Riddle Me This, Mob

by pinstripedJackalope

Summary

Mob is a fraud of a therapist who has been feeling rather bored with his life in recent years. What will change when a kid walks into his practice one day asking for the answer to an age-
old question?

An age-swap AU story of my own creation.

Notes

I'm borrowing bits and pieces of ideas from all kinds of places. If you see something familiar here, that's probably why! I've tried my best to make it my own, but honestly speaking you guys have so many good ideas that I can't help but steal a few of them, haha.

Also, my updating schedule is non-existent. I'll do my best to update regularly but I have a feeling that won't happen very often. I'm sorry in advance.
Shigeo ‘Mob’ Kageyama is very good at listening.

He wasn’t always. It used to be that his mind would wander at any opportunity, getting him in trouble with teachers when they found out that he wasn’t paying attention to their math problems like he was supposed to be doing. It would cause the whole class to laugh at him when he couldn’t find the answer to a simple equation. Embarrassing, though not as embarrassing as the fact that he wasn’t sure he’d be able to answer correctly even if he happened to be paying attention. It was a problem. Wandering minds, Mob learned from such experiences, meant getting in trouble, and trouble seemed to find Mob a lot growing up. It wasn’t just teachers calling him out on zoning out—it was also older kids trying to pick on him, and his emotions bursting explosively from his chest, and his baby brother getting caught in the crossfire when said emotions ignited his psychic powers, and—

Anyway, Mob is good at listening now. Very good. So good, in fact, that his discount counseling office (open six days a week!) is what you could consider a booming success. He has a decent roster of repeat clientele, and he gets enough walk-ins to fill most of the spaces in between. None of them are even very concerned about the fact that the license hanging behind his desk came from an unaccredited university, which is just the cherry on top.

Speaking of clients. Mob leans a little further away from the ashtray on the bookshelf at his back, hoping to distract from the cigarette he tried to put out too hastily, which is still smoking gently. The chatter from across the desk does not cease. It does not waiver. There is absolutely no indication that the kid sitting in front of him—are all ten-year-olds this verbose?—is going to stop any time soon. The only pauses he’s had so far are when he stops to describe a word he can’t quite remember, his accent mostly Japanese with just a hint of English still hidden in his vowels.

…Has Mob mentioned yet that he’s good at listening? Because he is. The green balloon of a spirit floating at his side, on the other hand…

“Jeez, talk about a chatterbox.” Dimple-san is staring down at the head of strawberry blond hair like it’s a fascinating species of worm. Very unprofessional. Good thing that no one can see him except Mob.

“Hush,” Mob breathes, then jumps as the kid leans forward suddenly, the river of words diverting itself to ask a question.

“Who are you talking to? Do you have a bluetooth?”

Ah. Hm. Usually Mob tries to downplay Dimple-san’s presence, seeing as mysticism and spiritual inclinations aren’t generally what people look for in a therapist, but Mob doesn’t intend on keeping the kid on as a client. He doesn’t take on children’s cases. It’s just not his thing. So, in his usual monotone voice, he tells the truth, which is: “It’s a spirit.”

The kid squints, quieting down for a moment that stretches much too long in the wake of all the words he’s spoken. Mob sweats in his turtleneck. Finally, the kid shrugs. “Can’t be that strong of a spirit if I can’t even see it.”

Dimple-san puffs up, his ectoplasm whipping about like a wind-sock in a storm, and Mob can’t help it—he finds himself smiling. A small smile, sure, but it’s there. And it’s there as the kid shrugs again, returning to whatever topic he was on previously.
The conversation goes on from there. And on. And on. Mob likes to think that at this point in his life he’s getting better at filtering out what’s important and what isn’t in what people say, but maybe he’s not as good as he thinks he is because it’s been half an hour and he still hasn’t discerned a point in the kid’s rambling. He walked into the office with the demeanor of someone who had a purpose, but Mob is getting more and more sure as time goes on that he misjudged and this is a prank somehow. He just has to figure out… well, how.

“Anyway, that’s when I said that some salt would protect her. Which was, um…” For the first time the kid falters. Really falters. Not ‘looking for a word that’s just on the tip of his tongue’—he’s stopped for good, voice fading into the sound of the white noise machine in the corner. He’s not looking at Mob anymore, instead picking at a hole in the knee of his elementary school uniform.

