doubt the complicated part, but the selfish part, definitely.

“Which means a penalty game is called for,” Kyoya said. He looked back at Kaoru, blush fully under control, and smiled, once again their calm, cool, and collected leader. He hung up his second shirt. “I think I have a fitting one in mind.”

“Nothing you pick can be more embarrassing than needing to admit to Hikaru that I guessed wrong after I told him to prepare a victory question,” Kaoru admitted, sitting down on the edge of Kyoya’s bed. “What is it?”

“Souvenir shopping,” Kyoya said.

“Souvenir shopping?” Kaoru asked.

“Exactly,” Kyoya said. “You know Paris better than I do. I have only been here twice, and one of those times I was far too distracted to pay much attention to the city itself. I have done research, but research often falls short of practical knowledge. I will need to pick out suitable souvenirs for my father, my mother, both of my brothers, my sister, my sister’s husband, and my sister’s child.”

“Your sister has a kid?” Kaoru asked, laying back on Kyoya’s bed and watching him walk laps between his suitcase and the wardrobe.

“Not for another two months,” Kyoya said. “We will plan a time for our shopping trip as the week develops. Perhaps after we visit the embassy.”

“Which you really do only want to do in order to discuss the lupus cure,” Kaoru clarified.

“Which I really do only want to do in order to discuss the lupus cure,” Kyoya confirmed. “Although I think you have an interesting idea regarding Tamaki’s family. The de Grantaines, despite having restored their position in society financially, clearly have not embraced their position in the way they once did. I have seen only two servants since we’ve been here and these rooms appear to have been left undusted for some time. It seems as though they are in a holding pattern.”

“Like they miss Tamaki. Like there’s not much else holding them back here.” Kaoru turned onto
his stomach and balanced his chin in his hands. “It really would make him happy to have his whole family reunited.”

“It would.” Kyoya stopped by the bed and looked down at Kaoru. “And, knowing you, it would make you happy to have your clothes unwrinkled. Go unpack.”

Kaoru sighed and shoved himself to his feet. “Souvenir shopping in Paris,” he muttered on his way out the door. Well, it definitely could’ve been much worse. Plus, now he had the first guess out of the way. The first failure was taken care of. He might not have any follow-up ideas yet, but he still had four years and eight months on the clock. He’d recoup the loss in no time.

And maybe along the way, they’d help Tamaki’s grandparents immigrate to Japan. That would be nice. Tamaki would be thrilled.

Hikaru was waiting for him when he returned.

“I’ve thought of the perfect question,” he enthused, but Kaoru just shook his head at him.

“No go,” he admitted. “I guessed wrong.”

“What? Boo.” Hikaru flopped back on the bed, excitement all gone in an instant. “Ugh. Why not just give up? This doesn’t seem like that much fun. Kyoya always has all the answers anyway. There’s no way he’ll slip up.”

“Kyoya doesn’t always have all the answers,” Kaoru protested. “We barely figured out the thing with Tamaki’s dad last year before it hit the papers.” He lay down next to his brother, frowning up at the ceiling. “And I don’t want to give up.”

Giving up was not normally something the Hitachiin brothers struggled with. If something stopped being interesting, then there was no point in continuing to engage with it. There had been a lot of toys, games, and even (maybe especially) people that the two of them had given up on over the years.

“I still think this game is interesting,” Kaoru said out loud, but that wasn’t quite right. Sure, the game was interesting, but there was something else to it.

‘Nothing else matters so long as the people that we care about most are able to understand us.’

That was it. It didn’t actually matter if the game was exciting or boring or impossible. Kaoru was not going to admit defeat. Not when it was his understanding of Kyoya himself that was on the line.

He wasn’t going to tell Hikaru that, though. His brother wouldn’t get it.

His brother didn’t get that sometimes, when you were the more passive brother, the more passive friend, it was nice just to know that someone was looking at you and really seeing what was there. Hikaru wouldn’t get that idea at all. But Kaoru got it.

It was okay if Hikaru didn’t understand, but Kaoru was definitely going to see this game through to its conclusion, no matter how long it took and no matter where it took him.
Manga Background Notes for Chapter 2 (warning, MAJOR spoilers follow!):

- Hotta is one of Kyoya’s personal bodyguards.
- Kyoya takes the opportunity of a class trip to France to secretly track down Tamaki’s mother so that he can give Tamaki an honest report on how she’s doing.
- Yuzuru, Tamaki’s father, eventually discovers (with the help of the Ootori Group) a cure for the disease Anne-Sophie, Tamaki’s mother, suffers from and works that discovery into a coup that gives him control over the Suoh organization, removing Tamaki’s grandmother Shizue from power and allowing Anne-Sophie to finally move to Japan so that they can get married. Shizue, thanks to Tamaki’s kindness towards her and continued obedience even after the coup, eventually accepts this situation and grants Tamaki her blessing to reunite with his mother as well.
- Tamaki’s full name is actually René Tamaki Richard de Grantaine Suoh.

Foreign Language Notes:
1. [tsundere: a term used to refer to a person who is openly cold or combative but has an (often hidden) sweet, kind, or affectionate side; the gap between the two personalities is often considered cute or appealing]
2. [ma patrie: “my homeland”]
3. [Oui, mon amour!: “Yes, my love!”]
4. [grandpère: a rather formal French term for “grandfather”]
5. [grandmère: a rather formal French term for “grandmother”]
6. [Tu n'avais pas besoin de venir toi-même!: “You didn’t have to come personally!”]
Kaoru wasn’t planning to give up on this particular game, but life had a tendency to march on without any regard to a person’s plans.

A week had passed since Hikaru and Kaoru had returned home from Boston—never, ever to return, if Kaoru had anything to say about it—and everything felt weirdly unchanged. In a lot of ways, it felt like America was an odd pocket dimension they had entered for an entire year only to pop back out and realize that no time had actually passed in the real world. They settled back into their classes at Ouran, back into their own bedroom, back into business as usual. Even the things that had seemed to change felt the same in the end. They were spending dinner one night talking about one of those things that had seemingly changed, a literature teacher who was new to the school and thus had yet to experience some of the Hitachiins’ most classic pranks, when a colorful force of nature swept into the family dining room, dragging their father in its wake like a tiny little fishing boat caught up in a ferocious, extremely well-dressed hurricane, just like always.

“Ah, I see you boys are home from America,” Hitachiin Yuzuha said, seating herself at the head of the table with a flourish, snapping her fingers imperiously at the servants as though they should have been expecting her to suddenly arrive in time for dinner after being out of the country for over a month. “Did you have fun? Ha, like anything’s fun in Boston. Please tell me you at least managed to spend some time in New York City.”

Kaoru looked at Hikaru. Hikaru looked at Kaoru.

They blinked at each other. In tandem, they looked back at their mother.

It had not been an illusion. The light was not playing tricks on them.

Underneath her skin-tight floral-patterned dress and shaggy green vest combo, their otherwise rail-thin mother’s stomach was roughly the size and shape of a small planet.

“You’re pregnant?” Hikaru and Kaoru exploded in unison, jumping up from their seats and pointing at their mother in parallel expressions of shock.

“When did this happen?” Kaoru asked.


“How do you think?” their mom snarked back, because of course that would be the question she’d focus on. Their dad nodded gratefully to the maid who had brought out his meal, beginning to dig in. “The same way it always happens!”

“That’s not what I meant!” Hikaru protested, shoving Kaoru back. “Just… what the hell, Yuzuha?”

“Hey, watch your language!” Yuzuha ordered. “The doctor said that the fetus can hear words at seven months, so you better behave yourselves, you shitty sons!”

“Seven months?” Kaoru yelped. “You are seven months pregnant and we’re just finding out about this now?”
“I’m sorry, are you not the same snot-nosed punks who randomly moved to America for a year with no notice? Or are you new children sent here to replace my last garbage batch?” Yuzuha scowled across the table at them. Their dad dabbed at his mouth with a napkin, sprinkling a little bit more salt on his potatoes. “I wasn’t aware you two were so very into sharing these days. My mistake! Should I send you a very special postcard? Maybe hire some airplanes to write it out for you in the sky?”

“We told you we were going to America!” Kaoru protested.

“Sure, you told us. More specifically, you told our answering machine. After you had already left.” Yuzuha smiled poisonously at the two of them. “I figured, if that was the way things worked in your world, I’d just leave you a nice little voicemail about the baby. After she was born.”

“She?” Hikaru and Kaoru chorused, slamming their hands down on the table like they were trying to pin down this fact before their mom could take it away from them. “We’re going to have a baby sister?”

“It depends on whether or not I disown the two of you before then, doesn’t it?” Yuzuha crossed her arms over her (huge, really ridiculously huge, was the doctor sure that she was only seven months along?) stomach. Their dad motioned for the servants to bring dessert over. “So who could say, really? She could be an only child, at the rate you two are going!”

“What’s her name going to be?” Kaoru demanded, leaning in.

“Ageha,” Yuzuha answered, finally starting to eat the meal in front of her.

“Awww,” Kaoru and Hikaru cooed in unison, finally sliding back into their seats.

“Yes, I’m sure she’s going to be adorable,” Yuzuha said between mouthfuls of steak. “After all, we all know how much cuter you two would’ve been as girls.”

“When’s the due date?” Hikaru asked, finally settling down enough to return to his own meal. Kaoru followed his brother’s lead, listening for their mother’s answer expectantly.

“October,” Yuzuha said.

“A Halloween baby!” Hikaru exclaimed, clearly moments away from cooing again.

“Shut up, Kaoru,” Yuzuha said. “Or Hikaru. Whichever one you are. Don’t try to kiss up to me. I’m still mad.”

“We should make her a little Halloween costume,” Kaoru said, ignoring their mother. “Hikaru, don’t you think so? Oh, we could—”

“—make her a butterfly!” Hikaru finished for him, Kaoru nodding along. “To match her name!”

“What a cliché!” Yuzuha snorted. “With that sort of imagination, the two of you will never get anywhere in this world. I was thinking more along the lines of a devil costume. The contradiction between the baby and the costume—”

“—is stupid,” Kaoru said. “What kind of devil is a baby devil?”

“How about the two that I raised?” Yuzuha said.

“I think you mean the two our nannies raised,” Kaoru countered.
“Same thing, Hikaru,” Yuzuha said dismissively.

“A pumpkin,” Hikaru said, snapping his fingers.

“Boo, that’s an even worse cliché,” Kaoru and Yuzuha said at the same time.

“Momotaro!” Kaoru immediately suggested. “Both the baby and the peach in one costume.”

“Not terrible,” Yuzuha admitted. “Draw up some plans and let me see them.”

“Yes!” Kaoru exclaimed, pumping his fist in victory. This was going to be the cutest thing he had ever designed, hands-down. It would have to be, for his very own baby sister. She deserved nothing less!

Their dad pushed his chair back and came around the table to give both Kaoru and Hikaru a single, simple kiss on the top of their heads, one after the other. “You’re going to be wonderful older brothers,” he said fondly, already heading for the door. “It’s good to have you both back. Tell me all about your trip later.”

As Kaoru got ready for bed, he thought about that. It was good to be back: good to be in their own home, good to have a project to focus on, good to be running the Host Club again.

It was all… good.

It was.

Wasn’t it?

Everything was fine. Great, even! The way it had always been, before they’d gone away to America for a year. Except for the small changes. And all the changes that had happened were good changes!

So why, then, couldn’t Kaoru rid himself of the itching, buzzing sense of wrongness somewhere inside his head while he brushed his teeth, while he pulled on his pajamas, while he slid underneath the covers of his bed?

Could it be that he hadn’t gotten much of a chance to visit New York over the past year, and his subconscious was upset that his mom kept rubbing it in?

Definitely not. He and Hikaru were planning to go to the city for college; he had plenty of time to get to know it in the future.

Could it be because he hadn’t made more progress in his game with Kyoya?

No, that wasn’t it. After his previous misstep, he had given himself mental permission to go slowly with that particular puzzle. Not having more leads was frustrating, but Kaoru knew he had plenty of time.

It couldn’t be because he was suddenly becoming homesick for Boston, could it?

The thought passed almost as quickly as it had arrived. There was nothing good about Boston. Boston was bad. Very, very bad.

Other than the memory that Boston was a place that existed on the same planet as him, he had nothing to complain about. And yet, the itch persisted.
“A little baby sister?” the girls squealed at Host Club the next day when they revealed the news, almost as excited as Kaoru and Hikaru themselves had been.

“But we’re not going to be able to hear about her for very long, will we?” one of the guests added mournfully. A pall settled over the girls again, like it had over and over again ever since Kyoya had made the official announcement a week ago that, although the Host Club was officially back in business, they planned to close the doors of the third music room for good at the end of the year, before the last of their members graduated high school in March. Kyoya had also added on a plug for the “super special ultimate final editions” of several photo books, of course. End of an era or not, Kyoya was still Kyoya.

“Don’t be sad, my beautiful angels!” Tamaki, always available to save the day, swept the mournful girl up into his arms and held her close. The other guests all clustered around him, clearly hoping that the sparkle of his personality would push back the darkness of the future for just a little while longer. “After all, beauty is meant to be fleeting. Even this encounter with you, as perfect as it is, as much as my heart might pine for it, cannot last forever. Otherwise, we might take it for granted and not properly treasure these few moments that we have together.”

The girl he was cradling melted, all traces of her melancholy evaporating under Tamaki’s soothing words.

Kaoru frowned, that itching sense of discontent running up and down his arms like it needed an outlet. He reached out and caught Haruhi’s hand as she walked past. “Do you really not mind that stuff?” he asked in an undertone. All of the girls around the twins had abandoned them for Tamaki by now, so he probably needn’t have bothered speaking so quietly, but, for some reason, it was hard to inject much energy into his voice.

“What stuff?” Haruhi asked blankly. Kaoru gestured with his free hand rather than respond and she looked over to see Tamaki mid-embrace. “Oh.” She thought about it for a moment, as though thinking about it for the very first time in her life, before concluding, “No, that’s fine.”

That was not a very satisfying answer. Kaoru scowled, not entirely sure what he was scowling at.

“He shouldn’t do that kind of thing to you,” Hikaru protested from Kaoru’s side. “I’m disappointed in him.” He was also scowling, his arms crossed grumpily. Kaoru knew why Hikaru was upset, at least. Why was it so much easier to understand his twin than it was to understand himself?

An uncharitable part of his brain reminded him that simple-minded people tended to be simple, after all.

“Shouldn’t do what kind of thing? Be Tamaki?” Haruhi smiled passively at the two of them. “I like him because he is Tamaki. I understand him and he understands me.” She actually pinched Kaoru’s cheek, because the two of them really were a terrible influence on her and they all knew it. “Please don’t worry about us.” Looking a little bit contemplative but still not even the tiniest bit jealous, she wandered back to her table and her guests.

“I think he needs a reminder that I’m going to swoop in the second it seems like he’s making her sad.” As soon as Haruhi had left, Hikaru had gone back to frowning at the cluster of girls around Tamaki.

“Does she look very sad to you?” Kaoru waved a listless hand in Haruhi’s direction to refocus his brother. She didn’t look very sad. She looked like she was seriously considering donating the Host Club’s coffee budget to a pro bono legal fund somewhere. Same as usual. “I think you need to find someone else already.”
“There’s no one else like her,” Hikaru pronounced emphatically, as if Kaoru didn’t know it. As if all of them weren’t a little bit in love with her, even if only Hikaru and Tamaki were openly passionate about it.

“There’s no one else like him, either,” Kaoru pointed out. Far be it from him to belittle his brother by the comparison; it was just a statement of fact. The whole group of them were probably a little bit in love with Tamaki, too. How could people be exposed to that much pure goodness in a person and not fall a little bit in love?

“I know,” Hikaru grumbled. “He’s the only person I ever could have given her up for, you know?”

Of course Kaoru knew. More importantly, he felt like maybe, just maybe, he had finally put a finger on that itchy, unsettled feeling that he had been struggling with. “This all can’t stay the same forever,” he said out loud, frowning, voice slow and uncertain. “We can’t stay like this forever. This is good, really good, what we have right now, but it can’t continue indefinitely. ‘Beauty is only beauty because it ends’ or whatever, right? We won’t have this anymore, once the Host Club is done, once you and I go to New York.”

Kaoru had a feeling that Hikaru was just going to point out that everything would be fine so long as the two of them still had each other, the way it had always been. After all, that had always been their approach to changes in the world in the past.

What he wasn’t expecting was for Hikaru to start laughing at him.

And especially for Hikaru to just… keep laughing at him.

Kaoru looked over at his brother, unable to read his mind for once. His frown morphed back into a scowl as the laughter continued and continued and continued until Hikaru was crying from it.

“Shut up,” Kaoru finally protested, taking his own turn to cross his arms grumpily. “Get over it already!”

“I-di-ot,” Hikaru wheezed, drawing out every syllable. “It’s like you don’t know tono at all.”

Hikaru wiped the tears of mirth from his eyes. “You’re so dumb. So dumb. Haven’t you realized? Tono says that garbage to the girls, but it’s not what he actually believes at all. He’s got his family now, right? Family isn’t just blood. He’s never going to let us go.” Hikaru shook his head again. “So, so dumb. I’m ashamed to be related to you.”

Kaoru blinked. Then he pouted. “Shut up! Things just feel kind of weird lately, okay? And how can you call me dumb when you’re all upset about the way tono’s treating Haruhi even though you feel the exact same way as she does about it?” Kaoru pushed his hair to the other side of his forehead with one hand, making a stupid face to imitate his brother. In his dullest possible voice, he rattled off, “‘Tono says all that, he doesn’t mean it, all the people who love him understand what he really means...’”

Hikaru caught Kaoru’s hand and pulled it away from his hair, letting his bangs fall back to their original position. His eyes sparkled wickedly.

“You know what would be a really good prank to play right now?” Hikaru asked, voice falling even quieter.

Kaoru tilted his head thoughtfully and then made a face as he realized what his brother was thinking. “A Hitachiin fight?” he confirmed, as quietly as he could. “Really? Right now?”

“If things go too easily for tono, it’s no fun, right?” Hikaru asked. “Plus, it’s been forever since our
“Fine,” Kaoru said, instantly caving in to his brother like he always did. Plus, he didn’t exactly hate the idea. It would be a nice way to vent some of this free-floating frustration. “You start it.”

“I can’t believe mom chose your design for Ageha’s Halloween costume,” Hikaru said immediately, voice only slightly louder but with the sort of heat that actually caused several girls to turn their way for the first time since Tamaki had shown up.

Eh, it was somewhere to start, at least. “Well, I can’t believe that you’re so jealous of a baby,” Kaoru said, slightly louder still, slowly building the momentum of their ‘fight.’

“I’m jealous?” Hikaru said, jumping to his feet. “I’m not the one who’s used to being the baby of this family.”

“Are you sure about that?” Kaoru asked, arms still crossed as he stayed seated. “You were sounding awfully whiny there, a minute ago.”

The girls started flocking back to them, trying to make peace, but soon both the twins were on their feet, yelling at each other across the room about replacement siblings and baby-like behavior.

Kaoru thought it was actually pretty cathartic, having these fights every now and then. It let them freely share some of the things that might have otherwise eaten away at them on the inside. Plus, the very nature of the fight meant that they were in on this prank together and that the real fight was against the rest of the world. It stopped the things they said out loud from stinging too hard, the way they might have stung on the inside if they hadn’t been set free.

Still, it didn’t take long for Tamaki to sweep in, begging them to make peace and remember that they were brothers who loved each other. Kaoru could tell Hikaru wanted them to drag it out a bit longer, keep their foolish lord on the ropes for a little while, so he stood his ground.

“I refuse to speak to you,” Kaoru snipped as the time for hosting wound down. “Not if you insist on being irrational.”

“Well, that works out, because you have nothing to say that I want to hear anyway,” Hikaru countered. He grabbed Mori-senpai to pull out the door with him. “I’m going to stay the night with Mori-senpai. I bet he won’t grope me in his sleep, unlike a certain creepy molester I know.”

The breath the girls were all holding in was practically a tangible force in the room.

“You stole my line!” Kaoru shot back. “Don’t come back until you’re ready to apologize, you pervert with a younger sibling complex!” All the girls exhaled at once with an audible whoosh at that. Kaoru continued, “I’ll accept groveling! And I can’t promise I won’t take it out on you!”

“Ha! Fat chance!” Hikaru said, and he slammed the club room door shut behind himself and Mori-senpai.

Kaoru and Hikaru had put on better productions, but this one seemed to sell itself well enough. Renge would probably have a whole new line of doujinshi about this storyline fresh off the presses first thing in the morning.

They had done such a good job selling it that the fight was all the girls could talk about as they left the room for the day, which meant they had actually managed to get them to forget about the swiftly approaching end of the Host Club for at least a few minutes. Hani-senpai seemed unbothered by either the fight or by the sudden abduction of his cousin, waving a cheerful goodbye
to the rest of them before heading out for the evening. A teary-eyed Tamaki seemed to be on the verge of saying something to Kaoru, but Haruhi caught his hand and pulled him away, giving Kaoru a dead-eyed ‘I know what you’re doing and I am not amused’ look over her shoulder as they went. Kaoru knew he should feel bad, but shame, always a more distant emotion for him and his brother, felt even further away than usual today.

Soon it was just Kaoru and Kyoya left in the clubroom. Kyoya was typing away at his laptop, transferring information from his record book into one of his many spreadsheets, doing the behind-the-scenes work that kept the club flowing so smoothly. Kaoru sighed, figured he couldn’t really think of somewhere more interesting to be anyway, and pulled up a chair to sit down across from him.

Kyoya glanced up, saw that it was him, and continued typing. “Good. I meant to talk to you. Give me just a minute to finish totaling the tea cake consumption for today.”

Kaoru laughed tiredly into his hand, even though he wasn’t feeling particularly amused. “Take all the minutes you need.” Far be it from him to interrupt important tea cake enumeration, after all. He was only here for lack of anywhere else interesting to be. He pulled his physics workbook out of his bag and made it through a problem and a half before the typing noises stopped.

“I’m sorry for the delay,” Kyoya said, sounding honestly regretful. Kaoru slid his book back into his bag, looking up. Kaoru hadn’t noticed earlier, but Kyoya looked tired up close.

“Your concealer doesn’t quite match your skin tone,” Kaoru observed. “Getting even less sleep than usual?”

Kyoya frowned, running a hand through his artfully tousled hair. His hair was too fine for that sort of behavior; it immediately settled back into his normal style. It didn’t really matter. Even his default hairstyle looked really good on him. Lucky bastard.

“Trust a Hitachiin,” he muttered. “It’s nothing.”

“It’s university,” Kaoru said. It was obvious. Kyoya was running the Host Club basically single-handedly, but that wasn’t anything new. He was finishing up that course he had been taking at Harvard long-distance, but he had been managing that for a while now. The only new responsibility on his plate was college, which he had started months late due to the difference in academic calendars between America and Ouran. He was playing catch up, and, even worse than that, he was playing catch up in law, a field that he had shocked everyone by choosing and that, as far as Kaoru knew, he didn’t have any real background in.

Kyoya quirked his eyebrows at him, eyes as sharp as always behind his glasses despite the hint of dark circles around them. “What gives you that idea?”

Kaoru shrugged, still listless. It wasn’t even worth the effort to explain. “It’s pretty obvious. Everyone’s talking about it, you know. Just not in front of you, ‘cause they’re terrified. ‘Ootori Kyoya? Majoring in law? Where’s the benefit in that?’”

Kyoya smiled at him, one of those barely-there, entirely honest smiles that he seemed to save for members of the Host Club. It was a good thing he didn’t whip that thing out all the time. It softened his eyes, rounded his face, smoothed his jawline… Tamaki wouldn’t have any fans left, if they could all see Kyoya like this. It was probably for the best. Kyoya already ate the girls (and their pocketbooks) alive without needing any extra help. “Are you asking?”

“No,” Kaoru said. He tried to smile in return. That sort of expression just seemed to deserve a
smile, even if all he could manage was a mediocre, tired one. “I know you were taking that business program at Harvard, so I figure that track was covered and law is going to help you out in a different way. I was just going to say that Mori-senpai’s a year ahead of you and might be able to help with some of it.”

“He and I have already discussed the possibility. Unfortunately, he took most of his first year courses in America, which has a significantly different curriculum.” Kyoya steepled his fingers over his closed laptop. “Now, I’m guessing you and your brother didn’t stage that flimsier than usual fight just so you could comment on my improper use of concealer or the difficulties of my schedule.”

“No,” Kaoru admitted. “We just have some stuff to work out, I guess.”

“You would think that by now you two would have learned how to do that sort of thing without dragging the rest of us into the blast radius,” Kyoya said, dry as always. “But, then again, I suppose your selfishness is one of your charms.”

Kaoru half-heartedly stuck his tongue out at him. “It’s mostly just a prank on to—Tamaki,” he admitted. It had started feeling weird to refer to Tamaki as tono when he wasn’t just speaking to Hikaru. Yet another small piece of weirdness that came with being back from America. “We were talking about how things are changing, especially when the two of us go to New York next year and the rest of you stay here, and Hikaru said that Tamaki’s going to keep us all together no matter what.”

“So this is a test,” Kyoya concluded. “You’re testing Tamaki to see how hard he’ll work to keep us together.”

“No!” Kaoru protested. Kyoya just raised an eyebrow at him. Kaoru amended his answer. “Well, it wasn’t intended that way.”

“It’s foolish of you to play a game when you already know the outcome,” Kyoya said. “And it’s not fair of you two to test him like this after everything else that we’ve been through together.”

“Ugh, stop,” Kaoru complained. “You sound disappointed in me. I hate it.”

“Then you should stop being disappointing,” Kyoya replied, blunt and insensitive as usual.

“It was Hikaru’s idea anyway,” Kaoru muttered, crossing his arms rebelliously. “And it’s not going to last very long, probably.” Unfortunately, said Kaoru’s brain and he frowned, trying to examine that dark, nasty thought before it slipped away again, but he wasn’t quite fast enough. What was wrong with him?

He looked back up to see those sharp dark eyes entirely focused on him. “Now it’s you who seems disappointed.” Kyoya raised a hand to his temple and pressed there, delicately, like Kaoru was giving him a headache. “I… had anticipated you might want to speak with me. I am not sure I have anything constructive to offer, but you are still… welcome to speak with me. If you think it would help.”

“I’d believe you if you could say that without acting like it was causing you physical pain,” Kaoru said, slouching down to rest his chin on his fist on the table.

“Would you rather I rescind the offer entirely?”

“I guess not…”
“Then…?” Kyoya twisted his wrist to make a simple sweeping gesture, inviting Kaoru to continue speaking.

What the hell did Kyoya even want, here? What was Kaoru supposed to say? Why was Kyoya so convinced that speaking to him would cure whatever was wrong with him?

“I have a guess. For the game.” Kaoru said. He hadn’t realized he was going to say that until it was out of his mouth. Shit.

Kyoya raised both eyebrows, sitting back in his chair. “Ah. I will admit, that was not what I was expecting. It has been a while. I was beginning to think you had given up.”

“I’m not going to give up!” Kaoru insisted, a little offended, though even his offense felt muted, smothered by a blanket somewhere deep inside of him. “You should know better than anyone that sometimes these ‘intellectual diversions’ take a while.”

“Fair enough,” Kyoya admitted. “What have you learned?”

Kaoru frowned, trying to figure out what he wanted to say.

Then he realized that this wasn’t a fair test either.

Kyoya was Kaoru’s friend. He didn’t have to trick him into a conversation. Only people who didn’t actually know him really believed Kyoya was as cruel as that. If it were important, Kyoya would listen without a game being needed as a cover.

“I’m lying,” Kaoru admitted, no longer able to meet Kyoya’s eyes. “Not about giving up! I still want to play. But I haven’t picked up on any additional clues to make a guess with, unless it’s something about you majoring in law. That seems too broad, though, and I haven’t managed to make it fit in with the other pieces yet. So I don’t actually have a real guess.” He thought for a moment, staring at the wall of the music room. Kyoya stayed quiet, letting him have his time. Finally, Kaoru continued, “I suppose that I have a wish, more than a guess. A wish of what you’re trying to do, because I know that, if you make it a goal, it will definitely happen. So it’s my guess because I want it to be true, not because I think it actually is.”

“Again, I feel like you have greater confidence in my character than is deserved,” Kyoya said. Kaoru looked, but there wasn’t a hint of a blush on his upperclassman’s face this time. Damn, he’d already mastered the one tool Kaoru had found to fluster him. That hadn’t taken very long. “What is this bad, not-really-a-guess guess, then?”

“That you’re taking the five years to figure out a way to keep all of us together forever,” Kaoru said. He probably would have sounded hopeful if he didn’t sound so detached. “A way for us all to follow our dreams, no matter how far they take us, but still stay together. So that not everything needs to change after we graduate.”

“Foolish.” Kyoya’s answer was cool and immediate. “I don’t need to make a plan for that. It’s already a given. As if Tamaki would let it happen any other way.”

Kaoru laughed tiredly, in spite of himself, ducking his head to hide his laughter in his hand. “You sound just like Hikaru.”

“Odd, since you’re typically the one with more common sense out of the two of you,” Kyoya said.

“I’m not sure if I should feel flattered on my behalf or insulted on Hikaru’s. Or vice versa.” Kaoru sat back in his chair, stretching his legs out, careful not to accidentally kick Kyoya across the table.
He stared down at his hands, splayed against the edge of the tabletop. “I guess I don’t have anything to be worried about, then. After all, we have Tamaki on our side.”

“But you’re still worried,” Kyoya observed. Kaoru finally looked back up at him. Kyoya met his gaze, then adjusted his glasses and said, “Because we both know that’s not what you actually wanted to talk to me about.”

Kaoru arched an eyebrow. “Oh? Go ahead and enlighten me, then, because I’ve got no clue what’s bothering me. It’s like there’s an itch in my brain, but I can’t figure out how to reach it in order to scratch it, and it just makes me want to make everyone else miserable too.” He shrugged, which was his new favorite mode of expression. Very versatile. Very low energy. “I have no idea why I’m feeling this way, or how it started, or what would make it stop.”

Kyoya frowned at this. “Because you’re frantically latching on to anything you can focus on in any given moment so that you don’t have to think long-term. You’re not stupid, Kaoru. You don’t honestly believe anything is going to change with the seven of us, even if you two go to New York for a few years. You’re being purposefully obtuse.” Kyoya laced his fingers together on the table, leaning in slightly, still frowning. He took a breath, then let it out. Then he took another.

Kaoru frowned. He had never seen Kyoya attempt to buy himself time before. What the hell was he preparing to say?

When he finally said it, it wasn’t what Kaoru had been expecting. “Your mother is pregnant,” Kyoya said, every word slow and measured like Kyoya was holding it up to the light, studying it carefully before offering it up to Kaoru. “You are due to have a little sister. Congratulations are in order, I suppose.”

“That’s the worst ‘congratulations’ I think I’ve ever heard,” Kaoru pointed out. He wasn’t sure where Kyoya was going with this, and it was making him feel even more uneasy than he had been. He covered up that uneasiness with a taunting smirk. “Kyoya, you have to at least pretend like you mean these things.”

“I would for someone who it wasn’t worth being honest with,” Kyoya said dismissively. Now that he had begun, it seemed impossible to stop him. “You are not a child. You do not need to be coddled. What you need is to face the reality of your situation. The Hitachiin family has been matriarchal for generations. Hikaru has shown muted interest, at best, in your mother’s business, but you have always appeared to be honestly invested in it. Whether your interest is due to an actual fascination with the world of fashion or whether it was born because you knew that Hikaru did not enjoy it and that one of the two of you would need to carry on the family mantle one day, I cannot say. I did not know you before the interest had already taken hold, or I might have a better idea.

Regardless, it is undeniable that fashion is now a passion of yours, however it began. You had always assumed that it would be your destiny to take over your mother’s company. That it had to be your destiny, because there were no other options available, for either you or the company.” Kyoya made no effort to blunt the merciless sincerity in his voice; he just kept staring Kaoru down, not letting him hide from the truth of his words. “Now, out of nowhere, there is going to be a female child to take charge of that company. A legitimate heir. You have followed the only path you have ever known for your entire life, and now that path is gone. Are you telling me that this idea has not caused you any concern? Have you truly convinced yourself that your current unhappiness is due to the fear of our friends moving apart, for no real reason whatsoever, and not due to the sudden, unexpected loss of what you had considered your birthright?”

That… that was it.
That was the itch.

A rushing sound echoed in Kaoru’s ears as it was ripped out of his mind and placed on bright and shining display on the table between them.

The music room shivered apart around them. Kaoru felt like someone had sucked all the air out of the room, out of his own chest, like covering up the itch had been all that had been keeping him together. He struggled to breathe, bringing up one hand to clutch against his racing heart, trying to keep himself in one piece before the vacuum could tear him apart.

“I… I really am excited to have a little sister,” he managed to protest, quietly. “I am. I am.” His voice trembled, pathetic in the void. He felt raw, entirely made up of painful, jagged edges around the now-empty space where the fear had been torn out of him. That was it. That had been it, ever since last night, lurking behind every other thought he had. How had it not registered with him? How had he managed to cover it up so thoroughly?

“I know,” Kyoya said, voice far quieter than it had been just moments ago. Kaoru darted a glance at him, seeking answers, seeking reassurance. Kyoya’s eyes were soft behind his glasses again, somehow, even though there was no smile in sight on his face.

“I bet… I bet she’s going to be really, really cute.” Wetness dropped onto Kaoru’s hands, once, twice, blurring the sight of Kyoya across from him, and he hurriedly brought both hands up to hide his face.

“I don’t doubt it,” Kyoya said with the same kind of delicacy that Kaoru had just been thinking that he hadn’t been born with. Kaoru could hear the noise of a chair being pushed back and a laptop being slid into a bag. There were a few footsteps, and then the soft, gentle pressure of a hand was on his shoulder. “Kaoru. There is not one set course for you in this world. There is not one set course for any of us. Never forget your family precept.” A short, purposeful pause filled the space between them before Kyoya continued, the words slow and intentional, “I have thought of your family precept often lately. It helped inspire our game. So you, especially, have no right to forget it.”

The Hitachiin family precept.

*Those who live their lives freely are the winners.*

By the time Kaoru looked up from his hands, he was alone in the music room. Kyoya was gone.

“Stupid,” Kaoru muttered to the empty air. “When someone has a reaction like that, you don’t just leave them alone to cry.”

Where there had been jagged edges before, now he just felt… nothing. He felt hollowed out inside. A big, walking blank.

Was he really such a terrible person?

Terrible enough to be jealous of his own unborn baby sister?

His unborn baby sister who was going to take everything from him.

It wasn’t her fault.

It wasn’t fair to be jealous.
It was the exact feeling he had accused Hikaru of, earlier in the afternoon, without even thinking about it.

Talk about cathartic fights.

He was so stupid.

Hikaru was right. Kyoya was right. He was stupid, and a terrible person to boot.

“She’s going to be so cute,” he said to the deserted room. His voice broke on the words, on the empty protests. “So, so cute. I’m going to love her so much.”

And he would. He knew he would.

But that didn’t stop it from hurting.

_Those who live their lives freely are the winners_, huh?

But some things were never going to be free. Some things were just out of a person’s control, at the end of the day.

Kyoya understood. Kyoya understood better than anyone else he knew, probably. No wonder Kyoya had assumed that this was what Kaoru had stayed after to talk about.

Of course, Kyoya was so emotionally stifled that he had walked out rather than have to deal with actually having the conversation. Still, at least he had tried. Kind of.

Shit, was this how Kyoya felt _all the time_? Wanting something, reaching for it, working _so hard, so diligently_, knowing the whole time that it was destined for someone else? Always knowing that your efforts were doomed to fail by an uncontrollable accident of birth?

Maybe Kaoru couldn’t blame him for walking away rather than talking about it.

It sucked. It really, really sucked, and Kaoru had just realized he was feeling it about five minutes ago. Kaoru already wanted to just scoop the empty, hollow feeling out of him and dump it in some corner, leave it with the trash for some maid to take care of.

Unfortunately, feelings didn’t actually work that way.

He honestly did like fashion. The interest wasn’t something he had forced in order to make life more convenient for those around him. He really, really liked it. He _loved_ it. He had loved it ever since he had been young. With his brother and he the way that they were, he had always been so captivated by the possibility of an outfit, of a hairstyle, of a certain layer of make-up to control the way a person appeared. His brother and he might be identical, but all it took was one slight difference in an application of their sense of fashion and their unique personalities would shine through, unquenchable. Fashion was the ability to construct an identity, the ability to choose how a person was sculpted and presented. The ability to fade in and be part of a set or the ability to stand out and be an individual—whatever a person wanted. Whatever Kaoru wanted.

Live his life freely? Fashion _was_ freedom, to him. It always had been.

Sure, it had helped that Hikaru hadn’t seemed to care as deeply about it, that he had treated it just like any other interest for them. An occasional diversion, albeit one that they tended to be good at. It had meant that Kaoru could both follow his dream and also take on responsibility for the family business, freeing his brother to follow his own passions at the same time. It had been a win-win-
win, as far as Kaoru was concerned.

And now...

Now nothing was set in stone.

Maybe little Ageha wouldn’t care about fashion at all. Their mother would never force her to follow in her footsteps, just like her own mother, their grandmother, had never forced their mom to follow her in hers. Those who live their lives freely are the winners, after all.

And even if he wasn’t next in line to take over the family business anymore, that didn’t mean he had to give up fashion entirely. He could make his own name, his own line. He could fight, in his own way. He might even convince his mom that, despite his gender, he really was the best person to be her heir.

Nothing was set in stone.

At least he had found that itch. At least he could put words to it.

Speaking of words.

Kaoru pulled out his phone and sent Kyoya a short message.

Thanks, he wrote, pausing only a moment to figure out what else he needed to say. You were right. I was avoiding thinking about it, but I needed that, I think.

He received a response almost at once.

Good enough, Kyoya had written. Penalty game for that pathetic guess you made: end this stupid fight with Hikaru immediately. Tamaki’s already initiating some idiotic plan to reunite you two, and it’s going to be far too much work.

Kaoru could practically see Kyoya’s eyes twitching as he wrote that. He laughed weakly, alone in their clubroom. He wiped at his wet cheeks one last time and picked up his bag. Time to go to Mori-senpai’s house and convinced Hikaru that they really, really didn’t need to pull this prank right now.

And after that… time to do some thinking.

What did he want for his future? What did he want to put his effort into? Underneath everything else, with every other guarantee taken away… what did he, Hitachiin Kaoru, want? If all the paths of the world were open to him… would that change anything?

What did it mean to “live freely,” at the end of the day? Forget his game with Kyoya—where did he want himself to be, at the end of the next five years?

He had a lot of thinking to do.

Chapter End Notes

Manga Background Notes for Chapter 3 (warning, spoilers follow!):
- Hitachiin Yuzuha is the twins’ mother. She runs a high-end fashion company. Her
personality is very similar to that of the twins.
- The Hitachiin family is traditionally matriarchal. The twins’ father took Yuzuha’s surname, and Yuzuha’s mother, Kazuha, is the seventh-generation master of her own business, a school of flower arranging, for which her husband, the twins’ grandfather, is only an assistant.
- The twins’ parents are rarely home, as they both travel a lot for work.
- The twins plan to go to a specialized art school rather than go to Ouran University with their friends.
- Mori-senpai majors in law in college.

Foreign Language Notes:
1. [Momotaro: a baby boy found in a peach in a Japanese legend]
2. [Doujinshi: an amateur manga publication]

The little Hitachiin sister is at least quasi-canon—the possibility of her was mentioned by Bisco Hattori when she wrote about the future of the twins. Along with her actual existence, her age in comparison to theirs is never actually confirmed.
What Hikaru constantly, first jokingly and then exasperatedly, referred to as “Kaoru’s midlife crisis” led to some real, tangible benefits for the Host Club.

They had never before been so well-dressed, and, for this group in particular, that was saying something.

Meanwhile, if Kaoru didn’t know better, he’d think Kyoya was treating Kaoru’s new-found drive to design half as an opportunity to profit and half as a game of its own.

As part of the “education on the interests of young girls!” that Tamaki wanted the entire Host Club to partake in before the club had their first ever official younger sister, Kyoya had somehow convinced Tamaki to read the novel *Heidi*. This had naturally led Tamaki to first take the whole club out on a weekend trip to visit the Heidi’s Village theme park in Hokuto City and then, the very next week, brightly suggest that they should hold an Alpine-themed hosting session. Kaoru had found himself spending that next week torn between hand-knitting sweaters and measuring the members of his club for lederhosen.

Then Tamaki’s desire to understand a wide range of young girls’ life experiences had led him to watch *From Up on Poppy Hill* on some mysterious recommendation that he never admitted to but was definitely Kyoya, leaving Kaoru to frantically research what the Ouran uniforms had looked like in the 1960s.

Then, by the week after *that*, Kyoya had reminded Tamaki that the *Harry Potter* series existed, just after the last film in the franchise had been released, and Kaoru was responsible for figuring out what colors to make the lining of his friends’ wizarding robes.

“You’re doing this on purpose,” Kaoru accused Kyoya a week later, when Tamaki practically face-planted over the doorway of the music room in his zeal to share how very excited he was about superheroes ever since he and Kyoya had watched a few movies over the past weekend.

“Is that an official guess?” Kyoya asked. He pushed his glasses up to catch the glare of the nearest light, voice dripping with innocent nonchalance so fake it was practically a crime on its own.

“You’re the worst,” Kaoru groaned, already getting a headache at the thought of trying to make spandex catsuits actually look appealing on a group of men.

Accessories. Accessories were going to be very important.

“You seem like you’re having fun again,” was all Kyoya said in response to that, already turning to help Tamaki back to his feet, ready to continue subtly encouraging this insanity.

And the thing was… well, Kyoya wasn’t wrong. Even when dropping stitches and fumbling with fashion tape and cursing pretty much all of modern civilization, especially the parts that had been made into ridiculously fantastical books and movies, Kaoru was having more fun than he had had in a long time. Maybe Tamaki was right in all his ranting about taking things for granted that Hikaru had insisted he didn’t actually mean. For so long, Kaoru had taken his involvement in fashion for granted. Now, it felt like he was embracing every opportunity to design and create that he could, fully embracing the knowledge that it all could be taken away from him at any moment.
He was having more fun than ever.

It didn’t hurt that he was also really good at it.

Really, really good, he thought as he admired his friends in color-coded form-fitting bodysuits that didn’t even look a tenth as stupid as they by all rights should, thanks to a judicious application of extravagant belts and logo designs.

By the time Ageha’s due date arrived, Kaoru felt like he had done the best he could to prepare himself for any eventuality.

But it turned out that he was wrong.

As he gazed down at the tiny, red-cheeked girl his mother had placed in his arms, he realized that there had been no possible way he could have prepared himself for how much he would adore her.

She was the sweetest, most innocent, most lovable, most adorable creature to ever grace this disgusting planet. Kaoru was one-hundred percent sure. When he had first become aware that a baby was on its way, he had prepared himself for obnoxious whining and crying or, on the other side of possibility, barely noticing her existence at all besides as a lump that the nannies and nursemaids would cart around. He had assumed that, while she would undoubtedly become cute, being a Hitachiin, that cuteness would come with age. Instead, he—and Hikaru, whose overprotective older brother complex seemed to have gone into overdrive with a sibling who was actually meaningfully younger than him—felt an acute sense of loss every time their sister was not in the room with them. It helped that she was a calm, sweet baby, barely making a fuss, spending most of her time blinking placidly at the world around her, smiling contentedly whenever Hikaru and Kaoru took turns cradling her gently in the crook of their arms.

Were babies that young supposed to give you their full attention like that? Were babies that young even physically capable of giving quiet, sustained attention like Ageha was?

His little sister was probably a prodigy, Kaoru concluded, not caring how sappy and pathetic he knew he was being.

“It’s like I used up all of the bad stuff when I made the two of you,” Yuzuha said thoughtfully at dinner one night, a week after delivery, and neither Kaoru nor Hikaru bothered to protest because they both agreed.

Ageha was the purest little angel in the world, and Kaoru thought he would probably die for her. It was odd; he didn’t think he’d ever felt this strongly about anyone before. Hikaru came closest, and, while he was willing to sacrifice a lot for his brother, it still didn’t even feel close to what he would give up for this tiny little baby.

In fact, he realized at about the same time as his mother had made the comment about Ageha’s overwhelming goodness that he no longer felt even the smallest pinprick of pain at the thought of losing the Hitachiin fashion label to her. Actually, Kaoru would hand the company to her on a silver platter, if she wanted it. He’d be her assistant. He’d have his sister and fashion. That was pretty much the winningest win of them all!

Not that Kaoru stopped throwing himself into as much design and fashion work as he could get his hands on. If anything, his drive grew even stronger. After all, he had to learn all he could so that he could better support Ageha!

Thanks to this drive, when Kazukiyo, still their class president and probably on track to become
president of the world one day if he could just grow a little bit more of a backbone, opened up a
class discussion on what their class wanted to do with their free day in October this year and
Momoka, still the object of his quiet adoration and still oblivious about it, thoughtfully suggested
an “interest exhibition,” Hikaru and Kaoru barely looked at each other before leaping to their feet
in unison and agreeing whole-heartedly.

Kaoru had so many ideas floating around in his head that it was going to be hard to narrow it down
to just one exhibit.

“What is an ‘interest exhibition’?” Haruhi asked into the quiet, thoughtful murmur of conversation
the suggestion inspired, the twins still standing on either side of her desk.

“It’s something the Ouran third-years do for their free day, some years,” Hikaru told her, leaning
on her shoulder.

“Since it’s our third year, and not all of us will return to Ouran for university, it’s a way to show off
what we want to be doing for the rest of our lives,” Kazukiyo explained from the front of the room.
“We’ll hold a small festival, and our classmates and parents can all see an example of what we plan
to do next.”

Haruhi hummed. “That sounds interesting,” she decided. “I think it would be nice to see what
everyone’s plans are.”

The vote had been unanimous, after that. Haruhi could also probably become president of the
world one day, Kaoru thought affectionately, reaching over to ruffle her hair and ignoring her
questioning look in response. It was basically impossible to say no to her.

“What are you two planning to do for the exhibition?” Haruhi asked them as they walked out of
their classroom and towards the courtyard where they had promised the rest of the club they would
meet up for lunch. She was looking even more thoughtful than usual, sandwiched between the two
of them.

“Something for Ageha,” they said at the same time, grinning at each other over the top of her head.
Kaoru had known they were on the same page about this, but it was still nice to have his twin
telepathy confirmed.

Haruhi pursed her lips together. “If you’re not careful, she’s going to become spoiled.”

Kaoru put his arms up in a careless shrug, one arm bumping into Hikaru’s as his brother did the
same thing. “What’s wrong with that?” they asked in unison.

Haruhi just sighed. Kaoru could hear a ghostly echo of Kyoya’s ‘trust a Hitachiin’ in that sigh.
“Still,” she insisted. “This exhibition is supposed to reflect on an interest of yours, right?”

“That’s not as important for the two of us,” Hikaru pointed out.

“Not since we’re planning to go to New York for college anyway,” Kaoru finished for him.

“What do you mean?” Haruhi asked, a frown causing a small crease to appear in her forehead.
Kaoru had warned her so many times that she was going to get wrinkles if she kept that up, but it
was still cute. So little phased her in life that it was nice to get at least this expression out of her,
even if it was just one of passive confusion.

“A lot of our classmates are planning to use this as an opportunity to show off their skills to the
parents of other students,” Kaoru explained. Hikaru just looked out the hallway window, clearly
already bored of the topic. “It’s a good way to start making an impression on the leaders of several different industries. Someone who is planning to become CEO of a business or chief of a trade might want to make use of those good impressions someday in the future.”

“Ah.” Haruhi nodded. “Right. It makes sense that there would be an ulterior motive like that, at this school. But couldn’t those connections be just as useful for the two of you, too?”

“Not as useful as the connections that we’d make at college in New York. The things we’re interested in tend to be more international.” Kaoru grinned down at their shared best friend. “Not that that doesn’t mean we’re not going to be the most impressive exhibitors in there.”

“Of course,” Hikaru agreed, jumping back into the conversation. He carelessly flapped an acknowledging hand towards the window, through which Kaoru could see the small form of Hani-senpai waving cheerfully at the three of them. “The exhibition is its own kind of competition, and we’re still going to win. The rest of our classmates won’t stand a chance of impressing anyone, with us in the room.”

“Of course,” Haruhi said, but it was a sigh, not the adamant agreement that Hikaru had just offered. As Hikaru pushed the door to the courtyard open for the other two, she suddenly paused. “Oh. I should have an exhibit too, shouldn’t I?”

Hikaru and Kaoru once more locked eyes over her head, delight stretching both of their expressions into wide grins.

“Commoner living!” they chorused.

“No,” Haruhi said immediately, pushing past Hikaru to go outside.

“Boo,” the twins whined, following her. “Commoner living, please?”

“I keep telling you two that that is not how politeness works.” Haruhi settled herself down primly at the table where Hani-senpai and Tamaki were already sitting. Tamaki cut off whatever conversation the two of them had been having to grin widely at his girlfriend, immediately draping an arm around her and nuzzling his forehead against her temple like he was dying and physical contact with her was the only way to save him. They both blushed bright red, still weirdly self-conscious about even the most innocent public displays of affection, even after living in the PDA-central that was America.

The twins rolled their eyes and sat down next to Hani-senpai, leaving the spot on his other side free for Reiko whenever class 3-D let out. “Where are Kyoya and Mori-senpai?” Kaoru asked as Haruhi took out the special picnic lunch she had prepared for all of them. To be honest, these lunches were never all that great. Haruhi might’ve been a talented cook for a commoner, but she didn’t have much on professional chefs. Still, there was something about the way she dished out servings for them. She wordlessly gave Kaoru slightly more of the carrots than anyone else and served Hikaru the sausages she’d set aside, having made them slightly spicier than the rest, without either of them saying a word about it. It fed his soul in a way that chef-prepared meals never did.

“Takashi and Kyo-chan have a special seminar, so they can’t make it to lunch,” Hani-senpai said brightly.

“Oh,” Kaoru said, slightly disappointed. Despite both Hikaru and Kyoya’s assurances, as well as his own realization of what had actually been the cause of all of his angst several months ago, he still couldn’t help the feeling that the time they’d all be able to hang out together as a group was numbered—and that number was falling each day. Everyone else might be staying at Ouran for
university, but Hikaru and Kaoru had known they wanted to go to New York for art and design school for years now, and even the pull of their friends wasn’t going to be enough to change that plan.

“What was it you were all saying about commoners when you came out?” Tamaki asked, evidently having finished going into paroxysms of joy about the serving of lunch Haruhi had prepared for him.

“Our class is going to be holding an ‘interest exhibition,’” Haruhi explained, clearly trying to head off any talk of commoners before Tamaki could get too excited. “I’d never heard of one before.”

Tamaki breathed out a noise of understanding. Hani-senpai nodded along, legs swinging underneath him. “It’s been a few years since the Ouran third years have held one of those, hasn’t it, Tama-chan?” Hani-senpai mused. “We should all come visit and see it!”

“What our underclassmen are good at,” Tamaki mused. “What they’re interested in… What my… my Haruhi…”

Haruhi just frowned, ignoring whatever fantasy meltdown Tamaki was having at her side with the ease of a lot of practice. “What am I interested in?”

Kaoru looked to the side, where Hikaru was glancing back at him. They shared a small, secret smirk.

Haruhi had nothing to worry about. She’d thank them one day.

Well, probably not.

But at least it would be fun!

“Speaking of the interest exhibition,” Kaoru said out loud, cutting off Haruhi’s brainstorming before she could get too far along. Hikaru and Kaoru already knew what she was interested in. Plus, it was sure to impress more of the parents in attendance than some obscure lawyer presentation would. They were only looking out for her best interests, really! “I was wondering if you’d be able to help me with some engineering, Hani-senpai.”

“Oh?” Hani-senpai smiled up at him with the same quick, easy grin he always had. Kaoru felt a flush of happiness warm him from somewhere in his gut. It made him feel like everything he was worried about and even some things he wasn’t worried about but really should have been would be okay in the end. Maybe it was just Hani-senpai’s energy vampire ways working on him, but Kaoru wasn’t complaining. “What’s your idea, Kao-chan?”

“I’m interested in designing baby clothes that would pair with smart technology,” Kaoru explained. “I was thinking of an outfit that would monitor heartbeat and blood pressure, that sort of thing. My dad can help me with the programming, but I’m not yet sure how I’ll be able to safely integrate the wiring into the clothing.”

“Sounds interesting!” Hani-senpai enthused.

“Could you help me too?” Hikaru asked. “I wanted to do something that would pair traditional baby toys with smart technology, like a kind of blocks-meets-video-games. But educational!”

“That also sounds interesting!” Hani-senpai grinned at the two of them, so widely it squinched his eyes shut. “I want to help!”
“This girl is going to become a monster,” Haruhi prophesied, doom coloring her voice. “And I thought the two of you were as bad as it could possibly get…”

“Don’t talk about our Ageha that way!” the twins said together, mostly not meaning it. “And thank you, Hani-senpai!”

“Kao-chan and Hika-chan are very cute when they have a child to look after,” Hani-senpai said, before standing on his seat and waving cheerfully. Kaoru turned to see that Reiko was finally making her way out to the courtyard to join them.

“I guess it’s true that your ideas aren’t terrible,” Haruhi admitted, slow and thoughtful, taking Hani-senpai’s light-hearted words into serious consideration. “Actually, they seem almost sensible. I’d be impressed, if you weren’t just using this as an excuse to spoil your sister.”

“I understand entirely,” Tamaki said, finally recovering from whatever fantasy had abducted his attention from the conversation. He reached across the table, clasping Hikaru and Kaoru’s hands warmly within his own. “The drive to protect those that you care about most! The fire burning within that tells you to remove all the horrors of this world from the sight of your precious angel! I will support the two of you in this venture in any way I can.”

Hikaru and Kaoru grinned at each other before snatching their hands out of Tamaki’s grip.

“No thanks,” they said, then bent their heads together, allowing their grins to bend positively devilish.

“Can you imagine?” Kaoru asked, his voice cast deeper like he was sharing a secret even though he didn’t bother lowering the overall volume of his voice at all. “A business major? Thinking he can help us?”

“Maybe if he hadn’t chosen such a useless major,” Hikaru taunted. “But who needs a business major if they’re trying to do something useful, right?”

“Right?” Kaoru echoed in agreement, grin widening even further as Tamaki flailed, nearly sending the lunch box flying as he assured them his major was useful, that he would show them, and, of course, as always, the cry of ‘devil twins!’

Even though he was confident about his path, Kaoru was going to miss moments like this. Beauty was fleeting and all of that. He just had to appreciate every moment that he had, the best that he was able.

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The end product Kaoru created for the interest exhibition was subtler than his usual work: just a pair of socks.

Of course, they were a pair of socks that monitored all of a newborn’s vital signs and, using a cute bluetooth-connected accessory that looked like a daisy, could then hook up with an app that Kaoru had enlisted his father to help him design, delivering constant reports on a child’s general health to a parent’s cell phone.

Plus, the socks were adorably patterned, impossibly soft, and comfortably warm.

Kaoru was prouder of them than of anything else he’d ever made.

Hikaru’s exhibit, set up next to Kaoru’s station, was alright too, Kaoru supposed. He had finally
decided on hollowing out a set of wooden blocks and filling them with an impressive array of electronics that would respond with subtle temperature, light, and smell effects when a child matched it to certain other blocks in the set, based on either color or symbol matching. Hikaru seemed confident the blocks would be educational and, while he didn’t have any evidence yet, Kaoru thought it might actually work out that way.

Haruhi’s exhibit, stationed across the room from the two of them, was fantastic, but she was probably going to kill the two of them over it.

“When you’re making a budget for a household,” Haruhi was explaining to a huge crowd of positively fascinated parents, the way she was grinding her teeth evidently not noticeable to her audience, “it’s not actually the same as when you make a budget for a business. Profit, for example. You can’t make household budget decisions based on profit calculations.” She pointed to the sample budget for an average Japanese family that she had pinned to the poster behind her.

“Fascinating,” one mother breathed, one hand coming up to cover her mouth in awe. Kaoru was fairly certain it was Momoka’s mother, seeming just as taken with Haruhi as her daughter had always been.

“Sure,” Haruhi said, eyebrow twitching. It really was such a shame that she had officially been signed up to lead an exhibit on “Commoner Finances and Lifestyles” and that the advertising pamphlet that no one had told her about had gone out to the parents before she had noticed the sign up and been able to change her interest.

Kaoru and Hikaru were definitely going to pay for this. Kaoru had no regrets. This was great.

Haruhi was still speaking, even though it seemed like every single word was causing her a new burst of pain. “Anyway, it’s important to balance a conservation of resources while also providing for the needs, both physical and mental, of the members of your family.”

“Some people can’t afford to buy all of the things they need?” one father asked, looking bemused by the thought. “Not in this day and age, surely?”

This was so good.

“You two certainly enjoy playing with fire,” snarked a voice from over Kaoru’s shoulder, and he turned quickly, finally pulled away from his observation of Haruhi’s slowly dying tolerance for the wealthy.

“Kyoya!” he exclaimed. He probably sounded more excited than he should be, but Kyoya and Mori-senpai had been exceptionally busy with classes recently, and he had actually been nursing a small fear that they wouldn’t be able to make it to the exhibition at all. But here was Kyoya, at least: standing right next to Kaoru’s presentation table, wearing the formal dark gray suit he tended to favor even though the university students were permitted to dress however they wished and even classically proper Mori-senpai usually just threw on a hooded jacket and jeans for school these days. “I was waiting for you!” Kaoru flourished the socks proudly. He distantly thought that maybe he should be embarrassed to be this excited over showing off a pair of fancy socks, but he batted the feeling back down. He trusted Kyoya’s opinions more than any of his other friends. It made sense to want to know what he thought.

“Yes, I’ve heard a lot about these socks,” Kyoya acknowledged, taking one of them delicately between his long fingers, turning it between his hands, feeling the texture and peering at the design, eyes clinically focused through his glasses. “Tamaki is very proud of the two of you, you know.” He tilted his head as he looked over the inside of the sock as well. His gaze flicked back up to
Kaoru, a small smile tilting the corner of his lips. “Hm. You have done well. I wasn’t expecting you to be able to still make them so sleek despite the technology that Mitsukuni says you managed to wire in, but I should have known better.”

*Mitsukuni* was new. Kaoru supposed that Kyoya had been spending a lot of time around Morisenpai and Hani-senpai recently, what with all the extra university work he’d had. It made sense that they were getting more casual with each other.

“Yes, I think this is a sound idea with excellent execution,” Kyoya said, finally passing the sock back so that Kaoru could once more place it on display. “Tell your mother that, if she has any interest in streamlining the design further, my father would be willing to invest in a wider production of these for our hospitals’ neonatal units.”

Kaoru snorted. Yuzuha was philosophically opposed to ‘wider production’ of anything. She believed mass production murdered the creative flow. But Kyoya was already turning away before Kaoru could say anything about it.

“You’re leaving already?” Kaoru asked, in spite of himself. What, was two seconds of Kyoya’s time all he was worth, these days?

“I actually have an appointment to keep,” Kyoya said. He absently glanced over Hikaru’s presentation while Hikaru excitedly told Soga-san about the oft-overlooked educational possibilities of sets of blocks in general and of Hikaru’s set of blocks in particular. “I wanted to make sure I saw the exhibition, but I really must be going.”

“Yeah, okay,” Kaoru grumbled, but Kyoya was already making for the door, out of earshot, without even saying an actual goodbye. That basically made Kaoru’s decision for him.

Fortunately, Soga-san seemed to be moving on to the next presentation, away from Hikaru. Kaoru didn’t waste any time, popping up at his brother’s side in Soga-san’s place.

“Watch my presentation for a minute. You can explain it just as well as I can. Most of the parents don’t know the difference between us anyway.”

“What?” Hikaru asked, blinking at him, taking a minute to catch up. “What’s going on? Why are you abandoning your socks? You love those socks.” His brother frowned, then, with suddenly narrowed, suspicious eyes, asked, “This isn’t another midlife crisis, is it?”

“Kyoya just stopped by,” Kaoru explained hurriedly. He needed to make it to the hallway before Kyoya disappeared from view so Kaoru could figure out where he was going. “He said he couldn’t stay because he had an appointment.”

Hikaru’s expression cleared and he rolled his eyes. “Right. Your game. I can’t believe you’re still playing.” Kaoru hadn’t even thought of the game, mostly of his own frustrated curiosity, but that was yet another really good reason to go follow Kyoya right now. Hikaru sighed, clearly reading his twin’s determination on his face. “Fine, just go.”

He didn’t have to tell Kaoru twice.

Kaoru walked as quickly as he could towards the door, politely nodding and smiling as he practically jogged past the parents wandering through their exhibition in groups of two or three. No one said anything to him, probably assuming he was heading out for a bathroom break. When he reached the door of the room, he peeked out carefully, not wanting to give himself away if Kyoya was still nearby.
It turned out that he had been just fast enough to catch sight of Kyoya turning a corner, heading away from the Central Salon, where the event was being held, and towards the administrative offices. Kaoru walked quickly in that direction, ignoring the parents and other students streaming in chattering groups towards the room he had just left. As soon as he reached the corner, he peeked carefully around it. This connecting hallway was mostly deserted, so it was easy to see the dark form of Kyoya’s back as he walked away. Kaoru waited, knowing that if he hurried after him too quickly, Kyoya would realize that he was being tailed.

Instead of turning down another hallway, however, Kyoya stopped by a window maybe thirty feet from where Kaoru was watching. He leaned one shoulder against the windowsill, arms crossed over his suit, facing away from Kaoru. It was an uncharacteristically casual stance for Kyoya.

Was he waiting for someone?

Kaoru frowned. It was awkward, watching from this corner. He was still in the main thoroughfare, even though Kyoya had turned into a side hallway, and parents and students would probably become suspicious if he kept lurking around the corner like the world’s most obvious spy.

He was about to turn away, give the whole thing up as just a random, weird interlude, when someone appeared from a door further down the hallway. The other man noticed Kyoya immediately, making a beeline for him. When he had taken a few steps, his features came into sharp enough relief that Kaoru was able to identify him as Tamaki’s dad.

Was this a coincidence? Or was this who Kyoya had been planning to meet?

They were just far enough away that Kaoru couldn’t make out what they were saying. Suoh-san raised a hand in greeting, saying something that made Kyoya stand up straight, hands dropping down to his sides. His back was still to Kaoru, so Kaoru couldn’t tell what he was saying in return, but whatever it was made Suoh-san grin widely and wave his hand in a vague, noncommittal gesture. He reached Kyoya’s place in the hallway and paused, saying a few more words.

Kaoru frowned. He wasn’t picking up anything from here, but there was no way to get closer without making his presence obvious.

Still, this didn’t look like a very official appointment. It looked almost like Kyoya had been waiting to ambush their school board chairman as soon as he left his office.

What was Kyoya trying to accomplish?

They continued speaking for a minute, long enough that Kaoru remembered that his position was awkward and he should probably consider moving. Before he could act on that feeling, however, Suoh-san started walking towards the hallway intersection where Kaoru was hidden. Kyoya stayed stationary next to the window, his back still and stiff. He hardly looked like he was breathing.

“Unfortunately, what you want isn’t very important to me in this matter, Kyoya-kun,” Suoh-san called back at him without turning around, raising his voice enough to be heard by Kyoya and, though he didn’t know it, by Kaoru too. “You know my demands. You can take them or leave them. I look forward to hearing from you once you’ve made a decision.”

Kaoru hurriedly backed up before Suoh-san could turn the corner, turning and trying to make his return to the Central Salon look casual, like he really was just returning from a short break.

What had that been about?

There were only a handful of reasons Kyoya would need to speak to the Chairman. It was possible
he needed to speak to him about something related to his university courses. Of course, something that involved Tamaki was likely to involve Suoh-san as well.

Kaoru was still mulling over the possibilities as he slid back into position in front of his exhibit.

“That was pretty quick. Did you find out something, or did you lose him?” Hikaru was lounging between their two presentations, clearly enjoying watching Haruhi try to contain her frustration at the giant congregation of fascinated parents she had somehow amassed. His eyes flicked over Kaoru and he tilted his head to the side. “You don’t look like you found out something.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Kaoru said, shortly. His brother looked a little taken aback by Kaoru’s abrupt dismissal, but just shrugged and turned his attention back to Haruhi. He had long ago grown bored with Kaoru and Kyoya’s game anyway.

The more Kaoru thought about it, the more he thought that Kyoya’s conversation with Suoh-san had to be part of their game. He had taken time out of a busy day to apparently ambush the school chairman in the hallway. That didn’t seem to be a politically savvy move. Suoh-san had said something about “demands.” Why would Suoh-san be demanding anything of a student, especially his son’s best friend?

Kaoru leaned back next to his display, his fingers practically twitching with the need to start putting pieces together. It really had been a while since he’d last put any substantial effort into figuring out Kyoya’s game. He’d just been distracted, what with leaving Boston and learning about Ageha and throwing himself into fashion like he had been. He had his own plans to figure out for the next five years, after all. He had his own life to lead.

But several pieces in that life had been pinned securely in place, by now. He had time to do some proper investigation.

And some proper thinking.

He was still confident that the plan had something to do with their friends. In fact, the encounter with Suoh-san was more proof of that, now that he thought about it. Kyoya had insisted that the purpose of the game was selfish, but Kaoru wasn’t sure how much he trusted Kyoya as a reliable reporter of his own character. The plan might also have something to do with Kyoya’s desire to major in law, though Kaoru felt less certain about this connection. Sure, it was true that Kyoya’s graduation from university would match up with the end of the five year timeframe, which seemed suspicious, but Kaoru just wasn’t familiar enough with law as a field to understand how it might help Kyoya or what he might be hoping to gain from it. Plus, there was the matter of his MBA from Harvard, which he’d finally completed. If he already had an MBA, it made sense that he’d want his undergraduate degree in something besides business. Didn’t it? He wanted to be different than his brothers, so that might explain why he hadn’t gone into medicine, like they had. Or did it?

His thoughts ran in circles like this until he finally accepted the fact that he just didn’t have anywhere near enough evidence to come to a solid conclusion.

All he could do was fall back on what he knew for sure.

Suoh-san had said that he didn’t care what Kyoya wanted. That Kyoya knew his “demands.”

Suoh-san was making demands of Kyoya. Demands that, for some reason, Kyoya was hesitant about granting. So hesitant, as a matter of fact, that ambushing Suoh-san outside of his office seemed to him like a viable way to convince Suoh-san to drop those demands.
An idea unfurled in Kaoru’s head, dark and tempting.

Had Kaoru’s read of Kyoya’s motivation been entirely wrong? Could Kyoya be attempting to abandon the family ship?

Could Kyoya, lineage- and family-obsessed Kyoya, be trying to abandon The Ootori Group in order to join Suoh Enterprises?

Kyoya would definitely be a prize for any company, there was no doubt in Kaoru’s mind about that. But Kaoru also had no doubt that Suoh-san was patiently and determinedly grooming Tamaki to take over as president after him. Would Kyoya really be willing to once again take a position underneath Tamaki, this time for the rest of his life?

Or was Kyoya trying to displace his own best friend?

Kaoru had no idea what any of this meant, but the slow fizzle of adrenaline coursing up and down his limbs was a clear sign that he wasn’t going to stop until he found out. This time, he wasn’t just going to jump in with an idealistic guess. He would find more pieces first. Real, hard facts. Information he could trust. There wasn’t a trace of doubt in his mind that he would succeed, especially with this much time left on the clock. Once he’d found enough clues, he was going to put them together until they told the whole story. In the end, he was going to beat Kyoya at his own game, no matter how confident Kyoya might be.

He was going to prove himself.

He was going to show Kyoya that he was worthy of having been challenged.

Plus, underneath the competitive buzz, he was just really looking forward to knowing what it was that Kyoya, their many-layered Shadow King, viewed as such an important goal that he was willing to dedicate five whole years of his life to reaching it.

It had to be something amazing.

Kaoru was willing to give whatever time it took to figure it out.

Chapter End Notes

Manga Background Notes for Chapter 4 (warning, spoilers follow!):
-Hani-senpai majors in engineering in college.
-The Hitachiin twins’ dad works as a software programmer.

Foreign Language Notes:
1. [san: an honorific of polite respect, often used for one’s elders]
Masks (Christmas, Year 1)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The stage: Ouran High School’s largest ballroom, glistening with pink and silver, the broad marble pillars festooned with tinsel and lights, wide tables off to the sides groaning under a buffet of mythical proportions while the polished dance floor shone under the lights of the chandeliers, all under the auspices of a twinkling Christmas tree so large that it dwarfed the sixty-person orchestra gathered around it.

The actors: six men of varying heights but all of a peerless grace, impeccably attired in well-tailored white tuxedos with delicate pink bow ties and handkerchiefs that made them match the fairy tale setting of the room, each of their faces unfolded into welcoming smiles underneath the sleek pink-and-white patterned masquerade masks that encircled their eyes.

Heavy double-doors swung open, revealing this fantastical holiday tableau.

“Welcome!” chorused the voices of the six masked men, standing in line, tallest to shortest, on the stairs leading up to the stage where the orchestra sat.

The Ouran Host Club was open for business.

One last time.

Kyoya had raised an outcry among the Host Club’s guests when he had announced that they were going to close the club down after Christmas and not, as the guests had evidently assumed from his “end of the year” comment, keep going until March, when the final members graduated. All it had taken was for Kyoya to politely ask two different girls if they valued the Host Club more than Haruhi’s chance to study for entrance exams, and the outcry had quickly died away.

Seriously, Haruhi could definitely become president of the world. She probably wouldn’t even need to campaign; she already had an influential enough fanbase that they’d take care of the whole election for her.

Kaoru smiled down on the ballroom from his position, the second-to-last host in line. The sight of the girls and boys—young women and men, now, nearly all of them—flowing into the room in their finest attire and elaborate masks, beaming and cooing over both the room and the hosts, made something syrupy and sweet swell in his chest. The feeling intensified: first at the brush of Hani-senpai’s shoulder against his arm as the smallest host bounced on the balls of his feet excitedly, and then further at the sound of Hikaru huffing a quiet laugh about something he had spotted from his vantage point on the step above Kaoru.

It was a shame, in a lot of ways, that they were losing the Host Club. He would definitely miss this feeling of being exactly where he was supposed to be, of belonging. He was sure that nothing else would ever come close to this, not in New York, not for the rest of his life.

“We are honored to welcome you all to the last ever Ouran Host Club event,” called Tamaki, second in their line-up, over the noise of the crowd. They immediately hushed and turned to hear him better. Kaoru glanced up the stairs to see the club president spreading his arms, enveloping the whole room with his gesture. “The Host Club held a masquerade once before, to say goodbye for a year. It seems only fitting for the Host Club to now hold a second masquerade, the better to say
goodbye to you all for good.” There were a couple of pained cries from the crowd at this, and Tamaki pressed one hand to his heart, his blue eyes warm and gentle through the halo of his mask. “Do not cry, my princes and princesses. As I have told you often over the past few months, it is only when there is the possibility of loss that true pleasure can be had. We invite you to live freely and joyfully in this moment, as we have always wished you to live.”

He brought the hand not clutched to his chest up to touch the edge of his mask. “The sense of anonymity that these masks bring with them will only last the night. Live this night as freely as you wish. Live in the moment and treasure it. Leave our presence here tonight with memories that will bring you delight for years to come. That is the final wish from us, the Ouran High School Host Club, to all of you.” A quiet sigh floated over the hall at these words.

Tamaki’s smile grew, pleased by this reaction. “We, the Host Club, have enjoyed all of the moments we have spent with all of you. At the end of this night, we will pick a queen, the one who has done the best out of all those present to make the most of her time here. This queen will receive one last gift from us, a gift that is traditional for the Host Club Christmas: she may ask for a kiss from the host of her choice.”

The shriek at those words filled the ballroom to the ceiling.

 Kaoru glanced up at the same time as his brother glanced down, their gazes meeting through their masks. In unison, their smiles turned into smirks.

Sure, it had been Kyoya’s idea originally, shared with the rest of them as soon as Tamaki had left for one of his many internships after a club meeting one day, but it was Kaoru and Hikaru’s execution that was going to win this for them.

“Now,” Tamaki finished, smiling out beatifically at the party-goers, totally unaware of the doom that was soon to befall him, “let’s dan-”

The double doors swung open once more. A girl—no, a young woman—stepped into the ballroom, shoulder-length brown hair delicately curling in at her shoulders, framing her already round, kind face into a heart. She was wearing a spectacular ball gown, almost like a Western-style wedding dress in its appearance. The sleeveless top sparkled in the light of the ballroom, glistening as silver as the tinsel, and the white waves of tulle dropping from the woman’s waist gave her a floating, ethereal appearance, as much of an angel as anything at the top of the Christmas tree. A soft pink ribbon cinched close around her small waist, dividing the shining top of the dress from the cloud-like bottom. The ribbon was tied into a delicate bow with long, streaming tails at her back, accentuating the impression of curves that the voluminous tulle helped to give her. She matched the hosts perfectly, all the way to the lacy white-and-pink mask that curved sweetly around her eyes.

She was positively stunning.

Kaoru twitched his hand to the side to give his brother a subtle low-five underneath the banister.

The twins, along with what seemed like every single other person in the room, looked away from this new visitor and up at the Host Club president, who, despite being a flawless performer in nearly every other circumstance, couldn’t seem to finish the very last syllable of his sentence. Instead, his jaw had dropped as he stared at their newest “guest,” struck silent by the sight, cheeks flushing as red as a tomato.

The horde of guests parted easily in front of the angel in their midst. She slowly made her way
across the dance floor, gazing up at the line of hosts. She stayed silent even when she stopped
moving, alone in the middle of the dance floor, eyes focused and fiery as she stared up at them.

Had she forgotten her lines? Or was she so upset that they were making her put this show on at all
that she was refusing to say them? Either one seemed equally likely, with Haruhi.

Kyoya had prepared for this eventuality, of course, just like he prepared for everything. He cleared
his throat, dragging the attention of the crowd away from the silent, heavily blushing Tamaki and
back onto himself, stationed in the middle of their line-up.

“It seems we are lucky enough to have a Cinderella at our ball,” Kyoya announced to the room at
large. He turned towards Tamaki on the step above him. “You should enjoy this time with her,
Prince. After all, you only have until the clock strikes twelve.”

As though the guests couldn’t help themselves, a soft, sweet “aww” of approval started to rise.
Haruhi stood silent, a pure white rose surrounded by a jungle of festive color.

Kyoya stepped back and then up a step. He took Tamaki by the shoulders and gently pushed him in
the direction of the dance floor. Tamaki stumbled but quickly righted himself, mechanically
walking down the remaining stairs, striding behind Kaoru’s back with hardly a whisper of a breeze
to mark his passing.

“Now,” Kyoya said, as Tamaki finally reached the dance floor and stopped within range of Haruhi,
“let’s dance.”

Their Shadow King sure was enjoying this. Kaoru glanced up at him again and caught the quick
look Kyoya was shooting back at him, as though reading his mind. Kaoru’s smile softened away
from the smirk he had been wearing and Kyoya smiled slightly in return. ‘Well done,’ Kyoya
mouthed, tilting his head towards where Haruhi was standing.

The orchestra started to play and Kaoru looked back down to see Tamaki finally, finally reach over
to pull Haruhi into his arms, tilting their heads together as they moved to a simple waltz. He
seemed to be speaking to her softly, blushing even harder at the quiet comments she appeared to be
making in return.

The “aww” of the guests ratcheted up significantly in volume, and then there was a sudden flurry
as both women and men sought their own partners to take to the dance floor.

Kaoru turned with the rest of his club to proceed down the stairs, ready to provide a willing dance
partner for the night to any and all that asked.

To his surprise, the very first person to grab him by the elbow and pull him to the side after he left
the staircase was not any of the girls, but instead a young man in a dark suit with a black and green
masquerade mask hiding half of his face. Kazukiyo’s blocky glasses were resting on top of his
mask, and Kaoru felt a sudden rush of affection for the incurable dork.

“Kaoru,” Kazukiyo said, familiar face screwed up with unfamiliar determination. “May I have this
dance? Just for a moment?”

Kaoru choked on his laugh, caught off guard at the unexpected question, losing a moment of
response time to his need to reboot, but then he turned to fully face his long-time classmate and
gave a short, polite bow. “Anything for you, prez!”

Kazukiyo rolled his eyes, which was a move Kaoru hadn’t been aware the nervous dork had been
capable of. Maybe the mask of pseudo-anonymity really did bring bravery with it. The other man
then stepped forward, taking Kaoru by the hand and the waist. Luckily, Kaoru had always been relegated to the girl’s part of formal dances when he and his brother had danced together for guests in the past, so he adapted to the more submissive role easily, even though it was a little awkward with Kazukiyo being so much shorter than him.

They stepped and turned for a few seconds, just another pair in the crowd, before Kaoru had to give into his own curiosity. “What’s this about, prez?”

“I… I would talk to Haruhi about this, but I’m beginning to think she’s actually no good with romance,” Kazukiyo admitted, quiet and miserable. “And, after her and M-Momoka, I think you and your brother are the two people at this school I trust the most.”

Kaoru rose his eyebrows. They went up so high, they had to be visible even past his mask.

“Not that you two are trustworthy,” Kazukiyo said, clearly attempting to be reassuring.

“Isn’t saying that more insulting than saying that you trust us?” Kaoru asked, bemused.

“It’s just that you two have always been honest with me, and that’s something that’s sometimes hard to find at this school. Plus, you’re way less scary than your brother.”

That was fair. On both counts.

Kazukiyo took a deep breath. “I am planning to go into law next year.”

“I know,” Kaoru said cautiously. He was starting to get an idea of where this was going. “You and Haruhi and Momoka, right?”

“Right.” Kazukiyo looked down at his feet. There was no need for that; he had been an entirely acceptable dance partner so far. His embarrassment over the conversation must be killing him.

There was only one thing that could bring Kazukiyo down to this level of bashfulness. “I want to confess to Momoka that I love her.”

Bingo.

Kaoru grinned, tilting his head to the side. “Awww,” he cooed, more gently than he had realized he was capable of. It was weirdly similar to the tone of voice he tended to use with Ageha. The class president always had been too pure to tease. “I think you should go for it.”

Kazukiyo glanced back up at him, hopeful. “Really?” he asked, voice dropping down to a pitch that was shy and adorable. “I know that’s what Haruhi would say no matter what because she’s so brave, and I was worried that was what Hikaru would say because he’d think it would be funny to see me get rejected, but… you’re saying it because you really think it would work, right?”

“Definitely,” Kaoru said. He was actually feeling pretty flattered that he had been the one Kazukiyo had sought out, now that the weirdness of the encounter was settling down somewhat. “It’s obvious she respects you too, prez. Plus, you two were childhood friends, right? She’s put up with you that long, so that’s saying something!”

“Please don’t word it like that,” Kazukiyo said faintly. His face appeared to have gone slightly green around the edges, nearly matching his mask.

“I honestly think it’s a good idea,” Kaoru assured him. “I’m not just saying that. I think you two will be cute together.”
Kazukiyo let out another deep breath, but this one seemed to be one of relief rather than uncertainty. "Thanks, Kaoru." His mouth curved into a small smile under his mask. "It'll be weird not having the two of you around all the time next year. You should keep in touch."

"We will," Kaoru promised, even though the idea that anyone in school besides their friends in the club might miss the two of them and want them to stay in contact had never occurred to him before this moment.

"Good." The song ended and Kazukiyo stepped back, bowing slightly. "I'll let you attend to your other guests. Just... thank you, Kaoru. For these past three years, for tonight, for... everything, pretty much." His smile widened. "I wasn't expecting it, but it was... fun."

Kaoru bowed back at him, feeling a sweet curl of warmth inside. Right. This was why the Host Club did all the crazy stuff they did. For this feeling, right here.

It turned out that being selfless rather than selfish really did have its perks, every once in a while.

Not that he was going to tell Hikaru about it. Even though Hikaru still felt like he owed Kazukiyo for the whole broken leg mess a couple of years ago, the opportunity to give him hilariously terrible relationship advice might be too much for his brother to resist.

Kozue was the next one to claim Kaoru's arms for a dance. It looked like she might've been patiently waiting for Kazukiyo to finish with him, which was cute of her.

"The masks are supposed to bring us bravery, right?" she said when they were a few steps in. Her mask was shaped like a butterfly, bright and sweet, much like her.

Kaoru smiled down at her. "That's the idea of the night. Is there something you're worried that you might regret not doing?"

"I'm sorry we could never beat the 'Which one is Hikaru?' game," Kozue blurted out and Kaoru nearly tripped over his own feet in surprise. The butterfly seemed oddly sad now, looking down. "Back when you two were still identical, I mean. I think you would have been my favorite, if I had tried to get to know you better. Not you and Hikaru-kun together."

Kaoru reached over to tilt her chin back up, making eye contact with her through the butterfly's wings. "You have nothing to apologize for, princess," he said, the familiar role coming easily even if the words were slightly more honest than usual. "We're just thankful you kept playing with us for all of this time."

The pink blur of a blush slowly spread out from underneath her mask. "Are you two really going to New York next year?" she asked timorously.

"We really are," Kaoru confirmed, but he grasped her hand slightly more warmly to ease the blow, twining their fingers together as he led her through a turn. "We're following our dreams. You make sure to follow yours, too, and I'm sure we'll see each other again some day."

Kozue seemed slightly mollified by this. To Kaoru's surprise, most of the rest of his dances seemed to follow this nice, easy pattern, with most of the guests just wanting to say their own form of goodbye to him.

Of course, there were also several girls who wanted to take the opportunity of the masks to confess their undying love. Kaoru let them down gently but firmly and fought the urge to roll his eyes as most of them immediately left his arms to confess their love to Hikaru instead.
They couldn’t all be winners.

Finally, the end of a song came without another guest already waiting to claim his arm. Kaoru bid his most recent partner farewell with a bow and made his way over to the buffet table. He was utterly unsurprised to see Haruhi there. While he had spotted Tamaki while dancing a couple of times, twirling around the room with several other fans and guests, he thought the club’s natural rookie was probably mostly avoiding the dance floor.

As if to confirm his thoughts, upon seeing him she immediately said, “I cannot believe you let Kyoya convince you to put me in see-through heels for this ridiculous Cinderella joke of his.”

“They’re comfortable, though, right?” Kaoru asked, leaning against the marble pillar where she had stationed herself. “We tried to find comfortable ones. And we’re not even going to take one away at the end of the night!”

“They’re as comfortable as a pair of heels can be, I guess,” Haruhi grumbled. She picked up a piece of sushi from the plate she was holding, placing it in her mouth reverently and sighing with joy at the taste that resulted. Kaoru grinned and reached down to tug a lock of her hair—from the side, not the bottom. He had no desire to destroy the subtle curls he had worked so hard on.

“What?” Haruhi asked, glancing up at him.

“I’m just glad you’re enjoying yourself, Cinderella.”

Haruhi hummed noncommittally, but Kaoru was distracted from whatever comment followed that hum by the sight of Kyoya stealing Tamaki from his guest after the end of the latest song, pulling him towards one of the outdoor balconies. Kaoru jabbed Haruhi’s sequined side with a finger and then let out a pained yelp.

“You’re the one who dressed me in what feels like an iron corset,” Haruhi said, merciless. “Serves you right.”

“Forget that for now!” Kaoru hissed at her, massaging his finger and peering in between the swirling dancers on the dance floor, trying to get a clear look at the balcony. “Kyoya and Tamaki are going outside to talk about something.”

Haruhi blinked up at him through her lacy mask. Even through the mask and a light layer of make-up, Kaoru could still tell she was looking at him like he was crazy. “... and?” she finally ventured.

“And,” Kaoru mimicked, “they’re probably trying to have a secret meeting about something!”

Haruhi just kept staring up at him. “And?” she repeated.

“And we should go listen to them.” Kaoru grabbed the hand that wasn’t holding her plate, towing her towards a pillar across the room before she could answer.

“Why?” Haruhi asked from behind him, though she didn’t resist the pull on her arm. “This seems pointless. They’re allowed to have private conversations.”

Haruhi was no fun at all. Kaoru would’ve much rather had Hikaru as his number two for this mission, but he had no idea where his brother was at the moment and didn’t have the time to waste to try to find him.

He wondered if he was finally going to get another clue for the game. He had had no luck in his investigation, ever since he had decided to give it more of his attention nearly two months ago. It
turned out that having “this game will take five years to win” as the only real guideline made it
difficult to figure out which of the things happening in daily life actually counted as clues
and which were just things happening in daily life. This judgment was especially difficult to make
if he was trying not to jump to fantastical, soap opera-like conclusions, like that Kyoya’s ambush
of Suoh-san in the hallway meant that he was trying to stab his best friend in the back in order to
take his job.

But for Kyoya to take Tamaki away from the final Host Club event ever, it had to be something
important, right? Something on a grand scale, even?

He had no idea how grand of a scale until he stepped up to the window next to the balcony doors,
careful to keep his body off to the side where the curtain was hanging, and peered outside,
squinting into the darkness. Through the faint light leaking out from the windows, he was able to
just make out Kyoya on his knees with his hands and forehead planted to the ground, performing
the kind of elaborate, traditional **dogeza** that Kaoru had never, ever imagined that proud,
derated Kyoya would be capable of.

What? Really, what? Maybe the soap opera-like conclusions were right! Maybe Kyoya really had
been trying to stab Tamaki in the back all this time, and now they had stumbled on his dramatic
apology scene!

“We shouldn’t be watching this,” Haruhi said quietly from Kaoru’s side. Kaoru startled; he had
actually forgotten that he had dragged her along with him. He glanced down. She was clutching
her plate with both hands now, purposefully averting her eyes from the window. “This is private,
Kaoru.”

“Why is he doing this right now?” Kaoru wondered out loud, looking back out the window.
“Anyone could see.” Well, maybe not. It was dark outside. He and Haruhi had needed to press
themselves kind of close to the window in order to see anything at all. Was that what Kyoya was
counting on?

As he wondered this, Tamaki, blond hair and white tuxedo making him a beacon in the darkness,
frantically fell to his knees in front of Kyoya, hands on Kyoya’s shoulders as he tried to tug his
friend back up to his feet. He appeared to be speaking quickly, letting go of Kyoya’s shoulder in
order to gesticulate before reaching back to try to tug him up again.

He didn’t look like he was angry that his best friend was trying to steal his birthright. Maybe the
soap opera-like conclusions really were wrong.

“We have to hear what they’re saying,” Kaoru said with determination. “Haruhi, go closer and
listen. They won’t be angry if it’s you.”

“Absolutely not,” Haruhi said immediately. “This is none of our business. We should **go**, Kaoru.”

She was probably right. Kaoru still didn’t move.

Kyoya was finally sitting up, kneeling instead of prostrate, and Kaoru breathed a small sigh of
relief. It had felt absurdly wrong to see his smooth, professional upperclassman doing something so
humiliating. It was like something in the inner workings of the universe had fallen obscenely out of
alignment, making down into up and left into right and Kyoya into someone who begged and
degraded himself.

Kaoru had to know what was happening. Dropping one hand to Haruhi’s arm, pulling her along for
no real reason but a faint wish for moral support, he carefully slid across the window to the door
and cracked it open. He was probably lucky Kyoya’s back was to them and that Tamaki was so focused on Kyoya, because, with the light of the ballroom behind them, there was no way the two on the balcony wouldn’t notice their unwanted eavesdroppers if either of them took even one second to look in the direction of the building.

“—would never hate you for that,” Tamaki was enthusing, still kneeling, his voice faint on the chilly night air that seeped in through the crack in the door. “I think it’s a brilliant idea. It will definitely work. I’ll do whatever I can to help!”

Kyoya was speaking more quietly, facing fully away from them, and Kaoru couldn’t make out what he was saying no matter how hard he strained, though he thought a muffled ‘sorry’ might have been at least one part of it.

“Nonsense,” Tamaki said, waving whatever Kyoya had said away. “My father was right. We can—” Suddenly, Tamaki, who had probably been planning to stare dramatically off into space, looked up, caught sight of Kaoru and Haruhi by the door, and sprang to his feet.

Kyoya glanced behind himself at this sudden movement and spotted them as well, and Kaoru felt his knees wobble underneath him with how pale Kyoya looked in the darkness, even through his light-hearted masquerade mask.

Haruhi was right. They shouldn’t have eavesdropped.

Of course, that didn’t stop Kaoru from announcing, “It’s Haruhi’s fault,” as soon as Tamaki strode over and yanked the door all the way open.

Haruhi just rolled her eyes, because Kaoru could put all the make-up and masks in the world on her and it would never change who she truly was inside.

Tamaki just ignored him, which he probably deserved. Instead, Tamaki gathered up Haruhi’s one free hand within both of his own, bringing it up to brush a gentle kiss along the back of her knuckles. “I’m sorry I left you, my love!” he cried, but it was a quiet cry, for Tamaki. “Kyoya had some important matters to discuss with me.”

“That’s fine. It’s what I assumed,” Haruhi said, even quieter. “I was just eating.”

Kaoru had noticed back in America that the two of them sometimes had an awkward way of holding conversations that made even something as mundane as discussing their dinner seem intimate. Kaoru figured it was just their way; anything loud enough was a show, with Tamaki involved, so they saved quiet for their personal lives.

He turned away from the two of them to give them their privacy and immediately regretted it. Kyoya was standing in the doorway now, leaning against the frame and studying him.

“Did you hear anything useful?” Kyoya asked, ignoring Tamaki and Haruhi’s quiet conference off to the side. His face was impossible to read, even without his glasses on to give him that trademark demon’s glare. His eyes were dark and steady behind the cut-outs in his mask, looking slightly larger than usual due to his contacts, and his skin was still paler than Kaoru was used to seeing it, which had to mean something. Even like this, though, the white tuxedo suited him, although Kaoru would’ve used something darker for his accent color if they hadn’t been trying to match the ballroom.

Right. He had been asked a question.

“I’m not sure yet,” Kaoru admitted.
Kyoya hummed in a method much like Haruhi usually did, tilting his head to the side. His mouth was still a flat, inexpressive line as he said, “Then you must not have heard very much.”

Dammit! Kaoru had known this meeting had something to do with their game; why hadn’t he gone over to the door earlier?

“Trust a Hitachiin.” Kyoya shook his head, but Kaoru could tell he was fighting back a smile now. There was a pucker at the corner of his lip, a clench of muscle as he tried to stop his true feelings from showing. Ha! He thought he was so unreadable; Kaoru had him figured out. “No apology for eavesdropping, and it’s clear you’re now only regretting that you didn’t eavesdrop sooner.”