“Go on,” Mob encourages, leaning fractionally forward. Dimple-san rolls his eyes, but keeps quiet as the kid fiddles and fiddles and fiddles and finally says…

“It was a lie. I lied to her. It made her feel better but it was still a lie. Does that… does it make me a bad person?”

There it is. This visit is not a prank, after all. Mob takes a deep breath, pushing air carefully out through his nose as he studies the kid in front of him. He sees pale, European features—fair hair and dark blue eyes that are looking down, refusing to make eye contact. He sees gangly limbs, wiry muscles—thin wrists with scrapes that must have come from playing outside somewhere that wasn’t very forgiving. He remembers the accent in the vowels, the search for words, and… what he has in front of him is a kid who came from somewhere very different from this, who has worked hard to find a place where he fits in, who still, after everything, isn’t quite sure if he really belongs.

Mob knows very intimately what that’s like.

He never meant to turn this into a real session. He intended from the beginning to do the bare minimum required to turn the kid back around and send him out the door and back to his parents. He can’t seem to help himself, however, when he leans forward and says…

“The worst people in the world are capable of good acts, you know.”

The kid folds his arms across his chest. He’s still not looking up. “Yeah, but that doesn’t answer my question, now does it?”

Mob breathes out, then leans forward and rests his hand on the kid’s shoulder. “It does. In a way. Everyone has the potential for good—even the worst of us can turn our lives around and come back into the light. What I mean is… people are neither good nor bad permanently. Being good is about wanting to be good, about trying hard and doing what you can to be better today than you were yesterday. We’re all human—we make mistakes. But when we try to be better…”

“…That makes us good?” the kid asks. His eyes have found Mob’s, now, lit up like he’s experiencing an epiphany. Mob nods sagely, hoping that the kid has found what he’s looking for. It’s fifteen minutes until his next scheduled client and he wants to get his paperwork in order before she arrives. Besides, he’s given the kid some pretty hefty ideas to turn over—that must be enough for now, right?

It seems to be so as the kid slips down from the chair he’s perched in, straightening his shirt and pulling the strap of his bag over his head. He’s quiet, contemplative—what Mob said must be really resonating with him. Mob stands, more than ready to lead him to the door so that he’ll never see him again, when the kid pauses.
Ah. Mob has a feeling he’s about to regret ever letting the kid into the office.

“Can I… um, can I come back tomorrow?” the kid asks. “I can—I can help out around the office! Like, sort your papers for you and make tea and stuff? Would that be okay? I’m good with people, so—”

Well, this isn’t good. Mob is winding up to let the kid down gently when his five o’clock appointment arrives, several minutes early. She stares down at the kid.

The kid smiles back with a charm that most ten-year-olds lack. “Please take a seat, Mr. Kageyama will be right with you!” he says, bowing slightly as he says the words. The client smiles, instantly at ease.

Which is… wow. Mob has never seen this particular woman smile before—the most he can get out of her is a slightly less pinched look. He stares down at the kid, who has started spouting a full-blown resume of clubs he’s been in and babies he’s sat and god knows what else. Like an itch, an idea starts forming in Mob’s mind. A bad idea, he’s already positive—but an idea nonetheless. “Yes… come back tomorrow,” he says. And it is so.
Chapter Summary

Something is bound to go wrong sooner rather than later. When the kid gets sick, what is Mob to do?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The kid’s name is Reigen, and he’s fairly tolerable, as far as kids go. He’s true to his word—he staples receipts and makes tea and gives clients something to smile about that Mob was never aware was missing until it showed up. The first day he sticks around, Mob counts out thirty yen from the vault to give him as payment. In return, Reigen (quickly becoming Reigen-kun) winks dramatically at him as if they have an understanding. An understanding about what, exactly, Mob doesn’t know—but two weeks in and Mob is feeling pretty confident that this arrangement will work out.

Especially considering the questions the kid asks.

Mob wasn’t lying when he gave Reigen-kun that little speech about being good—he does truly believe that bad people can become good, and vice-versa. At it’s most basic, human morality is an amalgamation of the actions a person decides to take. When said actions are positive, well… that makes a good person.

That first day, Reigen-kun accepted this at face value. By the time the second day rolls around, he’s got a list of inquiries poking at all the little loopholes such a generic statement inevitably leaves open. A singular act may be good for one person and bad for another, for instance—what does that mean for the individual committing such an act? Are they doing good? Does it depend on their intentions in that case? If someone intends good but does harm, is the act still a good act?

These questions, and their answers, come to Mob like absently flexing a muscle he forgot he had, a muscle that had atrophied throughout the past few years that he’s spent becoming numb and bored with his job. He was never big on moral philosophy, even in school, but he can’t deny the importance of ‘goodness’, no matter how nebulous a concept. Day by day, he finds answers to more and more complex questions—and day by day, hearing those answers and finding ever more incessant questions to ask, Reigen-kun worms his way into the office and the business, becoming as much a fixture as the awkward poster Mob’s dear friend, Teru, convinced him to pose for.

This is the rhythm they settle into, until one day in the third week.

“It was pizza day at school today!” Reigen-kun announces on his way in the door. “I saved my slice until just now, and let me tell you, it was worth it. I may or may not have gotten it all over my face because it was just that good.” His cheeks are flushed from the walk, and he deposits his bag in the corner before scrambling up onto the make-shift desk Mob found for him to sit at. He has pizza sauce on his face, Mob confirms, glancing over.

Just finishing up with a client, Mob asks him to ring up the receipt. Then he goes to the minuscule kitchenette and fetches his milk from the fridge. Ah, milk… nectar of the gods. The kid has turned his nose up at it the past few times Mob has brought it out, but alas, Mob has a surprise: chocolate
“Wow, is this for me?” the kid asks when Mob nonchalantly sets it down on the desk. He twirls the little carton in one hand, going to read the ingredients listed on the side.

Mob nods. “I thought maybe you’d like a treat. I can’t go buying special items often, but once in a while is fine.”

“Thank you, Mr. Kageyama!” Reigen-kun chirps. The odd and formal address makes Mob smile just a little—he’s learned, in the way he’s learned many things about Reigen-kun in the past few weeks, that the kid is from America. His parents moved him halfway across the world when he was about six and a half.

Mob asked, once, if learning Japanese as a second language was hard. All he got in response was a shrug. “Probably not as hard as learning all that psycho—whatever stuff,” he’d said, and that was it.

Also on the list of things Mob has learned is that Reigen-kun was supposed to wear a girl’s uniform. “It just wasn’t me,” he’d said of that one, and when Mob probed further, admitted that he didn’t really know the word for what he was. “Is there a word for that?” he’d whispered, soft and unsure. Mob had frowned ever so slightly, because he barely remembered the unit on gender identity disorder at the university. All he knew was that the kid wasn’t alone, so there had to be words for this. Right?

That day they’d spent a good two hours between clients just googling words and definitions, coming out the other side with a wonderful new vocabulary and a matching pair of grins. Mob carried his all the way home that night, where he promptly realized that that he hasn’t smiled, really smiled, in such a long time that he barely remembered what it felt like. He’s never been prone to displays of emotion, but he does mirror people—when his brother, Ritsu, used to grin as a kid, Mob would respond in kind. It usually only happened with people he felt a particular fondness for, which really puts the situation with Reigen-kun into perspective.

Maybe that’s what the chocolate milk is really about. Fondness… belonging. The kid is strange, talkative, too energetic more often than not, but… Mob feels fond of him whenever he’s in the room, and even sometimes when he’s not. It’s been a long time since Mob felt this way. Like he was part of something, like he and the people around him both belonged exactly where they were.

This makes it all the more poignant when week three rolls around and something goes wrong for the very first time.

It starts small. Mob is halfway through a session with a repeat client when he realizes that he hasn’t heard anything from outside the little session room in a good long while. Reigen-kun never quite stops moving—even when he’s sitting at his desk he tends to knock his ankles into the legs of his chair and tap the back end of his pencil on his homework. Sometimes he’ll even talk to himself, coaching himself through tough math problems that befuddle Mob on the best of days.

Right now? There’s nothing. None of that. Absolute silence for the first time in nearly three weeks.