He didn’t seem upset over what Kaoru might have seen, at least. Kaoru smiled at him, relieved. While he did want to win the game, he didn’t actually want to snoop badly enough that Kyoya got angry with him. No game was worth losing his favorite upperclassman. “Any interest in just telling me?” he asked, figuring that Kyoya seemed to have handled everything well enough so far that it was worth it to try and push his luck.

“None at all.” Kyoya now seemed oddly cheerful for the scene Kaoru had just witnessed. Was he happy because of what Tamaki had said in response? Or was he just happy that Kaoru’s attempts at learning more had been foiled?

Kyoya quirked an eyebrow at Kaoru in amusement but didn’t say anything more about it. Instead, he finally pulled himself away from the doorway, resting a hand on Tamaki’s shoulder to regain his attention. “Now, it’s time for four-sevenths of the Ouran Host Club to return to hosting, wouldn’t you say?”

The rest of the night passed uneventfully, after that. One guest twirled happily into another until Kaoru finally found Hikaru again and the two of them danced together one last time, the sighs of their fans far more calm and resigned than Kaoru had ever heard before.

The end of the event came about naturally, just as the clock struck midnight. The orchestra set their instruments aside and Kaoru and Hikaru climbed up to the landing halfway up the stairs, joined in quick succession by the five other members of the club—Haruhi included with the rest, this time.

“We want to thank you, one last time, for everything,” Tamaki called out over the heads of the crowd below. Once more, the guests turned to see him, looking both more tired and more pleased than they had at the beginning of the night.

This really was the right way to go out. Tamaki had some good ideas every now and then. Not that Kaoru would tell him as much; it would definitely go to his head.

“As we announced at the beginning of the evening,” Tamaki continued, “we have a Queen to appoint.”

He stepped back and Kyoya stepped up to take his place, closest to the banister. “The Queen this evening is a woman who is always honest to herself, without the need for a mask. She inspires all of us every moment of every day. She is the Host Club’s very own Cinderella, Fujioka Haruhi.”

Kaoru grinned at the glow of the blush on Tamaki’s face. Haruhi’s face was turning nearly fuschia. They hadn’t told her about this part of the plan, though it really was pretty pathetic that she hadn’t been able to see it coming.

“Haruhi,” Kyoya said, graciously stepping aside to let Haruhi take his place next to Tamaki, right
next to the railing, on display in front of hundreds of their classmates. “You have won a kiss from the host of your choice.”

Kaoru and Hikaru grinned at each other, and then turned back to look at their King and their Queen as they stood above their royal subjects.

Haruhi seemed struck to silence for a moment, but then her blush faded just as quickly as it had arrived. Kaoru cocked his head to the side, confused by this unnaturally quick recovery.

“A kiss from the host of my choice’? Those are the terms?” Haruhi asked, like she was confirming it, like she hadn’t been sitting in on all—well, most—of their planning sessions for this night.

There was no reply for a minute, until Kyoya, clearly off-footed, ventured a curt, “Yes.”

“Kyoya,” Haruhi said at once.

The silence in the room was deafening.

Out of nowhere, there was a short snickering sound, and Kaoru turned, eyes still wide in surprise at this turn of events, to see that Tamaki, Tamaki, was hiding what appeared to be a wide smile behind his hand, not appearing to be upset at all. Tamaki! Not upset! At his girlfriend asking for a kiss from another man!

“You want… a kiss from me?” Kyoya confirmed, voice sounding faint. This, clearly, had not been part of any plan he’d been aware of. Alarm bells started to sound in Kaoru’s mind.

“I’m the Queen,” Haruhi said. “The kiss is supposed to be my choice. No one said I had to be the recipient, however. So I choose for Kyoya to kiss… hm… Kaoru.”

The sudden screaming from the fangirls was deafening.

Kaoru convinced himself for a minute that, with his ears ringing like they were, he must not have heard Haruhi properly. His heart wasn’t quite as easily fooled—it had plummeted down so fast that he worried for a moment that it was going to leave his body entirely.

“W-What?” he mumbled, practically wheezing, embarrassingly off-guard. He could barely hear his own voice over the shrieks from below. “Did you say me?” Now Hikaru was snickering too.

“Both of you need to learn to stop dragging me into your plans,” Haruhi said placidly, in front of very nearly every human being they knew. Her angelic demeanor was a lie. She was a bigger devil than anyone Kaoru had ever met, up to and including he and his brother. She was going to be a terrifying lawyer. “The rules say it’s my choice, and I’ve chosen.”

“Better pucker up, Kaoru,” Hikaru snickered, and shoved Kaoru up the few steps between them and the landing. Tamaki had stepped back and done the same with Kyoya, so now Kaoru and his favorite, most intelligent, most emotionally robotic upperclassman were sharing the landing with Haruhi.

She took a step back, surrendering center stage to the two of them. “Enjoy your time on display,” she said serenely, and then stepped up to join Tamaki on the next set of stairs.

Kaoru’s heart was pounding too hard to be healthy. He’d never… sure, he and Hikaru played at a romance, but even they’d never… and that was his brother, even, his twin, practically himself in a different body, so whatever contact they did have felt like nothing, it was nothing, not like…
Despite playing at being a host and spending all that time in PDA-happy America, the full extent of Kaoru’s romantic interactions began with a fake romance with his own twin brother and ended with a ninety-eight percent platonic kiss to Haruhi’s cheek.

The terrible, embarrassing truth was that Kaoru was eighteen years old and still hadn’t had his first kiss.

He and hundreds of his classmates looked up at Kyoya. He thought his eyes were probably wider than any of theirs.

Kyoya looked stunned, just like Kaoru. He had gotten back a little bit of his color with the hours of dancing since the time on the balcony, not quite as pale above the white of his tuxedo jacket anymore, and he… he looked good, Kaoru knew that. Hell, Kaoru had dressed him. He looked professional and competent and also… Kaoru wasn’t unaware of the trimness of the waist underneath that cumberband, the subtly strong slide of those shoulders, the…

What was his brain doing? This was Kyoya.

Kyoya, his most enigmatic upperclassman, his most intelligent friend...

Kyoya, who was evidently going to be his first kiss.

Kaoru swallowed. His throat just made a clicking sound, no saliva available to moisten it.

Kyoya recovered first. He sent an odd, quick look at Tamaki out of the corner of his eye that Kaoru didn’t think he would have noticed if he hadn’t been standing right in front of him. It almost looked as if he were quickly gauging the possibility of getting himself out of this.

“Our Queen has spoken!” Tamaki announced grandly, evidently having caught onto that look as well. “A kiss is owed, and a kiss must be paid!”

Kaoru was able to see the tiny flicker of the minute eye roll Kyoya made before the other man stepped forward, one hand coming up to curl around Kaoru’s waist, underneath his open jacket. He tugged him into a more central location on the landing. Even through his shirt and cumberbund, Kaoru could feel the burning pressure of that hand on his waist. Kyoya’s other hand came up slowly, slipping first his fingers and then his palm along Kaoru’s cheek, tilting his head slightly to the side. Kaoru’s head moved at the action with no input from his actual brain, which was just buzzing nonsensically at this point.

One moment he had just been living his normal life, and the next he knew how it felt to have Kyoya (Kyoya!) cup his cheek.

If this didn’t end soon, Kaoru was going to start hyperventilating, and he had no idea why. So far, this was nothing new. This was nothing he and Hikaru had not play-acted at before. This was just another performance.

It didn’t feel like another performance. Kyoya’s fingers were longer and thinner than Hikaru’s, the palm of his hand cooler against Kaoru’s overheated cheek than Hikaru’s had ever been. Kaoru had never practiced or prepared for this with Kyoya. He hadn’t known to practice or prepare for this with Kyoya. What had Haruhi been thinking?

Revenge, probably. Kaoru was not entirely unfamiliar with the concept.

Kyoya leaned in. Kaoru almost stopped breathing, but Kyoya didn’t kiss him. He pressed their cheeks together, smoothly shaven skin to smoothly shaven skin, and just breathed out slightly, the
soft gust of his breath caressing Kaoru’s ear like a physical touch.

Did air count as something physical? Kaoru’s brain seized on the question and then immediately dropped it again, moving from one thought to the next in a panicked whirlwind.

Kyoya pulled back ever so slightly, and Kaoru’s brain actually slowed down a minute, relaxing.

Huh.

Was that... supposed to be it?

No, Kaoru realized as Kyoya stayed frozen in place, what this was was a chance. If Kaoru wanted to, he could step back now. The move had probably looked like a kiss on the cheek to their audience; Kaoru could treat it as such and end this now, if he were really so uncomfortable.

But where was the sportsmanship in that? Was he going to flee the very thing he had tried to put Haruhi on display for?

Kaoru had made his bed, and now it was his turn to sleep in it. There was no hiding from that.

He turned his head back towards Kyoya slightly, the tip of his nose nearly tingling as it brushed lightly against Kyoya’s cheek, granting permission for him to continue.

With permission granted, a soft touch that was undoubtedly a pair of lips—undoubtedly Kyoya’s lips—pressed slowly, gently, against the line of Kaoru’s cheekbone, just underneath the curve of his masquerade mask, sending a lingering shiver down the length of his spine that stopped cold somewhere around his tailbone.

Right. That was smart. A real, bonafide kiss on the cheek. It left the possibility of a magical first kiss experience still intact. And it definitely counted as a kiss, so they had honestly fulfilled the terms they’d been given.

The crowd thought so, at least. The room dissolved into the renewed and extremely excited screaming of fangirls.

Kyoya stepped back smartly, and Kaoru was extremely proud of the fact that he didn’t stumble when he lost the support of Kyoya’s hand on his cheek.

Nothing could be done about his blush, though. That was a lost cause.

“Merry Christmas, Kaoru,” Kyoya said serenely, like it had all been part of a game, like he wasn’t fazed at all despite having far less experience playing into their clients’ boys-love fantasies than Kaoru theoretically did. Kaoru could only watch, trying to make his brain stop tripping over itself in confusion, as Kyoya turned back to face the crowd once more. “Merry Christmas to all of you. We hope that, over the past four years, we were able to make at least a few of your dreams come true.”

Tamaki stepped back down to join the two of them on the landing. “Merry Christmas, everyone! Please never forget us, just as we will never forget all of you.”

The rest of the host club joined them on the landing to take their final bow.

From the feeling of prickly heat across his face, Kaoru knew he was still blushing, frozen in place in the middle of the landing. Hikaru stepped up next to him and kissed his other cheek with a loud, playful smack, making him jump what had to be close to a foot into the air. The shrieking of the
girls below revived and, if anything, intensified.

“You alright, there?” his brother asked him under the cover of the noise, clearly gleefully amused by Kaoru’s embarrassment.

“Shut up,” Kaoru hissed, suddenly regaining control over his body enough that he could shove his shoulder against his brother as he moved to more fully line up with the rest of them. “Like you’d handle it any better.”

He glanced down their line up of members to Kyoya, who, just like at the beginning of the evening, was already looking back at him. Kyoya raised a single eyebrow at him and Kaoru could tell even through his masquerade mask that he was silently asking if Kaoru was okay. Kaoru somehow managed to scrounge up a small smile in response, even as he was utterly unsuccessful at getting the heat out of his cheeks, and Kyoya’s eyebrow dropped once more, his lips parting slightly in what appeared to be quiet relief. Kaoru felt a flooding, warming sense of gratefulness to him. With a deep breath, Kaoru was able to bow with the rest of his friends.

And, with the thankful, delighted cheering of their classmates all around them, the Ouran High School Host Club closed its doors for good.

Chapter End Notes

Manga Background Notes for Chapter 5 (warning, spoilers follow!):
-In the manga, the party where Kasugazaki Kanako kisses Haruhi is a Christmas party, not a spring/cherry blossom party.
-The Host Club hosts a Farewell Masquerade as an attempt to painlessly reveal Haruhi’s true gender before the year in Boston.
-Kaoru takes Haruhi out on a date at one point—he ends the date with a kiss to her cheek, having made his decision to step back and make room for his brother to pursue her.

Foreign Language Notes:
1. [dogeza: an extremely deep bow that conveys a strong feeling of shame and apology]
“I could be studying right now.” The bush next to Kaoru rustled a little, letting out a sad little sigh. “I could be studying so much.”

“For what?” came an amused voice from the bush on Kaoru’s other side. “You’re already in university. If you think about it, studying any more ever again would just be a waste of your time.”

“Unlike this?” the first bush asked.

“I regret inviting the two of you along.” Kaoru pushed back the branch in front of his face. It was starting to get uppity, the leaves knocking into his nose. Kaoru blew at them in irritation. “This is a very important secret mission, and you two aren’t taking it seriously at all.”

“You’re right. I’ll just go, then,” said the voice to his right.

“That’s fine,” Kaoru said dramatically, squinting at the scene in front of him. He thought he had maybe seen a shadow move up in the darkness of the second floor, but he might have been hallucinating. They’d been here for an hour already, and staring at one dark, unchanging scene for that length of time had weird powers over a person’s imagination. “I’ll just stay here, in the dirt. Alone. Abandoned by even my closest friends. Without anyone to rely on in this world.”

“Okay,” Haruhi said from the bush to Kaoru’s right, rustling as she apparently took him seriously and got ready to extricate herself from the greenery and leave.

“Oi, don’t leave me alone with this obsessive maniac,” Hikaru whined from the bush to Kaoru’s left. “I got our family chef to make those cream puffs that you like.”

The rustling in the bush to the right paused. Haruhi was such an easy mark.

“My first Golden Week as a law student,” she finally said with a sigh. “And here I am, on my knees in the dirt, stalking an upperclassman from the bushes outside his house. For some reason, I never anticipated my law career beginning with criminal behavior.”

“That just shows a lack of imagination on your part,” Hikaru said loftily from the bush to Kaoru’s left, and Kaoru couldn’t help a quiet laugh at that, even as he reached up to tug that overly friendly branch away from his face again.

There continued to be not the slightest sign of movement from inside the Ootori family home. At least, there was no sign of movement visible from the sculpted bushes along the bank of windows into Kyoya’s room, which was the place where Kaoru, Hikaru, and Haruhi had hidden themselves.

“Maybe he left for the morning already,” Haruhi said, sounding hopeful.

Hikaru scoffed. “It’s nine o’clock in the morning, and it’s a holiday. I’m only surprised that he wasn’t still awake when we first got here.”

“You never know,” Haruhi said. Her phone made a quiet snapping sound as she flipped it open. “I’ll just call Tamaki, he probably knows—”
“No!” Kaoru said, louder than he meant to. The silence from the other two bushes sounded a little judgmental and Kaoru was glad for the greenery hiding his embarrassment.

Ever since the conversation he had spied on during their Christmas party, Kaoru had become more and more convinced that Tamaki had somehow joined in on whatever Kyoya was planning. The two of them had taken advantage of the lack of Host Club activities to start regularly disappearing off to places unknown together. Hani-senpai and Mori-senpai seemed to be around less often too. While all of them had made it out to see the three underclassmen of the club graduate high school, at least, the months leading up to that event had been far, far emptier of lunchtime meet-ups and weekend excursions than Kaoru had grown used to over the past few years.

It stung, a bit. Hikaru and Kaoru didn’t start school until August. All they had these days was freetime. Yet all the time in the world still wasn’t flexible enough for their clubmates to make time for them in return, even though the twins were planning to move to New York in July and it would suddenly become much, much harder for their friends to see them at all.

Meanwhile, Haruhi had already started her classes at Ouran University at the beginning of the month. She got to see Kyoya and Mori-senpai all the time, not to mention Tamaki and even Hani-senpai via association with Mori-senpai. Not that Kaoru could hold that against Haruhi. Haruhi, out of all of them, still made the most time for the twins.

Including going along with it when they abducted her first thing in the morning on her very first day of vacation to go spying.

Kaoru sighed, silently berating himself. Haruhi was a good friend and, at the very least, deserved an explanation for him suddenly yelling at her. “Look, I’m starting to think that Tamaki is in on it. If I want to surprise a clue out of Kyoya, he’s going to have to have his guard very, very far down. And I’m running out of time.”

Two months until they planned to move.

Two months to find a solution to the game before the few buildings that separated them grew to the size of continents.

Two months until, despite everyone’s assurances to the contrary, everything would change forever.

“I think you might be overestimating Tamaki’s ability to keep a secret,” Haruhi said dryly, but the quiet sound of her cellphone closing followed these words and Kaoru smiled to himself, relieved.

“No way,” Hikaru objected, always the quickest to defend Tamaki despite his tendency to also be the quickest to tear him down. “Tono can be really sneaky if he thinks that it’s important. Think of all the stuff with his family that he never shared.”

Haruhi made a quiet sound of acknowledgment. “All of us wound up knowing that stuff anyway, though,” she pointed out. “It was kind of an open secret.”

“But that wasn’t tono’s fault,” Hikaru insisted. “He can’t help how much of his private life the world knows just because of Suoh Enterprises. But he doesn’t share personal stuff very easily at all otherwise.”

There was still no movement in the house. Kaoru settled himself more firmly in his bush. That was okay. Time might be running out, but there was nowhere he’d rather be spending it.

Hours passed.
From the slow, even breathing in the bush to his left, Hikaru had fallen asleep at some point. From the total lack of movement (not to mention the incredibly suspicious glow) of the bush to his right, Haruhi had probably smuggled along one of her law textbooks and a flashlight and was taking the opportunity to study despite the situation.

Kaoru felt a rush of affection for his brother and their best friend. Here they were, in the dirt and the greenery for no good reason at all—except that Kaoru wanted to be here and that alone was enough for the two of them. His other friends might have been acting neglectful and stupid, but he was still pretty lucky.

Except when it came to spying, evidently.

Kyoya had to wake up at some point, even on vacation, didn’t he? It was nearing eleven in the morning.

The sound of a car grumbling its way up the drive behind Kaoru made him jump. He frowned and turned to get a better look at the top of the driveway from his hiding spot in his bush. All of the other members of the Ootori family had work, didn’t they? Kaoru didn’t think that the hospital business took time off for Golden Week. Or ever, really. Could it be Fuyumi, here to bring her son to visit his Uncle Kyoya?

Kaoru’s eyes widened in mute shock as Kyoya himself stepped out of the back of the black car that had parked just short of the front steps. Even from a dozen yards away, Kaoru could tell that Kyoya looked characteristically exhausted and very uncharacteristically rumpled.

He was wearing a t-shirt. If someone had ever asked Kaoru for a list of things he would never see in his entire life, Kyoya in a shirt without any buttons or layers at all definitely would have made the list, right next to actual unicorns. The man’s pajamas had buttons!

Kyoya leaned down to say something short (and, knowing Kyoya, probably biting) to the driver before he started climbing the steps to his front door. He was moving slower than usual, limping slightly and letting one of his feet drag.

Kaoru turned his attention back to the window he was practically plastered against. Almost immediately, the first floor of Kyoya’s room became bathed in light. Kyoya was standing in the doorway in all of his disheveled glory. His t-shirt was plain and black, nothing too crazy, and seemed comfortable over an equally comfortable-looking pair of gray chinos. It was the most casual outfit Kaoru had ever seen Kyoya wear, up to and including his attire for several beach trips.

As if to keep up with the casual theme, Kyoya now made his way to his staid green couch, still limping, and fell back with a complete lack of grace, clearly unaware that anyone was watching him. He dragged his laptop off his table and, still laying back with his head pillowed against the arm of the couch, started typing on the machine that was now balanced on his stomach. Unfortunately, the back of the laptop was to Kaoru, who therefore had no method of ascertaining what he was typing.

So this wasn’t a Kyoya who was coming back home to sleep, no matter how tired he appeared to be. This was a Kyoya who had woken up extremely early for some reason, leaving home at some point before eight o’clock in the morning, which was when the Hitachiins and Haruhi had begun their watch, and then returned later, exhausted and limping, just to complete additional work.

Kaoru stepped out of his bush hurriedly, ignoring Hikaru and Haruhi for now. He’d come back for them later. He quickly brushed down his pants and shirt, doing the best he could to make himself presentable. He’d selected his outfit, a simple dark green shirt paired with jeans, for ease of
sneaking around, but the dirt stains were still probably never going to wash out. Whatever. He’d just pretend it was a fashion statement. He ran his hands through his hair, pasted on his friendliest hosting smile, and stepped around the side of the house, luckily turning the corner before Kyoya’s driver could leave.

He waved at the man through the still-open window of the car, grinning cheerfully as though he had every right to be where he was at this minute.

“Hello!” he called out, just in case the chauffeur had any funny ideas about driving away. “Ah, you’re Kyoya’s driver, aren’t you?”

Like he didn’t know that already.

“Hitachiin-san,” the driver acknowledged. Kaoru reached the side of the car and could see the man bow slightly in his seat. He didn’t appear too ruffled by whatever Kyoya had said to him before heading inside. Then again, he’d been Kyoya’s chauffeur for years now; he had probably developed a filter for Kyoya’s condescension a long time ago. “Was Kyoya-sama expecting you?”

“Yes,” Kaoru lied, unabashedly. “I think he might’ve forgotten about our appointment. But that’s alright; I just took some time to go for a walk around the grounds.”

“Kyoya-sama is taking his training extremely seriously,” the chauffeur said gravely. “We are all very proud of him, but it does seem to distract him. We all appreciate your patience with him.”

His ‘training’?

Was Kyoya up this early to go in to some kind of internship or something?

A secret internship?

That he came back from in a t-shirt?

And also with a limp, which probably would’ve stuck in Kaoru’s brainspace more if the entire surface area in there wasn’t already occupied with the shock of that t-shirt.

“Of course,” Kaoru said out loud. “We all know how hard Kyoya works. Well, it seems like he’s pretty tired. Our meeting can wait for another day, I suppose.”

“Thank you for being such a good friend to Kyoya-sama,” the chauffeur said, again giving an awkward half-bow from his seat. “Would you like me to give you a ride home?”

It was tempting; there might be other clues in the car, after all.

Still, Kaoru wasn’t quite manic enough about the game to abandon Hikaru and Haruhi in the bushes of the Ootori property without any warning.

“No thanks,” he said. “The Hitachiin family chauffeur is still nearby. I’ll just call him back.”

“As you wish, Hitachiin-san.” The chauffeur nodded at him politely. As Kaoru stepped back, he rolled up the window and started up the car once more.

Kaoru waved as the man drove in the direction of the Ootori family garage. As soon as he was out of sight around the building, Kaoru slipped back around the opposite side of the entryway, down to where Hikaru and Haruhi were still concealed. He ducked from bush to bush, trying to keep his progress hidden. It didn’t seem to matter, from his quick glances inside. Kyoya’s head was still
entirely hidden behind his laptop screen. If anything, his typing appeared to have grown in its fervor.

Kaoru reached Haruhi’s hiding spot first and poked her in the back. The soft glow from inside the bush immediately vanished.

“I’m paying attention,” she said, clearly feeling guilty. Then she actually bothered to look inside. “Oh. It’s Kyoya.”

“Well spotted,” Kaoru said dryly. “I was able to get some information. We should go.”

“Okay,” Haruhi said agreeably, stepping out of the bush easily. Her guilt clearly hadn’t lasted very long.

Kaoru snuck over to Hikaru’s bush next. His brother was still asleep; when Kaoru poked him, he made an embarrassing snorting sound and the bush shook with his startled flailing. “I’m awake,” he protested, sleepily. The bush froze as he stilled. “Oh, look, it’s Kyoya.”

“You two are the worst assistant spies ever,” Kaoru complained under his breath. Slightly louder, he said, “Let’s walk down to the road again and I can call the chauffeur.”

“I don’t get it,” Hikaru said, pulling himself out of his hiding spot. He frowned down at the dirty stains on his own clothing before shrugging them off. They had intentionally dressed for this, after all. “You brought us here to watch him, right? He’s finally here, after all this time, and now you want to leave?”

“Shh!” Kaoru hissed. The Ootori household was likely to be soundproof, but it wasn’t worth taking chances. He led the two of them away from the driveway, towards the section of the wall from which they would be able to make their escape.

When they were safely off of the premises, having climbed back over the property wall in the same spot where they’d first climbed in, Kaoru said, “I talked to his chauffeur after he dropped Kyoya off. I got some information off of him.”

“His chauffeur?” Hikaru asked.

“So I was right,” Haruhi observed. “He had already left for the morning by the time we arrived.” Because it was Haruhi, the sense of ‘I told you so’ was there but only in a faint, polite sort of way.

“He went somewhere for ‘training,’” Kaoru told them.

“Maybe he’s just working with his dad or his brothers,” Haruhi suggested. “If he wanted to start making progress in the family business younger than his brothers did, it would make sense to have on-the-job training already.”

“I don’t think that’s it.” Kaoru kicked a loose rock down the road ahead of them. “He looked exhausted.”

Hikaru snorted. “Kyoya always looks exhausted.”

Kaoru tamped down a sudden, uncomfortable urge to argue with his brother. What was he even talking about? Kyoya always looked fine.

Except Hikaru wasn’t wrong. Kyoya did look tired far more often than he didn’t. Hell, Kaoru had thought almost that exact same thing when he’d seen him this morning.
Maybe Kaoru was just the tired one, right now. He’d gotten up earlier than he was used to these days for this attempt at playing spy, after all.

He shoved his irritation away, focusing on his mission.

“I think I’m on the right track to figure something out, but I still need more information,” he mused out loud. He took out his phone to call their chauffeur.

“Just hack into his computer or something,” Hikaru said, stretching. He reached out to gently brush a few stray leaves from Haruhi’s hair. When he spoke, though, his voice sounded unmoved, probably because he was still talking to Kaoru. “I’m sure Dad would help you. Much less of a need to entangle with nature that way.”

“Maybe,” Kaoru said. He told their chauffeur to meet them at the end of the street outside the Ootori family property and hung up. An idea struck him, and he smiled back at his brother and their best friend. “Except I have another idea.”

“Oh?” said Hikaru, not even bothering to actually sound interested, the jerk.

“We just have to come back tomorrow before Kyoya’s left for the day.”

“But we don’t know when he leaves in the morning,” Haruhi pointed out.

Kaoru had thought of that already. “We just have to get here earlier than any possible leaving time,” he explained. “Like… maybe four in the morning?”

It turned out that, as much as Hikaru and Haruhi might love him, it was asking for a bit too much to suggest that they show up at the Ootori house at four o’clock in the morning.

“Well, he didn’t need them.

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At least the Hitachiin brothers’ chauffeur didn’t object to accompanying Kaoru back to the Ootori estate before sunrise the next morning.

Not that the man actually had any choice in the matter. Still, it was nice to not be alone.

Kaoru told his chauffeur to park around the corner at the end of the street so that the two of them could keep watch to see any vehicle that left through the Ootori family’s main gate. With this new strategy, he was hidden away inside of a car instead of inside of a bush. It was far more comfortable and, as an added bonus, there was a noticeable lack of dirt touching his clothing. They were going to wait for Kyoya to leave for this supposed ‘training,’ and then (and this was very important) Kaoru was going to yell, “Follow that car!” like he was in a movie, and the two of them were going to follow Kyoya to wherever he was going.

It was all going to be very cinematic. He could already imagine how his professional cinematographers would edit the scene, cutting quickly between shots of his chauffeur clutching
the steering wheel with white-knuckled intensity and Kyoya’s car swerving evasively between slower-moving vehicles. Just when it seemed that his prey had successfully escaped, Kaoru’s car would swerve around the corner in a cloud of burning rubber, leaving Kyoya nowhere to run. It would be a masterpiece.

At some point, his daydreams became just regular old dreams as Kaoru drifted off to sleep.

Some small disturbance nearby woke him. Kaoru startled, then sat up and rubbed at his eyes blearily. He was curled in the passenger seat of their limo, the better to keep an eye on the gate. He glanced down at the clock in the dashboard, blinking. It was nearly five-thirty, now. He had definitely, definitely fallen asleep.

“I didn’t miss anything, did I?” he asked his driver, making a face and scratching at a bit of dried drool on his cheek. He probably hadn’t slept through an epic car chase, but there was no harm in double-checking.

“I’m not sure, sir,” the driver replied. He had leaned forward slightly in his seat; the quiet squeak of the leather must have been what had woken up Kaoru. The man was used to the Hitachiins and didn’t appear to have any strong feelings about his employer forcing him onto a mission before the break of dawn and then falling asleep on him. By this point, all of their family’s employees were either used to the two of them or long gone, so it wasn’t really a surprise. Kaoru should probably actually bother to learn his name, one of these days.

Nah. What was the point? It wasn’t like they were taking the car with them to New York.

The chauffeur continued speaking. “There was some movement by the gate a moment ago, but it doesn’t seem to be a car.”

Kaoru frowned, squinting out the window. The sun had just begun to rise while he had been napping, and the sky was now the omnipresent hazy gray of the early morning, making it a little bit easier to see what was going on around them.

There was a dark figure walking along the wall encircling the Ootori family property.

“He came out of the front gate,” Kaoru’s chauffeur reported.

The figure was walking with quick, confident strides that dared the world to try and get in his way.

Kaoru could recognize that gait anywhere, even when lugging a large bag like it was.

Something in his stomach twisted.

“Duck,” Kaoru ordered, and then he followed his own instructions.

Why was Kyoya going for a walk at five-thirty in the morning? More relevant to his churning stomach, why was Kyoya going for a walk in their direction at five-thirty in the morning? Kaoru had anticipated following another vehicle, not stalking a pedestrian from within his incredibly conspicuous limousine. It looked like his cinematic ambitions were once again doomed to come to naught.

He probably should have asked the driver to take a different car from the family lot for this adventure, now that he thought about it.

Kaoru nearly jumped out of his seat at a sudden sharp rapping sound on the passenger side window. He looked up only to see Kyoya’s entirely unimpressed face looking down at the tinted
Reluctantly, Kaoru nodded at his driver to roll his window down. Time to face the music, then.

“Oh, Kyoya!” he said as the window lowered, adopting a look of wide-eyed shock and hoping he had managed to get all of the drool from his earlier catnap off of his face, at least. “What a surprise!”

“It’s too early for garbage,” Kyoya said acerbically, the tone a jarring inconsistency from the casual t-shirt he was once again wearing, this one a pale red. “Open the door.”

Kaoru let the fake smile slip away and sighed, opening up the passenger door and stepping out to face the music. At this point, it would be hard to argue that whatever was coming wasn’t deserved.

Kyoya just stood up straight and blinked at him, his eyes narrow behind his glasses. He stared silently at Kaoru for nearly a full minute and Kaoru stared back, wondering if he should have written up a will before embarking on this operation.

Finally, Kyoya shook his head once and said, “That is not what I meant.” He flapped a hand sharply in the direction of the back of the vehicle. “Let me in.”

Kaoru suddenly realized that Kyoya wasn’t being so sharp and quiet because he was planning Kaoru’s imminent murder.

Kyoya was being so sharp and quiet because he was barely functional as a human being this early in the morning.

Kaoru had a sudden flashback to the Kyoya in his hotel bedroom in Boston, the Kyoya who had sat up in his bed in his silly formal button-down pajamas and revealed to Kaoru that he was one of the most important people to him before suddenly remembering that Kaoru was breaking and entering and he really should have kicked him out already.

A new, unstoppable smile split Kaoru’s face in two, nothing at all like the fake grin he had tried to put Kyoya off with not even a minute ago.

“I see,” he practically crooned, grinning demonically at Kyoya, who was now frowning in the direction of the car door as though not sure why it had not yet opened by the power of his bad mood alone. “Did you need a ride somewhere, Ootori-sama?”

“Shut up,” Kyoya snapped. “Why isn’t the door open?”

Kaoru snapped his heels together and gave an elaborate bow. “Your wish is my command!”

He reached down and opened the door. When Kyoya slid into the back seat of the limo, Kaoru followed him without waiting for an invitation.

The chauffeur met Kaoru’s eyes in the rearview mirror but didn’t say anything. Smart man. Kaoru sat himself down right behind the divide from the driver, leaving Kyoya to drop his bag and sprawl bonelessly on the length of the seat down the side of the car.

“So where to, Ootori-sama?” Kaoru asked, leaning in to watch the demon king try to bully his brain and body into alignment.

“Shut up,” Kyoya said again. He raised his hand part of the way to his face, as though planning to push his glasses up his nose, but the hand fell back down listlessly before it could even get halfway
there. Kyoya blinked again, as though confused why his glasses weren’t magically moving up his
nose on their own. He struggled into more of a sitting position, but was still mostly slouched in the
seat, like a puppet sitting string-less on a shelf.

Had Kaoru really forgotten how adorable early-morning Kyoya was?

“If I’m not talking, you probably should be,” Kaoru said, not bothering to temper the brightness
and volume of his voice even when Kyoya winced, frown tightening at the unwanted noise.
“Otherwise, we’re going to have a very awkward story to tell all of our friends about later.”

Kyoya stayed silent for a moment longer, but his frown had loosened somewhat, as though he were

The Haninozuka estate?

Wait.

Kyoya was spending hours in the morning training at the Haninozuka estate?

“Mmf,” Kyoya said, or tried to say. He was clearly having a hard time enunciating anything
through the bottom of his t-shirt, which Kaoru had pulled up over his face, the better to study the
body underneath.

There were muscles there. Not, like, a lot of them, but definitely a more defined group of them than
had existed when Kaoru had last fitted Kyoya for an outfit, back for the Christmas masquerade.
Kaoru let one fingertip touch the shadow of an abdominal muscle underneath Kyoya’s ribcage as
though to prove to himself that this wasn’t an illusion. The skin there was still a little bit warm,
probably from how recently Kyoya had still been asleep, and the slight flex of a muscle underneath
his hand was impossibly, undeniably real.

“The limp,” Kaoru breathed, finally dragging Kyoya’s shirt back down from his face. Kyoya
blinked past his now even more skewed glasses and then scowled at him, brain catching on to the
series of events a long moment too slow. “You got a limp because you’re training with Hani-
senpai! Forget the limp, how are you not dead?”

“He’s been going easy on me,” Kyoya admitted, and then his entire face went sickly white as
though he hadn’t meant to reveal that and still lacked the body control necessary to hide his
embarrassment. He regrouped by saying, “Does this car move, or are the tires just for show?”

Kaoru quickly pushed in the button on the nearest intercom. “We’re going to the Haninozuka
estate,” he said into the speaker. The car immediately started moving.

Kyoya closed his eyes, as though to avoid giving anything further away—that or to catch a few
more minutes of sleep. It was hard to tell.

“Is that really all I get?” Kaoru complained, reaching out to tap the side of Kyoya’s leg with the toe
of his shoe. Now that he could be fairly certain he wasn’t going to die, he felt safe pushing his luck
a little bit further. Kyoya’s leg offered a little bit more resistance than Kaoru was expecting, and he
glanced down, wondering what kind of unexpected buffness today’s chinos were hiding.

“It’s more than you had yesterday,” Kyoya said, eyes still closed. He was more talkative, though,
like the closed eyes let him imagine he was sleep-talking. “By the way, nice work finding the
blindspot in the cameras on our property. The security team has already fixed the issue, naturally.
You won’t breach the grounds that easily again. You only got as close as you did again today
because I was expecting you to give me a ride.”
“So you’re training with Hani-senpai,” Kaoru mused, ignoring this warning as he sat back in his seat to mull over what this newest hint could mean. “I’ve gotta tell you, Kyoya, that doesn’t help clarify any of the other hints I’d thought I’d gotten.”

“Are you planning on giving up?”

Kaoru looked up to see that Kyoya’s eyelids had opened a fraction, a tiny sliver of dark eyes visible as they glanced in his direction.

“No!” Kaoru said, defensively. “I told you before, it’s just going to take time. And I’ll need more facts. How long have you been training like this?”

Kyoya looked away. “I am not going to tell you.”

Kaoru made a face, but he had half-expected that response anyway. “What are the rules for me asking questions to other people?”

“None. Rules like that weren’t part of the original game, and I have no interest in stifling anyone’s freedom to speak how they wish.”

Kaoru thought about this, and had opened his mouth to say something else when Kyoya continued, “Except for Tamaki. If Tamaki tells you anything, he will regret it. Immediately.” Kyoya’s barely-open eyes still managed to flash somehow, despite the dim light of the limousine interior. “Extensively.”

Kaoru closed his mouth. He knew Kyoya probably actually only meant that Tamaki would regret it because he was a genuinely good person who would rather suffer a horrendous fate than do anything to betray his best friend’s trust, but it still wasn’t worth pressing the issue.

“Can I at least ask if this is why everyone has been so busy recently?” Kaoru asked, and, as much as he hated the fact that there was the faint thread of a whine in his voice, he wasn’t able to stop it.

Kyoya’s eyes opened fully. “It’s part of the reason,” he admitted. He brought his fingers up to touch his forehead, as though they helped to steady him. “However, it’s far from the only reason. Everyone has their plans for the future, Kaoru.”

Kaoru just sighed and looked out the window. It wasn’t that he didn’t know that. After all, he and Hikaru didn’t need to go to New York, if he really were so worried about losing everyone. But New York was the direction of the future that they wanted.

Kaoru just really wanted confirmation that he could have both. New York and also his friends. So what if that was a little bit selfish? Selfishness was one of his selling points, as Kyoya had pointed out to him on more than one occasion.

Kyoya let him stew in his own thoughts, silent except to quietly ask the driver to drop him off at the dōjō rather than at the main house of the Haninozuka estate. He didn’t meet Kaoru’s eyes when he said it.

“I’m going to win this,” Kaoru said as they pulled to a stop outside the dōjō and Kyoya made to leave the car.

He could see the very edge of a smile as Kyoya ducked past him.

Kyoya’s “I look forward to it” hung in the air of the car as the door shut behind him.
The minute Kyoya was out of the car, Kaoru pulled out his phone and dialed Hani-senpai’s number.

Hani-senpai picked up nearly immediately. “Oh, it’s Kao-chan! It’s awfully early, isn’t it?”

From the brightness of his voice, no one would have known, especially considering his legendary demon beast persona when he first woke up in the morning.

‘Energy vampire,’ said Kaoru’s brain.

“How long has Kyoya been training with you?” asked Kaoru’s voice.

“Eh?” Hani-senpai seemed thoughtful rather than surprised by the question. “I’m not sure… Maybe half a year? Tama-chan has only been training with us for a few months.”

Kaoru’s phone creaked in his grip. Tamaki was that much of a part of this?

He owed Haruhi the biggest ‘I told you so’ in the world.

“Why are they doing this?” Kaoru asked, just in case. “Have they told you, Hani-senpai?”

“Kyo-chan and Tama-chan want to get stronger!” Hani-senpai told him. Of course. Whatever that meant. “I have to go now, Kao-chan. Unless you want to join us for training?”

“Hm.” Kaoru pretended to think about it. “How long will it be?”

“We normally go for about five hours before Kyo-chan says we need to stop!” Hani-senpai enthused, and no wonder Kyoya had looked like he was on his last legs when he had gotten home the other day. If it had been Kaoru in his shoes, they would have needed a body bag.

“I’m afraid I can’t today,” Kaoru said into the phone. Or ever, he thought, but he wasn’t about to say that out loud. Hani-senpai probably wouldn’t be angry, but his feelings might be hurt, and that felt worse. “I have something else I need to do. Please say hello to everyone from me.”

“Of course, Kao-chan! Later!”

Kaoru closed his phone and turned to the car speaker once more. “Back to the Ootori house! Floor it!”

Sure, he supposedly had five hours, but “Floor it!” sounded like something he could eventually use in his screenplay, since the whole “Follow that car!” scenario had fallen through.

His chauffeur didn’t question the order, although his definition of “flooring” it was a little more conservative than Kaoru thought was reasonable. Still, it turned out that someone who was paid to go along with whatever he wanted was way more convenient company to have on this kind of trip than Hikaru and Haruhi were.

He would make sure to tell them that. Haruhi would just roll her eyes, but Hikaru would get all offended. It’d be fun.

They made it back to Kyoya’s house in record time. Kaoru didn’t bother hopping the wall this time. Instead, he put on his sweetest smile, climbed out of the car, and buzzed in at the gate.

“Hitachiin Kaoru, here to pick up something that Kyoya needs for his training today!” Kaoru chirped at the butler who answered his call.
Just like that, he was allowed inside the house.

Too easy. And they thought the Ootori private security force was so impressive.

But then Kaoru took one step into the house and realized that they didn’t need a private security force when the most obnoxious collection of atoms to ever call itself a ‘human being’ was already a member of the family.

“Yes, Akito-san,” Kaoru said, because it was either that or let out the disgusted ‘geh’ that was hovering in the back of his throat. “Good morning!”

It would’ve been a better morning if Kaoru had been able to continue to ignore Akito’s existence, of course, but it was a little late for that kind of wishful thinking.

Kyoya’s next-oldest brother narrowed his sharp eyes at Kaoru. When the butler had let Kaoru in, the asshole had been in the middle of straightening his tie in the hall mirror like the self-conscious jerk he was. The butler (that coward) had already disappeared, leaving Kaoru to deal with this black hole of a person alone.

“Kaoru-kun, is it?” Akito said like he didn’t care in the slightest if he was right or wrong. “Or are you the brother, what’s-his-name?”

Kaoru gritted his teeth and forced a smile onto his face. It felt like it took every bit of strength he had. Hey, look, Hani-senpai, he was training too! “Yes, I’m Kaoru.”

“Hm.” The obnoxious peacock straightened up, smoothing down the front of his shirt. “You are here very early. My lazy brother is unlikely to be awake at this time, you realize.”

Another hint, and Kaoru hadn’t even needed to look for it! Thanks for being such a reliable asshole, Akito-san!

So Kyoya’s own family didn’t realize what he was doing with Hani-senpai. Or at least he wasn’t talking about it openly enough that stupid, mostly-oblivious Akito had been able to figure anything out.

Whatever that meant.

“Oh, I don’t mind waiting for him to wake up,” Kaoru said, trying to inch towards the door to Kyoya’s little suite at the end of the foyer.

“You two do realize you’re not in high school anymore, right?” Akito asked officiously. “He’s going to need to grow up one of these days.” He turned towards the front door and Kaoru narrowly avoided a sigh of relief. Then, suddenly, the trash can with legs swiveled back around, dark eyes locking onto Kaoru in a way that was familiar but not nearly as powerful and piercing as Kyoya’s stare could be. “What did you say you were here for, again?”

Kaoru hadn’t. Kaoru very, very specifically had avoided saying anything of the kind.

“Just to see Kyoya,” he said vaguely. “I want to talk to him.”

“What about?” Akito asked, like it was any business of his at all.

This conversation was over.

Kaoru looked down, sighed, and, dredging up every ounce of his best hosting training, looked back
up with the undeniable glimmer of tears in his eyes, mouth drawn down into a trembling pout. “It’s just,” he sniffled at the other man, who suddenly seemed to regret having pursued this line of conversation, “I’m moving to New York for school and I’m so scared. It’s going to be so different, Akito-san, and what if the Americans don’t like me? I’ve heard the people in New York are mean and school there is scary and I’m going to really, really miss my friends and—”

Akito took a long step back, almost knocking into a table against the opposite wall. “These are all problems you overcome with age,” the pompous fart in a suit said, entirely unconvincingly. “I hope your conversation with Kyoya is fruitful and he helps you with…” He gestured vaguely rather than finish the sentence. “Goodbye, Kaoru-kun,” he said instead, and then he turned and fled.

Kaoru hated that waste of space so much, but he wasn’t about to let him become a waste of his time, as well. He immediately turned back to the door to Kyoya’s room and let himself inside.

He was very familiar with this room by now; not only had he been in it several times in the past, but the hours of observation through the window yesterday now made every single part of the room look familiar.

Including the open laptop on the table.

Kaoru made a beeline for it.

He seated himself comfortably on the couch as he moved his finger across the trackpad. Tsk, tsk, Kyoya! He should know better than to leave his computer unlocked, even in his private police-secured family estate. After all, any kind of criminal or snooping underclassman could just waltz in here…

Kaoru pulled up the messaging service, to see what he could find. He typed his own name into the search bar, just to see what would happen.

Nothing besides a few conversations they’d had. Boo.

Hm…

Next, mostly on a whim, Kaoru tried entering in ‘Hitachiin.’

Now that was interesting. The conversations with Kaoru were still there, as well as several with Hikaru that Kaoru was going to chivalrously leave unread, but…

But there were also two specific Hitachiin-addressed e-mail conversations that didn’t involve Hikaru or Kaoru at all.

Why was Kyoya e-mailing Kaoru and Hikaru’s mom and dad?

Kaoru was just about to click on the top conversation when there was a flushing sound from Kyoya’s attached bathroom. Kaoru slammed the laptop shut and set it back on the table, just barely managing to stop himself from throwing it. For one panicked moment, Kaoru thought that Kyoya had come home somehow, that there was maybe a secret portal between the Haninozuka dōjō and Kyoya’s bathroom.

Weirder things had happened, in his experience.

Then the bathroom door opened and Kaoru was staring not at Kyoya but at Kyoya’s main bodyguard. The tall, bald, scary one. Tachibana, Kaoru thought it was.
Bizarrely, the first thing Kaoru focused on was that the man was wearing sunglasses. It was barely six in the morning and they were inside. This guy was super on top of his brand, wasn’t he?

“Hello,” Kaoru said gravely, sanity evidently having left him along with his pulse when that toilet had flushed. “It’s a lovely morning.”

Tachibana’s face slowly turned to look from Kaoru to where the laptop was sitting at the edge of the table, closed and not even close to where it had been when Kaoru had first walked into the room.

“Hello, Kaoru-sama. You should probably not be in Kyoya-sama’s room right now,” Tachibana finally said, just as gravely.

“You’re right.” Kaoru immediately stood. “I’ll just go then.”

“I think that would be for the best.” Tachibana remained stationary in the bathroom doorway, watching as Kaoru marched from the room.

That certainly could have gone worse.

Plus, now Kaoru had two more pretty big hints... that he still had no idea what to do with.

He added them to the collection anyway, running down the full list in his head.

Five years. Supposedly selfish, but probably actually to help their friends. An MBA. A law degree. The Hitachiin family precept. Demands from Suoh-san. Apologizing to Tamaki. Training with Hani-senpai. Secrets from that idiot, Akito. E-mail conversations with Kaoru’s mom and dad.

In some ways, it felt like nothing. Kaoru still had no idea what would make all of these pieces fit together in a way that made any sense at all.

But Kaoru actually felt pretty good. He definitely had more pieces now. He was getting closer to… well, he couldn’t really say to what.

But still… whatever it was, he was definitely getting closer to it.

Chapter End Notes

Manga Background Notes for Chapter 6 (warning, spoilers follow!):
-Kyoya’s middle brother Akito and Kaoru do not like one another—Akito thinks Kaoru (and the other hosts, to be fair) are obnoxious, and Kaoru thinks Akito is annoying and too nosy about Kyoya’s life.

Foreign Language Notes:
1. [sama: an honorific of extreme respect, used for those of a higher rank than one’s self]
2. [dōjō: literally “Place of the Way,” a name for a hall for learning, often one associated with martial arts]
A pair of lips traced up the line of Kaoru’s jaw, the electricity of the touch making his nerve endings trill. His head fell back onto the solid curve of a shoulder as a high, needy sound shivered from his throat.

A breath of air ghosted over his ear. “Catch me,” came the words, so low as to be nearly indistinguishable.

But not nearly indistinguishable enough to hide the fact that it was Kyoya speaking.

Kaoru woke with a start. He was greeted by the sight of their New York bedroom, dark and empty of anyone else save Hikaru, who was spread out like a starfish and snoring at the other end of their shared bed.

Kaoru took a few slow, deep breaths. The strange, dreamy sensation had already fallen away, leaving him with a slightly unsettled feeling in the pit of his stomach. He preemptively rolled away from his brother, despite the nearly two feet already separating them. The two of them had shared a bed nearly every day of their lives, and thus they were more than used to waking up to the other experiencing a… well, a post-puberty morning problem, to put it delicately. Still, Kaoru would rather not have Hikaru make a joke about what had led to this particular case of early morning stiffness.

He’d known that jet lag could lead to weird dreams, but he’d still never experienced anything like that before. It had to be some kind of weird Frankendream, combining totally normal 19-year-old guy dreams with Kaoru’s waking determination to beat Kyoya at his own game. It was the only thing that made sense.

Not that his determination had amounted to all that much. Here he was, a newly minted resident of New York City, and Kyoya was still contentedly pursuing his mysterious five-year plan back in Japan.

Kaoru got up out of bed, too unsettled to go back to sleep. He walked over to the window to peer out at the already bright morning dawning over their new home.

Anticlimactically, the process of “moving” to New York hadn’t required any actual movement apart from boarding the family plane. After all, the Hitachiins had been keeping up a pied-à-terre in Midtown Manhattan for at least half a decade. The place was already fully stocked, and the butler would be more than willing to track down any other items the twins could possibly need.

Still, it was a little weird to think that this condo, which Kaoru was used to experiencing for a week at a time at most, was now his home and would continue to be for the next four years. The view outside their bedroom window, while spectacular, still felt foreign and out of place.

“Kaoru…?” Hikaru called sleepily from bed. “Everything okay?”

Kaoru turned to see his brother, who had one eye squinted open as he peered blearily up at him from his blanket-covered sprawl.

“Jet lag,” Kaoru said, glad for the easy excuse. “Go back to sleep.”
Hikaru didn’t need to be told twice. The snoring picked up like it had never been interrupted at all.

Kaoru twitched the curtains closed. They had a long, boring American day ahead of them. Maybe he really would look into hacking into Kyoya’s online accounts, like Hikaru kept saying that he should.

Although, first, he should probably figure out the course registration process for college.

When Hikaru stumbled out of bed a couple of hours later, Kaoru was lying on his stomach on one of the couches in their sitting room, kicking his feet in the air as he sifted through course description packets.

“How much of an idiot would I be to try to take extra courses in CompSci at a different school in addition to the fashion courses at our school?” he mused aloud.

Hikaru snorted and picked up one of the many isolated information sheets Kaoru had spread across the table as part of the planning process. He read through the first few lines of the sheet in his hand, then carelessly crumpled it up and lobbed it at Kaoru’s head.

“Sounds like a you level of stupid,” Hikaru pronounced. The balled-up piece of paper hit Kaoru’s temple with a sad little ‘thwip’ noise and bounced pathetically to the ground.

Kaoru looked over at Hikaru. Hikaru stared back at him.

And, with that first strike, the Great Wadded Up College Information Packet Paper War officially began.

The two armies froze mid-throw when their butler stepped into the sitting room.

“I… apologize for interrupting you when you’re hard at work,” he said, the pause pointed like a knife as he stared judgmentally at the crumpled up pieces of paper that were now scattered across the room.

Hikaru and Kaoru traded a look, and then both flung the paper balls they were still holding at the butler instead. Both balls smacked into the front of his suit jacket and fell to the ground, one right after the other, with twinned feeble ‘thwop’ sounds.

The butler didn’t even roll his eyes, even though Kaoru could tell he really wanted to. He was a Hitachiin employee, after all. “There are four young men and two young women here to see you.”

The twins barely managed to take a matching, excited step forward before their butler disappeared and the members of the former Ouran Host Club (and Reiko) flooded into their New York sitting room.

Weirdly, it was Reiko who reached them first, trampling over the paper on the floor in her rush to grab Hikaru’s hands and stare intently into his eyes. The twins both looked down at her, wide smiles frozen in their confusion.

Eyes large and unblinking underneath her severe bangs, she said, “I’ve been waiting so long to speak with you two. Please, tell me: have you seen any shadowy figures yet? Any disembodied voices? Visions of blood leaking from unlikely places?”

Ah.

“As opposed to blood leaking from likely places, huh?” Hani-senpai bounced up next to his
girlfriend before either of the twins could react to this interrogation, leaning against her arm and smiling up at them happily. “I guess that doesn’t seem as haunted, does it?”

Mori-senpai, shadowing the smaller pair, nodded his agreement and carefully slid into one of the few seats in the room not covered in paper debris.

“Not bad,” was Kyoya’s comment as he strolled past the group of couches and over to the mostly debris-free window, looking out over the sweeping view of Central Park. “A little smaller than I was expecting.”

“This is still an apartment, right…?” Haruhi asked under her breath, looking down the length of the room, where opened double doors on either side of an ornate fireplace showed the cavernous library beyond.

“A glorious home!” Tamaki trilled, twirling in the center of the room with his arms outstretched, barely managing not to trip over the paper on the floor. “A building dripping in history and class! A perfect launching place for my two sons to—”

And then Tamaki stopped speaking and went bright red.

Without missing a beat, Kaoru pulled Hikaru out of Reiko’s weirdly strong grip and the two of them slid into place on either side of Tamaki.

It was their turn to participate in this ritual of greeting.

“Eh? Eh? What is this?” Hikaru snickered, poking one of Tamaki’s ruby-red cheeks.

“Did to no say something he didn’t mean to say?” Kaoru asked in his turn, poking the opposite cheek.

“Sons,’ huh? We haven’t heard that one in a while. Is this how to no truly feels?”

“N-no!” Tamaki stuttered, hands flailing ineffectually. “You two are just… j-just… so troublesome…!”

Then the two of them swept him up in a giant bear hug. It was a convenient way to hide their faces as they finally processed that their friends were all here, every single one of them, all gathered in their New York condo, which was suddenly feeling a million times warmer and more welcoming than it had just a few minutes ago.

Tamaki’s arms settled around their shoulders, and Kaoru felt a little cracked piece deep inside of him finally settle back into place. The size of his grin was embarrassing; it was good that no one would ever see it through Tamaki’s shirt.

“How heartwarming,” said a dry voice from the entryway. “I’m glad you two are excited to be someone’s sons, at least.”

Kaoru and Hikaru both tilted their heads over Tamaki’s shoulders and stuck their tongues out at their mother. She stuck her tongue out back at them. Then, at the same moment, they caught sight of their dad, hovering in the shadows next to her.

The twins sprang away from Tamaki at once, hurrying over to their parents like proper, dutiful sons.

“You’re both here?” they asked in unison. “Did you bring Ageha?”
Their mom scoffed at them. “Of course we’re here. I need to check in on the preparations for Fashion Week. Plus, who else would’ve let your bizarre assortment of friends—and adorable Haruhi, of course, please don’t forget about those dresses I want you to try on, sweetie!—past the front desk?”

“We left Ageha with the nanny,” their dad added, quietly. “You two know that frequent plane travel is not good for a small child.”

“Boo,” the twins chorused, immediately dropping the dutiful pretense and turning their backs on their parents, all interest lost.

“Ungrateful brats,” Yuzuha said, but she didn’t sound surprised. “Whatever, just don’t wreck the place. More than you already have, from the look of things.”

Kaoru’s gaze just happened to drift slightly to the side at that moment, and he saw Kyoya half-turned, staring behind Kaoru at the space his parents must have been occupying. Kaoru quickly looked away to where Reiko was practically crawling into their fireplace as part of her paranormal investigation before Kyoya could catch him looking at him.

Kyoya had looked the same as always, though Kaoru didn’t really know what he had expected to be different. He clearly didn’t know that Kaoru had been having a weird Frankendream about him this morning.

Not that he should have known. Or that Kaoru was ever going to tell him.

Anyway, this was perfect, actually. A new opportunity to find some hints, just when Kaoru had thought he’d be out of luck for a while. He couldn’t have planned it better if he had tried.

“How long are you all planning to stay?” Hikaru asked, reading Kaoru’s mind like the good twin he was.

“It’s convenient that your building houses a hotel as well as a condominium complex,” Kyoya said, and Kaoru finally felt safe enough to look at him again. Kyoya was leaning back against the windowsill now, casually stretching out his legs. They must have come here straight from the airport. A few strands of Kyoya’s hair were ever so slightly out of place and there was a slight wrinkle in the neck of his button down shirt that implied he had slept on it at some point. Still, with Central Park stretching out of the window behind him, he looked like he was in the middle of posing for some new casual fashion line designed for the wealthy and bored. Kaoru’s hands itched to take a picture of the view.

In a totally normal for friends kind of way.

Kyoya tilted his head slightly to the side, unintentionally emphasizing the slight wrinkle at the neck of his shirt, raising an eyebrow at whatever expression was on Kaoru’s face. He then smiled, a small, interested quirk of his lips, as though predicting that Kaoru was just thinking about his next step in their game. Kaoru couldn’t help his automatic grin back at him, raising an eyebrow of his own in response, trying to communicate how badly he wanted to say ‘just try and stop me.’

The game. This really was a perfect, magical new opportunity for the game. That was what was important, here.

“We’ve reserved rooms here for the next week,” Kyoya said out loud, still looking at Kaoru, clearly meaning to give him the timeframe he’d have to work with.

From the corner of his eye, Kaoru could see that his brother was looking back and forth between
Kaoru and Kyoya with both eyebrows raised, clearly picking up on a deeper level to their conversation. As per usual when it came to the game the two of them were playing, he did not seem even a little bit impressed.

Tamaki, utterly oblivious to the quiet tension between two of his friends, stepped forward and interrupted their stare-down, raising a dramatically clenched fist of determination and nearly tripping over another wadded up sheet of paper in his fervor. “It was difficult to plan around our internships, of course, but we could not think of a better way to spend our summer break than by helping our youngest, most sheltered friends learn about their newest home!”

“Boo,” Kaoru and Hikaru said in unison. “Haruhi is younger than we are. And if we’re talking about sheltered…”

As one, the entire group turned to look at where Hani-senpai was crouching on the ground next to Reiko, wondering aloud if ghosts in haunted chimneys liked American-style roasted marshmallows the best, and shouldn’t they make some, just to check?

“Still!” Tamaki insisted, turning back to the rest of them, bright smile unfailing. “We have a plan!”

And, with that, “Operation: Help Hikaru and Kaoru get used to a typical New York life with the maximum preparedness!” began.

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**Day One: Hani-senpai’s Day**

“Rock, paper, scissors shoot,” came the soft but very aggressive cry from five different mouths as a group of young men huddled outside of their friend’s bedroom and tried to decide whose job it was to wake him up.

“No,” cried both Tamaki and Hikaru very, very quietly as they tied with paper but were soundly beaten by Mori-senpai, Hani-senpai, and Kaoru’s scissors.

“Again,” the two of them chanted, throwing out rock at the same time.

“Again,” they said, this time flourishing paper in unison.

“Again,” they cried, sotto voce. This time, Tamaki’s paper beat Hikaru’s rock.

“Nooooooo,” Hikaru moaned as quietly as he could, slumping to the ground outside of Kyoya’s bedroom. They were all clustered in the sitting area of the large suite of rooms that Kyoya was sharing with Tamaki and Haruhi, all ready to get started for the day… with one very significant exception.

“There’s no sense in complaining,” Tamaki whispered virtuously, entirely like he hadn’t been right there crying ‘no’ with Hikaru when they had first lost to the other three. “Kyoya’s not that bad when he first wakes up.”

He was literally using a handkerchief to mop the sweat of relief from his forehead, the hypocrite. Hikaru understandably ignored him. “Kaoru, do it for me,” he said instead, as demanding as it was possible to get while whispering.

“What?” Kaoru whispered back, already plastered against the opposite wall from the bedroom door with Mori-senpai and Hani-senpai on either side of him. “No. Definitely not.”
“He likes you better,” Hikaru said. “You probably won’t die.”

“You can’t know that.” Kaoru pushed himself even further against the wall he was hugging, as though that would somehow save him.

“But he’ll definitely kill me. Plus, you owe me.” Hikaru made a meaningful expression, as though to invoke the image of bushes and Kyoya’s house and eight o’clock in the morning on a vacation day all in one fell swoop of his eyebrows.

It succeeded. Kaoru wilted.

“You’re sure we need to leave this early, Hani-senpai?” Kaoru tried one last time.

“I’m positive, Kao-chan!” Hani-senpai insisted, but even his insistence was quiet, the constant sparkle around him slightly muted. “We need to get there as soon as it opens, to beat the breakfast rush! This is a very popular bakery, Kao-chan, and it’s a necessary part of your New York education!”

Kaoru just sighed at that, finally letting go of his death grip on the wall. The others, seeing his capitulation, took a large collective step away from the door.

“I’m going to go make sure Haruhi’s ready!” Tamaki said brightly, heading towards the door on the opposite side of the room.

“I’m going to check on Reiko-chan!” Hani-senpai said, Mori-senpai following him back towards the hallway.

“I’ll just meet you all in the lobby!” Hikaru said, not bothering to think of an excuse as he followed the other two. “Thanks, Kaoru!”

Kaoru didn’t even have a chance to respond before he was alone in the large suite’s sitting area. Cowards.

He took a deep breath and stepped forward, knocking quietly on the intimidating bedroom door. Maybe he would be lucky and Kyoya would already be awake. It might have been early by New York time, but it was around eight o’clock in the evening back home, after all.

“Kyoya?” he called, just as quietly as he had knocked. “You awake…?”

No response.

Gritting his teeth, prepared for anything, Kaoru slid a hand over the handle and opened the door.

There was no one in the room. The bed was pristine, like it hadn’t even been slept in. The desk by the window had Kyoya’s laptop on it, but the computer seemed to be closed and powered down at the moment.

Kaoru frowned, feeling his forehead furrow in confusion. Had Kyoya left to go somewhere already? He wouldn’t be off training, right? Hani-senpai and Mori-senpai hadn’t said anything about any training, and they would probably know.

While he was thinking over the possibilities, Kaoru heard the quiet rumble of a voice from behind a door that was slightly ajar in the corner, likely the small en suite.

Without thinking twice, Kaoru made his way to the door, careful to keep his steps quiet on the
plush carpeting of the room.

“—already awake,” Kyoya’s voice was saying faintly from the other side of the bathroom door.

Kaoru pressed himself against the wall next to the doorframe, not willing to risk a look inside just in case doing so would give away his prime eavesdropping spot. “I am actually glad you called, no matter how early. I had a feeling that you were going to avoid meeting me in person.”

There was quiet as whoever was on the other end of Kyoya’s conversation replied. A phonecall, then. It had probably rang at about the same time that Kaoru had knocked, covering up the sound at the door.

“No disrespect was meant,” Kyoya said smoothly in response to the missing half of the conversation. “I just assumed you were busy with your preparations for Fashion Week, Hitachiin-san.”

Kaoru stiffened, eyes growing wide.

“I’ve given a great deal of thought to the conditions you offered,” Kyoya said, totally ignorant of how Kaoru was frozen in shock only a few feet away. “And I think I have a compromise that might appeal to you.”

Another pause filled the air, leaving Kaoru in suspense. After a moment, Kyoya let out a soft, obviously insincere chuckle. “Oh, you misunderstand. I am offering this compromise because I think your current terms are too lenient. My goal is to prove my abilities to you, after all.”

A shorter pause ensued before Kyoya said, “My compromise is the exact same terms, but for Hikaru alone.”

A longer pause came before Kyoya said, “Those were my thoughts exactly. I am glad you agree. I will let you know when I have accomplished my terms. I expect you to make good on your end of our bargain at that time.”

Another pause, and this time the smile was real in Kyoya’s voice when he said, “It is a pleasure to do business with you, Hitachiin-san. I look forward to many more shared ventures in our future.”

His tone of voice told Kaoru that this conversation was done. He took a few large, slow steps back to the doorway, once again thankful for the plushness of the carpet muffling the sound of his movement. He would take the time to think about everything he had heard later. For now...

“Kyoya?” he called, louder now that he was no longer afraid he’d be waking the other man up. He leaned against the doorframe casually, like he’d just now opened the door and checked in. “Hansenpai says we need to go now if we’re going to beat the rush for the first bakery he wants us to visit.”

Kyoya stepped out of the bathroom, slipping his cell phone into the pocket of his pants. Oddly, he looked a little unsettled to see Kaoru there, like Kaoru had actually managed to surprise him for once. Kaoru gave him the most innocent look he could muster, gesturing to the bed.

“Did you even sleep?” he asked, voice remarkably even and calm for how churning and excited he felt inside. If the host club had done one thing for him, it had turned him into an excellent actor. If fashion fell through for him, maybe he could make a career in theater.

His first role would be playing himself in his dramatic re-enactment of his defeat of Kyoya, of course.
“No,” Kyoya said. He seemed to believe Kaoru’s veneer of innocence—or was willing to pretend he believed it, at least. He was wearing his typical summer wear, the tank top underneath his zippered vest openly displaying the swelling of the new muscle tone in his arms. Kaoru felt his heart give an unexpected stutter at the sight and quickly looked away, back up at Kyoya’s eyes, which were thankfully the same as always. Overcoming this stupid Frankendream was proving to be way more of a pain than he had thought it was going to be. “I finished some work instead. I thought I’d try to reset my sleep schedule this evening.”

“That’s not a healthy way to deal with jet lag, you know,” Kaoru teasingly scolded, standing up straighter as Kyoya approached him. “Watch, we’ll get some sugar and carbohydrates into you at these bakeries, and then you’re going to crash hard.”

“Are you willing to bet on that?” Kyoya asked, pausing in the doorway next to him and glancing down at him from the corner of his eye.

“I’m not foolish enough to bet against Ootori Kyoya,” Kaoru said, leaning his head back against the doorway to smirk up at the man in question. “But I do think I’m going to stop back by our place to pick up a pillow for today. Just in case I get a little tired, you understand.”

He could do this. No dream was going to be allowed to screw up one of the best friendships in his life.

Packing the pillow was a smart move. Kyoya made it through the first three stops Hani-senpai had arranged for their all-day baked goods tour of New York City before stretching out in the limousine Tamaki had hired for them and falling fast asleep. Kaoru slipped the pillow underneath his friend’s head and smacked his brother’s hand away when Hikaru made a move to draw something on his forehead.

“I’m not taking the fall for you twice today,” he warned his brother.

“No fun at all,” Hikaru whined, but he was quickly distracted by Hani-senpai explaining that the next bakery they were stopping by had their own *television show*, wasn’t that so cool?

Kaoru took the chance of his brother’s distraction to look down at the sleeping Kyoya thoughtfully.

Kyoya, who had said, “My goal is to prove my abilities to you,” over the phone to a person who was undoubtedly Kaoru’s mother.

And then had proceeded to make some sort of deal involving Hikaru—a deal involving “Hikaru alone,” for some reason.

And then had ended the conversation with, “I look forward to many more shared ventures in our future.”

And, in Kaoru’s dream, had said, “Catch me.”

Kaoru shook his head, frowning, trying to dislodge the stupid thought from his brain. He needed to focus, really focus!

Kyoya was fielding demands from Suoh-san, training with Hani-senpai, and now had some sort of evil back alley deal in the works with Yuzuha. This was all evidently to get them to trust him and so that he could prove his abilities, according to the conversation with Yuzuha. All to engage in more ‘shared ventures’ in the future?

Kaoru was beginning to have a suspicion that he finally had enough pieces to figure out what this
plan involved. He pulled out his phone and, with the hum of Hani-senpai’s excitement as a background soundtrack, began to do some research.

And, if researching Japanese business law distracted him from any thoughts about low voices and sensitive jaws and stupid Frankendreams, even better.

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**Day Two: Mori-senpai’s Day**

“Take me out to the ballgame~” Tamaki and Hani-senpai warbled together, swaying from side to side with arms draped across each other’s shoulders and matching caps on their heads. “Take me out from the crowd~”

“I’m fairly certain it’s meant to be ‘out with the crowd,’” Kyoya corrected them. Mori-senpai stayed silent, eyes locked onto the events on the field with surprising passion.

“Wasn’t this supposed to be a week where you all helped us find stuff we’d enjoy in the city?” Hikaru griped, balancing his head on his hand as he leaned on the granite tabletop of their luxury suite. “Baseball is so boring.”

Mori-senpai didn’t take his eyes off of the field, but he did reach over to rest one finger on Hikaru’s lips, shushing him. Hikaru obediently fell silent, though it looked like it was requiring every ounce of admiration and respect he had for Mori-senpai to not lick the offending finger like a child.

Kaoru smirked as he saw this out of the corner of his eye, but he didn’t look up from his phone. He just kept clicking through link after link of articles about Japanese business law.

One person. Several businesses. He was on the cusp of something big. He could feel it. Just a few more clicks and he’d have it all.

“I can’t believe you’ve abandoned me to this,” Hikaru muttered, rebelling against his Mori-senpai-imposed silence. “Both of you.”

“Huh?” said Haruhi, not looking up from her textbook.

“Never mind.” Hikaru sighed, settling back more firmly at Kaoru’s side. Kaoru made a small, unhappy noise when Hikaru accidentally jostled his internet scrolling arm.

He didn’t have to look to know his brother was rolling his eyes at him.

“If it would entertain you, Hikaru-kun, I know of several stories of baseball-related curses that I could share,” Reiko offered.

Kaoru felt more than heard his brother sigh for a second time. “Thanks, Reiko. At least someone’s trying, here.”

Well, if Hikaru had been looking for a way to punish Kaoru for not paying more attention to him, he couldn’t have found much of a better one than to listen to Reiko’s ghost stories for four hours straight.

By the time he had finally convinced his brother that night that it wouldn’t make any sense at all for the ghost of a dead goat from Chicago to be haunting their condominium in New York, no matter what Reiko had said, it was five o’clock in the morning.
Day Three: Reiko’s Day(/Night)

Forget the demon king. Forget the demon beast.

It turned out that the scariest of them all was actually the demon black magic girl.

Someone needed to put a stop to her reign of terror.

Unfortunately, the only one brave enough to do so was her doting boyfriend, who, worryingly, seemed to find her cuter the scarier she got.

And Kaoru didn’t think he had ever seen his mousy yearmate more terrifyingly excited, including when Hani-senpai had agreed to go out with her for the first time.

As if spending a full day visiting fortune tellers and weird little occult-based stores wasn’t enough, after dinner Reiko gathered them all together and flourished a wide variety of electrical devices like they were manna from heaven. “Keeping today’s preparations in mind, tonight we are going to document evidence of American ghosts and the nebulous forces that keep these lands accursed.” Reiko’s eyes were gleaming behind her dark bangs. “We’ll work in pairs to cover more ground. Each pair will have an EMF meter, an EVP audio recorder, a camera, and a Beelzenef doll personally attuned to the dark arts by Nekozawa-senpai himself. We’ll stake out the most haunted locations in New York City and find proof that the forces of evil are alive and well!”

“And we’ll figure out if they like cake!” Hani-senpai tacked on, beaming up at her.

“We’ll figure out if they like cake more or less than they like virgin sacrifices,” Reiko said, nodding sagely at her boyfriend as though this were a familiar conversation between the two of them.

Terrifying.

And it really left Kaoru—by this point running solely on the fumes of the single large cup of coffee he had consumed that morning—with only one choice.

“I’m with Haruhi!” he announced.

He and his brother had an extremely strong relationship. In fact, most people seemed to believe that their relationship was “weird” or “unnatural” or “gross.” Kaoru never really paid attention to those people; Hikaru was as much an extension of himself as his arms and legs were, and it was fine that other people didn’t understand that.

But he wasn’t sure even their relationship was strong enough to last a second night in a row of no sleep due to Hikaru screaming about a shadow moving in the corner of the room at three in the morning.

Even arms and legs sometimes left you with no choice but amputation.

“No!” Tamaki cried out, looking horrified at the very idea of Kaoru and Haruhi going ghost-hunting together. “I wanted to be with Haruhi!”

“Sorry, Kaoru,” Haruhi said immediately. “It’s better if I go with Tamaki.”

Kaoru was about to protest with extreme vehemence, but then his eyes met Haruhi’s and the dead,
dull look in her gaze reminded him that easily-terrified Tamaki had been sitting just on the other side of Hani-senpai and Reiko at the baseball game, definitely within earshot of Reiko’s ghost stories. Haruhi had probably had problems of her own to deal with last night.

And now she apparently wanted to continue dealing with Tamaki instead of handing him off.

The power of love was almost as terrifying as Reiko was.

“Fine,” Kaoru said with only a tiny amount of bitterness, like the incredible friend he was. Haruhi gave him a thankful look, which helped make him feel better about it. At least some people appreciated the sacrifices he made.

Speaking of ungrateful people…

“Tough luck, Kaoru. I call Mori-senpai.” Hikaru leaned carelessly back in his seat as though he were totally calm about this situation and not just claiming the friend he felt safest with. At least that left Kaoru off the hook.

It actually left Kaoru with Kyoya, which would have been more than fine... except that Kaoru had kind of been avoiding Kyoya ever since he had overheard that phone conversation.

The second Kyoya talked to him on his own, Kaoru had a feeling he wasn’t going to be able to stop himself from confessing the very rough outlines of a guess that he’d managed to cobble together. Patience really, really was not his strong suit. And he knew that the guess wasn’t ready, not yet. Kaoru had a good feeling about this one, but he wanted it to sound impressive and polished when he finally announced it.

That, and if he was already on a roll of half-baked confession, he was worried that the whole “I also had a weird dream about you and my obsession might be crossing some dangerous lines” bit would come out too.

The game. If he figured out his answer to the game and polished it up enough, gave himself enough of a script, no other sharing would be necessary.

“We don’t have to go through with this if you don’t want to,” Kyoya said to him. His voice was quiet and withdrawn. It was the first time either of them had spoken since the whole group had climbed into the limousine to be transported to their supposedly ghost-infested stations for the night.

Now, they were among the last two pairs left in the car, along with Haruhi and Tamaki. The other two were talking quietly at the other end of the car, fingers tangled together in between them.

They were seriously too cute. It made Kaoru want to throw something at them, but, since he wasn’t his obnoxious brother, he managed to suppress the urge.

“We could just go back to the hotel and ignore this foolish endeavor entirely,” Kyoya continued, clearly trying to gauge Kaoru’s silence.

It wasn’t fair to keep him in suspense. Kaoru took a deep breath and tore his gaze away from Tamaki and Haruhi, turning his head to look at Kyoya instead. Kyoya was sitting next to him against the back of the car, close enough to touch but far enough that it was clear he was trying to give Kaoru space. He was wearing several sensible layers, having come prepared for spending a night in the off-limits (except, evidently, if you paid an exorbitant amount of money in bribes) lighthouse that they’d been assigned, right along the edge of the city.
He was just... Kyoya. Calculating and terrifying and robotic, and also one of Kaoru’s best friends, thanks to the weird twist of fate that had brought Tamaki into both of their lives. The dream had just been a fluke, the result of some lines of communication inside his brain getting crossed while he was asleep. Looking at Kyoya now, awake, Kaoru didn’t feel any differently than usual, just generally warmed by his presence and glad to know him. Just normal friendship.

Some pressure around his heart that Kaoru hadn’t really been aware of eased slightly. This really was just Kyoya he was dealing with. What the hell had he allowed himself to get so freaked out about? Man, his subconscious was his own worst enemy. Haruhi would probably say it was karma.

“And break Reiko’s little ghost-loving heart?” he said out loud to Kyoya, his friend, realizing he’d allowed the quiet between them to drag on just a beat too long.

Kyoya took in this response and then glanced across the car, back to where Haruhi and Tamaki were being too domestic and adorable for words. “I’m sorry you lost out on Haruhi. Her presence is rather calming, isn’t it?”

Wait.

Was this Kyoya’s attempt at fishing?

Kyoya, who always knew everything, all of the time—and, when he didn’t, was not nearly this obvious about it?

Kaoru shrugged, not quite sure how best to answer Kyoya’s concerns if he wasn’t going to actually voice them. “I mean, I guess. But I mostly just wanted to get away from Hikaru for a little while, and she’s normally pretty good about helping with that. When Tamaki’s not struggling, I guess.”

“I see,” said Kyoya, and it was entirely possible that he really did, but there was something about the way he held himself—staying at an awkward distance, his posture unusually tense and straight (even by Kyoya’s standards) that caused doubt to flood into Kaoru’s mind.

Taking a deep breath to bolster his resolve, he slid over a couple of inches, bumping his shoulder against Kyoya’s. No more trying to mind read. Time for some honesty. Well, some limited honesty. Honesty that didn’t involve revealing his guess or any weird brain-line-crossing dreams he’d had. “You would’ve been my first choice for non-Hikaru ghost-hunting partner, you know. I’ve just been trying to avoid you.”

Kaoru could feel the slight flex of the muscles against his own bare arm, but it seemed to be a relaxing movement, not a tensing one. Kyoya probably assumed that, if Kaoru was willing to admit to it, it couldn’t be that serious.

“Avoiding me?” Kyoya confirmed, like he didn’t already know, like he didn’t have a repository of data in his head all related to the way Kaoru would duck behind someone else every time they had been close to each other over the past couple of days. “I see.”

“I have a guess for the game.” Kaoru could feel Kyoya relax even further, practically melting back against the seat. “But I’m really not ready to share it yet, and I was worried that if I spent more time around you, it’d be too tempting to just say it, even though it’s not ready. You know what I’m like.”

“I do,” Kyoya said, somehow managing to make his smirk audible before Kaoru looked up to see it. As soon as Kaoru met his eyes. Kyoya pushed his glasses up, obscuring his gaze behind the flash of reflected light. “I won’t push you, you know. You don’t have to tell me until you’re
ready.”

“I know that already,” Kaoru grumbled. “It doesn’t help.”

“I know,” Kyoya said. The bastard.

Kaoru jostled his shoulder again in punishment but didn’t move away. This was fine. This was great, actually. Kaoru wasn’t going to let any game or secret or dream come between the two of them.

“A few more days,” he said out loud. “I don’t think it should take much more time than that. I really think I have you this time.”

“Oh?” Kyoya said, voice quieter, the vibration of it rumbling lightly against the skin of Kaoru’s arm where they were still pressed together. Kaoru felt goosebumps rise on his own skin at the tone, which somehow felt private and secretive despite the presence of two of their best friends sitting several feet away. He very much refused to think anything at all about what the words ‘catch me’ would sound like in that tone. “I look forward to hearing it.”

Kaoru jabbed him with his shoulder again. “Hey, I’m having a hard enough time not saying anything. Don’t make it worse!”

Kyoya just laughed, a low, quiet chuckle that warmed something deep in Kaoru’s gut. He was still overwhelmed by his ability to make Kyoya emote, whenever it happened. It felt like he had tapped into some kind of mysterious power that very, very few other people had ever managed to master.

He felt the burden of the secrets he was carrying lift, for a moment. They were still Kyoya and Kaoru, at the end of it all.

It was Haruhi and Tamaki’s stop next. Rather than getting out immediately, they both hunched over and made their way to where Kaoru and Kyoya were sitting at the back of the car.

“Are you going to be okay?” Tamaki asked seriously. Even though he might have been asking both of them, the way his eyes were fixed on Kyoya told a different story.

Kaoru sniffed, crossing his arms, still close enough that his elbow bumped into Kyoya’s side when he moved. “Don’t worry, dad, I’ll return her in the same condition I got her.”

“They’re going to be fine,” Haruhi concluded, something easing in her eyes even as she gave Kaoru one of her tried-and-true unimpressed looks. “Let’s go, Tamaki.”

For once, Tamaki didn’t jump the minute Haruhi said to jump. Instead he maintained eye contact with Kyoya for a moment longer before nodding, a much more typical smile growing on his face. “Wonderful!”

Then he seemed to remember what exactly they were leaving the car to do and he abruptly paled, smile freezing. “O-oh… w-wait… maybe we should stay…”

“See you guys later,” Haruhi said, pulling Tamaki from the car.

“To the haunted lighthouse we go,” Kaoru said. “I can’t believe you all gave Reiko her own day.”

“She’s as much a part of our group as any of us, by now,” Kyoya said, voice cool and clear above Kaoru’s head as Kaoru leaned against his shoulder, making himself comfortable for the remainder of the trip.
“Boo.” Kaoru made a face even though there was no way Kyoya could see it from his current angle. “You’re just embarrassed to admit that you’re scared of her too.”

“Her social capital is insignificant,” Kyoya said calmly. “Her family is barely a presence in any meaningful circles. What would I possibly have to be afraid of?” After a pause, he added, “Kaoru, are you really falling asleep?”

“No,” said Kaoru, who was probably at least 80% asleep. It turned out that avoiding Kyoya took a lot out of him. Also, staying up all night to calm Hikaru down probably didn’t help.

Kyoya’s shoulders were nice. Not comfortable. But nice, still.

“I see,” Kyoya said neutrally. “Of course you’re not falling asleep. After all, you wouldn’t leave me to complete this ridiculous task alone.”

“Oh course not,” Kaoru said, his eyes closed. “I’m wide awake. I’m very helpful.”

They didn’t see any ghosts that night. Well, Kaoru didn’t, at least, considering that, while he did manage to stay awake for the rest of the limo ride, he still fell asleep with his head pillowed on Kyoya’s bicep half an hour into their vigil. Kyoya told him he hadn’t missed much more than a few scary contracts Kyoya had been looking over on the laptop he’d brought along.

And, even more importantly, Kaoru successfully kept his mouth shut regarding their game.

Just a little bit more time…

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**Day Four: Haruhi’s Day**

“Central Park’s actually nicer than I thought it was going to be,” Hikaru mused, flopping down across their shared bed.

“Mm.” Kaoru made a vague noise of acknowledgement, sitting back against his pillow at the head of the bed and continuing to scroll through his phone.

“I thought it was stupid that Haruhi wanted us to see a bunch of free places. What do we need free places for, anyway? But she might have had a point, I guess. It’d give us something to do with our poorer classmates. You know, if we have some reason we need to spend time with our poorer classmates.” Hikaru was quiet for a moment, mulling over this possibility. “Haruhi seems to think it’s important, at least,” he finally concluded.

“Mm.”

“I was actually more impressed by the Bronx Museum of Art than I thought I was going to be! It was surprisingly pretty cool.”

“Mm.”

Suddenly, Hikaru’s face was in between Kaoru’s eyes and his phone screen.

His brother did not look happy.

“Kaoru,” Hikaru said, voice uncharacteristically serious. “I know you’re all wrapped up in beating Kyoya in this stupid game you two have, but you were the one who was all worried about losing our friends when we moved, not me. And now you’re the one who’s not appreciating this visit with
them.”

Kaoru blinked, trying to bring his brother’s suddenly close-up face into focus. There was a slight pain behind his right eye, a spot of tension in the crease of his hand.

He supposed he had spent a lot of time looking at screens over the past few days. Plus, while he’d gotten a solid night’s worth of sleep last night, he still had a crick in his neck from the angle he’d been sleeping at. Looking down at his screen all the time wasn’t helping that get any better, either.

“You’re an idiot,” Hikaru informed him before he could marshal his crazy array of thoughts into order. “We have two days left with them before they need to fly back home. Don’t waste them.”

Kaoru shoved his brother away with a hand on his forehead, making him crash back down against the bed. “You’re right,” he said, softening the physical blow.

“Obviously,” Hikaru muttered into the sheets.

A few more of Kaoru’s thoughts wove together into a pattern that shone. “Plus... I think I finally have my answer.”

Hikaru just groaned into the blankets.

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Day Five: Tamaki’s Day

The Seaside Swing swung slowly back and forth in front of them, the lights, sounds, and most especially smells of Coney Island at dusk flourishing all around them, and Tamaki couldn’t stop crying.

“Kyoya!” he sniffled pathetically on the disgusting park bench where they’d been forced to stop because his emotions had rendered him incapable of forward momentum. “Kyoya, because I knew you, I have been changed for good.”

“That actually means very little, you realize,” Kyoya said, patience worn thin as paper by Tamaki’s endless blubbering ever since the end of the matinee of Wicked they had caught on Broadway that afternoon. “That use of ‘good’ in English just means ‘permanently.’ It is not necessarily a positive statement.”

“Mitsukuni!” Tamaki slurred, and wasn’t martial arts training supposed to make people more formal with each other, not less? “Mitsukuni, because I knew you, I have been changed for good.”

“I am going to throw him into the ocean,” Kyoya snarled, patience suddenly snapping. His forward momentum was arrested by Haruhi grabbing onto the back of the vest he was wearing over one of those plain t-shirts that Kaoru still couldn’t get past seeing on him.

“If you don’t let him get it all out now, it will only get worse,” she said with the attitude of someone who knew. “You all can go on. I’ll stay with him until he feels better.”

Hikaru and Kaoru saluted her, recognizing the sacrifice she was making, and, taking charge of two different wrists each, pulled the rest of their friends further down the boardwalk. They probably hadn’t needed to; there wasn’t much resistance to the idea of abandoning Tamaki, by this point.

“Maybe he’s possessed,” Reiko wondered. “There are some stories of Broadway ghosts—”
Kaoru was going to stop that line of thought right now.

“Let’s head back towards the beach,” he said out loud, feeling only a little bit bad as he made a quick turn, leaving Reiko to stumble into silence, since he was still holding on to her wrist. “An incredibly disgusting American hot dog really sounds like it would hit the spot right now, doesn’t it?”

“Not at all,” Kyoya grumbled, still clearly in a bad mood. Kaoru couldn’t really blame him; the rest of them had actively avoided sitting next to Tamaki in the car on the way to Luna Park, leaving Kyoya and Haruhi to deal with the emotional fallout of the show for the whole trip. Tamaki had been so pathetic that even Hikaru and Kaoru had looked at each other and came to the silent agreement not to pick on him about it. They might often be referred to as ‘devilish,’ but the two of them weren’t actually evil.

“Funnel cake sounds even better, right, Kyo-chan?” Hani-senpai enthused, seeming to be totally comfortable with Kaoru dragging him along. “I’ve never had cake made just for the beach before! Plus, the beach at night seems really nice! Right, Takashi?”

“It would be nice to sit and talk awhile,” Mori-senpai said quietly from where Hikaru was towing him, and Kaoru couldn’t help a small smile.

That did sound like a rather pleasant way to spend the evening, all things considered.

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Day Six: Kyoya’s Day

Of course it was Kyoya who came up with a day that was actually designed for Kaoru and Hikaru. And he more than delivered, naturally. Even Kaoru hadn’t been aware of some of the clothing stores and quasi-street bazaars that Kyoya had found for them to visit around the city.

And, as if that hadn’t been enough on its own, then Kyoya had said, while making purposeful eye contact with Kaoru, “I have a business contact I wish to impress who has some experience in fashion. Would you be interested in helping me put together a wardrobe for dealing with this person?”

That eye contact screamed that he knew, he knew Kaoru was on the right track, that Kaoru was chasing him down, and he was daring him to take the leap. ‘Catch me,’ that look said, and Kaoru finally felt like he could.

Kaoru let Hikaru take charge of the rest of their friends and, waving off the shopping assistant who was hurrying to their side, pulled Kyoya into the back of the store and into the nearest open fitting room, tugging the curtain closed behind the two of them.

When he turned back to face Kyoya, his friend had one eyebrow raised, looking uncharacteristically wide-eyed and startled. They were standing within inches of each other; the tiny fitting room didn’t exactly leave much room for maneuvering.

“Kaoru,” Kyoya started to say, one hand coming up to resettle his glasses on the bridge of his nose, “what on Earth are you—”

No point in leaving him in suspense, right?

“It’s a keiretsu,” Kaoru said confidently but quietly, very aware of their position in the store, only a
“By the end of five years, you have planned to put together a keiretsu that will join each of our families’ businesses together into one conglomerate and therefore keep us in each other’s lives permanently, all while also giving each of our families greater financial security and success.”

Now that he had started speaking, Kaoru was realizing he couldn’t stop, especially as Kyoya’s hand dropped away from his face and, instead of an expression of shock, a slow, impressed smile grew on his face with each additional word. “It makes sense, right? The Ootori Group could easily help the Haninozuka and Morinozuka families branch out from martial arts into a wider realm of fitness and health, which loops back around to help The Ootori Group expand into preventative care. Suoh Enterprises would be able to provide funding for what would be an extremely safe investment, on their part. The Hitachiin fashion line could not only be used by each of the other groups for uniform design and supply, but could also apply the know-how of the in-house team to interior design, maybe even the use of feng shui and other ideas for mental health improvements specifically. The Hitachiin software company could be used to safeguard the huge amount of confidential data that the other companies regularly work with. It all makes a weird amount of sense, for companies that are seemingly so niche. It’s… well, you probably know this, but it’s kind of brilliant, Kyoya. I can’t believe it never occurred to our parents before.”

“Our parents have no reason to trust each other as much as I trust each of you,” Kyoya said quietly, smile now wide and unashamed. He reached up to clasp Kaoru’s shoulder, solid and close and pleased. Kaoru’s heart thumped erratically in his chest, overcome with the adrenaline of having finally caught up. It was impossible not to be hyper aware of Kyoya in these close quarters. He never normally noticed his friends’ cologne, but now he couldn’t ignore the way that Kyoya still smelled fresh and clean, like lemon and bergamot, despite their many stops and the punishing heat outside. “And I see that trust was not misplaced. Well done, Kaoru.”

“It explains everything,” Kaoru said, feeling so light he could probably fly, if not for the grounding hand Kyoya had placed on his shoulder, fingers long enough to reach past the thin barrier of his layered tanktops, fingertips settling lightly on his bare skin. “Even though it was your idea and it’s totally brilliant, Kyoya, it really is, they’re each asking for something from you, aren’t they? To make sure that they can trust you before they go in on this.”

Suoh-san’s demands. The Haninozuka training. Whatever it was Yuzuha wanted him to do.

The need for a law degree in addition to a background in business.

Looking over all those contracts.

Secrets from his family.

Everything made sense.

“You need to tell me if I can do anything to help,” Kaoru insisted, dislodging the hand on his shoulder as he suddenly reached up to grab onto Kyoya’s arms, practically shaking him to show how sincere he was being. “Especially with whatever it was that my mom asked for. I bet it’s stupid and convoluted. She has no reason to go against this except to be difficult, and I bet that’s exactly what she’s doing.”

“I appreciate the support,” Kyoya said, reaching up to remove Kaoru’s hands from his arms, taking him by the wrists and continuing to hold on even as he dropped them down between them. His fingers made cool rings against Kaoru’s heated skin. “However, you’re smarter than that. If I am going to make this work, it will be because I have proven myself. I am not going to take any
“No more secrets, though,” Kaoru demanded. “I want to know what’s going on so that I can help, Kyoya!”

“‘No secrets’ is unfortunately something I cannot agree to,” Kyoya said, and, despite his words, his smile widened. Kaoru suddenly realized the expression actually looked a little bit like a smirk. Kyoya’s fingers were still wrapped around Kaoru’s wrists, but suddenly felt restraining rather than gently lingering. “After all, you haven’t won our game yet.”

All at once, a cannonball settled into the pit of Kaoru’s stomach.

“What?” he said, falling back to earth with a near-audible thud.

“I said, ‘you haven’t won our game yet,’” Kyoya repeated, and he was definitely smirking. Suddenly, those fingers around his wrist felt like handcuffs.

“But I did!” Kaoru argued, fighting to resist the pull of the black hole that must have opened up somewhere beneath his feet, trying to drag him to the ground. He broke his hands out of Kyoya’s grasp, reaching up to grab onto the front of his vest this time. If Kaoru was going down, he was bringing Kyoya with him. “It’s the keiretsu! That’s your plan!”

“The keiretsu is part of my plan,” Kyoya said delicately, seemingly entirely comfortable with Kaoru’s harsh grip pulling him in. “It is a stepping stone. But it is not actually the goal of the game that I am playing.”

“You are playing a game where founding an entire multi-firm conglomerate is only part of it?” It was taking every single bit of poise and self-control that Kaoru had to keep from howling.

“You should talk to Haruhi,” Kyoya advised, smirking down at him from barely two inches away. His gaze drifted across Kaoru’s face and some expression that Kaoru couldn’t read settled into Kyoya’s look, clouding it. His smirk softened slightly, those dark eyes crinkling in the corners. “Ask her about what I said to her about the cultural festival investigation, once upon a time.”

“What?” Kaoru finally let go, collapsing back against the side wall of the fitting room, giving up on both his legs and Kyoya as forms of support. “What does the cultural festival have to do with anything?”

“Ask Haruhi,” Kyoya repeated, straightening and smoothing out his vest where Kaoru’s grip had wrinkled it. “And I was serious about needing help with my wardrobe. If you’re still interested, that is.”

Kaoru whined, but he’d never in his life turned down an opportunity to dress up his friends and he wasn’t about to start now, no matter that all the adrenaline leaving him like that had made him feel more like a deflated balloon than a person. He struggled back to his feet.

“I’ll help,” he announced. He frowned and jabbed Kyoya in the chest with a finger, bossy. “But I will not enjoy it.”

“Sounds like a perfect penalty game to me, then,” Kyoya said, that asshole.

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**Day Seven: The Goodbye**
In a way, Kaoru knew he should feel thankful to Kyoya for making this game even more complicated than he ever could have imagined. His friends packing up to return to Japan should have sent him into a depressive downward spiral, but he was too distracted to feel much of anything. After all, he was busy trying to figure out what could possibly be a goal for which founding a new *keiretsu* would only be a *stepping stone*.

Maybe Kyoya wanted to be the youngest ever prime minister of Japan? Maybe he wanted to be declared the new Emperor? Maybe he wanted to become King of the Earth? Anything felt possible, at this point.

“Haruhi,” Kaoru said, grateful that she had been the one to open the door to their suite instead of Tamaki or Kyoya. “Are you busy?”

“No at all,” she said, opening the door more widely, clearly able to tell he needed her help. “Since he didn’t listen when I warned him after the first five, Tamaki is officially on his own for packing up the rest of his sixty-seven souvenirs.”

“Seems fair,” Kaoru said with a quiet laugh, but his heart wasn’t in it. He glanced in the direction of Kyoya’s door, but it was closed. He sighed and sat down on one of the couches in the sitting area. “So I thought I had this game I’m playing with Kyoya figured out, but it seems like I’m not even close.”

“I see,” Haruhi said neutrally, sitting down on the couch across from him. “That must be disappointing.”

“You’re telling me.” Kaoru slouched further down in his seat. “The worst part is that my guess wasn’t even wrong. It just wasn’t complete *enough.*” He shook his head to clear it. He was back to the starting line. He needed to focus. “Anyway, Kyoya said I should talk to you, so I wanted to try to catch you before you all left. I’m supposed to ask you about what he said during the cultural festival investigation or something.”

Haruhi’s forehead furrowed as she thought about this. Then, all at once, her expression cleared. “Ah,” she breathed. “I think I understand. Remember those letters we were receiving?”

“Vaguely,” said Kaoru. His concern during the cultural festival way back during their first year in high school had mostly been about having a good time during the competition for the Central Salon. He knew Haruhi had been trying to figure out who had sent the Host Club intimidating letters at the time, but he couldn’t remember much else.

“I thought I had solved the mystery of where they came from when we realized they smelled like oranges, remember?”

“Vaguely,” said Kaoru. His concern during the cultural festival way back during their first year in high school had mostly been about having a good time during the competition for the Central Salon. He knew Haruhi had been trying to figure out who had sent the Host Club intimidating letters at the time, but he couldn’t remember much else.

“I thought I had solved the mystery of where they came from when we realized they smelled like oranges, remember?”

Kaoru did remember something like that. He remembered being more upset than usual with that jerk Kuze, at least. He nodded.

Haruhi continued, “My original solution was wrong. It wasn’t Kuze. So Kyoya gave me a hint. He said something like… hm. I think it was that something that appears complicated can actually turn out to be simple. And vice versa, too.”

Kaoru took a moment to turn those words around in his head, to study them from all the possible angles.

Then he groaned, slumping forward in his seat.

“What does that even mean?” he complained. “And… and how does it even apply? Is this an
unexpectedly simple situation? Or is it an unexpectedly complicated one?”

Haruhi worried at her bottom lip for a moment before slowly and carefully saying, “Kaoru, you’re normally really good at figuring out how everyone else around you is feeling, but I think you struggle with that with Kyoya. Sometimes I think it’s because you’ve put him on such a high pedestal that you forget he has feelings at all. He’s human too, you know.”

If Hikaru had said that, Kaoru would have blown a raspberry at him. Then again, if Hikaru had said that, it wouldn’t have started with what sounded like a compliment; it would have just been a way to make fun of Kaoru’s Kyoya obsession. Coming from Haruhi...

Kaoru frowned at her, but it was an absent, thoughtful look, not an angry one.

Kyoya’s feelings…?

Sure, he hadn’t really given much thought to what Kyoya would get out of the keiretsu plan. It was a situation that seemed to result in its own reward, after all. Wasn’t financial success always Kyoya’s goal?

Kaoru realized that wasn’t right even as he thought it. Kyoya had proven again and again that he was more than willing to trade financial success for his friends—although he’d certainly take both, and do whatever he could to make taking both possible.

But was that really all that drove him?

“You’re right,” he told Haruhi. “I didn’t think about what Kyoya might want to get out of this. But… I have no idea. What he would get seems obvious, in this case.”

Haruhi leaned over and rested a hand on his knee. “You’ll figure it out,” she assured him as though it was a fact.

He was going to miss her blind faith in him so much.

She must have seen that in his eyes, because she stood from her seat and moved to sit next to him on his couch, hugging him tightly. “I’m going to miss you. And so will Kyoya. Maybe especially Kyoya. I think the rest of us bore him, sometimes. You’ve been his favorite for years—I hope you’ve realized that.”

Kaoru had, somewhere in between his unflappable former upperclassman becoming tense at the thought of Kaoru being upset with him and the way said upperclassman had smiled when he had heard the progress Kaoru had made in their game.

“I wouldn’t be too worried, though,” Haruhi continued, her voice firm and maybe a little bit resigned. “After all, if I have learned anything about the Ouran High School Host Club over the past three years, it is that they are impossible to get rid of.”

Kaoru laughed and squeezed her closer.

She definitely wasn’t wrong about that.

Chapter End Notes
Foreign Language Notes:
1. [pied-à-terre: a smaller home-away-from-home, usually kept by a person who has frequent business far from their primary residence]
2. [keiretsu: an alliance of different Japanese businesses who link themselves to each other by cross-shareholdings, allowing each company within to have independence while formalizing the support and close relationships of the other businesses in the group for the success of all; the Mitsubishi Group is one example]
“Hey.” A tall young man with blond hair styled into immaculate waves slid into the edge of Kaoru’s field of view, leaning a hip against the table that Kaoru was working at in the Maker Center. Kaoru glanced up to meet warm blue eyes behind a stylish pair of bright blue designer glasses. “I left you here hours ago. You’re going to overwork yourself. Are you sure I can’t talk you into going out for our pre-losing-our-lives-to-finals get-together tonight?”

Kaoru offered his classmate a small smile, hands not pausing on his keyboard. “Sorry, Lucas. Too much left to do before break.”

Lucas huffed, reaching over to rest a hand over Kaoru’s, physically arresting the movement of his typing. “One drink with us won’t kill you, Kaoru.” He pronounced Kaoru’s name like most of the Americans in his class, slurring the diphthong and flattening the second consonant so that it sounded like Cow-Ru. Kaoru barely batted an eye at it anymore. “And that’s what Thanksgiving break is for, right? Doing all the work you put off for the rest of the semester?”

Kaoru laughed, even though inside he wanted nothing more than to brush his classmate off and get back to work. He didn’t have time for this right now.

The low ache he felt every time he thought of how much Tamaki would love something a classmate had designed but that Tamaki wasn’t there to see...

The squeezing regret every time he turned to ask Haruhi to confirm his insight on an issue only to find no Haruhi in sight...

The momentary pall every time he needed advice from Hani-senpai and Mori-senpai only to realize that the time difference meant that they were asleep or busy...

The sudden stab of pain every time he wanted Kyoya’s clear, cutting commentary about his classmates, his classes, his life and had to rely on the slow crawl of messages instead of the quick dialogue of in-person conversation...

He was about to be free of all of that suffering for a glorious ninety-six hours.

So long as this project actually got done first.

Sorry, American classmates, but Kaoru had some very different priorities right now.

“I thought Thanksgiving was a holiday about spending time with family,” Kaoru said out loud. He might not be willing to take his hands off of his laptop, but he did lean back on his stool to properly look up at Lucas, because, no matter how much of a waste of time it was, he was trying, just like Haruhi had asked him to. Plus, Lucas wasn’t so bad. He was easier to talk to than most of the other members of the class. The students at their art-focused university were mostly split between sycophants who groveled at the Hitachiins’ name and “true artists” who spat at the Hitachiins’ privilege. Lucas, on the other hand, just treated Kaoru like another person. It was refreshing. He actually reminded Kaoru a little bit of Haruhi, that way.

“Common misconception,” Lucas said airily, tapping his nose and winking, eyes bright and shining behind his glasses. He was cuter than Haruhi, but it was the kind of cute that was surface level, a
layer of put-upon, intentional cute that he applied to himself like make-up. It wasn’t an unwilling, built-in part of his identity in the same way it was for her. He was less intelligent than Haruhi, too, and not nearly as much fun.

Basically, Kaoru just really missed Haruhi.

“It’s really a holiday for rewarding procrastination,” Lucas continued, not at all cognizant of all the ways in which he failed to measure up to the near-impossible standards Kaoru’s eclectic group of friends had set for him. He brought his hand down to rest on the top of Kaoru’s laptop, teasingly threatening to close it. “Plus, you said your parents are going to be in Hong Kong this week and your brother’s here with you anyway. It’s not like you’re going to be off traveling.”

“I am, actually,” Kaoru said. His artificial grin softened slightly as he remembered Tamaki’s most recent comment on the group messaging service they had enlisted for keeping in touch. It had mostly been incoherent, extremely excited nonsense words with a few emojis thrown in for taste before it had ended with the cry of ‘ONE MORE DAY’. “My brother and I are going to Dijon with some friends of ours.”

“Dijon?” Lucas asked, both eyebrows shooting straight up, smile dropping instantly into a pout. “Like, in France? You lucky bastard. I’m so jealous. Buy me something?”

“Only if you let me finish this project,” Kaoru said, waggling his fingers over his keyboard demonstratively.

Lucas sighed and stepped back, both hands raised in surrender. “Bribery, my greatest weakness. I’ll let you finish. You’re not getting out of some classmate bonding time when you get back, though, so make sure you have some good stories for it!”

“He doesn’t owe you shit,” said a sharp voice from behind them.

Kaoru rolled his eyes.

“That’s my extremely obnoxious cue, I guess,” said Lucas, turning to go. “Have a nice trip, Kaoru.” He literally stuck his nose up in the air before he stepped out of Hikaru’s way in order to leave the room.

Kaoru rolled his eyes again. They were going to wind up in the back of his head, at this rate.

He wasn’t sure exactly why Hikaru and Lucas hated each other so much. Ever since the first day Kaoru had dragged Hikaru along to one of his fashion class’s meet-ups, though, the two had been posturing at each other.

“Haruhi told us to try,” he reminded his brother, going back to typing as Hikaru took the exact place Lucas had just been occupying, watching the other man leave through narrowed eyes. “You don’t want to disappoint Haruhi, do you?”

“Some people aren’t worth the effort,” Hikaru grumbled, crossing his arms. He made sure that that line was audible, but then switched to Japanese rather than English as soon as the third party was gone. “Especially him. Haruhi would agree. He’s a slimeball who just wants to get into your pants.”

“What?” Kaoru’s hands accidentally smashed into his keyboard, ruining the concluding sentence of his Perspectives of Design report. He hurriedly pressed the backspace button. “That’s not… What makes you… What?”
Hikaru laughed at his reaction, pulling out his phone. “I knew you’d need some babysitting to get your project done. It’s a good thing I decided to stop by and check in on you. You shouldn’t let him distract you.”

“I wasn’t letting him… ugh.” Kaoru frowned, hunching his shoulders in as though that would save him from his brother’s temporary insanity. “Whatever. Even if that is his goal, which I’m not acknowledging it is, it’s not like I’m gay, so he’s out of luck there anyway.”

“Oh?” Hikaru said, with lightness so artificial that Kaoru immediately looked up to find out what expression was paired with that extremely odd tone. He had expected to see Hikaru looking at his phone, distracted by some message one of their friends had sent. Hikaru was looking at his phone, sure, but it was a blank stare, like he wasn’t actually seeing anything at all. Feeling the weight of Kaoru’s eyes on him, he turned to look back at him. It took a moment before he was able to paste on a smile that was just as artificial as the smile Kaoru had just been using on Lucas. “Uh… if you say so.”

“What?” Kaoru said, but it was almost like a hiss. He glanced around, but they were very nearly alone in the Maker Center. Two girls were working on a collaborative painting in one of the far corners and a third girl was hunched over a 3D printer, but they all seemed engrossed enough to ignore the conversation the twins were having. “What are you talking about? I was in love with Haruhi, remember?”

Hikaru shrugged. “I’m not saying you weren’t, but I’m also not saying that one crush means a whole lot, especially on Haruhi.” The fact that it only took a heart and a pulse to fall in love with Haruhi was so obvious that it did not even need acknowledgment, at least not between the two of them. “And that supposedly ended over three years ago, anyway. Who else has there been, since then?”

“I… I’ve been busy,” Kaoru protested. He wanted to yell, so he forced himself to whisper. There was only so loud a whisper could get, after all. “Who else was there going to be? Maybe someone during that awful year in Boston? Or maybe when we went back home for barely one more school year, should that have been when it happened? And… and you’ve never had a crush on anyone but Haruhi either!”

“Geeze, calm down. You know it’s not the same.” That was unfair, but it was Hikaru, so unfairness was probably to be expected. “Look, I’m not saying you definitely are… you know, like that, or anything. But if you were, or if you were into that and also girls, or whatever, well, that would be… you know. Okay with me.”

Kaoru kicked his brother’s feet out from under him. Hikaru yelped, loud enough that one of the girls working on the collaborative painting jumped and stared at them, startled, before she saw that no one was actually dying and got back to her own work. Hikaru had caught himself on the edge of the table with one hand and what appeared to be his spine before he could fall to the ground. He straightened, rubbing at his back and scowling just as hard at Kaoru as Kaoru was scowling at him.

“What was that for?” he hissed. “I was being supportive!”

“Shut up,” Kaoru hissed back. “I thought you wanted to make sure I wasn’t being distracted, so stop distracting me with your stupid theories!”

“I was just saying—”

“The plane leaves in twelve hours, and I have to finish this paper and also the symbolic representation project that goes with it, so kindly either stay silent or fuck off.”
America had been rather terrible for the Hitachiins’ tendency to curse, but, in this moment, Kaoru was glad he had access to that particular avenue of expression. Hikaru growled something unintelligible but then made a show of snapping his mouth shut, bringing his phone back up to hide his face behind.

It was nice to have him there, when he wasn’t spouting stupid nonsense that he obviously hadn’t thought through.

Gay. Hikaru thought he was gay. Where had that even come from?

Sure, Haruhi was the only girl Kaoru had ever had a crush on, but she was also the only decent girl that Kaoru and Hikaru knew.

Well, okay, Mei was pretty alright, actually.

And some of the girls in their class at Ouran, like Momoka, weren’t really that bad when you actually got to know them.

And some of the girls they had hosted were actually pretty nice. Kozue, for instance.

Kaoru just hadn’t ever had crushes on any of them because… well, he didn’t know, really.

They weren’t bad, but they also weren’t…

They weren’t exciting.

That was it.

Like, he was fine spending time with them, but he never felt the need to mash their bodies together in order to get more of them.

He made a face at his computer screen. He could definitely do without any body mashing with any of the girls he knew. The whole idea just seemed squishy and weird.

Still, it wasn’t like he felt the urge to mash his body up against any of the guys he knew, either.

Well, okay, there had been that one dream...

But that didn’t count! It was random brain-lines crossing, that was all. There hadn’t even been any body mashing in it, just those lips and that voice. It didn’t mean anything.

Kaoru’s scowl deepened.

Basically, Hikaru was an idiot, and so was he if he was going to take anything his brother said seriously.

He got back to work.

20 hours and counting until the Ouran High School Host Club would finally be reunited.

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Kaoru and Hikaru’s flight landed well before their friends’ flight was scheduled to arrive, so they continued without them to the hotel in Dijon.

They barely made it inside the door of the lobby before a bright, unexpected voice was calling out
in Japanese, “Hey, I know you two!”

Kaoru and Hikaru both looked around, trying to figure out where the vaguely familiar voice was coming from.

They saw her at the same moment.

“Carmen-san!” they cried, grins spreading across their faces in unison. They hurried over to where she was waiting, sprawled carelessly over one of the armchairs across from the reception counter.

Nanako looked as graceful and elegant as always. She was leaning against one arm of the chair with her long legs draped over the opposite arm, her empire-waisted dress tucked in underneath her. She had kicked off her heels at some point, clearly not caring that the hotel had a “no shoes, no service” policy posted in French right above her head. When they got closer, she pushed herself into a more typical sitting position, bringing her legs down in front of her.

She reached up to tug her long, curling hair over her shoulder, raking her fingers through it carelessly as it tumbled down over her chest.

Man, she was so cool.

She grinned up at the two of them, still absently trying to straighten out her hair. “Are the rest with you? I got here a bit early, but Kyoya said this was the meetup spot, so I figured—”

“You’re also here for our trip?” Hikaru asked.

“‘Kyoya’?” Kaoru asked, something about the use of the given name sticking with him.

He hadn’t realized that Kyoya had been keeping in touch with her after the encounter in Barcelona two years ago, let alone that the two of them were on such a friendly, casual first-name basis with each other.

“Yeah! I’ve been here a couple of times, so he invited me to play tour guide.” Nanako evidently didn’t care that she’d been interrupted in stereo. She smiled up at the two of them, eyes twinkling mischievously. “I figured that you all are pretty entertaining, so if nothing else it was going to be a fun way to spend a long weekend. Plus, you two are some of the few people I’ve met outside of my program who really care about Romanesque styles the way that people should, so I knew I’d be around my kind of people. Have you guys been to Burgundy before?”

“No, but now I’m excited! It sounds like this might actually be a great trip,” Hikaru enthused. Kaoru glanced over to see his brother beaming more widely than he had in a while.

Huh.

Kaoru supposed the two of them hadn’t been spending as much time together recently, when Hikaru wasn’t crashing into the Maker Center to protect Kaoru’s virtue or whatever that had been about. Hikaru was trying to get into the technology and design program their school offered while Kaoru had his heart set on fashion, so their courses and extracurriculars had started diverging.

Of course, they did eat all of their meals together and sleep in the same bed. But considering that they had gone from spending approximately ninety-nine percent of their time together to spending about sixty percent of their time together, it was still a meaningful change.

Had Hikaru been lonely? Had he been missing attention?
It was weird that Kaoru hadn’t noticed anything wrong.

It was obvious he’d been missing something now. Hikaru was practically gushing, eyes shining as he grinned widely at Nanako. “Kyoya never told us you were coming. It’ll be so great to have someone we can actually talk architecture with! Oh man, we have to tell you about this hotel we stayed in while we were in Boston. You’re not even going to believe what a nightmare this was.”

Nanako snorted. “Shitty architecture in Boston? The birthplace of the so-called ‘Federal style’? What a surprise.”

“Oh, you have no idea.” Hikaru claimed the spot on the armchair immediately next to Nanako, leaving Kaoru still standing and thus the de-facto person to check them in.

Kaoru sighed, but went anyway. It was fine, really. He had a very specific message to compose to Kyoya after all, all about surprise guests on what was supposed to be a Host Club group trip and how information about those guests might have been shared in advance, even if the surprise did make his brother smile like that.

He wasn’t even sure why he was feeling weird about it. Nanako was one of the coolest people he’d ever met, and it was actually a pretty awesome treat that they were going to get to spend more time with her. Plus, Hikaru had clearly been lonely and looked like he could use a friendly face. It was just…

This was supposed to be a Host Club group trip!

… whatever that meant.

It evidently did not mean anything at all like what Kaoru thought it should mean, seeing as he heard a shout and turned away from the reception counter to see Houshakouji Renge bearing down on him.

“Kaoru-kun alone? This is no good!” she was already announcing, arms frighteningly akimbo and eyes blazing. “No good at all! Where’s your brother?” She looked over to the sitting area and gasped, taking a frighteningly tight hold of Kaoru’s bicep. “Kaoru-kun. Kaoru-kun. Is Hikaru-kun leaving you for a woman?”

Kaoru was literally speechless in shock. He was also possibly losing circulation in his arm.

“Don’t worry,” Renge said ferociously, shaking his captured arm in determination. She had never really needed a partner to keep a conversation going, after all. “We’ll win him back, Kaoru-kun. I read a BL manga recently that had a plotline just like this.”

Kaoru suddenly found his voice again. “Renge,” he said, voice coming out pathetically weak. He would’ve been embarrassed if anyone but Renge had been there to overhear him. “What are you doing here?”

“Kyoya invited me,” Renge said without a care in the world—except for Kaoru’s fictional love life, evidently. What was it with everyone and making assumptions about Kaoru’s love life, recently? “He knew I was visiting with my father in Paris and asked if I wanted to come see you all while you were in the country.”

“Great,” Kaoru said weakly. “This trip is going to be… great.”

Kaoru spent an hour—an hour—trapped on a chair between two impossible forces. On one side, Nanako was gushing to a rapt Hikaru about the several different polychrome roofs a person could
find across Burgundy. This might have been an interesting conversation for Kaoru, too, but he was too distracted to be able to participate, thanks to the force on his other side. Renge was still clutching onto his arm, even a full hour later, and muttering under her breath about the many creative ways that Kaoru could win his brother back from ‘that overly-sexualized hag.’

Some of her methods involved parts of his anatomy that he was not comfortable hearing Renge talk about in public.

Most of her methods involved him crying.

The ones that overlapped between the two were terrifying ideas that Kaoru really wished his brain had never been exposed to.

The nanosecond that the rest of their friends appeared from behind the lobby doors, Kaoru threw himself to his feet, nearly pulling a muscle as he wrenched himself free from Renge’s grip.

“Hi, everyone,” he said as he rushed past them, ignoring Tamaki’s cry of greeting. He latched onto Kyoya’s arm and pulled him back out the door with him. “Good to see you all. Please excuse us.”

At least Kyoya came with him easily enough. He knew what he had done.

Kaoru whirled on him as soon as they were out of the doors, at the top of the steps leading down to the sidewalk below. He then paused for a minute.

It was… it was actually kind of weird, seeing Kyoya for the first time in months when he was used to them only being separated for a few days at most. His eyes darted over his friend’s appearance, taking in the longer hair swept artistically out of the way of his glasses, the paler skin that had long lost any of the leftover glow from the summer sun, the subtle thickening of muscle tone along his chest and arms.

Suddenly, unexplainably, Kaoru felt uncomfortable. His pulse thrummed in his ears.

It wasn’t fair for Kyoya to look all… all strange and different and adult and… and almost model-like, really, what was he doing being all…

‘Attractive,’ whispered a part of Kaoru’s brain that sounded traitorously like Hikaru. ‘The word you’re trying very hard not to use is attractive, Kaoru. The kind of guy you might have dreams about.’

“Ah,” Kaoru managed to get out, trying to get control of his body back. He belatedly remembered that he needed to breathe at some point. “Uh, hi.”

Kyoya blinked down at him from behind his glasses. Then his mouth tilted slightly, the skin around his eyes crinkling, amused at Kaoru’s expense in a way that was familiar and warming.

“Hello, Kaoru,” he said, voice slightly quieter than usual.

Kaoru realized they were blocking the doorway to the hotel and that there were other guests stuck on the steps below them, which probably explained Kyoya’s private tone of voice. He used the grip he still had on Kyoya’s wrist to tug him further down the stairs and to the side of the entryway, no longer blocking the door.

“Right,” he said, feeling clumsy and foolish. “We’re in the way. Right.”

“You look good,” Kyoya said, ignoring Kaoru’s awkward, empty words. His free hand lifted from
his side and made it halfway to Kaoru’s hair, as though to touch it, before ending in an aborted half-gesture and dropping back down. “You’ve grown your hair out a little, if I’m not mistaken. It’s an attractive look for you; it draws more attention to your eyes.”

“You too,” Kaoru said. “Uh, with your hair. I like it. Too, I mean.”

Smooth. Had Kaoru been a host or what? What the hell had that been?

Kyoya seemed to accept the mangled compliment in the spirit it was meant, at least. “Thank you. That means something, coming from you.” Kyoya’s half-smile curled into more of a smirk. “It’s good to see you, of course, but was there a reason you abducted me before we could check in?”

Right.

Right.

Kaoru raised an accusatory finger to jab Kyoya in his sweater-covered chest. “You know the reason,” he growled, his own smile falling away. “I thought this was a trip for our friends.”

Kyoya raised an eyebrow. “I didn’t think that Nanako would raise this amount of ire from you… ah. Renge has arrived early, then.”

‘Nanako.’ ‘Renge.’ ‘Kyoya.’ First name terms all around, then, was it?

“It’s nothing personal,” Kaoru insisted, putting his hands on his own hips, trying to ignore how much he probably looked like he was channeling Renge in that moment. “Like… Renge’s fine. As human beings go, there are worse ones out there, probably. But I was really looking forward to spending time with everyone. And by ‘spending time,’ I don’t mean ‘dealing with constant bombardment about the tragic love story I supposedly share with my twin brother.’”

“I wouldn’t be too worried,” Kyoya said, eyes gleaming darkly behind his glasses. “She is going to be distracted soon enough.”

“Definitely not soon enough. She keeps talking about how I need to tie Hikaru up and fuck him until he realizes the error of his ways.” Kaoru dredged up the words from a hollow, empty part of his soul that Renge had successfully carved out within him during just the past hour alone.

Kyoya didn’t even flinch. “I see,” he said with a smirk. That bastard. “And have you tried that approach yet?”

Kaoru’s facial muscles were not equipped to make a face as disgusted as that comment deserved, but they certainly tried. He crossed his arms. “Why do I suddenly feel like this is karmic revenge for all of the times that Haruhi told me to leave other people out of our plans?”

“You’ll like it,” Kyoya promised, tilting his head and smiling mysteriously down at Kaoru. “Trust me.”

And the worst part was that Kaoru did trust him, honestly, all the way down to his now permanently maimed soul. He could already feel the tension that had been playing across his bones like a needle on a record player for the past hour beginning to recede. If Kyoya said it was going to be fine, then it was undoubtedly going to be fine.

But he didn’t want it to be fine. That didn’t feel fair. He’d been angry, dammit!

“I do trust you. But this better be really entertaining,” he said, trying to hold onto the last remnant
of his anger over the issue but feeling it slip away despite his best efforts, his muscles loosening in relief.

“‘It will be,’” Kyoya promised. “Now, shall we return to our friends before they assume we’re plotting against them?”

“Aren’t you?” Kaoru asked pointedly.

Kyoya tilted his head so that the glare of the sun obscured his eyes in response, still smiling. “Aren’t I always?” he asked.

Kaoru couldn’t help grinning back, but it was an exhausted grin, and he pressed their shoulders together a little harder than he normally would as they turned to re-enter the building.

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Dinner that night was nice, at least at first. Kyoya had reserved an entire restaurant for the group of them, and Renge was focused on Haruhi long enough for Kaoru to greet Mori-senpai and Hani-senpai, make fun of Tamaki over having temporarily lost his girlfriend to the former club manager, and have a meaningful conversation about Gothic architecture with Hikaru and Nanako.

Then it was time for dessert.

That was when things started getting suspicious.

More suspicious than they already were, that was.

The chef emerged from the kitchen, a broad, thick-armed man with a serious moustache. “I’m so sorry, Monsieur Ootori,” he rumbled. His French was so regionally accented that it took Kaoru a moment to catch on to what he was saying. “I know you asked for our famous blackcurrant tart for dessert, but, alas, we only have enough of the season’s blackcurrants left to make a tart for two.”

The man’s eyes flicked down the group of them before settling on Kyoya once more. “I would be honored to make this tart for monsieur and his friends, of course. But there would not be enough to share, for this many of you.”

Fake.

This was all very, very fake.

Kaoru looked back at Kyoya, who had to all appearances been listening to this speech as though he were hearing it for the very first time. Likely feeling the weight of Kaoru’s gaze, Kyoya glanced back down the table at him. It might’ve just been Kaoru's imagination, but he could have sworn he saw the faintest ghost of a smile tilt up the corner of Kyoya’s mouth.

“That is an unexpected shame,” Kyoya said evenly, gaze drifting back to the chef.

Kaoru was harboring some major doubts about how ‘unexpected’ this whole situation was for Kyoya.

Kyoya was not finished. “Please do not trouble yourself about our numbers. We will find a way to determine which of us will be able to enjoy your world-famous tart.”

“World-famous, is it…?” Hani-senpai asked, a hungry gleam growing in his eyes.

“A game!” Tamaki cried, springing to his feet. “A competition, to be worthy to taste the fruit of
this talented man’s many labors!”

“A competition in pairs,” Kyoya said. “After all, it sounds as though there is only enough tart for two people. And I have just the idea.”

Of course he did.

It turned out that Kyoya had *just so happened* to hear about a tourism scavenger hunt that could be completed in Dijon and wouldn’t this just be the perfect opportunity to test it out? They’d partner up randomly, of course, except, wait, Kyoya had this randomization app on his phone that could do the partnering for them.

Wasn’t this all a little too convenient?

“What are you doing?” Kaoru asked out of the corner of his mouth as he stepped up to pretend to study the app over Kyoya’s shoulder. It looked very legitimate. Of course it would. Kyoya wasn’t that sloppy.

“Don’t you trust me?” Kyoya asked, just as quietly.

The bastard.

Kaoru soon found himself sitting next to Mori-senpai, his “randomly” assigned partner for this excursion, listening to Kyoya list off the expectations for this scavenger hunt with one half of his brain and studying the other partnerships with the other.

If he had ever had the faintest idea that the partners were truly decided at random, the fact that Hani-senpai had wound up partnered with Reiko and Tamaki had been partnered with Haruhi immediately put that idea to rest.

But Kaoru couldn’t quite see the sense in the other partnerships. While he was certainly amused to see his brother forced to pair up with Renge for the evening, he was less amused to see Kyoya paired with Nanako.

Was that actually what this whole thing had been about? Kyoya had kept up this secret friendship over the years and was now trying to find an opportunity to get closer to her? Was that why she’d been invited on this Host Club vacation?

That would be… weirdly secretly selfish of Kyoya.

But he was entitled to a bit of selfishness, wasn’t he? He’d been fighting so hard and so long for all the rest of them, after all. It wasn’t fair of Kaoru to get upset at him for a little bit of perceived selfishness, not at this point.

He was distracted in his thoughts by Kyoya inviting one member of each partnership to study the first clue and the accompanying map of Dijon he had prepared (almost like this whole thing wasn’t actually a surprise at all). Kaoru glanced up (and up and up—he always forgot how tall Mori-senpai was) at his partner, who just nodded at him in acknowledgment and then went to look over the map.

“Hey,” Hikaru hissed, suddenly popping up at his side. It seemed like he’d lost Renge to the map as well. “You don’t actually care about the tart, do you?”

“Not even a little bit,” Kaoru whispered back. “And I doubt Mori-senpai actually wants to win it over Hani-senpai.” Mori-senpai seemed to be taking his study of the map in front of him seriously
enough, but he was serious about most things, including cuddling small animals. Kaoru doubted that this seriousness was born of a sudden drive for blackcurrant tart.

“Awesome.” Hikaru’s eyes were twinkling. “How would you like to pull a prank on Renge?”

“I’m in,” Kaoru instantly pledged. “Literally whatever it is sounds good to me.” His voice dropped even lower. “She’s decided that my problem is sexual frigidity, Hikaru. Those are literally the words she used. *Sexual frigidity.*”

Hikaru couldn’t cover his mouth fast enough to hide the snort of laughter. Kaoru elbowed him in the ribs, hard.

“What’re we whispering about?” Nanako said quietly, suddenly leaning in from Hikaru’s other side. “You two aren’t even on the same team!”

Kaoru was ready to brush her off, but Hikaru said, “You’re not gunning for the tart, are you?” before Kaoru could say anything.

“No really,” Nanako said. “I’ve had them before, and I don’t think they’re all that special. Why?”

Hikaru gestured subtly to Renge. “Have you spoken with her much yet?”

Nanako huffed a breath and rolled her eyes expressively. “Not really. She keeps yelling ‘evil she-demon homewrecker!’ and running away whenever I come near her.”

Kaoru felt a pang of remorse for that. “Sorry,” he admitted, raising a hand apologetically. “Our fault. She’s convinced Hikaru and I are in love and you’re the foul temptress who’s splitting us up.”

“Nice,” Nanako said, not appearing to be at all disturbed by this revelation of Renge’s rabid fangirlism. “I would totally watch that soap opera.”

Hikaru laughed at that, and even Kaoru couldn’t help a small smile of his own.

“We’re planning to prank her,” Hikaru explained. “It’s harder than you’d think, because she’s such an airhead that she has no concept of danger. You in?”

“Yes,” Nanako said immediately. “And not only that, but I already have some ideas.”

Right. Kaoru had gotten so wrapped up in his weird, unwarranted unhappiness with the situation that he had forgotten that Nanako was *cool as hell.*

“There are several tourist spots around here that are just perfect for pranks,” Nanako continued, voice still quiet but beginning to pick up a bit of the fire of intrigue. “What’s our main pranking goal? Scare her? Make her life less convenient? Laugh at her? Abandon her somewhere?”

“*Definitely* abandon her,” Kaoru and Hikaru said in immediate unison.

“As soon as we possibly can,” Kaoru added alone.

“Saint Bénigne Cathedral,” Nanako said back, just as quickly. “It’s nearby, so it’s probably going to be one of our first stops, and it’s got this really amazing crypt. It’s not huge, but it’s very symmetrical and difficult to find your way out of in the dark. And it should be *really* dark, because visiting hours are over for today.”

“I like it,” Hikaru said. “What else have you got?”
It seemed like most places in Dijon were ideal pranking spots, as Nanako told it. The hedges outside of the Chartreuse de Chammpol were a prime location for ambushes. The owl on the Eglise Notre Dame was an excellent distraction. Some of the exhibits at the Jardin des Sciences de l’Arquebuse were only a half step away from being a prank already.

They had fully brainstormed five different plans for possible pranking opportunities by the time the conversation around the map appeared to be breaking up.

Mori-senpai was the first to turn away from the group and return to Kaoru’s side. Hikaru and Nanako stepped back out of his way, looking ridiculously furtive.

Mori-senpai tilted his head slightly, but evidently decided the incredibly suspicious behavior of the other two wasn’t his business.

“Saint Bénigne Cathedral,” he said to Kaoru. “To begin.”

Exactly what Nanako had guessed. Perfect.

“What are we supposed to find there?” Kaoru asked, turning to go. Before he could take even a step towards the door, though, he was nearly knocked off his feet by first Hani-senpai and then Tamaki zooming past him, their respective girlfriends following behind them at a much more sedate pace.

“The number of keyboards on the organ,” Mori-senpai explained simply. He reached up to run a hand through his hair, still as short and messy as always, eyes automatically tracking Hani-senpai and Reiko as they ventured out into the darkness outside. “The number will tell us which statue to look at outside of the Chartreuse de Chammpol.”

Kaoru rolled his eyes. “Kyoya certainly planned out a whole thing, didn’t he?”

Mori-senpai quietly murmured his agreement, not looking particularly bothered.

Kaoru frowned. “Mori-senpai, you don’t actually want to win, do you?”

Mori-senpai considered this for a minute. “No,” he finally said, sounding firmly decided now that he had thought it through. “The tart should go to someone who will properly enjoy it.”

That was good. At least Kaoru wouldn’t be putting his teammate out with his alternative focus. For just a minute, Kaoru considered involving Mori-senpai in their plan to prank Renge as well, but he just as quickly decided against it. The former host club’s “wild type” had a gentle soul—there was no way he’d see the same fun in giving Renge a hard time.

“The others will enjoy it more if we try our best, though,” Mori-senpai said, quiet but decisive, hand forming a fist of determination at his side.

Mori-senpai was too good for this cruel planet. Kaoru patted his bicep, which was as high as he could reach without getting weird and needing to stretch for it. “We’ll do our best, then,” Kaoru said.

Of course, he didn’t say their best at what. He assured himself that it didn’t actually count as lying so long as Mori-senpai never knew he had been lying.

The Dijon Cathedral was a beautiful Gothic construction that Kaoru would’ve loved to have spent some time studying if there weren’t the promise of additional entertainment on the line. Tamaki and Hani-senpai seemed to have already gotten what they needed and jetted off to the Chartreuse
de Champmol for the next step, but the other three pairs all arrived at the Cathedral at the same time.

Just as planned.

Now Kaoru just had to make good on his part of their first—and hopefully only, if they successfully lost Renge in a crypt for a few hours—prank.

“Mori-senpai!” Kaoru called from a passage that was exactly where Nanako had said it was going to be. “I think I found the way to the organ!”

“No!” Hikaru cried from the other side of the basilica. The cry was so fraught that Kaoru actually had to pause for a moment, honestly worried that Hikaru was upset over something. Hikaru must have been working on his acting recently. “Renge, we have to get there before them!”

“Of course!” Renge cried, and dashed past Kaoru before he could say anything else.

She ran past him all the way down into the crypt.

Perfect.

It really was a shame that Reiko was off with Hani-senpai. If they had some of her stories, that really would have upped the terror quotient of the pitch black darkness down there. As it was, the rest of them disappearing while Renge was alone and out of sight would have to be prank enough to start. Plus, it meant that Kaoru wouldn’t have to hear anything else about the healing, brainwashing powers of sex with his brother for at least a couple of hours.

Just as Kaoru had turned around to tell Mori-senpai ‘oh no, my mistake, let’s go leave right now,” there was a tremendous scream from behind him and Mori-senpai was suddenly a blur, flying past Kaoru down the path to the crypt as well.

Kaoru spun around and ran after his partner.

He had never heard Renge scream like that before.

He turned on the flashlight app on his phone and skidded to a halt at the top of the darkened stairs, shining his flashlight down to see what had happened.

Mori-senpai was standing near the bottom of the stairs, Renge swept up into his arms bridal-style.

“... huh?” Kaoru said from his place at the top of the stairs, trying to both catch his breath and mentally process this sudden turn of events.

Mori-senpai blinked up at him, squinting a little in the light. Renge was gazing up at Mori-senpai. It might have just been the reflection of the flashlight, but there seemed to be stars sparkling in her eyes.

Hikaru jogged up to Kaoru’s side and stared down with him.

“So... what happened?” Hikaru finally ventured.

“Morinozuka-senpai saved me,” Renge breathed. “I turned my ankle and nearly fell down the stairs, but then suddenly... he caught me. Like a prince.”

Kaoru and Hikaru traded blank looks.
“That’s, uh, kind of his thing?” Hikaru finally offered.

There was a sudden shadow behind the twins and Kaoru’s back stiffened.

“What did you two do?” Kyoya asked, sounding tired and maybe a little bit disappointed.

Kaoru hated that tone.

“She was running and she tripped!” he defended, wheeling around and making Kyoya close his eyes against the light of his flashlight. He fumbled to turn the light off. “We didn’t do it!” His gut still lurched with a sickening punch of guilt. Okay, so maybe it hadn’t been the brightest idea to send Renge running down a dark staircase in an old cathedral. At night. Alone.

To be fair, they had seen exactly zero evidence in years of acquaintance to think that Renge was capable of fear, and it wasn’t like they had thought any part of this would actually hurt her.

There was a soft shuffle behind him as Mori-senpai carried Renge the rest of the way up the stairs and set her down next to Kaoru. She reached up to pat his head while he was still bent over. It was a move that Kaoru had never seen anyone but Hani-senpai dare to attempt.

“Such a good knight,” Renge cooed. Then her eyes flashed. “Maybe… too good. Are you trying to hide the truth of the organ? Are you planning to keep the blackcurrant tart to yourself? Bribery to steal Haninozuka-senpai away from innocent little Reiko, all to feed the ravenous hunger of the jealousy within you!”

Mori-senpai just stared at her, wide-eyed. If words were physical, it was clear that this particular set would’ve stabbed him through the heart.

Renge pointed at him dramatically. “Well, you won’t succeed! Hikaru-kun and I will win the tart so that he can share it with his brother and their forbidden love can bloom anew!”

“We’re right here,” the twins chorused.

Nanako, who had finally caught up with the rest of them, let out what sounded like a quiet laugh. “That’s almost kind of sweet, isn’t it?”

Despite her tone, she looked serious and concerned when Kaoru glanced back at her. “You are alright, though?” she asked Renge, confirming Kaoru’s read of her concern.

“No thanks to you, you praying mantis!” Renge sneered.

Kyoya looked between the group of them before pushing his glasses further up on his nose. “This organ has five keyboards. Shall we go to the Chartreuse de Champmol before we cause an international incident here?”

Renge actually snapped to get Hikaru’s attention back on her. Hikaru looked like, while he was mostly glad she was alright, he was also desperately wishing Mori-senpai had let her at least stub a toe or something.

“Hikaru-kun!” Renge declared. “No lollygagging just because you want to spend more time with the over-sexed harlot!”

Nanako just raised an eyebrow at this, concern finally melting away to entertainment. “Her hatred is so pure and innocent, it’s almost cute,” she said quietly, turning to smile and wink at Kaoru.
Hikaru groaned, but this was one situation that Kaoru was absolutely not willing to sacrifice himself to free his twin from. His brother returned to Renge’s side and she immediately grabbed onto his arm, tugging him off to their next destination.

At least they still had the definitely not-dangerous prank plan numbers two through five to fall back on.

Of course, plan number five wouldn’t work unless they caught up with Tamaki and Hani-senpai. And it wasn’t even a prank so much as it was ‘just leave Renge and Reiko alone for long enough for Reiko to start telling ghost stories and hope that Reiko’s creepiness is strong enough to overpower Renge’s obliviousness.’

Kaoru wasn’t going to hold his breath waiting for that one.

They would have to rely on pranks two through four to do it, then.

Kaoru wasn’t as involved with the rest of the pranks, unfortunately. The rest of the plans all involved either Nanako’s knowledge of Dijon or the many different pieces of prank paraphernalia that Hikaru had smuggled on this trip and had quickly detoured to pick up from their room before the groups had left for the Cathedral. A trip to the Chartreuse de Champmol next meant that the other two were going to make combined use of the hedges there and the old fake fart smell spray that Hikaru had conveniently packed.

Still, Kaoru was looking forward to observing. Maybe they weren’t as likely to lose Renge for a while, but seeing her covered in fake fart smell would be some small solace to his battered brain.

They hadn’t even walked a fraction of the distance to the next site before they were able to see Tamaki and Hani-senpai, two blond streaks down a side street, already rushing off in a whole new direction. Kaoru watched, bemused, before falling back slightly to walk next to Kyoya, who was bringing up the back of their clump.

“Who planted all the clues for you?” he asked. “Was it Tachibana?”

“Tachibana has work to do,” Kyoya said, not even bothering to deny that he really was behind all of this. “I would never send him on an errand so foolish.”

“Hotta, then,” Kaoru concluded.

Instead of replying, Kyoya just stopped walking. Kaoru slowed to a stop as well, looking back at him questioningly from a few steps ahead. At nearly the exact same moment, Kaoru heard Renge let out a loud, disgusted noise from her place several yards beyond him.

“Is that something dead in these bushes?” she demanded, her voice cutting through the gloomy darkness of the sidewalk that they were on. Kaoru turned and squinted, but he couldn’t see far enough to make her out any longer, even though her voice carried clearly. “I can’t keep walking in these conditions! What if I step in it? Hikaru-kun, you must go on alone and find the next clue for us!”

“Would you like to go on a quick trip with me?” Kyoya asked Kaoru, apparently entirely unconcerned about Renge’s ordeal. “The others are going to be busy for the rest of the night, and this is where my path splits from the rest.”

Kaoru tilted his head, taken aback by this sudden offer. “Your path?” he asked.

“It’s just back to the hotel, really.” Kyoya gave a slight shrug of his shoulders. “There are
additional guests arriving, and I would like to be able to speak to them before the rest of our friends return.” Kaoru could make out the gleam of a smile on Kyoya’s face, even in the dark. “I feel like you deserve the right to come along for this meeting. After all, it was your idea in the first place.”

*That* pulled at Kaoru’s curiosity, although he also felt a flare of frustration at the thought of *even more* guests in their party. But… “What about Nanako and Mori-senpai?”

“With all of the other excitement occurring, I highly doubt that they will worry unduly if they notice we’re gone. Still, you may send your brother a message to pass on to the others, if you wish. Or just stay, of course, and tell the others where I have gone.”

“No, no, I’m coming too,” Kaoru said hastily, quickly pulling up his phone to send his brother a glasses emoji and the message ‘*don’t wait up*’ before jogging back so that he could once more fall in step with Kyoya, who had already started walking back in the direction of their hotel. Getting a special sneak peek into whatever Kyoya was planning and *also* being far away from Renge for a while were a far more tempting treat than even seeing Renge pranked would be.

“My idea, hm?” Kaoru said aloud, brushing back a strand of his hair that had become displaced by his jog. “Are you sure about that?”

“Entirely. It was a brilliant one.” Kyoya’s voice was full of frank, unreserved admiration.

Kaoru pretended to fan himself, leaning momentarily against Kyoya’s shoulder as they walked. “A compliment from the great Kyoya-sama himself? Oh, I’m *swooning.*”

“I am simply giving credit where credit is due.” Kyoya adjusted his glasses. Kaoru glanced up to try to read his expression, but it was impossible; the glare from the streetlights they were passing was too pronounced at this angle. “I believe that the two of them wish to thank you as well, which is the real reason I wanted you to accompany me.”

“Not just for my charming company?” Kaoru asked.

“There’s that as well, of course,” Kyoya said, unflappable as always.

“Or to keep the two of us from accidentally killing Renge?” Kaoru offered.


Kaoru brought up a finger to tap his chin, thoughtful. “So there’s two of them, and they’ll want to thank me for my brilliant idea,” he mused. “Is this part of our game?”

Kyoya made a soft, thoughtful humming noise, thinking about his response before putting it into words. “If it was, it was only because you made it so,” he finally said, climbing the steps to their hotel lobby.

Kaoru didn’t have much time to wonder about what that meant, because he had followed Kyoya into the lobby and could see the new guests for himself.

Tamaki’s grandparents were sitting in the lobby, holding hands while they quietly spoke to one another in gentle French because ‘adorable’ was evidently genetic.

*‘It was your idea in the first place,’* Kyoya had said.

Kaoru could feel his jaw literally drop. He grabbed onto Kyoya’s left arm with both hands.
“Did you…?” he hissed, not even able to fully get the words out, not even able to fully get his brain around the sheer size of the concept he was being faced with. “Is this really…?”

As he stuttered the de Grantaines saw the two of them and stood with kind, beaming smiles.

“Kyoya and Kaoru, if we’re not mistaken,” said Tamaki’s grandfather in French, coming forward to clasp their hands firmly. Kaoru was forced to let go of Kyoya’s arm in order to accept this sign of affection. “The two we have most to thank for the terrifying yet incredible change we are set to embark on.” The older man fell back to wrap an arm around his wife’s waist. “We cannot thank either of you enough for the way you have supported and aided our family.”

“You are the ones to be thanked for your open-mindedness when I first broached the idea,” Kyoya said smoothly. He stepped away from Kaoru, closer to the older couple, pulling a packet of folded papers from his pants pocket. “I’ve been keeping these safe for you. They will need to be certified when we return to Japan, of course, but all the other paperwork for your long-term residency permit has been properly filed.”

“Thank you, Kyoya,” Monsieur de Grantaine said smoothly, taking what had to be a pair of visas from Kyoya’s grasp. “We find ourselves in your debt in a way that we are unlikely to have the power to repay.”

“There is no need to think in such a way,” Kyoya said, voice soft and honest. Kaoru felt a shiver trickle down his spine at the oddly gentle tone. “Think of it instead as the repayment of a debt of my own.”

Kaoru’s mind quickly flashed back to that dogeza during the Christmas party last year, to Kyoya apologizing to Tamaki so deeply that he had to fold himself to the floor in order to do it.

What the hell had Kyoya done? What the hell had Tamaki said?

Who was this person, who smiled down at the grandparents of his best friend as though they were his own? A guy who planned secret trips to France and secret gifts of people, just to surprise and reward and… and show his love. Really, that was what it was, that’s what it always, always was. A guy who pretended like he was a monster and yet lived his entire life to benefit his family, his friends, all of the people that he loved.

Kaoru’s heart throbbed, hard and quick.

“Nonsense,” Monsieur de Grantaine insisted, clapping Kyoya’s arm warmly as he beamed up at him.

He might have said something else, but Kaoru had stopped paying attention.

He was just looking at Kyoya’s open, honest expression, the curl of a real smile across his thin lips, the arch of slender eyebrows over his dark, focused eyes, the curve of his jaw around the words he was saying, the sweep of his hair as he leaned down to better hear the older couple speak, and all Kaoru wanted to do was slam him into the nearest wall.

He wanted to kiss that expression.

No, not just kiss it. He wanted to devour it, to feel and to claim every single seldom-seen inch of it with his lips, to memorize it and mark it and hide it, to keep it jealously and secretly his, to stop anyone else from ever being allowed to see this side of his friend.

He wanted to mash his own body into Kyoya’s and then to do it again, and again, and again, to
somehow show Kyoya just how much Kaoru saw him, just how aware Kaoru felt of him, how incredibly incapable Kaoru was of ever looking past him. He wanted to figure out a way to make his feelings physical, to make it so that Kyoya could feel them, all the way down to the truest center of him, feel just how much Kaoru valued him. Kaoru wanted to breathe Kyoya in like oxygen and let him rest there, inside his lungs, protected and part of him forever.

Fuck, said Kaoru’s brain.

I am really, really fucked, it continued, as though it hadn’t quite sold the overwhelming terribleness of this situation the first time around.

Kaoru somehow made it through the rest of the conversation. The big grandparent reveal was supposed to happen in the morning. That made sense. Tamaki was going to be distracted with the scavenger hunt all night; this would give him a new focus tomorrow, an automatic recovery from his downward spiral after Hani-senpai inevitably won the tart. The de Grantaines were going to check into their hotel room and rest for the evening. That also made sense. In fact, it was a great idea. Kaoru was going to go to his hotel room too. He avoided meeting Kyoya’s eyes as he announced as much.

It was either shut himself away for the night or do something he was really, really going to regret.

Like grab Kyoya by the front of his sweater and demand that he actually give him that first kiss he’d been so worried about back in December. Or just take the kiss the same way Kyoya had kissed him, cup one of those pale cheeks in his palm, tilt that perfectly angled jaw, run possessive fingers through that dark, fine hair...

He shut himself away in his room. He got ready for bed. He tucked himself in. He stared blankly at the ceiling.

It was a little after midnight when Hikaru slammed in, grinning, words tumbling out of him before he was even fully inside, kicking his shoes off and stripping his shirt as he went.

“I can’t believe you and Kyoya skipped out on us, Kaoru! I’d be upset, but you’re going to be so jealous of what you missed that there’s no point. Get this—Renge fell into an actual ditch. It wasn’t even a planned prank, it just happened and was hilarious. And Hani-senpai won the tart, of course, and—”

Hikaru turned. Hikaru caught sight of him. Hikaru stopped talking and climbed into bed next to him, resting their heads on the same pillow and staring up at the same spot at the ceiling.

For a full five minutes, there was silence.

“I’m into guys, too,” Kaoru said.

“Okay,” Hikaru said. His hand squirmed under the covers and down the sheet until it found Kaoru’s, linking their fingers together. “If you hook up with Lucas, I’m never speaking to you again.”

Kaoru pinched Hikaru’s palm. “I can’t believe I missed seeing Renge fall into a ditch.”

“There’s always tomorrow,” Hikaru said. He squeezed Kaoru’s hand tightly, a promise.

Tomorrow. At some point, Kaoru was going to need to handle tomorrow.

Right now, that sounded like a problem for tomorrow.
Kaoru listened to the familiar hum and rumble of his brother’s voice, unwavering and true, and allowed the comforting cadence of it to lull his mind to a tired, thankful blank.

Chapter End Notes

Manga Background Notes for Chapter 8 (warning, spoilers follow!):
-Shouji Nanako is the daughter of an Ootori business associate. She is currently living in Spain for graduate school. A marriage was originally arranged between her and Akito, Kyoya’s middle brother, but, thanks to interference from the Host Club, a business deal was concluded between the two companies without the marriage being required. The twins nicknamed her “Carmen” for her exotic looks and cool personality.

-Yasumura Mei is the daughter of the owner of the pension that the Host Club helps out at that one summer. She and Haruhi are good friends, and she quietly helps Haruhi realize her feelings for Tamaki, although she does step back when Kaoru asks her to please let Haruhi figure things out on her own.

Foreign Language Notes:
1. [monsieur: a formal address for a man in French]
As tomorrows often do, this one dawned earlier than Kaoru would’ve liked.

Well, maybe not “dawned” as such. Kaoru woke up, blinked his sleep encrusted but definitely wide awake eyes, and stared through the pitch blackness of the hotel room to see that the alarm clock on the end table was cheerfully flashing “3:00 AM” at him.

So… not dawn. Still awake.

He groaned and buried his face in his pillow as though that would make the time suddenly become something more reasonable, like noon.

There was no way he was getting back to sleep.

Jet lag was the worst.

At least it hadn’t left him with any awkward, uncomfortable dreams, this time. Just the awkward, uncomfortable reality.

Kaoru turned in bed to stare up at the dark ceiling of the Hitachiins’ hotel room, all of the memories of the previous night—those long, long couple of hours ago—returning to him one beautiful, painful piece at a time. The moon was out, the night was old, they still had eighty-four hours left in their trip to France, Tamaki’s grandparents were immigrating to Japan, and Kaoru had a giant crush on one of his best, least attainable friends.

This seemed unfair. Why couldn’t he have fallen for open, accepting, and undeniably beautiful Tamaki, like any kind of a normal gay guy probably would have? Sure, it never would have worked out, but Tamaki would have felt terrible about it for a long time and at a great volume, and that would’ve been some small consolation, at least. Mori-senpai would’ve been ideal, actually; that might even have worked out, because Kaoru had no idea what kind of people Mori-senpai was into, if he was even into people at all, so he might have had a reasonable shot at that particular target.

It was a stupid crush. It was maybe the stupidest crush possible. It was never, ever going to happen. Kaoru couldn’t even imagine Kyoya being willing to choose his own partner instead of going along with whoever his father arranged for him. The thought that Kyoya might go so far against his family’s expectation that he’d not only pick his own partner but actually choose someone like Kaoru, another guy, theoretically ending his branch of the family line forever…

Impossible.

Totally, totally impossible.

Kyoya valued his family more than anything else, even himself. Even on the small off chance that Kyoya was totally, undeniably gay, without a single heterosexual bone in his entire body, there was no way he’d put his own inclinations over his family’s fortunes.

But the heart wanted what the heart wanted, and evidently what Kaoru’s heart wanted—really, really wanted, if the despair currently marinating his soul in black tar was any indication—was a
manipulative, robotic, hypotensive shadow king who didn’t wear his heart on his sleeve so much as he buried it in a secret vault surrounded by barbed wire and a private security force.

Kaoru supposed he had always enjoyed a challenge. He should’ve figured that he was going to do something like this to himself.

So that was that. The second person Kaoru had ever fallen for in his life, and the situation was just as impossible as the first one had been, albeit for very different reasons. Kaoru had gotten over Haruhi easily enough for Hikaru’s sake; he would just have to decide to get over Kyoya for his own.

‘*Those who live freely are the winners,*’ said the Hitachiin family precept, and Kaoru wasn’t about to live his life mourning his lack of control over someone else’s feelings.

It was decided, then. Kaoru might have had a crush, but he was going to move on. Again.

He let out a long, slow breath, as though he could somehow breathe the feelings out of himself. That would be convenient. There was a soft red glow to the side of the room: the alarm clock, still reflecting whatever ungodly hour of the morning it currently was. Kaoru ignored it. If jet lag had decided to give him this time to think, he was going to take this time to think. As satisfying as it was to assure himself that he would get past this, he knew his thinking wasn’t quite done.

What was the plan for all the time up until his crush went away? He wasn’t expecting instantaneous results, after all.

Crush or not, he enjoyed spending time with Kyoya. While he couldn’t control someone else’s feelings, he also didn’t have to ignore his own. He was far too selfish to deny himself what he wanted just because Kyoya didn’t feel the same way about him.

That was his answer, then. Kaoru was going to do what he wanted without any regrets, just like he always had. It was the Hitachiin way, after all. Avoiding Kyoya, actively trying to find fault in him, paying more attention to other people… it all sounded like a boring hassle. Not worth it.

Of course, thinking this while lying in bed next to a snoring Hikaru at some point just after 3 AM was very different from actually implementing this in a reasonable way when face-to-face with a smiling Kyoya in the hotel lobby just after 10 AM.

10:15 was when they were all supposed to meet in the hotel lobby before beginning their excursions for the day. Kaoru had dragged Hikaru down there a few minutes early, just so they wouldn’t miss Tamaki’s first reaction to Kyoya’s big reveal.

But, despite the promise of the entertainment to come, Kaoru’s brain still fixated on Kyoya.

It was like his sleep deprivation allowed his feelings to paint the world around Kaoru with a broad brush, dimming everything in the background but making Kyoya shine with the luster of solid gold, like he was under his very own personal spotlight. Kyoya’s eyes were unguarded, dark and steady and pleased behind his glasses, and he didn’t even seem exhausted or tense for once in his life. He was wearing an emerald green cashmere sweater that made him look both comfortable and svelte, the hint of a pale blue button-down shirt peeking from underneath his sweater collar as he nodded at some comment Tamaki’s grandfather had made. He looked proper and comfortable and warm, all at once.

Kaoru was definitely going to get over him at some point. But right now all he wanted was to walk over to him, push him backwards onto one of the couches in the lobby, and melt on top of him like
a blanket, filling every crevice of his body.

In a lovey-dovey way!

But also in a sexy way.

He wouldn’t actually do it, of course.

But **wow** did he want to.

He had to actively work to drag his eyes away from the shining, smiling Kyoya he had been presented with. Tamaki had entered the lobby looking like he was on the verge of starting a mushroom farm in an unattended corner of the room, still depressed over last night’s defeat in the scavenger hunt. The moment he saw his grandparents, though, he practically levitated to their side with the force of his joy, arms wrapping around both of them at once as they explained in response to his shocked exclamations that no, they weren’t actually here on a coincidental vacation; they had actually come to hitch a ride back to Japan, their new home country, on the Ootori family jet.

Hikaru leaned against Kaoru’s shoulder, a weight that Kaoru automatically adjusted his stance to support, as the rest of the former Host Club watched the reunion. “This?” Hikaru said. Kaoru glanced to the side to see that Hikaru’s expression was bright and he wasn’t taking his eyes off of Tamaki’s teary, joyful face, even as he spoke to Kaoru. “This is what you and Kyoya were up to last night?”

“Kyoya mostly,” Kaoru said. As though the name had mystical powers over him, his eyes immediately slid back to focus on Kyoya’s small, pleased smile. Kaoru wanted to memorize the shape of that smile, preferably with his mouth. He cleared his throat and finished his comment to Hikaru, though it was beyond his abilities to tear his eyes away from Kyoya again. “He wanted to check in on them and give them their visas before everyone was distracted by the big reveal this morning.”

There was a quiet pause, and then Kaoru’s line of sight was unexpectedly cut off by a terrified-looking Hikaru. His brother had pivoted and grabbed him by both shoulders in one sharp, sudden movement. It seemed like he was trying to block him from the view of the rest of the room.

“No,” Hikaru breathed, searching Kaoru’s face. His golden eyes were abnormally wide, even for the two of them, and his claw-like grip on Kaoru’s shoulders felt uncomfortable, bruising. “Don’t tell me…”

Well. That hadn’t taken very long.

Kaoru couldn’t help the rush of blood to his cheeks, stubbornly dropping his chin to look down at the marble-toned floor of the lobby. Hikaru was standing close enough that ‘down’ was the only direction that would allow Kaoru to avoid his eyes. “I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he said loftily, which was probably more than enough confirmation, even for Hikaru.

“**Him?**” Hikaru hissed, clearly not fooled for a moment. “**He’s** what led to…?” Hikaru’s head tilted, like he was looking around furtively, though Kaoru didn’t bother to look up to see what Hikaru was seeing. All of their friends were probably still distracted watching Tamaki’s reunion with his grandparents. Hikaru lowered his voice even further anyway. “To last night’s realization?”

Kaoru was still staring at the floor. Meeting Hikaru’s eyes seemed like a bad, embarrassing idea, right now. “How did you figure it out so fast?” he whined, as quietly as he could. “I literally had to give you a very special and emotional speech about my crush on Haruhi before you realized what
was going on last time.”

“You’re being obvious, Kaoru.” Hikaru’s voice was shaking, despite how quiet he was being. “You looked like you had hearts for eyes or something. For… for… him.”

He didn’t have to say the name. They both knew he had figured it out.

Kaoru must have been being really, really obvious, if even Hikaru had picked up on it.

“It’s fine,” he said aloud, keeping his voice hushed but his jaw stubbornly firm as he finally looked up again, meeting Hikaru’s now-narrowed eyes. “It will all be fine. I already have a plan to deal with it.”

“A ‘plan’?” Hikaru spit out the words disbelievingly, like they were rusty nails that had unexpectedly wound up in his mouth. So much for unconditional brotherly love and support.

“I’m going to get over him,” Kaoru said, so quietly he barely moved his mouth to say the words. He tried to shrug with careless nonchalance. His shoulders were barely able to twitch in the strength of Hikaru’s grip. “Just like I got over Haruhi. It’s only a matter of time. I’ll enjoy the crush while it lasts, and it will move on when it moves on.”

Hikaru’s eyes screwed up even more tightly as Kaoru spelled his plan out. He looked like he was in physical pain. “That’s not a plan!” he snarled as soon as Kaoru was done speaking, each word quiet but enunciated clearly—projectiles he’d been winding up to throw in Kaoru’s face. “That’s literally the opposite of a plan. That’s… that’s a not-plan!”

“That’s not a word,” Kaoru hissed back at him.

“It’s as much of a word as that was a plan, so it’s fitting.”

“Why are you making such a big deal out of this?” Kaoru glanced over his brother’s shoulder. As distracting as Tamaki’s overflowing joy was, they probably didn’t have this moment of privacy for too much longer. “It worked for me once already, with Haruhi, didn’t it? It’s going to be fine.”

“You never looked at Haruhi like that,” Hikaru said. Something deep and dark and worried was filling his golden eyes now. It was just as embarrassing as Kaoru had feared it was going to be. He looked back down at the ground, avoiding that look. Hikaru kept speaking anyway. “Even I would have noticed, if you had. And, look, I’ve tried really hard to get over her and it’s really hard to stop caring for someone that you like like that, okay? Don’t write off emotions that easily, Kaoru.”

Where did Hikaru get off, telling Kaoru to not write off his emotions? At least Kaoru recognized the things that he felt, unlike some emotionally-stunted twin brothers he could name.

“We’re not the same people, you realize,” Kaoru said, shortly.

“I know,” Hikaru said. Kaoru unwillingly looked back up to see that his brother was looking hunted now. “It’s going to be so much worse for you than it was for me.” He shook his head sharply. “And to think, I was worried about fucking Lucas,” he said, so quietly that Kaoru was able to diplomatically pretend he hadn’t heard that part.

A hand entered into Kaoru’s peripheral vision, lightly touching the bend of Hikaru’s elbow.

“Are you two okay?” Haruhi asked, just as quiet as the two of them were trying to be.

Kaoru quickly scanned the room, but everyone else was still focused on Tamaki’s reunion with his
grandparents; even Renge hadn’t managed to look away from the emotional display to see what the twins were up to.

Aw. Haruhi and her responsible, mothering heart.

“We’re fine,” Kaoru said, expecting his brother’s voice to join along with his in their usual way.

Hikaru was silent in front of him. Kaoru raised his eyebrows at him. Hikaru looked away from him, down at Haruhi. “Don’t worry about it, Haruhi,” he said, finally letting go of Kaoru’s shoulder so that he could rest a hand on top of Haruhi’s head instead. “I’ll handle this one.”

Kaoru’s eyebrows flew up even higher. Hikaru thought he was going to handle it, did he?

“This sounds like a disaster waiting to happen,” Haruhi said, pursing her lips, slipping out from underneath Hikaru’s hand. “I’ll just leave you two to that, then.”

Haruhi’s mothering heart might need a bit of defibrillation before she had real children, actually.

“You’re going to handle this?” Kaoru asked his brother quietly as soon as Haruhi had stepped away.

“Shut up and be happy for Tamaki,” Hikaru said grimly. His face was pale but set, like a hero from a Kurosawa film who knows he is the only one capable of saving the day—and that that victory will only come at a grave personal cost. “We’ll talk later.”

It turned out that ‘we’ll talk later’ really just meant ‘I’ve got a really stupid plan and I don’t want you to figure it out so I’m going to make faces at you as you hang off of Kyoya but otherwise ignore you until I invite you out for coffee the day after we get back to NYC, counting on you being so excited to spend time with me again that you won’t realize it’s a trap.’

Kaoru did not, actually, realize that it was a trap. Then they stepped into the upscale coffee shop that they preferred and he saw an unfamiliar brown-haired glasses-wearing nerd look up from his laptop and brighten, waving at Hikaru in a subtle, dorky way as he closed down his computer.

That was when everything finally clicked.

Kaoru immediately tried to about-face back to the sidewalk. Hikaru wrapped a tight, unforgiving arm around his neck, trapping him in place.

“When you had an ill-advised crush,” Kaoru hissed in Hikaru’s ear, trying frantically to twist himself back out of his brother’s grip, not caring about the spectacle they were making, “remind me, how many times did I set you up with some random person? Right, that was it: zero. Zero times. Because I am a good, supportive brother.”

“He’s not some random person,” Hikaru hissed back through the vacant smile he had plastered on, nodding past Kaoru’s shoulder at the random person. “He’s in my Sustainable Systems class and asked me out. I’m not interested, but history had shown that you have a brown-haired glasses-wearing fetish, which means he’s your type and you’re his type. You’re welcome.”

It was too late to escape. Random Guy had given up on awkwardly waiting and had abandoned his seat, making his way over to the two of them.

“Everything alright?” Random Guy asked, one hand coming up to tuck a lock of his dark hair
behind his ear. The movement just emphasized how unfortunately pointed his face was. “Hikaru and… Kaoru, right? Hikaru was totally right; you are the hot one.” He smiled, nervous with his own flirting. His smile revealed that he had huge teeth, like a beaver. Hikaru was trying to set him up with some guy with bad pick-up lines and beaver teeth?

Kaoru made a buzzer noise, crossing his arms in an X and narrowing his eyes at the beaver-toothed interloper. “Neither of us is the hot one,” he said coldly. “Together, we are the hot two, and we’re both extremely out of your league. Thanks for playing, bye-bye.”

Mr. Beaver looked taken aback. He glanced at Hikaru as though searching for guidance.

Hikaru just shrugged. Kaoru could feel the movement from where he was still trapped under Hikaru’s armpit; it felt like his neck was in a vise. Kaoru pinched Hikaru’s forearm, but his brother still didn’t let go. “Well, it’s not like he’s wrong,” Hikaru said above his head. “I only asked you to meet us here because I’m trying to set him up, you asked, and, honestly, it seemed like more work to say no than to go along with it.”

Mr. Beaver’s eyebrows shot up at Hikaru’s lack of tact.

“You two are kind of assholes, aren’t you?” Mr. Beaver said, wiped so blank by the shock that it wound up more of an observation than a judgment.

“Yes,” Kaoru and Hikaru confirmed in unison. It wasn’t like they cared about this beaver’s opinion, anyway.

Mr. Beaver grumbled something about ‘pretentious, should’ve known better, waste of my time’ as he turned and marched back to his laptop to pack it up.

“Well, classes with him are going to be awkward now,” Hikaru sighed, watching him go.

“Whatever, I’ll just never speak to him again and hopefully he’ll return the favor. You really didn’t feel it at all? I thought the brown-haired-with-glasses thing might have given your heart a flutter, even though he’s all…”

The two of them stared at his retreating back, Hikaru thinking and Kaoru waiting to see what Hikaru would come up with.

“Rat-like,” was what Hikaru finally settled on.

“Aw, I was thinking more like a beaver,” Kaoru said.

“Yes, that one’s better.” Hikaru finally let Kaoru go. Kaoru stood up and straightened the poncho he was wearing, flicking the strands of his newly dyed strawberry-blond hair away from his eyes.

When he finished primping and focused on his brother again, Hikaru was staring at him with pursed lips.

“But really, nothing?” Hikaru tried.

“Weren’t you the one who was all ‘don’t underestimate your emotions, Kaoru’?” Kaoru asked, honestly amused now that the unpleasant shock of his brother springing a surprise blind date on him was over and the stranger was gone. “You thought that a last-minute date with one of your classmates would be enough to make me move on, just like that?”

“It was worth a shot,” Hikaru said. “Don’t worry, though. I’ve got a second option lined up for dinner tomorrow.”
Kaoru made a face. “Ugh, no thank you.”

But then he froze.

Wait… wait…

Wouldn’t this be a rather painless way to figure out how Kyoya felt about him?

Not that Kaoru was holding his breath for any fits of jealousy or anything, but, if a fit of jealousy just so happened to occur, well…

Plus, if Kaoru were actively seeing other people, fishing for information about Kyoya’s own love life would actually be a lot easier, wouldn’t it?

Kaoru felt a mischievous smile curl its way across his face entirely without his consent.

“Never mind, go ahead,” he said to Hikaru, stepping up to the counter to put in his coffee order. A flat white with double ristretto, the same as they always got. “Matchmake away.”

Hikaru, understandably, seemed to find this abrupt change of heart more than a little bit suspicious. He stepped up to the counter as well but leaned against it, facing Kaoru instead of the barista.

“Okay, why are you suddenly fine with this?” he asked, a small frown-induced wrinkle marring his forehead in a very Haruhi kind of way.

“He’ll have another of the same thing,” Kaoru told the cashier, handing over their card for payment. “I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he told Hikaru.

Hikaru made a sweeping gesture, encompassing Kaoru from head to toe. “You literally tried to run away when we first got here. I honestly thought I’d have to trick you into every single meet-up. Now you’re all…” He tossed his head to the side and simpered, clearly trying to imitate what he thought Kaoru was acting like.

Kaoru kicked him in the shin and stepped past him carelessly when he frowned and tried to kick him back. “If you thought you’d have to trick me every step of the way, it seems like you might’ve just come up with a bad plan.” He led the way to the counter where the drinks were served. “It didn’t take a new crush for me to get over Haruhi. I don’t know why you think it’ll be a cure-all this time.”

“Why go along with it, then?” Hikaru pestered, returning to his side. Kaoru flashed a smile and a wink at the young woman preparing their drinks. He knew Hikaru had done the same in the same moment when she sighed, clearly in spite of herself, and then went back to gathering their ristretto shots with a red flush high in her cheeks.

They were probably going to get her number along with the drinks. Maybe Hikaru would add her to the list of dates.

“It doesn’t sound boring yet,” Kaoru said in response to Hikaru’s question. It was the truth, mostly because of his own ulterior motives, but it was also an answer that Hikaru would understand.

And, in fact, that did appear to be answer enough for Hikaru, who dropped it.

While they waited for their drinks, Kaoru flipped open his phone. It was 2 AM in Tokyo right now, so Kyoya was probably still awake.
Hikaru’s decided to start setting me up, he typed out. It’s mostly to get rid of the people asking him out, I think. We nearly made this one cry.

Just as he had expected, the response came back nearly at once.

You two could conquer the world if you ever bothered to apply yourselves to anything of actual consequence.

Kaoru grinned at that, inordinately pleased by both the speed and the content of the response. He tapped the side of his phone, relishing the physical evidence of the connection between the two of them, even so much of a distance apart. Isn’t that your job anyway? he wrote back.

You know how much I enjoy competition, Kyoya responded.

There was a short pause, and then another message pinged through the thousands of miles separating them.

Either way, you really should stop making girls cry. You’ll disappoint Father, and you know how delicate he is. Mother would have no choice but to punish you.

Kyoya was making a joke. Kaoru knew that. A cutting one, of course; both a reference to Tamaki’s obsession with keeping girls happy and also his weird family fantasy, all in one. Kaoru actually felt a quicksilver grin flash across his face, fingers itching to make some joke about Kyoya’s kinky taste in roleplay.

But, as he continued to stare at the message, tendrils of cold reached long, grasping fingers up from his stomach, icing over his veins, stilling his hand on his phone.

‘You really should stop making girls cry.’

It only made sense that Kyoya would assume all of Hikaru’s matchmaking endeavors for Kaoru would involve girls. That was the only sensible assumption possible, seeing as no one back home had any reason to believe that Kaoru was anything other than completely straight.

Was it even worth keeping it a secret? It wasn’t like he was honestly worried about rejection, not from their friends. Still, something in his stomach curdled at the thought of coming out over a text message, and to Kyoya in particular, at that.

“Why are you making that face at your phone?” Hikaru asked, suspicion back in full force.

Kaoru shoved his phone in his pocket and looked back up at his brother, noticing that Hikaru had grabbed both of their finished drinks—and yes, written on the side of both of their napkins was the same set of 10 digits. The barista’s phone number.

“It’s nothing,” he said, accepting his cup from Hikaru’s hands. “Who am I having dinner with tomorrow?”

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Dinner was with an upperclassman who Hikaru had run into in the Maker Center their first day back from Thanksgiving break and, realizing that she, too, had brown hair and glasses, had asked out on Kaoru’s behalf.

It was also a colossal failure.
She was cute enough, in an unpolished sort of way, but she was also quiet and boring. If Kaoru had been his brother, he would have placed a whoopie cushion under her seat when she left to powder her nose, just to see how she would have reacted. Because he wasn’t his brother, he quietly asked her what was wrong.

She said that nothing was wrong.

Kaoru accidentally said, “So you’re always like this, then?” out loud.

He texted Kyoya to let him know that he was very quickly becoming a stain on the very name of hosting.

Kyoya did not seem terribly sympathetic.

Furthermore, when Kaoru tried to turn the text conversation around, to ask what Kyoya did on the dates he went on, then, “Mr. So Smooth,” his only response was, *Dating is for people who don’t already know what they want.*

Which was a frustratingly smooth answer that, at the same time, actually answered absolutely nothing at all.

The rest of the dates followed a similar pattern. Hikaru tried setting him up with artsy girls and guys, with people they saw at museums, with that one barista from the coffee shop they liked, with a wide swath of different people. Even with…

“Lucas?” Kaoru asked, honestly amused when he saw the wavy blond hair waiting for him inside a cafe storefront where Hikaru was dropping him off one afternoon.

“Well, it’s starting to feel like your type is just ‘make Hikaru as miserable as possible,” Hikaru said, frowning and crossing his arms as he looked away defensively. “I found the most extreme option on that scale.”

“I would give my entire right arm to see the conversation you had with him to set this up.”

“I honestly hope this doesn’t work,” Hikaru admitted with a sigh, uncrossing his arms to lightly push Kaoru in the direction of the doors. “But, after all… no, never mind. I was about to say ‘what’s the worst that can happen,’ but I don’t trust this bastard as far as he could throw Moris—senpai. Have fun, but also be careful, please.”

It was actually cute, to see his brother this earnestly overprotective.

“Hey, Lucas,” Kaoru said, sliding into the seat across from his classmate. “How did Hikaru rope you into this whole charade?”

Lucas smiled widely at him. He had dimples, and it was clear that he knew it.

“No one’s more surprised than me, I promise you,” Lucas said, dimpling indiscriminately. “It turns out that I’m willing to put up with a lot for a chance at you—including your brother.”

There was a pinch in Kaoru’s stomach but he managed to keep his expression blank. There was a very specific list of people allowed to insult Hikaru. Lucas was most assuredly not on that list.

“You’re too hard on him,” Kaoru said, keeping his voice mild. “He arranged for this, didn’t he?”

“That’s true,” Lucas acknowledged. He stretched a leg out underneath the small cafe table, running
the toe of his shoe up Kaoru’s calf, along the inseam of his blood-red chinos. “It was like you weren’t picking up on my flirting at all. I was beginning to worry that you were one of those cases. You know the type—the kind whose beauty comes at the expense of their brains.”

The pinching in Kaoru’s stomach was getting worse. “Sure,” he said out loud, moving his legs slightly, letting Lucas’ foot fall back to the floor.

Lucas, it turned out, was about as good at taking a hint as he thought Kaoru was. “I mean, a Hitachiin who’s also gorgeous? It would’ve evened the scales if you were dumb as a brick. Or had the personality of an ass, like your brother.” Lucas winked. “Not that I necessarily would’ve said no, even then.”

Kaoru sighed and stood up, cradling his drink to his chest. It was a good thing he’d gotten a to-go cup. “Oh, Lucas,” he sighed, laying on a melodramatic sadness he absolutely did not feel. “At least we’ll always have ‘Perspectives of Design.’ If you ever insult my brother again, I’ll end you. Have a great afternoon; I’ll see you in class!”

“Well?” Hikaru asked after he had returned from that one, purposefully not looking up from his laptop. Kaoru could tell his teeth were gritted and his jaw was tense, even from the doorway to their living room. “How was it…?”

“I think I’m going to see him again...” Kaoru said. He flopped down next to Hikaru on the couch, resting his head on his brother’s thigh. “… the next time we have class, because I won’t be able to avoid it. Other than that…” Kaoru gave a big, sweeping thumbs-down.

“Oh, thank god,” Hikaru said, falling limply against the back of the couch, giving up any pretense of nonchalance. “Okay. I had hoped that one was going to be a long shot. I can still do this.”

Three weeks passed. The message chain between their friends was positively humming with excitement over the trip to Hawaii that Kyoya and Tamaki had organized for them all for the week of Christmas. It was nice to have something to look forward to.

It was that thought that made Kaoru finally realize that he wasn’t looking forward to the dates anymore, not even a little bit. All of the faces were starting to run together in his head, all of the experiences very nearly interchangeable. Plus, Kyoya wasn’t really responding in any kind of satisfying way to the news of his dates, just poking fun at him for being selfish and easily bored, so that hope, too, had been dashed.

Unfortunately, now this game, too, was just… boring.

“I can see some of the benefit in flying coach,” Hikaru said, leaning back in their first class seats, on the way to the Haninozuka beach house in Hawaii. “Everyone on this plane right now is heading to Hawaii too. There are so many people in coach, maybe I could find someone to set you up with while we were there, but—”

“Don’t worry about it.” Kaoru said, relieved that Hikaru had given him such a convenient opening. “I’m not having fun with it any more.”

“Boo,” Hikaru said, but it was more of a sigh than a word, like he had expected this response. He reached over and twined their fingers together, warm, supportive, and clearly still worried. “Are you sure, Kaoru?”

Right. Because Hikaru was terrified of the alternative, of Kaoru having his heart broken by their most notoriously cold-hearted friend. But Kaoru had never really believed that this super-speed
blind-dating approach was going to cure that particular problem, and he also didn’t believe that his heart was on the line quite as badly as Hikaru seemed to think it was.

“Very sure,” Kaoru said, squeezing Hikaru’s hand in his own, trying to pass his own surety along. Twin telepathy had to be good for a situation like this, right? “It’s not like I think anything’s going to come of it, you know? But it’s still more fun to spend time with him, even just as friends, than with anyone else. Except for you,” he added on, because Hikaru’s twin telepathy could get weirdly sensitive about stuff like that.

Hikaru sighed, but didn’t say anything else. He also didn’t let go of Kaoru’s hand.

Kaoru looked out the window at the approach of the islands of Hawaii, and couldn’t help the way his heart rabbitted in his chest. A break from the dreary, gray, slushy New York winter. An end to meals spent with stranger after stranger who meant less than nothing to him.

A week with the group of people he liked best in the world (minus Ageha, of course). It seemed like the perfect cure for everything that ailed him. This week was going to be positively therapeutic.

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Kaoru swirled the icy glass of pineapple juice the butler had left him and peered over the top of his overly large sunglasses at the view down the beach, where Hani-senpai was absolutely destroying Tamaki and Kyoya in what evidently passed for ‘training’ among the group of them. This was how the four of them, including Mori-senpai, had begun each morning of their vacation so far, and Kaoru was so very, very thankful to be alive.

Talk about therapeutic.

The third time Kyoya was tossed into the ocean and stood, clearly disgruntled, water streaming from his dark hair down the lines and planes of his bare chest, droplets tracing the path of his muscles before getting caught by the V-cut just above his shorts line and then teasingly dipping out of view, Kaoru let out a long, entirely unintentional sigh.

If there had ever been even the slightest question remaining in his mind about how gay he actually was, the strength of his desire to lick ocean water off of Kyoya’s chest was quickly making it clear to him that the answer was extremely.

Vacations were the greatest.

A shadow loomed over the lounge chairs.

“You two need to be careful not to stay out here too long,” Haruhi said.

“I’m fine,” Kaoru said automatically in what he knew had to be a dreamy, distracted sort of voice.

He then froze, jaw tightening.

He was used to speaking in unison with someone else.

He was not used to the person he spoke in unison with being Reiko.

He glanced over to where she was sitting, huddled under a long-sleeved shirt and a gigantic beach umbrella, clearly avoiding the sun but not at all willing to avoid the view in front of them. She
hadn’t seemed to notice their speaking in unison, large, luminous eyes still locked on the image of Hani-senpai giggling as he kicked Tamaki into a sand dune.

Kaoru had just joined in on a chorus with a girl lusting after her boyfriend.

… Maybe he would be lucky. Haruhi was notoriously oblivious. No matter how obvious he was being, there was no way it was strong enough to overpower Haruhi’s inability to read a room.

Right?

“Even in the shade, your skin can take damage from UV reflection from the sand,” Haruhi said, practical as always. “Come inside so that you can take a break and reapply sunscreen, at least.”

Kaoru very nearly sighed again. He was safe. Thank you, Haruhi, for your pure commoner heart and unnatural lack of human imagination!

He obediently stood and followed her back in the building, the sand warm between his bare toes. Haruhi might actually have a point; it was hard to remember how long he’d been laying out in the sun, a cold drink in his hand and a refreshing view to distract him. Reiko appeared unwilling to leave the view at all, huddling even more tightly underneath her umbrella. Haruhi would probably have to bring the sunscreen out to her. At least Kaoru wasn’t that far gone.

Hikaru was inside the main lounge, stretched across the couch and playing a video game on the large television screen while the others were all outside. Leaving Haruhi to wander off to find sunscreen, Kaoru thumped down next to his brother’s back, pressing his cold glass of juice to his neck and receiving an entertaining yelp in return.

“You’re finally in, then?” Hikaru asked, not even taking his eyes off of the game long enough to glare at Kaoru for the icy hello. “Got tired of the view?”

Kaoru snorted. “Not likely.”

Hikaru made a gagging sound, tearing through enemies on the screen. “I think we can definitely say that you’re into guys, Kaoru.”

“Oh, are you?” asked Haruhi, sitting down on Kaoru’s other side, next to Hikaru’s legs. “Turn around so I can put some of this on your back.”

The twins both stiffened at the same time. Hikaru’s character died a bloody messy death in ultra high definition.

“Haruhi!” Hikaru yelped, throwing the controller down and dragging his feet back under himself, turning to face the other two, his eyes beseeching. “It wasn’t… It’s not…”

He focused on Kaoru alone, guilty and helpless. Kaoru bit the inside of his cheek, frustrated, but then sighed.

It’s not like he hadn’t just had a heart attack over this very thing a few minutes ago. It was too soon to have a second one. The moment was here, like it or not.

“I am,” he confirmed, turning his back on Haruhi because it seemed easier in the moment. “Into both guys and girls, as far as I can tell.”

Haruhi just hummed her acknowledgement, rubbing sunscreen into his bare back.
Her lack of reaction was cute, as always, but also kind of frustrating. Kaoru felt like this should be a more dramatic, meaningful moment.

“I like Kyoya,” he added, watching Hikaru’s eyes widen as he spoke, because he was evidently so desperate for a reaction that he was willing to be incredibly stupid.

“Kyoya seems to have that effect on people who are bi, I guess,” Haruhi said behind him, entirely unconcerned, and also what? “Your back’s done.”

Oh. Right. Her dad had also always seemed to have a thing for Kyoya. That… made some sense, then.

Did it?

What the hell was this conversation?!

Hikaru was the one who started laughing first, dropping his forehead down to rest on Kaoru’s shoulder.

“Haruhi,” he managed to gasp out. “You’re a KY superhero.”

That started Kaoru laughing, slapping a hand over his face to cover the inelegant snort.

“I don’t understand you two at all,” Haruhi said frankly, and the two of them reached over to tug their best friend into the center of their sprawl on the couch, caging her in a group hug. Haruhi let them manhandle her, despite clearly having no idea where any of this was coming from.

“Thanks, Haruhi,” Kaoru managed to say around his cathartic giggling. He kissed the top of her head and she blinked up at him, tilting her head to the side.

“Sure…” she said, obviously writing this off as a weird twin thing. “I have to go make sure Reiko puts sunscreen on. Are you two done?”

“Yes, yes,” the twins said in patient tandem, setting her free. “Go be a good mom-friend.”

Haruhi clearly didn’t understand the American slang but just as clearly didn’t care enough to ask about it. She headed back out the big doors that led out to the beach. The twins watched her go in silence.

“She’s too good for us,” Hikaru said quietly in the vacuum of her absence.

“No way,” Kaoru said, squeezing his brother’s shoulder reassuringly. “Her life would be boring without us.”

“Are you going back out there too?” Hikaru picked up his controller once more. He sounded resigned, like he already knew the answer.

“Yes,” Kaoru admitted

Then, an idea occurred to him.

Wasn’t this actually an excellent opportunity to snoop through Kyoya’s stuff free of interference? He still had a game that he wanted to win—wanted to win more than ever, actually. It turned out that there were actually quite a few questions he’d really like the chance to ask Kyoya, if he were going to be guaranteed an honest answer. Questions he could probably play off like a gag, like “Would you ever date a man?”, and questions that were too close to his heart for him to be able to
play off but that were still incredibly tempting to ask, like “Would you ever date me?”

“Actually,” he drawled, slowly and purposefully heaving himself to his feet. “I think I’m going to make a quick stop somewhere first.”

He had apparently already lost Hikaru’s attention to the shooter he was playing, which was fine. He meandered for a moment, like he really was meaning to head back outside, but then, acting like he had suddenly remembered something he had forgotten, he turned and made his way straight to the staircase, up to the guest bedrooms on the second floor.

There was no real point to the deception, but it still helped Kaoru feel like more like a proper spy.

He saw his prize as soon as he opened the door to Kyoya’s assigned room. Kyoya’s precious laptop was sitting out, alone and unguarded. Kaoru, grinning, nabbed it off the desk and settled back on Kyoya’s bed as he waited for it to boot up.

Except… he was not greeted by the sight of Kyoya’s boring, generic sleep screen when the computer woke up.

Instead, he found himself face to face with an intimidatingly blank screen asking him for the password.

At some point since Kaoru had last used the computer, Kyoya had put a password on it.

Kaoru pouted at the lock screen.

To be fair, this turn of events made some amount of sense. Kaoru was actually surprised it had taken Kyoya this long to password protect his electronics, although the presence of a highly trained security team constantly surrounding his belongings probably lent its own feeling of protection.

To be less fair, boo.

Heavily disappointed, not expecting much, he wrote ‘KaoruIsNumberOne’ in the password box.

The screen blacked out. For one breathless moment, Kaoru thought that the password had actually worked, that that was the password that Kyoya had chosen to use. Then, as though someone were typing on the other end, green letters started appearing on the blank black screen, one at a time.

“Nice try, son,” the letters said. “Please stop trying to break into your friends’ electronics. It’s not polite. I love you; don’t forget to give your parents a call if you ever have a down moment.”

A stylized “H” popped up at the bottom of the screen. Then the whole thing winked out and returned to the original lock screen.

Kaoru blinked. Then he laughed, curling his legs up next to him on the bed.

So Kyoya had not only already won their dad over to this keiretsu idea, but was also already getting help from him in safeguarding his electronics.

Kaoru, still grinning despite the setback, grabbed a notepad and pen from the end table and scrawled a quick note.

“Well played,” he wrote. “Good taste in electronic security firm.”

He signed the note with his initials and a small picture of a face blowing a raspberry and left the finished product and the laptop on the end table. He then lay back sideways on the bed, not quite
ready to leave yet.

The bed already smelled like Kyoya, despite the group of them only having been here for three days so far. The fresh, crisp scent of Kyoya’s cologne wafted up from the sheets underneath Kaoru. He took a breath, then another, and allowed his eyes to slip closed.

Here, like this, in Kyoya’s bed, it was so easy to imagine... well, a different world. Kaoru allowed himself a moment, allowed himself to imagine a world where Kyoya returned from his training outside and came back to this bedroom to find Kaoru curled up in his bed. A world where Kyoya would grin at the sight, glasses flashing, and say, “Good. I wanted my sheets to smell like you tonight,” before pinning Kaoru to the mattress and...

Okay, that was a step too far. It broke the suspension of disbelief. It was far, far more likely that Kyoya would say something like, “If I have to have the sheets cleaned again today, the bill is coming out of your bank account.”

Or something like, “At some point, I am going to start charging you rent.”

Kaoru’s inner Kyoya voice was getting really good.

It took a minute too long for it to click. The minute it did, Kaoru’s eyes flew open and he sat straight up.

Kyoya, still shirtless and slightly damp, either from the sweat or the seawater, was leaning against the doorframe, looking passively down at the image of Kaoru sprawled, shirtless, across his bed.

Kaoru knew he should be embarrassed to be caught in this position, but it was hard to feel much of anything other than the jittery, swelling feeling of excitement in his chest at the sight of the other man. Even though he knew nothing would realistically happen, not like in his daydreams, there was still a breathless sense of anticipation tingling up and down his limbs just from being in the same room as Kyoya.

Anything could happen, breathed his heart, even as his brain rolled its metaphorical eyes at it.