Hm. Maybe the kid stepped out for a moment. He does sometimes have to pick up calls from his mom, and prefers to do so in the hallway outside the office. Or, another probable option, he’s just… being quiet. Even a kid like Reigen-kun has to have quiet days, Mob figures, returning his attention to his client.

Most of his attention. Most of his attention returns to his client. A few minutes later he’s grateful that he was paying that small sliver of attention, because it’s the only reason he’s able to hear the
Mob cuts the appointment a few minutes short, guiding the man through the office as fast as is polite, before turning to the kid. He’s not at his desk—he’s huddled up on one of the office sofas, curled up tight with his knobby knees up near his chest. Crouching down in front of him, Mob takes a moment to study his tense posture and the tears running down his cheeks. Mob has never actually taken care of a kid before, barring when he was a kid himself helping his parents out with Ritsu. The older they got, however, the more it seemed as if Ritsu was the one taking care of him, and now… well. Suffice to say that Mob has no idea what to do with a kid who is clearly upset.

Or… not upset. There’s something wrong, definitely, but as Mob watches he takes note of the way Reigen-kun is curled up around his stomach and has a feeling he knows what’s going on. While stomach aches around that age can be caused by mental distress, the best practice is to rule out physical ailments first before turning to other explanations. Training kicking in, Mob rests his hand on the kid’s forehead. He’s not warm… but that hardly means anything. Fevers are fickle things, and you can be sick without being febrile. Still, Mob lets his hand linger, brushing almost-ginger hair off a pale face. “Hey,” he whispers. Reigen-kun hiccups, tears still streaming from his eyes. “Hey… can you tell me what’s up?”

All he gets in response is a shake of a head. Mob isn’t deterred. There’s something going on, and what kind of therapist would he be if he can’t get to the bottom of it?

It takes a few minutes of hiccups and silence and leading questions before Reigen-kun starts to give. “M-my mom says I’m lying,” he says, before he says anything else. He sucks in a deep breath, curling further toward his knees. Both his arms are wrapped around his middle.

“Lying about what?” Mob asks softly. He’s still crouched on the floor before the sofa, sure that if he moves now Reigen-kun is going to clam up and he’ll never figure out what this is, much less how to make it better.

“About f-feeling bad. She s-says it’s not as bad as I say it is and—and that I’m j-just doing it to get out of doing homework. But I’m n-not! I swear! I’ve lied a l-lot but I haven’t lied about this, you have to believe me—”

Mob rests both hands on Reigen-kun’s shoulders, shushing him gently so that the sudden torrent of words will stop. He believes the kid. In fact, he’s never believed anybody more than he believes Reigen-kun right this very instant. “You’re feeling bad right now?” he asks softly, just to confirm. He gets a miserable nod in response. “Alright… okay. Here’s what we’re going to do.”

Reigen-kun hangs onto every word as Mob outlines a plan involving the heating pad from the junk box in the closet and a movie on Mob’s laptop, with the office trash bin nearby just in case Reigen-kun starts to feel pukey. After the kid has had some time to work through it, Mob is going to walk him all the way home, where he can sleep it off and hopefully be feeling better by tomorrow.

“And maybe next time we’ll try a treat without dairy,” Mob muses, settling himself on the sofa just beside his new student. He’s already canceled the rest of his appointments today. He sets his laptop on his knees, an American cartoon ready to play.

“That’s okay? All of this is… okay?” Reigen-kun asks in a small voice. He’s hesitant, but soon enough Mob feels his weight pressing in at his side. He raises his arm, letting Reigen-kun shuffle closer to him before resting that arm around the kid’s shoulders.

“Yeah. It’s okay. As long as you’re okay, okay?”
Reigen-kun nods. They hit play. Mob holds him close, even when he dozes off with the heating pad clutched in his arms like a teddy bear and starts to drool a little on Mob’s navy blazer. The world grows dark around them as the sun begins to set at the end of the day, the stars struggling to shine through the lights of the city. It’s soft, and beautiful, and Mob breathes out softly so as not to disturb the child pressed against his ribcage.

It’s been less than three weeks he’s had the kid and Mob couldn’t imagine letting go for the world.

Chapter End Notes

Reigen has food sensitivities. That's all. He’s a picky eater and his mom is at the end of her rope trying to deal with him.