Having a crush was fun. Way, way better than the dull, repetitive dates he’d been on. Hikaru was crazy if he had honestly thought any of those people could inspire something that would replace this feeling.

He grinned up at Kyoya, unabashed. “I’m sorry officer, but I’m awfully low on funds at the moment. Could I possibly pay with... my body?” Kaoru lounged back on his hands with exaggerated seductiveness, only fifty percent joking.

“Don’t make offers you’re not willing to follow through on,” Kyoya said easily, stepping past Kaoru’s legs to get a change of clothes from his closet, totally ignorant of the way his words made Kaoru’s heart very nearly combust. “Mitsukuni keeps saying that I should get a live body to practice my sparring on.” Kyoya slid a razor sharp smile back at Kaoru over his bare shoulder. Kaoru’s heart stuttered. “Still interested?”

“On second thought, my body is a temple and how dare you,” Kaoru said. He also tugged over one of Kyoya’s pillows to hug to his chest. Maybe if he put a physical barrier between his heart and Kyoya it would help dampen the impact somewhat. “How’s the training going?”

“No second thought, my body is a temple and how dare you,” Kaoru said. He also tugged over one of Kyoya’s pillows to hug to his chest. Maybe if he put a physical barrier between his heart and Kyoya it would help dampen the impact somewhat. “How’s the training going?”

“As well as can be expected,” Kyoya said. He picked up the note on the end table, glanced over it, and raised an unimpressed eyebrow at Kaoru before setting it back down and continuing to speak. “It would have been better if I’d been working on this for a decade or more, but I am doing the best
“I can within the timeframe that I have.”

“Five years,” Kaoru mused aloud, kicking the heels of his feet lightly against the side of the bed. “Are you still on track for your victory?”

“Yes,” Kyoya said immediately. He then tilted his head, smirking down at Kaoru on his bed. “Are you?”

Kaoru stuck his tongue out at the passive jab. “One day you’ll get sloppy and I’ll get the piece that will make all the rest of it make sense,” he vowed.

“Unlikely,” Kyoya said. “But good luck, of course. Now get out of my room so I can shower.”

“I can join you,” Kaoru offered immediately, winking. He was lucky he and his brother were already known for being shameless. It made flirting a lot easier. “I can wash your back.”

“And try to hunt for clues among my toiletries, I assume,” Kyoya said dryly. “No, thank you. I can manage this myself.”

“Your loss,” Kaoru sing-songed, finally standing. “I’ll get my missing clue one of these days, though.”

“I’m counting on it,” Kyoya said as Kaoru left the room.

Kaoru froze just outside the door.

Kyoya was counting on Kaoru finding the clue that would beat him? That was a new piece of information, wasn’t it? Kaoru whirled around, ready to interrogate him… only to find the door to Kyoya’s room already closed.

Still, he had gotten more than he thought he would out of this investigation, even though he’d missed the end of the beach training for today.

There would always be more beach training to watch tomorrow.

And Kyoya was counting on Kaoru beating him in their game.

Vacations were just really the best.

Chapter End Notes

Foreign Language Notes:
1. [KY: an abbreviation for the term kuuki yomenai, which is someone who cannot “read the air” and respond appropriately to a situation]
“Whuff fime arr you kimmin nn, a’in?” Kaoru said through the handful of pins in his mouth.

“The plane is scheduled to land at ten o’clock New York time, but, as I’ve said, please don’t trouble yourself about us. I’ve already arranged for transportation to the hotel. We also have a prior engagement arranged for the evening, so you don’t need to worry about keeping us entertained while you should be preparing.”

“Ff krse.” Kaoru pulled three of the pins out from between his teeth, carefully threading them one after another through the edges of the hem he was marking. “I ne’er worry,” he managed to enunciate through the pins that remained.

“You could probably stand to worry more about some things,” Kyoya said from the other end of the video call. When Kaoru glanced down at the screen lying on the table next to him, Kyoya was giving him a mildly disapproving look, mouth pinched and eyes hidden behind the reflection of the ceiling light off of his glasses. “I shudder to question a professional, of course, but aren’t you cutting it close for these alterations?”

“s fine,” Kaoru said in response to that look paired with that question, because maybe if he said it often enough it’d become true. He pulled the rest of the pins out of his mouth, sticking them into the cushion on the table. He then picked up his phone in one hand and the pieces of fabric that were mostly a pair of pants in the other, making sure to give Kyoya a wide, reassuring smile as he went. “Everything’s fine. I just have a few more adjustments to make for that last minute model change I told you about, and then I’ll be done.”

It was such a lie that Kaoru was surprised that the pants in his hands didn’t immediately catch on fire. He had so much left to do.

“You’re the expert,” Kyoya said, his disbelief obvious in a polite, pointed sort of way. “I’ll understand if you need to go so that you can focus.”

Kaoru made a negative noise as he resettled at his sewing machine, balancing his phone in a place of honor on the table. It was actually easier to get into the passive, zen-like state he preferred to sew in with Kyoya in the background, explaining some minutiae of business law that he was learning. “Tell me about your intellectual property reading again.”

It was such a lie that Kaoru was surprised that the pants in his hands didn’t immediately catch on fire. He had so much left to do.

“Please?” Kaoru whined, setting the fabric in place in the machine and adjusting his phone so that he could still see Kyoya clearly as he worked without needing to crane too far. “I still don’t believe that a book exists that’s nearly as boring as you telling me about the Patent Office.”

It was a convenient story.

The real truth was that it was 1 AM in Tokyo and, if he managed to keep Kyoya on the line for
long enough, the sound of Kaoru’s sewing machine clicking in the background had a decent track record of putting Kyoya to sleep at something resembling a reasonable hour.

Kaoru had first learned this by accident back in January. He had been calling each of his friends to formally invite them to his school’s annual fashion show, which was where Kaoru was planning on debuting his first ever full line of clothing. Kaoru had been multitasking at the time, and, during his call with Kyoya, the sound of his sewing machine working in the background had lulled the other man into such a deep state of somnolence that he had eventually fallen asleep mid-sentence.

Kaoru might have stayed on the line listening to the gentle, flowing rhythm of Kyoya’s breath for an embarrassingly long time.

After that, he had started calling Kyoya every single weekday afternoon, right before he and Hikaru met up for lunch. He was getting more sewing done than ever, which was keeping him from falling even further behind for his show than he already was, and, even on the days when he didn’t actually send Kyoya fully to sleep, Kyoya still seemed looser in his shoulders and softer along his jawline after Kaoru had run the sewing machine and pestered him about his classes for half an hour. Win-win, just like Kaoru liked it.

Kyoya never brought up the fact that these phone calls seemed to have become a daily habit out of nowhere. Kaoru was always the one to make the call, even now, but Kyoya never failed to pick up the phone. Some days he only answered to offer his regrets, to say that he was in the middle of an important reading or some family event and would have to speak with Kaoru another time, but the majority of the time he stayed on the phone with Kaoru until he fell asleep or until Kaoru needed to leave to go meet his brother for lunch, whichever came first. They would chat, Kaoru would sew, and the lazily pleased feeling of contentment that would settle into Kaoru’s bones at the sound of Kyoya’s voice would stick around for hours, leaving Hikaru to remark on more than one occasion that sewing seemed to have become Kaoru’s drug of choice.

Yeah, sure. It was the sewing that was doing it.

Kaoru wasn’t intentionally keeping the phone calls a secret from his brother, really—it just never came up. Whenever Hikaru asked what Kaoru had been up to while he had been at his Technology of Design or Sustainability in Tech classes, Kaoru just made vague references to his progress on his fashion line and then quickly changed the subject. He was perfectly capable of showing the specific pieces he had sewn to Hikaru later, if his brother bothered pressing, which Hikaru, being Hikaru, often did, so Kaoru reassured himself that this proved he wasn’t really lying—he was just protecting his brother from worrying over nothing.

There was no harm in taking a few minutes each day to catch up with Kyoya while he got some work done; they were friends, first and foremost. This was the kind of thing friends did all the time, after all. He and Hikaru messaged Haruhi constantly. This was the exact same thing.

… Alright, so Kaoru was a filthy liar.

Honestly, he knew this weird phone call habit was a terrible idea. Sometimes it felt like his heart was actually pulling off loop-de-loops in his chest at the hushed, sleepy tone that Kyoya’s voice tended to adopt at the end of their phone calls. He wasn’t trying to “protect Hikaru”—he wasn’t ever going to tell Hikaru because he knew his brother would try to stop him, and Hikaru could take Kyoya’s sleepy voice out of Kaoru’s cold, dead hands.

“If you’re going to ask me to explain my reading, it’s only polite to listen to what I’m explaining,” Kyoya said, breaking through Kaoru’s twinge of pained, panicked defensiveness at even the thought of Hikaru finding out about these conversations.
“I’m listening,” he assured because, again, he was a filthy liar. “Something copyrights trademarks something.”

“You’re not wrong,” Kyoya admitted, clearly begrudging the fact. “Next time, however, I will make sure to prepare an assessment. Just to clarify any areas of confusion you might still have.”

Kaoru laughed, starting up his sewing machine. “Like you made me run laps in high school?”

“What can I say?” Kyoya said, voice slow and bland. “I enjoy watching you exert yourself.”

Kaoru’s heart thumped against his rib cage like it wanted to break out. It hurt, but in a way that was terribly, achingly sweet.

This, too, was a part of the phone call routine that Kaoru never, ever wanted to give up.

“Lucky you,” Kaoru said, watching his hands feed the fabric through the machine instead of making eye contact with his phone. The feel of the smooth material slipping through his fingers made his heart give another pang, distantly wishing that his fingers were trailing over Kyoya’s skin instead. His next few words slipped out deeper, throatier than was probably wise. “I’ve always liked to be watched.”

“Clearly,” Kyoya said dryly from the other end of a video call that Kaoru had made just to sew in front of an audience, and Kaoru snorted a half-swallowed laugh at that. Kyoya would do this, too—drop from a tone that Kaoru’s lovesick heart could easily read as flirting into the same old friendly banter at the drop of a hat.

It was maddening.

It was invigorating.

It was definitely a disaster waiting to happen.

And then Kaoru’s bedroom door banged open and Disaster walked straight into the room.

Later, through the gentling hand of several years and the loosened inhibitions that came along with more than a few stiff drinks, Kaoru was able to admit that he had, in fact, screeched like a terrified parrot.

“What? What happened?” asked Hikaru, frozen in place in the space left by the now-open door, looking around for the source of that horrible noise, clearly not able to comprehend that it might have come from his own purple-faced brother.

“I’m not doing anything,” Kaoru said at the approximate pitch and volume of a cat whose tail had found itself underneath someone’s boot. He glanced over at his phone, where Kyoya’s eyebrows had climbed nearly halfway up his forehead in surprise at his ear-splitting reaction. Time seemed to crawl to a standstill as the part of his brain that worked purely on animal instinct searched for any kind of escape from this impossible predicament. He looked back at the pair of pants he was in the middle of sewing. He knew that the delicate material he was working with would be mangled beyond repair if he stopped mid-way through. And yet...

It really wasn’t even a choice.

Kaoru gave up the pants as a lost cause and dove for his phone. He wasn’t entirely sure what he was planning to do with it when he got it. If he hung up, Kyoya would have some valid and undoubtedly pointed questions for him later. If he didn’t hang up, Hikaru would have some valid
and undoubtedly pointed questions for him pretty much immediately. If only he could get the phone in his hands, surely some other, much more preferable alternative would present itself.

That faint flicker of hope was snuffed out of existence when Hikaru, having noticed his line of sight, took advantage of his brief moment of indecision over the fate of his pants to dart past him and snatch the phone up first.

“Who are you—” Hikaru started to say. Kaoru could see the exact moment when Hikaru realized who was on the other end of the video call. His face paled, so subtly that Kaoru doubted anyone but he would have noticed. A split-second later, faint pink mottling streaked across his paled cheekbones as he tried to throttle his anger. Ah, his brother really was growing up!

… This was not the time to celebrate.

“—Kyoya,” Hikaru finished, more in acknowledgement than in greeting. He was definitely avoiding meeting Kaoru’s eyes, keeping his gaze fixed down on the phone in his hands.

“Hello, Hikaru.” Kaoru could hear Kyoya’s voice echo from the phone’s small speaker. He sounded as sharp as ever. If he had been starting to drift towards sleep when he and Kaoru had been talking, it wasn’t clear at all from the sound of his voice now. “It’s good to see you. Kaoru and I have just been confirming the plans for our arrival tomorrow.”

Kaoru blinked. They had just been… what now?

“I see,” Hikaru said, his voice dangerously flat and neutral. “Seems like a weird time for that, seeing as your flight is supposed to be leaving in just a few more hours.”

“Indeed.” Kyoya’s voice took on a slightly more pointed note. “I had wondered if Kaoru were using the call as an excuse to delay finishing the last pieces for the showcase, but he assured me that the work is practically complete.”

Kaoru watched Hikaru’s gaze travel from the now-mangled hemline of the pants in the sewing machine to the scraps of fabric on Kaoru’s work desk and then back to the phone.

“That’s what he said, huh?” Hikaru asked, voice still uncharacteristically flat.

“Since you’re here now, I’ll just confirm the plans with you and allow Kaoru to return to work unimpeded,” Kyoya continued.

Ha. At this point, Kaoru was lucky if he’d get any work done ever again.

But that idea seemed faint and unimportant next to the enormity of what was happening on the phone right now.

Had Kyoya honestly thought that the purpose of today’s call was just to confirm the plans for tomorrow? After weeks and weeks of daily phone calls, after Kaoru had been asking him to tell him all about copyright law while he sewed, did he still believe that confirming plans was the reason?

It seemed impossible for Kyoya, brilliant, manipulative, room-reading Kyoya, to be that dense. On the other hand…

Was Kyoya trying to cover for Kaoru?

That idea seemed much, much worse.
Covering for Kaoru would imply that Kyoya knew. That he knew that Hikaru would be upset if he learned that Kaoru was talking to Kyoya. That he had to have some guesses for reasons as to why that might be. Having guesses would imply that Kyoya had somehow figured out the feelings that Kaoru had, the feelings that made Kaoru crave hearing Kyoya’s voice every single day, even if all he could hear in that voice was news about the stock market, of all the stupid boring things.

It would imply that Kyoya had evaluated these factors and decided to come to Kaoru’s aid, to lie, for some reason that could be anything from pity, which would be horrible, to friendship, which would be bittersweet, to… to something that Kaoru wasn’t even going to let himself think about, because the idea was so astronomically optimistic and hopeful that the sheer impossibility of it would surely crush him.

He stood there, frozen half in fear and half in hope, as Hikaru confirmed what Kaoru already knew, that Kyoya had arranged for transportation and entertainment for their friends and Hikaru for tomorrow and they would all meet up with Kaoru for dinner that night before the show began the following day.

Hikaru hung up the phone and turned to face Kaoru.

Golden eyes met identical golden eyes.

There was silence for an agonizingly long moment. Kaoru studied Hikaru’s face, the streaks of red on his cheeks, the glint of fire in his eyes, the pinch of the muscle in the corner of his jaw, and wondered what his brother was seeing on his own face.

Whatever it was made Hikaru soften, ever so slightly. The pinch of skin at the corner of his cheek smoothed out, the glint in his eyes dulled, the red flush of his cheeks faded.

“So,” Hikaru said, breaking the silence between them. “Kyoya was lying to me. That’s not unusual.” He paused, letting the silence stretch between them for a thin, precious moment. “Are you going to lie to me, now?”

Kaoru honestly wasn’t sure himself.

“No,” he said, voice soft and a little uneven, surprising both of them.

But, at the end of the day, he had never lied to Hikaru about something that actually mattered before, and he wasn’t going to start now. No matter how hard it was to tell the truth.

“Fine. Why did you call him?” Hikaru asked, still clutching Kaoru’s phone in his hand.

“I’ve been calling him every day since the middle of January,” Kaoru admitted, voice still rocky and uncertain, each additional word making Kaoru twitch in pathetic fellow-feeling as Hikaru jolted at the stab of betrayal. “Every time you’ve had a class before lunch, I’ve called him.”

Hikaru paled yet again, this time without the accompanying flush of anger. “Why?” he asked next, voice quiet and plaintive.

“I…” A lump welled up in Kaoru’s throat. He didn’t look away from his brother’s eyes. He couldn’t. “I noticed that he falls asleep more easily to the sound of my sewing machine.”

It was like all the blood fled from Hikaru’s face entirely, leaving him sickly and ashen. He crumpled, shoulders hunching as he dropped Kaoru’s phone back down on the nearby table. “Oh, Kaoru,” he said, quiet and sad, and that was all it took to send the two of them falling towards each other, mutually pulling each other into a tight hug that somehow managed to keep both of them on
their feet.

“I know,” Kaoru babbled. “I know it’s stupid, I know—”

“And you couldn’t tell me?” Hikaru interrupted, sounding just as lost and forlorn as Kaoru felt. “You’re... you’re torturing yourself and you thought—”

“I thought you’d make me stop—”

“You need to stop—”

“I can’t,” Kaoru said, muffled, into the fabric of Hikaru’s shirt, having bowed down to better hide his face in his brother’s shoulder. “You don’t get it. If this is all I ever have, then I still want it. I want it especially if it’s all I’ll ever have.

“You don’t think I get that?” Hikaru asked, holding Kaoru even more tightly, practically molding them into a single person. Kaoru wished that he could, for a senseless moment. Maybe as one person, the two of them would finally achieve some balance. Maybe then the two of them wouldn’t be like this anymore, like reckless codependent messes. “Of all people, you don’t think I understand wanting to hold on to every tiny little scrap you’re given from the person you know you won’t ever have?”

“I know it’s going to backfire. I know it’s going to hurt.” Kaoru didn’t know who or what he was protesting anymore. The lines in their argument had blurred for him, just like everything always did between the two of them.

Hikaru, like always, seemed to have a perfectly formed sense of where he stood, at least, and, like always, fought to pull Kaoru more firmly into his orbit. “Then why won’t you let me protect you? Why won’t you let me stop you?”

“You can’t,” Kaoru insisted, because that, at least, was clear to him. “Even if I stopped right now, it would hurt.” Kaoru pressed his forehead more firmly against his brother’s shoulder, half-seeking and half-resisting comfort. Even imagining a situation where he never heard Kyoya’s sleepy voice again, where he didn’t have that daily call to look forward to... “It would hurt so much.”

They stood there in silence for another moment, arms wrapped tightly around each other. Hikaru finally sighed, his breath ruffling Kaoru’s hair.

“My class today was cancelled at the last minute,” he said.

Kaoru snorted an embarrassing noise that was mostly a half-laugh into Hikaru’s shirt. He held on tighter, grounding himself. “Oh? You don’t say.”

“I was thinking I could pick up lunch somewhere to give you more time to keep working. But I wanted to check in first to see what you would want, and I thought it would be a nice surprise. So... surprise.”

Kaoru laughed more honestly, more clearly. “What a nice surprise,” he finally managed to say.

Hikaru finally disentangled himself from Kaoru’s arms, frowning at him from just far enough away that he could be sure Kaoru was seeing his disapproving expression. “It’s not like I would force you to do something you didn’t want to do, Kaoru. Don’t keep secrets just because you’re worried about how I’ll react.” A little bit of the flush of anger returned to Hikaru’s cheeks, though it was clearly muted from what it had been when he’d first seen Kyoya at the other end of that phone call. “We’ve never done that. Not us.”
“When did you get so mature?” Kaoru teased, but Hikaru didn’t flinch, golden gaze burning a hole into him. Kaoru relented, raising his hands apologetically, too tired to continue riding this emotional roller coaster. “You’re right, you’re right. I’m sorry, Hikaru.” He gave his brother another quick, squeezing hug, feeling his brother take his tension into himself. Shared and halved, like all else between them. The relief made Kaoru say, “Not telling you something because I’m afraid you’ll judge me sounds more like something you would do, after all.”

“No,” Hikaru said, thrusting him away again. Kaoru grinned at him, a small, tired grin, despite the break in reassuring physical contact. Hikaru just shook his head adamantly. “Nuh-uh. You are not allowed to make fun of me for at least four months. Not when you’re being the stupid one.”

“For once,” Kaoru pointed out, the beginning of a wider, teasing smile tugging at the corners of his mouth.

“Five months,” Hikaru said, raising an eyebrow. “Go ahead, make it six.”

“I’m happy eating lunch from whichever restaurant you feel is best, my wise and perfect brother,” Kaoru said, attempting an artificially angelic air. He felt hollowed out inside, but that wasn’t necessarily a bad thing. The secret had been weighing on him, keeping him down. He felt light now that it was out, now that Hikaru knew and… well, didn’t approve, sure, but at least understood. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have a pair of pants that I’m probably going to need to make from scratch.”

“Serves you right,” Hikaru said, pinching Kaoru’s earlobe in a way that was just on the near side of painful. Kaoru swatted at the offending hand, but Hikaru was already fleeing the room.

For a brief, damning second, Kaoru wondered if Kyoya would still be awake and available, if he tried to call him back.

Hikaru’s burning glare flashed into his mind’s eye, and he turned to his desk instead, leaving his phone on the table where Hikaru had dropped it.

He could be rational. He could be good.

Plus, he really did need to finish the rest of his line before the show.

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Kaoru barely saw his friends when they actually arrived the next day. He was putting the finishing touches on the last few accessories he needed when the group blew in like a tsunami, crashing through the Hitachiin family condo and abducting Hikaru before they disappeared just as suddenly as they had appeared, evidently content to leave Kaoru to work as they went out and did who-knows-what.

At least, Kaoru had assumed that was the plan.

Roughly an hour after they had all left, though, Kaoru startled at a noise behind him and turned to find that he was no longer alone in the condo. Kyoya had returned and was now letting himself into the twins’ bedroom.

Kaoru blinked and stared. He had had several dreams like this, by now, but the Kyoya in his dreams was typically wearing something a little bit more comfortable than a starched white button-down and gray slacks. After the trip to Hawaii, wet swim trunks had tended to be cast in that particular supporting role more often than not.
“Kyoya…?” Kaoru asked, trying to confirm his vision. He had reached a state where he was seeing a flashing silver needle poking in and out of cloth even when he closed his eyes, so it would honestly not be a shock at this point if he had lost his mind entirely and just entered a bizarrely realistic-feeling sewing-induced daydream.

“Please don’t mind me,” Kyoya said, walking over to sit back on the twins’ bed, settling against the pillows.

Signs were pointing more towards ‘bizarre, sewing-induced dream’ with every passing moment. Kaoru couldn’t look away if his life itself depended on it.

He watched, wide-eyed, as Kyoya pulled a book out of the bag he had dropped to the floor next to the bed and opened it. Absently, almost as if he didn’t notice that he was doing it, Kyoya began reading out loud: “The purpose of the Unfair Competition Prevention Act is to provide for matters such as measures for the prevention of unfair competition and compensation for damages caused by unfair competition, in order to ensure fair competition among business operators and accurate implementation of international agreements related thereto, and thereby contribute to the sound development of the national economy.”

The words washed over Kaoru.

Their significance came one long, confused beat behind, once the surprised rush of endorphins wasn’t quite so strong.

Was this… actually real life?

Had Kyoya left behind the rest of their friends to come back and read his textbooks to Kaoru while he sewed?

Did Kyoya really, honestly think that that was what the phone calls had always been about? Was that why he had always picked up? Because he thought that Kaoru needed him, needed the help of his voice, of his beyond boring reading, so that Kaoru could focus on his sewing?

Kaoru felt his heart swell in his chest, just like it did every time he received another unexpected reminder of just how obscurely, secretly kind Kyoya could be.

Kyoya was probably bad for his health, but Kaoru still found himself smiling as he silently turned back to his sewing machine.

Why not take advantage of this sudden unasked-for kindness? Kaoru let the droning legalese wash over him and refocused on the task at hand.

Several hours passed. Kaoru wasn’t sure how long exactly; the entire world had narrowed down to the fabric in his hands and the ebb and flow of the sounds behind him.

‘Sounds,’ not voice, because, not very long into his work, Kyoya’s voice had trailed away. Kaoru hadn’t even looked up at the time, just smiled more widely as the calm, easy cadence of Kyoya’s breathing had washed over him. The sound was as regular and settling to him as the sound of the sewing machine thrumming underneath his hands.

Of course Kyoya had fallen asleep. What else had he been expecting? Jet lag on top of the sewing machine sound? It was the perfect recipe for an unconscious Kyoya.

When he finally finished his work, Kaoru set it aside and turned around, leaning his chin on the back of his chair.
His reward was waiting for him.

Kyoya was stretched out in the Hitachiins’ bed, a lean dark line. Kaoru took his time to look him over, drinking in the sight one piece at a time. Kyoya’s hair was still long enough to brush the edges of his eyes, perfectly framing his pale, elegant face. He looked relaxed in sleep, one hand still clutching the textbook that had fallen across his chest and the other lying limply to his side. His eyelashes were dark shadows against his cheeks, his glasses a clear, unobstructed window to the face underneath.

He was beautiful. Kaoru wanted to keep him there, in that exact spot in Kaoru’s bed, forever. At least in part, to be fair, because he wanted to let the perpetually-exhausted Kyoya keep sleeping.

On the other hand, the thought of what Hikaru would have to say if he returned early to find Kyoya asleep in their bed led Kaoru to walk over to his side and lean down, gently taking him by the shoulder and shaking him awake.

“Kyoya,” he said, not bothering to hide the soft, coaxing curl of his voice, so similar to how he would speak to Ageha back home. It was fine; Kyoya was still mostly asleep and undoubtedly wouldn’t remember the specific tone of voice Kaoru had used to wake him. Kaoru’s embarrassing baby voice was safe. “It’s time to wake up.”

Kyoya’s shoulder was warm and firm underneath the crinkle of his button-up, the shirt basically one large wrinkle thanks to his impromptu nap. Kaoru let his hand linger, memorizing the feel of the curve of Kyoya’s shoulder underneath his palm. There was no harm in the gesture to anyone but himself, after all, and his heart was so far gone at this point that forward seemed the only direction to go.

“Mrf,” said Kyoya inelegantly. He wrenched his shoulder out of Kaoru’s grip and turned to faceplant into Kaoru’s pillow, bringing both arms up to better bracket his head—and to block his ears.

A hot sensation flared right underneath Kaoru’s gut at the sight of Kyoya’s dark hair splayed out against his pillow. Kaoru had to squeeze his eyes shut before he could enjoy the sight too much. This was so good and so very bad.

“Kyooooouya,” he sing-songed, blindly falling into a sitting position next to his place on the bed. “Wakey-wakey.”

“Eh vih nn yo,” Kyoya muttered nonsensically into the pillow.

Kaoru slipped his eyes open a crack. Kyoya was still in the same place. The same beautiful place. He let out a soundless breath, admiring the sight from head to toe. What? He was only human. An incredibly selfish, spoiled human with very little self-control who was currently being presented with the most delicious, tempting vision he could possibly imagine.

It was kind of a miracle that he hadn’t just swan-dived directly onto Kyoya’s back like some kind of crazed lunatic.

“If you don’t get up, I’m going to tell Tamaki about the existence of outlet malls,” Kaoru threatened brightly, smiling down at the demon king. His hands itched to brush back Kyoya’s hair, to run his fingers through the fine, dark strands, to let his hands walk their way down the firm planes of Kyoya’s back. He curled his fingers together, physically preventing himself from giving in.
Kyoya let out a long, pained groan that might’ve been an attempt at the word ‘no.’

“I’ll do it,” Kaoru teased, nudging Kyoya’s defenseless side with his knuckles. Kyoya twitched away, growling. “You know I will. If you thought Tamaki was bad in a department store, just imagine how he’ll react to an entire outlet mall.”

Kyoya flipped back over all at once, his hair disheveled and his mouth a frustrated line underneath the flash of the light on his glasses. “Devil,” he managed to grouse. He slowly struggled to sit up, tugging at his shirt ineffectively. It remained a wrinkled mess despite his best efforts. He gave up and blinked owlishly at Kaoru through his uneven glasses. He then scowled deeply, slow like syrup thanks to the sleepiness still clinging to him. “Brat.”

“Look at you,” Kaoru cooed, helplessly charmed. “Those were real words and everything.”

Kyoya fell back against the pillow once more, reaching up to rub at the bridge of his nose. There was a set of pink marks where the pressure of the pillow had pushed his glasses into the delicate skin of his face. “How long was I asleep?”

“Long enough for me to finish all the work I still had to do,” Kaoru said. He ran his knuckles along Kyoya’s side again, just because he could. Kyoya glared at him, kitten-like and ineffectual. His eyes were tired and cloudy. Kaoru grinned at him, bright and pleased. His work was done, his friends were here, and Kyoya was in his bed. What had he ever been worried about? Everything that had ever happened in his entire life was worth it, since it had led to this moment. “Thanks for your help, by the way.”

“Mm,” Kyoya said, finally managing to bully his body into fully sitting up. He readjusted his glasses yet again, clearly still in the process of calibrating himself.

A question flickered in the back of Kaoru’s mind. “How’d you manage to get back here alone, anyway? Where did everyone else go?”

“Once I said I was here to assist with your preparations for the show, your butler let me in,” Kyoya said. He tilted his head to the side, sliding his glasses further up his nose. They caught the light this time, obscuring his expression. “As for the others… Hikaru is playing tour guide for Renge and Nanako, since they have never been to New York before. The rest are on an excursion with a friend of yours that they all wanted to meet.”

Kaoru tilted his head to the side as well, frowning. There was way too much going on in that single answer. “Renge and Nanako are here too? Wait, a friend of mine?” Who could that possibly be? Despite Haruhi’s advice and Kaoru’s (admittedly somewhat lackluster) efforts, there hadn’t yet been any classmates that Kaoru had formed any kind of connection with.

Kyoya made an acknowledging sound but didn’t seem inclined to share any additional information, despite Kaoru’s clear confusion. “What’s the time?” he asked instead, answering the questions with a question. “I hope we haven’t missed our dinner reservation.”

Kaoru glanced at the clock on the wall. “It’s just after five,” he said.

“Good,” Kyoya said. “We won’t be late, but we should probably start getting ready to go.” He looked down distastefully at the wrinkled mess that his shirt had turned into during his nap.

Kaoru felt a stubborn feeling well up inside of him. He didn’t want Kyoya to go. He wanted to keep him here, in his bed, for at least one minute more.

He thought about that, about his wish to keep Kyoya nearby. He thought about Kyoya himself, at
how he worked, about how kind he was at many, many steps removed, the better to hide his kindness under a selfish facade.

He blurted out, “Was the entire purpose of our game to give me a solid link to you and the rest of our friends for the next five years, so that I would feel better about going away to college?”

Kyoya’s hands stilled against his shirt and he looked back up at Kaoru, still sitting next to him on the bed. His eyes were clearer than they had been even a few moments ago, the clouds giving way to a thoughtful and measuring look. His voice, when he spoke, was quiet but firm. “An intriguing notion once more, but I unfortunately must disabuse you of it. As I’ve told you before, the game is far more complex and selfish than you seem inclined to believe.” He frowned slightly. “I am also not sure where this uncertainty continues to spring from. You should know by now that no amount of distance is a danger to our friendship.”

Kaoru rolled his eyes. He couldn’t quite put a finger on how he felt about Kyoya’s response; it was reassuring, in a way, to know that Kyoya didn’t think he was such an emotional invalid that his feelings needed Kyoya’s constant monitoring and protection. On the other hand, it would’ve been pretty amazing to think that Kyoya had designed this entire game just because he’d been thinking so intently about Kaoru’s feelings.

“I believe that also counts as a guess,” Kyoya continued, frown slowly ticking up at the corners until it became a small, smirking smile. “Which means a penalty is in order.”

Kaoru pouted at him. “Boo,” he said. “But I’m so busy with the show!”

“Don’t worry; the penalty should not get in the way of your preparations.” Kyoya’s smile was definitely on the far side of smug now. He reached out a hand to pinch the end of Kaoru’s bangs, long enough now to reach Kaoru’s chin, between two fingers. His other fingertips brushed the edge of Kaoru’s jaw, light as habutai silk. Was this… was Kyoya teasing him? “Your penalty is this: you are utterly forbidden to ever tell Tamaki about the existence of outlet malls.” Kyoya paused for a moment, and then his eyes narrowed. “Or to allow Hikaru to tell Tamaki about the existence of outlet malls, either.”

Kaoru couldn’t help his wide, pleased grin, despite himself. “Booooo,” he protested, much louder but also much less genuinely than his last protest, grinning the whole time. “You ruin all of my fun!”

“Hardly,” Kyoya said, which was fair and true. He tweaked Kaoru’s hair and then let go, sliding around Kaoru on the bed until he was sitting next to him on the edge instead of back against the pillows. “How confident are you about tomorrow’s show?”

Kaoru seriously considered the question. He’d been so focused on fulfilling his artistic vision for his line that he hadn’t spared as much thought for the inherently competitive nature of the show. Several of the other freshmen and sophomores in his program were preparing lines for it as well.

“Not as confident as Hikaru is that I have it in the bag,” he finally decided. “Still, fairly confident overall. I think a few of my classmates had interesting ideas for their themes, but a lot of their designs are chaotic in practice. It depends on what the judges are looking for, but… I’m proud of what I’ve made.”

Many of his classmates had creative, appealing ideas, but Kaoru had worked with costuming in the Host Club for long enough to know that it was often the simple and subtle that actually made an outfit sparkle. His line, ‘Individualizing Conformity,’ was all about the subtle details: the delicate, beaded, sparkling embroidery along the edges of an otherwise traditional suit jacket, the lacy, neon-colored interior layer barely peeking out beyond the edge of a staid pencil-skirt, the boring
black belt that had jewel-studded cat-shaped button clasps instead of a buckle.

He was proud of what he had created, no matter what the judges decided at the end of the show. They were all outfits that he himself would actually wear, which was important to him, after all of his time in frustratingly unreasonable costumes with the Host Club.

“Hm. Shall we make the competition more interesting, then?”

Kaoru turned slightly to better face Kyoya, who was still sitting next to him on the bed. Kyoya wasn’t facing him, but even through his glasses it was clear that he was looking at Kaoru out of the corner of his eye. “What do you mean?”

“A wager,” Kyoya replied. “If the judges pronounce you best designer, then I will give you a hint towards the solution of our game. Consider it a reward for focusing on your work here rather than on our game, for a time.”

“A wager requires some penalty for a loss, too,” Kaoru pointed out. Not that he wouldn’t say no to a hint, since his pursuit of an answer in their game seemed to have stalled out, but… “What happens if I lose?”

Kyoya shrugged, knocking their shoulders together so lightly that it wasn’t clear that he had meant for it to happen. “I highly doubt you’re actually going to lose, so there seems to be no point in preparing for such an eventuality. We can worry about that if it becomes necessary.”

“A wager for which there’s no downside and nothing in it for you?” Kaoru raised an eyebrow, skeptical. “I’d be crazy to turn that down, wouldn’t I?”

“Nothing in it for me if I know someone who is an award-winning fashion designer?” Kyoya asked, raising a matching eyebrow back at him.

Kaoru hid a laugh behind his hand. “So I’ll be designing your clothes forever, in this future you’re imagining?”

“Maybe that will be the punishment for losing this competition,” Kyoya said, still smiling his small, smirking smile. “Do you accept?”

“Since I have this weird feeling that I’ll be designing clothes for all of our friends for a long time to come regardless, I still can’t see the downside,” Kaoru said, light and teasing. “I’m in.”

“Then we should get ready for dinner,” Kyoya said, standing. He then paused, glancing back down at Kaoru, still on the bed. “Ah, and your hint is the reminder that I never do anything that does not benefit myself in some way.”

Kaoru blinked at Kyoya’s back. “I… but I haven’t won yet!”

“You will,” Kyoya said as though stating a basic fact, already moving toward the door. “I’ll meet you in the lobby once I’ve had a chance to change.”

And with that, he left the room, leaving Kaoru feeling windswept and elated for reasons he couldn’t properly articulate.

Kyoya never did anything that didn’t benefit himself, huh?

Including play games.
Including read himself to sleep on Kaoru’s bed.

Including making ridiculous wagers based on his faith in Kaoru’s abilities.

Kaoru wasn’t able to stop grinning the entire time he was getting ready for dinner. Then, just as he was standing in their closet trying to decide which of his winter caps best matched his outfit, Hikaru burst into their bedroom.

“Kaoru?” he called, sounding near frantic. “Kaoru, are you still here?”

“In here!” Kaoru called from his place in the closet, turning towards the door, preemptively worried by the tone in his brother’s voice.

Hikaru was in the room with him nearly immediately. “Have you heard yet?” he asked, crossing the room in quick strides, grabbing on to Kaoru’s arms. “Has anyone told you?”

Kaoru’s grin, having faded at Hikaru’s sudden arrival, vanished altogether at that. “Told me what?” he asked his brother. “What is it, Hikaru?”

Hikaru was pale and worried. “Kyoya,” he managed to say, voice tight, before words seemed to fail him.

The bottom dropped out of Kaoru’s stomach and his imagination went into overdrive. Kyoya? What had happened with Kyoya? Dammit, Kaoru had only let him out of his sight for an hour, tops! America was so dangerous, with its guns and its gangs and its weird excessive hand gesturing. Where were Kyoya’s bodyguards when they were needed? Why wasn’t Hikaru speaking? What had happened?

Kaoru was ready to tear himself out of Hikaru’s grip and to run off to find Kyoya himself, to accomplish… something, anything, whatever was needed, at least to prove to himself that Kyoya was okay, that he was alive, when Hikaru finally found his voice.

Then nothing was okay at all.

“Haruhi told me that he’s staying here an extra day,” Hikaru managed to say, eyes locked on Kaoru’s face, hands trembling against Kaoru’s arms. “Because his dad arranged for an *omiai* for him with one of their business associates while he was here.”

A marriage interview.

A marriage interview for Kyoya.

Kaoru’s knees buckled underneath him; he only managed to stay up off of the floor thanks to Hikaru holding him up. Hikaru said something else, but Kaoru didn’t hear it.

Yes, Kaoru had known that his crush on Kyoya was doomed from the start.

He had known, rationally, that not only was Kyoya straight, but, straight or not, he was undoubtedly fated to be used as a pawn to create an alliance for his family’s business.

Kaoru had been telling himself for months and months that all that mattered was that he enjoy himself in the moment, that he live freely, that he embrace what he was given. That it wouldn’t hurt as badly if he kept in mind that the end was coming eventually, if he stayed logical and aware the entire time.
He’d been wrong.

The end was here, and it hurt like hell.

Chapter End Notes

Foreign Language Notes:
1. [omiai: a marriage interview; basically a preliminary meeting to determine the suitability of two individuals for an arranged marriage]
The decision to stay in New York for the summer break after their freshman year was an unexpectedly easy one.

Kaoru, as a result of having been awarded the label of “Best Designer” at his university’s fashion show back in March, had been offered a high-level position with a New York-based designer for the summer months, with the promise of some of his designs being debuted in Paris during Fashion Week. It was an excellent opportunity to prove himself as an artist and designer outside of the Hitachiin brand—to make a name for himself as an individual instead of just as his mother’s son.

And, conveniently, taking the position meant that Kaoru would be at least one entire ocean away from Kyoya for a few months more.

The only complication was Hikaru.

Hikaru, who had received competing offers for internships with several different gaming and design companies back in Japan, but hadn’t been offered anything at all in America.

Hikaru, who ultimately decided that he wasn’t going to pursue any of the positions being offered to him in the interest of staying in New York with Kaoru for the summer instead.

Kaoru had tried to protest this arrangement exactly one time. When he had, Hikaru had looked at him like he was an idiot and said, “It’s like you think I actually want to spend the summer working.”

It was a lie, or at least a purposeful misdirection of the truth via sarcasm. The twins, despite their openly hedonistic natures, had always had a passion for creating new things with their own power. Working for a fashion designer, working at a game company—those jobs hardly counted as ‘work’ to the two of them.

The fact that Hikaru was willing to tell such a bald-faced, obvious lie rather than give the actual reason why he wanted to stay was a giant flashing sign. He clearly thought Kaoru was still so emotionally delicate that he wouldn’t be able to handle even the spoken reminder of why Hikaru didn’t think the next couple of months were a great candidate to be the first time in their lives that the two of them were separated for more than twelve hours at a stretch.

Kaoru was so relieved that the weak subterfuge and rampant overprotection didn’t even bother him.

So, just like that, the decision was made.

The Hitachiin twins would not be returning to Japan for the summer.

The group chat with their friends exploded at the news.

Oh no! Life isn’t as much fun without Hika-chan and Kao-chan, right? Hani-senpai wrote in response to their message, rounding out his declaration with a long line of crying emojis.

True, Mori-senpai agreed, that one word operating like a hammer of guilt with its unadorned
brevity.

SEND US VIDEOS EVERY DAY, Tamaki commanded. EVERY SINGLE DAY, SO THAT IT’S LIKE WE’RE ALL STILL TOGETHER.

Kaoru and Hikaru grinned at each other at that one and immediately sent a video to the group that was just the two of them pulling an akanbe in unison.

Ah, it feels like you’re right here next to me! Tamaki sent back, and was their foolish tono trying to master sarcasm? Or had he actually meant that?

Either way, that was adorable.

They waited, but...

That seemed to be that.

Kyoya and Haruhi didn’t respond to the news at all.

Kyoya made sense. He was probably busy with school and wedding preparations. He might not have even seen the message yet.

Waiting for Haruhi, on the other hand, was like waiting for the other shoe to drop.

When the call finally came in, the two of them were leaning against each other on their couch, pretending to study while actually just staring at the phone with trepidation. Kaoru glanced at his brother, who nodded at him, and then he reached down to accept the call, putting the phone between the two of them on the couch so that they both could hear Haruhi clearly.

“Kaoru, is this about Kyoya?” Haruhi asked as soon as they picked up. ‘Subtlety’ and ‘tact’ were not languages that were able to be studied in a book and thus were languages that Haruhi would probably never actually be able to master. It was cute, when it wasn’t directed at him.

“No,” Kaoru protested immediately. Hikaru took his hand and squeezed it. “I was offered a really great position here, so it would be stupid to turn it down.”

“That would be true,” Haruhi said. “But ‘smart’ or ‘stupid’ never really seems to have much bearing on the decisions you two make.”

The two of them made eye contact with each other and rolled their eyes, despite their nervousness. “Wow, thanks, Haruhi,” they chorused.

“If it’s the best decision for your future, then I support it,” Haruhi said. “But if it’s just a way to avoid Kyoya, then I think it’s silly and unnecessary. He’s not actually going to get married.”

Kaoru frowned and made some staticky-sounding noises. “Oh, no, you’re breaking up, Haruhi. Guess we need to end this call.”

Haruhi sighed, tired and put-upon and clearly fond of them in spite of herself. “Congratulations on your new job, Kaoru,” she said. “Please talk to Kyoya at some point like a rational human being.”

Kaoru had not actually talked to Kyoya about anything at all, rational or otherwise, since Kyoya had congratulated him on his victory in the fashion show back in March.

He hated to disappoint Haruhi, but he was not about to start talking to Kyoya now.
It was for the best in the long-term, as both Hikaru and his own mind kept assuring him. It wasn’t that he was just avoiding Kyoya because it made him feel better to do so in some kind of petty, childish way, like Haruhi clearly thought. Avoiding him sucked. A lot. It felt like he was going through the day-to-day motions of his life with some essential part of himself missing.

The absence of the daily phone calls was one thing; Kaoru had been making the calls often enough that they had become second nature, and more than once he had found his phone in his hand right around noon for no satisfactory reason at all. That was just a physical reminder, though, a habit that would die away with time.

The absence of Kyoya himself was another thing entirely. The space in Kaoru’s brain that had been given over to random business facts was rough and raw like a scab, a scab that would sometimes leak pointless information about foreign investment or unfair competition like some kind of statistical pus. The need to send Kyoya a message whenever anything happened during the day, to see what snarky input his friend might have about some stranger’s conversation or outfit, was a physical pull in his chest.

At some point, Kyoya had become Kaoru’s best non-Hikaru friend. Kaoru had been speaking to him more often and more deeply than anyone else, even Haruhi. Cutting him out felt like he had cut off a part of his own body, and, even months into his self-imposed avoidance, Kaoru had no idea when or if that particular wound would ever heal.

So, yeah. Kaoru would give up avoiding Kyoya in an instant, if he thought it were safe to do so. Obviously, though, it wasn’t.

Even Hikaru clearly thought that Kaoru was being a little bit extreme, going cold turkey as quickly as he had. Sometimes Kaoru would look up to find Hikaru looking back at him, forehead wrinkled and worried, only to immediately smile a bright, artificial smile as though nothing were wrong at all when he noticed Kaoru looking back at him.

This, too, was a new, unfortunate wrinkle in Kaoru’s life.

Hikaru had started lying to him.

The twins had never needed lies before, but now untruths and misdirections wandered in between them as Hikaru bumbled and fumbled through his self-appointed task of keeping Kaoru happy and protected. The lies didn’t feel like the sort of betrayal they might have when they were younger, since they were still being honest about everything that mattered, and they could read each other so easily that none of the attempts at lying actually meant very much, but it was still a dramatic change.

Could it be that this was actually a positive development for them? Creating a bit of separation, a tiny wall to divide them? Kaoru wasn’t sure. The two of them were a mess, as this incident was making clear. Both of them were too needy too quickly, too dependent and clingy. At least they would always have each other, assuming they never found anyone else. But that was part of the problem, too, wasn’t it? As much as they always wanted to help each other, weren’t they just making their dependency worse?

Worrying about the effect of recent events on his relationship with his brother at least distracted Kaoru from the empty gaping ache in his heart. If he couldn’t close this one wound, then maybe it made sense to focus on nurturing the minute changes between him and Hikaru to see where they led, and not on the fact that Kyoya hadn’t even bothered to congratulate him on his job offer.

Of course, no sooner had he made this personal declaration than he arrived home after classes the
day after they had messaged their friends about their summer plans to find their butler greeting him with a gigantic bouquet of orange roses.

“Aw, Jeeves, you shouldn’t have,” Kaoru cooed, covering up his bewilderment by falling back on his default nature: being a little shit.

“As I have told you several times, young master, my name is not Jeeves,” their butler said, expressionless. “And I didn’t. These were delivered a short time ago, along with a card.”

He passed the card to Kaoru. Kaoru opened it to read, Congratulations on the new position. The world of fashion is lucky to have you, and I am proud to know you. As always, I will continue to enjoy watching you, wherever you progress. — KO

Kaoru’s heart immediately fell down an elevator shaft. Or so it felt, at least.

“Ah,” he said out loud, feeling like something ought to be said. The other alternative was to keep staring at this card for the rest of his life, drinking in every swirl of every letter, every possible secondary meaning of every word until he wasted away where he stood. “How… nice.”

He was not going to analyze the note.

As always, I will continue to enjoy watching you—was that just a vague comment about their friendship or a veiled reference to Kyoya “enjoying it when Kaoru exerted himself”? Nope! He was not going to analyze the note.

Wherever you progress—a supportive statement or a passive-aggressive comment on Kaoru’s recent avoidance of him?

He was not...

I am proud to know you—a polite thing to say or something that Kyoya actually meant?

“So, Jeeves,” Kaoru said, desperate to get outside of his own head as soon as he could. “Um. There wasn’t any other note or message or anything?” Perhaps a long, well-annotated message that explained exactly what the hell that first note was all about?

“None, sir,” said the butler. “Just one card and sixty-six orange roses.”

Kaoru’s spine straightened all at once, so quickly that he wouldn’t have been surprised if he had pulled a muscle.

Sixty-six orange roses.

Sixty-six?

It had to be a coincidence. It had to be some kind of weird twist of fate.

“Sixty-six,” Kaoru said out loud. “That’s, uh. Not how roses are typically delivered, huh?”

“I’m sure I couldn’t say,” said the butler, face a total blank. “Do you need anything else, young master?”

“Maybe a therapist,” Kaoru said under his breath. The butler, a well-trained Hitachiin employee, did not express his own sentiments about that particular statement. “No,” Kaoru said, a little bit louder. “Thanks, Jeeves.”
Kaoru dragged the card and the bouquet into the living room, placed them both on the coffee table, and fought not to panic.

Orange. Orange was safe to dwell on. The roses were orange because that had been Kaoru’s color, back in the Host Club. Orange was Kaoru and Kaoru was orange. Orange roses would have been the only flower to make sense, in this circumstance, from one friend to another. It was just a friendly reference to the context of their very friend-like friendship. That was all.

Except even orange wasn’t safe, not really.

At best (at worst?), Kyoya had picked a color and flower that was highly symbolic and emblematic of Kaoru, showing a level of thought and attention that, on a purely logical level, was typical of him.

At worst (at best?), Kyoya had picked the flowers knowing that, in the language of flowers, the meaning of “orange roses” ranged from “happiness” and “pride,” which would fit the tenor of the note, to…

To “passion.”

To, specifically, “romance developing from friendship.”

Just like the orange rose itself was a hybrid of the yellow rose of friendship and the red rose of love.

The symbolism seemed brazenly obvious and impossible to ignore.

Before the thought had a chance to wind its way too insidiously into his mind, Kaoru slapped himself in the face. Lightly, because he wasn’t an idiot and giving himself a bruise wasn’t worth the hassle of putting on concealer, but hard enough to distract himself from thoughts that were too dangerous to be seriously considered.

He was being stupid. He was being so, so stupid. Clearly, Kyoya was just being thoughtful. He had wanted to make the gift unique to Kaoru, so he had used Kaoru’s own rose color. It was sweet, but it wasn’t a declaration of love.

Sixty-six orange roses.

There was only one possible reason Kaoru could think of for that one.

The last day he and Kyoya had spoken, the day of his fashion show, had been exactly sixty-six days earlier.

Kaoru had been counting, despite himself.

Had he not been the only one?

Had Kyoya sent him a rose for every day since they had last spoken?

Had Kyoya been counting the days until Kaoru would talk to him again?

That was ridiculous. There was no way. Maybe Kyoya knew something about the number of roses that Kaoru didn’t.

Kaoru pulled up an internet browser on his phone and typed in his query.
That turned out to be a mistake.

The only result that Kaoru could find for the symbolic meaning of exactly five-and-a-half dozen roses was ‘my love for you will never change.’

Kaoru’s phone fell out of his suddenly limp hands.

Kaoru wasn’t crazy. He wasn’t reading in where there wasn’t anything. He couldn’t be. Could he?

The only options on the table, as far as he could tell, were:

A. Not only had Kyoya noticed the silent treatment, but he had missed Kaoru so much that he had gone so far as to count the days since they had last spoken one-on-one because that’s how much speaking to Kaoru meant to him.

B. Kyoya might not have been aware of exactly how many days it had been since they had last spoken one-on-one, but he had instead intentionally sent Kaoru a bouquet that meant ‘my love for you will never change,’ meaning… well, that he wanted to say that his love for Kaoru would never change.

C. Kyoya both had noticed exactly how long it had been since they last spoke and had also been aware of the significance of that number of roses in a bouquet.

D. Kyoya had chosen a number at random.

Kyoya never did anything in his entire life without having spreadsheets to justify it. Option D was definitely out.

Which only left options for which there were undeniable implications.

Implications of how strongly Kyoya cared about Kaoru.

Implications that the care Kyoya took when it came to Kaoru came from somewhere deeper than just pure friendship.

Implications of this from Kyoya, who, according to his most recent frustratingly brief update to the group chat, was supposed to be getting married to the only daughter of the owners of a New York-based hotel chain in less than a year, though he had said that none of them should bother saving the date, probably because it was going to be a small, family-only affair.

This was awful.

Kaoru had made it through the past few months by assuring himself over and over again that there was no point in feeling the loss of something he had never actually had. He had managed to assure himself that nothing was meant by those moments that seemed to signify more than simple friendship, that his overactive imagination and desperate heart had merely been conspiring against him.

The bouquet in front of him took up the majority of their over-sized coffee table. It was hard to think that he was imagining that.

Kaoru wanted to call Hikaru. He needed Hikaru to talk him down, to remind him that it wasn’t actually worth putting his heart on the line for this, that there had to be some other reasonable explanation that he wasn’t seeing yet because he was weak and blind when it came to Kyoya. Calling Hikaru would be the sensible option. Hikaru was just working in one of the campus computer labs; he would definitely pick up if Kaoru called.

Kaoru’s fingers must have missed the memo. Instead of following the sensible path, he pulled his
phone back up and dialled Kyoya’s number quickly, fingers nearly slipping across his phone keypad in his hurry to pull up the recently neglected contact.

His heart was still falling down that elevator shaft, it turned out, and it was determined to bring the rest of him with it.

It was 3 AM in Tokyo. Kyoya picked up on the second ring.

“Hello,” he greeted, voice clear and precise despite the late hour.

Kaoru scowled at that, even as the sound of that voice, that voice, finally, after so long, caused his heart to flutter pathetically in his chest. “Don’t you have training to get to in a few hours?” he asked, somehow keeping his own voice just as even as Kyoya’s.

“I have an important reading to finish for class first,” Kyoya said as though they were picking up the threads of a conversation from five minutes ago instead of speaking to each other for the first time in over two months.

“Have Tamaki read to you while you train,” Kaoru said.

“Tamaki can’t read all of the kanji in my textbook,” Kyoya said in a way that would have sounded dismissive and judgmental coming from anyone else but was just a statement of fact coming from Kyoya. “I doubt you can either, before you offer to read it to me long-distance.”

“I wasn’t going to offer,” Kaoru lied. “You don’t know what kanji I know or don’t know.”

Kyoya just hummed at that, the lack of specific words somehow even more cutting than an actual response would have been. “Congratulations on your job offer,” he said, changing the subject. “Did you receive my gift?”

Like he didn’t know that was why Kaoru was calling.

He did know why Kaoru was calling.

Didn’t he?

For someone who always seemed to know everything, figuring out how well Kyoya was able to read his mind was actually pretty frustrating.

“I did,” he said out loud. “But I don’t understand it.”

That seemed to sum it all up nicely

“Did they not attach my note?” Kyoya asked, with a tone in his voice that implied a florist somewhere was going to be fired very soon.

“No, that’s not it,” Kaoru said immediately. “I got the note.” Whatever poor sap he had just saved definitely owed him one.

“Oh,” Kyoya said. “Is the gift not self-evident?” His smile was clear in his voice. “You’re blooming, Kaoru. Sixty-six days after you won the first award of your nascent career, and you’ve already been offered the next step on your path. If it were not clear enough already, I am exceptionally proud of you. I know how hard you’ve worked for this.”

Ah.
There it was. The rational explanation that Kaoru’s too-attached-too-soon heart had overlooked.

The elevator free-fall of his heart came to a sudden, jarring stop.

Kyoya had counted the days since Kaoru had gotten the “Best Designer” recognition, which just so happened to have been the last time the two of them had spoken. Sixty-six days. Sixty-six orange roses, to represent Kaoru.

Kaoru in bloom.

It was one of the sweetest, most thoughtful gifts Kaoru had gotten from anyone, even without any romantic connotations.

It was, therefore, entirely typical of Kyoya.

How was Kaoru ever supposed to turn his back on his friendship with this guy? How the hell was Kaoru ever supposed to get over this guy?!

He clutched his phone so tightly that the edges of it pressed into his hand, cutting off his circulation. It hurt, which was good—the momentary pinch of pain was a distraction from the utter agony in his heart.

“How’s the wedding planning going?” he asked, desperate now for any sharp edge that would help him cut the pieces of Kyoya out of his heart once more and spare him from the renewal of this particular ache, which, if he was being honest with himself, he’d have to admit had never actually left at all.

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“Hm? Oh. One moment.” Kyoya sounded slightly distracted and Kaoru felt a flash of fear that What’s-her-name-san, the heir to the hotel group, was there with him now. They were going to get married, after all. It would’ve made sense for them to spend some late-night time together, to prepare for what was to come. “Noir, let go of that.”

That… didn’t sound like What’s-her-name-san’s name, the best that Kaoru could remember.

“Noir?” he asked.

“That… also didn’t sound like the way someone would talk about their fiancée.

Kaoru realized that Kyoya was now trying to video call him. Kaoru accepted, confused.

He was greeted by Kyoya’s typical serious, bespectacled gaze. He had gotten his hair cut since Kaoru had seen him last. He probably kept it slicked back professionally during the day, but it was currently a loose and messy halo around his head, casting a soft shadow in what Kaoru could recognize as the light of Kyoya’s bedside lamp. That same light made Kyoya’s skin glow warmly, despite its naturally pale tint, offering a contrast from the dark blue button-up pajama top he was wearing.

Two months of no contact had done absolutely nothing to lessen the strength of Kaoru’s feelings. Just seeing the tiny, jittery image of Kyoya on his phone was sending a rush of warmth surging through his veins. How in the world had he ever thought he could possibly do without this—without him?
“Hey,” Kaoru finally said, voice scraping painfully out of his throat. “Long time no see.”

“Hello,” Kyoya said in return. “This is Noir.”

He turned the camera to focus on a sleek black kitten who was apparently trying to murder the blanket at the end of Kyoya’s bed. As though aware she was on display, the cat wriggled and pounced and pawed and flipped and fell off the end of the bed in a mad, desperate scramble, dragging the blanket down off of the bed on top of herself. A piteous, pathetic nya~ echoed up faintly from where the cat had fallen.

Kaoru blinked.

“You have a cat,” he finally said.

“She is surprisingly unintelligent,” Kyoya said matter-of-factly, as though the cat’s intelligence were the surprising part and not the fact that Kyoya had voluntarily taken in a pet at all. “Of course, I have no standard by which to judge feline intelligence, and her appreciation of me is rather heartening. Furthermore, she is already quite capable of taking care of herself, despite her inability to understand how basic physics works.” Kyoya turned the phone back to himself once more. “I’m sorry for the tangent; I was trying to warn Noir before her antics got the better of her, but you have now seen how fruitless that endeavor is. You asked about the wedding. Thankfully, as of this evening, that whole business is over.”

The emotional roller coaster of a crush on Kyoya was too much for Kaoru’s poor heart. One more sharp turn, and he might just keel over.

“It’s what?” he asked. Did that mean the wedding was cancelled? His heart soared in elation at the thought. On the other hand, did that mean the wedding had been rushed and completed shotgun-style? Even the thought of it brought heartbreak, his emotional high crashing back to the ground. Back and forth, up and down and all around—his emotions were a mess.

“While we had to act otherwise, the marriage was never actually going to happen, of course,” Kyoya said, like he had assumed that Kaoru already knew that. Haruhi had been right, it turned out; they probably should have spoken about this earlier. “The Kanemoto family’s stocks took a hit due to a bad land deal for the new branch they wished to construct in Atlantic City back in February. The idea of the company’s presumptive heir being engaged to an Ootori with the assumption of an alliance on the way was enough to salvage their position for the time it took to re-sell the land and obtain a more promising position. The news of the new purchase should break later today, in your part of the world, and offer more than enough of a public relations boost for the engagement to be officially broken off with little to no impact or fanfare.” Kyoya made a quiet, dismissive noise. “Publicly traded companies are so easy to manipulate. Kanemoto owes Ootori a favor now, which is fortuitous, considering the real estate expansions my father has been eyeing. Going along with the charade was troublesome, but it seems as though the effort has been worth it in the end.”

This was both amazing and terrible news.

Kaoru was glad beyond words that Kyoya wasn’t about to get married.

But that was no consolation to Kaoru’s heart, which had just spent two months trying to get over Kyoya just to have every supposed obstacle torn down at once, showing Kyoya to be just as frustratingly, teasingly available-yet-not as he ever had been.

Kaoru was never, ever going to get over him.
“This one didn’t work out,” Kaoru said, voice low and sounding pained even to his own ears. Hopefully Kyoya would assume his tone was due to electronic interference on the part of the call itself. “But the next one might.” And Kaoru would still be here, hurting about it like an idiot. Like Kyoya’s dumb cat, rolling head-first off the side of the bed, totally unable to comprehend the basic physics of their relationship.

“I wonder,” Kyoya said, as even and neutral as always. “It depends on what would be in it for the Ootori family, I suppose.”

It always did. And Kaoru had nothing to offer, on that front. Sure, if he had been born a woman, the match would have been very nearly perfect: two families of equally impressive status and heritage with at least some sort of common interest. But, as a man, he could never offer the most important thing of all: a method to continue the family line. All else was moot, in the face of that singular difficulty.

“Don’t you want to choose who you marry?” Kaoru demanded, letting some of his frustration out on the nearest, easiest target. “I know that the whole arranged thing worked out for Yuuichi and Fuyumi, but you can never know if it’ll work for you until it’s too late if it doesn’t.”

“I don’t think I can answer that question,” Kyoya said, his voice sounding almost… playful? What the hell? Kaoru’s frustration was momentarily derailed by the sheer weirdness of that tone in this context. “All I will say is that the thought of being able to choose who I will spend the rest of my life with is not without its merit.”

What did that mean?

“It was good to hear from you,” Kyoya continued to say. “Once more, congratulations on your job offer. I will always be here with law texts if you need help with your sewing, once you start the new position.”

Wait.

Had Kyoya just assumed that Kaoru had stopped calling him simply because he didn’t have any more sewing to do?

That the phone calls had only ever been about helping Kaoru with his sewing in the first place?

“Good luck with your training,” Kaoru said out loud, not able to make sense of any of his thoughts anymore. “You should go to bed soon, okay?”

“We’ll see,” Kyoya said, which was as good as a ‘no.’ “Goodbye, Kaoru.”

“Bye, Kyoya.”

Kyoya hung up, but Kaoru didn’t put down his phone. Instead, he opened up an individual chat thread that last had an excited comment in it about a bunny-shaped cake Kaoru had seen in the window of a New York bakery last weekend.

You always have some weird telepathy about the rest of our love lives, don’t you, Hani-senpai? he typed out quickly. Has Kyoya ever been in love before, as far as you can tell?

“The thought of being able to choose who I will spend the rest of my life with is not without its merit,” huh?

That had to mean that Kyoya had considered it before, didn’t it? A love match instead of an
arranged one?

Which implied that someone existed who had given Kyoya a reason to consider a love match in the first place.

When Hikaru finally came home, the sun was setting. Kaoru was still sitting on their couch, staring at the orange roses. Hani-senpai hadn’t responded to him yet, which was reasonable, Kaoru supposed; it was still so early in Tokyo that even the notorious early riser was probably still asleep. That knowledge had not stopped Kaoru from checking his phone for a response every two minutes.

“Whoa,” Hikaru said when he came into the room, immediately making a beeline for the flowers. “That’s a crazy bouquet! Pretty boring, though. Terrible presentation. Was it dad? It looks like something dad would do.”

“No,” Kaoru said. His voice was creaky with disuse. “It was Kyoya.”

Hikaru froze, one hand extended to touch the edge of a vibrant orange petal. He looked at Kaoru, searching his face, and then, apparently upset with what he had seen, turned a new, angrier look on the bouquet.

“The engagement is off,” Kaoru said. He shook his head when Hikaru looked back at him. “That’s not why he sent the flowers; they’re just in congratulations for my job offer.” He waved his hand dismissively, brushing the idea away for more important news. “But the engagement is off, too.”

“So that’s what Haruhi was talking about,” Hikaru said, sitting down next to Kaoru on the couch. He took hold of Kaoru’s hand, establishing a physical link between them like that would funnel some of Kaoru’s distress away. “If this match wasn’t the one, there’ll be another one for him, Kaoru. Don’t give up. I think you’ve been making progress.”

Kaoru laughed, turning to face his brother, pulling his legs up to sit cross-legged. “Do you? I thought so too. But then I called him on the phone this afternoon, and it’s no different at all. It feels exactly the same, like no time had ever passed at all.” He took a deep breath and finally admitted: “I don’t think it’s just a crush. I think I’m in love with him.”

Hikaru, somber-faced, turned to mirror his sitting position and squeezed the hand that he still held. “I kind of thought that was the case,” he said, voice low. “What do we do? Ignoring him didn’t help.”

“So I won’t ignore him,” Kaoru said, the rightness of the decision washing away some of his humming uncertainty. “What were we thinking? Ignoring things isn’t like a Hitachiin.”

“Those who live their lives freely are the winners,” Hikaru quoted at him, one corner of his mouth curling up slightly. “New question, then. What do you want to do, Kaoru?”

When Kaoru thought about it like that, actually thought about what his ideal outcome would be, about what he wanted, the answer was clear.

“I want to seduce him,” he said, firm with resolution, feeling his own mouth curve in what must have been a parallel expression to Hikaru’s. “I want to win him over. I want to take every conceivable issue he might have with being with me and destroy it until he feels like being with me is the only thing he’s ever wanted.”

Hikaru nodded, thoughtful. They sat in silence for a moment, both thinking their own thoughts. The longer Hikaru sat, the more his grin stretched across his face. Kaoru could feel his own smile slowly but surely growing to match.
“I think that’s a plan I can get behind,” Hikaru finally said, his grin having reached Cheshire-like proportions. “You’re right; running away doesn’t suit us. This is much better.”

Kaoru’s phone finally buzzed in his other hand and he immediately pulled it up to check it, Hikaru leaning their foreheads together so that they could both read the incoming message at once.

 Weird telepathy? So mean, Kao-chan! But Kyo-chan’s love life, huh... Hani-senpai had responded. That’s a tricky question! Once upon a time, I thought Kyo-chan was another one of Haru-chan’s love-victims. But Kyo-chan told me that Haru-chan isn’t his type.

“How could Haruhi not be someone’s type?” Hikaru asked, grin immediately gone as he scowled, giving in to his outrage on Haruhi’s absent, unoffended behalf. “She’s perfect.”

“Down, boy,” Kaoru said, even though his heart was echoing the same question, a little moreoptimistically. From his perspective, the only way Haruhi could not be someone’s type was if that someone wasn’t into women at all, even a little tiny bit. Everyone loved Haruhi because, as Hikaru had put it, Haruhi was perfect! In a very flawed way. In a very flawed, very adorable way.

Hani-senpai still had more to say, evidently. A couple more message bubbles popped up in quick succession.

Back then, Kyo-chan also said that he’d never pick someone who wouldn’t benefit his family.

Still, Kyo-chan always goes after exactly what he wants, right? He’s almost a Hitachiin like that!

I bet, if Kyo-chan found someone who was his type, Kyo-chan would find a way to make that person a benefit to his family, no matter what, and then they’d live happily ever after!

There was a short pause before Hani-senpai sent one last message.

Whenever you want to talk, Kao-chan, I’m here!

Kaoru scrunched up his nose. That was probably a sign that Hani-senpai’s love telepathy had struck again, which meant everyone except for Tamaki and Kyoya himself knew about his crush, since Hani-senpai’s telepathy for their love troubles was only matched by Mori-senpai’s telepathy for Hani-senpai.

Still, he had known he was taking a risk, sending the message to Hani-senpai in the first place, and he didn’t really regret it.

“Kyoya’s type,” Hikaru mused, unaware of Kaoru’s own thinking. “He was always so cold when hosting, so we don’t really have any hints about that, do we?”

Kaoru actually laughed at that. This, at least, he felt a little bit certain about. “Oh, I have some ideas. You’re not going to like any of them.”

Hikaru groaned and flopped back against the couch arm. “You’re not going to need me to pull off some twin-type seducing, are you? I’m not sure I could do that in this situation, even for you.”

Kaoru snickered at the mental image. “Absolutely not. Even if he was into that sort of thing, I don’t think Kyoya would ever consider a fantasy starring you that didn’t also star a gag.”

“You have terrible taste in men,” Hikaru announced, poking Kaoru in the knee with one of his toes in revenge. “You’re lucky that I usually mostly like this one, and that I like the idea of scheming against him for once even more. What is your plan, then? We didn’t accidentally ruin everything
by planning to stay here for the summer, did we?"

“No,” Kaoru said immediately. “It’s perfect, actually. It’ll give me a lot of time to prepare my
attack.”

It turned out that, in the process of playing his and Kyoya’s game, he’d already learned a
substantial amount of information that would be useful in an attempted seduction of Ootori Kyoya:
the things that flustered him, the things that he admired, the things that he valued.

Kaoru could almost write a book, by now.

It would undoubtedly help if he could progress in their game as well, of course. After all, Kyoya
enjoyed a close challenge just as much as Kaoru did. Unfortunately, Kaoru was still stuck on his
last realization: that Kyoya planned to create a *keiretsu* between their families’ companies. He
hadn’t found anything after that point that he considered a hint about Kyoya’s motivation, despite
the supposed “hints” that had been handed to him since then.

“Something that appears complicated can actually turn out to be simple.”

“I never do anything that does not benefit myself in some way.”

“The thought of being able to choose who I will spend the rest of my life with is not without its
merit.”

And, of course, Haruhi’s contribution: “You’ve put him on such a high pedestal that you forget he
has feelings at all.”

An idea emerged from the thoughts churning together in Kaoru’s brain, because all of those pieces
did fit together in a way, didn’t they?

Weren’t they all about a drive in Kyoya to make his own choices, one day? To be free to follow his
feelings?

He had never quite figured out how ‘inspired by the Hitachiin family precept’ fit in with the
*keiretsu* plan, but Kaoru’s family precept definitely fit in with this new idea.

Was a *keiretsu* just intended to be step one of Kyoya’s dramatic bid for freedom?

Did Kyoya think that the new conglomerate would somehow unshackle him from his father’s
expectations?

Kaoru tapped his cheek, thoughtfully.

It was still too soon to say. The answer felt unfinished, incomplete.

That was fine. Regardless of Kyoya’s end goal, Kaoru had the first move in his own game to make.

He pulled up a different chat thread and started typing. *Hey, I have an idea for a game. Any
interest in playing?*

Hikaru read over his shoulder and groaned. “You’re right, I already don’t like it,” he said.

“You don’t need to,” Kaoru replied. “It’s not for you.”

Kyoya was awake, of course. It was unlikely he had ever bothered to sleep at all, seeing how late
he had been awake. Kaoru did not envy him his time training with Hani-senpai today.
It depends, Kyoya responded.

Kaoru grinned. *I have a game I’m planning to win in about two and a half years. If you can figure out what the goal of the game is before I win it, then you’ll have beaten me.*

“I don’t get you two at all,” Hikaru whined. “How is this fun? Is this fun?”

Kaoru ignored him.

*Sounds familiar*, Kyoya said. *What’s the prize?*

*Bragging rights, of course*, Kaoru typed. *And one favor of the victor’s choice.*

*Within reason*, Kyoya amended.

*Reason is highly overrated*, Kaoru replied. *Why qualify it? Scared you’re going to lose, Kyo~o~ya?*

“You’re playing with fire, Kaoru,” Hikaru warned.

“You don’t have to tell me how hot he is, trust me,” Kaoru responded with a cheesy grin, ignoring the pained groan that earned him, eyes still focused on his phone.

Finally, the response popped up.

*Fine. You’re on.*

Ha. Sleepy Kyoya was so bad at texting etiquette.

Kaoru knew his eyes must be gleaming evilly. Whatever. He felt better than he had in ages.

If their friends got together over Thanksgiving break again, that would give Kaoru over six full months to prepare.

Kyoya wasn’t going to know what hit him.

Chapter End Notes

Foreign Language Notes:
1. *[akanbe]: a taunting expression where a person pulls down on their eyelid with one finger and sticks out their tongue at the same time]*
2. *[nya]: the Japanese onomatopoeia for “meow”]*
“So what’s your normal plan for when you want to seduce a man?” Kaoru asked, lounging back in the chair he had chosen and loosening the cashmere scarf around his neck with an artfully careless tug. “I mean, besides insulting the man’s twin brother who also happens to be the person he is closest to in his life and then implying you’re only in it for a quick lay anyway.”

It was the first class period of the new semester, and Kaoru had decided he was done running away.

Even from Lucas, who continued to stare straight ahead in the seat next to him, unresponsive in the face of Kaoru’s at least forty-three percent friendly question.

If he had expected Kaoru to be bothered by this, he was going to be very disappointed. If he was expecting Kaoru to give up, then that just proved how little he knew him. “There has to be a more reliable system than totally alienating your intended target, right? Otherwise no gay man would ever get laid. Is that it? Do gay men never get laid? Or is that just specific to you?”

“I’m not talking to you,” Lucas hissed under his breath.

Aha. “You just did,” Kaoru pointed out.

Lucas went as white as a sheet and scrunched down in his chair. His carefully coiffed hairstyle drooped into listless blond fronds.

“Don’t tell them,” he pleaded, voice nearly a whimper. It was unexpectedly pathetic. Kaoru blinked at him. “I didn’t mean to. Please don’t tell them.”

Tell ‘them’?

“Oh,” Kaoru breathed.

He hadn’t thought about it in a while, but...

‘The rest planned an excursion with a friend of yours that they all wanted to meet.’

That was what Kyoya had said, back when he had visited with Kaoru the night before the fashion show. In the heat of everything that had happened that night, the sudden marriage announcement and the subsequent temporary breaking of Kaoru’s heart, he had entirely forgotten about that weird and unexplained line.

He leaned forward, suddenly far more interested in what Lucas had to say than he had been just a moment ago, when he had mostly been interested in ruining Lucas’ day.

“Did they tell you not to talk to me anymore?” he asked, positively lighting up with the knowledge. “How did they even know about all of that? Was it Hikaru? It was Hikaru, wasn’t it?”

“I don’t know,” Lucas said, and he was definitely whimpering now, having slipped so far down in his seat that the quivering ends of his hair were the only part of him visible from Kaoru’s position in the chair next to him. “I was just minding my own business and…. No! No! I’m not supposed to
“talk to you! Please, tell them I didn’t say anything. Tell them we never spoke!”

“This is fantastic,” Kaoru informed the top of his classmate’s head, grin splitting his face in two. “I wonder if Hikaru told them what really happened or just that you were a huge asshole. I really want to know what they said! Are you sure you don’t want to tell me?”

Lucas was possibly catatonic with fear at this point. He didn’t respond to Kaoru’s question. Kaoru didn’t mind too much, settling back in his own chair. His grin was still so large that it was likely visible from space. As much as he might complain about Hikaru’s overprotectiveness on occasion, it was still nice to be coddled, especially by this particular group of people.

Mori-senpai and Hani-senpai combined had probably made Lucas piss himself.

Kaoru was really sorry he had missed it.

Kaoru pulled out his notebook, ostensibly preparing for the start of class, but his mind was still back on what Lucas had just revealed.

Had Hikaru told their friends the real reason why he had wanted them to convince Lucas to stay away from Kaoru?

Kaoru found that the idea didn’t bother him anymore. After all, Haruhi already knew about his interest in men and Hani-senpai and Mori-senpai probably had some pretty accurate guesses after he had consulted with Hani-senpai about Kyoya’s love life. The only people who might have been surprised to hear that Kaoru had gone on a date with a man would have been Tamaki and Kyoya, and Kaoru wasn’t too worried about them knowing, not like he had been back when he had been less certain of it himself.

Kyoya especially would have to figure out Kaoru’s orientation pretty soon, if Kaoru’s plan was going to make any real progress. If he were already aware of how Kaoru felt towards men, then that was one less obstacle in Kaoru’s way.

Speaking of Kyoya…

Kaoru slid his phone out of his pocket and sent him a quick message.

*So what exactly did everyone do to Lucas?*

*Nothing,* Kyoya answered without any delay. Kaoru glanced at the clock at the top of his screen. Kyoya had promised him that he’d try to go to sleep earlier tonight.

Okay, so maybe it hadn’t been a promise. Maybe Kaoru had just scolded and teased and cajoled Kyoya until he had admitted that getting more sleep the night before an important assessment might actually have an impact, however minor, on his score. Same thing, practically speaking.

It was still before midnight back home, though, so Kaoru would give him a pass for now.

Kyoya had sent a second message while Kaoru had been busy double-checking on his sleep schedule. *Why, did he say something to you?*

It was a question that was clearly worded to appear innocent while promising the full force of the Ootori private security force underneath. InterPol would never catch Ootori Kyoya putting something down in writing that he couldn’t just imply with vaguely malicious intent instead.

Kaoru glanced over at Lucas, who was still practically cowering underneath the table.
No, Kaoru finally said, deciding to be the bigger man despite all the very entertaining possibilities promised by the alternative. But you just confirmed it for me.

Did I? Kyoya wrote, the blankness of text practically indistinguishable from the tone he probably would have adopted for this conversation in person. Call me after you get out of class.

One eyebrow climbed up Kaoru’s forehead at that. Ever since he had decided to make it his plan to seduce Kyoya, he had returned to the routine of calling him every single day around lunchtime. After all, Kyoya was secretly a soft-touch inside, as Kaoru had learned through long experience. Any step towards seducing him physically was going to have to start by seducing him emotionally.

Kaoru had told Hikaru that once, in exactly those words. Hikaru had made a face and told Kaoru that he was perfectly happy never hearing any more details about this plan ever again, thanks.

All of that was just to say that Kyoya had never needed to make the phone calls a request—or an order, as the case now appeared to be. Aye-aye, sir! Kaoru typed back simply.

After all, he knew Kyoya wouldn’t answer his questions even if he sent them. Kaoru would just have to spend all of class dwelling on them instead.

Why was Kyoya suddenly picking now to become uncertain about Kaoru’s daily phone calls?

Was Kyoya worried that, now that classes were back in session, Kaoru would be so busy between school and his continuing design work that he would let the calls slip through the cracks? That would be adorable… and fairly out of character. After all, Kyoya had let Kaoru give up on their phone call routine for sixty-six whole days back in the spring without appearing to care.

Was it just that Kyoya had something important to tell him? If so, what could it be?

Kaoru barely paid attention during class, focused instead on brainstorming reasons that Kyoya would want to make sure they spoke on the phone that day. He knew he wouldn't miss very much in his inattention; from last year’s experience, the first day of class was mostly reserved for going over the course syllabus anyway. He'd just double-check later for anything important he might have missed.

Plus, the allure of daydreaming about an imaginary Kyoya who was so desperate to confess his undying love and adoration to Kaoru that he’d actually put such a desire into words was impossible to ignore.

The second they were dismissed, Lucas slid underneath the table and crawled out the other side to flee the room without needing to walk past Kaoru. Kaoru watched him go, amused, and then pulled out his phone.

“Kaoru here, reporting for duty,” he said in Japanese as soon as Kyoya picked up, storing his notebook back in his bag and winking at the pair of girls chatting further down the table, both of whom appeared extremely unimpressed by the Hitachiin boy who thought he was so much better than everyone that he could make a phone call while still in the same room as other people. Still, he could take a hint. He shouldered his bag and made for the door, keeping his phone pinned between his shoulder and his cheek. “Your wish for a phone call is my command, Kyoya-sama.”

“Be careful,” Kyoya said from the other end of the line. As always, the sound of his low, measured voice in Kaoru’s ear made a pleasant shiver work its way down his spine. Kaoru practically wriggled with it, grinning as he made his way out of the university complex. “If you call me that too often, I might stop answering to anything else.”
“And what a shame that would be, Kyoya-sama,” Kaoru practically purred. His grin was unstoppable, bright and happy as he always was whenever he was able to get Kyoya half-flirting with him like this. “You’ll never be able to talk to anyone but your bodyguards ever again.”

“Oh, there are a few other people I’m sure that I could convince to speak to me that way,” Kyoya said, and that comment went straight to Kaoru’s heart (and also a few less pure places) like an entire quiver full of lovey-dovey (and extremely sexy) arrows had been shot at him at once.

It turned out that Kaoru was a huge hypocrite, to his complete lack of surprise, and he totally understood where Tamaki was coming from with this whole ‘in love’ thing. When Kyoya said nice things to him, it was a struggle not to wag an imaginary tail. He would definitely bring an entire marching band to their first date, if he didn’t think that Kyoya would murder him (or at least hire other people to murder him) for it.

If he could get them to the point of a first date, of course. But that was fine; he had a plan, after all.

Well, he had a goal, at least. In true Hitachiin style, he was just going to figure out the rest as he went.

“So what’s the reason for the special request?” Kaoru asked. It was a nice enough day outside; he would just walk home. Better that than take the subway and let half of New York eavesdrop judgmentally on his private conversation. “You know I’d probably call anyway, right?”

“In case there were interfering factors, I wanted to make sure that we still spoke,” Kyoya said. “The matter is slightly time-sensitive. An American film that I helped to fund is going to premiere this winter, and today the lead actress invited me to accompany her on the red carpet. As an up and coming force in the industry, I know you probably field requests like this often, but I wanted to ask if you have room in your schedule to design my suit.”

Well.

That was a lot to unpack.

“You funded an American movie?” was, for some reason, where Kaoru’s brain decided to begin the unpacking process.

“As I said.” Kyoya sounded slightly irritable at the need to repeat himself—or at the embarrassment for needing to stoop so low as to ask for something from Kaoru in the first place. “I understand if this request is unreasonable in its timing; still, I feel as though this opportunity would give you additional exposure and help—”

“Oh, no, I’m definitely doing it,” Kaoru assured him. “You don’t have to convince me. Honestly, I would’ve been really insulted if you’d asked anybody else. Except my mom, I guess. But you can’t just leave me hanging like that, Kyoya. You chose to fund a movie? What movie? An American actress invited you to the premiere as her guest? What actress? What is going on? The people have questions, Kyoya!”

The Kaoru of the past would have been crushed at the thought of Kyoya being specially invited to an event by an actress, convinced that he was on the verge of losing Kyoya to some romantic tryst beyond his control. The Kaoru of the present could see exactly how poorly Kyoya and an actress would fit together and thus recognize these crumbs of information for the teasing trail they were intended to be.

Plus, if the actress did have any romantic designs, Kaoru would just have to show her how
incredibly, impossibly outclassed she was when it came to loving Ootori Kyoya.

“Oh?” Just like that, Kyoya was back to obliquely teasing, embarrassed irritation slipping away like it had never been. “I’ve always heard that curiosity is healthy. I better not answer and risk ridding you of it.”

“Kyoya!” Kaoru whined. “You cannot possibly do this to me.”

“Can’t I?” Kyoya was clearly too entertained for this all to be allowed to continue. “As always, I look forward to seeing what your impressive research skills are able to manage. Thank you for accepting the position as my designer. I am available the last weekend of the next month. If you have no prior engagements, that would be an ideal time to schedule the first fitting.”

“Yeah, should be fine.” Kaoru had no idea if he was available that weekend or not, but there was no way he was letting anything stand between himself and a weekend with Kyoya, so any other prior engagement was dead to him anyway. “I’ll send you some design ideas over the next few days. In the meantime, though, you really need to go to bed.”

“I am aware,” Kyoya said. “I only stayed awake this late to make sure I could speak with you after your class.”

“Good luck on your test tomorrow,” Kaoru said, stupidly warmed by the fact that Kyoya had stayed awake for him, no matter the reason. “Give Noir a hug from me.”

“I never do,” Kyoya said flatly. “If you wish to spoil the silly little thing, come back to Japan and do it yourself.”

“One day,” Kaoru promised, feeling the promise like a string around his heart. “Goodnight, Kyoya.”

It was only a fragment of the length of time they normally spent on the phone, but that was fine. Kyoya needed his sleep and Kaoru had some research he needed to do, after all.

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It only took a small amount of digging, relatively speaking—through one of Kaoru’s models from the spring fashion show to her new employer on the West Coast to a studio who was familiar with the name “Kyoya Ootori”—before Kaoru found what he was looking for.

Kyoya should have warned him.

All of the designs he had been halfway through completing were returned to his “Future Ideas” folder and he started over from scratch.

Forget traditional, even for Kyoya. Not for this situation.

He needed something that was gentle rather than sharp, something that would fade away from the limelight while looking like it was stealing it. Something too traditional would be railroaded, with that particular companion on his arm.

He wound up deciding on a navy blue suit with a shawl-style lapel in black, all over a white, partially unbuttoned shirt. It would flow, almost dress-like, without any of the typical lines and angles that male fashion was traditionally known for. Still, it would look enough like a suit that it wouldn’t push the envelope in a way that Kaoru knew Kyoya would be uncomfortable with for such a highly-publicized event.
Kaoru was extremely proud of it.

Kyoya approved of the picture of the design that Kaoru sent him at once, all without asking for Kaoru’s reasoning. Kaoru didn’t mind; Kyoya’s automatic trust in his ability to solve his puzzles always brought a warm glow to his chest.

It brought an even warmer glow to Kaoru’s chest when Hikaru came to him to tell him that he was planning on going back to Japan for the weekend when Kyoya was planning to be in town.

“His visit is on the same weekend as the Tokyo Game Show,” Hikaru had explained. “Dad said I could go as part of the company contingent, so I’m planning to go.”

It would be a great experience for Hikaru, but Kaoru knew his brother was doing it mostly for him, to let Kaoru have his undisturbed weekend with Kyoya. It was thoughtful and unselfish—Hikaru really was growing up.

It didn’t stop the two of them from falling asleep with their arms around each other the night before Hikaru’s plane was supposed to depart, holding on tightly enough that they both had marks the next morning.

It would be the first time they’d ever taken a trip without each other. It would be the first time they had ever spent more than a single night without each other.

Hikaru would have the rest of the host club to keep him company, at least. It sounded like Tamaki had always wanted to see the Tokyo Game Show and was planning on accompanying Hikaru, despite the fact that Hikaru had explicitly said that he shouldn’t several times. It was either because Tamaki was really worried about Hikaru being alone for the weekend or because he was really, really excited to see the cosplaying that would happen at the Game Show. Even Kaoru wasn’t willing to gamble on the answer to that particular puzzle.

And, back in New York, Kyoya was going to keep Kaoru company in his brother’s place.

Kaoru would never trade his brother for anyone, but he was also definitely okay with this particular replacement—on a temporary, approximately weekend-length level, at least.

He spent the afternoon of the day Kyoya was supposed to arrive keeping himself busy, finishing up a project at the Maker Center. He was planning to surprise Kyoya at the airport when his plane landed later that night, but he was trying not to think about it so that the anticipation wouldn’t drive him up a wall. He had already tried working at home, in the spare room his parents had converted into an atelier for him when he had gotten his internship at the start of the summer, but every noise and change in light had distracted him so badly that he had needed to relocate for the sake of his own sanity.

It was better. He was fine now. He was very much Not Thinking About It.

Which meant he nearly threw his design pad across the room when a shadow fell over him early in the evening and an extremely familiar voice murmured, “It’s always refreshing to see you focused on a project.”

Kaoru twisted on his stool so quickly he nearly fell off of it. “Kyoya?” he breathed, trying to confirm what his ears were telling him.

It was him. It was really him. He was here and real, not a figment of Kaoru’s overactive imagination. He was wearing a long, dark jacket, open in the front to reveal a ruby-red v-neck sweater over a button-down shirt. He didn’t look like a man who had spent a day traveling; he
looked like a man who had stepped straight out of Kaoru’s daydreams.

Kyoya smiled down at him, that subtle tilt of the corner of his mouth that Kaoru’s imagination could never quite replicate. “I was able to leave a little bit earlier than I had originally planned,” he said.

The bang of Kaoru’s stool falling over echoed through the room as he threw himself at his friend. It was probably a distraction to the other people working in the room, but Kaoru didn’t really care. Kyoya stiffened at the hug at first, and Kaoru almost expected Tachibana or Aijima’s hand in the back of his shirt to pull him away, but then Kyoya softened, his muscles untensing, and he readily wrapped both of his arms around Kaoru’s shoulders, holding on awkwardly but just as tightly as Kaoru was, as though he understood exactly what Kaoru needed.

This. This was exactly what Kaoru needed. Kyoya was warm and solid and real, a complete sensory experience. Kaoru had wrapped himself around his friend so completely that he could hear the low, steady drumming of Kyoya’s heartbeat and smell the specific blend of lemon and bergamot that made up Kyoya’s cologne. Kaoru buried his head in the curve of Kyoya’s neck, propriety and even any plan of seduction far from his mind.

It had been six months since the last time they had been in the same room as each other. Sure, they had spoken over video chat regularly, especially in the last few months, but it wasn’t the same as actually feeling the reality of Kyoya, finally here with him.

When he felt his inner Kyoya-meter finish its recharging process, he loosened his grip and stepped back, grinning up at his friend.

“It’s good to see you,” he said.

Understatement of the year.

Kyoya blinked down at him, reaching up to straighten his glasses, which Kaoru’s sudden embrace had knocked slightly askew.

“You as well,” he said. “Where would you recommend for dinner? As you are catering to my selfish timetable, it will be my treat.”

“There’s a place about five minutes away in the Flatiron District that has a few Michelin stars,” Kaoru said casually, like he hadn’t scouted for weeks trying to figure out a place to take Kyoya for dinner that seemed like it would be half as incredible as Kyoya deserved. “And it will be my treat. After all, I’m the one that’s currently employed and not risking a small fortune on an investment in a film starring Benibara.”

“It’s not a very large risk. She’s actually quite a talented actress.” Kyoya’s lips curved once more into that subtle grin that Kaoru adored. “You discovered the identity of my date to the premiere.”

“Yeah, weeks ago. You should’ve just told me.” Kaoru reluctantly moved further back to shut down his computer and pack up his design book. “I had to scrap all of my original ideas once I realized that your date would probably also be wearing a suit. I barely managed to finish the pieces on time.”

“I never doubted that you would figure it out.” Kyoya led the way back out of the Maker Center, to the street where the car he had arrived in was still waiting. Kaoru followed, ignoring the craning and whispering of those same judgmental girls from his fashion class as he and Kyoya walked by. Kyoya, never one to ignore a future potential business partner, turned and offered the girls just a
taste of his dazzling customer-oriented half-smile.

They practically shrieked before descending into even more frantic whispers. Kaoru hid a snicker with the back of his hand, though he also definitely understood where the girls were coming from.

Tachibana was waiting alongside the car. He nodded politely at Kaoru in greeting as the two younger men approached. Kaoru told him the name of the restaurant as he followed Kyoya into the back of the car and Tachibana nodded once more in confirmation before vanishing towards the front of the vehicle.

“So why this investment?” Kaoru asked as the car rumbled to quiet, purring life underneath them. “I’m guessing your father wouldn’t approve, so it’s all your own personal funds, isn’t it? Investing your own money in a movie doesn’t sound much like you.”

Kyoya once again resettled his glasses. “What other reason could there be except for the fact that this film is part of my plan?”

Without having asked for it, after a drought that felt like it had lasted for years, another clue had fallen at Kaoru’s feet.

“Part of your plan?” Kaoru repeated. “Benibara’s first Hollywood performance ties into you wanting a keiretsu between our families, for some reason?”

Kyoya said nothing, only continued to smile mysteriously at him from across the backseat of the car. Kaoru groaned, melodramatically flopping back in his own seat. He should have known better than to word it as a question.

“I guess I’m doing more research, then,” Kaoru said.

“You’re not the only one with such a task in front of you,” Kyoya said, linking his fingers together and resting his hands peacefully on his lap. “I was surprised when you suggested a game of your own. I must admit, I wondered how much prior planning went into the proposition.”

“Well,” Kaoru admitted shamelessly.

Kyoya huffed a soft breath that was half a laugh, half a resigned sigh. “As I thought. You shouldn’t propose games so carelessly, Kaoru. It makes them far too easy.” The car stopped and Kyoya prepared to exit, smiling down on Kaoru once more. “Would you care for an additional wager? A second favor on the line?”

“I should say it depends on the wager,” Kaoru said. “But let’s be honest: I’m probably in.”

“I plan to have your game solved by the end of this weekend,” Kyoya said. He smirked, glasses flashing in the reflection of passing headlights. “I don’t think I’ll need two more years.”

“Oh?” Kaoru’s stomach was churning in something besides hunger. Kyoya already thought he knew the aim of the game Kaoru had proposed, did he? Well, bring it on. “Sounds good to me.”

Dinner went just as Kaoru had planned. Kyoya seemed to be impressed by the restaurant, or at least not disappointed, which was its own form of success. It was definitely worth the several thousand dollars Kaoru had sunk into eating there over the past few weeks to try it out and make sure it was good enough.
Not that the cost mattered; Kaoru was willing to pay far more than that for a look of approval from Kyoya.

They had kept their talk light through the course of the evening, with Kyoya updating Kaoru on their friends back home and Kaoru telling Kyoya all about the different projects he and his brother had started that he hadn’t yet had a chance to tell him about over the phone. The courses had raced by, just background for their catching up.

As they wrapped up, Kyoya had leaned forward and said, “Next time, you really do not need to go to such an effort. When my intention is to enjoy a meal with company, the content of the meal matters little to me. Still, if your intent was to impress… then I will admit that I am quite impressed. New York has no shortage of fine cuisine, but this has truly been a remarkable experience.”

Kaoru nearly glowed at the compliment.

After dinner, they parted ways for the evening, with Kyoya promising that he would stop by the Hitachiin family condo as soon as he was awake in the morning so that they could have the first fitting of his commissioned suit.

The promise that Kyoya would stop by “as soon as he was awake” gave Kaoru more than enough time to prepare for the next step of his plan.

He assumed he wouldn’t see Kyoya until noon at the absolute earliest.

He put more time and effort into researching Benibara’s new movie than he did even to his own outfit selection for the next day. After all, he knew which of the two was more likely to impress his intended target.

He just had to hope that the conclusion he had come to was accurate and not just a figment of his overly optimistic imagination.

He was not going to run anymore, though, even out of fear of his own overreaching. The instant the butler led Kyoya into Kaoru’s workshop the next afternoon, Kaoru shooed the servant back out and then turned to Kyoya and said, “You’re gay, aren’t you, Kyoya?”

He had to bite off the weird, anachronistic attempt to tack on the senpai suffix to his friend’s name. He hadn’t called him that in years, at this point. Something about the question, though, had him again feeling like the foolish, clumsy little underclassman he had once been. He felt like some pathetic little thing, small and young and still terrified of rejection by all the very many ‘others,’ the ‘not-my-brother-nor-I’s of the world who never seemed to understand him.

Kyoya didn’t appear startled by the conclusion Kaoru had reached. At least he didn’t appear to be offended, either, and that was one very specific load off of Kaoru’s heart.

Kyoya raised an eyebrow passively, sat himself down on the couch that Hikaru normally crashed on while Kaoru was working, and said, “What leads you to that conclusion?”

Kaoru nearly stuck out his tongue in disgust.

Of course. The question itself wasn’t awkward enough; trust Kyoya to make him show his work.

“The movie Benibara is starring in is supposed to be groundbreaking even for American cinema,” Kaoru began to explain. “I haven’t been paying much attention because it’s not normally my area of interest, but it seems like talk about it has been all over the news networks here. It’s supposed to
be a pretty traditional cross-cultural romance film, except that both of the people involved are women. I guess it’s a big deal because it’s supposed to be a romantic comedy, not a drama? Something about making a statement about gay romances in film and how they’re typically portrayed.”

“And it’s premiering after months of free press, thanks to the subject matter, to an audience who, because of the current dialogue about such social issues, seems primed to support it regardless of how good or terrible it is,” Kyoya said brutally. “Benio came to me when they were struggling to find a studio that would back it. It was clear to me that this film was going to come at the perfect time to be a commercial success in America regardless of the quality of the movie itself. An extremely safe gamble, made all the more tantalizing because of the many other investors who had allowed their own old-fashioned prejudice to interfere with the marketing opportunities available. Is my reasoning not sound?”

“Sure,” Kaoru admitted. “That all makes sense. But the only way you’d know if the market here was actually ready for a film like that, Kyoya, is if you were already paying close attention to the dialogue about gay rights in the country. That’s the kind of subtle study that requires sustained attention, not just pulling a bunch of statistics when the mood strikes you. Plus, you can say it was a safe gamble, but a safe gamble is still a gamble. This seems like the type of gamble that would only be worth it to you if you’d be able to set it up so that win or lose, you still personally win. In this case, win or lose, you’d definitely still get the word out across the entire world about those representation and depiction issues the news keeps talking about. But that only works as a benefit to you if those specific issues are relevant to you. So there’s only one specific condition that allows this investment to actually be a win-win for you, and that’s if you’re gay.”

He was confident in his conclusion, he reminded himself. He had thought this through at length last night, and then re-analyzed it all this morning.

It was the only thing that made sense.

Still, it took him a long, terrified moment to look back over to the couch. When he did, it was to find Kyoya grinning at him, far more wide and proud than his usual small smile. “Well done, Kaoru,” he said, crossing his legs delicately. “America tends to be somewhat of a leader of cultural perceptions on some social issues. I have a vested interest in the success of this particular film due to my own sexuality and the awareness that I wish to bring to issues that I face because of it. You are entirely correct.”

Ah.

Kaoru’s breath caught and snagged in his throat.

He hadn’t been overly optimistic. He hadn’t been reading in to what hadn’t actually been there. Kyoya was gay.

*Kyoya was gay.*

“Oh,” he managed to say out loud, sounding stupidly surprised even though it had been his own conclusion in the first place.

Kyoya continued smiling at him. “You didn’t trust in your own logic?” he asked. “Hm. I can think of a few reasons for that.” Kyoya raised up one hand and started counting off on his fingers. “The first reason might be that you yourself have such ingrained ideas of the capabilities and identities of gay men that you cannot fit your knowledge of myself as an individual with your negative
preconceptions of gay men in general. I highly doubt this is the case. Your mother has many friends and close associates who are gay, and you appear to treat them with as much respect as you do any other of her professional acquaintances."

He put up another finger. "The second reason for your hesitation might be a lack of confidence in your own capabilities as a thinker, leading you to not trust the conclusion that you have reached. There are two potential reasons I can deduce for this lack of confidence. First, it is possible that you simply lack confidence in your thinking and conclusions in general, not only in this situation. This seems unlikely, since I have always found you to have a healthy degree of trust in your own abilities. The last possibility, then, is that you doubted your capabilities as a thinker in this specific situation. I can think of no reason why you might doubt yourself for this situation unless you thought your emotions were getting in the way of your logic, which does tend to be an obstacle of yours." Kyoya’s dropped his hand back down to his lap. His smile took on a slightly softer edge, no longer the almost Hitachiin-style grin he had been sporting before. "This is my conclusion, then, Kaoru. For some reason, which I will not yet speculate on, were you hoping that I was gay?"

For the second time in as many minutes, Kaoru felt small and terrified, a pitiful thing cringing in a stubborn spotlight.

But that wasn’t the Hitachiin way.

What was the point in hiding anything on his own end? Especially because here it was, what he’d been hoping for: confirmation that Kyoya might possibly be amenable to being seduced by him. Confirmation that his plan might even work, of all the crazy ideas that Kaoru had never honestly let himself imagine.

Instead of cowering, Kaoru turned to face the spotlight head on.

"Speaking as a bisexual man to an extremely attractive gay man, of course I was hoping for that outcome," he said, a smile tugging at the corner of his own lips in response to Kyoya’s own.

"Ah. The hesitation is explained, then."

The air between them was crackling now with an electricity that Kaoru could feel throughout his entire body.

Still, just because he now had confirmation that Kyoya might be capable of being interested in him didn’t mean that that interest was a guarantee. After all, Kaoru had already taken a front-and-center seat to watch his own twin brother’s heart break, despite Hikaru and Haruhi also having an already strong friendship and compatible sexualities as a potential basis for something deeper. In romance, there were no promises. Kaoru took a deep breath, shaking his head slightly to clear it.

"Well, this bisexual man is even more interested in seeing you in the suit he made, now that he knows his appreciation for the sight will not offend," he said, gesturing to the pieces hanging from the screen in the corner of the room. "There it is. Go ahead and change behind the screen. Step out when you’re ready and we’ll see how accurate those measurements you sent me really are."

"Alright," Kyoya acquiesced easily, allowing the charged moment to dissipate just as easily as Kaoru had, standing to do as he had been told.

Kaoru took advantage of the moment with Kyoya out of sight to bury his face in his hands and take several more deep breaths, trying to calm his racing heart.

Kyoya was gay.
Kaoru had called him ‘extremely attractive’ to his face and talked about his appreciation for his appearance and Kyoya had shown no more reaction than to confirm his own logical conclusion about the situation and do as he had been told.

There really weren’t any other signs or symbols to wait around for.

If Kyoya were into men and Kaoru still couldn’t seduce him, then he would have no one but himself to blame.

The mission was a definite go.

By the time Kyoya stepped back out from behind the screen, Kaoru was calm and ready to face him.

The measurements he had been sent didn’t appear to be wrong. The suit matched Kyoya perfectly, looking formal yet flowing in a way that wouldn’t steal attention from the sharp lines of whatever tuxedo Benibara would undoubtedly be wearing. Kaoru would have to send Benibara’s designer a swatch of the material he had used so that they could make sure the accessories for the two outfits complemented each other, but they should look gorgeous together otherwise.

“Well?” Kaoru said aloud, gesturing to the mirror across the room. “Tell me what you think and we’ll do some adjusting.”

Kyoya stepped over to the mirror and looked himself over studiously, going several moments without comment.

He then looked up and dark eyes met Kaoru’s gaze through the mirror.

“It’s perfect, Kaoru,” Kyoya said, his voice quiet and private as though he were talking about something far different than the fit of a suit. “You’ve truly outdone yourself.”

Kaoru could feel the heat suffuse his cheeks even as he demurred. “I’m just lucky you gave me the opportunity, really,” he said. “No one else in my program has been asked to design something for the red carpet before.” He scooped his pin cushion off of his desk and stepped forward, ready to work. There was little that impressed Kyoya more than competency, after all. “Before you get too swept away with the compliments, give me a minute to make some adjustments.”

Kyoya nodded, focusing once more on his own reflection as Kaoru flitted around him.

If anything, he was going to have to loosen several parts of the outfit. That was a pain, since loosening was always more difficult than tightening, but it wasn’t an insurmountable task, this far out from the event itself.

“You’ve grown even more muscles, huh?” he said out loud, frowning as he gathered and prodded the suit material.

“Is that a problem?” Kyoya asked, voice a low rumble that shot straight down Kaoru’s body, and Kaoru realized suddenly how close they were, his chest practically molded to Kyoya’s back as he reached around Kyoya’s shoulders to pinch and straighten the fall of his jacket.

Kaoru froze in place.

Well. This was jumping ahead several steps in the plan. Still, if he were already there...

“Not a problem at all,” Kaoru said, lowering the volume and pitch of his voice to match it to
Kyoya’s, like they were sharing a secret in the corner of Kaoru’s workshop. His hand swept down the line of the lapel, despite the fact that it was already lying perfectly flat against Kyoya’s finely-toned chest. “In fact, you could say I’m a fan. Even if it makes my job harder.” He tweaked the end of the jacket, adjusting the lines slightly. He dropped his voice even lower, practically whispering his next words in Kyoya’s ear. “Of course, I’ve been told that you enjoy watching me when I’m working hard.”

Suddenly, without warning, Kyoya turned in Kaoru’s arms, and then they were facing each other. Kyoya’s eyes were sharp and scrutinizing through his glasses, only inches away. “Kaoru. Are you playing some sort of game?”

“No!” Kaoru said automatically, offended by the thought. He would’ve stepped back, but his pin cushion was still in his right hand and he was worried about stabbing Kyoya in the back if he made a wrong move. Then he remembered the context of this interaction, and he smiled, sheepishly. “Although, technically, I guess I am.”

Kyoya thought about this response for hardly a moment before his expression cleared. “Ah.” One hand came up between them, a knuckle resting gently underneath Kaoru’s chin, tilting his head slightly to the side. “Disappointingly sloppy, Kaoru. You’ve given me the answer far too easily. The goal of the game you proposed out of the blue six months ago… It was to win me?”

Well, that… wasn’t a wrong way to put it.

“Yes,” Kaoru admitted. His sheepish smile became slightly cheeky; he could feel the crinkle of it in the corners. “Please tell me it’s working, because that would be the only consolation I would have in exchange for the two favors I now owe you on top of losing my own game.” On top of Kyoya figuring out about his crush, but that didn’t even bear mentioning, not yet. Not until he had some kind of idea of what Kyoya was thinking.

“Hm.” Kyoya stepped back and dropped his hand. Kaoru felt the loss of it, the loss of Kyoya, for barely a moment before Kyoya was leaning in, pressing their foreheads together. He held himself there, his eyes closed, and Kaoru, too, held himself still, eyes wide open, not sure what Kyoya was up to but willing to go along with pretty much anything Kyoya wanted, at this point.

Kyoya just breathed for a minute. Kaoru could feel each one of those breaths against his mouth. If Kyoya was just trying to tease him, then it was definitely working. When Kyoya finally spoke, it was in a murmur. Still, every word that slowly shivered into existence in the air of their mingled breaths embedded itself inside Kaoru’s soul. “If I am going to get what I want in life, which I fully intend to, then I want all of it, without any concessions.” What Kyoya ‘wanted’ in life… was he implying what he wanted was Kaoru? “I refuse to live a life of secrets and fragmented pieces. I refuse to be content with a runner-up prize.” Kyoya’s eyes snapped open, dark and fathomless, meeting Kaoru’s gaze from barely inches away. One of his hands came up, fingers grazing Kaoru’s cheek carefully. “If you dare to aim high enough to have me, Kaoru… then I hope you are working on a way to make having you something I can do freely, openly, and permanently.”

Kyoya stepped back, seeming not to care about the pin cushion Kaoru was still holding behind him. Kaoru fumbled to get his arms and the pins out of the way and then just gaped at his friend.

“Kyoya…” His voice was trembling, which was embarrassing. “Are you…” He shook his head frantically, tossing his carefully styled hair all out of alignment. “Are you saying that you want me to seduce you?” His voice reached a pitch he was further embarrassed that he was still able to reach. “‘Permanently’?” A quick, unintentional look in the mirror revealed his face to be flushed red, hair and clothes in a flustered disarray. Excellent start at that whole seduction thing, then. Hikaru was going to laugh himself silly when he heard.
Kyoya smiled at him. “Oh? A Hitachiin, not up to the challenge?”

Kaoru groaned and stumbled backwards pathetically, finally falling back against his own couch, all energy fried up after that exchange of electricity. “So,” he said to the ceiling, limbs flopped and lifeless. “I guess this means I have your permission to seduce you? And by ‘seduce you’ you really mean that you’re already into me, but that you don’t want to pursue anything if we can’t be together… forever…” Kaoru suddenly sat up straight, staring back at Kyoya. “Wait, did you just propose? Was that a proposal?”

Kyoya brought up a hand to push up his glasses, catching the light and turning them opaque. “Nonsense. When I propose to you, you will have no questions about the matter.”

A thrill issued from Kaoru’s stomach all the way up to tickle his brain. “‘When’?” he squawked.

“Not that it is yet relevant,” Kyoya added, apparently unperturbed by the contents of this conversation. “After all, you will hardly be able to seduce me successfully if you must do so in secret.”

“This is so unfair,” Kaoru whined. His cheek and forehead were still prickling where Kyoya had touched him. He raised a hand to touch the side of his face, chasing the feeling. “I was planning to sneakily sweep you off your feet, you know. You weren’t going to know what hit you. And then you come in, flirting and talking about ‘having me permanently’ and ‘being together openly’ and throwing around proposals like it’s nothing. I was really proud of myself for reaching this point, you know?”

“You know me,” Kyoya said quietly from over by the mirror. “I only ever want all or nothing. If ‘all’ with me is truly your goal, it will not be an easy one to achieve. I cannot make any promises otherwise, and I refuse the thought of anything less.”

Kaoru snorted and then finally managed a smile, flopping onto his back on the couch, head still turned to see his friend. “Trust me, Kyoya, I never thought pursuing you would be easy.”

Kyoya smiled back at him through the reflection in the mirror, resettling his glasses, once more bringing his eyes into view. They were warm, despite his words. “You are familiar with many of the difficulties of living in our position in society. So long as those difficulties exist, we cannot possibly be ‘all’ without ruining more than I, at least, could bear, so we are thus limited to ‘nothing.’”

“Speaking of challenges…” Kaoru pointed dramatically at Kyoya from his half-reclined position. “Are you really telling me that we’re both into each other but you’re not willing to even, even… even kiss me until I somehow successfully get rid of all the obstacles to us getting married?”

Kyoya just shrugged, glasses flashing as they moved through the path of the light. “You are familiar with many of the difficulties of living in our position in society. So long as those difficulties exist, we cannot possibly be ‘all’ without ruining more than I, at least, could bear, so we are thus limited to ‘nothing.’”

Kaoru groaned, but then a thought occurred to him and he slowly pushed himself back to his feet, strolling back towards Kyoya, a wicked grin curling its way across his face. Kyoya blinked and watched him, abruptly on his guard.

“So,” Kaoru drawled. “You’ve decided on ‘nothing.’ I guess that’s fine with me.” He darted in and pressed a quick kiss to Kyoya’s cheek, a match to the one Kyoya had given him back at their Christmas masquerade at Ouran. Kyoya’s skin was smooth and warm and perfect underneath his lips. Kaoru knew he was smiling like a well-fed cat as he pulled back away. “I, however, am going
to follow my family precepts, live freely, and, most of all, take what I can get.”

“Kaoru,” Kyoya said, voice a warning growl that made Kaoru shiver pleasantly at the implied threat of it. He wished he could go back in time and tell his younger self to pay more attention to how attractive Kyoya’s growling could be. And to think, he’d wasted so much time being afraid of it!

“I promise to be good,” Kaoru said immediately, stepping past Kyoya and bending to pick up his fallen pin cushion in one smooth, lingering movement. He grinned over his shoulder from this half-bent stance, clearly placing himself on display for Kyoya’s perusal. Plan: Seduction was a definite go. “In public, at least. But, when we’re in private… all bets are off. After all, what’s life without a little bit of a challenge, Kyoya?”

“Well,” Kyoya said. He turned his head slightly, light blocking out his gaze. “I suppose there’s nothing to say, then, but ‘let the games begin.’”

This was going to be the best weekend ever.

Chapter End Notes

Manga Background Notes for Chapter 12 (warning, spoilers follow!):
-Aijima, like Tachibana and Hotta, is another member of Kyoya’s team of bodyguards.
“I can’t believe you planned for this year’s Christmas trip to be to Granada,” Kaoru said over the phone, practically cooing in pleasure. “Be careful, Kyoya, or I’m going to start thinking you like me or something.”

Hikaru made a disgusted face at Kaoru’s simpering from his spot on the couch next to him. Kaoru stuck his tongue out and kicked his brother lightly in the knee, not losing his smile for a moment, even when Hikaru kicked him back slightly harder than was strictly necessary.

“I only planned the flights and accommodations,” Kyoya said from the other end of the phone call, giving Kaoru something far more pleasant to focus on than Hikaru’s stupid grumpy face. “Haruhi and Tamaki were the ones to pick Granada.”

“Oh huh,” Kaoru said. If his phone had had a cord, he definitely would have been twirling it back and forth around his pinky finger. He was grossly head over heels for this manipulative robot person and he did not care. “And when did they decide this? Wasn’t it after having dinner with you the other night? Tell me, what did your chef serve, again?”

“Tortilla del Sacromonte. Why do you ask?” Kyoya said at once, clearly already prepared to answer this question despite his slyly innocent follow-up question.

“And if I looked up tortilla del whatever, what would be the location of origin, do you think?”

“I’m sure I couldn’t say, for a search term that vague,” Kyoya said, but Kaoru and he both knew he’d been caught.

It was hard to say if the route to Haruhi’s brain was truly through her stomach or if she just saw through what Kyoya was trying to do and decided to go along with it out of the goodness of her heart. Both possibilities seemed equally likely.

Regardless of Haruhi’s reasons, however, Kyoya’s seemed perfectly clear to Kaoru.

Granada was the home of the Alhambra, which both Hikaru and Kaoru had complained endlessly about missing out on, the last time the group of them had visited Spain. Not only had Kyoya remembered, he’d done what it had taken to make the trip happen for the two of them.

For Kaoru.

He didn’t think he’d ever stop grinning.

His smile was most definitely not contagious, unfortunately. In fact, his rising elation seemed to have the opposite effect on Hikaru, whose scowl only deepened as he and Kyoya finished their daily catch-up call.

Boo.

“Be happy for me,” Kaoru whined, kicking his brother again, even more lightly this time. “This is all turning out perfectly.”
“Is it?” Hikaru asked, not even bothering to kick back. Not a good sign. “Or, a better question: what’s the ‘this’ you’re referring to?”

“Kyoya and me,” Kaoru said. When that didn’t get the reaction he’d hoped for, he wagged his eyebrows playfully. That also didn’t seem to do it, so he said, “You know.”

“No, I don’t know,” Hikaru said, scowl deepening. Worse sign. “And I don’t think you know either. What is actually supposed to be going on with the two of you?”

Well… “Nothing,” Kaoru admitted. “Officially. But, unofficially, he pretty much said he wanted to marry me.” Even his brother’s all-pervasive frown couldn’t blot out the thrill of excitement he felt as he said those words out loud.

“That’s the problem,” Hikaru insisted, slamming shut the textbook he hadn’t been reading for a good hour or so anyway. “The answer is nothing, and yet your brain is somehow convinced the answer is engaged.”

“It’s just for now,” Kaoru protested. He and Hikaru always understood each other. Hikaru would understand this, too. Kaoru just needed to find the right words. “Kyoya likes me, Hikaru. He said it, that he wants it to be ‘all or nothing’ with me.”

“There it is again, ‘nothing.’” Hikaru threw his book to the table and turned, reaching out one hand to fasten it around Kaoru’s wrist as though physical touch would better help him find the right words of his own. “All of us know what Kyoya wants. Kyoya always, always wants ‘all.’ It’s practically built into his DNA. But he’s not going to be able to have ‘all’ with you, Kaoru. Even if some miracle happens and attitudes change—and that would really be a miraculous change—even if you two manage to make this whole fantasy come true, even then… you still can’t ever give him kids, which means you’ll never give him his family’s approval, which means ‘all’ will never, ever happen. All that will be left is ‘nothing.’”

Hikaru. So overprotective. Like those weren’t thoughts Kaoru had already needed to fight off again and again, often late at night as he stared at the ceiling, sleep still a far off specter. Still…

“He’s gay, Hikaru,” he said, quiet and secretive about this secret that wasn’t his, even though they were alone in their living room and Kyoya had long ago given him permission to tell Hikaru about his sexuality. “No woman will ever be able to give him ‘all’ either, not truly. Kyoya’s going to have to compromise, one way or the other, and I’ll be damned if I’m not the one he compromises for.”

Hikaru sighed, running his free hand through his hair in frustration, his other hand still wrapped around Kaoru’s wrist. “I’m less worried about you being damned and more worried about you throwing yourself into this and getting your hopes up only to be hurt even worse than you were before.”

“Let me worry about my hopes,” Kaoru said, knowing even as he said it that his request would fall on deaf ears. With Ageha nearly half the world away, pretty much all of Hikaru’s worry had refocused on Kaoru, just like always. He really needed to find his brother a hobby. Well, the only thing he could do right now was try to change the subject. “Maybe I am setting myself up for massive, soul-crushing disappointment, but at least we’ll be in Granada, and it will be Christmas. That should be fun, right?”

Hikaru stubbornly refused to smile. “I guess. So long as it’s not some ploy by Kyoya to manipulate your emotions.”
Now that was funny. Kaoru gave his brother a blank look. “Do you even know him?”

They both took a minute to think about Kyoya actually putting painstaking effort into manipulating some guy into liking him romantically, with no other benefit to the act. The notion was so ridiculous that, for the briefest of seconds, Hikaru’s frown broke. The brothers snorted in unison and shook their heads in identical gestures of disbelief.

“Plus, you have to pick a side,” Kaoru continued when the mental image had left. “Either Kyoya’s nefariously trying to take advantage of me for his own twisted ends or he doesn’t actually care about me at all and is going to break my heart. You can’t live in fear of both.”

“Watch me,” Hikaru said stubbornly. Kaoru sighed and turned his hand to link their fingers together rather than have Hikaru continue to clutch onto him.

“I’m not worried about my hopes getting too high,” Kaoru said, squeezing Hikaru’s hand in his own. “You know Kyoya too. Even if he does break my heart, we both know he’d do it gently.”

Hikaru’s frown snapped right back into place. Kaoru frowned at him in turn. “He would,” he insisted. “Kyoya’s different with us than he is with the rest of the world. Sure, he’s an asshole, but we matter to him. He won’t be an asshole just to be an asshole.” Hikaru opened his mouth, clearly ready to disagree, so Kaoru preemptively added, “Not about stuff that matters, at least.”

Hikaru closed his mouth and sighed through his nose, tipping his head forward to rest his forehead on Kaoru’s shoulder. “If he breaks your heart, I’m going to break him.”

“You will not,” Kaoru said. His eyes were getting quite the workout today, what with the amount of rolling they were doing. “Even if nothing more ever happens between the two of us, we’re all still going to be friends, just like with you and Haruhi. Plus, have you even looked at him recently? He could probably take you in a fight with both hands tied behind his back.”

“I’d hire someone else to do it,” Hikaru grumbled.

“Sure,” Kaoru said, patting his brother’s head. “You’re very brave and strong and wealthy and whatever. You’re much bigger than Kyoya in every conceivable way.”

Hikaru finally sat up and cracked a grin at him, mollified despite how sarcastic Kaoru was being. His brother was such a simple soul. “We both are. And don’t let him forget it.”

Kaoru somehow won the epic struggle not to roll his eyes again. “Let’s start planning our trip. We have one week in Granada and friends who currently have no respect for Moorish architecture. We have a lot of work to do.”

There was nothing quite like the promise of time spent subjecting their friends to an education in proper art appreciation to cheer Hikaru up.

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Of course, outings with the former Ouran High School Host Club never did go according to plan.

They had barely finished the first breakfast of the trip before Haruhi disappeared from the bathroom in the hotel lobby.

If she kept this up, Kaoru was just going to start sewing GPS trackers into all of her clothes.

“The local police are aware, for all the good that will do us,” Kyoya announced as he re-entered
Tamaki and Haruhi’s hotel room, which had unofficially become the Search-for-Haruhi HQ. Tamaki was pacing a hole in the carpet in front of the television, calling all the Suoh contacts in the country to see if a disgruntled business associate might be to blame again. Hikaru was hunched over at a table in the corner, arguing with a particularly finicky employee of their cell phone company who was refusing to divulge any information regarding the location of Haruhi’s cell phone, even though she was still technically on their plan. Mori-senpai and Hani-senpai had gone out to coordinate the on-the-ground search with Kyoya’s bodyguards. Nanako and Renge, once again the extra odd couple that Kyoya had invited for reasons of his own, had evidently reached a truce in their amusing cold war. Now Nanako was sitting next to Hikaru, ready with paper and pen to record the result of his efforts, face pale in worry, while Renge had left in a flourish of skirts, taking Reiko with her to review the hotel’s security camera footage downstairs.

Which left Kaoru, standing next to the hotel room window, utterly useless except for theoretical plans to microchip all of his friends’ clothing for the rest of their lives.

He was the only one who acknowledged Kyoya’s reentry and subsequent announcement, nodding distractedly, barely glancing back at the rest of the room before once more fixing his gaze out of the window. Tamaki and Haruhi had a corner suite up on the top floor of the hotel, which actually gave Kaoru a decent view of the surrounding streets. While he knew that whoever had taken Haruhi was probably long gone by now, he couldn’t shake the feeling that, the minute he looked away from the window, he’d miss some vital clue to her location.

Next time. Next time they wouldn’t have to keep an eye out, because she’d be microchipped. They’d just be able to use a satellite to track her.

A soft creaking sound next to him snapped him out of his frustrated reverie. His eyes flicked down to see that Kyoya had taken a seat on the couch closest to him, his back to the window and his laptop open on his knees. He didn’t say a word, but Kaoru could see from his vantage point over his shoulder that he was cycling through footage from traffic cameras.

Kaoru wasn’t going to ask how he had gotten access to that footage.

He returned to looking out the window. The surrounding roads and walkways contained far more pedestrians than cars, which should have been useful for Kaoru’s purposes, but none of the people strolling by looked anything like Haruhi.

Why was it always Haruhi? The rest of them had been prepared practically since birth for the eventuality of some force thinking that they could be used against their families if only they could be stolen away. It probably sounded paranoid, but it was the truth: they were all prepared to be kidnapped at any time. Well, maybe not Hani-senpai or Mori-senpai, since only an absolute lunatic would target the Haninozuka family. Still, even new-money Nanako and barely-qualified-as-wealthy Reiko probably had some training in what to do if kidnapped. A boring little kidnapping would be a walk in the park, for the rest of them!

Okay, thinking over all of this made Kaoru admit that maybe it made sense that any kidnapper who had done even an ounce of research would target Haruhi in the end.

After this, they were definitely going to all contribute to hiring an entire squadron of bodyguards for her, whether she liked it or not.

Plus microchipping.

Kaoru heard a crunching sound beside him and glanced down again.
Kyoya had gripped the decorative wooden arm of the couch so tightly that it had splintered in his grip.

Under any other circumstance, Kaoru would have been elated by this casual show of Kyoya’s newly developed strength. Instead, he saw the beads of blood start welling up from the splinters that had burrowed their way under Kyoya’s skin and felt the restless tension in his stomach coil into a tight, worried knot.

At least the sight finally gave him the ability to step away from his unnecessary post at the window, walking to the en suite to wet a towel and grab the tweezers that he had packed for Haruhi when he and Hikaru had put together a toiletry bag for her, not trusting her to do an adequate job on her own. He returned with the supplies and soundlessly kneeled at Kyoya’s side, taking his injured hand in both of Kaoru’s own. At least playing nurse for a few minutes gave him something productive to focus on.

“It’s my fault,” Kyoya said, his voice low and tired. He turned his laptop screen slightly, showing Kaoru a blurry image of a white van with a large logo on the side. A combination of squinting and a quick mental translation revealed that the logo was for the facilities management department at the local university. Kyoya’s injured hand twitched within Kaoru’s grasp. “Last year, the Ootori Group cancelled a research stipend that we used to offer the university here due to lack of adequate progress on their stated goals.”

“You don’t know that’s who took her,” Kaoru insisted, just as quietly. He ignored the laptop screen, cleaning Kyoya’s hand with a few gentle swipes of the cloth and picking at and easing out all of the splinters he could see, one at a time. “Do you?”

“There is no need for a facilities management vehicle to be this far from the university campus,” Kyoya said. “It is the most suspicious vehicle I have seen in the vicinity. I will see if Hikaru’s work confirms my suspicions, but I do not believe I am likely to be wrong.”

“I hope you’re right.” Haruhi being taken by a batch of disgruntled academics definitely fell on the positive end of the spectrum of kidnapping possibilities. Maybe they were subjecting her to some kind of scientific lecture right now. Haruhi would probably enjoy that, knowing her.

“This, Kaoru. This is the reason for my hesitation.”

Kaoru blinked and looked up from Kyoya’s hand, which he was still holding despite it being as splinter-free as he could make it. Kyoya was looking down at him, eyes shadowed. He seemed to be focused somewhere inward, not seeing anything but his own perceived failure.

“Angry professors always freak me out too,” Kaoru said lightly.

Kyoya ignored his pathetic attempt at a joke. His hand was stiff and cool in Kaoru’s grip. “We cannot even go on a vacation without outsiders monitoring us and attempting to use us for their own ends. There is no time, no location, that we are ever truly safe. To invite even further attention, further attacks… it is foolishness of the highest order. Others will always be watching.”

The tight ball of anxiety that had been living in Kaoru’s stomach shoved itself upward, into his throat.

So Kyoya thought now was a good time to talk about this, did he?

Where was this even coming from?

“Are you kidding me?” he asked, voice no more than a low rumble through the sudden dryness of
his throat. Despite that, he could feel Nanako turn in their direction from the table, having caught on to something in his tone. He tried to lower his voice with only middling success. “We’re all prepared for something like this, aren’t we? Plus, is this really the time? We need to make sure Haruhi is okay.”

“It’s the perfect time,” Kyoya replied, eyes unusually bleak and clouded behind his glasses. “It was Haruhi this time, and it will be Haruhi again, if someone thinks that she is the key to keeping the rest of us in line. Or, if we dare to make a romantic link between the two of us public, it will be you, taken or threatened in order to force my hand on any of a number of issues.”

Kyoya winced, a barely noticeable tightening of his eyes, as Kaoru’s grip on his injured hand tightened. Kaoru probably would’ve cared about that more if he weren’t in the process of slowly becoming a fiery ball of rage.

“That’s what you think?” he asked. His restraint, keeping his voice mostly quiet and mostly even, was fraying fast. “That I’d just be some… some weakness to you? That’s ridiculous, Kyoya. We come from the same background. These risks… they’re nothing we haven’t lived with for years.”

“The nail that sticks out gets hammered down,” Kyoya said dully, like he hadn’t even heard Kaoru speak. What was he seeing, with his eyes focused inward like that? Why wasn’t he listening to Kaoru’s really quite reasonable set of points, here? “A man and a woman would blend in among the other socialites. Two men would paint a larger target on both of their backs.”

Something was definitely wrong.

“You don’t think I can handle being ostracized by society?” Kaoru asked, fighting his way towards something that felt like solid ground in all of the oddly coded half-arguments of this conversation. “Me?”

Kyoya’s eyes finally cleared somewhat, appearing to actually see Kaoru for the first time since the conversation had began. Kaoru kept eye contact, trying to look confident but also confused, like a guy who was convinced of his stance but also totally willing to listen if Kyoya decided to actually start explaining himself. Any minute now would be fine, Kyoya.

Kyoya kept looking at him for a long, silent minute. “No,” he finally said, voice calm and cutting like a knife. Despite his tone, the look in his eyes was horribly bleak and pained. It looked like the one he was actually cutting with his words was himself. “Me. I wouldn’t be able to handle it.”

The icy rush of clarity quickly snuffed out the fire of anger that had been licking its way up Kaoru’s veins, leaving a cold, dead feeling in its place. He narrowed his eyes, no longer caring about what exactly was tearing Kyoya up inside.

“You,” he repeated. “You couldn’t handle it.” Of course. How could he have forgotten? Hikaru, Haruhi, Hani-senpai, even Kyoya himself had tried to remind him, over and over again: Kyoya, just like the Hitachiins, was inherently selfish. Unlike the Hitachiins, he valued reward over risk.

He wasn’t going to perceive any risk worth taking if, heavens forbid, that risk actually dared to threaten him and his livelihood in any kind of meaningful way.

Still, Kaoru had thought… He had hoped that he had gotten to know Kyoya better than that, that he had seen that there was actually a soft heart beating underneath all of that cold calculation. He had thought that Kyoya cared enough to...

No. He had to stop.
What was he doing to himself?

He had been assuming Kyoya had a plan, at least, that they were going to… what, ride off happily into the sunset on white horses? That they were going to spend years flirting and teasing until gay marriage was legalized, at which point they’d immediately go from not-dating to married, just like that? That was his romantic, optimistic plan? That’s the direction that he had thought that Kyoya had been aiming for?

Hikaru had been right.

Kaoru had been getting his hopes up.

He had told himself that his high expectations didn’t pose a threat so long as he remembered, logically, that his hopes were just that: hopes, not reality. After all, it would’ve been crazy to think that Kyoya and he could be together in some kind of romantic way in reality, right? Too crazy to be honestly believed, definitely.

It was one of the meaner tricks he’d ever played on anyone, and he had no one but himself to blame. Maybe Kyoya had that kind of logical control over his emotions, but Kaoru didn’t, and he probably never would.

Any other comment either of them would have made was cut off by Hikaru’s extremely loud, “Thank you!” and the sound of a phone being thrown down onto a table. They both turned to look at Kaoru’s brother, conversation ended just like that.

Hikaru ran a hand through his dark hair, looking exhausted despite the full night’s sleep they’d gotten the night before. “They lost track of her phone somewhere in the university campus, across town.”

“That makes sense,” Kyoya said. Kaoru dropped his hand as the others in the room all turned to face the two of them. Kyoya turned his laptop to the room at large, showing the image of the suspicious van. “This is likely to be an Ootori matter. We recently cut our contributions to the university’s research funding.”

“Well, they made it an all of us matter,” Hikaru said, hands bunched up into fists at his sides. “C’mon, get your bodyguards and Hani-senpai and Mori-senpai together. We’re going to go get Haruhi back.”

Kyoya had already taken his phone out and was tapping a message on it. “We’ll meet them in the lobby,” he said, standing in one fluid movement as he continued to focus on his phone, leaving Kaoru crouched down besides a now-empty seat. He straightened much more slowly than Kyoya had, watching Kyoya and Hikaru corral Tamaki and pull him out the door.

Nanako stepped up next to him. “You all have dealt with this before,” she said. She was so cool, with her serious older-woman vibe. Even in a period of chaos that she clearly had not been expecting during her vacation, she had kept her calm and done what she could to help. Kaoru felt a wistful pang. Why couldn’t he have fallen in love with someone like her, instead of a maladjusted asshole like Kyoya?

“Not as often as you might assume,” Kaoru responded. “Still, it’s the second time this has happened to Haruhi.” He made his way towards the door, holding it open for Nanako to follow him. It looked like the rest of his friends had already disappeared down the staircase. He sighed and headed that way, unable to find much enthusiasm despite the possible lead on Haruhi.
“And, forgive me for butting in, but this is the excuse Kyoya is using for refusing to date you?” Nanako asked from behind him.

Kaoru stiffened, having not expected the follow-up question.

He turned to face her with a rueful expression. That was them caught, then. Whatever, it wasn’t like it had been his bright idea to have that conversation right then and there, in front of everybody. “You heard us?” he asked instead of answering her.

Nanako smiled kindly, spreading her hands. “Again, I apologize, but there was relatively little else to focus on in that room. I didn’t realize the content of what I was hearing until it was too late.”

At least she didn’t seem heartbroken or distraught over the content of the conversation. Some long-ignored part of Kaoru, which had never quite been sure why Kyoya kept inviting Nanako on these trips, eased at the realization that she wasn’t actually in love with him.

“It’s okay,” he said. “And yes. This is the excuse he’s using.”

“I see,” she said, tucking her hair behind her ear. Kaoru briefly wondered if the action, much like Kyoya pushing up his glasses, was actually just a useful ploy for time. “Makes sense, I suppose. That boy is too invested in what his family thinks for his own good.”

Even now, Kaoru still had to beat down the automatic impulse to leap to Kyoya’s defense. “Trust me, I know,” he muttered instead.

“Still, I didn’t realize quite how bad you all had it,” Nanako continued. “At least randomly getting kidnapped was never something I needed to worry about while I was in college.”

“It mostly only ever happens to Haruhi,” Kaoru said. “I think we’re going to put some bodyguards on her after this one. Probably without telling her. She wouldn’t accept them otherwise.”

Haruhi somehow still hadn’t lost the belief that she was separated from their wealth, that she was an outsider to the lives that her boyfriend and most of the rest of her friends lived. It was quickly becoming a laughable delusion. Kaoru was going to support Kyoya one-hundred percent in any sneaky efforts he decided to take to keep her safe from her own stubborn commoner nature.

Ugh. Kyoya.

What the hell was going on with Kyoya?

“Is it worth it?” Nanako asked all of a sudden as they made their way downstairs. “The money, that is.”

“Huh?” It wasn’t exactly the last thing Kaoru had been thinking of, but it was close. Still, he knew his answer. “I mean, it doesn’t really feel like a choice for most of us. Even if we tried to turn our backs on it all, our families would still be who they are. We’d still be a target for anyone trying to get to them. Plus…” Kaoru shrugged. “I mean, I guess I can’t officially speak for all of us, but I definitely wouldn’t know how to live any other way.”

“I see,” Nanako said. She was quiet for a few steps and then followed up with, “But would you give it up if it meant that you’d get him? Would he be worth it to you?”

That… was not something Kaoru had considered before. Kyoya wore wealth and pedigree like a second skin; the thought of giving both up in order to have him seemed contradictory, somehow. What would Kyoya even be, with all of that stripped away? What would be left of him?
As though it had been lurking in his head, just waiting for the proper motivation to make itself known, Kaoru saw a sudden, unexpectedly detailed image in his mind’s-eye. In it, he was laying down in a commoner’s living room which looked suspiciously like the Fujioka’s, despite Kaoru’s subconscious seeming convinced that the space belonged to him. He was absentmindedly knitting something, his upper body balanced back against a solid surface that kept him tilted up just enough to see both his work and the television across the room.

That solid surface he was resting against was Kyoya. Kyoya was sitting behind him in this vision, legs crossed to serve as Kaoru’s pillow, holding up a newspaper with one hand and gently running his fingers through Kaoru’s hair with the other.

It was domestic and peaceful and lovely and didn’t require hardly any money at all.

“Yeah,” Kaoru said, his voice cracking pathetically on the words. “I like what I do and I like what I have, but I like him more.”

“But you won’t actually give it all up,” Nanako said, interrupting his reverie.

Kaoru shook off the vision of domesticity, pulling his head back into the real world. “With Kyoya, it’s all or nothing,” he explained, repeating what had become a frequent reminder for him by now. “He wouldn’t give it up, even if I would.”

Nanako laughed, a deceptively dorky snort for her otherwise posh appearance. “That does match up to my experience with him,” she said. “Sounds like a great way to only ever get ‘nothing,’ if you ask me.”

They entered the lobby to find Kyoya and Hikaru debriefing Renge, Reiko, Mori-senpai, and Hanisenpai while Tamaki clung pathetically to one of Kyoya’s arms.

“—located on the university grounds,” Kyoya was saying as they approached. “One of my bodyguards is currently speaking with university security to try to obtain—”

Kyoya’s phone rang shrilly, cutting him off. He answered it immediately, barely glancing down to check who was calling.

“Hello?” he said, his voice clipped and short.

“Ah,” he said.

“I see,” he said.

“We’re in the hotel lobby,” he finished.

He hung up. He cleared his throat. He glanced down and straightened the hem of his shirt.

“Come on, Kyoya,” Hikaru whined. His patience had snapped first, to the surprise of absolutely no one. “You’re killing us here. Was it a ransom demand? What are they asking for? Is she okay?”

“It was not a ransom demand,” Kyoya said. “It was Haruhi speaking. She is evidently in a taxi on her way back to the hotel. It appears that she has temporarily lost her phone and therefore needed to borrow the driver’s.” He tapped out another message on his phone, probably to tell Tachibana that he could stop intimidating the campus police or whatever it was that he had sent him off to do.

“Haruhi?!” Tamaki yelped, yanking Kyoya down by the arm in order to pull himself back up, like they were on a very awkward standing seesaw. “She’s okay? She’s alive?!”
“Evidently,” Kyoya managed to enunciate past Tamaki shaking him. He was able to finish his message as well, clearly long since used to Tamaki treating him like furniture. “Which you should have known already, since she said she tried to call your phone twice before trying mine.”

As Tamaki frantically checked his pockets to try to figure out where he could have left his phone, Kyoya turned to the rest of the group. “Mitsukuni, Takashi—it looks as though there is still work that needs to be done.”

“Ah,” Kaoru breathed, suddenly understanding the situation.

“What’s going on?” Nanako asked him, clearly bemused by the way Mori-senpai had started cracking his knuckles and Hani-senpai had started bouncing giddily.

“Haruhi somehow managed to talk her way out of being taken hostage,” Kaoru explained. “Again.”

“Talked her way out?” Nanako asked, raising a slim eyebrow. “‘Again’? Still, that’s good, isn’t it?

So what are they doing?”

“But there was a they,” Hikaru said. He had taken a few steps towards her when she had first emerged, but he was now hanging back, allowing her and Tamaki to have their moment. His movement put him right next to where Kaoru and Nanako were standing, and Kaoru leaned against his brother’s shoulder in mute support. “You were kidnapped?”

“Accidentally,” Haruhi insisted. “It seems like they were actually after Nanako-san.”

Both Kaoru and his brother turned in unison to look at Nanako, whose face had paled in surprise. “Me?” she asked, tilting her head. “Why were they after me?”

“They got you and Carmen mixed up?” Kaoru couldn’t help saying, hearing his brother echo his disbelieving words right next to him as they glanced back and forth between the exceptionally tall, stylish, and well-endowed Nanako and the short, adorable but bland and flat-as-a-plank Haruhi. “Were they blind kidnappers?”

Haruhi shrugged in Tamaki’s embrace. “I think they were just told to go for the young woman from Japan, and I was the first one in the bathroom.”

“We’ve heard enough,” Hani-senpai said, his voice dark and dripping with menace the way it tended to get whenever he was about to hand someone the beatdown of his life. He had been holding Reiko’s hand but dropped it in order to step forward and put his hands on his hips. “No one kidnaps our friends without our permission. Right, Takashi?”

Mori-senpai grunted his assent, cracking his neck threateningly. Renge was looking up at him with an expression that was not dissimilar to the one she’d given him after he’d caught her on the stairs
during their trip to Dijon.

“Calm down, you two,” Haruhi said, somehow managing to sound competent and commanding even while speaking to two martial arts masters with her boyfriend draped over her like a particularly weepy, clingy blond blanket. “They’re not going to do it again. And what do you mean, ‘without our permission’?!”

“The ‘again’ is what I think a lot of us are having an issue with, Haruhi,” Kaoru pointed out—entirely reasonably, from his perspective. “Since it reminds us that they kidnapped you for a first time already.”

“They made a mistake,” Haruhi said, tearing her dead-eyed stare away from Hani-senpai and Mori-senpai with what appeared to be some significant effort. “They thought Nanako and Kyoya were here to elope.”

“What?” chorused the whole group of them, except for one.

“Oh,” the one exception said as though the last piece of a puzzle had finally slotted into place.

“What?” chorused the rest of them again, this time twisting to direct the question towards Kyoya.

“Oh, calm down,” Kyoya said, waving his hand irritably at them all. “It’s all a misunderstanding. At dinner last night, Nanako and I happened to be talking about elopements. Someone must have overheard and spread the rumor.”

“You and Nanako are planning to elope?” Hikaru asked, sounding personally outraged. Kaoru glanced at his brother, raising an eyebrow at the strength of his reaction. A reaction like that might make someone think that Hikaru was the twin who was in love with Kyoya.

“Save your sleep talk for when you’re asleep,” Kyoya snapped at Hikaru. “We were talking about eloping as a concept. Someone must have overheard and spread the news to someone who became worried. Ah.” Kyoya turned back to Haruhi. “Was the person you were taken to after you were kidnapped a Japanese man, by any chance? Roughly Nanako’s height, with frameless glasses?”

“He assumed you’d figure it out,” Haruhi said with a nod. “He asked me not to confirm it, but he also kidnapped me, so…” She shrugged.

“Who is it, Kyoya?” Kaoru asked.

“The Abo family,” Kyoya replied. “Specifically Abo Taishiro. He was six years ahead of Tamaki and me in Ouran. C-class.”

C-class was far enough down the Ouran hierarchy that the name didn’t ring any kind of bells. Kyoya seemed to expect as much, and continued to speak. “The Abo family is one of the rivals of The Ootori Group in the field of therapeutic resorts. Taishiro is the eldest son, and has been living abroad to study winter-themed resorts for the past year. He must have panicked upon hearing a rumor that the Ootori’s would soon have access to the Shouji family’s property through a marriage. Upon learning that we were also in the Sierra Nevada region for vacation, the temptation to act must have been too much.”

“I hate every single part of this,” Nanako complained, crossing her arms and scowling. She still looked beautiful but also terrifying. Kaoru was going to have to recommend to Hikaru that they re-nickname her “Valkyrie.” “I wish he had actually gotten me. I would’ve had some things to say to him.”
“You don’t wish that,” Haruhi said immediately.

“Haruhi!” Tamaki cried, turning her by her shoulders to look her over, suddenly frantic again. “You’re so adamant! Is it because he hurt you? My precious, delicate Haruhi!”

“Not ‘hurt’ as such,” Haruhi said, still projecting her voice to be heard by everyone even as Tamaki mothered her. “It seems like Abo-san was planning to try to steal Nanako-san out from under Kyoya, so he spent a lot of time reading romantic poetry he’d written to me before he realized I wasn’t Nanako-san.” Haruhi tilted her head to the side, a far-off look in her eyes. “It was really bad poetry.”

The group of them shuddered at the thought.

“I really don’t think beating him up will solve anything,” Haruhi continued, giving Hani-senpai and Mori-senpai another disapproving once-over as they continued to look menacing. “It was a misunderstanding to begin with, and he was very apologetic when he realized his mistake.”

“As he should have been,” Kyoya said, his glasses flashing sinisterly in the light. “His family’s resorts continue to exist simply because the Ootori Group hardly considers them a threat. He should learn to be more careful not to overplay the hand he has been dealt.”

“I don’t think destroying his family’s business will solve anything either,” Haruhi said, turning the same disapproving look she had been sending Hani-senpai and Mori-senpai onto Kyoya instead.

“You all really deal with this sort of thing all the time?” Nanako asked disbelievingly, looking back and forth between them all.

“You innocent little flower!” Renge suddenly exclaimed, shoving Kaoru out of the way to get to Nanako. Kaoru stumbled, blinking in surprise. He had actually forgotten Renge was there, which was usually a difficult feat.

Having reached her target, Renge clasped Nanako’s hands between her own and peered up into her eyes. “Forgive me for assuming you were so worldly! My, it is clear now that you have no idea.” Renge turned dramatically but didn’t let go of Nanako’s hands, tugging her to stand by her side, gazing towards some scene that existed only in Renge’s head. “The struggle that the world of commoners may never know! The great responsibility that comes with great privilege! The repressed lifestyle of the wealthy! The seclusion that requires a man to seek solace in the bosom of his most trusted companions, for only they can understand his pain! Oh, I could eat three bowls of rice!” The smile she turned on Nanako now was verging on manic. “Come! I have so much to teach you!”

“I’m going back to our room to nap,” said Haruhi, who had turned on her heel the minute the word ‘commoner’ had been uttered. “Wake me up when it’s time for lunch.”

“Haruhi!” Tamaki cried, springing after her. “Let’s nap together!”

Hani-senpai waited until the elevator door had closed behind the two of them before turning back to Mori-senpai with his own terrifyingly manic smile. “I feel like stretching my legs. A lot, a lot! Maybe into someone’s face! Do you feel like that too, Takashi?”

Mori-senpai murmured his agreement, quickly following Hani-senpai out the lobby door.

Reiko’s cheeks had gone slightly red, her eyes big and shining. “I am going to go watch,” she said simply, following Hani-senpai through the doorway like she didn’t have eyes for anyone or anything else.
“Is everyone else just going to ignore the fact that Renge just used the word ‘bosom’?” Kaoru and Hikaru asked in amused unison. No one else seemed to be paying attention to the two of them, so they just looked at each other and shrugged.

“Let us follow them!” Renge declared. Nanako, her arm still trapped between Renge’s hands, was unceremoniously pulled in the direction of the doorway Hani-senpai and Mori-senpai had just disappeared through. “We can see the passionate male friendship in action! Then I can lend you some educational reading material on the subject!”

Nanako somehow managed to wiggle a hand free and latched onto Hikaru’s arm before Renge could fully tow her past. “Help me,” she managed to say, half-laughing and half-desperate. “Come with, at least.”

Hikaru laughed too but also stepped forward readily. “You owe me,” he said, following the pair of women out the door.

Which left Kyoya and Kaoru alone in the hotel lobby. Well, alone with several other travelers, all of whom were clearly confused but also entertained by the massive drama in Japanese that had just unfolded in front of them.

“You should probably tell Tachibana or someone to intercept them,” Kaoru said, jamming his hands in his pockets. “Otherwise, we’re going to spend the rest of this trip trying to keep Hani-senpai and Mori-senpai out of jail instead of exploring the Alhambra, and that doesn’t sound fun at all.”

“I already sent the message,” Kyoya said calmly. “If you’ll excuse me, I’m going to take the rest of this morning to get some work done while everyone else is occupied.”

Before he could think through his actions, Kaoru reached forward and grabbed Kyoya’s wrist, arresting his movement.

As soon as he realized what he had done, he immediately dropped the captured wrist, raising his hands in surrender. “Sorry!” he said. “I just… can we talk before you do that? In private?”

Kyoya looked at him. From the slight sagging of the skin around his eyes, Kaoru could tell that he could probably use a nap after the events of this morning as well, though he was unlikely to ever admit to it.

“Yes,” Kyoya said. “Of course we can. Shall we speak in your room?”

Ah. Typical Kyoya. The Hitachiin room had the possibility of Hikaru returning at any moment—a perfectly neutral suggestion, just in case there were any further eavesdroppers like there had evidently been at dinner last night. It wouldn’t seem nearly as scandalous for them to head back to the Hitachiin room to talk instead of to Kyoya’s solo, private room.

Even now, after he’d essentially declared any relationship between the two of them impossible, he was still doing whatever he could to protect his reputation. To protect it from nothing, since he had decreed that nothing was going to happen anyway.

Kaoru took a deep breath to steady himself, to try to bank his anger, before he led Kyoya up to his and Hikaru’s room.

The minute the door closed behind them, he turned and pinned Kyoya against it without touching him, putting his hands on either side of Kyoya’s head.
“Haruhi was never in any trouble,” he said, flatly.

“She could have been,” Kyoya said, appearing utterly unconcerned about Kaoru boxing him in like this and picking up their earlier argument out of the blue. “It was a mere stroke of luck that she wasn’t taken by someone more dangerous.”

“So should she stop dating Tamaki then? Should they break up just because she might one day be hurt by someone dangerous who is trying to get to him through her?”

“No,” Kyoya said. “We just need to be more vigilant. I’ll post some bodyguards on Haruhi. This won’t happen again. They won’t get close enough, next time.”

Kaoru dropped his head, resting it on Kyoya’s shoulder. “So,” he said out loud, staring unseeingly down the length of Kyoya’s body to the bland red carpet-covered floor. “Tamaki and Haruhi shouldn’t break up because we’ll be vigilant enough to keep them safe. On the other hand, we shouldn’t start dating in the first place because…?”

“It’s different, Kaoru.”

Kaoru tried to memorize the feeling of Kyoya’s voice rumbling against his ear, the smell of his cologne. If this conversation went the way he thought it was probably going to, then… well, he would just focus on memorizing the feeling now.

“Fine.” He took a step back. He met Kyoya’s eyes. “I can’t do this, Kyoya. I thought I could, because I thought that, at some point, you would meet me halfway. But there’s no guarantee that that day will ever come, is there? Not really. You have your five year plans and your goals and your games, and you’re just expecting me to wait for you until everything works out. Assuming that everything does work out. That’s not fair.”

“It isn’t,” Kyoya said. The skin around his eyes seemed to pinch still further, as though this topic of conversation were making him even more exhausted. “And it’s not something I’ve done. I never asked you to wait for me, Kaoru. I wouldn’t dare. Whatever game you might have started on your own, the purpose of mine was not to trick you into something. You mean a great deal to me. More than I can afford to lose, for any reason.”

Kaoru couldn’t shake the niggling feeling that they were talking past each other, that they were both missing some point that the other one was trying to make. There were too many games between the two of them. Full, clear communication was not normally the way that they operated.

“I like you,” he said, trying desperately to tear down the barrier of half-admissions between them. “I like every part of you, Kyoya, even your drive to go beyond the best even when it’s something stupid that doesn’t even matter. You’re my favorite person to play with, besides my brother. You are my friend. But I want to be more than that to you. With you. There’s never been anyone else who I’ve wanted that with, not like this. Everything that I do in my life, I would rather do it with you by my side than do it without you there. But I’m not going to live half of a life while I wait around for you to be comfortable with the idea, for every possible risk to be taken away.”

“I would never want you to,” Kyoya said. One of his hands, the hand that Kaoru had spent part of this morning pulling splinters out of, had curled into a fist against the door. “I cannot be anything other than I am. You say that you like me—this is part of me as well. You say that you like my drive to go beyond the best—that is the very same drive that refuses to allow me to take a foolish gamble.”

“I’m not a gamble, Kyoya,” Kaoru said, stepping in and grabbing Kyoya’s shirt, wrinkling the
material. “Do you really not trust me, even now?”

Kyoya looked more pained than Kaoru had ever seen him before. He reached up and took Kaoru’s wrist. His grip was gentle at first, but then a slight squeeze made Kaoru’s hand open involuntarily, letting go.

“At this time, the risk would be incommensurate to the reward,” he said out loud, the words flat and dull, like they were words he had repeated to himself over and over again inside his head before he had ever decided to give them voice.

Kaoru fell back, stung.

Was Kyoya honestly saying that the problem was that Kaoru wasn’t worth it? That he’d thought the matter over and all he could think was that Kaoru wasn’t enough of a reward to risk his future on? That that was his final conclusion?

“Fine,” he said, tossing his hair and crossing his arms in front of his chest defensively. “That’s fine.”

Kyoya blinked. “Kaoru, you—” he finally managed to begin to say, voice flattened and listless.

“I’m done,” Kaoru said, his own voice sharp and biting. “I’m not playing anymore. This game has officially stopped being fun.”

Kyoya stiffened. “I—”

“Whatever, Kyoya,” Kaoru said breezily, ducking underneath Kyoya’s outreached arm and opening the door behind his back, not caring if Kyoya stumbled as he lost the support. He didn’t, of course. Still, Kaoru wouldn’t have cared if he had. “I’m cutting the strings. I’m going to go spend time with my friends, including you, in one of the coolest places I know. But I’m not wasting time on daydreams any longer.”

His body was halfway out the door when he added, “By the way, in case you missed it with your all-seeing eye, you were wrong about the identity of the kidnappers today. Makes you wonder what else you might be wrong about, doesn’t it?”

He looked back when he was fully in the hallway. Kyoya looked oddly hunched and small in the doorway, like Kaoru had hurt him somehow. Still, if he had any kind of a response, it was taking him a long time to formulate it.

Kaoru was done waiting.

He left.

Chapter End Notes

Manga Background Notes for Chapter 13 (warning, spoilers follow!):
-At one point, Haruhi is kidnapped from a New Year’s festival by several Suoh Enterprise employees whose business contract with the organization has been terminated. It all ends peacefully and comedically.
All Kaoru wanted was to hide away in New York and nurse his broken heart in peace.

Unfortunately, even his broken heart couldn’t bear the thought of skipping Hani-senpai and Mori-senpai’s college graduation.

So, barely three months after that terrible trip, which he and Hikaru had taken to just calling ‘that vacation,’ Kaoru was back to being in the same room and breathing the same air as Ootori Kyoya.

Not that he was being given much time to dwell on that fact.

“The thing about Morinozuka-senpai,” Renge mused, her voice about a hundred decibels quieter than Kaoru was typically used to hearing it—so quiet that it kept making him want to ask if she was feeling okay, “is that he has some of the greatest gap moe I have ever seen, and, as you are aware, I am a moe expert. It is not obvious. You have to really pay attention to see it. But that just makes the moe even stronger, when you do see it.”

Kaoru hummed in absent acknowledgement, wondering again how he had wound up sitting alone with Renge for this event. It had all happened in a blur. One minute he had been walking next to Hikaru, trying to find seats left over in the section of the hall reserved for the sprawling Haninozuka-Morinozuka clan and their friends, and the next Renge had grabbed onto him, claiming that the row was full and the two of them had better sit behind the rest. Hikaru had given Kaoru a confused look, but had then shrugged and slid into place in front of the two of them, next to Haruhi and Tamaki, without comment.

Next to Haruhi and Tamaki and Kyoya.

Right.

That was why Kaoru hadn’t protested winding up in a different row with Renge.

“He looks like a thug,” Renge continued, entirely like she thought Kaoru cared. “And his skill at martial arts encourages that conclusion. But he acts like a prince from a fairytale. Yesterday, I saw a bird land on his shoulder. He fed it some of his lunch.” Her voice picked up in volume, almost as though she couldn’t help herself. “I could’ve eaten three whole bowls of rice!”

“TAKA!” came a cry and a frantic double-armed waving motion from further down the row in front of them. The soon-to-be graduates were filing to their seats. “I’M SO PROUD OF YOU!!”

Renge snorted dismissively, glaring down the row at the way Satoshi was practically vibrating with joy at his big brother’s accomplishments, the outburst clearly having brought her back under control. “Of course, Satoshi-kun is cute, but his moe is entirely surface-level. It’s too boring. He is like fool’s gold—the surface shines, but in the end, he’s just another rock. Morinozuka-senpai, on the other hand…”

Kaoru couldn’t help a snort of laughter at the thought of Satoshi’s reaction if he could hear this conversation. Would he wind up agreeing just because of how much he, too, idolized Mori-senpai? ‘Oh, yes, I’m definitely a rock compared to him!’
“Why are you talking to me about this, Renge?” he asked out loud.

“Gap moe is a powerful force, isn’t it, Kaoru-kun?” she said. Kaoru blinked, startled, as she suddenly slid a wicked looking smile in his direction, the first time she had looked at him at all since they had sat down. “Kyoya has quite a bit of gap moe as well, doesn’t he?”

Kaoru felt a surprised flush suffuse his face and glanced quickly down the row in front of them, where Kyoya was sitting primly on the other side of Tamaki. Fortunately, he appeared unaware that he had just become a topic of conversation in the row behind him.

The back of his head looked really good.

Not that it mattered to Kaoru.

“Nah,” Kaoru said aloud, not bothering to keep his voice particularly low. “He’s pretty much an asshole all the way through. No gap there.”

“Lukewarm!” Renge announced, shaking her head dismissively. “You have spent too long observing him to still hold such tepid opinions!”

Kaoru sighed, slouching in his seat. Why was this conversation happening with Renge, of all people?

Wait, why was this conversation happening with Renge, of all people?

“Is this a sign that you’re finally giving up on Hikaru and my love affair, then?” he asked out loud, honestly interested in her answer.

Renge brushed the question off. “Please, Kaoru-kun, I have read far too many manga not to recognize the signs when one man is in love with another. Those long ago stories of you and your brother were the fantastical delusions of a child. I’ve grown to prefer reality.”

Huh. That was an unexpected development. Kaoru was about to comment on it when Renge continued speaking. “After all, the idea of the two of you and Kyoya is far more appealing. Two brothers, identical in all, including in their hearts! In love with a man who will find it impossible to choose, torn between his love for his family and his passion for his two beautiful lovers!” Renge sighed happily. “I can’t wait to see how it ends.”

“We’re not one of your manga, Renge,” Kaoru pointed out through gritted teeth. So much for ‘grown to prefer reality.’ He should have known it was just going to be something like this in the end.

“Still, Kaoru-kun,” Renge said, scolding. “If you’re in love, you need to fight for it!”

“You have no idea what you’re talking about,” Kaoru said.

“Of course I do,” Renge said. Without another word, she stood up. The tiles underneath her made a gritting, grinding sound. Then there was an electronic squeal, like gears had started up far underground, and, with a rumble, the square of flooring beneath her feet began rising up into the air, hoisting her up above the other observers of the graduation ceremony on a sudden pillar of flooring. “Morinozuka Takashi!”

The sound of her cry echoed through the room, interrupting the final preparations for the ceremony that were happening up front. All of the graduates turned around—including Mori-senpai, standing a head above everyone else in the room, the look of confusion clear on his face.
“I like you, Morinozuka-senpai,” Renge called from her pedestal, pointing at Mori-senpai in a way that seemed practically accusatory. His face became, if anything, even more blank in his confusion. “We are going to get married. Congratulations on your graduation, my future husband!”

And, with that proclamation over, the pillar started descending, Renge laughing brightly the whole time.

She literally disappeared into the floor, at which point tiles clicked back into place, hiding the hole in the ground from view. Kaoru frowned down at the empty spot next to him that used to hold both Renge and a chair, still not entirely sure why she had felt the need to drag him into this whole scheme.

The moment before the tiles had resettled, he had definitely heard a faint voice calling out, “Your turn, Kaoru-kun!”

The room was silent.

Then a loud guffaw suddenly rang out, nearly making Kaoru jump from his seat.

“That girl!” cried Hani-senpai’s father. When Kaoru looked over, he was slapping his knee in delight. “I like her! She seems like quite a fighter, eh, Akira?”

Kaoru and everyone else in the room turned to see Morinozuka-san’s response. He still had his eyes focused across the room, on his eldest son’s face. He sighed, the noise almost as loud in the stunned quiet as Haninozuka-san’s laughter had been, and then he pinched the bridge of his nose like he was warding off a headache. “And here I was, thinking that a wife would finally give my Takashi a break from the troublesome whims of Mitsukuni…”

Haninozuka-san slapped Morinozuka-san’s back, hard enough that the sound echoed. “I kept telling you that Takashi liked all of that ‘troublesome’ business, and here’s the proof! Ah, young love! Those were the days…”

The rest of the room descended into sudden, frenzied, gossiping conversation.

Hikaru twisted back in his chair, staring at Kaoru. Kaoru just made a face back.

“What—”

“—was—”

“Ah, the blooming of love!” Tamaki said from his seat next to Haruhi, taking her hand and pressing a kiss to the back of it. “The most glorious flower of them all! At last, another of our friends has cultivated the garden of his heart to reach its most beautiful state!”

Kaoru was about to protest the crazy idea that Mori-senpai was somehow in love with Renge, but then he looked back out over the graduates. Mori-senpai was still staring at the now-empty spot where Renge had made her proclamation, his face bright red with the most obvious blush Kaoru had ever seen on him. Hani-senpai had pushed his way over to him and now appeared to be talking a mile a minute, bouncing excitedly at his cousin’s feet, smiling widely.

Well, if Hani-senpai approved, that was probably that.

Plus, if anyone was going to appreciate the care and dedication that Mori-senpai put towards his hundreds of Gundam models, it was probably going to be Renge, weirdly enough.
Ugh.

“I think I’m losing my mind,” he said to his brother.

“Have you reached the point where it’s started making sense yet?” Hikaru asked, his voice and eyes far away, his mind clearly following the exact same track as Kaoru’s was. “I feel like logic and reality are having a civil war in my brain.” He suddenly startled, pulling his phone out as his expression brightened. “Oh, wait, I definitely have to tell Nanako about this. At least that way we won’t be losing our minds alone.”

“I guess she should’ve come to the graduation after all,” Kaoru said. She had been invited, since, thanks to Kyoya bringing her on so many of their communal vacations of the past few years, she was practically one of their group by now. The museum she was interning at hadn’t approved the vacation, though; they were opening a new exhibit and needed all the help they had available.

The rest of the graduation was relatively uneventful after that, although, to be fair, Renge’s contributions to events were often hard to top, even by the former Ouran High School Host Club. As the guests all left the hall to meet up with the graduates outside, Kaoru hung back just long enough to catch Kyoya’s sleeve.

‘Your turn, Kaoru-kun!”

Ugh.

He had reached the point in his life where he was taking advice from Renge.

Kyoya paused and looked at him, Yasuchika and Satoshi squabbling as they passed behind the stationary pair. Kaoru fought to keep his composure.

He and Kyoya hadn’t spoken at all since their conversation in the hotel room in Granada. Kaoru had been trying his best to make good on his vow to move on, in his own way. Sure, he hadn’t gone so far as to date anyone else yet, but he knew himself too well to think that he would be able to go that far this soon anyway. This situation wasn’t like back when he had first realized his feelings for Kyoya; he was now in far too deep to think that he would be able to find someone new so easily. Just like Hikaru had done before him, he knew he was just going to have to repair his broken heart by giving it time and prioritizing his friendships first.

And Kyoya was still one of those friendships, no matter what else had happened (or had not happened) between them. He couldn’t ignore him forever—he didn’t want to. He’d given himself a break, but being able to analyze and gossip about their friends was an aspect of their friendship that he didn’t ever want to lose.

Renge had inspired him to take his turn, to fight for what was important to him.

Which, in this case, was gossiping about her.

“Was this whole Renge thing your goal all along?” he asked Kyoya, aiming for a friendly grin and at least managing a slight upward curve of his lips. “You told me ages ago, when I complained about her, that it would be worth it in the end. Was this why? Were you really planning on this from the beginning?”

“No, actually,” Kyoya admitted. He returned Kaoru’s small smile with one of his own, his eyes more hesitant than usual to meet Kaoru’s but still as dark and warm as always when they did. Kaoru’s heart gave a wobbling, unsteady thump in his chest. He pressed his lips together, too familiar with the feeling to be surprised or disappointed in himself. He had known getting over
Kyoya would take time. He had only had a few months, so far. It would happen eventually. There were no other options, after all.

He had other things to focus on right now. Kyoya’s answer had not been what he had been expecting.

“You didn’t invite her along all those times to try to get her to fall in love with Mori-senpai?” Kaoru clarified.

“No,” Kyoya repeated. “The possibility never even occurred to me, actually. I invited Renge along as part of a plan involving your brother.”

Kaoru blinked at that revelation and then scrunched up his nose in disgust. “You were trying to set Renge up with Hikaru?”

Kyoya actually laughed at that, holding his hand up to his mouth to hide his quiet snicker behind it. “Oh, no, not at all,” he said, the harsh, uncomfortable lines of his face having relaxed slightly. “If that had succeeded, can you imagine the nightmare that the two of them would have been for everyone else? No.” Kyoya glanced around and, even though they were practically alone in the hall, save only for a pair of graduating students talking inaudibly by the far door, he still lowered his voice. “Your mother has refused to join my keiretsu until your brother is married. That was her asking price.”

Kaoru blinked, not having expected that. Then he started laughing, so hard that he bent nearly in half with the force of it.

“Wow,” he finally managed to choke out through his chuckling, clutching his stomach. “She must really want you to fail, doesn’t she?”

“She does,” Kyoya confirmed. Kaoru glanced up to find Kyoya gazing down at him, a small smile still curling the corners of his lips as though he had forgotten it was there. It was so fond that it hurt. Kaoru bit the inside of his cheek lightly, hoping the flash of physical pain would keep his stupid emotions in line. “But I think my plan has been going well so far, despite this unexpected side benefit for Renge.”

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“Wow,” he finally managed to choke out through his chuckling, clutching his stomach. “She must really want you to fail, doesn’t she?”

“She does,” Kyoya confirmed. Kaoru glanced up to find Kyoya gazing down at him, a small smile still curling the corners of his lips as though he had forgotten it was there. It was so fond that it hurt. Kaoru bit the inside of his cheek lightly, hoping the flash of physical pain would keep his stupid emotions in line. “But I think my plan has been going well so far, despite this unexpected side benefit for Renge.”

“So you’re trying to marry off Hikaru, but not to Renge.” The answer was practically staring him in the face and he slowly frowned, not sure how he felt about it. “It’s Carmen-san, then. Nanako.”

“Mm,” Kyoya said, neither confirming nor denying. “We’ll see. Still, you cannot deny that having a common target for their shared sense of humor has certainly brought Hikaru and Nanako closer together.”

Kaoru tilted his head. The longer he thought about it, the more comfortable he felt about the idea. Hadn’t he himself wished that he could’ve fallen in love with Nanako? It would be nice to have his brother involved with someone he had so much respect for. Plus, she and Hikaru fit. The same mature cool-headedness that Kaoru so admired would be an excellent counter-balance to his brother’s immaturity, especially since it seemed like her maturity level did not actually extend to her sense of humor.

“You and Nanako are planning to elope?” Hikaru had asked back in Granada, sounding personally hurt above and beyond the way that he would have sounded on Kaoru’s behalf alone.

He hadn’t even noticed at the time that his brother had called Nanako by her name rather than ‘Carmen.’
Well. This explained a few things.

Kaoru wondered if Hikaru himself had noticed his emotions start to shift yet. Probably not. That had the promise to be fun, at least. Hikaru was such an awkward, bumbling fool when he was in love.

“Has anyone told you that your ability to read people is scary, Kyoya?” he said out loud. “I think I’m actually getting goosebumps. Creepy.”

“As you yourself pointed out, my abilities are not always as impressive as they could be.”

At the reminder of their prior conversation, Kaoru realised that he was still holding on to Kyoya’s wrist and immediately dropped it. “Well, we all have our weaknesses,” he blustered, taking a step past Kyoya, into the aisle. “I’m going to go find Hikaru. We’ll see you at the Haninozuka house for the party.”

He hurried out of the hall. It turned out he had pulled away at the perfect time; just as he was exiting, he nearly ran down Tamaki in the doorway, probably on his way back to search for Kyoya.

“Sorry, *tono,*” he said, so flustered that the old nickname just slipped out. He flushed, feeling barely fifteen years old again, choked out the word “bathroom,” and continued pushing past his friend.

Only to realize that the bathrooms were on the other side of the lobby, with hundreds of people milling between him and his goal. It was less than ideal, seeing as Kaoru currently wanted to speak to or see approximately no one at all, with the sole exception of *maybe* his brother.

He hung back, torn with indecision over whether he should push through or not, when he heard the quiet murmur of voices behind him. Tamaki hadn’t fully closed the door behind him when he had gone back into the hall for Kyoya.

Kaoru heard his own name and took several faltering steps backward. The shadows by the door were as good a hiding place from the rest of human society as any other, really.

“Communication is the basis of any healthy relationship,” Tamaki was saying when Kaoru leaned back against the hallway wall immediately next to the door. His friend sounded pompous and wise, the tone he usually adopted for lectures to his friends. “You have to convey your emotions properly or he won’t understand!”

“Are you an idiot? How many times do I have to tell you?” Kyoya said in response, his voice harsher than Kaoru had heard it in years, especially when it came to Tamaki, Kyoya’s most consistent weak point. “I don’t want to do that. *I refuse* to do that. The connection would ruin absolutely everything he has managed to build. Any other person on this planet would be better for him. We’ve already seen the beginning of how bad it can be. I cannot and will not take an action that would make it into something even worse.”

Kaoru had to assume they were talking about him, thanks to Tamaki having used his name earlier, but he was struggling to understand what they were saying. Maybe the conversation had started with Tamaki checking in on him and had then just moved on to something else entirely.

“You’re being selfish,” Tamaki said.

“I’m being *selfless,*” Kyoya snarled back. “You know better than anyone how badly I want this.”

“You’re being *selfish,*” Tamaki repeated, refusing to back down. “Try asking him if he thinks it
would be worth it. Relationships involve two people! Decisions can’t just be one-sided.”

Kaoru stepped away from the wall, whatever response Kyoya was making fading into the background along with all of the noise of the foyer.

If they were talking about some other guy that Kyoya was in a relationship with, that he had picked over Kaoru for some mysterious, probably stupid reason, then Kaoru really didn’t want to hear it.

Either way, he had done his friendly due diligence. He and Kyoya had actually had a mostly-normal conversation without him swooning and ruining it. He had watched (encouraged, maybe, though he still wasn’t entirely sure what that conversation had actually been about) Renge confessing to Mori-senpai. Plus, he had found a promise of possible future fun in teasing Hikaru about his mysterious, unacknowledged feelings for Nanako.

It had been a more successful trip than Kaoru had been anticipating when he and his brother had first boarded the plane. Still, he was ready to go back to New York. Thanks to Kyoya and his red carpet debut at the end of the previous year, he had several commissions to work on in addition to his end of semester work. Unlike his social life currently, work was simple. He would just design and draw and sew and let the world see what he was capable of.

Yes. Everything would be simple in New York.

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When Tamaki and Haruhi announced that they were going to come to New York for a visit, hardly two weeks after Hani-senpai and Mori-senpai’s graduation, Kaoru should have seen it for what it was: a bright, flashing sign that he was going to be kissing his simple plans goodbye.

He had thought at first that it would be nice in a quiet, domestic sort of way to have only a few of their friends visit for Golden Week. Not that New York celebrated Golden Week, but there were still plenty of things to do in the city, around classes and final exams and other responsibilities. The twins would just trade off as host, depending on who had less work to do on a given day.

Still, despite this clear-cut plan, Kaoru wasn’t overly surprised when, on an afternoon that was supposed to be dedicated to Hikaru showing Tamaki and Haruhi a cool pop-up bazaar the twins had recently discovered so that Kaoru could catch up on some of his design work, Tamaki slipped into his atelier instead.

To be honest, he had half-expected something like this. He had been a little bit surprised that Tamaki hadn’t sprung the question the minute that Haruhi had graduated high school, actually. “Are you here to ask me to design an engagement ring for Haruhi?”

“What?” Tamaki asked, frozen halfway to the couch. “Did you— Did she— what?”

Kaoru rolled his eyes, kicking himself away from his work table, crossing his arms and turning so that he was facing the couch instead.

“No one said anything, Tamaki. I just assumed this was coming.”

“It’s not that!” Tamaki protested, collapsing into the couch, face bright red under his golden hair. “Not yet, at least! I mean, not now! I mean… I haven’t even asked her father’s permission yet!”

Kaoru frowned, tilting his head to the side, studying his friend. “Does she want you to do that?” That didn’t sound very much like Haruhi.
“Of course!” Tamaki said, in a way that definitely meant that he hadn’t actually asked her. “Haruhi and Ranka-san are so close, and he cares about her so much. I have to make sure he approves of passing the ownership of his only daughter from his loving arms into my own!”

Okay, he definitely, definitely hadn’t asked Haruhi about this first. Kaoru was going to have to start planting hidden cameras on Haruhi’s outfits to tape this permission-asking when it actually happened, because, while there was no way Haruhi would agree to tape it for him, this sounded like the kind of encounter that both posterity and the Hitachiin home video collection would be incomplete without.

“Anyway!” Tamaki said, face still bright red. “We don’t have to worry about that yet because Haruhi doesn’t want to get married until she’s done with school. But… would you mind? Helping me design the ring? When that time comes?”

“Of course not, but only because it fits in with our plan to make sure Haruhi wears only Hitachiin-made clothing and accessories for the rest of her life,” Kaoru said, smiling. “That way she’ll always have a Hitachiin closest to her, no matter what other nosy lords might try to force their way in.”

“Thank you!” Tamaki beamed, totally ignoring the comment about the Hitachiins being closest to his girlfriend. Their foolish *tono* really was growing up. “I know she’ll love it. Oh, but that’s not what I’m here to talk about.” Tamaki then shook his head, wavy blond hair flopping in the light of Kaoru’s workshop. Weirdly, for no good reason, Kaoru found himself flashing back to when Kyoya had been sitting in that same spot, the day he had visited for the last fitting for the suit Kaoru had designed for him. The way he had looked in Kaoru’s room, in the clothing that Kaoru had made for him, smiling and flirting as easily as breathing...

Kaoru turned back to his desk, trying to banish the memories from his mind. “Oh?” he said out loud, fiddling with some of the fabrics he had lying by. “If it’s not an engagement ring design, then what do you need from me that Haruhi couldn’t be here for?”

“It’s about Kyoya,” Tamaki said from his place on the couch. Kaoru stiffened, refusing to look back around at him, unsure what his face would communicate and whether or not it would be something he actually wanted Tamaki to see. “And also about you. I told him that I wouldn’t say anything. I am breaking my promise, because he is being unreasonable.”

“That’s not very friend-like of you,” Kaoru muttered. He subconsciously made a fist around the chiffon he had been playing with, wrinkling and curling the delicate material beyond repair. “You don’t have to say anything about Kyoya and me, Tamaki. Kyoya has already made his feelings very clear to me.”

“No, he hasn’t,” Tamaki insisted, and, before Kaoru knew it, Tamaki was standing at his side, peeling the ruined fabric out of his hands. “A year ago, when we arrived for your fashion show, we spoke to a man who is in your fashion program.”

Kaoru looked up at Tamaki’s eyes, confused by what felt like a total non sequitur. “Lucas, right?” he asked, wondering why this was coming up now. “Yeah, I heard about that later.” From Lucas himself, not that he was going to confirm that fact and sell out his poor terrified classmate.

Tamaki nodded, leaning back against Kaoru’s worktable and continuing to make eye contact, always patient and kind despite everything in his life that should have made him selfish, bitter, and hard. “We sent Hikaru away with Renge and Nanako to keep them busy, and then Kyoya came here to distract you. It was Kyoya’s idea; he didn’t want either of you to know. I encouraged him to tell you eventually, but… I guess I don’t have to tell you how stubborn Kyoya is! Still, you deserve
to know.”

This conversation was just going to be full of surprises and odd turns, it sounded like.

“Know what? How stubborn Kyoya is?” he said, since it seemed like Tamaki was waiting for some kind of acknowledgement before he continued on.

Tamaki pulled his phone out of his pocket and tapped across the screen for a minute before showing Kaoru what he had brought up.

It was a picture of a webpage that Kaoru had never seen before; the garish use of colors and graphics made it look like it was probably some kind of social media blog. Still, it was hard to pay attention to anything on the rest of the page, because, in a banner across the top, in thick, imposing font, was the main subject line.

“HEIR TO THE HITACHIIN FASHION LINE, HUNGRY FOR COCK?” read the headline.

“He does his best work on his knees!” read a blurb off to one side.

“Sur-mount-ing the fashion world, one man at a time!” read another.

There were pictures. None particularly damning—just Kaoru, smiling and laughing at something off-camera, giving a sleepy, unintentionally bedroom-eyed look out of a window, looking at his phone with a wrinkled forehead as he walked down a New York sidewalk.

Kaoru gaped at the image for a full minute, his entire body frozen and wooden in shock.

For some reason, the first question that occurred to him was, “Tamaki, why do you have this on your phone?”

“He took down the post, with some encouragement. Still, Kyoya and I are keeping a file on him, just in case he ever does something like this again.” Tamaki pursed his lips and, pulling his phone back away from Kaoru, finally clicked the image away.

Far too late. It was burned into Kaoru’s eyes forever now.

He could really understand why Kyoya might not want to show him that.

‘He took down the post.’

‘He.’

Lucas.

His friends hadn’t gone after the jerk because of something Hikaru had said. The showdown hadn’t been his friends’ version of overdramatic, overprotective revenge for one awkward date.

*This* had been what all of that had been about. No wonder Mori-senpai and Hani-senpai had instilled Lucas with so much fear. Kaoru was half-tempted to sell-out that he’d spoken to him again, if only because he wanted to see just how much further his friends would go on his behalf.

Hell, Kaoru was half-tempted to tell *Hikaru* that this had happened.

Except then Hikaru would be in jail, because he would definitely kill the asshole.

He understood why the rest of their friends hadn’t wanted to tell the two of them.
“That wasn’t all,” Tamaki said, quietly, still leaning against the table next to where Kaoru was seated. He turned his phone again. This time, it wasn’t an article portrayed on the screen; it was a text thread. Kaoru vaguely recognized it as being from 2channel, although he hadn’t spent much time on the text board himself.

Maybe he should’ve. Maybe then he would’ve known that all of this was happening.

The thread was clearly in response to someone sharing the link to Lucas’ stupid blog. There were a lot of comments along the lines of “who’s surprised?” and just “hahahahahaha,” but there were also some comments questioning the origins of the success of the Hitachiin brand “from the top.”

“Several clients dropped your mom over this,” Tamaki said quietly. “Even when it came out that the creator was just someone else in your program, bitter over your success.” He smiled. “That PR angle was Haruhi’s idea.”

Kaoru scrunched up his face. Hearing that both Haruhi and his mother had likely seen a webpage labeling him as “hungry for cock” was a bit much for one day.

“Why are you telling me all of this, Tamaki?” he asked, feeling exhausted all of a sudden. What was he supposed to do with this information now? He supposed he could funnel his frustration into his work or something, but right now he mostly felt like hiding away from the world and never speaking to anyone else ever again, because it turned out that, much like he and Hikaru had always assumed, everyone in the world (except for the two of them and, fine, also their friends) was actually garbage. “It sounds like it’s all taken care of. Frankly, I’m one-hundred percent on Kyoya’s side on this one. I really did not need to know that any of this had happened.”

He was staring down at his desk, not really seeing anything. Without any warning, he felt a pair of fingers underneath his chin, tilting his face up to meet Tamaki’s warm blue eyes.

“This was important for you to know so that you had access to all of the available information,” Tamaki informed him. It seemed like the entire world was now just the blue of his eyes. The impact was rather overwhelming, from this close. Was this how the girls who visited the host club had felt? Kaoru could feel all of his unhappiness fly in the face of that brightness and then just fall pathetically away, unable to keep up any kind of sad momentum. “Think, Kaoru! Kyoya knew that this had happened, but you did not. Does that put any recent conversations of yours in any kind of new light?”

Kaoru rolled his eyes, trying hard to look away from that earnest gaze. If he stared straight down at his work space, he could almost avoid seeing any of that blue. “Sure. It tells me that Kyoya’s right and that I’m wrong, that the greater public will probably be even harsher on an Ootori about all of this than they were on me. I should know my place. Whatever.”

“Kaoru.” Tamaki’s voice was uncharacteristically stern. Kaoru looked back up at him in spite of himself, mouth still pulled down in a bitter pout. “Sometimes I think that you focus on Kyoya so much that you forget that he is a fourth child, not actually the heir.” It sounded startlingly like something Haruhi had said to him in the past, and Kaoru abruptly wondered if Tamaki really had snuck away from Haruhi to have this conversation secretly or if Haruhi had actually been the one to suggest it in the first place, volunteering to take Hikaru away for his own sake.

Tamaki wasn’t done. “The vast majority of rumors that might spread about Kyoya might impact his reputation and the possible alliances his father could use him for, but they wouldn’t touch the core of his family’s business. You, on the other hand, are the presumptive heir of your mother’s line.” Tamaki raised a hand to cut off Kaoru’s objection before he could make it. “I know that you think that Ageha-chan will take it from you, but the rest of the world sees the eldest Hitachiin son
Tamaki put both hands on Kaoru’s shoulders, both a comfort and a restraint. “Kyoya isn’t staying away from you because he’s worried about his own reputation. He’s staying away because he’s worried about yours.”

‘At this time, the risk would be incommensurate to the reward,’ Kyoya had said.

Kaoru had assumed he had meant, ‘You’re not worth it.’

If Tamaki could be believed—and he was one of the worst liars Kaoru knew, so there wasn’t much to doubt there—then ‘I’m not worth it,’ was what Kyoya had actually meant.

Specifically, ‘I’m not worth it yet.’

Kyoya hadn’t wanted to be with Kaoru because he thought he hadn’t done enough to protect him yet.

Kaoru… didn’t know what to feel anymore. If his heart kept lurching and swooping like it was, it was going to tear itself out of his rib cage and he was probably going to die.

Tamaki was still standing there, holding him, studying him, clearly trying to make sure that he was okay. Knowing Tamaki’s insane tenacity when it came to taking care of people, he probably would be… eventually.

Tamaki and Haruhi both… Mori-senpai and Hani-senpai, too… Really, Kaoru was just incredibly, overwhelmingly lucky in his friends. He reached up and took hold of the backs of Tamaki’s hands, trying to be reassuring. He realized belatedly that his hands were shaking, and that probably sent the wrong message. Whoops.

“You know,” he said out loud, finally looking back up into Tamaki’s worried eyes. “Nanako asked me months ago if I would be willing to give up all of my wealth for him. I thought it was a stupid question, at the time. Not because I wouldn’t make that trade, but because giving up all of my wealth seemed like the easiest way to put him even further out of my league. But, still, my answer was ‘yes, definitely.’”

Tamaki smiled at him, bright and pleased. “I thought as much,” he said. “Kyoya is Kyoya, so he has a plan to ensure that giving up your position in society won’t be necessary. Since Kyoya is Kyoya, it will definitely work out! Still, you deserved to know. I keep telling him that it’s never going to be a healthy relationship if he doesn’t learn to stop keeping secrets.”

Kaoru abruptly stood and took a quick step forward, directly into Tamaki’s space, the better to wrap him up in a suffocatingly tight hug. Tamaki responded without hesitation, holding onto him just as tightly.

“You,” Kaoru said, muffled by Tamaki’s shirt, “are an unbelievably good friend, toko.”

Tamaki laughed brightly, still holding him. “Not as good as you, Kaoru! I hardly did anything at all. All I did was tell you things that you could have found out on your own if you had known to search. You, though—you helped bring my grandpère and grandmère back to me! And you make Kyoya really, really happy, you know? I’m glad he has you.” Tamaki pulled back, looking suddenly nervous. “Not that—I mean, as a friend. I don’t want to pressure you— Your romantic decisions are your own, and it’s not my place to try to make them for you.”

Once again, it sounded like he was reading a script Haruhi had written for him.
Kaoru laughed, bringing up a hand to hide the way he was practically tearing up over this ridiculousness. Talk about an overreaction. “Tamaki, if I were able to get over Kyoya, trust me, I would have by now. But it looks like he’s stuck with me.”

“Oh!” Tamaki said, beaming. “That’s good, isn’t it? I mean, that’s fine. Whatever you want! But that’s good. Just so long as you both are happy!”

“Did the two of you come here for Golden Week just so you could tell me all of this without Kyoya knowing about it and trying to stop you?” Kaoru asked, smiling in spite of his still-conflicted emotions.

Tamaki’s grin turned rueful. “I think doing anything without Kyoya knowing about it is actually impossible,” he said, running a hand through his hair. “It would be my guess that Kyoya already knows this is what we came here for. He would’ve followed us, I’m sure, except his family is hosting press-heavy events for both Constitution Day and Children’s Day this year and he won’t be able to get away.” Tamaki brightened. “Are you going to tell him that you want to date him anyway? That you don’t care about the fall out?”

Kaoru snorted and shook his head. “No way.” He patted Tamaki’s shoulder condescendingly. “That’s not how the two of us work, Tamaki. Don’t worry about it. I have a plan.”

“Ah,” Tamaki breathed, a hand fluttering up to rest over his heart. “Love is going to triumph yet again!”

That was enough of that. “Hey, Tamaki,” Kaoru said, grin widening a little. “Did you know that your heart is actually on the opposite side of your chest?”

Tamaki froze. His hand slowly crawled to the other side of his chest. He frowned. His hand moved back the other way.

“That doesn’t seem right…” he muttered, hand walking its way back to the other side of his chest again. “Wait… is it…?”

Kaoru laughed so hard that he really did cry, this time. He had the greatest friends in the world.

And his family was pretty alright too.

Speaking of…

“You can borrow my laptop if you want to look it up,” he said to Tamaki as he wiped his tears, reaching down to tug his computer out of its drawer. “I’ll leave you to it. I have a phone call to make.”

Tamaki brightened again. “To Kyoya?”

Kaoru shook his head. “He can languish for a little while, after everything he’s put me through.”

Plus, Kaoru still wasn’t sure what he was actually going to say to him. Hopefully the phone call he was planning to make now would help him start to figure that out.

He let himself out of the room, pulled out his phone, and called his mother.

“Are you dying?” she asked as soon as she picked up the phone. “Or is this some stranger who just happened to find my dead son’s phone, lying by the side of the road? That must be it. Thank you, stranger. I appreciate the phone call, because I doubt my son would call me even if he were actually dead.”

There was a pause. In a quieter, substantially more worried voice, Yuzuha said, “Is everything okay, Kaoru?”

Kaoru fought the urge to smack himself on the forehead. “What, I can’t call you ‘mom’ every once in a while? That’s what you are, you know. It’s just a job description.”

“Uh huh,” Yuzuha said, sounding utterly unconvinced. “Did that asshole classmate of yours do something else? He’s going to be blacklisted from every fashion house in the **world** by the time I’m done with him. He’ll struggle to get a job serving **coffee.**”

Well, that was half of the job done already. Time to get the rest over with as well. “He didn’t do anything else. I just wanted to call and tell you that I’m bisexual.”

“Oh.” There was another pause. Two in one phone conversation—Kaoru really had caught his mom by surprise. “Is this the part where I say ‘I know’? Oh, no, wait. Am I supposed to say, ‘I will always support you’? No, no. Um. ‘Thank you for telling me’?”

Kaoru laughed. Talk about an emotional roller coaster of an afternoon. “Thanks for the support, mom. I knew I should have told dad first.”

“He’s right here, I can tell him,” his mom said. There was a quick murmur in the background and then she was back. “He says that we will both always love you no matter what. I think his imagination isn’t strong enough. Just think of all the other things you could still do to disappoint us!”

“I thought you said it could never get worse than that time when we stuck a frog down the front of the dress you designed for the Jordanian princess and it was still living there when she came for her fitting?”

“Right, how could I have forgotten about that?! That’s true, it can’t ever possibly get worse than that, so I guess we really are stuck accepting you forever now no matter what, trash-child number two.”

“Great. I’m super lucky.” He slumped back against the wall, feeling relieved even though he was well aware of how ridiculous this whole conversation was. “Anyway, I’m in love with Kyoya, and I’m becoming more and more certain it’s mutual, so that’s probably going to be a whole nightmare until we get it figured out. I wanted to let you know in advance, in case people find out and the business takes a hit or something.”

“If you put the business before yourself, I really will disown you,” Yuzuha said. “You better follow your heart first and foremost, Hikaru. We raised you better than that.”

If his mom was back to pretending not to know which twin he was, everything really was going to be okay.

“Just don’t ask me to set up a **yuino** with Yoshio. He might not be the most boring man I’ve ever met in my entire life, but that’s only because I know your father’s father.” There was a quiet protest from the background on his mother’s end of the call. “I’m just being honest, darling. When was the last time he called to talk about something besides fishing? Twenty years ago?”

“I make no promises,” Kaoru said, because now that she had said it, a formal **yuino** with the Ootori family to set up a pair of sons sounded like one of the funniest encounters he could imagine. “Anyway, I know you’re going to make fun of me for saying this, but I just wanted to confirm: you
really don’t care if there are a bunch of stupid rumors about me in the tabloids and it causes issues for the business?”

“Well, I don’t care now,” Yuzuha said. “But keep asking me and I will, just for the principle of it.”

“Great,” Kaoru said. “Then I’m going to try to get into as many tabloids as possible.”

“That’s my son,” Yuzuha said. “Have fun. Your dad says to stay safe.” She blew a raspberry. “Whatever. Don’t be boring. I assume we’ll hear from you again if you’re dying, but who actually knows? Remind your brother that we exist.”

“Give Ageha my love,” Kaoru said. “Remind her that she’s my non-Hikaru favorite.” Slightly louder, he called, “You’re second favorite, dad! And I guess you’re okay, Yuzuha.”

“Goodbye, brat,” his mom said, and hung up on him.

Kaoru grinned and rested his phone against his lips. He had his family and his friends on his side. He had access to all of the relevant information.

The emotional roller coaster was finally pulling into a station, and that station was actually feeling pretty good.

He ducked his head back into his workshop, where Tamaki was apparently still trying to figure out the position of his heart in his chest, if the way he was staring intently at an anatomy cut-out on the screen in front of him and clutching the front of his shirt was any clue.

“Hey, Tamaki,” he said. “Send me the stuff you have on Lucas.”

Tamaki blinked up at him before smiling cheerfully. “Sure!” he said, already reaching for his phone.

Kyoya had been trying to protect Kaoru, had he? Well, Kaoru was going to show Kyoya that he didn’t need any protection.

And then he was going to sweep that emotionally constipated idiot off his stupid feet if it was the last thing he did.

Chapter End Notes

Manga Background Notes for Chapter 14 (warning, spoilers follow!):
- Satoshi is Mori-senpai’s younger brother, the same age as Yasuchika, Hani-senpai’s younger brother. He is the mirror image of his brother: still kind and loving, but extremely loud and extroverted instead of silent and introverted.
- Mori-senpai assembles Gundam models as a hobby. He has… a lot of them.

Foreign Language Notes:
1. [yuino: a formal engagement ceremony involving an exchange of gifts between families]
“Kaoru, have you heard?!”

Kaoru managed to avoid sewing his own finger into the neckline of the dress he was working on, but only just.

“Hikaru!” he protested, yanking his hand out of the danger zone. “How many times have I told you not to startle me when I’m in the middle of sewing?”

“Oh, right.” Hikaru didn’t sound abashed in the slightest. Kaoru looked up to see his twin leaning against the now-open doorway, a wide smile stretched across his face. “Sorry.”

Yeah, he definitely looked it.

“What am I supposed to have heard?” Kaoru asked, resigned to the fact that he was going to have to listen to whatever news Hikaru was here to deliver before he could continue working.

“Lucas,” Hikaru said with relish, not sounding even a little bit apologetic for having interrupted Kaoru’s work. “He’s been expelled. I always knew he was garbage!”

Kaoru quickly bent over as though to study his project, using the angle to hide his smile.

Hikaru didn’t have any idea. And Kaoru was going to keep it that way, because he liked his brother innocent and happy and not in prison for committing acts of homicidal rage.

“Oh?” Kaoru said, straightening the fabric in front of him, playing it cool. “Did you hear why?”

Of course he hadn’t. Kaoru had made sure to cover his tracks very, very well.

“No one could tell me,” Hikaru admitted, begrudgingly. “And I haven't managed to hack into the school's in-house network yet.” He brightened again. "Still, whatever the reason, at least he’s gone. And good riddance!”

“Mm, if you say so,” Kaoru said, unaffected as could be. “I’m glad you have finally defeated your arch nemesis. I really need to finish this dress before we leave tomorrow, though. Have you finished that last essay yet?”

“Yeah, it was a piece of cake. Can I help out in here at all?”

Well, if he was offering… Kaoru made a gesture to one of the side seams further down the dress, turning his own attention back to finishing up the neckline. Without another word, Hikaru got to work, pulling over the spare chair and piling the dress fabric onto his lap. The two of them worked in peaceful quiet for nearly half an hour.

Kaoru knew it couldn’t last. Hikaru was clearly only giving the project in front of him half of his attention, sometimes staring at it, motionless, for several long moments before shaking his head and getting back to work.

“So…” Hikaru finally said after one of these bouts, staring down at the fabric in front of him but clearly not seeing it at all. Here it was, then. “The Lucas thing was not all I wanted to talk about,
actually. I, uh… I invited Nanako to come to Karuizawa with all of us.”

That was not the comment that Kaoru had been expecting.

Had Hikaru actually been so distracted by Nanako that he had forgotten to worry about the fact that Kaoru and Kyoya were going to be in close quarters for an entire month this summer?

That was a lot of distraction. Maybe Kyoya had half a chance to win this deal with Yuzuha after all.

“Oh?” Kaoru said, continuing to work. “Awesome! She likes that kind of historical, small-town-culture kind of place, doesn’t she? You can show her around. Get Mei-chan to help.”

“You really think she’ll like it?” Hikaru asked, looking up at Kaoru, the relief obvious in his clear golden eyes. “She’s never been before, and she was worried about coming back to Japan. I really had to sell it hard. I think she’s worried her dad is going to jump out from behind a tree at some point and ambush her with another *omiai*, just because she’s back in the country.”

“He promised her five years of freedom, didn’t he?” Kaoru said. He was very, very familiar with the fact that it hadn’t been five full years since their trip to Barcelona yet—after all, he still had a game that he was hoping to win by the time that window was up. “She still has another year left, right?”

“Sure, but she’s worried that he’ll think she’s giving in early if she goes back home.” Hikaru sighed. “You’re right. It’ll probably be fine.” He nodded, decisively, shaking the uncharacteristic doubt from his shoulders and smiling instead. “She’ll like Karuizawa. Like you said, it suits her. There’s a lot of culture back home that she’s missed out on. It’ll be cool to see it all through her eyes.”

Kaoru, meanwhile, was abruptly realizing that it really was quite the coincidence that Nanako’s five years of freedom just so happened to end neatly in the timeframe that Kyoya had given himself for his plan, with a wealthy young man that her father surely couldn’t help but approve of waiting for her in the wing.

Had Kyoya really taken all of that into account when making the deal with Yuzuha?

No wonder he had felt fairly confident promising her that he could marry Hikaru off without feeling a need to adjust his overall time frame.

Kaoru felt a familiar warm flush in his chest as he was reminded yet again how brilliant and cunning Kyoya was, even if he could be scarily manipulative.

And this brilliant, cunning man cared about Kaoru the most out of anyone.

Sure, that care was inspiring him to use his scary manipulation *against* Kaoru in a way that Kaoru didn’t appreciate even a little bit. But that would all be fixed on this upcoming trip.

“Are *you* going to be okay?” Hikaru asked, obviously suddenly remembering why this trip might have been awkward for his brother. “At least our families all have our own residences in Karuizawa. You never have to see him, if you don’t want to.”

Poor Hikaru. He was missing so much information, but it wasn’t exactly a situation that Kaoru could fix without simultaneously ruining his larger goal of keeping Hikaru from murdering Lucas.

“I have a plan,” he said instead.
Hikaru groaned. “This isn’t the first time you’ve said that, Kaoru,” he said. “Every time, he messes you up again.”

“I have him figured out this time.” Kaoru could hear the confidence in his own voice; hopefully Hikaru would be able to hear it too. He finally had all of the pieces to try and outplay the chessmaster, and he was going to enjoy every minute of it. “Trust me. I think that I’m on the verge of winning the game.”

Hikaru groaned again, slouching pathetically in his chair. “Ugh, I had forgotten about the stupid game you two were playing.” He studied the seam he had been working on, picking back up from where he had gotten distracted. That was as good of a sign as any that he was feeling better about everything. “It’s not the first time I’ve heard you say that either, you realize.”

Kaoru just waved off this misplaced concern. He wasn’t going to guess too early this time and give Kyoya the opportunity for another penalty. He could only imagine what stupid self-defeating penalties Kyoya would try to impose on him to try to keep Kaoru away and “safe” from endangering the Hitachiin family business with his disobedient sexuality.

“So what are you planning to show Nanako first?” he asked, not afraid to play a little bit dirty to get his brother off of his case.

Before he could say anything to distract Hikaru further, his phone vibrated on the desk next to his sewing machine. He glanced at it, looked back at Hikaru, and did a full-on double-take back at the phone when his brain actually processed who was calling.

“Who is it?” Hikaru asked, looking up from the seam and seeing Kaoru’s reaction.

“I’ll be right back,” Kaoru said instead of answering, which was very suspicious and basically an invitation for his brother to eavesdrop on him.

He couldn’t bring himself to care too much about that right now.

Snatching his phone off the table, he headed out into the hallway, where he finally answered it.

“Hell-ooo?” he said, dragging the greeting out teasingly.

“Kaoru,” Kyoya said at the other end of the line. “Good. I was hoping you would answer, though I would have understood if you hadn’t.”

Kaoru suddenly appreciated on a deep, visceral level why his mom always gave them such a hard time during the rare times that they called her. He had to bite down on about three hundred variations of a sarcastic ‘I had to answer to make sure you weren’t dead!’

After a good half-minute of deliberation, all he managed to say was, “Mm.” Being sarcastic with Kyoya was a good way to get into an arms race that Kaoru had no hope of winning. Plus, it wouldn’t exactly set the tone he was aiming for.

“I’m always going to answer when you call, Kyoya,” he added. “Mostly because it happens so rarely that my curiosity gets me every time.”

So he hadn’t succeeded at beating back the sarcasm entirely. Oh well.

“I remain uncertain of how seriously you took the game that you proposed last year,” Kyoya said, ignoring his commentary. “Technically, you still owe me two favors, assuming you meant it when you admitted that I had correctly deduced your goal.”
“I meant everything I said about that ‘game,’” Kaoru said immediately, the beginnings of a smile tugging the corners of his lips. “I still plan on winning it. And your game, too. I officially take back my forfeit.”

“You—” Whatever Kyoya had been planning to say suddenly cut off. Kaoru could hear him take a deep, centering breath from the other end of the line. “I know Tamaki spoke to you.” He practically snarled Tamaki’s name. Was he really still angry about that? Still angry at Tamaki, his best friend in the world and the closest thing to a kicked puppy that human genetics had ever created? “You know now why the game you are playing is dangerous to you. It is in your own best interest to stick to your prior decision to move on from any feelings you might still have for me.”

“Ah, yes, I might run afoul of my family precept: ‘those who live their lives freely are the winners, but only if there’s no danger in it for them, because otherwise they better never leave home.’”

Okay, so his impulse for sarcasm was still very much alive and kicking. To be fair, Kyoya deserved it.

“I am calling in one of my favors,” Kyoya said, sounding stiff and uncomfortable. The fact that he hadn’t immediately snarked back at Kaoru about the stupidity of all Hitachiins in general and Hitachiin Kaoru in specific showed more than anything else just how hard he was working to try to put some distance between them. “There is an event occurring in Karuizawa this summer, an event that has been planned for quite some time. It would be…” He paused and took another deep breath before he rephrased whatever he had been about to say. “I would like to request the honor of your attendance.”

“An event?” Kaoru asked, narrowing his eyes. If this was some stupid ‘I’m getting married out of nowhere, come to my surprise wedding!’ kind of revelation, like they were in a soap opera, he was not going to be held responsible for his actions.

It was not a wedding.

“It’s a fight, actually,” Kyoya said.

Kaoru blinked.

It turned out that the bigger surprise was yet to come.

“I am going to fight Haninozuka-san for control of the Haninozuka and Morinozuka families.”

The noise Kaoru made was so loud and inarticulate that Hikaru gave up on lurking behind his workshop door, bursting out into the hallway and demanding, “What’d he do? What’s wrong?”

Kaoru just stared at his brother, wide-eyed, voice strangled somewhere deep in his throat, unable to make a sound.

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Karuizawa never stopped being refreshing. For the rest of Kaoru’s life, the resort town would remind him of the summer of his first year of high school—of the “refreshing” battle between the hosts, and Hikaru’s date with Haruhi, and just being young and silly and free in general. Even now, older and wiser, something about the surroundings made the inside of his chest feel all warm and nostalgic.

Still, he had no desire to go back to that high school moment. Not when he caught sight of Haruhi and Tamaki, quietly engrossed in conversation over which of the locally-made jams to send home
to Ranka, or Hani-senpai and Reiko walking down the street, swinging their joined hands between them as they went, or Hikaru pointing out some local volcano-related talisman for Nanako’s attention, or Mori-senpai carrying a truly mountainous pile of shopping bags for Renge…

Actually, Kaoru was going to ignore that last bit for now, because it still made his brain hurt to look at or to think too hard about it, thus ruining his otherwise relaxed state of mind.

No, Kaoru wouldn’t trade his current visit for anything. Even if he was likely to see Kyoya die in front of his very eyes soon.

“I’m not going to die,” Kyoya insisted from his side, more irritable the more frequently Kaoru vocalized the increasingly elaborate funeral plans he was pretending to make. “I’ve been training with Mitsukuni for years now.” The shadow of a wince passed across Kyoya’s face, a quick tightness in the corner of his jaw, the pain there and then gone. “If that training didn’t kill me, this fight certainly won’t.”

“You don’t have to die a virgin, you know,” Kaoru said, tilting his head and smiling cheekily at his friend—at the guy who should be his boyfriend by now, dammit, especially if he was arbitrarily deciding to risk his life over some stupid business venture. “I am more than willing to help you out, in that regard. Ready and willing, you might say.” He fluttered his eyelashes obnoxiously. The offer was entirely genuine (more than genuine, stressed his too-long-ignored libido), but that didn’t mean Kaoru had any delusions that Kyoya would actually take him up on it.

Kyoya met his gaze flatly. “I’m sure you would,” he said. He hardly even looked around to see if anyone else was in range to overhear them, even though they were in the middle of a crowded road. Progress! Kaoru’s ‘flirt him into submission’ plan might have been off to a shaky start due to the unexpected news about Kyoya’s stupid death wish, but Kaoru was steadily recouping ground now that the shock had settled a little. “Good thing I’m not going to die, then.”

“I can’t believe you’re going to leave me a virgin widow,” Kaoru complained, crossing his arms and pouting. “That’s really embarrassing, you realize. I won’t even be properly used goods.”

Kyoya’s eyes narrowed. “... You’re trying to walk me into a trap.”

Kyoya grinned back at him. “Would I do that?”

Kyoya sighed, and, as though reciting from a prompter, dully said, “You’re not used goods, Kaoru.”

“Wanna change that?” Kaoru purred immediately, grinning even more widely.

“You’re not going to invent a proposition surprising enough to make me forget my reservations about this,” Kyoya said severely, glasses flashing in the light from the sun. “You are being irrational. You and your brother always let your emotions govern you. The minute you think about everything logically—”

Kyoya stopped speaking. Kaoru had laid two fingers against his lips, quieting him. Strangers continued walking around the two of them, two stationary rocks in a river of people.

Kaoru’s grin had fallen away, replaced with a stern determination that filled every part of his body.

“This lecture has been a long time in coming, so you better listen to it,” he said firmly, all signs of his prior teasing gone. He had been wondering how long it was going to take Kyoya to give Kaoru an excuse to whip out this particular speech. “You don’t get to tell me how I should think, Kyoya. You don’t get to decide what’s best for me. You don’t get to say what is a worthwhile sacrifice for
me to make and what is not. I am not going to force anything on you, and you’re just as forbidden
to say that you are doing any of this on my own behalf. I formally take away any permission you
ever had to speak for me about any of this.” He stepped back, dropping his hand down. “And, in
the meantime, I’m going to do what I want. And, if that involves flirting with you as much as I
want, then I am going to flirt with you as much as I want.” He grinned again. “You can shoot me
down as much as you’d like, but that won’t change the fact that you are the most incredible,
attractive, awe-inspiring human being I know, and you deserve to be told that, regularly.” Kaoru
tapped his own cheek, thoughtfully. “Anyway, what do you think of muga silk as the material for
your burial clothes?”

Kyoya stared at him, glasses still opaque in the light. Finally, he said, “I’m not going to die.”

“Uh huh,” Kaoru said, turning to continue their stroll through the marketplace, their friends flitting
from shop to shop around them. “Muga silk it is. It’s very rare and expensive, you know. It used to
be reserved only for royalty.” His smile became less rogue-like and more benign, relaxed and
pleased. Karuizawa really was a refreshing place. “So I figure it’s really the only material worthy of
an ass like yours.”

To his delight, for the first time in years, he looked over and saw the faint trace of a blush glowing
pinkly in the arch of Kyoya’s cheeks.

Kyoya’s compliment weaknesses, as compiled by Dr. Hitachiin Kaoru: his selflessness and,
evidently, the well-proportioned nature of his ass.

Good to know.

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Dinner that night was even more raucous than usual for them—Kyoya’s fight with Haninozuka-san
was scheduled for the next day, and it was clear that most of their friends were more worried about
it than they were willing to admit to. Well, Tamaki was, at least, and Tamaki’s emotional state
tended to pull the rest of them in its wake like a particularly devoted tugboat.

Kyoya had explained a little bit more about the situation to Kaoru over the phone once he and
Hikaru had finally calmed him down. The fight was supposed to be very traditional and ritual-
heavy, with only the fighters themselves and one witness each.

Kaoru hadn’t originally realized, when Kyoya had called in his favor, that it meant he would
actually be playing a role in the fight. Still, since the other witness was supposed to be Hani-
senpai, Kaoru wasn’t too worried about keeping an eye out for tricks.

Haruhi slid into the seat next to Kaoru, leaving Tamaki gibbering and clinging on to Kyoya’s side.
Kyoya seemed to have forgiven Tamaki for going behind his back to tell Kaoru about the Lucas
situation, at least. Kaoru absently wondered just how much groveling Tamaki had needed to do to
make that happen.

“I finally had a chance to ask Benio-san about that matter you wanted to know about,” Haruhi said
quietly, eyes steady as she watched her boyfriend sob into his best friend’s shoulder. She absently
sipped at a cup of tea, clearly not concerned about Kyoya in the slightest. Whether that was due to
her total faith in him or just her total lack of interest in yet another nonsensical ‘rich people affair’
was impossible to tell.

Kaoru had actually nearly forgotten that he had asked Haruhi to reach out to Benibara about the
Kyoya situation. He had tried to reach out to the actress himself, but her assistant had taken a great
deal of pleasure in informing him that “The marvelous, incredible, awe-inspiring Benibara-sama has no desire to speak to such a worthless male.”

“What’d she say?” he asked, nursing his own drink.

“She said that he’s been using the capital that he amassed thanks to the success of her movie to make several big contributions behind the scenes, both in entertainment and in politics,” Haruhi said. “She’s actually rather impressed by him, which was hard for her to admit. She says it’s at least partly thanks to him that the Prime Minister’s wife came to the Tokyo Rainbow Pride Parade a few months ago.”

Politics. That had been the missing piece, this whole time.

“Is that so?” Kaoru asked, dragging out each syllable in a slow drawl. Business, entertainment, and politics. Kyoya was making moves in all three. To what end?

“It sounds like you two might be getting closer to getting yourselves figured out,” Haruhi said passively. “Good. It’s exhausting to watch you play this ridiculous game.”

Kaoru chuckled, reaching over to ruffle her hair. “Noted,” he said. “I promise, once we get all of this sorted out, we’ll keep all the rest of our games to ourselves in the future.”

“I don’t believe you,” Haruhi said seriously. “But you really should consider it. Tamaki’s been making himself sick over the two of you.”

That did cause a pang of remorse to echo in Kaoru’s chest. He glanced at Tamaki again, still curled up at Kyoya’s side, warbling about how it was a crime to destroy beauty in its bud or some such nonsense.

“Well, you can promise Tamaki that I have it under control,” he said.

“I’m not going to make him any promises that I’m not sure you’re capable of keeping,” Haruhi said.

That surprised a laugh out of Kaoru, who clutched his heart dramatically even as he chuckled. “Haruhi! So mean!”

“Are you ready for tomorrow?” she asked, ignoring his outburst. “I’ve been asking Tamaki, but he doesn’t know much about Haninozuka fighting rituals.”

Kaoru shrugged. “I only know that I’m supposed to dress formally and show up to bear witness to whatever happens.”

Haruhi hummed at that. “Do you think he’ll be able to win?” she asked.

Kaoru looked in the same direction she was looking. Kyoya was steadily eating, no sign of nerves in his entire body as he gave cutting, monosyllabic responses to Tamaki’s many impassioned outbursts.

“I think he can do pretty much anything he puts his mind to,” he admitted, quietly. “But that isn’t stopping me from worrying, for some reason.”

“Ah.” Haruhi reached down and took his hand, squeezing it reassuringly. “Sounds like love to me.”

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Kaoru was not familiar enough with the intricacies of dōjō to identify if there was something special or unique about the one he was escorted into when he reached the Haninozuka family’s Karuizawa residence the next morning.

He could definitely say it was a dōjō. Such was his expertise on the matter. Definitely dōjō-ish. Lots of wood. Also, lots of empty space. Yep. Very dōjō-y.

Kyoya was already there by the time he arrived, standing near the door and wearing a white keikogi. The outfit looked impossibly strange on him. Even when Kaoru had seen him spar with Hani-senpai in the past, he had only ever worn modern work-out clothing. The martial artists’ garb looked wrong on him, old-fashioned and ill-fitting.

It looked like a mistake.

Suddenly, Kaoru felt bad for making so many jokes about Kyoya’s imminent death.

Kyoya spotted him in the entryway and came over, nodding in acknowledgement. He slowed, eventually stopping as he came close enough to peer questioningly into Kaoru’s face.

“Are you alright?” he asked quietly, lightly placing his hands on both of Kaoru’s shoulders, clearly convinced he was about to fall over. He was looking worried—worried about Kaoru, as though Kaoru was the one about to risk his life. He was only wearing his contacts, which meant that, for once, there was no barrier to the emotions that passed like clouds across his eyes.

Kaoru grinned at him, though the movement felt as wobbly as his vision did. This was supposed to be Kyoya’s fight, so he should really stop feeling like he’d been run through a thresher. “Hey, sorry about that,” he managed to say when he found his voice. “I just remembered that you were about to leave me a single mother for our two incredibly irresponsible sons, and I got so mad that I think I blacked out for a second in rage.”

Kyoya let out a huffing breath, not letting go of Kaoru’s shoulders. “You have nothing to worry about,” he said, making steady, reassuring eye contact. “I am not going to lose.”

“Don’t think I don’t notice how you keep protesting the dying part but not the widowed part,” Kaoru said, covering up his concern with an overdramatic pout. “I am not equipped to take care of both Hikaru and Tamaki. One of them will definitely wind up on the street.”

“Get rid of Tamaki first,” Kyoya advised, dropping his hands to his sides. “He’ll be adopted more quickly; he’s less inclined to bite.” He then paused, eyes dark and considering. “Kaoru… there’s a reason I asked for you, specifically, to be my witness. Have you figured it out yet?”

And, on that mysterious note, Kyoya stepped away from him. Kaoru watched him go, confusion quickly replacing his worry—which had probably been Kyoya’s intention from the beginning.

That manipulative bastard.

“Kao-chan!” Hani-senpai called from the other end of the room, waving at him, his normal beaming grin not even a little subdued despite the situation. “Come sit with me!”

Kaoru made his way across the room, slipping into place next to Hani-senpai and matching his seiza, offering a mental thanks to whatever gods happened to be listening that he had gone with a more traditional hakama for the occasion instead of a full suit like he had been considering.

“Good timing, Kao-chan,” Hani-senpai said merrily, grinning up at him. “Dad should be here any minute.”
“I probably should have asked this earlier, Hani-senpai, but what are the witnesses actually supposed to do, here?”

“These are some of the oldest rules of the Haninozuka clan, Kao-chan,” Hani-senpai explained, his attitude somehow becoming both teasing and instructional at the same time. “For a fight with an outsider, like this one, the witnesses are here so that both sides have a method to tell others what happened. For a fight that will control the future of the family, also like this one, the witnesses are supposed to be symbolic of the paths that the two champions are fighting for.”

Kaoru tilted his head to the side, mystified. At least having Hani-senpai as a witness made sense, then. “So you’re your father’s witness? Symbolic of the Haninozuka family’s desire to retain private control, right?”

“That’s me!” Hani-senpai said, sparkling. “And you’re symbolic of what Kyo-chan is fighting for, Kao-chan. Tama-chan really wanted to be Kyo-chan’s second, but Kyo-chan knew that that would break the rules, so he told him it was no good.”

Kaoru gaped down at Hani-senpai. “His second?” he squeaked. “I’m not supposed to fight, am I?”

“Not at all.” Hani-senpai giggled like the question had been absurd. “After all, Kyo-chan’s not going to lose.”

More than anyone else he’d spoken to about it, it was actually pretty reassuring that Hani-senpai thought so.

Still… Kaoru was supposed to be “symbolic of the path” that Kyoya was fighting for. What did that mean? Kyoya wanted control of the Haninozuka family because they were one of the oldest and most powerful families in the country—he definitely needed them if his keiretsu idea was going to succeed. Was Kaoru just representing the idea of the keiretsu somehow? Was it related to his family? After all, Kaoru’s family had already joined the keiretsu, through his father’s side. Was he symbolic of an early victory and thus of the success of the venture as a whole?

“Silly Kao-chan.” There was a disturbance on the air by his face. When he looked down, he saw that Hani-senpai was wagging a finger of admonishment under his nose. “You’re thinking too hard. You have to think symbolically. You are here to represent an idea! For example, I’m here for family.”

Hani-senpai wasn’t able to say anything else, though, because his father chose that moment to enter the hall.

Kaoru took a deep, calming breath, watching as Haninozuka-san walked to meet Kyoya in the center of the room in long, confident strides.

“The day has finally come,” Haninozuka-san boomed, his voice just as loud and echoing in the empty dōjō as it had been in the full graduation hall. “When you approached me about this matter, years ago, I expressed doubts that you had the commitment and drive necessary to lead this family down a successful path. Today, as agreed, we will see the true strength of your resolve.”

Kyoya bowed low, acknowledging Haninozuka-san’s comments. “I appreciate the opportunity to issue this challenge, Haninozuka-san.”

“Yes, yes, you’re very polite,” Haninozuka-san said, waving the pleasantries off. “As the master of this clan, I accept your challenge. Today I will fight for family. If I prevail, then you will end your efforts to control the future of this clan.”
Kaoru blinked as Kyoya’s eyes drifted off to the side, to look at him.

“Today I will fight for freedom,” Kyoya responded, tearing his eyes away from Kaoru and politely looking back at Haninozuka-san. “If I prevail, then the Haninozuka clan will agree to join my keiretsu, to the benefit of all.”

Freedom.

Kaoru was here to symbolize freedom.

That’s what he meant to Kyoya.

Kaoru felt his heart brimming up, full of emotions too deep and complicated to put into words.

Before he could even begin to try to sort through his feelings, the battle began.

Haninozuka-san made the first move, rushing at Kyoya, clearly anticipating an easy, early victory.

Kyoya moved so fast that Kaoru was barely able to see him. One moment he was standing in Haninozuka-san’s way, and the next he was standing next to him, bringing a sharp, precise elbow down on the center of his back.

Haninozuka-san rolled away from this attack, reaching out as he did so in a futile attempt to pull his opponent’s feet out from under him. Kyoya side-stepped and then fell back onto his hands, his body a graceful curve, kicking out in the direction of Haninozuka-san’s face. Haninozuka-san, clearly anticipating the attack, grabbed Kyoya’s foot at the end of his kick. Undaunted, Kyoya used the pressure against his heel to fling the rest of his body up into the air, twisting around to bring his knees down to bear against Haninozuka-san’s shoulder blades.

“Ah, Hani-senpai,” Kaoru whispered out of the corner of his mouth, watching as Haninozuka-san let out a brief roar and let Kyoya go, tumbling away before turning back to face Kyoya once more, a scowl on his face. “You didn’t by any chance tell Kyoya that your dad has a weak back, did you?”

“Members of the Haninozuka clan need to be ready for attack at any angle and at any moment!” Hani-senpai said angelically, not even bothering to whisper. “If my dad didn’t want his back problems to be used against him, then he shouldn’t have had them in the first place!”

It felt more than a little unfair, but who was Kaoru to complain? Hani-senpai certainly didn’t seem to think that it was breaking any code of conduct. Kaoru returned to paying attention to the fight, which was slowly becoming a game of cat versus mouse. Training with Hani-senpai had made Kyoya faster than Haninozuka-san was prepared to deal with. Kyoya’s blows might not have been as strong as the older man’s, but all he had to do was keep landing them and his victory would be assured.

Kaoru was honestly starting to believe that he might have been overreacting about this whole thing to begin with when a sharp, sudden sound echoed in the room.

“Kyoya!”

It took Kaoru a moment to realize that he had been the one to scream. He was scrambling, trying to
push himself to his feet, to get to Kyoya’s side, but his knees were numb due to the extended time sitting seiza and his feet kept getting caught in his hakama, keeping him trapped.

“Kao-chan, it’s okay,” Hani-senpai said soothingly at his side, putting a firm hand on his arm, making it impossible for him to move and interfere with the bout. “Look, look! He’s getting back up, see?”

Kaoru looked, barely registering what he was seeing. He blinked, trying to focus. Kyoya did, in fact, appear to be hoisting himself back to his feet, one trembling motion at a time. He coughed, more wetly than Kaoru was comfortable with, and wiped at his mouth.

“Is he bleeding?” Kaoru asked Hani-senpai, frantic. “I can’t tell from here. Is he bleeding?”

“No, no,” Hani-senpai assured him. “He’s fine, he’s fine! I’ve hit him harder than that lots of times. He just wanted to make sure my dad got a good hit in to preserve his honor. Kyo-chan is thoughtful like that!”

If Kyoya’s thoughtfulness was going to start extending to letting himself be flung into walls like a ragdoll by random old men that he didn’t want to insult, then he and Kaoru were going to need to have some words.

Those words were going to begin and end with “Stop it.”

Kyoya straightened his uniform and took a step forward. “Haninozuka-san,” he said, voice coming out a little bit more harsh and rasping than usual but still controlled and clear and obviously Kyoya, no matter the abuse he was putting his body under. “I plan to end this match with my next attack.”

“You’ve impressed me, Ootori-kun,” Haninozuka-san rumbled. “You have successfully shown me your resolve. I, too, will put my all into this next attack. We will see which of the two of us is most suited to guide this clan into the future.”

Kaoru held his breath as the two ran at each other. Kyoya darted low, as though aiming for Haninozuka-san’s feet, and Haninozuka-san sprang up into the air, diving like a swimmer, clearly intended to come down on Kyoya’s arms to put an end to the challenge.

Kyoya had been prepared for this approach. He did another one of those super-quick dodges that Kaoru could barely track before mirroring the exact attack Haninozuka-san had successfully used against him moments ago, bringing both of his hands down sharply on Haninozuka-san’s back with a surprisingly loud kiai.

Haninozuka-san crumpled at Kyoya’s feet. Kyoya stayed standing there, clearly no longer worried about a counter-attack. “Haninozuka-san, do you yield?”

“Yes,” came the croak from the huddled man at his feet. Haninozuka-san slowly pushed himself upward, wincing and rubbing at his back. “I yield. The honorableness of your conduct and the strength of your resolve have been proven to me. I trust the Haninozuka clan to your hands.”

“Ah, not yet, not yet!” Hani-senpai cried, bounding to his feet. “It’s my turn! I challenge you, Kyo-chan!”

Hani-senpai’s dad turned in shock. Kaoru, who couldn’t stand to look away from the sweaty, disheveled, incredibly sexy mess that was Kyoya in this moment, couldn’t help but notice that he didn’t look even a little bit surprised by this development.

Kaoru had assumed that having Hani-senpai as the other witness meant that he wouldn’t have to
watch out for tricks.

He had naively been anticipating tricks from the wrong direction.

“Haninozuka-san, would you mind being my witness?” Kyoya asked without hesitation, further proving Kaoru’s conclusion that this particular trick had been a group effort.

“I—But—” Hani-senpai’s dad looked back at Hani-senpai, clearly very confused.

Hani-senpai placed a hand on Kaoru’s shoulder. “Go ahead, dad! Kao-chan will be my witness.”

“I will?” said Kaoru at the same time as Haninozuka-san said, “He will?”

“Go sit down already, dad!” Hani-senpai said. It looked like he wasn’t even planning to exchange his hakama for a keikogi. He just bounced out to the center of the room, like the fight they had just seen had only whetted his appetite to engage in some violence of his own.

Why was it always so easy to forget how absolutely terrifying Hani-senpai was?

It was all the sparkles, definitely. And the ancient wisdom. He was like a tiny happy little Buddha. You didn’t expect tiny happy little Buddhas to punch like a train.

“I challenge you, Kyo-chan!” Hani-senpai announced.

Kyoya smiled slightly, though Kaoru still didn’t like how pale he looked. Haninozuka-san settled down heavily at Kaoru’s side.

“Do you, ah, know what is happening?” he asked Kaoru under his breath. Even though he was clearly trying to whisper, his voice was still loud enough to be heard across the room.

“No idea, sir,” Kaoru admitted. “But I’m guessing we’re about to find out.”

“As the master of this clan, I accept your challenge,” Kyoya said, eyes focused on his new opponent. “Today I will fight for family. If I prevail, then you will respect my authority as your father’s representative when it comes to business and continue to abide by your father’s wishes as a member of his family.”

“Today I will fight for freedom!” Hani-senpai responded, grinning widely at Kaoru and making a peace sign before turning back towards Kyoya. “If I prevail, then we’ll still join your keiretsu, but I get to make my own decisions about my life independent of the plans of my family—starting with my marriage to Reiko-chan!”

Kaoru’s breath snagged in his chest.

Ah.

This had been the plan all along, then.

He supposed that that was a cause he was more than happy to be a symbol for.

“Mitsukuni,” Haninozuka-san said from next to Kaoru, voice suddenly a furious rumble. “We’ve talked about you and that two-bit gangster’s daughter—”

“Losers aren’t allowed to talk!” Hani-senpai scolded brightly, appearing entirely unconcerned about his dad’s opinion on the matter. “Are you ready, Kyo-chan?”
“No,” Kyoya said, falling into a defensive stance. “But I am unlikely to ever be ready for this.”

What followed was quick, at least. It was over before the first wince had finished traveling across Kaoru’s face, so fast that he hardly even had time to worry. One minute, Kyoya was standing across from Hani-senpai, and the next Kyoya was flat on his back and staring up at the ceiling, Hani-senpai sparkling over him.

“I yield,” Kyoya said blankly. “Mitsukuni… even after all this time, you were still holding back, weren’t you?”

Hani-senpai just giggled. “Yay! Kao-chan, do you want to help me pick out an engagement ring? We have to go get Takashi, too. He has really good opinions about this kind of thing!”

“Mitsukuni.” Haninozuka-san rose to his feet. “I agreed to let you live the way you wish. But uniting our family with that… with a family with no honor—”

“Respect the rules, dad!” Hani-senpai said stoutly, wagging his finger at his dad with a disappointed look on his face. “A man with honor respects the rules of the challenge, right?”

Haninozuka-san looked like he had swallowed an entire lemon in one go.

Kaoru ignored the family fight (Was it a fight? Was it possible to have any kind of a normal fight with Hani-senpai?) and stood, walking over to Kyoya’s side. His knees creaked as he kneeled down again. Stupid seiza.

Kyoya blinked as Kaoru’s head entered his field of vision. Kaoru grinned down at him, ignoring the pain in his legs. It was probably nothing next to what Kyoya was feeling right now. He wrapped his hands around an imaginary microphone, raising it to his lips. “So, Ootori-san. A victory years in the making. How does it feel?”

He tilted his empty fist down towards Kyoya’s mouth. “It feels rather more painful than I had hoped it would,” Kyoya said. He smiled, but it was a weak, pained thing. “I had, perhaps optimistically, believed that success could have been attained with fewer cracked ribs.”

Kaoru dropped the imaginary microphone and hurriedly reached out for Kyoya’s chest, hands hovering, unsure what to do. What did a person even do to treat cracked ribs?

Kyoya reached one hand up and caught Kaoru’s wrist gently, wincing at even that much movement. “It’s fine, Kaoru. I’ve become used to it since I’ve been training with Mitsukuni. There’s not much to be done but to let them heal.” He struggled to sit up, still holding on to Kaoru’s wrist. “Well, at least that’s over.”

“So Hani-senpai’s the head of his family now?” Kaoru asked, looping his free arm around Kyoya’s back to help support him, despite his quiet insistence that he didn’t need the help.

“It’s a bit more complicated than that,” Kyoya said. “But the Haninozuka family and the Morinozuka family will join my keiretsu, when I bring the paperwork by, and Mitsukuni will finally be able to marry Reiko, so at least we have both gotten what we wanted out of the whole affair.”

“Huh,” said Kaoru. He slowly stood up with Kyoya, half-supporting him. “I guess I just assumed they hadn’t gotten married yet because Reiko was still in school. I had no idea his family was so opposed.”

“Mitsukuni isn’t one to complain,” Kyoya said. He nodded towards the door and the two of them
started walking that way, leaving Hani-senpai and his dad to sort out whatever they needed to. They slipped their sandals on at the entranceway, Kyoya moving gingerly for even such a minor action. “Mitsukuni’s known since he and Reiko first started dating that this was the path he was following. It is my fault that it took so long for him to see it through. He could have challenged his father at any time, but he knew such a challenge would run the risk of his father abdicating and giving him full control of the family. While I had a chance of beating his father in a fight and therefore gaining the backing of the clan in the traditional, honorable way, there was no way I’d be able to beat Mitsukuni if the clan was left to his control before I was ready for the challenge.”

Kaoru grinned. “Aw,” he cooed. “Hani-senpai and Reiko delayed their happiness just for you, Kyoya. You better get them the best wedding present ever.”

“I’m already planning on it.” Kyoya smiled thinly as he slid out from under Kaoru’s supporting arm and sat down to rest on a bench outside of the hall. The breeze around them was pleasantly cool; Kaoru could only imagine how refreshing it must feel to Kyoya right now.

Kaoru settled down on the bench next to him, bumping him—very, very gently—with his shoulder. “Don’t think I’ve forgotten that you chose me to symbolize ‘freedom’ for you, Kyoya. I feel like that’s something we should probably talk about.”

Kyoya leaned back, resting his head against the wall behind them. “It wasn’t a choice,” he said, voice so quiet that it was nearly lost to the breeze. “This ritual was too important to break the rules, or even to bend them. I was forced to be honest. There was no other option but you.”

Kaoru turned slightly, looking at his friend. Kyoya’s eyes were closed. He looked young and innocent, the same deception that his face always pulled when he took off his glasses for any length of time. His hair was dark and slick with the sort of sweat and exertion Kaoru would never have imagined him capable of when they had first met, all those years ago, before sports festivals and the search for Tamaki’s mother and a game that was five years in the playing. Kyoya’s skin was pale and delicate enough that Kaoru could still see the red irritation along his collar from where Hani-senpai had flattened him into the mats.

Kaoru didn’t realize he was reaching up to run his fingers across the red mark on Kyoya’s neck until he was already doing it. Kyoya’s eyes fluttered open and he tilted his head to better see Kaoru, hazy and tired but not protesting.

“Hey, Kyoya?” Kaoru said, his voice dropping down, down, down until it was barely a breath—a secret shared. His hand ran up Kyoya’s neck, skirted the edges of his hair, traced his jaw, drew random shapes along his cheek, brushed along the slight dimple underneath the curve of his lips. “You deserve freedom. You know that. Don’t you?”

“I don’t want to hurt you,” Kyoya said, his lips barely parting to let the syllables through. Kaoru’s fingers traced the movement, felt the exhalations and tremors in the air between them. “I have made many sacrifices in my life. If you became one of them…” When Kyoya finally continued, the words tied tight like a knot between them. “I don’t think I could bear it. With one stroke, you could make every other sacrifice I have ever made pointless. I’ve never faced a situation like that before. It seems far less painful to encourage you to seek out another path. You deserve better than to be involved with someone who would only bring you difficulty and pain.”

“Why don’t you let me decide what I deserve, okay?” Kaoru said. His hand stilled, cupping Kyoya’s cheek. He turned further on the bench, curling one of his legs underneath his body, the better to force Kyoya to look him in the eyes. “I don’t care about what they say in the tabloids. I care about you. But you keep pushing me away. Just you, every time. No one else is trying to take me away from you, especially not me. I’m a Hitachiin, as you are always reminding me. Hitachiins
are too selfish to make sacrifices. We figure out what we want and we take it.”

“Just a little bit longer,” Kyoya said, and it took Kaoru a long minute to realize that that was plaintiveness coloring Kyoya’s voice, a breed of helplessness that Kaoru had never heard from him before. “You say that I deserve freedom. But your freedom is more precious to me than my own. How can I be truly free if my freedom will come at your expense? I can’t allow that. I have come to terms with the fact that I won’t be able to give you the happiness you deserve, not yet.” His hands curled into fists on top of his legs. “I’m so close, Kaoru. So close to the end of my game. But the thought of asking you to ‘wait’ is repugnant to me. All I want is for you to be happy, with or without me. All of the available data indicates that, at this time, your happiness is more likely without me.”

Kaoru poked him in the shoulder with his free hand—gently, because he wasn’t a monster. “You already make me happy, you idiot. At least, you do when you aren’t acting like you know me better than I know myself and running me off for no good reason. I don’t want to wait for your plans to be finalized. I trust you more than anyone. I already know you’re going to succeed.” He pulled his hand from Kyoya’s cheek, sitting back more firmly next to him, staring across the bright fields of grass that surrounded the dōjō, the Haninozuka summer residence sparkling like a gem in the distance. “Be my date for Hani-senpai’s wedding.”

“The press—”

“Will assume we are both attending as two of Hani-senpai’s frighteningly handsome and wealthy single friends.” Kaoru leaned back, resting his head on the same plank of wood as Kyoya. “And even if they figure it out, I don’t really care. Win or lose, it sounds like a fun trick to me.”

Kyoya laughed, a subtle, pained-sounding huff of air. “Trust a Hitachiin,” he sighed.

“Kao-chan! Kyo-chan!” Hani-senpai cried from just inside the doorway. “Are you two ready to go ring shopping?”

“Be my date to the wedding, Kyoya,” Kaoru urged, turning to face him, wanting at least this much to be established before the rest of the world intruded on them. “Give me one date to show you what you’re missing while you wait around for that perfect, painless future moment.”

Kyoya looked back at him from inches away. “One date,” he agreed, mouth flat and unsmiling. “But we’re keeping it a secret and tabling talk of anything more until after. Agreed?”

Kaoru was smiling enough for the both of them. “Agreed!” he said quickly, a little bit worried that Kyoya would take the deal off the table if he delayed.

“Ah, here the two of you are!” Hani-senpai sparkled, sticking his head out the doorway. He glanced between the two of them, clearly reading an entire novel in the look. If anything, his smile widened even further. “Love is so nice, isn’t it? Let’s go find a ring for Reiko, now!”

Love, huh?

Kaoru wasn’t going to think about that. For now, he was going to focus on what he actually had: the promise of a date.

One date. Their first official date. It was finally happening.

Kaoru had gotten his foot in the door. Now he just needed to keep it open long enough to remove all of the hinges.
Then they could come back to this whole ‘love’ idea.

Chapter End Notes

Foreign Language Notes:
1. [keikogi: the white uniform typically associated with martial arts training]
2. [tatami: Japanese flooring material, often made with a covering of sweet-smelling straw]
3. [seiza: a traditional way of sitting, involving kneeling and then sitting back on one’s heels]
4. [hakama: formal clothing involving wide, stiff pants with a specific array of pleats]
5. [kiai: the term for the short shout uttered when performing an attack in martial arts]
Hani-senpai and Reiko’s wedding was a powerful lesson in the art of compromise.

Since Kaoru had started paying more attention, he was slowly realizing that, actually, their entire relationship had been built on a long series of compromises. The development had been so subtle yet pervasive that Kaoru had never even noticed the balancing act, the harmony that was required to make Hani-senpai more comfortable in the dark while Reiko became more comfortable in the light, the compromising that gave Hani-senpai the vocabulary of curses while Reiko learned the language of cakes.

Kaoru was looking now.

Their wedding ceremony was going to be a traditional affair. It would be held at a private shrine on the Haninozuka family’s sprawling Tokyo estate. Both families would attend, including Haninozuka-san, despite his continuing distaste over the whole affair. The former members of the Ouran Host Club would be the only invitees not related to the bride or groom. After the ceremony, a large reception with a much extended guest list would be hosted at Matsumoto Castle, a location that was both historic and, according to legend, cursed. Reiko would start the night in a traditional shiromuku, then change into an equally respectable uchikake, and then finally put on the incredibly elaborate Gothic-style ball gown that she had commissioned from Kaoru and had not stopped talking about since. Hani-senpai, meanwhile, kept finding new details to tell them all about the cake. Apparently, it was going to be shaped like a bunny, twice as tall as Mori-senpai and ten times as wide.

They were truly adorable, and Kaoru was incredibly happy for them. But he couldn’t let his happiness distract him. As he made his own plans for the day, the same mantra kept circling around in his mind.

Compromise was key.

Press wouldn’t be a problem at the ceremony; an individual would have to be certifiably insane to trespass on property that belonged to the Haninozuka family. The reception was going to be another matter, however. The Haninozuka-Kanazuki alliance was already the topic of a great deal of gossip. Reporters were working themselves into a lather trying to find out what sort of blackmail the Kanazuki’s, a relatively low-ranking clan in a well-known yakuza family, had on the Haninozuka’s to pull off such an impossibly advantageous match. There was talk of a possible investigation being thrown around—not that that would go anywhere, since the government would never dream of going after the Haninozuka family for any reason short of a hostile coup, and even then the politicians might just shrug and step aside peacefully rather than fight back against that particular family. Still, the near-constant swirl of rumor and intrigue meant that there would be both professional and amateur reporters flocking to Matsumoto on the evening of the event, hoping to catch any possible hint of a scandal.

So.

Compromise.

Kyoya was convinced it would ruin Kaoru’s life if the outside world discovered that they were
dating, so Kaoru would make sure they were able to date without the outside world knowing about it.

He tried to clear his mind of any foggy, romantic notions of dancing with Kyoya or kissing his cheek or holding his hand during dinner. It was fine. He would definitely make those dreams come true one day; it just wasn’t going to be the day of Hani-senpai’s wedding.

Still, this was their first date, and Kaoru was going to make it count. If he was expected to act like they were just friends hanging out together as friends for most of the evening, well…

Then he was also going to show up at Kyoya’s house five hours before the wedding was supposed to start.

The art of compromise!

“T’m here with Kyoya’s suit for the wedding,” he informed the Ootori family butler, who gave him a look that said he didn’t really need to hear the reasons for Kaoru’s visits, at this point in their acquaintance. Still, Kaoru liked having every possible base covered. If anyone happened to ask the man later about the Hitachiins’ son (not that one, the other one) and his presence at the Ootori house, ‘he was here with Kyoya’s suit for the wedding’ was a perfectly reasonable explanation.

The butler ushered him inside the house, where he glanced around before heaving a sigh of relief. Fortunately, it looked like he wouldn’t have to endure another terribly awkward conversation with Akito as payment for gaining access to Kyoya’s room.

Unfortunately, it seemed that his celebration had been a little bit premature.

“Ah, Kaoru-kun,” Kyoya’s father said as he stepped out of a nearby door and paused, clearly surprised at finding Kaoru inside his home. “To what do we owe this early morning visit?”

“I brought Kyoya’s suit for the wedding,” Kaoru said brightly. It wasn’t technically a lie. Still, he couldn’t help but be thankful for the Host Club. Years and years of putting on a mask in front of their fans had made some lying-adjacent behaviors soothingly automatic. “I wanted to get in one last fitting before we left.”

Ootori-san’s brow furrowed. It was intimidating.

Ootori-san could breathe and it would be intimidating.

‘My designs on your son are innocent.’

The phrase ran through Kaoru’s mind over and over again, just in case the other man could somehow read his thoughts. After all, Kyoya had to have gotten his powers from somewhere. Not that ‘thinking the opposite’ had ever been a strategy that had worked particularly well on Kyoya.

“I thought Kyoya was using a suit he already owned for today’s event,” Ootori-san said out loud. It was very unclear what, if anything, he had managed to pick up from Kaoru’s thinking. “He just picked it up from our family tailor yesterday.”

Ah. Whoops.

“This is supposed to be a surprise,” Kaoru said, perhaps a bit too quickly. He had prepared for this! He just had to remember his preparations! “It’s a mix of an early birthday present and a belated ‘thank you’ for choosing me as his designer for his red carpet debut.”
Ootori-san nodded. “I must say, I was impressed with the work you did on that occasion. I am sure Kyoya will be honored that you prepared another such garment for him.”

Kaoru didn’t utter his sigh of relief audibly this time; there was no reason to tempt fate. “It’s my own honor to be favored by the Ootori family,” he said. “Please let me know if you ever have need for my services, Ootori-san. It would be my privilege to dress such a luminary.”

“I will keep that in mind,” Ootori-san said, finally continuing his walk past Kaoru, across the foyer, clearly finished with their conversation. “I will see you both at the reception this evening. I look forward to seeing how this new creation of yours suits my son.”

Right. Another reason why the reception was going to have to be part of the compromise.

Their families had all been invited.

Kaoru was guessing that Kyoya’s permission to treat this occasion as a date did not stretch far enough to allow for kissing in front of their parents.

Not that Kaoru was assuming kissing was on the table! He had waited this long for his first kiss; his libido had basically given up on him as a lost cause. He would be totally comfortable with it if Kyoya didn’t want kissing to be on the table quite yet. What was another few months? He could make it another few years, even, probably!

(He really, really hoped it wasn’t going to take years.)

Still, if kissing was on the table, it definitely wasn’t going to happen with Kyoya’s dad around.

(Kaoru hoped so badly that kissing was going to be on the table.)

Kaoru gave his head a quick shake, hoping to knock those images away, if only for a moment or two. Fantasizing about finally making out with Kyoya was a nice way to spend a few hours, but it would have to wait for a time when he wasn’t in the middle of the Ootori family foyer. He needed to get to Kyoya’s room, and soon. If he were lucky, he’d make it there without Akito bursting out of a hidden door to ambush him with conversations about Kyoya’s current grade point average and how law was an inferior subject area to medicine in every conceivable way.

Kyoya’s room was dark when he entered, but that was no surprise. He probably had a good three hours before Kyoya would wake up. That was fine. He had work to do, and Kyoya didn’t need to be awake for him to do it.

He bounded up the stairs to Kyoya’s loft, not bothering to stay particularly quiet.

Kyoya was exactly where he had assumed he would be, curled up in his bed, utterly and completely dead to the world.

“Good morning, Kyoya,” Kaoru said brightly. The lump in the bed didn’t even move. Perfect. Before Kaoru could do anything else, though, there was a slightly irritable nyan~ from underneath the covers and Noir poked her head out, blinking slowly and sleepily at him.

Kaoru grinned widely and swooped down to cuddle Kyoya’s cat in his arms. She allowed this behavior, possibly because she was still at least seventy-five percent asleep. “Hello, Noir,” he quietly cooed, gently rubbing his cheek against the top of her head. “I’m sorry to bother you, but I have plans with your dad today.” He turned the cat around, making eye contact with her. “I’ll return him safely, I promise.”
Noir yawned in his face, which Kaoru took as a sign of approval. He dropped her off in the basket next to the bed and returned to the task at hand, stripping the blankets off of his date-to-be and studying the material he’d be working with.

He took an extra minute or two in the studying just because he could. Sure, it wasn’t the first time he’d dressed Kyoya while the other man had been asleep, but it was definitely the first time that the sight of him at the beginning of the process had made Kaoru’s heart jump up into his throat.

“This won’t be the last time,” Kaoru promised the sleeping man out loud. “After today, you’re definitely going to realize how stupid you’re being, and then I can do this all the time.”

He got to work.

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By the time Kyoya finally started to wake up, Kaoru was practically done.

Kyoya’s head lolled first to one side and then to the other. His eyes slowly blinked open, still hazy with sleep and without his glasses to sharpen them.

He froze when he realized he was not actually in his bed. His head lifted, slowly, until he saw Kaoru standing at his bathroom sink.

Kaoru, having caught sight of the movement, smiled at him brightly through the bathroom mirror.

“Good morning, Kyoya! I already said it once this morning, but you probably don’t remember that one.” He stepped back to the chair that he had dumped the sleeping Kyoya into and did one last pass over with the hair cream he had brought. “And… I think you’re done.” He turned to pack up the toiletry bag that he’d put together for this venture.

Kyoya blinked and then re-focused on the mirror, clearly looking at himself rather than at Kaoru.

“... a new suit?” he managed to say, his voice rumbling and scraping over each syllable. They were his first words of the day, and it showed.

It sounded incredible, like a Kyoya both rougher and less guarded than normal at the same time. Kaoru immediately promised himself that he was going to get a lot more first-words-of-the-day out of him in the future.

“Surprise!” Kaoru said, tucking his sewing kit into his toiletry bag. “I had to use your measurements from the suit I made you last year, so I came over early enough that I could make some last-minute alterations while you slept. Do you realize that you’ve already lost muscle tone, Kyoya? That didn’t take very long. Hani-senpai is going to be so disappointed in you!”

“... It looks good,” Kyoya said, still staring at his own reflection.

Kaoru was momentarily put-out by how surprised he sounded before realizing what this must seem like to Kyoya, who hadn’t been privy to any part of Kaoru’s months-long preparation for this very moment. He’d gone over every single part of this suit again and again, adjusting each and every piece to Kyoya’s tastes, to the point that no part of the final outfit seemed to stand out to him any longer. There was no way he’d ever tell her, but he’d spent far more time and money on this suit than on Reiko’s dress.

But he could see where someone who hadn’t been exposed to every last step of the process of the suit’s creation would be a little bit surprised.
He slowly raised his eyes, focusing on Kyoya’s reflection rather than the bag in front of him. He tried to convince his brain that he was seeing the outfit for the first time, the better to help him try to see things the way Kyoya was seeing them.

The jacket was a matte black that suited Kyoya perfectly, setting off the pale tone of his complexion. It was made of qiviut, so soft and sturdy that it would feel better than silk against his delicate skin and yet last him for years if he wanted it to. The shirt and tie that Kaoru had made to accompany the rest were a bright, stark white, giving Kyoya’s skin a slight hint of color in comparison. Other than the purposeful use of black and white and sharp angles, there was no other embellishment or embroidery on the outfit to distract the eye from the slender, well-toned form of Kyoya himself.

The complete effect made Kyoya shine like a jewel in a band. The suit was all obsidian, angled and smooth and dangerous, and Kyoya himself was an opal, pale and shining with an inner fire that nothing could quench.

Kaoru’s heart thumped pathetically out of beat, straining for something that wasn’t yet his to take, not really.

“Here,” Kaoru said quietly, reaching into his breast pocket to pull out the glasses he had carried to the bathroom from Kyoya’s bedside table. “Put these on so you can really see it.”

Kyoya silently did as instructed. Kaoru’s hand tingled where Kyoya’s fingers had brushed his palm.

With Kyoya’s glasses on, the look was complete. His bangs were side-swept, framing his glasses perfectly. The cream Kaoru had used made the fall of his silky-fine hair look completely natural.

“You, uh… I think you look really good,” Kaoru managed to say, feeling suddenly, stupidly shy. What was he doing? This was his own handiwork! There was no reason at all to feel intimidated or surprised by it.

“Thank you,” Kyoya said, still staring at his own reflection. “Why did you make me a new suit, Kaoru?”

Ah. Fair question. “This is our first date,” Kaoru admitted. Despite all the lies he had fed Kyoya’s father earlier, the truth spilled easily from his lips now, like it had just been waiting for the proper moment to break free. “But we’re going to have to act like it’s not a date at all for most of it. So I thought I’d be more okay with that if I could see you wearing something I made. This way, no matter what else happens today, I can look at you and know that, whoever you’re talking to or whatever you’re doing, I’m still the closest one to you, even if no one else knows about it.”

Kyoya’s eyes widened minutely, the usual sign that he had been startled by something. Possibly by the strength of Kaoru’s childish possessiveness. Oh well.

Kaoru shrugged, apologetically. “I understand if it doesn’t make sense. The short answer is just that I really wanted to.”

Kyoya’s eyes flicked back to the side as he stood from the chair Kaoru had put him in, looking at his own reflection rather than Kaoru’s. “You’ve been working from sunrise to sundown to finish Reiko’s gown on time. When could you possibly have had the time to make this?”

The truth was that Kaoru had only had the time because he had turned down several lucrative commissions and gone without a full-night’s sleep more often than not for the past couple of
months. That didn’t sound like the kind of answer Kyoya would want to hear, though, so Kaoru just awkwardly laughed.

Kyoya’s eyes narrowed at that response, not even a little bit fooled. He stepped up to Kaoru at the vanity and glanced over all the materials he’d brought, from the toiletry bag to the sewing kit to the garment bag hanging from a hook on the back of the door. His gaze focused on Kaoru’s fingers, fidgeting minutely with the handle of the toiletry bag, and then traveled back up to meet Kaoru’s eyes through the reflection in the mirror.

“It’s gorgeous,” he finally said. “I am incredibly impressed, Kaoru, though it sounds like I would not have approved of your methods. Especially because you did not need to go to such an effort. You know that, though I admire your craft, my interest in this area is limited, and I am afraid that I am an unworthy host for something that is clearly a work of art.”

Kaoru’s heart throbbed. Kyoya thought the suit he had made was art.

“Whatever, I did it more for me than for you anyway,” Kaoru blustered, flushing slightly. “Like I said. It means a lot to me just to see you in it.”

“You said as much,” Kyoya confirmed, seeming like he was still trying to come to terms with the idea. His reflected gaze walked a path down from Kaoru’s eyes to his nose, his mouth, his neck, finally lingering on his top, a simple button-up flannel. “You didn’t make a suit for yourself?”

“Nah,” Kaoru said. He grinned, ruefully. “I was a little bit busy.” He nodded over to the bag hanging on the door. “I just brought a suit I already had. I figured I’d change before we headed out for the ceremony.”

“And how long do we have before then?” Kyoya asked. “It appears as though you have removed me from the vicinity of my alarm clock.”

“The last time I checked, we still had an hour before we had to leave,” Kaoru said. “That was before I started on your hair, so… probably a half hour or so, now? I should probably start getting ready, actually. I already did my own hair before I came over this morning, so all I have to do is put on the suit, but—”

Kyoya turned towards Kaoru, away from their reflections, and reached up to tweak the end of one strawberry blond strand of hair, as though Kaoru’s words had reminded him of it. Kaoru blinked in surprise and stopped speaking, tilting his head in silent question.

“Your hair does look quite nice. I told you before that I liked the length, but I don’t think I ever told you how much I like this color.” Kyoya’s voice had adopted a hint of that same rumble that his just-woken-up voice had been full of, even though he’d been speaking more clearly for a while now. Kaoru’s heart thudded nervously in his chest for no good reason at all. “That was remiss of me. You look… angelic.”

Kaoru couldn’t help a laugh at that, turning to face Kyoya, leaning a hip against the vanity. It was good to have the extra support. His heart was still hammering away despite his laughter, leaving him feeling flushed and clumsy. “Good thing you know me better than that, huh?”

Kyoya’s hand slipped from his hair and cupped his cheek instead. Kaoru wondered if he could feel his pulse from there, if he would notice the way Kaoru’s cheeks blazed at the thrill of his touch. “Indeed. After all, it could only be a fallen angel who would go so far as to pursue a demon king.” His lips tilted in a smirk that immediately made Kaoru’s whole body feel like it was a live wire, thrumming and sensitive. “I don’t think it will take a full thirty minutes for you to put your suit
Well, probably, unless Kaoru accidentally mussed the hair he had been so careful to style that morning, in which case he would have to—

“Kaoru,” Kyoya said, amusement lacing every syllable. “What I meant was that, if it’s alright with you, I am planning to kiss you now.”

Kaoru’s train of thought jumped the tracks, hit a brick wall, and exploded.

Hair?! Who could possibly be worried about hair at a time like this?!! Where should his hands go? Shit, he was shaking. Should he be shaking? Wait, forget his hands, what about his mouth? Should he have brushed his teeth extra hard this morning?!?

“Oh, yeah, okay,” he babbled. “That sounds like… yeah, I agree. Good idea! I mean—”

Kyoya took off his glasses, dropped them carelessly on the counter, and pressed their lips together.

Oh.

That was...

Kaoru’s arms immediately plastered themselves around Kyoya’s shoulders, utterly certain that they were never letting go, not ever. He was going to be Kyoya’s newest and most constant accessory: Hitachiin Kaoru, human necklace. Kyoya’s hands had fallen to Kaoru’s hips, rumpling his button-up as he held on to him. The faint pressure made Kaoru whine and press closer, their lips sliding together more thoroughly. The sound of his heartbeat was rushing in his ears, eliminating all other noise save for the quick-quick pulse of Kyoya’s heartbeat, which Kaoru could feel everywhere their skin touched.

It was just...

Kaoru had closed his eyes the minute their lips had met. Still, he could feel the way that Kyoya tilted his head by the drag of his lips against Kaoru’s. The movement made something warm and flickering spring to life deep inside his gut, urging him on, making him press even closer, chasing the feeling of their hearts beating in tandem.

His movement made his arms slip against the material of Kyoya’s suit jacket, which really was impossibly soft.

Kyoya’s suit…

The thought was a niggling itch in his brain. He frowned into the kiss, tilting his own head, trying to ignore it.

He had just finished getting Kyoya ready.

But he was finally having his first kiss! He was kissing Kyoya!

But walking into Hani-senpai’s wedding with red, bruised lips and rumpled clothing was probably beyond the scope of any possible compromise that Kyoya wanted.

If Kaoru wanted kissing Kyoya to be a thing that was still on the table for the future, they should probably stop the kissing that was happening right now in this moment.

Ughhhhhhhhhhh.
Kaoru didn’t have the willpower to actually pull his mouth away, but he stopped actively applying pressure, so that felt like a step in the right direction.

“We’re going to ruin your suit,” he murmured against Kyoya’s mouth, against those thin lips that could express so much, that felt so good. Then he pressed closer again, possibly sending very slightly mixed messages. He just couldn’t stop himself. “I spent a lot of time on that suit, you know,” he mumbled into Kyoya’s mouth.

Kyoya’s only answer to this was to make an incredibly sexy growling sound that vibrated against Kaoru’s lips and shot its way all the way through his body. Then he twisted the two of them, lifting Kaoru up and setting him down on the edge of the vanity as though he weighed nothing at all. He pressed into the V made by Kaoru’s legs and kissed him harder, more deeply, hands clutching desperately at Kaoru’s sides.

Kaoru actually whimpered at the feel of it, his thought process derailing once more. Kyoya was… His tongue was… His body was… Kaoru slid forward an inch to press them together even more solidly and caught Kyoya’s resulting sigh with his mouth. Kyoya’s hands had finally managed to rumple Kaoru’s top up far enough that he was touching skin. Kaoru’s head fell back at the sensation, at those cool fingertips against his overheated skin. He leaned against the mirror behind him, welcoming the support even as Kyoya’s mouth chased after his, the angle of the kiss pushing their lower bodies together even more solidly. Kaoru’s hips twitched slightly, rocking up against the incredibly welcome feeling of pressure.

Was this going to… were they going to…?

Kaoru’s hips twitched again and Kyoya groaned into Kaoru’s mouth, hands tightening on Kaoru’s sides, practically welding them together.

It was so, so good.

No, no, they needed to stop!

Kaoru once again pulled away, slightly more definitively this time. Their lips were no longer actively touching each other. That felt like a big step. He scooted back on the vanity, trying to end the contact of the rest of their bodies as well, though he struggled to find the motivation to move back more than a hair’s breadth. Still, it was enough to bank the fire driving him on, at least for now.

“Kyoya,” he said, ignoring the panting, breathy quality of his voice. “I really want to do this, a lot. A lot a lot. All the time, really, and especially right now. But you and I both already owe Hani-senpai and Reiko a lot, and showing up to their wedding late and dishevelled would be a terrible way to pay them back.”

Kyoya dropped his head, resting his forehead against Kaoru’s shoulder, keeping the slight distance between the rest of their bodies as well, though he struggled to find the motivation to move back more than a hair’s breadth. Still, it was enough to bank the fire driving him on, at least for now.

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Kyoya dropped his head, resting his forehead against Kaoru’s shoulder, keeping the slight distance between the rest of their bodies that Kaoru had created. “You’re right,” he said, voice hoarse and beautiful. “I am being foolish.” In a lower, quieter voice, barely audible, he murmured, “I just hadn’t realized…”

He trailed off and Kaoru couldn’t help a breathless laugh, patting Kyoya gently on the back. “Of course the Shadow King never had a reason to think about how nice making out would be. Very on-brand, your highness.”

“Brat,” Kyoya growled. He wasn’t exactly smiling as he straightened up, but his gaze was calculating rather than angry. His lips were shining and red. Kaoru had done that. The sight made
him want to see what the rest of Kyoya’s body would look like, if given that amount of attention. He took a deep breath, trying to calm himself.

Kyoya wasn’t done speaking. “I will admit that it was nicer than I was anticipating.” He raised his hand to Kaoru’s chin, dragging his thumb along his lower lip. A fiery, just-shy of painful sensation chased across Kaoru’s skin at the touch.

“How bruised am I?” he asked, too pleased about the cause to be overly upset about the result. “I brought a little bit of makeup, at least, but I wasn’t exactly planning on something like this.” If they had kissed at all tonight, he had assumed that he was going to have to be the instigator and that it would be a small, stolen peck in the shadows at best.

He was definitely not complaining about this turn of events.

Hani-senpai’s wedding. He had to stay focused. There were many, many events he would be selfish enough to skip in order to make out with Kyoya instead, but Hani-senpai’s wedding was one of the few that he wouldn’t even consider it for.

Kyoya was studying him. “The bruising is noticeable,” he finally admitted. “For me as well, I’m anticipating.” He glanced at his reflection, behind Kaoru’s back. Then he smiled, slow and dark and sensual. If he had been wearing his glasses, Kaoru was sure they would have been flashing in the light. “I like that thought,” he said, voice dark and soft. “I might not have the talent to craft something that you can wear tonight to remind you of me, but the thought of a mark of mine existing where others will not be able to see it… of, as you said, being closer to you than any others could hope to be, no matter what else this night brings…”

Kaoru flushed, pushing Kyoya away with hands on both of his shoulders. “Okay, that’s enough talk about marking and being closer!” he said. Kyoya smirked wickedly at whatever expression Kaoru was making—probably an extremely flushed one, judging from the renewed feeling of heat in his cheeks. Kaoru just stuck his tongue out at his friend and pushed his way off of the vanity counter. “Let me get my suit on and fix my hair and then I can do something about our faces.”

“Mm.” Kyoya stepped out of his way. “I should probably go make sure Tachibana isn’t searching the house for me.”

“Kyoya!” Kaoru practically squeaked, reaching out quickly to stop him. “Um, if you do that, he’s definitely going to see…” He gestured up at Kyoya’s lips. Now that they were far enough apart for Kaoru to see him properly, he could see that not only were Kyoya’s lips red, but he also had the tell-tale marks of stubble burn all around his mouth. Had Kaoru really done that? He’d known that Kyoya’s skin was delicate, but...

He shook his head, trying to clear the distracting thoughts and the echo inside his head of Kyoya’s low-toned voice talking about a ‘mark of mine.’ “Tachibana might have some questions if he sees you right now, that’s all.”

“I don’t mind,” Kyoya said through his flushed-pink lips, appearing confused by the interruption. “It is pointless to keep secrets from Tachibana. He cannot do his job if I am hiding information from him.”

Well, that made sense. Still… “You don’t care if he knows?” Kaoru asked, double-checking just in case.

Kyoya turned back to Kaoru, the movement slow and thoughtful. He then took a few long strides back to Kaoru’s side and leaned in to kiss him once more, this time a simple peck.
Kaoru blinked as Kyoya’s hand ran down his cheek, unexpectedly gentle, before Kyoya pulled away.

“Kaoru. You appear to be operating under the misapprehension that I would be embarrassed or ashamed to be involved with you. Nothing could be further from the truth. If I felt that it was possible to openly admit to a relationship between us without inviting damaging, painful scrutiny on us both, and potentially ruining your career in the bargain, I would not hesitate to do so. However, my bodyguards are not an outside party. They have been with me for years, and I trust them all entirely. There is no benefit to either of us to hide the situation from them.”

“Right.” Kaoru shook his head. “Sorry.” He poked Kyoya in the side. “You let me spend years thinking you weren’t interested, you know? That isn’t going to go away overnight.”

Kyoya caught his hand and kissed the back of it in an absent, romantic gesture that spoke of a lot of time spent around Haruhi and Tamaki. “I suppose I’ve had more time to come to terms with what I am comfortable with and what I am not. After all, though I was not foolish enough to hope for reciprocation until recently, I’ve known how I’ve felt about you since high school.”

And, with Kaoru still feeling the aftershocks of that bombshell, Kyoya left the room.

That was fine.

Kaoru had plenty to keep himself occupied, now.

He had spent years—actual, real life years—pining for Kyoya, and the whole time Kyoya had felt…well, something that he hadn’t actually defined, but still something back towards Kaoru?

They could have been kissing like that for years?

And Kyoya had instead spent all of that time not realizing how Kaoru felt and then, when he had, pushing Kaoru away ‘for his own good’?

Kyoya was the biggest idiot in the world, Kaoru concluded as he pulled his suit on. He was really lucky that Kaoru was such a kind person that he wasn’t going to hold it against him for the rest of his life.

“Leave your bags here,” Kyoya said, returning and snapping Kaoru out of his mental tailspin.

“Hm?” Kaoru said, looking up at Kyoya from his bag, which, by that point, was nearly packed. He had been taking a moment or two longer than truly necessary to do so anyway, putting each brush and tube away with slow, unnecessary precision as his mind wandered over the events of the past hours, days, years. Some tiny frightened part of him had been convinced everything that had just happened had been a dream or some other freak happenstance, and that the moment he left this room, it would all be revealed as some cruel joke.

Kyoya gave him a pointed look that Kaoru felt, even from the other side of the bathroom. “It gives you a reason to come back tonight.”

It suddenly struck him that Kyoya wasn’t always an idiot. Maybe he could forgive him for the obnoxious delay in the kissing department after all.

“Come here and let me do your makeup,” was all he said out loud. “We can’t go to Hani-senpai’s wedding looking like this.”

Hikaru was waiting for him when they pulled up at the shrine, actually coming all the way down to
the car when Tachibana opened the door to let them out. He immediately noticed the lipstick and concealer, despite the neutral tones Kaoru had selected, and raised an inquisitive eyebrow. “Date’s going well so far, then?” he asked. “The ambush worked?”

Kaoru grinned at him. “Can’t complain.”

Kyoya ducked out of the car behind him and squeezed his shoulder lightly. “I’m going to go find Tamaki,” he said, nodding in distracted greeting at Hikaru. “There will be room in my car if you need a ride to the reception.”


It was a good enough cover story, at least.

As Kyoya walked away, Hikaru whistled lowly. “You’re a magician, Kaoru. Even I think Kyoya looks good in that suit.”

“Speaking of dates,” Kaoru said, linking his arm with his brother. “Has Nanako’s plane landed yet?”

Hikaru turned an angry red, scuffing a foot against the ground. Kaoru blinked and then frowned. The misery was rolling off of his brother in waves.

“I’ve only been gone for a few hours, Hikaru!” he hissed, looking around in concern. It looked like they still had some time before the ceremony, at least. He wrapped his arm more securely around his brother, leading him off to the side, out of the line of sight for Reiko’s currently arriving family. “What happened?”

“She, ah. Hadn’t realized this was supposed to be a date,” Hikaru muttered towards the ground. “She thought it was just as friends, like the Karuizawa trip. I said something this morning… she says I’m ‘too young.’ Too young to know what I want, to settle down, any of it.”

“It’s not like you proposed to her,” Kaoru scoffed. “One date, and she’s talking about settling down?”

Hikaru went, if possible, redder. Kaoru’s arm froze around him.

“Hikaru…” he breathed.

“I just mentioned the possibility,” his brother said, bypassing quiet and coming all the way back around to loud and offended. “I know the time limit her dad gave her is up in a year. It was mostly a joke, okay? I just commented on how… on how her dad would probably approve, if she and I were ready for a step like that by then.”

Kaoru winced. Hikaru was such an unbelievably massive idiot that it made all the other idiots that had ever lived pale in comparison. He mentally apologized to Kyoya for ever having used the same terminology for the two of them, even inside his own head.

Kaoru wasn’t as close to Nanako as Hikaru was, and even he knew that her dad approving of a lifestyle choice of hers was not a point in that choice’s favor.

“Is she still coming to the wedding?” Kaoru asked. “As friends or otherwise?”

“I think so,” Hikaru muttered. “Though I didn’t actually get a firm confirmation. She probably
will. She’s already in the country and I think she really wants to see it, if only because she thinks it’s going to be hilarious.”

Probably pretty accurate.

“Well, we’ll see how she acts at the reception,” Kaoru said. “Maybe she was just in a bad mood from the jet lag.”

He would talk to her. He was sure that, however Hikaru was describing the conversation, it had actually been even worse. It probably wasn’t irreparable, though; it would just need a lighter touch than Hikaru was capable of.

Before he could assure his brother any further, they were summoned for the ceremony.

It was the first Shinto-style wedding ceremony Hikaru and Kaoru had been to since some cousin of their father’s had gotten married when they were little. The shiromuku didn’t really suit Reiko at all, the fabric so bright and pure that it hardly looked like her inside of it. Hani-senpai, on the other hand, was practically glowing, clearly without eyes for anyone or anything else but his bride, no matter how odd she looked in this context.

When the ceremony was over, Kaoru left his brother for just a moment to track down Kyoya again.

“I think I’m going to have to turn down that spot in your car,” he said quietly, nodding at Tamaki and Haruhi as they dropped back and let him and Kyoya have their conversation. “Hikaru might’ve messed things up with Nanako. I’m going to try to talk him through it and see what can be salvaged.”

Kyoya sighed. “How could he possibly… Never mind, I don’t want to know.” He shook his head, then brought up one hand to clasp Kaoru’s bicep in a way that probably looked perfectly friendly to anyone watching but felt much more meaningful to Kaoru. “Go. Mitsukuni has informed me that we have been seated together at the reception, so we will have time to talk then.”

Kaoru grinned at him. Even though Hikaru was making a mess of things, being able to talk to Kyoya casually like this, to revel in the deeper meaning to all of their words that no one else would be able to tell… It was still really nice. “Just know that, if we were somewhere private right now, I would definitely kiss you,” he said cheerfully. “I just want to keep you informed, so that you don’t judge all Hitachiin Kaoru first dates experiences by what is happening on this one.”

“Ah, perfect,” Kyoya said sardonically. “I’ll make sure I keep that in mind for our next first date.” A tiny smile curled the corner of his mouth. “And, for the sake of staying informed, please know that, if we were somewhere private right now, I am not entirely sure that I would be able to stop kissing you.”

Kaoru nodded sagely. “That sounds unproductive. Good thing we’re not somewhere private right now, then.”

“Is it?” Kyoya asked and Kaoru beamed at the heat behind that pair of words. Kyoya let go of his arm, lightly pushing him back in the direction of the shrine. “Go take care of your brother, Kaoru.”

Kaoru went. Hikaru was already in their car; he looked a little bit surprised when Kaoru ducked in after him.

“I don’t want to interrupt your date,” he said out loud, but the line of tension in his shoulders was already relaxing in obvious relief.
“Don’t worry about it,” Kaoru said. “I think it’s off to a pretty good start, actually. There are likely to be at least a few more dates in the future, I’m thinking.”

“That’s good,” Hikaru said, not sounding like he meant it even a little bit. Oh, his foolish, selfish, easily distracted brother. What would Kaoru do without him? “I’m glad at least one of us has today working out for him.”

Kaoru sighed, leaning against Hikaru’s side supportively. “Tell me exactly what you said, Hikaru. Let’s see what we can do to fix it.”

From Hikaru’s description, it wasn’t actually as bad as Kaoru had been fearing. Hikaru honestly had been joking, it sounded like, and Nanako, surprised by the nature of the ‘date’ and then reminded of the swiftly-approaching end to her days of freedom, had reacted poorly.

“Let me talk to her,” Kaoru said. “If she shows up to the wedding, that is. It sounds like she was already worked up and just read into everything the wrong way. Hopefully, if it’s me talking to her instead of you, she’ll be able to take a minute to think about things.”

“Yeah, okay,” Hikaru said, either automatically trusting Kaoru or automatically trying to avoid extra emotional labor, it was tough to tell.

Kaoru really hoped that his brother’s trust (or laziness) wasn’t misplaced. Not only did Kyoya and Hikaru both seem to be relying on this relationship with Nanako working out, but Kaoru knew himself well enough to know that it would be nearly impossible for him to concentrate on any relationship of his own so long as Hikaru was struggling.

He would have to figure this thing out. For all their sakes.

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When Nanako dismissed herself from the former-host-club-and-companions table to use the powder-room, Kaoru followed her. He waited patiently outside the bathroom, finally clearing his throat when she stepped back into the hallway. She didn’t look even a little bit surprised to see him.

“I know, I know,” Nanako said before he could say a word, leaning against the hallway wall next to him and covering her eyes with one delicate hand. “I overreacted, and now everything’s awkward.”

Kaoru raised his hands, innocently. “I haven’t actually said anything yet.”

Nanako snorted indelicately in her gorgeous evening gown, always a fascinating contrast between the posh and the down-to-earth. She dropped her hand and narrowed her eyes at Kaoru. “If Hikaru wants to prove to me that he’s an adult, he should probably handle his own problems, don’t you think?”

Kaoru leaned against the wall next to her. To anyone else passing by, they probably looked like any other couple, taking a brief moment away from the wackiness of the main room, which had been hosting a performance of kendo techniques that seemed to be on the verge of devolving into a full-on brawl between the Haninozuka family and a few of the yakuza clans when they had left the room.

Kaoru’s money was not on the yakuza.

“I’m not here to solve Hikaru’s problems for him,” he said, which was only a partial lie. “I know you didn’t go to Ouran, so I just wanted to give you a little background on how things worked
there. Just so you have all the information for whenever you do have a conversation with Hikaru
again."

“Sure, sure.” Nanako waved a hand dismissively. “Explain away, senpai.”

Kaoru just accepted the term, ignoring the sarcasm with which it had been delivered. “Hani-senpai
and Reiko have been dating since her first year of high school,” he started out by saying. “They
have never dated anyone else. They’ve wanted to get married for years, but were held back by the
objections of Hani-senpai’s family, which he finally overcame this past summer. Haruhi and
Tamaki have been dating since her second year of high school. In her entire life, Haruhi has only
gone on two dates that weren’t with him. Tamaki has never dated anyone but her. They are
planning on getting married as soon as Haruhi graduates from law school. Kanan and Kuze—they
were the couple sitting at the table behind us, the smiling woman and the man who kept
challenging Kyoya to sushi-eating contests—they got engaged in middle school. Needless to say,
neither of them have ever dated anyone else. They got married as soon as they both turned twenty.”

“What is in the water at Ouran?” Nanako asked, laughing her tinkling, sarcastic laugh. “That’s the
point of this story, right? That Ouran creates weirdly young monogamous couples who last
forever?”

“Not at all,” Kaoru said, smiling an equally sarcastic smile at her. “You’re thinking about this story
backwards. It’s not that Ouran creates these couples. It’s that these couples are made of the types of
people who go to Ouran.”

Nanako thought about this for a minute. It was a good sign; at least she wasn’t just immediately
writing him off. “You’re saying this is another old-money rich people thing,” she finally said.

Kaoru made a ding noise of approval, like on a game show. “Got it in one. Several of us have
families that want to arrange marriages for the good of the business. That was the situation with
Kanan and Kuze, and is also the situation with the Ootori’s, which you yourself almost fell victim
to. If that’s the case for a couple, the people involved in the arrangement, like Kanan and Kuze, or
like Kyoya’s sister Fuyumi and her husband, often grow to truly care for each other. After all,
there’s no point in sabotaging your own happiness, especially if any choice otherwise has been
taken from you. For those of us who theoretically have a choice…” Kaoru shrugged. “‘Choices’
are often more complicated than they seem. Most of us could never date a commoner. It’s not a
matter of discrimination—it’s just a lack of common ground. Dating a commoner runs the risk of
trusting your heart to someone who doesn’t understand the unwritten rules of the society to which
we belong. Such a person could hurt you grievously and never even realize that they had done it.”
He smiled ruefully. "I learned this lesson the hard way. I once went on a date with a former
classmate of mine." The word 'former' tasted sweet in his mouth. "When I rejected him, all it took
was one bitter, unthinking stroke for him to do measurable, irreparable damage to my mother's
business. It only makes sense, then, that even those of us capable of a choice tend to gravitate
towards our own."

He spread his arms demonstratively. “What I’m really trying to say is that, once we’ve found a
person who is like us, a person who understands our lifestyle, a person that we could see ourselves
happy with for the rest of our lives… well, we tend to stick to that person like a burr. We work to
make the relationship work, because often both sides have too much to lose, financially as well as
emotionally, to allow the relationship to crumble. It might not be romantic, but it’s more than
effective inspiration to keep a relationship strong.”

There was a pause for a long, thoughtful minute. Kanan walked past, waving merrily at Kaoru
before she ducked past them into the bathroom.
“You say all of that like it’s for the best,” Nanako finally said. “But it sounds miserable to me. What about love?”

“Love can grow out of all kinds of situations,” Kaoru said. He nodded towards the bathroom door. “Kanan and Kuze are very much in love, despite the fact that they weren’t the ones to make the formal arrangements for their relationship originally. Hani-senpai and Reiko are so in love that sometimes it makes me want to punch a teddy bear, just to lessen the world’s cuteness level a little bit. Plus, don’t act like you’re one of the people without a choice at all. Your dad has given you another year to live life as freely as you want before he calls you back to heel. A lot could happen in that year. Date Hikaru or don’t. Date some guy in Spain or don’t. Hell, try to win Renge away from Mori-senpai—actually, now that I say that, that’s the one I’m in favor of. Forget Hikaru; do that one.” He grinned and Nanako rolled her eyes at him. “But just because we’re raised from a young age to be aware of our future responsibilities and expectations, that doesn’t mean we’re all trapped. It just means we’re realistic. And just because Hikaru is a few years younger than you, that doesn’t mean he doesn’t know what he wants. We’re currently attending a wedding for a man hardly two years older than he and I are. I’m not saying that means you should forgive him for being an idiot, because that’s basically built in for him, so if you can’t handle that, it’s better to know that now. I’m definitely not saying you need to marry him or anything. After all, I’m currently Team ‘Please Get Renge Away From Mori-senpai’. But I wanted to explain part of where Hikaru’s coming from, at least, because he sucks at putting big stuff like this into words.”

They stood in silence for so long that Kaoru wondered if Nanako was actually going to respond to him at all.

“You’re so wise-acting that it’s kind of gross,” she finally said. “Hikaru is way more fun.”

Kaoru laughed at that one. “I agree with you one hundred percent,” he said. “I would rather spend time with him than with me too.”

“So, Mr. Wisdom, are you applying any of that sage advice to yourself? I seem to recall a family of particular interest to you being included among your list of the ones that ‘often arranges marriages.’”

“We are actually on our first date right now, if you must know,” Kaoru said, smiling. The smile sobered slightly as he admitted, “We’re still not sure what’s going to come of all of it. We haven’t even agreed that there will be more dates. But he says he has a plan to make everything work out, and I trust him. It’s like I said. For people like us, just being willing to fight for a relationship is half the battle won.”

“Well, I’m rooting for you,” Nanako said, pushing herself away from the wall. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’m going to go touch up my makeup again. And then it sounds like I have a terrifying young woman that I should try seducing away from her extremely tall boyfriend.”

“Extremely tall fiancé,” Kaoru corrected, wincing at the reminder. “... we think. No one is actually sure what is going on with the two of them.”

He had asked Hani-senpai, a couple of weeks ago, and all Hani-senpai had said was, “Love is so nice, isn’t it, Kao-chan?” which had implications so many and varied that Kaoru hadn’t dared attempt to unpack it. Hikaru had asked Mori-senpai himself and, according to Hikaru’s report after the fact, Mori-senpai had just blinked and blushed a little, which was so terrifying that the twins were refusing to think about it.

“Even better,” Nanako said. She leaned down and kissed Kaoru’s cheek. “Good luck with your date, Kaoru. Tell mine that I’m not going to attempt another bathroom escape, in case he’s
worried.”

“I will,” Kaoru promised, and pushed away from the wall to head back to his seat.

As he was re-entering the main hall, his phone buzzed in his pocket. He frowned, not sure who would be messaging him—practically everyone he knew was at this wedding somewhere, after all.

His frown eased as he pulled his phone out and saw that the message was from Kyoya.

_I was thinking_, the message said, _that, if you wanted to start designing outfits for me on a regular basis, that would be of great benefit to the both of us. Your brand would continue to be placed in the public eye and my own status as a patron of the arts would be reinforced. The only potential downside would be all of the extra time we would need to spend together, for fittings and the like._

Ah.

Kaoru’s grin curled all the way across his face, stretching his cheeks.

That was future dates figured out, then.

_You are my favorite customer_, he typed back. He then looked up, still hovering in the doorway to the hall, focusing across the room on Kyoya. His date was ignoring the rest of their table and looking down at his phone. Kaoru could see him smile at Kaoru’s message from across the room before he typed something in response, his long fingers flicking purposefully across his phone.

_Good. I don’t share well_, read the response when it had pinged its way into Kaoru’s hand. Immediately on its heels came the follow-up message, _I don’t beg lightly, but please come back soon. Your brother is about to begin crying into his sushi._

Kaoru laughed quietly and slipped his phone back into his pocket. It did look like Hikaru was pretty distraught, from where he was standing. Better go let him know that he and Nanako had had a good talk.

First dates and first kisses and good talks and now, finally, _finally_, the promise of more to come.

And all it had taken was one foot in the door, Kaoru thought with satisfaction, making his way back to his seat.

Chapter End Notes

Manga Background Notes for Chapter 16 (warning, spoilers follow!):
-Kuze Takeshi and Matsuyama Kanan are two students in the same year as Hani-senpai and Mori-senpai. Their families are friends with Kyoya’s family.

Foreign Language Notes:
1. _[shiromuku]: a pure white outfit traditionally worn for Shinto weddings_
2. _[uchikake]: an elaborately embroidered silk robe that a woman will typically wear for the beginning of a wedding reception_]
Game Over, Part One (Christmas, Year 4)

Christmas was coming, and it was going to be the first where every single member of the former Ouran High School Host Club had a significant other to spend it with, where no one would be left out when it came time for couple’s cake.

So, of course, Kyoya and Tamaki had rented out a private island in the Caribbean for all of them to share for the week.

Not that Kaoru was complaining, despite knowing that this meant he was going to be forced to celebrate the romantic holiday with his friends as well as with his newly-acquired boyfriend.

How could he complain? After all, a private island in the Caribbean was about as far away from nosy reporters and blog writers as it was possible to get. He and Kyoya were actually going to be able to share a room overnight, for the first time since they had begun dating. They would be able to kiss somewhere besides the hidden, windowless, not-at-all-romantic hideaway of Kyoya’s bathroom. They would be able to hold hands out on the beach and eat off of each other’s forks at dinner.

Not that Kaoru thought that Kyoya would have much interest in eating off of Kaoru’s fork so long as he had a perfectly serviceable fork of his own. Still, he would be able to eat off of Kyoya’s fork if he wanted to, and that was the important thing.

So Kaoru was very, very comfortable with the concept of this romantic group retreat, despite it not being as private as one who was less accustomed to the idiosyncrasies of the Ouran High School Host Club might have expected for a couple’s first Christmas together.

Plus, though Kaoru would never admit this bit out loud, it was actually a relief to know that, even as he was going to be sharing a room with his boyfriend for their first ever couple’s vacation, his brother would never be more than a door or two away. That was probably at least part of the reason why Kyoya had agreed to go along with Tamaki’s grand plans for the trip in the first place.

His boyfriend tended to be thoughtful like that.

One day Kaoru would get over the little thrill he felt every time he thought of Kyoya as his ‘boyfriend.’ He had a feeling it wasn’t going to happen anytime soon. Hikaru definitely would have been totally disgusted by his behavior, if he hadn’t been in the middle of constantly swooning over his now-official girlfriend every opportunity that he got.

All of this fantasizing and anticipation meant that he and Hikaru were both excited—to put it mildly—when they finally reached the island.

“The sand is pink!” Kaoru exclaimed, clutching his brother’s shoulder.

“So pink!” Hikaru exclaimed in return, clinging onto Kaoru’s elbow. “The ocean is green!”

“So green!” Kaoru cried.

“Hooray for Christmas!” they cried together. “Hooray for the beach!”

“Calm down,” Kyoya said.

“Please don’t stop them,” Nanako said. “This is hilarious.”
“Hooray vacations! Hooray islands!” the twins said before turning to their respective significant others with matching beaming, wicked grins.

“Nude swimming?” they suggested.

“I’m going to go check that the staff have all reached the island safely,” Kyoya said, making a very casual, slow-moving, and unmistakable break for it.

“Kyoya!” Kaoru cried, abandoning his brother to chase after his boyfriend, dodging around Hani-senpai and Reiko as they walked along the beach and giggled at him. When he finally caught up to Kyoya, just inside the main villa, he bobbed around his feet beseechingly. “Make Hotta do it! Doesn’t nude swimming sound like fun? I’ve never tried it before—this is the perfect opportunity!”

“I do not see the appeal,” Kyoya said, unmoved. “Sand is troublesome. If you would like to see me nude and covered in water, our room has a perfectly serviceable bath.”

Kaoru froze. Kyoya made it several more steps before noticing, glancing back over his shoulder with a smirk curling the corner of his mouth.

“Oh? Did you not want to bathe with me later?”

Kaoru was not going to survive this vacation. He was definitely, one-hundred percent, for sure going to die.

But what a way to go.

“We should go see our room,” he said immediately, rushing to catch up with Kyoya again, grabbing his wrist and holding on tightly. “We should go see our room right now. Just to make sure it’s in an acceptable condition. It’ll be a room-check. Very professional. Very necessary.”

“Later,” Kyoya stressed, tugging his arm loose from Kaoru’s hold until he could slide free of his grip. Kaoru barely had a moment to feel disappointed before Kyoya gently tangled their fingers together. When Kaoru glanced at his boyfriend’s face, it was to find that his smirk had faded into a soft, subtle smile. Kaoru really loved vacations. “I really do need to make sure all of the staff arrived safely. Can you imagine if this group were missing a cook for an entire week?”

“It would be fine. Haruhi would just cook for us.” Kaoru tried to tow Kyoya in the direction of the bungalows using their joined hands, but Kyoya stayed stubbornly on his own path.

“This is supposed to be Haruhi’s vacation as well,” Kyoya pointed out. “You’re lucky that selfishness is one of your charming points.”

“You think that all of my points are charming points,” Kaoru argued, delighted at the way his words made Kyoya’s smile curl up even further.

“I will admit to no such thing,” Kyoya said, like his expression wasn’t an admission all its own.

“It’s okay, I think that all of your points are charming points too,” Kaoru said, watching carefully for the tell-tale hint of pink along the crest of Kyoya’s cheeks that showed that one of Kaoru’s compliments had hit home. “Especially your ass.”

“Kaoru,” Kyoya said evenly, eyes flicking down to meet his as though to say ‘I know what you’re looking for and I’m not going to give you the pleasure.’
“What? It’s not my fault that you have an extremely charming ass,” Kaoru replied, trying and failing to match Kyoya’s serious tone even as a mile-wide smile stretched across his face. Whatever. He was never going to lose that smile again at this rate, so Kyoya was just going to have to deal with it.

“If you’re just going to try to distract me, then you can go bother your brother until I’m done,” Kyoya said.

“Does that mean the distraction is working?” Kaoru asked before pressing a quick apologetic kiss to Kyoya’s cheek. “Sorry, sorry. Go do your hyper-competent thing, Shadow King. I’ll keep myself entertained, I promise. Not with Hikaru, though, because I’m guessing Nanako wasn’t as anti-nude swimming as some people I know.”

Kyoya’s disgust at the thought was clear in the subtle crinkling of the skin around his nose. Kaoru just laughed, kissed him on the other cheek just because he could! and dropped back to let his boyfriend go to work.

Then he found a seat from which he could watch Kyoya coldly and dispassionately terrify several employees into acceptable shape.

Vacations really were the best.

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It turned out that sleeping in a bed with someone who wasn’t Hikaru was… different.

Kyoya didn’t snore, for one thing. Not that Hikaru snored, not really, but he definitely breathed loudly in a sleepy, satisfied sort of way. Kyoya, on the other hand, practically slept like he was dead, quiet and still, breathing soft and even and only audible at all if Kaoru was really listening for it.

Another thing was that Kyoya didn’t move much in his sleep. Kaoru was used to Hikaru starfishing his way across the bed over the course of the night, leaving him to contort his body into whatever free space was left available. Kyoya’s natural inclination to sleep like the dead meant that he tended to stay in one location all night long, stretched out on his back with his head nestled against his pillow.

A third thing was that Kyoya seemed to run much cooler than Hikaru, probably due to his low blood pressure. At home, Kaoru would often be torn between overheating beneath the blankets with Hikaru or freezing on top of the blankets alone. With Kyoya in bed with him, the perfect temperature seemed to be a constant.

Sharing a bed with Kyoya was obviously a superior experience to sharing a bed with his brother in every conceivable way, which made it exceptionally stupid that Kaoru spent their first night together tossing, turning, and otherwise utterly unable to sleep.

How was it even possible that sleeping with someone who might as well have been his perfect sleeping companion somehow made him miss his brother’s obnoxious bedtime quirks?

He got out of bed at sunrise, giving the night up as a lost cause. He would just drink a bucket of coffee and hope that when the next night rolled around he’d be tired enough to pass out without noticing how strange his sleeping situation had become.

Nanako was already in the eating area in the main villa when he got there. She raised a cup of coffee as a salute to him from across the room.
“I can’t believe you’ve ever managed to get a full night’s sleep in your entire life,” she said, nursing her cup as Kaoru collapsed into the seat next to her, slumping over the table pathetically. “He’s a monster.”

“You get used to it,” Kaoru said in response, the truth of that simple statement paining him deeply. “Please tell me how you got coffee, because I think my body might just give up on this cold cruel world without it.”

“Is Kyoya that bad too?” she murmured. She must have signalled to the butler or something for him, because, by the time he managed to lift his head off of the table, there was a steaming mug in front of him. He sighed in pathetic gratefulness and gathered the mug in his hands.

“Worse,” he said in belated response to her question. “Kyoya’s perfect. He’s practically the best sleeping companion possible. It’s me. I’m a broken man.”

Nanako’s sigh might have been a snort of laughter if she had been better rested. “I guess you weren’t kidding when you said that you get used to it.”

“I cannot stress enough how much I wasn’t kidding,” Kaoru replied, sipping his coffee. He couldn’t even muster the energy to scowl when it burned his tongue.

“Things are going well with the two of you, then?” Nanako asked as she gently pried Kaoru’s cup from his hands, clearly trying to save him from himself. “You should probably let that cool a little while longer.”

“I don’t need a tongue as much as I need that coffee,” Kaoru said. His voice was stubborn, but he let her take his cup without any further argument. “Yeah, things are great. Well, as great as they possibly can be, for a secret relationship where most of our ‘dates’ involve hiding out in his bathroom for a few minutes, pretending to be adjusting an outfit I’ve made for him.”

Nanako frowned. “That doesn’t sound very ‘great’ to me.”

Kaoru waved off her concern. “You sound like him. That’s the real reason he didn’t want to date me, you know, because he thought I could do better. He thought that he’d be limiting me. But I would take stolen moments with him over a public and extravagant relationship with anybody else every time, no matter what he thinks is ‘best’ for me.”

Kaoru was probably rambling. Oh well. They couldn’t all be moments of wisdom.

“Huh. Interesting.”

When Kaoru glanced up at her, Nanako’s eyes appeared to be fixed on something in the distance. When she finally spoke again, her voice was quiet and restrained. “Kyoya is a surprisingly interesting man, for someone who seems so shallow.”

Kaoru smiled tiredly, slumping down to balance his chin on the table. “That’s how he catches you.”

“I suppose,” Nanako said. She paused for a moment, then continued speaking in a quiet, uncertain tone that made it seem like she was only half aware that Kaoru was still there. “What matters more to a person’s ultimate happiness in life...? Is it freedom, or is it filial piety?”

“Mm?” was Kaoru’s brilliant contribution.

Nanako continued speaking. It was unclear if she had even heard him. “For years, Kyoya has been
telling me that the happiness of freedom was illusory unless it was paired with responsibility. I have always argued that responsibility must naturally and automatically be the death of any real freedom. It’s a debate for which we have never managed to find a satisfactory conclusion.”

She curled a long strand of dark hair around her finger, tugging thoughtfully, gaze still far off in the distance. “When I first understood how you felt for him, I was sure it could only end in heartache for you. But my understanding of freedom has recently developed nuance. Within the realm of responsibility, there are still choices that can be made. Within the realm of freedom, there are still connections that should be treasured, supported, and, in the end, obeyed. Despite all of this, for Kyoya to come this far…

“I feel almost as though he and I have traded our positions without noticing. I was attempting to run away, yet my actions seem to have brought me to the same destination that my father desired. Kyoya has always attempted to be the dutiful, obedient son, yet his actions have brought him to an end that would likely horrify his own father.” She let go of her hair, the strand bouncing free. She laughed, the sound tired and a little bit sad. “What was our debate even about, in the end?” She shook her head. “Huh, I must be tired.” Her attention snapped back to Kaoru instead of whatever it was she had been seeing inside her head. “I’m sorry! You’re used to this lifestyle; you probably don’t want to hear my melodramatic, uninformed philosophizing about it.”

Kaoru wasn’t really listening. His brain had gotten stuck the moment Nanako had mentioned Kyoya’s father.

So much of his and Kyoya’s conversations about the potential dangers of their relationship had focused on the possibility of backlash against Kaoru, thanks to Kyoya’s constant fixation on the topic. Still, the repercussions for Kyoya himself, despite having the potential to be less public and business-affecting, were very real. Kyoya never seemed to want to talk about the possibility of those repercussions, and Kaoru had let him get away with it, over and over again. He was just so happy that Kyoya was willing to give this precious possibility of something between them a try that he had blocked off the part of him that was worried about how it might impact Kyoya’s life if any of what they were doing came to light.

He had been selfish.

‘Trust a Hitachiin,’ whispered Kyoya’s voice in his head.

“Kaoru? Did I break you?” Nanako asked gingerly.

“Kyoya has a plan,” was all he said, as though it were an answer for every single question in the sudden maelstrom in his mind. She tilted her head in confusion, clearly not understanding what he was responding to. That was fine; he was talking more to himself than her anyway, at this point. “I don’t know what it is yet, but…”

Except… was that true?

Didn’t he know what the plan was?

He had been assembling more hints quietly, constantly. The puzzle pieces had been shuffling around in his mind, each new piece adding a new dimension to the image that was slowly but surely taking shape.

He realized with a start that the finished picture had been lurking for months now. Maybe since Hani-senpai’s wedding. Maybe since even earlier than that.
The picture had been in the back of Kaoru’s mind every time Kyoya had stressed that his concern in their relationship was the possibility of repercussions on Kaoru and not on himself. It had been percolating when he had heard that Kyoya had had a hand in convincing the Prime Minister’s wife to attend the Tokyo Pride event. It had been marinating in every update regarding the slowly growing success of the *keiretsu*, as Kyoya had brought piece after piece into play under his control on the epic chessboard in his mind.

The final image was composed of the following, as far as Kaoru could tell:

Kyoya was putting together a powerful *keiretsu* solely through his own abilities and connections, guaranteeing even greater success and profit to the Ootori Group by joining it to an unstoppable alliance of businesses. Forget being the heir to his family’s business; Kyoya was going to carve out a new position, higher than any of his brothers, higher even than his father could ever hope to attain. Kyoya was going to boost the Ootori Group to unprecedented heights and, at the very same time, create a situation for himself that would free him of his family’s restrictions entirely.

But that freedom wasn’t enough, on its own. Kyoya had also spent the last few years carefully investing in and cultivating public awareness of LGBT issues, including bringing powerful politicians into the fold. He was going to great lengths to increase public awareness and acceptance of his sexuality, both overseas and at home, no matter what his father personally thought about it.

The goal of Kyoya’s game was not just so simple as to beat his brothers, or to live free of his family restrictions and control.

For Kyoya, it was always all or nothing.

Kyoya was trying to have both freedom and filial piety, all at once. To do exactly what he wanted while also obtaining his father’s blessing for it.

Kaoru had once thought that a relationship with Kyoya would have been easy and perfect, if he had just been born as a girl. Silly him; he had left that wistful thought there.

To be fair, it took a very specific kind of mind to look at that dilemma and realize that there was another avenue besides “go back in time and change around some chromosomes.” Only a very specific kind of person, both brilliant and willing to play an exceptionally long game, would realize that there was another way to solve this dilemma: don’t change the participants in the game, change the game board itself.

Kyoya was that kind of person.

He was going to great lengths—basically the *greatest possible lengths*—to prove that a relationship with a man, too, could benefit the Ootori family. That it could be legal and acceptable and—most importantly to all of Ootori-kind—*useful*.

Freedom and family. All or nothing.

No wonder he wasn’t worried about repercussions for himself. He thought he had every part of the situation under control, like always.

That idiot.

“You’re not actually dead, are you?” asked Nanako, whose presence Kaoru had entirely forgotten about. Her voice had taken on an uncharacteristic hint of worry. “My relationship with Hikaru is probably too new to survive me having murdered you, even if it was a total accident. Not that I wouldn’t just blame Kyoya, mind you.”
“I’m alive.”

Kaoru shoved his head back off of the table, where it had fallen once more at some point during his long rumination. He finally stole his coffee back from Nanako and took a long gulp. When he had been properly fortified, he said, “Kyoya really does think he knows everything, doesn’t he?”

“Oh. You think?” Nanako said with a bright, energetic smile that matched her sarcasm perfectly.

“It’s why he needs us around,” Kaoru concluded confidently, ignoring her. “He’s a genius, but he’s also such a colossal imbecile at the same time.”

Nanako raised her mug in a mock-toast. “Hear, hear.”

What Kyoya wasn’t considering—at what hadn’t even appeared to *occur* to Kyoya to consider—was that, while public acceptance and laws were one thing, private feelings were another entirely.

Kyoya was always so bad at handling feelings, even his own.

Maybe every single part of Kyoya’s plan worked out. Maybe he somehow made gay marriage acceptable by both society and the law, and he put himself into such a position that it would be possible for him, the universally respected manager of a powerful *keiretsu* at this hypothetical future point, to marry a man.

From what Kaoru knew of Kyoya’s father, there was no way he would accept such a match, regardless of its technical legality. There was too much emphasis on tradition in the Ootori family, too much focus on the sanctity and importance of the family line.

If Kyoya’s father couldn’t see the point of something as simple as love-matches instead of arranged marriages, then the odds of him accepting a love-match between two men, no matter how ‘legal’ or ‘useful’ it was, were less than zero. Profit alone certainly wouldn’t be enough, not for this, not with Ootori-san’s very belief system on the line. The only way they had a prayer’s chance of this working out—and even this would be the longest of long-shots—was if they could somehow prove to him that such an unconventional relationship still could fit into his conventional expectations.

Once again, Kaoru had some research to do. And also an extremely awkward conversation to have with his mother.

On the positive side, Kaoru was pretty sure he had finally won their game, and with a whole year to spare.

He’d wait to say anything to Kyoya until after he’d done his research, though. If he was right about both Kyoya’s goal and also Kyoya’s negligence when it came to the emotional side of his plan, then he’d need to have his own plans in place beforehand.

There was far more at stake than a simple game, by this point. Kaoru wasn’t even going to consider the possibility of winning their game if it would mean losing Kyoya in the bargain.

“Let’s make a pact,” Nanako said, setting down her empty coffee mug. She was speaking slowly and enunciating clearly, obviously still worried about his mental state. “If neither of us can sleep after this, for the rest of the trip we’ll just take turns sneaking into each other’s rooms at night and knocking each other out with a mallet.”

Kaoru laughed. Nanako really was the greatest. He absently mused that his life really would have been much easier if he had fallen for her in the first place, though his heart scoffed at the very concept. “I’m really glad that Kyoya kept in touch with you, you know.”
Nanako snorted at him, her grin bright as quicksilver. “You’re just saying that because Hikaru’s way more calm and controllable now that he’s regularly having sex.” She smirked and stretched luxuriously, “Ah, young men and their *stamina*...”

If she had thought this was going to gross Kaoru out or get under his skin, she had dramatically misread his relationship with his brother. It was Kaoru’s turn to offer her a toast with his coffee mug, smirking back at her over the top of it. “Agreed.”

Nanako hid a laugh behind her hand. “Gross,” she said, easily capitulating in this game of oversharing chicken. “For what it’s worth, I’m really glad that Kyoya kept in touch with me, too.”

“*Tea*...” came a rumbling, terrifying voice from the doorway, interrupting their moment.

Ah. Hani-senpai was awake, then.

“We should probably make a run for it,” Kaoru said with a glance towards the doorway, where the shadows had lengthened and darkened to an unnatural degree for so early in the morning.

Nanako sighed and slipped out of her seat.

“Well, at least life with you all is never boring,” she said as she followed him from the dining area in a crawl. Hani-senpai stalked unseeingly past them, nothing but caffeine and violence in his eyes.

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The second night of Kaoru’s vacation was much more pleasant than the first, and he didn’t even need a mallet to the skull to make it happen. He woke up at something resembling a respectable time the next morning, the sunshine peeking in invitingly on his and Kyoya’s shared bungalow. At some point over the course of the night, he had huddled up against his boyfriend, curling an arm around his stomach and resting his head against his shoulder rather than on a pillow. Kyoya’s skin had warmed slightly where Kaoru’s hands had snuck underneath the cloth of his pajamas, but, thanks to his lower natural temperature, it wasn’t uncomfortable and sticky in the places where they were touching.

Kaoru nuzzled even closer, hitched a leg over Kyoya’s waist, and thought contentedly that he could probably get used to waking up like this.

Now he just had to make sure that he did what he could to make waking up like this the sort of thing he would be able to get used to.

He spent the rest of his morning curled up against Kyoya’s chest, feeling each peaceful, sleepy breath his boyfriend took. At the same time, he scrolled through pages and pages of legalese on on his phone.

It looked like his plan, such as it was, was going to be even more difficult than he had feared. Still, he gathered what information he could and, when he felt he finally had enough, slipped out of bed and made a phone call to Yuzuha.

The phone call was *precisely* as awkward as he had feared it was going to be. He returned to bed with what felt like a permanent grimace carved onto his face.

He didn’t have to stew in his miserableness for long, at least. He had hardly gotten back in bed before Kyoya was turning for the first time all night, slipping an arm around Kaoru’s waist and burying his face into his shoulder rather than vice versa.
Kaoru’s scowl lightened in spite of itself. Was Kyoya snuggling him?

“Good morning.” Kaoru offered quietly, just in case it was a false alarm.

“No such thing,” said Kyoya sleepily, his growling, freshly-awake voice trembling across Kaoru’s heartstrings just like always.

Kaoru slipped one arm across Kyoya’s waist and raised his other hand to run it through the soft strands of his hair. “I don’t know about you, but I was just thinking that this was one of the better mornings I’ve had.”

Kyoya hummed meditatively into Kaoru’s shoulder. “I suppose I can’t actually argue with that,” he finally said into Kaoru’s skin and, just like that, Kaoru’s for-the-rest-of-time grimace was melting away like it had never been.

They made it out to the main villa right about the time that everyone else was eating lunch.

“Kaoru!” Hikaru cried, immediately plastering himself to his brother’s side. “I missed you, tell me everything.”

“I would rather you didn’t,” Kyoya said. When Kaoru just smirked and wiggled his eyebrows at his boyfriend, clearly not willing to make any promises, he sighed and left to find Tamaki.

“I love him so much,” Kaoru said sappily when Kyoya was too far away to overhear.

“He does seem to be doing better at this whole boyfriend thing than I would have expected,” Hikaru admitted, clearly begrudging the admission. “It’s really weird; if he was so set on leading you on from a distance for so long, then what changed?”

“I got Lucas expelled and then just flirted and browbeat him into submission,” was not what Kaoru was going to say.

“I think I made him see that some of his concerns about the relationship were misplaced,” was what he said instead. It was broadly true. Hikaru didn’t need the specifics anyway.

Hikaru seemed to accept this easily enough. “I guess I shouldn’t have given your ‘plans’ such a hard time. Speaking of plans, though, everyone’s talking about visiting the reef after lunch for some snorkeling and scuba diving. Nanako’s really excited. Evidently she’s never seen a reef before.” Hikaru’s smile became something sweet and warm that Kaoru was still unused to seeing on his brother’s face in relation to anything except for Haruhi or Ageha. “She takes the whole ‘new experience’ thing really seriously, you know? It makes everything a lot more fun.”

Kaoru swung an arm around his brother’s shoulder, pressing their temples together as they looked out across the room. “We definitely got lucky, didn’t we?”

He could see the edge of Hikaru’s smirk out of the corner of his eye. “You’re conspicuously not giving me details, so I’m not sure if you did, but I definitely did. Several times this morning alone.”

Kaoru just laughed and waved this comment off. “Oh, I know that whatever you think Kyoya and I are doing is even more deliciously deviant than what we are actually doing. I’d hate to get in the way of your imagination.”

Hikaru froze at that. Oh, his poor, easily teased, annoyingly overprotective brother. “Deviant?” he finally squawked, far louder than either of them had been speaking up until that point.
“Are we talking about deviancy?” Renge asked, materializing out of thin air as if the word were part of some arcane summoning ritual. “Ask me if either of you need any tips in that department.” She covered her mouth in a half-hearted attempt to hide her superior smirk. “Takashi-kun and I have been making great use of some techniques that I have found—”

“No!!” cried both twins at once, springing away from her like a parallel set of Jack-in-the-boxes.

“Mori-senpai doesn’t have sex!” Hikaru declared adamantly.

For once, Kaoru agreed with his brother’s irrationality entirely. “He is too pure!”

“We don’t need evidence!” Hikaru said frantically as Renge opened her mouth.

Kaoru bravely stepped forward and clapped a hand over Renge’s face. “We need to never speak of this again!”

“Renge,” said a low, calm voice. Renge suddenly disappeared from under Kaoru’s hand and was hoisted up into the air and turned. Kaoru looked up to see Mori-senpai somberly making eye contact with his… girlfriend? fiancée? pet lunatic? One of the above, probably.

Mori-senpai hooked an arm underneath Renge’s legs and brought her closer to his chest, cradling her against his body “We’ve spoken about this,” he said patiently, gazing down at her with an expression on his face that Kaoru was absolutely refusing to identify but was still suspiciously warm and sweet.

Renge pouted and traced a spiral on Mori-senpai’s upper chest. “I just wanted to brag a little,” she complained.

“I understand,” Mori-senpai said quietly. “You can write about it later.”

Kaoru and Hikaru made horrified eye contact with each other and slowly slunk away.

That was… several different layers of too much information. Renge had managed to win all games of oversharing chicken forever.

“Kyoya,” Kaoru whined, retreating to where Kyoya was sitting with Haruhi and discussing something about the water conditions for the planned diving expedition. “Renge is corrupting my mind.”

“There remains a part in there that is still uncorrupted?” Kyoya asked dryly.

Kaoru pouted at him, throwing himself into the vacant chair next to Haruhi and leaning on her shoulder. “Haruhi,” he whined instead, nuzzling against her hair. “Renge is corrupting my mind and Kyoya is being mean about it.”

“That’s nice,” Haruhi said vacantly.

Kaoru hoped his brother was having more luck finding support in this trying time.

“You both suck,” was his trenchant social commentary. His boyfriend and best friend didn’t appear to care about his insightful analysis of their combined moral character and went right back to discussing tides and marine wildlife.

Kaoru sighed dramatically but let them have at it. Across the room, Hikaru made a horribly disgusted face at him and then hid in Nanako’s shoulder.
At least he could always count on Hikaru to understand his pain.

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Scuba diving was a nice mental palate cleanser. Hikaru, Nanako, and Kaoru managed to convince Tamaki that every other large fish that they saw was a shark by the quick expedient of pointing at the fish frantically and then swimming desperately in the other direction until Haruhi realized what they were doing and gave the three of them a look so disappointed that it made Kaoru’s blood run cold. Even Nanako wasn’t immune, judging from the chagrined expression on her face.

Kyoya had bowed out of the entire experience, electing to watch from the beach instead. Kaoru wasn’t terribly shocked. It was probably difficult for Kyoya to see the benefit in an in-person visit just to see a view that he could easily simulate on his computer screen.

It was the perfect time to have a private conversation, actually.

That thought in mind, Kaoru made sure to leave the water earlier than his friends, pausing only to see Hani-senpai engaging in what appeared to be a synchronized swimming routine with a whole group of what were definitely sharks, to Reiko’s apparent delight.

Shaking his head in the water, Kaoru emerged and stripped himself of his gear until he was back in only his swimming trunks. He left the other materials scattered across the beach, knowing that one of the multitude of employees Kyoya had arranged for would be lurking around somewhere to take care of the abandoned gear for him.

Kyoya was busy on his laptop, clad in a tropical shirt and board shorts as he sat underneath a large red-and-white-striped beach umbrella, looking entirely out of place at the formal wooden table that one of the staff had likely brought out for him. He didn’t appear to notice Kaoru’s approach in the slightest.

Kaoru alerted him through the most expedient way possible: he ducked in-between his arms and straddled his lap, hooking his arms around his neck.

He knew Kyoya had been working for too long in the hot sun when he had to blink for a minute or two. The realization that he was now looking at a man’s chest and not a laptop screen was evidently rather slow to arrive.

“Hi,” Kaoru said cheerfully. “I missed you.”

Kyoya didn’t appear to mind this interruption very much, at least. As soon as he had registered what was going on, he just settled back in his chair, resting his hands on the bare skin just above Kaoru’s swim shorts.

“I missed you as well,” he said, making Kaoru beam. Kyoya never said anything he didn’t mean. “Although now I am regretting the emotion. Do you realize how cold you are?”

“I missed you as well,” he said, making Kaoru beam. Kyoya never said anything he didn’t mean. “Although now I am regretting the emotion. Do you realize how cold you are?”

“It’s fine,” Kaoru said, snuggle-hopping slightly closer to his boyfriend—gently, since he was still on Kyoya’s lap and didn’t want to damage anything that would be too difficult to replace. “You’ve spent too much time in the sun. I’m just looking out for your own good.”

“I highly doubt that,” Kyoya said, his hands slipping further around Kaoru’s back, cradling him.

The sun was warm and bright above them, the water was cool and calm around them, and the air felt alive with possibility.
“Kyoya,” Kaoru said, knowing that this, finally, was the time. There was nothing left to wait for. “I think I’ve figured out the game.”

“Oh?” Kyoya’s hands ran up and down Kaoru’s back, slow and lingering as though memorizing a map. “Tell me. I have several new ideas for penalty games that I would like to try.”

Kaoru laughed at him, grinning helplessly. He was positively silly for this man. “I’m not automatically saying no to the games, but I really do think I have you this time,” he said.

Kyoya raised an eyebrow at him as though to say, ‘get on with it already.’

“You want to be able to marry a man,” Kaoru said, every word feeling right in his mouth as he said it. Finally. This was it. The culmination of everything. A solution four years in the making. “That’s what this has all been about, the entire time. You’re making the keiretsu to give yourself the freedom to choose your own partner, and you want that partner to be a man.” He smiled. “A man who will benefit the Ootori family, of course. But, regardless, a man. A man of your choice who you can legally marry.”

Kyoya’s fingers tightened slightly against Kaoru’s back, small points of pressure, and he studied Kaoru’s face for so long that, for a stomach-dropping minute, Kaoru worried that he had somehow gotten everything terribly wrong, that Kyoya was about to lecture him about letting his emotions get in the way of his analytical thinking again.

But then Kyoya smiled, bright and wide and open and perfect, and Kaoru lost the ability to care about any other sensation at all. His whole world was that smile. It immediately became his lifelong goal to see that smile again, as frequently as he possibly could.

“Correct,” Kyoya said quietly, still smiling. “Congratulations, Kaoru. You’ve won our game with a year to spare.”

Kaoru grinned and leaned in, affectionately rubbing the tips of their noses together, silly and giddy with Kyoya’s words after the moment of nonsensical fear he’d just had. “See? I told you I had you.”

“I knew you’d figure it out at some point.” Kyoya’s arms were tight and warm around him. “I have always had a great deal of faith in you. It was why I wished to play this game with you in the first place. I think it was quite the enjoyable venture, despite my loss. Have you considered what you want your prize to be?”

“I have some ideas,” Kaoru admitted, nuzzling Kyoya’s cheek. Kyoya never babbled like this, drifting between ideas like he’d been unmoored. Kaoru had somehow taken him by surprise. It was incredibly cute. “But I want to hold onto it for now.”

“Of course,” Kyoya said easily, his voice a quiet, pleased hum in Kaoru’s ear. “It’s your prize, to be used whenever you wish.” He straightened his legs, making Kaoru slide a little bit further away from him, once again making eye contact. “In the meantime, now that you know the full plan, you might be interested in what I am currently working on.”

“Boo.” But Kaoru obeyed the unspoken request and reluctantly removed himself from Kyoya’s lap, climbing to his feet and turning to see the computer screen. “Not more work, Kyoya. We’re on vacation!”

“It’s a pleasant sort of work,” Kyoya said. “See for yourself.”

He had to squint to make out the text in the sunlight, but, once he was able to read a few lines, his
eyes involuntarily widened.

“Wait,” he breathed, gaze now riveted to the screen, drinking it in. “Wait. Kyoya, Is this real?”

“It’s still in the drafting stages,” Kyoya demurred. “But I was invited to be part of the team to help finalize the draft before it is going to be introduced to the ward in a few months.”

It was a document solemnly announcing that Shibuya ward was going to start offering ‘partnership certificates,’ conferring on same-sex couples the same rights as a marriage.

Kaoru looked at his brilliant, impossible, incredible boyfriend with awe in his eyes.

“It’s a small start,” Kyoya said. He hadn’t even noticed Kaoru’s look; he was still staring at the screen, his eyes clear and sharp and focused. “But it’s a start nonetheless.”

“If all of our friends weren’t right over there,” Kaoru said solemnly, pointing at the pristine sea. “I would have sex with you right here, right now, right on this beach.”

Kyoya’s face immediately lost its smile and scrunched in disgust. Kaoru already missed the smile terribly.

“That’s a disgusting idea,” Kyoya said, looking faintly nauseated. “And why bother, when we have a perfectly comfortable bungalow not even twenty yards away?”

“You are no fun,” Kaoru informed him. “But I’m also up for the bungalow idea, honestly.”

Kyoya frowned but still reached out to close his laptop.

“I’m going to call you ‘my dearest husband’ the whole time,” Kaoru said, taking Kyoya’s hand in his own and tugging his boyfriend to his feet, solemn look melting away to reveal a grin that he knew had to look positively wicked.

“I’m going to call you ‘obnoxious brat’ the whole time,” Kyoya said.

“Kinky,” Kaoru teased out loud, and Kyoya smiled his typical little barely-there curling smile at him. That smile was alright too, even though it wasn’t the bright, all-encompassing look that Kaoru already desperately wanted to see again.

If Kyoya’s plans worked out, though, Kaoru would have all the time in the world to make that smile happen.

Marriage, huh?

Kaoru could definitely see the benefit in that.
Kaoru’s wake-up call on the third morning of his Christmas vacation was far less pleasant than his second had been.

At first, he wasn’t actually sure what had woken him. There had been some difference in the air of the room, some tiny little change that had made his eyelids sweep open. The sun wasn’t up yet, and the room was still dark and unfamiliar. A soft buzzing sound tickled his ears as though from a great distance.

It was Kyoya’s phone, he realized with sleepy detachment. It was only set to vibrate and stuck in the pair of pants that Kaoru had slowly and teasingly peeled off of his boyfriend the night before. There was no way in hell Kyoya was going to hear it, but it was more than loud enough to rouse Kaoru. He lay there, waiting for the ringing to stop. Once it did, he turned over and closed his eyes.

It vibrated again.

And then it happened again.

And again.

Kaoru eventually realized that whoever was calling wasn’t going to stop. He pushed himself into a seated position with a weary sigh. He clambered over Kyoya, not bothering to be particularly gentle or careful, and slithered down onto the pile of abandoned clothing on the floor. Realizing he had landed on top of his intended target instead of next to it, he rolled to the side before reaching into Kyoya’s pants pocket and sliding out the buzzing hunk of plastic that seemed hell-bent on keeping him awake.

As soon as he saw the label attached to the number that was calling, he sat bolt upright, all thoughts of sleep vanishing without a trace.

Father.

Kyoya’s father was trying to call him.

Was something wrong? Had something happened back home?

Should Kaoru try to wake Kyoya up?

That was probably a mission that would be doomed to failure from the start.

Should he just let the phone keep ringing?

It didn’t seem like Ootori-san was the type of person to give up, even on his phone calls.

There was only one thing Kaoru could do, it seemed.

Bolstering his confidence with a few deep breaths, he did his best to ignore the fact that he was sitting half-naked on a pile of clothes in the bungalow he happened to be sharing with his secret boyfriend. The ‘answer’ button was staring at him accusingly, big and green and much more intimidating than it had any right to be. ‘I know what you’ve done,’ it seemed to be saying. ‘You
Still, Kaoru pressed it.

“Ootori Kyoya’s secretary,” he said, as brightly as he could manage despite the frog in his throat. “Kyoya-san is still asleep. May I take a message?”

There was a long pause. Then, Ootori-san said, “This is Hitachiin Kaoru-kun, isn’t it?”

The way he said Kaoru’s name made his blood run cold, far colder than any disappointed look from Haruhi had ever managed. He jumped to his feet and hurried into the bathroom, shutting the door to create a barrier between himself and Kyoya.

He wasn’t sure how or why. But Ootori-san definitely knew.

He sent up a tiny, terrified prayer of thanks to whoever happened to be listening to such things that he had made sure to take care of his own plans within twenty-four hours of realizing that plans might become necessary.

It turned out that, even having realized the need in advance, he had still barely made the deadline by a hair’s breadth.

“Yes,” he finally said, sequestered away from Kyoya and as ready as he was ever going to be to take on this obstacle. “It’s Kaoru, Ootori-san.”

“Just as well,” Ootori-san said, sounding tired despite the fact that it was still relatively early in the evening in Japan. “Kaoru-kun, I have spent the last several hours dealing with the news that, tomorrow morning, a tabloid planned to run several pictures of you and my son in compromising positions on a beach.”

Kaoru closed his eyes.

Ah.

Kyoya trusted all of the Ootori employees implicitly, but he had never said that the employees at this resort were Ootori-trained. Kaoru had just assumed that their normal behavior in front of their friends or Kyoya’s bodyguards would also be safe here. Neither of them tended to be very public in their displays of affection, even around their friends, but in that golden moment yesterday afternoon, with their friends theoretically out of sight, celebrating the end of their game, it had felt private enough…

This was his fault.

He hadn’t done much besides sit on Kyoya’s lap and press their noses and cheeks together. It wasn’t anything he hadn’t done to Haruhi before, or, hell, even to his own brother. Still, with a male friend, and without the Host Club as a front to excuse it… well, it was more than enough. All it would have taken—all it had taken—was one person with a camera… hell, with a phone that could take pictures, even.

“I’m very, very sorry, Ootori-san,” Kaoru said, starting with the easiest, lowest-key response, the better to gauge Ootori-san’s initial feelings about the situation. “It won’t happen again.”

“It won’t happen again because it was a fluke that will never recur or because you naïvely believe that you will hide your behavior more effectively in the future?”
So he wasn’t the only one attempting to gauge the severity of the situation.

Kaoru didn’t answer, though he knew precisely which of the two options he would pick.

Ootori-san appeared to take his silence as an answer anyway. “This relationship must end,” he said, voice not even passionate enough to turn cruel. “In youth, a boy may experience many things. But, as he grows, he must have the maturity to put such youthful indiscretions behind him. The world is watching, Kaoru-kun. It is my understanding that you have even more to lose in this affair than my son would.”

“If I needed to, I...”

He stopped himself.

“I would give it all up for him,” was absolutely not what Ootori-san wanted to hear.

Stupid. He was letting his emotions get the better of him. That was the exact opposite of the right approach to take with Ootori-san. Taking a slow, deep breath, he tried again. “Ootori-san, I know we have gone about this nontraditionally, but I have very traditional designs on your son. I wish to marry him.”

“I’m afraid that is a preposterous idea,” Ootori-san said. His voice might have even sounded apologetic, if it hadn’t been so cold and factual. “There is no precedent for this sort of match. It would never find acceptance.”

“Actually, Kyoya is working even now on helping to draft a policy to start reversing that sort of attitude,” Kaoru said, his own voice warm and stubbornly proud. “They are going to allow civil partnerships in Shibuya soon, and that’s only the beginning.”

He thought he heard Ootori-san murmur something along the lines of “that law degree…” in a fatalistic tone.

Good. It proved that he was listening, at least. And, if he was listening, that meant that he could possibly be convinced. It was time to see if the extremely quick research and preparations Kaoru had done yesterday morning would be able to make up for all of those subjective, illogical, emotionally charged things that Kyoya had never brought up before.

He had barely been made aware of the possible issues before, thanks to his own carelessness, he was already being tested on them. Still, he had to hope that his preparations were going to be enough.

He hoped so much that his preparations were going to be enough.

“My parents are already aware of and in support of our relationship,” Kaoru said, forging on. He was pretty sure Ootori-san would respect honesty and specific plans more than broad platitudes about how much Kaoru cared for his son anyway. “My parents and I have agreed that I will join the Ootori family registry. If such an act remains illegal for a married couple of the same sex at the time when Kyoya and I are married, my parents will grant permission for Kyoya to ‘adopt’ me, to make sure that I still become an Ootori regardless of the law. I bring along with me an alliance with the entire Hitachiin family, stretching from my grandmother’s business to my parents’ to my own.” Not that that would be saying much, if Kyoya succeeded in his keiretsu plan. Still, Ootori-san didn’t know that.

“Furthermore, my mother has already agreed to serve as both egg donor and surrogate for any potential child Kyoya and I intend to have.” And Ootori-san had better appreciate that one, because
it had been one of the worst conversations of Kaoru’s *entire life*. He had learned more about the process of pregnancy and the many, many negative side-effects on a woman’s body than he had ever wanted to know, since his mother had wanted to make abundantly clear the scope of the favor he was asking for. “Or even just as a surrogate, if another donor is found. She would release the child to us upon birth, and the child would be added to the Ootori family registry upon reaching the appropriate age. Through her, we would have children of our own blood to carry on the Ootori family name.”

Kaoru took a deep, centering breath. It was time for the last stretch. “My intentions towards your son are as serious and honorable as I can possibly make them, Ootori-san. My only hesitation has been my fear that you would not approve. If you are amenable, however, my parents are willing to make an announcement and hold a formal engagement meeting as soon as the event can be planned.” That, too, had been painfully awkward to ask for, though he had mostly been numbed to feeling any emotion ever again after the whole pregnancy talk.

“The one thing I asked you to avoid, you little brat!” Yuzuha had complained at great volume, but she had quickly agreed, likely as motivated to end the conversation as Kaoru had been by that point.

There was a long pause on the other end of the phone call, followed by an equally long sigh.

Kaoru struggled to catch and document every single noise that came across the line. This was it.

Either he had done enough preparation for this moment to cover up for all of the personal, emotional things that Kyoya had skipped over, or…

He wasn’t going to think of the ‘or.’ Not until it became necessary.

“Kaoru-kun,” Ootori-san finally said, sounding quiet and serious. Kaoru’s heart dropped. The ‘or’ loomed in his mind. “I respect all of the effort you have gone to in arranging all of this. It is clear that you are taking this arrangement between yourself and my son extremely seriously. Many of these ideas would never have occurred to a typical young man of your age. I am impressed by your foresight, which is not a feeling I went into this conversation anticipating.”

Kaoru could feel the ‘but’ coming like it was a giant hammer.

“Howeever,” Ootoori-san said, too fancy for something like a ‘but,’ “I remain unconvinced that this is a sustainable long-term partnership for any man, let alone for someone as frequently in the public view as an Ootori. As I have said, the impetuousness of youth can lead to a great many decisions that seem wise at the time but can clearly be seen for the foolishness they are from the greater maturity of adulthood. It is clear to me that one ward’s policy will not overturn more than a millennia of evidence regarding successful family structure. Whatever you and my son think you feel for each other, this is a union that can never bear fruit. It is merely an ill-fated sapling, planted in cursed ground.”

Kaoru’s heart froze in his chest, cold and hard as crystal, spreading ice through his veins.

It hadn’t been enough.

He had thought of the consequences and done the research and found solutions in the nick of time, and it still hadn’t mattered, in the end.

It hadn’t been enough.

Nothing was ever going to be enough.
“I have arranged for the evidence of the indiscretion to be destroyed,” Ootori-san said. It sounded like he might feel the barest bones of regret; not that Kaoru particularly cared what Kyoya’s father was feeling right now. “You appear to be a thoughtful young man, Kaoru-kun. I trust that you will see sense and break off this affair before any other such artifacts have the chance to come into being. You and Kyoya are both still young; I know that the slightest inconvenience at your age feels like the end of the world, but one day you will both see the wisdom of this path.”

Ootori-san clearly didn’t know him at all. Something dark and defiant in Kaoru growled at him to say ‘no,’ to say ‘bite me,’ to say ‘if we make this a contest, you will lose.’

But he had more than just his own happiness on the line.

“I will tell Kyoya we spoke,” he said, making no other promises.

“Please do,” Ootori-san said. “I will call again later, when my son is more likely to be awake. I would appreciate it if you would let him answer the phone, at that time.”

“Yes, sir,” Kaoru said, and Ootori-san hung up on him.

It hadn’t been enough.

*He* hadn’t been enough.

Kaoru left the bathroom.

Kyoya was still asleep, still lost in blissful ignorance for a few hours more. Kaoru sat on the bed next to him, ran his fingers caressingly through his boyfriend’s fine, sleep-tousled hair, and wondered what to do.

He tried to think it through over and over again. He tried to adopt new angles. He tried to act like he had the specific kind of mind that would change the game board rather than the pieces.

Despite all his effort, he kept coming back to a single contradiction.

Freedom and family.

Kyoya wanted to have them both.

Kyoya was never going to be able to have them both.

How could Kyoya possibly choose between the two options, when he had lived his life for the past four years solely to avoid ever needing to make that very choice?

He wouldn’t be able to choose. He would just keep planning and planning and planning until the day he died. It would be like the myth of Sisyphus. Forever pushing the rock uphill. Forever foiled just before he could crest the peak.

Forever in hell.

As hard as he tried, Kaoru could only think of one solution. There was only one path that would spare Kyoya the heartache of turning his back on one of the halves of his heart.

Someone had to take the rock out of Sisyphus’ hands.

He was still sitting at the edge of the bed when Kyoya woke up.
“Mrph,” Kyoya groaned. Kaoru looked down at him just to look, just because he could. Kyoya was wearing his navy blue button-up silk pajamas. Just last night, Kaoru had taken his time unbuttoning them, mapping out the uncovered territory with his hands and his mouth until he had thought he was going to drown in everything that made up Kyoya.

Kaoru had laughed when Kyoya had put the pajamas back on to sleep in after they had finished and showered, teasing him about being ‘buttoned-up’ both figuratively and literally.

“Kyoya,” he said, voice croaking from disuse even though he’d been awake for hours by this point. “I’m using my prize.”

This was the only out he had managed to think of, in all that time.

Maybe the rock wasn’t a rock at all. Maybe the game board wasn’t what he thought.

Kaoru had to know, one way or the other.

Kyoya slipped his glasses on and sat up, still half-asleep but clearly trying to bring his awareness under his control. He blinked several times in quick succession, though the movement did little to clear the fog in his eyes. “Mm?”

“I have a question for you, and you have to answer it truthfully,” Kaoru said. “Those were the rules.”

“I’m familiar with the terms,” Kyoya said, and Kaoru treasured those gravelly, early-morning words. “As you might recall, I did make them.”

“Right. Well, this is my question, then: what causes you the greatest happiness?”

It was the wording Kaoru had spent hours deciding on.

He knew it was an extremely unlikely possibility, but he was too selfish to leave himself without any out at all.

Kyoya frowned, clearly not having anticipated such an abstract question.

“You have to answer completely honestly,” Kaoru said quickly. “You can take time to think about it, if you need to.”

After all, every extra moment Kyoya took to answer was a moment longer that Kaoru could pretend—

“I don’t need the extra time,” Kyoya said. Kaoru fought not to scowl. Of course Kyoya didn’t need the extra time. “It is actually a question that I have considered before.”

Kyoya lay his hands flat on the mattress, palms up, looking down at them as though the answer to Kaoru’s question lay within them.

“The thing that makes me happiest in this world is to, with my own power, bring satisfaction and joy to the people who are important to me.”

Kaoru had thought—Kaoru had dreaded—that Kyoya’s answer was going to be something pretty much exactly like that. He half-heartedly wished that the answer had been ‘you, of course~.’ That answer would have taken the necessity of a choice out of Kaoru’s hands. Still, if he were truly being honest, Kaoru wouldn’t change this part of Kyoya for anything.
It was knowing that this was going to be Kyoya’s answer that had made him fall in love with him years ago, as he had watched him smile down at Tamaki’s grandparents.

It was knowing that this was Kyoya’s answer that was going to make him leave him now.

Kaoru was suddenly strikingly aware of exactly what Kyoya must have felt as he had thrust him away again and again to try to ‘protect’ him. In this moment, it felt like he held Kyoya’s heart in his hands, a precious, delicate, fluttering creature, finally separated from all of its guards and barbed wire.

He would do literally anything to keep that heart safe.

The danger to Kaoru in their relationship had always been transitory. It had always been something that would easily pass, especially when the Hitachiin PR team was fully coached and prepared.

The danger to Kyoya, on the other hand…

There was never going to be a cure for that. A choice between Kaoru and his family, no matter which he chose, would do damage to Kyoya’s heart that would never, ever heal.

It was up to Kaoru to remove the rock from Sisyphus’ hands.

“I’m breaking up with you,” Kaoru said.

Kyoya’s eyes went wider than Kaoru had ever seen them go before.

“Do I get a reason for this decision?” Kyoya asked, his voice even despite the clear shock written across his features. His expression was slowly melting into something deep and hurt, like water trickling its way down a windowpane during a spring thunderstorm.

Kaoru stood and looked away. He couldn’t bear this. This wasn’t fair.

“I spoke to your father,” he said, because he had promised to deliver the message. “He helped me to see that the risk is incommensurate to the reward.” He then winced, knowing that those words were a low, nasty blow, selfish and underhanded even for him. He hurried to the door, incredibly thankful for how late Kyoya slept each day. His brother would undoubtedly be out and about somewhere, and Kaoru could cry into his shoulder until the both of them melted away into seafoam or something.

“Kaoru,” Kyoya said sharply. Kaoru could hear the shuffling as his boyfriend—his ex-boyfriend—struggled to slide out of bed, to get his just-awakened body to obey his mind. “What—? Why are you—?”

Kaoru couldn’t bear to hear anything that Kyoya might say. His resolve was teetering like a spinning plate already. He couldn’t run the risk that Kyoya might give him an out, convince him to change his mind.

He fled the room.

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When he heard the sound of his workshop door opening and then closing again over the noise of his sewing machine, Kaoru scowled. None of the staff ever came into his atelier without knocking.

There was only one jerk who did that on a consistent, obnoxious basis.
He couldn’t lie and claim that he was surprised. Even though he had emphasized to his brother that he was fine going home from their Christmas trip early and alone, that he would prefer that, actually, that he wanted some good, quiet, solitary time, he had still known, deep down, that not even Nanako was going to be powerful enough to keep Hikaru in the Caribbean once Kaoru had flown back to New York City.

Still, it was the principle of the thing.

He had explicitly told Hikaru not to follow him. Those had been his very last words to him as he had boarded the boat he’d commissioned to take him to the nearest island with an airport that offered direct flights to New York.

“I told you not to come,” he said, not even dignifying his brother with his full attention as he finished up the piece he was working on.

The last twenty-four hours had been among the hardest of his life. He had cried for the entire plane ride back to New York, wearing an eye mask and pretending he was asleep to avoid any awkward questions. Then he had gotten back to the condo only to immediately sequester himself away in his workshop, trying hopelessly to find something to distract him.

It actually might be kind of nice to have his brother around for support. Maybe Hikaru would be able to convince him to eat something. Or to sleep, at some point.

Still, he had told his brother not to come. He had to keep his eye on the principle of the thing. “I’m going to punish you for this, you know.”

“Oh?” said a voice that was definitely, definitely not Hikaru’s. “I hope punishing me involves speaking to me, because I believe we have rather a lot to talk about.”

Kaoru startled so badly that the thread he was working with snarled hopelessly. His stomach had plummeted somewhere so deep that it felt like it must have landed in the vicinity of the condominium lobby.

“Also,” the voice continued. “Despite it only having been twenty-four hours, I find I already miss the sound of your voice. I suppose the past few days have spoiled me.”

Kaoru turned around, each small inch of movement feeling like it took an impossibly long time to complete.

Kyoya was leaning back against the closed door of Kaoru’s workshop, eyes hidden behind the reflection of the glow of the desk lamp off of his glasses. It was impossible to read his expression, but his words... … Kaoru wasn’t going to think about his words.

This had not been something that Kaoru had anticipated, not even in his wildest, craziest fantasies. It wouldn’t have been, because… because...

“You shouldn’t be here,” Kaoru said stubbornly. Was Kyoya trying to ruin Kaoru’s sacrifice? Well, Kaoru wasn’t going to let him. “You should still be in the Caribbean. I don’t want you here. How did you even get into our condo?”

Kyoya didn’t respond verbally. Instead, he held up a cardkey for their building in one hand and a sheet of paper in the other. The cardkey was unmistakably Hikaru’s. On the paper, in Hikaru’s distinctive scrawl, so large that Kaoru could read it easily even from across the room, were the
Okay, so his brother suddenly turning traitor had not been something that Kaoru had been expecting.

“What are you doing here?” Kaoru finally asked, giving in. If even Hikaru had gone along with this… Kyoya must have made a very convincing case for himself. Kaoru ached with the need to hear it, even as he knew that it wouldn’t matter, that it could only make the hurt worse. “I thought I made myself clear to you yesterday.”

“You did.” Kyoya was still leaning against the door, not chasing Kaoru down but also not letting him escape. “I have realized, however, that I have been remiss in making myself clear to you.” He took a careful, measured step forward—a presentation rather than a pursuit. “I am in love with you, Kaoru.”

Kyoya hadn’t said those words before.

Kaoru had confessed, back on their trip to Granada, but Kyoya’s response had been muddled by the stress of Haruhi’s kidnapping and Kyoya’s own stupid martyrdom.

Sure, it might’ve been clear in Kyoya’s actions, in the looks that Kaoru would sometimes catch him trying to hide behind his glasses, but the words themselves hadn’t been said.

Kaoru wished he still hadn’t heard them.

It just proved that it was exactly as bad as he feared, that his existence was going to be the weakness that tore apart Kyoya’s heavily guarded, surprisingly delicate heart.

Kyoya wasn’t done. “My love is founded on logical qualities, naturally. Your mind is brilliant, yet you actively undercut your own successes in order to better the fortunes of those you care about, showing an emotional understanding of the world that has taught me much over the years. I know that I can rely on you to be tireless in your pursuit of truth, and yet also trust in you to find and embrace your pleasure without ever allowing it to become a distraction, a distinction that I have long struggled with. You are skilled in your craft, committed to your dreams, and devoted to your friends. Furthermore, if that were not enough, I… I have fun, when I am with you. You have a glow to you that I have often considered to be a guiding light. I have never, not before nor since our acquaintance, met another person who so well matches my thoughts, passions, and desires. It is as though you are my missing piece. Without your presence, I feel incomplete.”

Kaoru stared at Kyoya, his mouth gaping open, not quite sure how to process what he’d just heard. Kyoya smiled at him, that small quirk of his lips that Kaoru adored.

“If I am to spend my life with a single companion, then there is no one I wish to have in that role but you,” Kyoya said, as though all the rest hadn’t been enough already. “I still do not believe that I will actually need to choose between you and my family in the end. However, if such a choice does become necessary, then, without question or hesitation, for the rest of my life, my choice will be you.”

This must have been what Kyoya had told Hikaru to get his blessing to chase after him.

It was beautiful and sweet and earnest and incredibly, achingly painful.

“How can you do this to me?” Kaoru asked quietly, turning in his desk chair and burying his head in his hands, unable to bear to look at Kyoya for even a moment longer. “It’s not fair. I love you too. The thought that I could ruin your life—”
“The only way my life would be ‘ruined’ would be if I somehow lost you from it,” Kyoya said immediately. “I have already told my father as much.”

Kaoru’s head snapped up and he twisted around without any input from his conscious mind. He stared blankly, unseeing, in Kyoya’s direction.

Telling Hikaru was one thing. Telling Ootori Yoshio was another entirely.

“You idiot,” he said, voice blank with the shock of it. “What if he doesn’t forgive you?”

“Then he is a fool,” Kyoya said, not even needing to think about it. “I am going to bring the Ootori Group to greater heights than any in the family before me, and that success will be due in no small part to my desire to be with you. By virtue of your inspiration, you are, in a way, the greatest benefit to the Ootori Group that any partner of mine could ever have hoped to be. If my father fails to realize this, then he is being blinded by his own prejudice and has no one but himself to blame.”

“And did you tell your father all of that, too?” Kaoru asked, still not sure what he felt.

“I did,” Kyoya said.

“And how did he respond?”

For the first time since he had arrived, a moment of hesitation slowed Kyoya’s speech. “He has… temporarily stopped acknowledging me.”

The words pierced Kaoru through the heart and anger boiled out of the hole that resulted.

Ah. A solution to what he was feeling, at last.

“This was why I wanted to break up!” Kaoru said, fury raging underneath his skin. “You spent so long convincing yourself that you would be miserable if we were together because you were so worried about me. Well, this is exactly what I was worried about for you, and here it is, it’s happening, and it’s all my fault!” Kaoru threw himself out of his chair and hurried to Kyoya’s side, dipping his hand in the pocket of his pants without permission, pulling out his phone and shoving it into his hands. “Call him. Tell him you were wrong, that you didn’t mean it.”

“No,” Kyoya said.

“Yes,” Kaoru insisted. “If you don’t want me to suffer, Kyoya, then you need to fix this.”

“You don’t have to suffer,” Kyoya pointed out. “As you can see, I am perfectly comfortable with this state of affairs.”

“Liar,” Kaoru said, stepping back, something vicious and sharp twisting its way through his chest. “This must be killing you. You’re only pretending to be fine with it for now because you think that you’re going to win in the end, somehow. That you’re still going to convince him.”

Kyoya stepped forward, through the barbed wire of Kaoru’s words, and raised a hand to gently run his fingers across Kaoru’s cheek.

“No,” he said softly. “And yes. I do still have confidence that my father will grow to see reason; however, I do not believe that the alternative, that his stubbornness will continue, is impossible.” His touch firmed, and he cupped Kaoru’s jaw, meeting his gaze. “Even if he never forgives me, even if he never even speaks to me again, I will consider the trade acceptable so long as I still have you.” His eyes were dark and piercing through his glasses. “If it was not clear, Kaoru, the
alternative—turning my back on you—is not acceptable to me.”

“You live your entire life for your family,” Kaoru said pathetically. He was frozen by Kyoya’s words, by his touch.

“I used to,” Kyoya said. He smiled, that perfect little curl, so warm and close. “Before Tamaki. Before you. You could say that I have been inspired to consider the benefits of ‘freedom.’”

Kaoru didn’t know what to say to that.

“Kaoru,” Kyoya said, clearly having no such issues. “I would very much like to kiss you, but I am not sure my advances would be welcome at this time.”

“No,” Kaoru said, stumbling back, the word torn from somewhere in the very depths of his heart. “Kyoya, I’m never going to forgive myself for this. It’s not fair. I’m never going to be able to enjoy this, because I’m never going to be able to forget what you had to sacrifice to make it happen. Every moment every day for the rest of our lives, I’m going to look at you and see all those ties that broke because of me. I… I have to figure out what I want to do.”

To his credit, Kyoya did not attempt to follow Kaoru when he broke from his grip. He stood stationary by the doorway, hands falling back to his sides.

“I understand,” he said, though he did sound regretful. “But please, no matter what, don’t cut me out, Kaoru. I understand that whether or not this relationship will be worth the accompanying struggle and pain is a decision that only you can make, at this point. You asked for me to never take the decision from your hands again, and I have sworn to myself to fulfill that wish. However, even though you will ultimately be the one to make this decision, you do not need to make it alone. Even if you decide that anything more would be too much, I hope that our friendship will remain. As I have told you before, you are a sacrifice that I am unwilling to make, even if you yourself are the one to request it.”

Staying friends, after everything. After he knew what Kyoya tasted like. After he had felt every inch of Kyoya’s body molded against his own. That sounded… well, awkward. And terrible, in so many tiny little deadly ways.

But not impossible.

“Agreed,” Kaoru said.

“Then, as your friend—would you tell me what you’re thinking?”

Kaoru laughed humorlessly, sitting back down in his chair. “Sure, if I could figure it out.”

“I see,” Kyoya said. “My presence here is likely to muddle more than it clarifies in that regard, I suppose.” He stepped back, towards the door. “I can show myself out, if you think it would be for the best.”

“No!” Kaoru said, the word ripped from him just as unexpectedly as the last time. Kyoya said nothing, just met his eyes, patiently waiting for an explanation. Kaoru didn’t look away. He owed Kyoya this much, at least. “Please don’t go. I’m not sure what I want to say yet, but I still want you here.”

“I am familiar with the feeling,” Kyoya said, sitting down on the couch across the room.

“Pretend it wasn’t about us,” Kaoru said, perched on the edge of his desk chair, some tug deep
inside of him pulling him towards Kyoya still, even as he purposefully held himself away. “Pretend I’m Haruhi. Pretend that Tamaki’s grandmother has said that she will never, ever accept her, and furthermore, if they stay together, she’ll never speak to Tamaki again. What would your advice be?”

“That she has no need to worry, for Tamaki will simply win his grandmother over, the way he does with all who encounter him,” Kyoya said, not missing a beat. “Furthermore, I would comment that it seems out of character for Haruhi to allow a setback such as this one to stop her from following the path that she knows is right.”

Kaoru frowned. “I guess that was a bad example,” he said. “Tamaki and Haruhi are unique like that, after all.”

“Oh?” Kyoya spread his hands, encompassing the distance between them in the gesture. “Could the same not be said for the two of us?”

“Then let’s speak uniquely to the two of us.” Kaoru pushed himself back in his chair firmly, putting more distance between them, crossing his arms half in thought and half in defense. “Not that long ago, you thought it wasn’t worth it to pursue a relationship with me because you believed that such a pursuit would endanger me. What convinced you that you were wrong?”

“Why ask questions to which you already know the answer?” Kyoya countered. “You yourself took the effort to show me the error of my thinking.”

Kaoru frowned. Kyoya was right; he shouldn’t have asked the question.

It was different when it was him that Kyoya was trying to protect. The entire situation was different. If Kaoru couldn’t convince the world that he was worth taking seriously as a designer no matter the rumors that were spread about him, then he had no one but himself to blame. Kyoya, on the other hand, was working against generations of tradition that he had absolutely no part in creating and years of upbringing that he had just as little to do with implementing. Ootori-san’s belief in meritocracy appeared genuine, but even that had to have a limit—especially if he couldn’t rid himself of the notion that a relationship with Kaoru would involve his most promising son throwing his life away.

“Please take all the time that you need to think about it,” Kyoya said from his spot on the couch, interrupting Kaoru’s thinking. “I originally hadn’t anticipated being able to start a relationship with anyone at all until my plan had reached its conclusion. These moments that I have shared with you have been an unsought gift. Like any other gift, it would be ungracious of me to complain simply because I am being asked to wait before indulging myself.” Kyoya stood again. “Are you and Hikaru planning to come back for Tamaki and my graduation this spring?”

“Of course,” Kaoru said, not quite following the change of topic, too caught up in the dangerous allure of Kyoya referring to him as a ‘gift’ in which he wished to ‘indulge’.

“Good,” Kyoya said, straightening the cuffs of his sweater. “Tokyo Rainbow Pride is being held only a week afterwards. You should stay for it.”

Kaoru definitely hadn’t been expecting that. His attention immediately snapped out of his daydreams, back to the present moment. “Should I?”

Kyoya raised an eyebrow at him. “Or not. It is your decision. I am, however, planning to march in the event as a representative of Suoh Enterprises.”
“Suoh Enterprises’?" Kaoru asked, stunned. “Not the Ootori Group?’

“Since my father will not speak to or of me, it would be difficult to work for my family’s company after my graduation. Fortunately, Suoh-san stepped in and offered me a position on the Suoh Enterprises’ legal team until such time as my plans for the *keiretsu* have been finalized.”

“But your dad just learned about us,” Kaoru said, stunned. “He just stopped speaking to you yesterday.”

Kyoya frowned slightly. “Tamaki,” he said as means of explanation.

Kaoru’s brow smoothed. Of course. Tamaki had heard that Kyoya had been essentially disowned, and his first response had been to immediately find another family to invite him to join—his own.

“You see, Kaoru?” Kyoya said, voice as steady and firm as always, despite the nearly combative nature of his words. “I am not interested in turning back, with you at my side or not. My path was always going to lead me here, regardless of how anyone else felt. Now, I should go—but not for long. You asked me to stay, and I shall stay. In order to do so, I need to check in to my hotel room. I will return as soon as I am able. Perhaps we could order dinner in.” He turned to the door, then paused, glancing back over his shoulder. “You are responsible for many changes in my life, Kaoru. My sexuality is not one of them. It would be utter nonsense to punish yourself for it.”

And, with that having been said, Kyoya let himself out of Kaoru’s workshop.

Kaoru slumped back in his seat.

He hadn’t wanted Kyoya to leave, to abandon him with his own thoughts, but it was probably for the best that he had a moment to mentally regroup.

What should he do?

He’d always been selfish, compared to most people. He knew this. But he’d also always stepped back when it came to the people that he loved the most, and that had always evened the scales in his head. It was okay to be selfish, he had always assured himself, just so long as he never lost the capability to be selfless when it actually mattered.

He didn’t want to be selfless this time. He wanted to run forward, to throw himself all in, to claim Kyoya as his and stick up a skyscraper-sized middle finger to his family if they didn’t accept it.

But he also wanted Kyoya to be happy. Kyoya *deserved* to be happy, more than anyone else that Kaoru knew. He was so tired of Kyoya being the one to make the sacrifices, every single time.

According to Kyoya, it would make Kyoya happy to have Kaoru.

Kaoru didn’t feel even a little bit worthy of that. He would mess up someday—probably more than once, if he were being honest with himself—and then Kyoya would be sad, or, more likely, mad, and then there wouldn’t be anyone else to blame anymore, just Kaoru himself, and Kyoya would have alienated his family for *nothing*.

It was terrifying. It was an impossible amount of pressure. It made Kaoru want to run in the other direction, just as much as he wanted to run towards Kyoya in the first place.

Kaoru did the only thing that he could think of.

He called his brother.
“Kaoru?!” Hikaru sounded frantically relieved when he picked up the phone. Kaoru might have missed a call from him. Or two. Or ten. “You jerk. You’re lucky Jeeves let me know you were home and safe, or I’d be on my way home right now to punch you in the brain until it started working right!”

“I’m sorry,” Kaoru said. He hadn’t meant to worry his brother. He just hadn’t wanted to talk to anyone—not even Hikaru, for once in his life.

“If you’re calling me, then I assume you received my bespectacled gift.” Hikaru didn’t sound apologetic at all for having sold him out. Kaoru probably deserved that. “I had a feeling he’d get you to come out of your isolation chamber. Does this mean he told you everything?”

“Yes,” Kaoru said. “But I don’t know what to do about it all.” He walked over to the couch and collapsed across it on his stomach. The air still smelled ever so slightly like Kyoya’s cologne. Kaoru buried his face in the seat cushion.

If Kyoya were being serious… If he meant what he said… If Kaoru didn’t need to worry about his family and Kyoya didn’t have to worry about Kaoru’s job and they could share space all the time, be together all the time, as easy as anything, letting the rest happen as it may…

He could always have this smell.

He could always have Kyoya.

It sounded too good to be true. Life was never quite that easy, not for them.

“You love him, he loves you back,” Hikaru said, distant and tinny through the phone. “Seems easy enough to me. Even for you two.”

Hikaru understood more about him than anyone else in the world, but this was one thing he never seemed to get.

“Could you bear it, if it were you?” he asked, turning his head so that he was no longer half-suffocating himself in his couch. “What if Nanako’s dad said that you two couldn’t get married because our families were ill-matched?” It was within the realm of possibility. If Shouji-san were still interested in using Nanako’s marriage to expand the Shouji family’s available land into the territory of new businesses, then the Hitachiins’ set of businesses was practically useless to him, requiring very little land at all. They’d be able to get him the connection to old money, sure, but not to new opportunity. “What if he decided that he would never speak to her again if you married her?”

“Sounds like his problem to me,” Hikaru said easily. “And I bet Nanako would say the same.”

Sometimes Kaoru was impossibly jealous of his simple-minded, easily pleased brother.

“I’m serious,” Hikaru said, and he sounded it. “If Ootori-san doesn’t approve, that’s his loss, isn’t it? Not Kyoya’s. You know Kyoya is the kind of perfect gem that every single parent on this planet wishes he or she had as a child. Well, maybe not our parents. Or Tamaki’s. Or Haruhi’s. Well, maybe Haruhi’s.”


Hikaru forged on. “Still, he’s the perfect bastion of filial piety, the perfect brilliant heir, and Ootori-san will have no one but himself to blame if he throws that away.”
“I’m going to tell Kyoya that you called him perfect.”

Hikaru snorted. Nanako was clearly rubbing off on him. “If he doesn’t already realize that I’d never approve of you dating anyone less than perfect, then I officially take the ‘perfect’ back, because that would make him an idiot.”

Aw. “I’m going to tell Kyoya that you called him an idiot.”

“I already called him an idiot to his face yesterday and lived to talk about it. He’s actually not very intimidating when he’s all flustered and frightened that he’s lost you, you know. I couldn’t manage to pick on him at all. If it didn’t feel like something from some kind of insane fever dream, I’d actually say it was a little bit cute.”

Kaoru definitely understood that. “I love him,” he admitted. “The thought of spending the rest of my life with him is kind of terrifying, but I also want it more than I’ve ever wanted anything. I just couldn’t bear it if he ever regretted it.”

“I don’t know what all he said to you, but it seems pretty clear to me that he’s determined to do this with or without you,” Hikaru pointed out. “Seems to me like it’s not your responsibility so much as your opportunity. Can you imagine how it would feel if he wound up with some other guy?”

Oh.

Oh.

They sat in quiet for a moment, processing that idea, well over a thousand miles between them but their minds still close in thought.

They reached the same conclusion. Kaoru could feel it, shining in the silence between them.

“Shall we?” Hikaru asked, breaking the moment.

Kaoru didn’t need to ask about the sudden plural.

“Yes,” he said. “Those who live freely are the winners, after all.”

Hikaru recited the precept at the exact same moment, totally in-sync.

They hung up without needing to say goodbye. They both had other things to do, now.

Kaoru immediately went to their butler and sent him away with a very specific shopping list and the order to hurry.

He then returned to his workroom and cleared his desk.

It had been a while since he had attempted any ikebana. The fewer distractions around him, the better.

Kyoya took his time returning, likely trying to give Kaoru space with his thoughts. By the time he actually got back, Kaoru had been ready and waiting for him for nearly half an hour, leg jumping underneath him as he sat in the living room. All of the anxiety he had somehow forced from his mind as he had been arranging the flowers Jeeves had purchased had poured back in the moment that he had a creation he was pleased with. He had relocated to the living room out of a faint hope that a change in location would ease at least some of his tension.

It hadn’t.
“I’m sorry for the delay,” Kyoya said, a large bag of carry-out hanging from one hand. “I—”

Kyoya froze.

He had seen the arrangement sitting in the middle of the coffee table: three tall, beautifully green-and-blue forget-me-not stems twisting up from a small bed of green leaves studded with pure white gardenias.

True love grown out of a secret love.

Kaoru stilled his nervous twitching. He watched Kyoya, studying his face, trying to see the exact moment that he understood.

Kyoya’s face was frustratingly blank. He gently set the carry-out bag down on the floor next to the table where the arrangement was displayed, then slowly walked around the couch, studying the display from all angles.

“It’s a bit direct,” Kyoya finally said.

Kaoru rolled his eyes and then laughed, bright and loud.

At least Kyoya was never boring.

Kaoru was so in love with this asshole.

“Didn’t your grandmother teach you any subtlety?” Kyoya asked, ignoring his laughter as he straightened his glasses.

“My grandmother?” Kaoru asked, still grinning, heart full to the brimming. “Subtle?”

“I suppose a lack of subtlety does run in the family,” Kyoya conceded. “That’s alright; I’m subtle enough for the both of us.”

“Says the guy who sent me a bouquet of sixty-six roses before we were even dating,” Kaoru said, and he stood up, stepping into Kyoya’s personal space, wrapping his arms around his waist as he gazed at him from inches away. “I recognize that my current actions and my upcoming words might seem contradictory, but I still think we should break up.”

“I see,” Kyoya said gravely, his own arms coming up to drape around Kaoru’s shoulders, seeming unbothered by the contradiction so far.

“We’ll wait to start dating until after you’ve seen your plan through. That way, I won’t ever have to worry about your feelings for me being tied up in your feelings about whatever happens with your family. I know logically that I’m not responsible for the situation with them, but I think that’s the only way I can avoid feeling responsible.”

Kyoya nodded, not looking surprised, though an easing in his jaw spoke to some measure of relief. He really must have been worried. “That is reasonable.”

“But the way I see it,” Kaoru continued, “we don’t necessarily need to be dating to enjoy each other’s company. Right?”

He was standing close enough to see the minute flicker of Kyoya’s eyes that was the closest to an eye roll that Kyoya typically came. “A Hitachiin’s mind works in labyrinthine ways,” he said dryly.
“For example,” Kaoru forged on, “you’re here right now. It seems like a waste to sleep alone, doesn’t it?”

“How very logical of you,” Kyoya said, amusement curling to life underneath the dryness of his tone. “Save for the fact that I have already reserved a hotel room.”

Kaoru waved off this information as irrelevant, hands re-applying themselves to Kyoya’s waist the moment the action was done.

“And,” he said, “if I’m going to be in Tokyo for Ouran’s graduation anyway, I was thinking I might as well stay for the Pride Parade. It would be an excellent PR move for the Hitachiin brand. If you’re also planning to go, then it would make sense to go together—as friends, of course.”

“Of course,” Kyoya said, fingers smoothing along Kaoru’s shoulders as though to say, ‘friends, is it?’

“Also,” Kaoru said, “I’m guessing that Hikaru and Nanako will want the two of us as witnesses for their wedding, though this is still hypothetical. I’m not actually sure if she’s going to say yes. Still, if they do get married, I’m guessing they’re going to elope somewhere culturally significant. It would make sense to share a hotel room, right? Save on costs.”

Kaoru could feel Kyoya’s stomach tense underneath his palms. Kyoya’s eyes were bright and clear in front of him and the smile he had been holding back curled the corners of his mouth, no longer able to be repressed.

“Hikaru is planning to propose?” Kyoya asked, confirming the tidbit of news.

“He can’t stand the thought of her with someone else,” Kaoru said simply. It was easy, when he thought about it that way. When they thought about it that way. They always had been selfish. “He knows he wants to marry her, so he’s going to try a proposal and see how it goes.”

Sure, Hikaru hadn’t said it out loud. Still, it couldn’t have been more obvious to Kaoru if he had screamed it.

“I see,” Kyoya said. “That sounds logical on the surface and yet incredibly ill-conceived at the same time.”

“Sounds like Hikaru, then,” Kaoru said.

“Yes,” Kyoya said. “Nothing at all like a plan to put off dating for a year while going on a series of excursions which appear to be dates with the person that you are not dating. That is clearly a plan with much wisdom and foresight behind it.”

Kaoru tugged Kyoya closer to him, pressed a kiss to his cheek, right below his glasses, and whispered in his ear, “Be nice or I’ll make you sleep in your hotel room.”

“A true tragedy,” Kyoya said. His hands tightened on Kaoru’s shoulders, pushing him back very slightly, until he could once more look him in the eyes. “Kaoru, I will not hide the fact that I am delighted by your decision. Still, are you quite sure about this? This path will not be easy, no matter the strength of our personal feelings.”

Kaoru grinned openly at him, letting him see how sure he was. “If we were dating, I would tell you that the strength of our personal feelings is all that really matters. Since we’re not dating, I’m going to tell you to stop worrying so much and focus on winning your game so that we can start dating already.”
Kyoya’s smile curled wider, pleased, approaching the state of the smile from when Kaoru had won their game. “Then I had better get to work.”

Kaoru’s heart was never going to recover from this man.

Good thing that it was beginning to seem like it would never need to.

Chapter End Notes

Manga Background Notes for Chapter 18 (warning, spoilers follow!):
-Unlike in the anime, Kyoya’s father is not actually a physically abusive jerk in the manga. He is portrayed as being slightly distant and cerebral but still caring about all of his children. He also has a great deal of faith in Kyoya’s capabilities and future.

Foreign Language Notes:
1. [ikebana: the Japanese art of flower arranging]
Hikaru and Nanako’s marriage was a lesson in the art of having things exactly the way you want them without compromising even a little bit.

Neither of them bothered to inform their parents—especially not Nanako’s father, who would’ve wanted to make the occasion a glamorous and widely publicized networking event—of their plans for matrimony until after the paperwork had already been filed.

While that could have been enough on its own, they didn’t actually stop there. They were both on the same page regarding a dinner reception, that page being a big, nearly blank document with the words “boring; not happening” stamped across it in large red letters, but Hikaru still managed to talk Nanako into a symbolic ceremony at a shrine for three major reasons: a.) cool tradition, b.) cool outfits, and c.) cool alcohol.

Nanako agreed that those were three entirely valid, convincing reasons, and then she added a fourth: being able to actively rub her dad’s face in the fact that she was managing to fulfill all of his ridiculous marriage pawn expectations while still leaving his dreams of using her for business expansion and networking sadly unfulfilled.

Kaoru’s brother really had found a fitting soulmate for his devilish heart.

He was so happy for them.

They chose Itsukushima Shrine in Miyajima for the event, telling Kaoru that Nanako had always been fascinated by the area. Still, Kaoru had a feeling that the real reason was that the shrine was far enough away from home to make an overnight stay necessary. Not only were there fewer opportunities for Nanako’s father to try to sneak in uninvited guests that way, but it was also an opportunity for Kaoru and Kyoya to share a room in the Suoh’s vacation home on the island. After all, it wouldn’t be proper for Kaoru to share a room with his brother on his brother’s wedding night.

Had he mentioned how happy he was for the two of them?

Well, he was really happy.

And part of that was definitely for the two of them.

As for the rest of his happiness…

Well, knowing that he was going to get several nights in a bedroom with Kyoya didn’t hurt.

Sure, it had been nice to go to the Pride Parade back in the spring, openly holding hands—”just to make a point,” Kaoru had said with mock-severity when Kyoya had raised an eyebrow at him at the time, clearly saying, ‘this is us not dating?’ without actually putting his skepticism into words.

And it had been nice to call Kyoya every day, knowing that the phone and video calls weren’t just tolerated but were actually actively anticipated, that Kyoya wanted to hear Kaoru’s voice and see his face just as badly as Kaoru wanted to hear and see his. It dulled a little bit of the pain at the fact that they were miles and miles apart, with Kaoru finishing up his junior year at his school in New
York and Kyoya beginning to learn how to navigate the legal department at Suoh Enterprises, a department he planned to work with for a very long time to come, if everything went according to his plan.

Yes, despite the distance, there was a lot that was nice about his current situation with Kyoya.

Still, nothing could compare with sleeping in the same bed as him.

Kaoru could tell that Kyoya thought that their official classification of “not dating” was merely a foolish indulgence of semantics. It was a thought that Tamaki, Haruhi, Hikaru, and even Nanako had verbalized to Kaoru several times, with varying degrees of frustration. They weren’t entirely wrong about that.

If there were anyone on this planet who could see the value and strength of indulging in semantics, though, it was Kyoya. Because of this, he never directly said anything about their relationship status continuing to be defined as “undefined” despite the two of them, all of their friends, and even Kaoru’s increasingly exasperated family knowing that it wasn’t likely that there would ever be anyone else for either of them. Kyoya appeared content to allow Kaoru his total control over the situation, even if that control was mostly being used to construct an elaborate and ridiculous illusion that didn’t really matter or mean anything to anyone outside of Kaoru’s own head. He knew it was stupid, but it really did make him feel better, telling himself that he was just Kyoya’s friend and that Kyoya’s continuing glacier-like chill with the rest of the Ootori family had nothing to do with him—or, rather, only involved him to the extent that a friend of his was suffering and he was determined to help support that friend during this difficult time no matter what, especially with whatever bodily comfort he might be called upon to provide.

As friends.

Semantics.

But it was semantics that allowed Kaoru to do what he wanted without feeling guilty about it, so he refused to dwell on any of it. Why ruin the illusion?

The reason he pulled Kyoya into their assigned bedroom the minute that Kyoya arrived at the Suoh vacation house the night before Hikaru’s wedding ceremony, then, was just to be supportive. If it was true that physical contact released some kind of feel-good hormones, then Kaoru was going to make sure Kyoya got as much of them as he possibly could.

Because he was such a good friend.

He was awakened long before the alarm was set to go off by a sharp rap on the door of the room that he and Kyoya were sharing. He grumbled but pushed himself out of bed, assuming that Hikaru was having some last-minute cold-feet that only the voice of his twin would be able to soothe. Kyoya didn’t so much as twitch as Kaoru extricated himself from their embrace. Kaoru pouted down at him, wanting nothing more in the moment than to curl himself back around his very good, very platonic friend and snuggle his way back to sleep.

The banging on his door increased in urgency.

Scrunching his face up into a pre-arranged scowl, he quietly cleared his throat and prepared himself for the most stern, dry, and paternalistic lecture he could muster at this hour of the morning. He might even be forced to use sarcasm, despite the happiness of the day.

He opened the door in nothing but his boxer briefs, an entirely unamused look on his face.
Then he saw who was actually there and his face twisted even further, into something more like disgust.

“Be careful or it will stick that way,” Yuzuha said, already dressed in a long silk button-up blouse with an uneven hem and a chunky black belt that emphasized her waif-like figure, all paired with clinging, floral-patterned slacks. It was immediately obvious that she was already prepped and ready for the day. “Is your boyfriend still asleep?”

“He’s not my boyfriend,” Kaoru said automatically.

“I’m going to pretend you don’t keep saying that,” Yuzuha said, crossing her arms. “Since it would mean I spent a very unpleasant hour on the phone with you for nothing.”

“Why are you here, Yuzuha?” Kaoru asked, trying to stop his brain from automatically reliving that terrible hour, now that it had been brought up. “Don’t you have enough to do today without harassing me about my relationship status too?”

“I am your mother, and thus will always have enough time to harass you about your particularly stupid relationship status, especially when I’m extremely busy and don’t need something else to be worrying about,” she said. She probably was extremely busy, too. She and Kaoru had gotten into a long-distance, Cold War-esque mini-fight over who would get to design Hikaru and Nanako’s clothing for the big day, which Hikaru had adamantly refused to get into the middle of, the traitor. Yuzuha had only won in the end by using her secret weapon: telling Kaoru that, if he let her have the bride and groom for the day, he could design Ageha’s outfits for the entire weekend. Their lengthy battle of wills combined with Hikaru’s last minute wedding announcement had left her with hardly any time to make her preparations. “But, because I’m a wonderful mother, I thought I’d bring you a gift.”

A sweet angel stuck her head out from behind his mother’s legs, and Kaoru shrieked like a little girl and half-closed the door, hiding his body behind it. The actual little girl in the hallway just blinked up at him, unconcerned by this reaction.

“Yuzuha!” he hissed. “Ageha can’t see me like this! I’m not dressed!”

“She’s your sister,” his mom said dryly. “Lacking clothes around each other never seemed to bother you and your other sibling. Plus, it’s not like she hasn’t seen nude models before.”

Ageha, that precious cherubim, nodded gravely. “It’s okay. I knew Kaoru-niisan wasn’t going to look as nice as the models.”

Kaoru’s body was probably already in the process of shutting down as he slowly died from embarrassment, but he bravely soldiered on. He fell to his knees, still hiding the majority of his body behind the doorway, and flashed a shaky grin at his adorable little sister. “Hey there, my little butterfly. Kaoru-niisan’s really happy to see you, but would you mind coming back later and letting him get dressed, first?”

“No can do,” Yuzuha said brightly, that evil demon witch woman. “I figured you’d need her here so that you could make alterations for her clothes for today, and I have to go track down your ungrateful brother, so I am officially dropping her off with you until the wedding. Have fun, you two! We’ll see how well your boyfriend handles himself around children!”

And with that, Yuzuha was gone, leaving her son and daughter staring at each other around the barrier of an elaborately carved wooden door.
Kaoru spent a long, mournful minute wishing a somber farewell to his fantasies of waking Kyoya up just early enough for another round of feel-good hormone releasing activity before the ceremony.

It was lucky that the interloper was his adorable little sister. He probably would have ignored an obligation to literally anyone else.

“Oh do you want to see the dress Kaoru-niisan made you?” he asked, even though he was still blushing so profusely that the flush had managed to crawl halfway down his chest.

“No,” Ageha said, pouting adorably at him. “Kaoru-niisan always dresses me like I’m a cupcake.”

“Not this time!” Kaoru promised, mentally tossing out the five Ageha-sized a-line princess dresses he had designed in a flurry of inspiration. He had made plenty of non-princess styled outfits, right? He had brought a couple, undoubtedly. One, at least. It would be fine. “Go into the bathroom, and Kaoru-niisan will be right there with your dress for today.”

Ageha let out a put-upon sigh, but trudged into the bedroom as Kaoru stood back. She obediently headed straight into the room’s attached bathroom without so much as a curious look at what else the room might have to offer.

That was good.

Also good was the fact that Kyoya always changed back into his pajamas to sleep in, no matter what he and Kaoru had been up to before bed. Still, Kaoru walked over and tucked the blankets around his friendly colleague, as though that would somehow make it better if his nearly four-year-old sister saw that someone besides his twin had been cohabiting in the same bed as her big brother.

Now Kaoru could worry about his own clothes. He pulled on the first pair of slacks he saw, wincing and immediately stripping them off again when they hung a little bit loose on his thighs, threatening just enough friction to chafe. Kyoya’s, then. They were similar enough in height that it was often difficult to tell at a glance. With a little bit more digging, Kaoru finally found his own pants and tugged them on instead.

Thankfully, he had packed exactly one non-cupcake dress for Ageha for the weekend. It still had an a-line skirt, since it was hard to do much else with dresses for little girls without the finished product looking like a sack, but it was much subtler than the lacy, embellished confections that had been the only other type of outfit he had packed for her. This dress was flowing and sweet, with the lightest touch of ribbons on the shoulders and at the side of the waist giving the finished product some form.

“I guess it’s okay,” was the height of Ageha’s praise once Kaoru had tried the dress on her and made the few alterations and adjustments that were necessary. She was a Hitachiin after all. She then perked up a little and looked almost shy as she stared up at her big brother. Ageha’s big, doe-like eyes made Kaoru’s insides melt into a warm, gooey puddle of happy feelings. “Is tono around here somewhere?” she asked.

Kaoru only staggered a little at the stab through his heart. The need to pick on and insult Tamaki warred with the need to make his little sister happy. It didn’t take long for Ageha to win that match-up. “Why don’t we go see?” he managed to ask through gritted teeth. “Just let Kaoru-niisan change into his own wedding clothes, okay?”

“Fine,” Ageha said gracelessly, clearly only appeased by the thought that she would soon be seeing
her favorite of her brothers’ friends.

Kaoru ducked back out of the bathroom. He pulled a pen out of Kyoya’s bag and left him a brief note telling him where he was going and why. He hurried to pull on his outfit for the wedding before adding an addendum to his note to Kyoya, asking him to please bring Kaoru’s hair and make-up bag with him when they met up later. Kaoru was definitely not going to be able to give both aspects of his appearance the care and effort they deserved with Ageha looking on.

“Alright, my little butterfly,” he finally said, re-entering the bathroom, dressed and at least mostly ready. “Are you ready to go find Tamaki?”

Ageha had been sitting on the side of the bath, kicking her heels in boredom. She brightened as soon as Kaoru’s words were out of his mouth.

“Yay!” she cheered, hopping to her feet. “Tono!”

Kaoru very much regretted ever having used that nickname in front of his little sister. Actually, in retrospect, it was probably Hikaru’s fault. It felt unfair to blame Hikaru for anything on his wedding day, though, so Kaoru would just have to content himself with shaking a displeased fist at his brother in his mind for now.

Kaoru wasn’t familiar with the Suoh family property in Miyajima, especially since he and Kyoya had sequestered themselves away in their room the moment Kyoya had arrived last night. He had no idea where to start in their search for Tamaki. On a hunch, he asked a passing maid where the kitchen was and headed in that direction, one hand tucked into Ageha’s grip.

His hunch paid off. Haruhi was there, huddled over a cup of tea and a textbook.

“Studying now?” Kaoru couldn’t help protesting upon seeing her.

Haruhi blinked up at the two of them, wrinkles in her forehead smoothing out as she smiled at Ageha. “There’s nothing wrong with studying,” she said, more gently than she would have if she had been speaking to Kaoru alone.

“Kaoru-niisan only thinks it’s bad because he’s an idiot,” Ageha said, clearly parroting something their mother had said before.

“That’s not true,” Haruhi said to Ageha. “Your brother is extremely intelligent. He was normally either third or fourth in our class at school, you know.”

Kaoru beamed, the kind words from his always-honest best friend warming him. “Haruhi—”

“He just decided to ignore that intelligence in favor of his art,” Haruhi continued, merciless even as she clearly thought she was still being kind.

“Haruhi!” Her name was much more of a whine this time. “Design takes intelligence too!”

“All he makes are cupcakes,” Ageha confided in Haruhi.

“He does make an awful lot of those, doesn’t he?” her fellow cupcake-dress victim commiserated.

“We’re looking for Tamaki,” Kaoru said, determined to end this conversation before the bruises to his ego got any worse. “Any idea where he might be?”

“I think he planned to spar with Mori-senpai and Hani-senpai this morning,” Haruhi said, closing
her textbook and standing. “They don’t get the opportunity as often anymore and Tamaki enjoys it, probably because Hani-senpai has hit him in the head one too many times. Come on. I’ll help you look.”

Haruhi seemed to know her way around, at least well enough to get them out to the gardens. They found Hani-senpai and Mori-senpai there, but no Tamaki in sight.

“Kao-chan! Haru-chan! Age-chan!” Hani-senpai beamed and waved at them all before kicking Mori-senpai in the face. Mori-senpai had clearly seen it coming and easily blocked the blow with his forearm, nodding at them all in acknowledgement.

“Have you two seen Tamaki?” Haruhi asked.

“He was here earlier!” Renge called out from the side, and Kaoru winced. Renge and Reiko were sitting in lounge chairs and watching the fight from underneath a large parasol, motionless enough that Kaoru hadn’t noticed them as they had approached. He tried to immediately go back to not noticing them, which was difficult because Renge kept talking. “I think he went to find you, Haruhi.”

“Of course,” Haruhi said with a sigh.

“Do you want to learn how to fight, Age-chan?” Hani-senpai asked brightly, ducking underneath a kick from Mori-senpai and pushing up from underneath his cousin’s leg enough to unbalance him and send him thudding heavily down into the dirt. “It’s really cool!”

“That sounds like work,” Ageha said, scrunching up her adorable little nose, and wow, she really was Hikaru and Kaoru’s little sister. Kaoru turned to smirk at Hikaru, only to remember that his brother was off somewhere getting ready for the day. He made a mental note to tell Hikaru about the comment later instead.

“So true!” Renge said warmly. “What a wise child! After all, it’s far more enjoyable to watch than it would be to play! Isn’t that right, Reiko-chan?”

Reiko nodded fervently, eyes still hungrily fixed on where Hani-senpai was springing off of the ground to throw shuriken at Mori-senpai out of nowhere.

Kaoru abruptly realized that he and Renge were actually in agreement about something, and that was terrible. He needed to do something drastic to counteract this troubling twist of reality.

He knelt down and took his sister by the shoulders. “Don’t listen to that witch,” he said firmly. “She’s already corrupted enough goodness and purity in this world.”

“Are you trying to convince your sister to learn to fight, then?” Haruhi asked, bemused.

Kaoru paused, torn between his desire to protect his precious little sister from any form of violence and the absolute necessity of keeping her away from literally anything to do with Renge’s unique perspective on the world.

“Kaoru-niisan’s an idiot,” Ageha said again, observing his indecision. She turned to Haruhi, blank-faced, offering a hand to her imperiously. “Where’s tomo? I want tomo.”

“Right, right,” Haruhi said patiently, reaching down to take Ageha’s hand while Kaoru continued to weigh the relative pros and cons of rocks and hard places. “Come on, Kaoru.”

Kaoru followed, relieved that he was able to mentally shelve his dilemma, at least for the time
being. Hikaru would have to help him tease out an answer later.

“We’ll see you at the wedding!” Hani-senpai called after their retreating backs.

They had barely made it back inside the house before Yuzuha was practically running them over.

“Oi, Hikaru,” she said. “There you are. Have you happened to see your brother around?”

“I assume he’s with Nanako,” Kaoru said. “Also, don’t you think it’s pointless to pretend not to
know that I’m Kaoru when we both know you’re looking for Hikaru in the first place?”

“We’re looking for tono,” Ageha informed her mother seriously. “Have you seen him?”

“Ribbons, Kaoru or Hikaru or whoever you are? Really?” Yuzuha looked over Ageha’s dress
critically. “So uninspired! The rest isn’t intolerable, I suppose. Chiffon is so difficult to pull off in
children’s clothing, and you didn’t do terribly with it. No, I haven’t seen the Suoh kid this
morning.”

“I think Hikaru and Nanako-san went for a walk,” Haruhi said, cutting through their messy family
dynamics with the ease of long experience. “Nanako-san wanted to see more of the area before the
ceremony.”

Yuzuha patted the top of Haruhi’s head fondly. “I still can’t believe neither of my delinquent boys
managed to catch you, Haruhi, my dear. I can only hope they’re properly ashamed of themselves
for letting such a precious doll get away.”

“I think all of us are pleased with how things turned out, Yuzuha-san,” Haruhi said, smiling more
politely up at Yuzuha than Kaoru would have been able to after a comment like that.

“You’re only saying that because at least you’re attaching yourself to a family that’s mostly sane,”
Yuzuha said ominously, putting both hands on her hips. “Meanwhile, I’ve got more Shoujis and
Ootoris around than anyone should ever have to deal with.”

“I think you would be bored if you were attached to a family like mine, Yuzuha-san.”

Yuzuha laughed brightly. “There’s a difference between entertainment and frustration, my lovely
Haruhi, and Ootori Yoshio makes sure I find that line regularly.”

“Kyoya’s not my boyfriend,” Kaoru protested into the void. He shouldn’t have bothered. Everyone
ignored him, including Ageha, who seemed to be thinking that, if she stared hard enough at the
closest door, Tamaki would magically teleport through it.

“So I keep hearing,” said a dry voice from behind him, and Kaoru whirled around to see that
Kyoya had just stepped through a different door entirely. Ageha looked extremely unimpressed by
the continued lack of Tamaki in her life. “I apologize on the behalf of my frustrating father,
Hitachiin-san.”

Yuzuha normally would’ve waved this comment away, but instead she was weirdly silent. Kaoru
looked back at her and realized that she had turned a sickly shade of green upon seeing Kyoya.

“Right,” she finally said, unsteadily. She let loose an incredibly artificial and shrill laugh. “Well,
haha, it’s getting late, look at my wrist, how time flies, I’m just going to go track down my at-this-
moment-in-time most disappointing son and make sure he’s prepared for his wedding, goodbye.”

Kaoru blinked at his fleeing mother and then turned back to Kyoya in awe.
“What did you do?” he asked. Whatever it was, he hoped Kyoya could teach him. He was entirely in favor of anything that could spark that sort of reaction from his mother.

Kyoya just frowned at him and untucked the corner of his dress shirt, clearly not at all bothered that both Haruhi and Kaoru’s little sister were standing right there. “Never mind what I did. Was this really necessary?” He gave Kaoru an entirely unimpressed look past the corner of his lifted-up shirt.

“I wasn’t sure where to find paper?” Kaoru tried, grinning as he took his time admiring both the abdominal muscle definition that Kyoya still hadn’t managed to entirely lose and the long, looping note that Kaoru had scribbled across Kyoya’s stomach before leaving their room that morning.

Black pen really did look good on Kyoya’s pale skin. It hadn’t been as clear in the darkness of their bedroom. The artist in Kaoru’s soul was very, very pleased.

“I wanted to make sure you found my note?” Kaoru tried next, widening his eyes innocently at this person who was most certainly not his boyfriend.

Kyoya sighed and dropped his shirt back down, hiding the words that Kaoru had scrawled across his stomach. “Brat,” he said, tucking his shirt in once more. The corner of his mouth curled upwards slightly regardless of his words, because he was too fond of Kaoru’s hijinks to stay mad at him and they both knew it. “Don’t think that I won’t punish you for this later.”

“I look forward to it,” Kaoru practically purred.

Kyoya stepped forward enough to run the tips of his fingers lightly over Kaoru’s cheek in a barely-there caress. Back when they had been dating, Kaoru had grown to realize that this was the sort of brief, limited physical affection that was the only type Kyoya tended to engage in in public and yet felt as purposeful and romantic as a kiss, when it came from him.

“Haruhi and your sister have abandoned you,” Kyoya pointed out, stepping away once more. Kaoru blinked dreamily and looked to the side. Huh. When had that happened? “You should track them down before Ageha talks Haruhi into getting rid of the dress you made for her.”

“She wouldn’t!” Kaoru gasped, despite knowing that she most definitely would. He reached out a hand to Kyoya, beseeching. “Come with me to distract Haruhi?”

“Tamaki will do enough of that when you find him,” Kyoya said. “I actually have unfinished business with your mother that I wish to take care of before the rest of today’s events provide too much of a distraction.”

Kaoru blinked and the pieces slotted into place.

“The keiretsu,” he said aloud. “She made a deal. Today’s the day that your side of the bargain is fulfilled. She has to join.” Hitachiin Yuzuha, finally tricked into becoming a cog in a larger machine. That was what she was running from. That was how Kyoya had scared her off so effectively.

Kyoya smiled grimly at him like an ancient warrior going off to fight another battle. A weirdly legal, weirdly business-oriented battle. “I’ll come find you when I’m done,” he promised.

How romantic.

Kaoru leaned in and kissed his cheek and then chased off after wherever Haruhi and his sister had disappeared to.
Luckily, they hadn’t made it very far. He entered the main foyer to find that the two of them had finally found Tamaki. This appeared to be a recent discovery, from the way Tamaki was still spinning Ageha in a joyful circle through the air. Typically he could only keep up that greeting for sixty seconds, maximum, before he started making himself sick and dizzy and had to stop.

Kaoru halted at Haruhi’s side, watching the other two together.

“He’s not bad with kids, is he?” he asked, dangling an arm across his best friend’s shoulder and resting his cheek against the top of her head in a half-slouch, half-embrace.

“Of course,” Haruhi said. “After all, he’s just a big kid himself.”

Kaoru snickered, nearly inhaling several strands of Haruhi’s hair.

“Where’s Kyoya?” Haruhi asked, pressing her head more firmly against him in a way that told him that she didn’t actually mind being used as his headrest.

“Off to badger my mother into doing what he wants,” Kaoru said. “The usual.”

“Have you two talked about kids, yet?” she asked, which was not the follow-up question that Kaoru had been expecting.

“He’s not my boyfriend,” he said automatically.

Haruhi sighed. “You two are ridiculous,” she said, as exasperated by their existence as always. “One day you will learn how to communicate like real human beings, and all of us will be better off for it.”

“We’re not dating because we communicated like real human beings,” Kaoru protested. “We’re not dating for the greater good! And we haven’t officially talked about the kid thing yet, but my mom’s had some eggs frozen for years already and volunteered to carry a kid for us, so…”

Haruhi sighed again. “Not dating, but you have a plan for children on standby.” Her head shook from side to side underneath Kaoru’s cheek. “The two of you really are made for each other. I can’t believe none of us saw it before.” She thought about that for a moment. “Unless Hani-senpai did. It’s always so hard to tell, with Hani-senpai.”

“You should marry me, tono!” Ageha was busy saying to Tamaki, who had finally put her down on the ground, clearly unsteady on his feet after all of that spinning. “Hikaru-niisan can share his wedding!”

“Is that a proposal, Princess Ageha?” Tamaki gasped in unfeigned delight, sparkling at her as he fell to his knees and took her hands in his own. Then the sparkles dimmed and he held the back of one hand to his forehead, a tragic pall coming over his face. “Unfortunately, while I am honored by your feelings, I must live a life knowing that I am not worthy of an angel such as you. You are too good and pure for a wretch such as myself!”

“That’s true,” Ageha said with a nod. She appeared not to notice the jolt as her pointed words landed. “But that’s okay. I want you anyway, and that’s all that matters!”

“Hitachiins,” Haruhi muttered.

Kaoru hid his laughter in Haruhi’s hair. “Careful, Haruhi,” he managed to say. “Looks like you have some competition. Hitachiins tend to go after the things they want, you know.”
“If she’s still serious about wanting him after she grows old enough to understand what he’s really like, she can have him,” Haruhi said dryly. All the dresses and long hair in the world somehow hadn’t managed to turn her soul any more feminine or delicate in the end. Kaoru might have mourned that fact if he didn’t love her so much exactly the way she was.

“Tamaki’s lucky you’re not a jealous woman,” Kaoru said, squeezing her shoulders.

“I’m lucky that it’s so easy to spread out the labor of doting on him,” Haruhi countered.

“You both are lucky that I’m not a jealous man,” said a voice from behind them.

Kaoru grinned over his shoulder at Kyoya. “You’re not my boyfriend,” he said, the words far more playful than they were most of the time when he had to say them. He snuggled more firmly against Haruhi, who sighed but was too used to the violation of her personal space to react any further.

“I stand by my statement,” Kyoya said, amusement sparkling in his dark eyes as he walked over to the two of them.

Kaoru laughed at that. “No, you don’t. Tell me that you don’t know the exact name, current occupation, and darkest secret of every single person that Hikaru ever set me up on dates with.”

“Relevant data collection is not jealousy.”

“Uh-huh.” As though pulled by a magnet, Kaoru let Haruhi go and molded himself to Kyoya’s side. It was a much nicer side, much easier to drape himself over than too-short-for-comfort Haruhi. “Especially when two people aren’t dating.”

“The continued happiness of my friends is relevant to me,” Kyoya said, like Kaoru didn’t know that already. He tucked an arm around Kaoru’s waist, keeping him close. “I wouldn’t want them to become entangled with people who were not worthy of them.”

“And yet you continue to refuse to break up Renge and Mori-senpai.” Kaoru pressed his cheek against Kyoya’s shoulder. “I know you could do it if you tried. For me.” He batted his eyes up at him.

“I see no need to take that sort of action,” Kyoya said, smirking. “After all, what benefit could there be in prioritizing one friend’s happiness over another?”

“Mori-senpai does seem perfectly happy,” Haruhi pointed out from behind them, pointedly ignored her friends’ uniquely annoying form of flirting. “It’s only you and Hikaru that seem to have a problem with their relationship, Kaoru.”

“It’s hard being one of the only ones to see the truth,” Kaoru commented sadly. “The ‘truth’ being, of course, that Renge has replaced Mori-senpai with a robot and is keeping the real Mori-senpai in an otaku dungeon somewhere.”

“What is an ‘otaku dungeon’ supposed to be?” Haruhi asked.

“The place where we’ll one day find Mori-senpai,” Kaoru answered sagely.

“If Renge has invented a method to make robots realistic enough to replace people, then I especially see no need to antagonize her,” Kyoya said. “Particularly because the business opportunities of such an invention would be remarkable.”

“It’s like no one cares about Mori-senpai at all,” Kaoru commented sadly. He missed his brother.
Hikaru understood how unholy and cursed this union was. Hikaru understood how he felt about Renge, and Ageha, and practically everything. It sucked not having him nearby to commiserate.

It was probably going to keep sucking. He was… he was probably going to miss his brother a lot, after today.

Until this moment, he’d managed to avoid thinking too much about it. Hikaru had waited until the very last minute to make his plans, after all. Then, last night, when Kyoya had first arrived, he had been so excited… And then, this morning, he hadn’t even woken up before his mother had dropped Ageha on his lap…

Oh.

Understanding finally came, hours—days, maybe?—late.

This had all been coordinated, hadn’t it? Kyoya, Hikaru, his mother, his friends.

They’d all been trying not to let him think about it.

Not to think about the fact that, after today, Hikaru was going to be sleeping in a different bedroom every night.

That Nanako was going to be moving into their New York condo for a while, a third person in a space that had, for quite some time, accommodated only two. That, as soon as Hikaru and Kaoru graduated college, Hikaru and Nanako were planning to start traveling the world, since Hikaru could do his coding and design work practically anywhere.

Kaoru would be invited, of course. Kaoru would always be invited.

It would never be the same.

Kyoya must have seen something of his thoughts on his face, because he suddenly tightened his hold on Kaoru’s waist, reminding him that he was there. “Haruhi,” he said out loud. “Would you and Tamaki mind watching Ageha for a few moments? Kaoru needs to finish getting ready for the wedding.”

“It’s no problem at all,” Haruhi said. She had probably seen something on Kaoru’s face as well, in spite of her oblivious nature. She had likely been looking out for something like this, after all, had probably been expecting this to happen, at some point.

Had the plan been so detailed that it had even included making sure that he had wound up with either Kyoya or Haruhi, his two closest friends and also the two who were consistently the best at reading him, within arm’s reach for practically the entire morning of the wedding? Had everyone known going in to this day that Ageha would ask for Tamaki and thus send Kaoru in Haruhi’s direction long before he could spend too much time awake and alone with his thoughts? That Haruhi would be able to keep an eye on him for long enough for Kyoya to wake up and take over?

The trip back to their guest room was a blur. Kaoru just passively let Kyoya tow him in the right direction. He was clearly more familiar with the layout of the property than Kaoru was.

“I’m okay,” he said, the minute the door closed behind the two of them. Kyoya said nothing, just turning the lights on before turning to face him.

“I’m really okay,” Kaoru tried, again. “Really. It’s not like I didn’t know this was going to happen one day.”
Of course, knowing it was going to happen and watching it actually happen were two entirely different things, it turned out.

Kyoya stepped in close and gathered Kaoru into his arms, one hand slipping through his hair to cradle the back of his head like he was precious. It was too gentle, too sweet.

“I am here,” Kyoya said, the words simple and unadorned.

It was too much.

Kaoru broke. He held on tightly to Kyoya, fisting his hands in the cloth of the back of his shirt, burying his face in his shoulder.

A life without Hikaru…

No. That’s not what it was. He still had Hikaru. He’d always have Hikaru.

But it wouldn’t be the same.

He realized he had been mumbling into Kyoya’s shoulder ever since Kyoya had embraced him.

“I’m okay,” he was saying, over and over again. “I’m okay. I’m okay. I’m okay. I’m okay…”

Kyoya was silent, one hand still cradling his head while the other ran soothingly up and down Kaoru’s back, letting him take whatever comfort he needed.

“You’re much better at this now,” Kaoru finally managed to say in the lull when his involuntary string of ‘I’m okay’ had wound down. “I still can’t believe you actually left the room when I was crying about Ageha, that one time.”

Kyoya just held him even closer. “I am not sure I have much more to offer now,” he admitted quietly. “I see no point in ignoring reality or in offering pointless platitudes. I know of no way to ease the hurt that you feel. It makes me feel… annoyingly helpless.”

“The hurt I feel is stupid anyway,” Kaoru said into the soft, muffling material of Kyoya’s suit jacket, his voice ragged. “I can’t keep him with me forever. I don’t even want to. I really like Nanako. I’m really happy for him, for both of them. I wouldn’t wish for anything different. Not really. So this reaction is… it’s stupid. I’m being stupid.”

“You’re not being stupid. It’s not stupidity to feel emotions.” There was a short pause, and then Kyoya continued, “I know I am no replacement for your brother, so I feel almost ashamed to offer this as consolation, however: I am here, as I have said. I will be here, Kaoru. Forever, if you will have me for that long.”

Kaoru stumbled back, shoving Kyoya a step away from him, keeping him at arm’s length. “You said that you wouldn’t give me platitudes,” he accused, knowing that he was being irrational, unfairly hurt by even this simple comment that had clearly been intended as a kindness. “You never say things that you don’t mean, Kyoya. Don’t start now. I couldn’t handle it.”

“I have not said anything that I do not mean,” Kyoya said steadily. He didn’t look offended that he had been pushed away so suddenly, focused instead on meeting Kaoru’s eyes, on making the seriousness of his words clear. “I do not need to be in the building for my work with Suoh Enterprises. Once the keiretsu is officially in operation, I can manage it from any location in the world. If this is what you need, if I am what you need, then I will move to New York tomorrow.”
Kaoru gaped at him. The first, stupid thing that occurred to him to say was, “But you’re not my boyfriend.”

That actually made Kyoya smile, the small curve of his lips that Kaoru treasured. “Aren’t I?”

Kaoru poked him in the chest. “Don’t put that on me right now too. I’m sad! You’re supposed to be taking care of me!”

Kyoya caught his hand and gently kissed the back of it before he continued speaking. “As I have said, my physical location makes little difference to my employers. I can easily join you in New York—even as a friend.”

Kaoru allowed himself to envision it, for one beautiful, breathless moment. Nanako and Hikaru in one bedroom and Kyoya and Kaoru in the other. Waking up next to Kyoya to go to class and going back to bed with him each night. Sharing dinners with the four of them. Sitting on the couch together, Kyoya reading legal documents while Kaoru sketched.

It would be perfect.

It would also be too soon.

“You can’t,” Kaoru said, the words heavy with regret. Kyoya looked like he was about to correct him, so Kaoru shook his head. “What I meant was that you shouldn’t. Your game’s not done. As of today, you’ve gotten all of the families you need except for your own. It doesn’t matter if you can do the job from New York. If you take off to another country just because I want you to, your dad is going to think that he was right about everything about our relationship: that I’m a distraction, that I’m stopping you from reaching your full potential, that we’re just ‘cursed ground.’ And he wouldn’t be wrong. Sure, you could do the work from New York, but it would be much easier if you were still here.”

Kyoya didn’t argue with him. It was the truth, after all.

Instead, he said, “Two months.”

That… didn’t mean anything at all, to Kaoru.

“Eh?” he said when it didn’t look like Kyoya was going to elaborate.

Kyoya almost looked surprised that Kaoru hadn’t been able to follow his logic. “In two months’ time, I should know enough about your mother’s business to finish drawing up the last of the paperwork for the conglomerate,” he explained. “That’s when I will go to my father with the full plan.” He met Kaoru’s eyes purposefully. “If he turns me down at that time, then he is such a stubborn fool that it would be unwise to work with him regardless, and I will find a different institution to make the final backbone of the keiretsu. If he sees the wisdom in this conglomerate, as I fully anticipate that he will, then he will officially be working underneath me. Either way, he will no longer have any say over the decisions that I make in my personal life, including where I live.”

“Two months,” Kaoru echoed. Two months of living as a third wheel to Hikaru and Nanako, but living as a third wheel to Hikaru and Nanako with the promise of Kyoya at the end of it.

The promise of Kyoya, but also the guarantee that things were never going to go back to the way they had been. More change, even if it was a change Kaoru was excited for.

“‘The flow of the river is ceaseless and its water is never the same,’” Kyoya recited, reading his
mind. “The bubbles that float in the pools, now vanishing, now forming, are not of long duration: so in the world are man and his dwellings.’’

Kaoru rolled his eyes. “Ugh, stop it,” he said. “I know, I know. Life is change. Whatever.” He took a deep, fortifying breath. It didn’t matter. The old saying was no consolation. He still hated it when things changed.

“Two months,” he confirmed, as positively as he could.

Kyoya once again ran his fingers over Kaoru’s cheek, though this time he followed the action by gently tilting Kaoru’s face into a kiss.

Kaoru fell into it greedily, letting Kyoya’s presence warm him.

“I feel as though we have found a few other constants that we can rely on,” Kyoya said musingly as he finally pulled back, still holding on to Kaoru’s hand. “The Host Club has turned into one such constant. Though much has changed since Tamaki first brought us together, our care for each other has remained unchanged for years.”

“No entirely unchanged,” Kaoru said, ghosting his free hand over the curve of his not-boyfriend’s ass and managing a small smile when Kyoya gave him a look in response that he liked to think was affectionate in addition to being unamused. “But I understand your point.”

“Do not forget that you are not alone,” Kyoya said, as though worried the message hadn’t been made clear enough. “No matter what changes occur, so long as the rest of us have breath left in our bodies, you are not alone.”

How could he think anything otherwise, now that he was aware of the all of the subtle machinations that had gone into making doubly, trebly, especially sure that he wouldn’t be alone on this particular morning?

He finished getting ready for his brother’s wedding.

He attended his brother’s wedding.

Standing in a line with the group of people who had become his family, he reminded himself that he was not alone.

Chapter End Notes

Foreign Language Notes:
1. [niisan: a suffix for an older brother]
2. [otaku: a term for people who are obsessed with aspects of pop culture to the detriment of other fields of their lives]
3. [The lines Kyoya quotes are from Donald Keene’s translation of a classic piece of Japanese Buddhist literature called Hojoki or An Account of My Hut]
Two months, it turned out, was both longer and shorter than it seemed.

Longer because it was a struggle every single evening that Kaoru went to bed alone, wishing Hikaru and Nanako a good night before disappearing into his empty bedroom. Kaoru would sometimes spend hours staring blankly at the ceiling of the room before sleep finally claimed him. Sometimes he would give up on sleep entirely and go back to work in his atelier, designing and sewing until he passed out at his desk.

Shorter because Kaoru was so busy between school, commission work, and trying to stay updated on the progress of Kyoya’s plan that the daylight hours seemed to fly by. There was never enough time in the day for all of the things that Kaoru needed to accomplish, so he often found himself thankful that he was working through the night as well. He told himself that less rest meant more productivity, pointedly ignoring the fact that he spent many mornings fixing all of the mistakes he’d made the night before.

Then, two weeks before Kaoru’s Thanksgiving break, Kyoya told him that he had managed to schedule a meeting with his father for the following Wednesday.

As soon as their phone call ended, Kaoru informed his brother that he was flying back to Japan. It didn’t matter that it was the middle of the semester or that he had commissions to work on. There was no chance that he’d be half a world away when Kyoya and his father finally had this talk.

To his surprise, Hikaru didn’t try to talk him out of it by telling him that Kyoya didn’t need him or that he’d just be pointlessly hurting himself by going. Instead, all he said was, “We’re coming with you.”

That meant that Kaoru needed to wait to leave until after Hikaru had given a presentation for one of his classes, which meant that the three of them didn’t actually reach Japan until the night before the meeting. It was probably for the best; Kaoru wasn’t entirely sure what he’d do when he got there. He hadn’t told Kyoya he was coming, not wanting to distract him or add another burden to his already exceptionally heavy load. The extent of his plan, if one could call it a plan, was to hunker down in his family’s living room and fret until he knew how the meeting had ended.

Fortunately, it didn’t seem like Hikaru and Nanako expected much else from him. As soon as they arrived at the Hitachiin family home, they settled him down in the nearest comfortable chair, tucked a blanket in around his legs, and took up posts on both of the armrests, keeping up a nearly constant stream of chatter as they projected random movies on the wall and brought him comfort food as though he were in some kind of helpless coma.

When Kaoru’s phone rang Wednesday morning, far earlier than he had even dared to hope it might, he nearly leapt out of his skin. He didn’t bother looking at the caller-ID before snatching the phone up out of his lap.

“Hello?” he said, his voice a harsh croak after sitting in silence for so long.

There was no response from the other end of the call, save for some faint shuffling noises.
“Hello?” Kaoru said, voice louder, clearer, and carrying a sharper edge. If someone had thought that today was a good day to prank call him, then that person was going to learn the hard way that the Hitachiin sense of humor had some very definite and vengeful limits.

His voice continued to be met by silence.

Kaoru frowned and pulled the phone away from his ear to get a better look at who had called.

Seeing the name on the screen, he nearly did a double take.

*Tamaki?*

What was Tamaki thinking, calling him *today* of all days?

He wasn’t the kind of person to pull a prank, and especially not one to pull a prank on a friend who was going through a rough time.

Was it an accidental dial, somehow?

Had he meant to call for moral support and just forgotten to say anything once the call had actually gone through? Gotten distracted by a passing dog, perhaps?

It seemed plausible.

He looked up and met Hikaru’s eyes. His brother looked just as confused as he felt, so he knew this hadn’t been a part of any wider plan, or at least not part of any plan that Hikaru had been aware of.

“Ootori-san, Suoh-san, Morinozuka-san,” said a cool, efficient voice from the other end of the phone call, the sound of the words muffled and dulled as though the noise were struggling to make it down the phone line. “Ootori-sama is ready to see you now.”

Kaoru fumbled, nearly dropping the phone.

His attention once more shot up to his brother, who was looking back at him with what must have been a mirror image of the wide-eyed mixture of surprise and understanding that Kaoru could feel dawning on his own face.

Tamaki had known that Kaoru would spend today an anxious wreck.

So he had found a way to help.

He was going to let Kaoru eavesdrop on the meeting.

Irrepressible adoration for the stupid, wonderful leader of their stupid, amazing family of friends bubbled up in Kaoru’s chest.

There was more shuffling from the other end of the phone call, probably the noise of their friends standing from whatever seats they’d been waiting in. The shuffling noises were followed by the steady sound of footsteps against tile.

Then there was the sound of a door closing.

Kaoru took a deep breath and turned on his phone’s speakerphone feature, laying it down on the table in front of him. Hikaru and Nanako each took one of his now-free hands, holding on tightly.

“Kyoya,” said a voice from the other end of the call, faint and far away but precise and enunciated
enough that every word was crystal clear regardless. “I must admit, it surprised me that you did not attempt to arrange a meeting earlier. Would it be appropriate to assume, based on your delay as well as your choice of companions, that you are not here to apologize and make amends, but rather to make another attempt at persuading me to accept your foolish and immature path?”

Kaoru was probably holding Hikaru and Nanako’s hands too tightly. They didn’t say anything about it, though, just pressed in more closely around him, wrapping him in a warm and supportive cocoon.

“I apologize, but I arranged this meeting for another purpose entirely,” Kyoya said, his voice just as clear as his father’s and slightly louder. He must have been standing right next to Tamaki. “I am here today with a business proposition.”

There was a quiet moment. Kaoru fought not to hold his breath for it.

“A business proposition?” Ootori-san finally said, and he really must have been surprised, to waste time parroting Kyoya like that. “For me?”

The sound of footsteps once again gently echoed across the call, growing slightly fainter before becoming louder once more. Someone had walked away and then back again.

“What is this?” Ootori-san asked when another moment had passed.

“That is the paperwork necessary to join the Shou keiretsu,” Kyoya said. He had never told Kaoru the name he had chosen before. The ‘prize,’ then, was it? That was fitting. “It is a new leisure-and-lifestyle-based conglomerate that is supported by cross shareholdings from Suoh Enterprises and includes the Haninozuka and Morinozuka Works, the many branches of the Hitachiin brand, and Shouji Petroleum.”

That was one gain that Kyoya hadn’t told Kaoru about. He looked over at Nanako, who smiled softly at him.

“It was a last-minute win,” she whispered. “Dad was worried about going against the Ootori Group, since we’re already supposed to have an alliance with them. But he’s savvy enough to see the benefits of a larger conglomerate.”

Kaoru just squeezed her hand in response. His heart was in his throat; he didn’t think he’d be able to say anything if he tried.

“I am the keiretsu’s manager,” Kyoya was saying at the other end of the phone call. “Suoh Tamaki is here to speak for Suoh Enterprises, should you have any questions regarding their involvement. Morinozuka Takashi is here as a representative of the keiretsu’s legal team.”

In the years that he’d been chasing after Kyoya, trying to figure out his plan, he had never anticipated just how involved Mori-senpai had been in Kyoya’s plotting. He had always assumed that most of the time that Kyoya and Mori-senpai had spent together was being used to discuss their law classes or, in the last few years, to train Kyoya to fight Haninozuka-san. He had thought he was being sneaky when, years ago, he had called up Hani-senpai to try to figure out what Kyoya was training for, but it turned out that Mori-senpai had probably been the weak link all along.

Mori-senpai was also a terrible liar. Kaoru probably could’ve had the truth out of him years ago, if only he had known to press for it.

When he had said as much to Kyoya a few weeks ago, Kyoya had just responded, “Why do you think I avoided talking about Takashi to you as much as I possibly could? Didn’t you think it odd,
since we were in the same program?"

Well, it was obviously suspicious in retrospect.

There was silence on the other end of the phone for a long, long time. Kaoru hoped that the silence meant that Ootori-san was carefully reading over the passel of documents that Kyoya had prepared, and not that Ootori-san had hired a team of ninja to take out his son and his friends as quietly and sneakily as possible.

Finally, with the sound of a creaking chair to preface it, Ootori-san said, “I would have to be a fool to turn down this opportunity. With the backing of the companies you have named, the Ootori Group would be able to expand exponentially.”

Kaoru’s heartfelt sigh of relief was interrupted as Ootori-san continued speaking. “However, it has occurred to me that this keiretsu—Shou, you said?—needs a specialized business such as the Ootori Group just as badly, if not more, than the Ootori Group needs them. The Ootori Group could easily stay independent, without the complicated politics of this conglomerate, and still see success. This keiretsu you have proposed, on the other hand, currently appears to consist of many companies with limited interaction. It will struggle without a powerful, established, interconnected company such as the Ootori Group to help support its initial growth, especially as the ties of each of these companies to the medical field is clear. Without the Ootori Group, your keiretsu is without a sensible center.”

Hikaru practically growled. Kaoru appreciated the sentiment, but still shushed him.

“The fact that you are pointing this out instead of rejecting the idea outright implies that you already have an idea for a compromise.” Kyoya didn’t sound hesitant or surprised; he had told Kaoru a few days ago that he suspected that his father might attempt to negotiate for more. “The lucrative possibilities are not enough on their own?”

“A deal must be fair to both parties,” Ootori-san said calmly. “While the benefit of your keiretsu to the Ootori Group is clear, it is nowhere near the level of benefit that the keiretsu would receive from the Ootori Group in return.”

“It must be killing Tamaki to stay quiet right now,” Hikaru muttered. Kaoru shushed him again, but squeezed his hand to take some of the sting out of it, because it wasn’t like he was wrong.

“What, from your perspective, would be an equitable exchange of resources to make this deal more attractive to the Ootori Group?” Kyoya asked evenly.

“You,” Ootori-san said.

Kaoru closed his eyes. Kyoya had never directly addressed this possibility, but Kaoru had still known it was there, lurking unspoken between them.

“This keiretsu is an incredible feat both of business and diplomacy. The fact that you, at such a young age, have managed to convince so many disparate parties and personalities to trust their family-owned ventures into your hands… Frankly, Kyoya, it is astounding. Not even I could have arranged such a coup, and certainly not at your age. You have more than shown me my mistake in doubting you, however briefly. Once the keiretsu exists, it will no longer need someone with your talents simply to maintain it. You would be wasted on the position. If the Ootori Group is going to join this conglomerate, then my condition is that, when it does, you will return to the Ootori Group as my official heir and the future CEO of the company.”
The air poured out of Kaoru’s lungs like someone had punctured them. He tore his hands out of Hikaru and Nanako’s grip, hiding his face, too ashamed by the prickling in the corners of his eyes to face them.

Here it was, then. Everything that Kyoya had ever wanted as a child, being handed to him on a silver platter.

A silver platter with strings attached.

Of course, those strings were nothing that Kyoya hadn’t lived with as a possibility for his entire life so far. His family—his father—controlling his fate had always been a given to him. If Kyoya hadn’t gone and gotten himself very nearly disowned, all of those strings would have continued to be draped over him, official heir or not. Kyoya was used to the strings. He had learned to live within their invisible confines—not exactly free, but flexible enough to avoid feeling their persistent tug.

The only part of Kyoya that those strings might strangle was Kaoru.

It was pretty much exactly what Kaoru had long been afraid of: Sisyphus, looking up to the top of the hill, boulder in his hands, while a voice whispered to him, “This time. This time, you’ll make it up. I promise.”

To Kaoru’s surprise, his Sisyphus just laughed. It was a low, polite chuckle, but it was still a laugh. Kaoru, heart still in his throat, slowly pulled his hands away from his face, staring down at the blank phone screen. Hikaru and Nanako immediately took his hands back into their own, silently reminding him that they were there.

“You and I both know that Yuuichi is far better equipped to take over the Ootori Group than I am,” Kyoya said. “He has years of experience in the field of medicine, experience that it would take me a lifetime to replicate. No, I can be of much better service to the family behind the scenes, by seeing to the success of this keiretsu with the Ootori Group as one of the leading beneficiaries.”

“You flatter your brother in the very same breath as you seek to rise above him. Furthermore, you flatter him falsely. He would serve as an excellent advisor for you, I am sure, but the leader of the Ootori Group does not need mastery of the field of medicine as much as he needs mastery of the field of business—a field in which you have proven yourself, above and beyond any heights your brothers could hope to achieve.”

Kaoru couldn’t help the twinge of pride in his chest, even as his heart continued to ache, not yet knowing what the results of this conversation were going to be.

“If you intend to make this a personnel negotiation, then the sensible response is to ask what you have to offer me,” Kyoya said, changing his approach. “I understand the benefit to the keiretsu. In exchange for losing my leadership they will gain the Ootori Group’s inclusion. I understand the benefit to the Ootori Group that you are presuming, if I were to work on its behalf alone instead of for the full conglomerate. However, what is the benefit to me, personally? If I remain the manager of this keiretsu, then I will have far more power and influence than I would have even as the CEO of the Ootori Group, and with far less of the public’s attention, which is my preference. What more could you possibly offer me?”

“I am promising you a position at the head of our family, above your elder brothers, and that is still not enough for you.” There was a short pause. Ootori-san had clearly made some movement, taken some action. Kaoru hated that Tamaki hadn’t managed to get them video and then hated himself for hating Tamaki, even for a moment. “Ambition is good, Kyoya, but be wary of overstepping.”
“Ootori-san—” said a voice that was unmistakably Tamaki’s, louder and more emotional than anything else that had been said yet, clearly the closest speaker to the phone.

“This is not your place, Suoh-kun,” Ootori-kun snapped at the same time as Kyoya snarled a quick, short, “Tamaki.” “Know the limits of your own affairs.”

Kaoru immediately felt even worse that he had ever had a negative thought towards Tamaki, if only for a moment. Tamaki was the best person alive, and Ootori-san didn’t deserve to lick his shoes.

“You can call me an ungrateful son all you would like, father,” Kyoya said after this interruption. “However, you are the one who raised me to be ambitious. The keiretsu does not need the Ootori Group enough for it to be a worthy trade for my demotion, from my perspective.”

Another pause. Kaoru wished so badly that he could see what was happening. Hikaru and Nanako’s hands were starting to sweat—or maybe that was just his own.

“I see,” Ootori-san said. “I understand now. This is about the Hitachiin boy.”

No.

No.

This was exactly what Kaoru had desperately wanted to avoid.

“I’m simply negotiating—”

“You are letting emotions cloud your judgment. You are letting base, temporary desires overthrow your filial loyalties.”

Kyoya’s voice, when it echoed out, was noticeably wry. “If that is truly what you believe, then it sounds as though perhaps the family should not be entrusted to my care after all.”

“You are playing a game with me, Kyoya. You seek to free yourself of your responsibilities to your family while still being able to imagine that you are serving them. You are attempting to have all of the benefits of being the head of the family without making any of the sacrifices that must be attendant on that position. You are showing yourself to be a selfish child, unable to put the needs of others before your own.”

“Ootori-san—” Tamaki tried again. Kaoru desperately wished for him to stay quiet. If he got kicked out and took their phone line with him, Kaoru wasn’t sure what he was going to do. Thankfully, Kyoya started speaking before Tamaki could get any further words out. “You are correct, father,” he said, probably intentionally loud enough to drown out whatever Tamaki had been trying to say. “I am playing a game, and it appears that I have won. Whether or not you accept my decision, I will still control what is soon to be one of the most powerful keiretsu in the country. If you were not allowing your own feelings to cloud your judgment, then you would see that, rather than ignoring the needs of others, I am planning on using my victory to bring our family to untold heights of success and security. As you yourself said, earlier in this meeting, only a fool would turn down this opportunity. This is a victory that I have only been able to achieve due to my desire to find a path by which you might be persuaded to accept my relationship with ‘that Hitachiin boy,’ as you referred to him. Rather than being selfish, the sacrifices I have made to reach this point, which have been many, have only been possible because of my devotion both to our family and to him.”

“Society is never going to accept this path you are on, no matter how successful you personally
regard yourself. You will learn soon enough. A man who chases two rabbits doesn’t deserve one, Kyoya.”

“Society is changing,” Kyoya said, voice as calm and even as always. Kaoru desperately wanted to see him, to look at his face, to make sure he really was okay.

“Change is not always a positive. Nor is it a given to be the change that you are hoping for.”

“Nothing in life is a given,” Kyoya countered. “That does not stop ambitious men from attempting to shape the future as they wish.”

“The Ootori Group will not join this keiretsu,” Ootori-san said. “Not so long as I still hold doubts about its leadership.”

After all this time, after all this effort…

It still hadn’t been enough.

And, despite everything, despite the break-up, despite their attempts at secrecy, it was still Kaoru’s fault.

“I understand,” Kyoya said. Kaoru’s body was practically thrumming with the need to see him. “Naturally, you must make the decision that you feel is in the best interest of the company.” The ‘no matter how foolish and illogical your feelings are’ was practically audible.

“Prove me wrong,” Ootori-san said sharply. “Tell me that you are willing to give up on this ill-advised relationship, Kyoya. Show me that you can still see sense, and my trust in your maturity and leadership will be restored.”

“I will never give up on him,” Kyoya said, voice just as strong and sure as ever.

Kaoru was standing up from his nest in his chair before he had even realized that he intended to move at all.

“I have to go to him,” he said blankly to Hikaru and Nanako, who had made quick motions towards him when it looked like he was getting up. He couldn’t let them stop him. He wouldn’t, because… “I can’t let him face this alone.”

The voices continued to issue from his phone, still lying on the table in front of him.

“You could have made the Ootori family strong, Kyoya. The strongest it has ever been.”

“The Ootori family could still be the strongest it’s ever been, father.” Kyoya’s voice was finally losing some of its fervor. Now he was speaking quietly. He sounded pained, almost defeated. Despite winning the war, it was seeming less and less likely that he was going to win this, the most important battle. Kaoru’s arms ached with the need to hold him. “In my life thus far, I have frequently found that, with others, one can become far stronger than one ever could have become alone.”

Kaoru had heard enough.

He had to go to him.

“Kaoru, what are you—”

He was out the door before Hikaru could get out the rest of his question.
His chauffeur must have forgotten what it was like to see one of the Hitachiin twins on a mission. All Kaoru had needed to do was to step into the garage and say “We’re going to the Ootori Executive Offices right now,” and the man had practically jumped out of his own skin in his hurry to get the car ready.

Kaoru didn’t really care. They made it to the Ootori Group’s office building in record time. It turned out that his chauffeur actually could “floor it,” so long as he had the proper motivation.

He strode into the lobby doors. He had never actually been to the Ootori Group’s Executive Offices before. It looked exactly like he would have imagined it, if he had ever had cause to imagine it. Everywhere he looked was glass and metal, minimalist and imposing.

The starkness of the lobby made him finally slow down, steps faltering as his single-minded motivation hit a snag, emotions still a jumbled, messy ball somewhere in his chest.

Several men in dark suits were stationed around the room, clearly members of the Ootori private police force “blending in” behind newspapers or on fake phone calls on the chunky black chairs stationed around the room. Kaoru could tell even through their sunglasses that they were giving him dark, measuring looks. He was still wearing the rainbow-patterned button-down and pastel yellow undershirt he’d flown back to Tokyo in, his eyes bleary and his hair a tangled nest from an anxious, sleepless night on a plane, so he couldn’t really blame them.

He was suddenly acutely aware of just how out of place he was here. A messy child, an aimless artist, a splash of rainbow and light in an imposing place that was made for shadows and angles. No wonder the security team was keeping an eye on him. The lobby of the Ootori Group Executive Offices probably hadn’t ever seen someone like him before.

Suddenly, his cluttered emotions streamlined and he knew exactly what he wanted to do from here. He wanted to march up to that counter and demand a meeting with Ootori Yoshio. He wanted to have a formal, professional meeting so that he could formally, professionally point out that Ootori-san was the biggest idiot on the planet for failing to recognize and appreciate what he had. He wanted to shake him. He wanted to say that you couldn’t live an entire life in black and white, like this whole stupid office building, because that was the kind of life that was boring and pointless.

Still, storming into Ootori Yoshio’s office and informing him that he was an idiot and his way of life was pointless seemed like the kind of idea that was better kept a fantasy rather than a reality.

Except… why?

He had done everything else the best that he could, and it still hadn’t been enough.

He had tried playing this game properly, obediently. He had tried playing this game according to Kyoya and Ootori-san’s rules: slowly, step by step, formally and professionally. In the end, though, it had turned out that the game had been rigged. That the game had always been rigged, right from the very start, and a victory had never even been possible for him.

So maybe it was time to replace the gameboard.

After all, what else was there left to lose?

A lot, protested his brain anxiously. Lawsuits and financial repercussions and bridges neither of you can afford to burn.
So what? said a part of his brain which actually sounded a lot like Hikaru. That probably should have raised some red flags, but, in Kaoru’s current state, he couldn’t help but find the cadence of the thought process comforting. *Is honesty illegal now, or something?*

“You know what?” he said out loud to the room at large. “This place could *use* a little more color.”

He went from standing still to sprinting faster than any of the security forces had been anticipating. He managed to leap the reception desk, past a woman who seemed to take this turn of events with a calm, even-handed chill, barely blinking as he flew past (possibly an Ootori-designed robot?), and ducked into the elevator bay before anyone could stop him.

He had been anticipating the additional guard within the elevator bay. After all, the Ootori family could practically write a book on being *overly* over prepared. He stayed crouched as he emerged, knowing the man was probably anticipating someone taller, and gave him a quick, sharp jab between the legs as the man came swinging for him. He then paused to incline his head solemnly in the man’s direction because that had been a low blow and he knew it. Still, desperate times called for desperate measures.

He made sure to steal the man’s ID card, just in case.

No prepared like overprepared? He was going to show Ootori Yoshio how it was done.

In a spontaneous, last-minute plan kind of way.

In the Hitachiin way, in other words.

They would probably be expecting him to take the elevator. He pressed all the buttons he saw, just to keep up the pretense for however long it could possibly last, and then he used Sore Dick-san’s keycard to let himself into the nearest stairwell and started climbing his way up.

He assumed Ootori-san’s office would be on the top floor. That seemed like an Ootori kind of thing to do.

He made it up three floors before he could hear the sound of footsteps ringing up the stairwell behind him. He tried to push himself harder, faster—he regretted ever making fun of Kyoya’s training with Hani-senpai. If he had known a dramatic chase scene was in his future, he would have gotten much more involved in their daily exercises. He flew up one more floor three steps at a time, almost making it to the landing, before more men in suits and sunglasses burst out of the door in front of him, now solidly blocking Kaoru from his destination.

He skidded to a halt. It was either that or run face-first into some security guy’s chest.

They stared him down. He stared back at them from two steps below the landing, mind working furiously. There was a soft shuffle behind him and the footsteps below him stopped, probably trying not to trip over each other as they realized that their prey had finished fleeing. He didn’t dare look back at the total numbers he was facing. That would involve turning his back on the mess of guards in front of him.

“Do you guys not hire ladies?” was the first thing it occurred to him to say out loud. He fought the urge to roll his eyes at himself. His brain wasn’t exactly in peak condition, at the moment.

This was important, though. He had to do better.

“Does it change anything if I say that I’m doing this all for love?” he asked, trying desperately to put his mess of emotions into words. “Look, there’s… damn, that’s a lot of you, give me a second
to count—wow, are there twenty of you on this one landing, that seems unwieldy—whatever, anyway, there’s twenty of you here right now, plus maybe a few shorter ones I can’t see and therefore couldn’t count, plus whatever kind of platoon is behind me, so law of statistics says that at least one of you is probably gay or bi or something. And it sucks, okay? It would be a hundred times easier if you weren’t like that, right? But it’s not really the gay part that sucks, or the bi part or whatever you are, but it’s society. You know? Because all you want to do is to be with the person that you love. That’s it. You just… you just want to be able to do everything that everyone else gets to do, right? Group dates and sappy confessions and Valentines chocolates and Christmas cakes and awkward wedding receptions and everything."

The weren’t attacking yet. Kaoru kept talking. He knew he was babbling, but he had a solid point, at least. He thought. He hoped. Somewhere. There was a minor shuffling noise behind him, but he refused to turn around, to break the tenuous stalemate that he had found.

“And, well, you all know the Ootori family. You know what they’re like. You all know Kyoya, especially. And, sure, he can be a total asshole, especially when he thinks you’re incompetent or not doing your job—um, maybe don’t think about that one too hard right now. Anyway, you guys see all the behind the scenes stuff, so you see how much he actually cares, right? And now imagine a guy who cares that much, who cares about everything down to the smallest detail, that kind of guy, the kind of guy that Kyoya is, imagine him not being able to be with the person that he cares about the most. Okay? He’d go along with it. You all know he would. He’d do whatever was expected from him.

“And he’d run this company and keep you all employed so that you go home to your wives or girlfriends or even your boyfriends, for the one-maybe-two of you who are gay and-or bi, because I’m rooting for you! Anyway, you’d go home to the person that you chose, or maybe to no one at all, if that’s your type, no judgment here, and the point is that you’d be going home to exactly what you wanted. Because Kyoya would be here, making sure you had a job, taking care of business, so that you could do that, so that you could go home to whatever home situation makes you happy. So you could have all the group dates and confessions and couples’ Christmases in the world, forever, because Kyoya would be here, making sure the company was still here for you the next morning.

“But Kyoya doesn’t get that. You all know the kind of pressure he’s under. And the crazy thing is that Kyoya doesn’t need that pressure to keep him in line. He would do all of it easily, gladly, just because he wants all of you to keep being able to go home to whatever lives you want to be living. He’ll keep doing his best because he always does his best, no matter what, even if it’s something stupid. Because that’s who he is. So he doesn’t need some ridiculous unfair rules about how he should be living his life. He doesn’t need expectations, because he’d do the right thing even if the rule didn’t actually exist. He’s already perfect, alright? He’s already perfect. And he deserves… he deserves more than I can give him. I know that. But he seems to want me anyway, so…”

Kaoru’s voice trailed off as he thought about that for a minute. A new, huge, earth-shaking revelation was looming in his mind, knocking out any other points he might have been on the verge of making like a ridiculous bowling ball of comprehension.

“Love means understanding each other,” he breathed, nearly in awe over the realization. He wasn’t even sure if he was quoting Haruhi or Kyoya or Tamaki or Nanako anymore. It felt like all of them had said something similar to him, at one point or another. He’d just never realized…

“‘All that matters is that the people that we care about understand us,’” he said. That one was definitely Kyoya. “That’s what he gets from this. That’s what he gets from me. I don’t have any expectations for him. I already think he’s perfect. Even when he’s grumpy. Okay, especially when he’s grumpy. And mean. And tired. And stupidly self-sacrificial. And emotionally robotic. Just…”
every phase he has. Even when we were friends, I accepted all of him. He’s never needed to put on a mask around me. He’s never needed to pretend to mean something he didn’t, because he knows… He knows that I understand. That I love him anyway. Don’t you see? That’s all Kyoya wants—someone who will love him anyway. No expectations, no rules. Just to be seen for himself. Can you imagine? Wanting something so small, and yet not being able to believe that it will ever happen? That’s ridiculous. It’s unfair. So I’m never going to stop fighting for him. Even though all of you will definitely beat me if we actually fight. I’m speaking metaphorically about the fighting. Just so that’s clear.”

The guards continued staring at him, as though not entirely convinced that he was actually done speaking. But Kaoru was finally done. He felt winded and also elated at the same time.

He had never really understood what Kyoya got out of either their friendship or relationship. He had never even bothered thinking about it. Somewhere in the back of his mind, Haruhi was definitely shaking her head in exasperation at him while Tamaki beamed, the words ‘You always put him on such a pedestal that you forget that he has emotions too’ scrawled underneath their imaginary feet. Well, he had gotten there in the end. That was what mattered.

He could do this for Kyoya. He would do this for Kyoya. And Kyoya’s dad wasn’t going to stop him, although his private security force could certainly try.

“Aw, Kao-chan!” cooed a familiar voice from behind him, breaking through the reverberating silence. “That was so sweet! But you don’t have to fight. That’s why I’m here, right?”

Kaoru whirled around.

Standing behind him on the lower landing was not, as he had assumed, half an army’s worth of guards.

Instead, he was now looking down on Hani-senpai, who was beaming and sparkling at him in approval, and Haruhi, who was standing placidly behind their shortest friend and holding up her phone at such an angle as to imply...

“Were you filming me?” Kaoru asked, suddenly horrifically embarrassed. “Delete it!”

“I can’t,” Haruhi said. She didn’t look sorry at all. “I promised Tamaki. He wanted ‘footage of his son becoming a man.’”

She looked like the words half-killed her to say, but she also didn’t look like she was interested in giving up the phone. Kaoru mostly understood. Tamaki’s puppy dog eyes could move mountains.

Still, he had to try something. He jumped down the stairs to reach her and beg, or cry, or offer to be her servant forever, because no one was allowed to hear that mess of half-baked thoughts and emotions, not ever, not Tamaki and especially not Kyoya, when Hani-senpai—Hani-senpai!—stuck a leg out and tripped him.

“Don’t get distracted, Kao-chan,” he scolded when Kaoru looked up at him from his new spot, sprawled over the landing and shocked out of his embarrassment. He noticed that, from this angle, he could see a veritable mountain of men in suits piled up on the next landing down. Ah. That was what had happened to the half of an army behind him. “Hika-chan said you had something important you were trying to do, right?”

Right.

Right.
Kaoru stood up again, looking back up the stairs. “Sorry to trouble you, Hani-senpai,” he said. “Would you mind clearing a path for me?”

“Not at all!” Hani-senpai said cheerfully, cracking his knuckles terrifyingly. “That’s what senpai are for!”

Kaoru assumed he was speaking broadly, about being there when their underclassmen needed them, and not actually about fighting off squadrons of elite security forces. Still, with the practically gleeful way he was eyeing the men on the landing above them, it was hard to tell.

“I’m supposed to tell you that Hikaru hasn’t used your father’s access to hack into the office security system because that would be illegal,” Haruhi said quietly. “And that he hasn’t taken over the security cameras, and that he won’t automatically unlock Ootori-san’s office when you get that far, because, again, that would all be very illegal.” Haruhi was looking like she very much regretted every decision in her entire life that had led to this specific situation. “So… do what you want with that non-information.”

Kaoru kissed her on the cheek, because she was the greatest friend a guy could ask for. He also tried to make a grab for her phone with the arm he had stretched behind her back, because even Tamaki’s puppy dog eyes were nothing on the embarrassment of the scene he had just made.

Haruhi accepted the kiss and avoided the grab. She knew him too well.

“Good luck,” she said, pocketing her phone.

“We’ll follow right behind you, Kao-chan,” Hani-senpai declared. “Good luck, good luck!”

“Um, Haninozuka-sama,” said one of the men on the landing above them. “We don’t actually want to fight you.”

“Boo! Without a challenge, how can you hope to improve?” Hani-senpai wagged a finger at them in disappointment. Then he pulled a bo out of the back of his shirt. “Prepare yourselves,” he growled.

Kaoru made it through the group without too much difficulty. Someone might have tried to grab at one of the flapping ends of his shirt, at one point, but then the bo came flying by him with Hani-senpai attached and that was the end of that.

He didn’t encounter anyone else as he climbed up the last few flights of stairs. When he reached the last floor before the roof, he took a deep breath to steady himself before opening the door.

The hallway before him was empty. Either Hani-senpai had taken out every security force in the building or Hikaru had somehow managed to fool the electronic surveillance into thinking that this was not Kaoru’s destination. Either way, he made his way to the large oak doors that dominated the center of the hallway without interruption.

Despite his Hitachiin reputation and all of the crimes he and his friends had committed to get to this point, he still stopped to knock before bursting inside. After all, it was one thing to break and enter, but it was quite another to be rude about it.

“I’m coming in,” he said under his breath. Then he opened the doors.

To his surprise, Ootori-san wasn’t alone in his office. Kyoya, Tamaki, and Mori-senpai were still there as well.
Kaoru immediately flushed, determinedly not meeting Kyoya’s eyes, scared of what he might see there. He had assumed the three of them would be gone already; despite rushing to the office as fast as he could, he had thought that their meeting had been ending when he had first left his house and would surely have been long over by the time he actually arrived at the offices.

Taking a few deep breaths, he steeled his nerves and strode forward, ignoring his friends as he made his way to Ootori-san’s desk. He did his best to keep every movement as confident and purposeful as he could, no matter how badly he wanted to run and hide.

“Ootori-san,” he said with determination. “I apologize for the interruption. I wanted to try to persuade you not to make a mistake.”

“So I have heard,” Ootori-san said, gravely.

What did that mean? Kaoru tilted his head in confusion, and then noticed the large computer monitor to the side of Ootori-san’s desk, visible both to him and to the rest of the room, currently showing a stairwell that was empty of anything except for a pile of groaning men in suits.

An ice-cold flash of fear stabbed itself deep into Kaoru’s heart.

“Ah,” he said, all his purposeful determination evaporating. “Right. Uh. You heard… all of that, then.”

Ootori-san merely inclined his head in a gesture that could mean anything. Now that he was a flesh-and-blood person and not just a disembodied voice over the phone, Kaoru was struck by just how horrifically intimidating Kyoya’s father could be. Still, he had a message to deliver. That was the most important thing, no matter how terrifying it was to feel Kyoya’s lurking presence behind him and Ootori-san’s quiet judgment in front.

“I love your son,” Kaoru said. Might as well start with the most important part. “I will do anything to support him, always. I even tried to give him up because I thought that was the best way to make him happy. He managed to convince me that it was not. With me—thanks to me—he is more capable of being himself than he could ever be with anyone else.”

“You don’t have to tell me who my son is,” Ootori-san said, but his voice was quiet, not angry or admonishing.

“Right,” Kaoru said. ‘As long as the people we care about understand us, the other stuff doesn’t matter.’ Kyoya hadn’t been raised in a vacuum. That idea had needed to come from somewhere. Kaoru inclined his head in Ootori-san’s direction. “You understand Kyoya too, Ootori-san. You keep saying that you’re worried he’s being impulsive or emotional, but we both know that Kyoya isn’t like that. I think that what you’ve actually been worried about this whole time was me.”

“Kaoru,” Tamaki said quietly from behind him, sounding gut-punched on Kaoru’s behalf. Kaoru ignored him. This was too important for him to be distracted by Tamaki’s mothering.

“I understand the reputation that my brother and I have earned for ourselves,” Kaoru continued. “That our entire family has earned for ourselves, really. I cannot deny that that reputation is accurate. We are impulsive and emotional, every single one of us, from my grandparents on down. Still, that passion means that we are also utterly devoted to those that we care about and determined to do our best for them, no matter what it takes. My parents, my grandparents, my great-grandparents—for generations, Hitachiins have been partners with their spouses in both life and business. I know that I surprised and impressed you once before, with my preparedness when you called about those tabloids. That is who I truly am, Ootori-san. That is who my family is. I am
ready to fight the entire world for Kyoya’s sake, if that is what has to be done in order for him to succeed.” He took a deep breath. It was time for the final stretch. “That’s what I wanted to come here to say. That you won’t ever find a better match for Kyoya than me, no matter how hard you search, because I meant it when I said that I would do anything to support him. And we both know that support is all Kyoya needs to change the world.”

This proclamation was met by a sharp, ringing silence. Kaoru realized he had raised his fist in a passionate demonstration of the strength of his feelings and quickly lowered it, realizing that raw passion was unlikely to move this particular audience.

“Seven percent for three years,” Ootori-san said. His eyes drifted to look behind Kaoru. “Five percent for the following three. That is my final offer.”

Kaoru was sure that the question marks that he was feeling were visible above his head.

“That is… acceptable,” Kyoya said from behind him. There was some tone to his voice that Kaoru couldn’t quite place. “Takashi and Tamaki will prepare the paperwork for you. Welcome to the keiretsu, father.”

“What?” Kaoru asked, finally verbalizing his all-encompassing confusion. Then there was a hand on his shoulder, quieting him.

“Kaoru is not needed for the rest of this meeting. I will show him out,” said Kyoya, and Kaoru was steered—gently but firmly—from the room.

The heavy oak doors closed behind them and Kaoru winced at the heavy finality of it.

“Sorry,” he said bleakly. “I know that was kind of—” Over the top? Overdramatic? Over… everything? He peeked up at Kyoya’s face, ready to face the music.

He didn’t even get the chance. Before he knew it, Kyoya had shoved him backwards, pinning him against the hallway wall and kissing him like the world would end if he stopped.

Kaoru melted. He wrapped his arms around Kyoya’s waist and clung to him, kissing him back with just as much desperation, like Kyoya was oxygen, was necessary. He didn’t even care that the frames of Kyoya’s glasses were digging into his cheeks. It was just further proof that it really was Kyoya, that Kyoya was here, in his arms.

“You didn’t tell me you were coming to Japan,” Kyoya said into his mouth. His hands had come up to frame Kaoru’s face, as though Kyoya, too, needed to make sure he were really here and not just some kind of dream creature. The tips of his fingers slid along Kaoru’s skin, desperate and desiring. “Foolish. It’s the middle of your semester.”

“Shut up,” Kaoru said, the words hot and wet in the shared space between their mouths. If Kyoya were lecturing him about his scholastic responsibilities, then clearly they weren’t kissing hard enough. He immediately did what he could to rectify the situation.

It wasn’t quite enough.

“I love you,” Kyoya still managed to say, to breathe, to pant against him. He said it again and again, and soon Kaoru realized he was saying it back, the words mingling and tangling until it was impossible to tell where Kyoya’s ended and his own began.

After a few minutes, their frenzy died away. They were still in the hallway of the top floor of the Ootori Group Executive Offices, after all. Still, it seemed impossible to put even the faintest trace
of distance between them. Even as they stopped kissing, Kyoya pressed his forehead to Kaoru’s, keeping them in contact.

“I clearly missed something when I hung up the phone,” Kaoru took the opportunity to say. “What was your dad talking about?”

“‘Hung up the phone’?” Kyoya sounded puzzled, even as he nuzzled closer, dragging his nose along Kaoru’s cheek. “Ah. Tamaki, I assume. We will need to speak about your tendency to eavesdrop at some point, especially if you continue to eavesdrop so poorly. My father had already agreed to join the keiretsu before you started your rampage through the building and we became a little bit distracted.” Kyoya pressed their cheeks together as though he still couldn’t quite believe that Kaoru was really here, as though physical contact were the only way to make certain. “He was just naming his terms, at the end. If the Ootori Group doesn’t see growth of at least seven percent a year for the next three years, and then five percent for the three years after that, then they can walk out of the conglomerate and take whatever profits or shares they have invested in the other companies with them.”

“Oh,” Kaoru said, feeling young and immature and foolish, everything that Ootori-san probably thought that he was. “I thought he had turned you down.”

Kyoya laughed, a light, affectionate chuckle. “He was never going to turn me down,” he said. “Why do you think I brought Takashi? I could have represented the legal team well enough on my own.”

Kaoru thought for a minute. Then he finally pushed Kyoya back a step, frowning at him.

“The Houshakuji Corporation. It was a reminder. Mori-senpai and Renge are...” Kaoru’s frown became a disgusted pout. “They’re... engaged, or something, and, if Morinozuka Works is going to be joining this conglomerate, then your dad is probably going to lose one of his biggest medical supply partners, assuming Renge takes the Houshakuji Corporation to her new husband’s business instead.” He turned his pout on Kyoya. “You said you hadn’t meant to set them up!”

“I hadn’t,” Kyoya said. “It just happened to be an incredibly fortuitous coincident.”

Kaoru crossed his arms, unable to rid himself of his ridiculous pout. Nothing was ever coincidental, with Kyoya. “So I guess this was all for nothing, then,” he said grudgingly. So much for grand romantic gestures. “You didn’t actually need me at all.”

“No,” Kyoya said, at once. “It was perfect, Kaoru. You are perfect.” He stepped in closer again, as though he couldn’t help himself, sweeping his hands along Kaoru’s cheeks, through his hair. “It was different, before you arrived,” he whispered in Kaoru’s ear, which mostly seemed like an excuse to move close enough to insert one of his legs teasingly in-between both of Kaoru’s, to tangle their bodies together in an intimate embrace that was entirely inappropriate for the hallway of the Ootori Group offices. “Before you arrived, he was asking for a guarantee of fifteen percent growth a year for fifteen years. He dropped his terms to practically nothing. That’s how much you impressed him. That’s how much you earned his trust.”

Kaoru did not understand business people at all.

He supposed it didn’t matter. That’s what he had Kyoya for.

“I guess there’s just one last thing to confirm, then,” Kaoru said. There was a nervous fluttering in his stomach, of all the stupid useless things to be feeling in this particular moment. “Be my boyfriend, Kyoya?”
Kyoya kissed him again, light and teasing. He then pulled back, glasses managing to flash in the light of the hallway even from so short a distance. “When have you ever known an Ootori to turn down something of such clear benefit to himself?”

That asshole.

Kaoru loved him so much.

Kyoya didn’t actually manage to successfully extricate himself from their embrace in order to escort him from the building for another ten minutes. Still, Kaoru left willingly when it was time to go.

He knew his boyfriend was going to be fine now, after all.

Chapter End Notes

Manga Background Notes for Chapter 20 (warning, spoilers follow!):
-Kyoya’s eldest brother, Yuuichi, already has his medical degree and assists Yoshio, their father, in running the Ootori Group.

Foreign Language Notes:
1. [shou: 賞: award, prize]
2. [bo: a wooden staff used for fighting in some forms of martial arts]
If Kaoru were being honest, he had been suspicious about what this year’s Christmas was going to entail for years. After all, this was it. Theoretically, this was the self-imposed time limit for Kyoya’s game.

And, from Kaoru’s perspective, Kyoya’s victory didn’t look certain at all.

Sure, several different cities and wards had followed Shibuya’s lead in offering partnership certificates to same-sex couples, but even those partnerships were far from being widely accepted—or even something that was legally binding in the eyes of the government. Kyoya had made huge strides towards his goal, but it didn’t look like he was anywhere close to a ‘mission accomplished’ status yet.

Still, Kyoya was frustratingly unhelpful whenever Kaoru brought this up, just saying, “We’ll see,” with an impenetrable, mysterious air that told Kaoru absolutely nothing at all about his plans.

Hikaru and Nanako were planning to go on a trip to Djibouti City over the twins’ break from school. Kaoru made them swear up and down to send him pictures, and resigned himself to a boring couple of weeks stuck at home, trying to finish the commissions that had backed up while he’d been in Tokyo. He’d been hoping for the chance to visit Kyoya, or vice versa, but Kyoya had told him that his week was scheduled full of meetings anyway. Kaoru had begged and schemed, but his boyfriend had been unmoved. Kaoru had finally accepted Kyoya’s counter-offer that they’d both be better off getting caught up on their own workloads so that they could enjoy a trip together in the spring instead.

For the first few days of his break, Kaoru bonded with his sewing machine, only taking breaks to exchange messages with Hikaru, Haruhi, and the rest of his friends, all of whom seemed to have exciting jet-setting plans for the holidays. He also called Kyoya at least twice a day, once in the morning to catch up on Kyoya’s day and then again at night to tell Kyoya all about his own—not that there was very much to tell, regrettably.

Then, just under a week into his break, on the morning of Christmas Eve eve, he woke up to the sound of knocking on his bedroom door.

Kaoru just groaned into his pillow. Doing so little with his days made it very hard to fall asleep at night. He hadn’t fallen into bed until really, really late last night. So late that it had actually been morning.

“Sir,” the butler said, his voice slightly muffled through the closed door. “A visitor has arrived and is waiting for you in the living room.”

Kaoru’s eyes flew open at that.

A guest?

He wasn’t expecting anyone.

Or, rather, he had been hoping for a very specific someone ever since he’d flown back from Tokyo in November, but had been told again and again that his hopes would not be fulfilled.
Hell, even if it was just one of his mother’s friends who had somehow misheard which city she was currently in (Paris, if Kaoru remembered correctly—not that he spared too many brain cells keeping track of his mother’s ever-changing whereabouts), it would be a break in the monotony.

He hurried out of bed and pulled on a pair of pants and a long-sleeve sweater over a button-down shirt. He took a few moments to tame and style his hair and to go through his skin care regimen. If it really was one of his mother’s friends, he didn’t want to look sloppy.

If it wasn’t one of his mother’s friends…

If it was the person he was hoping, that he was nearly assuming that it was…

Well, in that case he really didn’t want to look sloppy.

He made it out to the living room just to learn that, even though he had mostly known who it was going to be, the confirmation of it was enough to make his heart race frantically in his chest.

Kyoya was sitting on his living room couch, one leg settled over the other as he read the newspaper and waited patiently for Kaoru to emerge from his bedroom.

He looked like he was made for the room. Like he was made for Kaoru’s home.

It was like a real-life version of the happy, domestic scene he’d imagined so many years ago—long enough ago that the memory of that fantasy hit him like a punch to a chest.

He would be able to make that fantasy a reality, now, if he still wanted.

He gave up on lurking in the doorway and staring at Kyoya like a besotted idiot. Rather than announce his presence, he strode confidently into the room and, much like he had on the beach in the Caribbean, insinuated himself between Kyoya’s chest and his newspaper, slipping his legs onto the couch on either side of Kyoya’s lap to balance himself.

This time, since they were alone in Kaoru’s house, he stole a kiss, too.

“Hi,” he said when he pulled back.

“Hello,” Kyoya said. The kiss broken, he was now obviously attempting to read the paper over Kaoru’s shoulder. “Forgive me; I had assumed you would take a few minutes longer, so I haven’t quite finished the article I was reading.”

Kaoru hid a laugh in Kyoya’s shoulder. “Take your time,” he said, turning to press a wicked grin into the curve of Kyoya’s neck. He was momentarily distracted by the fresh, citrus-infused smell of Kyoya’s cologne. It was more vibrant in the warmth of Kyoya’s skin, proof that Kyoya was finally here, here in person, wrapped securely in his arms. Kaoru had half-hoped, half-assumed that this surprise visit was coming, but it was still nice to have the physical confirmation.

Then he remembered that this, too, was a game. A game that he was currently losing. To a newspaper.

Properly motivated, he kissed his way up Kyoya’s jawline, each kiss slower and more lingering than the last. He nipped lightly at the spot where Kyoya’s jaw met his neck before rising up higher on his knees and teasing his earlobe with the tip of his tongue.

There was a rustling noise as Kyoya turned the page of his newspaper.
Kaoru let out a quiet laugh, very aware of how close he was to Kyoya’s ear and not wanting to make a too-loud noise. “Asshole,” he muttered affectionately before pressing a kiss against Kyoya’s cheek and then settling down more firmly on his lap.

Never let it be said that Hitachiins didn’t use every single advantage they had.

He mouthed another kiss along the corner of Kyoya’s jaw, only this time he paired the kiss with an achingly slow, teasing roll of his hips.

It was Kyoya’s turn to laugh. “Brat,” he said, tone just as private and affectionate as Kaoru’s had been. There was another rustle, but this time Kaoru had a feeling it wasn’t because a page was being turned. In fact, he soon felt both of Kyoya’s hands settle on his back, clearly having allowed the paper to fall carelessly to the ground.

Kaoru pulled back enough to smile at his boyfriend. “Hi,” he said again, and kissed him for real.

“You don’t seem overly surprised to see me here,” Kyoya finally said, much later. They had wound up horizontal on the couch at some point, with Kyoya braced above Kaoru on his elbows, their legs tangled together at the other end of the sofa. Kaoru wasn’t interested in changing this positioning any time soon. Maybe not for a week or two. It would be fine; Jeeves could just bring them all their meals.

“No way,” Kaoru said in response to Kyoya’s non-question. “It was just a question of how long it was going to take. I knew you wouldn’t answer any direct questions, so I could only guess.” He reached up to tap Kyoya on the side of the nose, disapproving. “If you hadn’t shown up by Christmas, I was going to be very disappointed in you.”

“You know me better than that,” Kyoya said. It was a sweet statement, not a chiding one, and Kaoru couldn’t help his pathetically lovesick smile in return.

And people thought he was a devil?

… Okay, maybe that was usually fair. Still, right now, practically glowing underneath his boyfriend, Kaoru had never felt more like the fallen angel Kyoya had once judged him to be.

“Did you bring a Christmas cake for us to share, at least?” Kaoru asked.

“No,” Kyoya said, lips quirking in a small smile. “You’re going to have to make do with just me.”

“Boo,” Kaoru said, but it was hard to sound like he meant it with his fingers tracing idle circles in the short, soft hairs at the nape of Kyoya’s neck.

“I do have a small gift for you, however,” Kyoya said, sitting back on his heels, straddling Kaoru’s lap. Kaoru took a moment to admire the view from this position before noticing that Kyoya appeared to be pulling something out of the back pocket of his pants.

It was a folded-up piece of paper.

Kaoru’s breath snagged in his throat.

He had a feeling that he knew exactly what this was.

“I’ll have you know that I spent far less than ten dollars on this.” Kyoya’s lips were still curled in a small smile, his dark eyes shining. “Still, I hope that you found it worth at least ten dollars of entertainment.”
He offered Kaoru the paper.

Kaoru’s fingers trembled as he reached up to take it, still lying on his back on the couch.

The trembling got worse as he opened the paper one careful, gentle movement at a time, desperate not to let his jittering, uncertain motions hurt the gift he had just been given.

One end of the paper was a little bit ragged from where it had been torn in half. Kaoru had a feeling that, if he dug out his own paper from where he’d been keeping it buried in a desk drawer in his workroom, a place where he had been fairly confident that Hikaru would never find it to make fun of him, the ragged edges would be a perfect match.

The half-paper in his drawer, of course, said, “The ‘Five Years’ Game.”

The half-paper in his hand said, “I want to be able to marry the man that I love.”

“You still owe me one favor, if I recall correctly. I have decided on my request, though I am more than willing to accept alternatives if you find my terms at all distasteful.”

Kaoru looked up from the paper, which he distantly realized was shaking in his grip like a leaf in a storm. Kyoya was still braced above him, his gaze dark and piercing and fixed on Kaoru’s face as though he were drinking in every tiny change of his expression.

Kaoru was aware of Kyoya’s lips moving, of his mouth shaping words. The sound of them seemed to reach him an impossibly long moment later.

“Marry me.”

“I didn’t get it right,” Kaoru said blankly. He had a feeling his entire body was shaking now, going hot and cold in turns, utterly overwhelmed. “You said that I had won, but I didn’t get it right. I only guessed that you wanted to marry a man.” He had never said anything about love. Somehow, stupidly, that seemed very important. His mind was stuck there, unmoving.

“Foolish.” Kyoya ran his fingers along Kaoru’s cheek then kept on with the movement, tracing his jaw, his chin, his neck, memorizing him with a slow, gentle sweep of his fingertips. “You know me better than to think that I could ever go to the effort of marrying a man I didn’t love. Kaoru.” His voice went sharper on Kaoru’s name, tearing Kaoru’s attention from the paper, where it had drifted at some point, back to Kyoya. The gaze looking down at him was practically blazing, the barrier of Kyoya’s glasses long since discarded to the coffee table. “You haven’t actually told me if this is a favor that you are willing to grant.”

Kyoya hated to repeat himself.

But they understood each other.

“Kaoru,” he said again as Kaoru stared up at him, paralyzed by too much, all at once. His voice was soft and gentle and impossible, a voice that Kaoru never, ever would have been able to imagine if he hadn’t known this man so well, if he hadn’t spent years learning all of the impossible levels to him. “Marry me.”

It finally sank in.

“Yes,” Kaoru said. Kyoya was asking to marry him. Kyoya was asking to marry him. “Yes, yeah, of course, I don’t—what other synonyms are there for yes? I mean them all, in every language. Yes a hundred times, a thousand, a million. Yes for every day for the rest of our lives.”
Kyoya leaned in to kiss him, which was for the best, because otherwise Kaoru was going to keep chattering variations of ‘yes’ until he realized what he was doing and was forced to flee the country out of sheer embarrassment.

“Good,” Kyoya said when he finally pulled back, the familiar tiny smile that Kaoru adored still curling across his face. It wasn’t the face-splitting grin that Kaoru still wanted to win back one day, but he loved this smile too.

He just loved Kyoya. Every ridiculous, guarded, game-playing part of him.

And absurdly, impossibly... Kyoya loved him too.

“The room downstairs that I reserved for our yuino this afternoon would have been a little difficult to explain, otherwise,” Kyoya continued to say, and what was that, again?

“What did you just say?” Kaoru managed to verbalize.

“Today is taian. We would need to wait six days for the next auspicious day, and, even though I wanted more of a window between the proposal and the yuino, I couldn’t convince our parents to fly out next week. Your mother was especially vocal about her need to get back to London.”

“Yuzuha is always vocal,” Kaoru said, distractedly. “Oh, was she in London?” He shook his head, trying to shake the gooey ball of mush that had once been his brain into some kind of working order. “Wait, I’m sorry, you need to slow down for a minute. Did you just say that you reserved a room for our yuino?”

“Yes,” Kyoya said. He smirked down at Kaoru, clearly enjoying the fact that he’d managed to catch his devious boyfriend completely off guard yet again. Kaoru couldn’t wait to plan his revenge. That wouldn't happen until he was a little less distracted by how painfully happy he was feeling, though.

“Our yuino that you managed to get all of our parents to attend,” Kaoru continued to confirm. “Including my mom? Including your dad?”

“Yes,” Kyoya repeated. He was so smug, the bastard. And rightfully smug, which made it even worse. The strength of Kaoru’s love for him felt like it was going to burn him to a crisp. “Our siblings as well. I will be the first to admit that I have suffered some setbacks in my game. I underestimated the strength of the resistance to the legalization of same-sex marriage. However, the terms of my game were always personal and selfish at their core, as has already been made clear. According to those terms, my game is now over.”

“You’re able to marry the man that you love.” Kaoru had to be glowing by now. “Me.” He frowned, feeling his forehead wrinkle, confusion momentarily overpowering his joy. “Wait, not that I’m complaining, but didn’t you just point out that gay marriage still isn’t legal in Japan? I’d marry you in a heartbeat, Kyoya, I’d marry you today, but it wouldn’t mean the same thing, not yet.”

Kyoya raised a hand and started to tick off the facts on his fingers. “My father has given his blessing. I am no longer a pawn of the Ootori Group. As a shadow organizing force behind the keiretsu, whose front will continue to be Tamaki and Suoh Enterprises, public attention on me should be minor at best.” He put up the next finger very slowly. “You are not wrong that I have failed to achieve the legal victories that I wished for at home. Still, despite the obstacles preventing our relationship in Japan, the Japanese government is still forced to recognize legal documents from other nations. This includes marriage licenses from New York, where gay marriage is legal.”
He frowned. “Of course, just because they will recognize that the document exists does not necessarily mean that it will carry the same weight. In fact, legally, it won’t. In order to achieve that level of parity, there is much work left to be done. I will continue to do what I can. But, at least for now—”

Kaoru cut him off with a kiss.

Kyoya didn’t have to defend or explain himself to him.

He understood.

The game was going into overtime, but that was fine.

At least for now, they would have this.

At least they would have each other.

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The formality of the ceremony, the act of gathering the families together to celebrate the engagement, was actually far sweeter and more emotionally satisfying than Kaoru had ever dreamed it could be. When he and Kyoya finally made their way downstairs and into the room that Kyoya had reserved for them in the hotel part of the complex, the image that greeted them was one that Kaoru knew he was never going to forget.

Kaoru’s dad was gamely talking to Kyoya’s dad about something, both men looking serious but calm, while Yuzuha laughed brightly with Kyoya’s mom. Fuyumi was cooing over Ageha in her tiny formalwear while Hikaru kept up a conversation with Yuuichi-san, making no attempt to hide the extent to which he was intentionally ignoring Akito, who fluttered around the edges of the conversation looking utterly confused as to what was expected of him but stubbornly participating regardless.

His family.

Their families.

Kaoru’s heart was never going to shrink back to a normal size.

When the two of them were spotted in the doorway, Kaoru’s mother was the first to reach them. She immediately gathered him up in a hug that seemed to mostly be an excuse to hiss, “The one thing I wanted to avoid, Hikaru,” in his ear, but she probably wasn’t that upset, if she was still pretending not to know which twin he was even now. The words were almost a touching reminder of how long she’d been on his side about all of this.

His dad just waited his turn and then hugged him and whispered, “I’m so happy for you—but he better treat you right,” just loud enough for Kyoya to hear from over where his own family was greeting and congratulating him, which was even nicer.

After their dad let go, Hikaru practically tackled him to the ground. Kaoru held on to him just as tightly. “I missed you,” Hikaru said first, his words practically tripping over themselves as he hurried to get them out all at once, overflowing with a full week’s worth of secretkeeping—a full week too long, it seemed like. “Kyoya said that I wasn’t allowed to spoil the surprise, and Nanako said that the only way that was going to happen was if we left the country, and she wasn’t wrong, but it still sucked. Never let me leave you again.”
“I missed you,” Kaoru babbled back. “I was so bored, it was an amazing surprise, I’m so proud of you for not spoiling it, but please never leave me again.”

Ageha was the last one to greet him, once he and Hikaru had finished their elaborate reunion. “You’re going to get married?” she asked, clinging to their mother’s side and peering up at him thoughtfully.

Kaoru kneeled down to be on her eye level. “Yes,” he said.

“To him?” Ageha nodded in Kyoya’s direction. “Another boy?”

“Yes,” Kaoru said. His heart throbbed in fear. Ageha was going to be disgusted, she was going to stop speaking to him, she—

“Good,” Ageha said solemnly. “Now there’s not as many people between me and tono.”

—she was terrifying.

He loved her so much.

Now that he thought about it, he had a definite weakness for people whose personalities could run roughshod over his own. He wasn’t going to investigate this particular weakness too closely.

The families situated themselves across the room from each other and the ceremony began.

Seeing Ootori Yoshio sitting through a formal **yuino** for two sons was exactly as hilarious as Kaoru had thought it was going to be. He didn’t actually laugh out loud at the man, because he was too thankful for Ootori-san’s willingness to be present at this event in the first place, but he avoided making eye contact with Hikaru, knowing that even something as small as seeing his brother biting his lip would be enough to push him over the edge into inappropriate hilarity.

After all of the formal pleasantries were done, all of the symbolic gifts exchanged (no female-styled **obi** in sight, thankfully), the families made their way to the main floor of the building, to the restaurant that Kyoya had evidently reserved for the evening.

Kaoru hung back so that he and Kyoya could walk there together. He also caught Kyoya’s hand in his own, holding onto it, because that was a thing he could do now, even in front of their families.

“This is amazing,” he breathed, too overwhelmed to think of more flowery words. “Kyoya, this is all perfect. I can’t believe you planned all of this without telling me.”

Kyoya just looked at him and raised an eyebrow.

“Fine,” Kaoru conceded. “I **can** believe you planned all of this without telling me. And it was worth it. I love it.”

“I’m glad,” Kyoya said. “As I told you once, I couldn’t bear the thought of making you wait for me. Still, I feel like you were left waiting, regardless of my intentions. I wanted to make sure the end result was something that would make all of your waiting worthwhile.”

Kaoru squeezed the hand in his, the hand of his boyfriend—of his **fiancé**, now.

“I hope you realize this means that, the next time you leave me waiting for anything at all, my standards for repayment are going to be **extremely** high,” Kaoru said.

He could see out of the corner of his eye that a pleased smirk was curling Kyoya’s lips. “I look
forward to the challenge,” he said simply.

Those standards immediately shot through the roof when they entered the restaurant and Kaoru saw that the dining area wasn’t quite as empty as he had been anticipating.

Instead, every single member of the former Ouran High School Host Club was already there, waiting for them alongside their significant others.

Someone—Kaoru assumed it was Tamaki, because, honestly, who else could it have been?—had outfitted all of them with cheer uniforms, complete with hachimaki emblazoned with Kyoya and Kaoru’s names.

Kaoru automatically made a grab for the back of Kyoya’s suit jacket before he could make a run for it.

“They’re here!” Tamaki exclaimed as soon as he noticed that the families had entered the room. “Everyone, just like we practiced!”

“Kyoya and Kaoru! Congratulations!” their friends all cheered with a mixed degree of enthusiasm, though even Haruhi, always the least enthusiastic unless food was involved, was managing a raised voice and a grin. “To Kaoru and Kyoya! To true love!”

“I am going to kill him,” Kyoya growled under his breath.

“You knew he was going to do something exactly like this,” Kaoru responded confidently. Then, his voice lowering and taking on a more teasing note, he added, “You like it.”

Kyoya refused to dignify that with an answer, which was as good as an admission.

The parents and siblings, minus Hikaru, left to take their seats for dinner, avoiding the scene and letting the friends have their time together.

Kaoru was very nearly blown backwards as a blond blur made a beeline for Kyoya, hugging him so hard that he actually lifted him into the air and twirled him like he normally twirled Ageha. Clearly at least one of the two of them hadn’t been neglecting his Haninozuka training.

Kaoru was distracted from watching Kyoya battle his obvious urge to throttle Tamaki by Nanako swooping in and hugging him, her mass of hair momentarily blinding him. “Forgive me if I don’t twirl you,” she said dryly, before pulling back and flashing him a warm smile. “I’m so glad that we both got what we wanted, in the end. Even if our paths to getting there were not really what either of us expected.”

Kaoru didn’t even have the opportunity to respond before Renge was shoving Nanako out of the way to take her position in front of him. Renge took this rudeness with grace, though she immediately moved over to where Hikaru was busy chatting to Haruhi and plastered herself to his side, clinging a little bit more closely and more affectionately than she normally would in mixed company.

“I am very proud of you, Kaoru-kun,” Renge said with the air of an old master, ignoring Nanako’s twincest-shattering transgressions with the ease of a fangirl who had a real-life gay romance to focus on instead. “I’m glad that you found the courage to fight for your forbidden romance.”

Mori-senpai loomed behind his… whatever the two of them were. He smiled at Kaoru, reaching down to ruffle his hair affectionately. His hand felt like a security blanket. Kaoru actually missed it when he stopped.
“We both are glad for you,” he said. Renge leaned back against him comfortably. “You two are good for each other. We are happy that you are happy.”

“Just keep in mind that, if you ever want to monetize your story—”

“Renge,” Mori-senpai said.

“You’re right,” Renge said, nodding. “If Kyoya ever wants to monetize your story—”

Mori-senpai picked Renge up and physically moved her away from Kaoru.

Hani-senpai and Reiko were the next pair to approach him, clearly having just finished offering Kyoya their congratulations.

“Love really is nice, isn’t it?” Hani-senpai enthused, taking both of Kaoru’s hands and twinkling up at him with all of the wisdom of the ages. “I’m so happy for the two of you!”

“How long have you known, Hani-senpai?” Kaoru asked. He waved around the room. “You saw it all coming, didn’t you? Honestly, how long?”

“Who knows?” Hani-senpai answered mysteriously. “But I will tell you a secret~! Something that I didn’t tell you when you asked about Kyo-chan’s love-past, before.”

Hani-senpai tugged Kaoru down until he was able to whisper in his ear, “Kyo-chan didn’t just say that Haru-chan wasn’t his type, when I asked him about it. He told me that he would not pursue her because he had obtained something even more precious that he had no intention of ever betraying.”

Hani-senpai pulled back, sparkling at Kaoru, pleased and wise and always bubbling with the unending energy that he somehow managed to find just by enjoying life with his friends. “He was looking at a whole group when he said that. It was super, super nice! But… I happened to notice, Kao-chan, that Kyo-chan’s eyes were mostly focused on one specific member of that group, even then.”

Kaoru couldn’t help his flush, his smile as his eyes drifted up to where Kyoya was talking seriously to Mori-senpai and Renge—hopefully not about monetizing their romance.

‘After all, I’ve known how I felt about you since high school,’ huh?

One day, he was going to get that story out of him.

Meanwhile...

“I can’t believe you got upset at me for saying that you have love telepathy, Hani-senpai,” he said out loud. “It was just the truth.”

“Mitsukuni is a powerful magical force,” Reiko said solemnly, and Kaoru nearly jumped out of his skin. He had totally forgotten she was there with them. “Love is, too. I am willing to help you construct love curses, if you ever think you might need them to retain Kyoya-san’s affections. I think Mitsukuni’s blood could be an incredibly potent agent.”

“Thank you… I think…” Kaoru said. “I’m going to have to turn you down, though.”

“Good,” Hani-senpai said brightly. “Only Reiko-chan is allowed to drink my blood!”

Reiko went bright red and hid her face, although she was clearly smiling in delight.

Kaoru was… definitely not going to ask.
Why had both of his most respectable senpai wound up in the weirdest possible relationships?

“Do you mind if we cut in, Hani-senpai?” Haruhi asked politely. Beside her, Tamaki seemed to be literally hovering with the strength of his happiness.

“Please, save me,” Kaoru said.

“So rude, Kao-chan!” Hani-senpai said, but he was smiling as he and Reiko retreated anyway.

Haruhi and Tamaki hugged him in the same moment, sandwiching him between the two of them.

“You better not get tears in my hair, Tamaki,” Kaoru said, but he wrapped his arms around both of them anyway.

“Our best friends are getting married,” Tamaki said. Kaoru had mostly meant his warning as a joke, but the catch in Tamaki’s voice was making him think he should have put a little bit more force behind his words. “We can double-date forever.”

“So you keep saying,” Haruhi said with a sigh from her place underneath Kaoru’s arm. “Over and over again.” She pulled back to smile up at Kaoru, sweet and supportive. “I’m glad you two finally got yourselves figured out. No more games?”

Kaoru snorted, glancing over at Kyoya. He had finished his conversation with Mori-senpai and was now looking over at the three of them, the three people he was closest to in the world. He wasn’t exactly smiling, but there was something gentle and relaxed about him, like he couldn’t quite believe his luck.

Kaoru loved it.

Kaoru loved him.

“Are you kidding me?” Kaoru said to Haruhi, still admiring his fiancé from a distance, not able to believe his luck either. “Games forever starting now.”

Haruhi sighed. “I should have known.”

“And I think our next game is going to be called, ‘How is it even possible that Tamaki and Haruhi are going to be the last in our group of friends to get married?’” Kaoru continued, finally managing to tear his attention away from his incredible fiancé and back to the people he was supposed to be talking to. “My guess is that it’s because Tamaki is too scared of rejection to propose.”

Tamaki immediately went as red as the rising sun pictured on his headband. “What? No. That’s not true. I’m waiting. We agreed to wait. We—Haruhi. Haruhi, you don’t think that’s true, do you?”

“You’re assuming that Renge and Mori-senpai are getting married anytime soon,” Haruhi pointed out. Because she always knew exactly how to hurt him, despite not having a cruel bone in her body, she continued, “The two of them seem perfectly happy with their current relationship, so perhaps they intend cohabitation without marriage for a while yet.”

“Boo,” Kaoru said automatically. “Gross.” He attempted to leave the two of them, to whine to Kyoya about this situation, but Tamaki caught him by the elbow, arresting his escape.

He glanced back at his foolish tono. Those bright blue eyes were still watering, but he was wearing a smile underneath them.
“I don’t have to tell you not to hurt him,” he said quietly. “Because I know you won’t.”

They exchanged a silent moment of understanding.

Kaoru broke it by saying, “I can’t believe you’re giving me a shovel talk.”

“A ‘shovel talk’?” Tamaki asked, clearly unfamiliar with the term.

“It’s when you warn a person that, if they do something wrong to a person that you love, no one will be able to find their body. Because you’re going to kill them and bury them with a shovel.”

“Kill them?” Tamaki spluttered.

“Ah,” Haruhi said, nodding. “That sounds much more like the talk that Hikaru and I had with Kyoya.”

“You gave Kyoya a shovel talk for me, Haruhi?” Kaoru asked, delighted by this fresh revelation.

“Might as well,” Haruhi said, sounding like she had convinced herself that this was an entirely logical stance to take. Whatever justification she had needed to give herself, Kaoru was still touched by the result.

He gave the two of them another hug. “Thanks,” he said. “You two are…”

He didn’t finish the sentence. There was no good way to explain what the two of them were to him and Kyoya.

“We never would have been able to do this without you,” he said instead. “Just… thank you.”

“What else are friends for?” Tamaki asked, squeezing him tightly.

“Tamaki, be careful not to get overly tactile with my fiancé,” said a voice from behind them. “I won’t hesitate to have your hands surgically removed.”

Tamaki pulled away immediately, red and sputtering. Haruhi lingered a moment longer and kissed Kaoru’s cheek, ignoring Kyoya’s interruption. “I hope you both are happy for the rest of your days,” she said, quiet but firm. “You deserve that and more.”

The two of them finally pulled away from him, following the rest of their friends to the tables, finally ready for dinner. Kyoya stepped into the space they had left, taking Kaoru’s hands in his, studying his face.

“A nice surprise,” he concluded, dark gaze as observant and measuring as always.


“Good,” Kyoya said. He glanced back at the full tables, at all of the people that they loved that were now gathered in this one location. “Marriage… it’s almost like another game, is it not? There are many pieces to balance and goals to achieve, after all.” He smiled at Kaoru, the hidden little curve of his lips that Kaoru had adored since long before he had known exactly what it was that he felt for his cold, mysterious, but always beloved upperclassman. “Are you up for the challenge?”

Kaoru smiled back at him. The robot, the soft-heart, the distance, the affection… all of it was Kyoya. He loved it all, every part. “Aren’t I always?”

They didn’t kiss because, after all, they were still on display in front of all of their friends and
family. Still, Kyoya squeezed Kaoru’s hands gently, and, in the moment, that quiet confirmation seemed nearly as good.

No matter what, from now on, they were going to face the world together. Whatever games they had in front of them, from now on the two of them would be playing on the same team.

The world had no idea what it was up against.

Chapter End Notes

Foreign Language Notes:
1. [taian: the most auspicious day possible according to the Japanese almanac; a great day for weddings and engagements in particular!]
2. [obi: the wrap for a kimono, a gift often given in engagement ceremonies as a symbol of female virtue]
3. [hachimaki: stylized headbands, typically white with a red rising sun in the center]

Six months ago, when I finished rereading Ouran, I was left with a desperate desire for a sequel that would give Kyoya and Kaoru the same romantic comedy treatment that the original story had given Tamaki and Haruhi. Unfortunately, I couldn't find anything that scratched that particular itch and thus was forced to take matters into my own hands. Lacking any kind of artistic talent, I decided to at least write this story—this novel, really—knowing the whole time that it was entirely possible that no one but myself would ever find it worth reading. If you are one of the ones who did, who joined me for this journey down a very niche, specific path, then I am so unbelievably grateful to have been able to share this with you. I just wanted to take a moment to say thank you to every single one of you who made it this far. I only hope that I was able to give you a little bit of the same joy that the original text has always brought me.

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