Also... about his mom. She's not a bad woman, in this series. She's just a little... narrow-minded. And work-oriented. Kids maybe weren't the best choice for her, but alas, here she is. She's doing her best.
Harmony

Chapter Summary

Little Reigen isn't the only one with troubles. Mob hasn't intentionally used his powers in over two decades, and Reigen has things to say about that.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Someday you have to let me possess you. You know, as payback for all the favors I’ve done for you.”

Mob hums in vague agreement, clearing his throat a little when the client stops talking for a moment to look at him oddly. “Go on,” he encourages. “You were talking about a string of bad luck?”

“Right! So after the ladder thing—”

Just like that, the client goes back to their rant, and with a roll of his eyes, Dimple-san gets back to suctioning up the dark smog of a curse that is dogging this particular client’s back. Mob has learned to nod along when people are talking, and that’s what he’s doing now—listening and nodding, his face impassive. He’ll have to come up with some insight into the situation (maybe this bad luck is like only spotting orange when you’re looking for orange?) and give the client a new paradigm to think about before the session comes to a close, but for now his role is minimal and he’s okay with that.

Through a crack in the session room’s door, Mob spies Reigen-kun’s small form sitting at his little desk, his feet swinging away at his chair. Mob was right, in the end—it was a sensitivity to dairy. The kid’s pediatrician recognized the symptoms when Mob finally convinced Ms. Reigen to take her son in, and Mob had to nod very seriously as the woman then thanked him profusely because she, and he quotes, “thought the kid was crying wolf.”

It’s all in the past now, though. After some griping about how he’s going to miss pizza and mozzarella sticks and all kinds of other American things that Mob is grateful he’s never seen in person, Reigen-kun calmed down and went on with his elementary-schooler life like nothing had ever happened. Mob may never forget the massive implications there—“my mom says I’m lying” “it was a lie... am I a bad person?” “what if you mean to do good but you mess up?”—but as long as Reigen-kun is okay, it’s okay. It’s okay.

It’s okay.

It’s...

“Mr. Mob? You in there?”

Mob blinks, as if coming awake. Where did he go just now? He’s not sure. Somewhere else, that’s for certain. To a place where the pressure in his chest became too much and burst out in a rush of blue light and—

—did Reigen-kun just call him Mr. Mob?
“Oh, is that not okay? I can call you Sir instead if you’d like,” Reigen-kun says, when Mob ponders this out loud. “Or Mr. Sir! Like that one book! Would that be better?”

“Oh. No, anything you’d like is fine. Just ‘Mob’ is also a good option. It’s up to you.” Mob shakes his head a little, the straight edge of hair just above his eyebrows tickling his face. Where did his client go? Dimple-san is off at the far end of the office so the curse-lift is obviously complete… Reigen-kun must have led the client out while Mob was otherwise occupied.

Oh. Hm.

“Mob… Mobbu,” Reigen-kun is saying, testing the name on his tongue. “That’s fun to say. Why do people call you that, anyway?”

“It’s been my nickname since I was a little kid,” Mob responds. His lips are dry. He breathes out. His heart is racing.

Why is his heart racing?
Why is his hair no longer tickling his face?
And why is the chair he’s sitting on starting to float off the ground?

All at once Mob realizes what he’s doing—he’s having a panic attack, and those are his powers, coming out to play in response. Reigen-kun seems to know that something is wrong—he’s hovering very close, a worried edge seeping into his voice as he keeps talking. Jolting in his seat, Mob’s next realization is that Reigen-kun—he’s a kid. He shouldn’t be nearby. He shouldn’t be anywhere near Mob when his powers come out, because when Mob’s powers come out bad things happen, and while Mob doesn’t want to hurt just about anyone on the face of the planet, Reigen-kun is very much at the top of the list of people Mob doesn’t want to see hurt, especially by his own hands.

“It’s okay! It’s okay, Mr. Mob! Don’t worry about that! I’m cool—I’m fine!” Reigen-kun says, and oh, Mob has been saying things out loud. He must really be out of it.

Sweat breaks out across his forehead. His lungs feel small and pitiful as he sips air through his numb lips.

“Okay, this isn’t working—let’s try a different approach,” Reigen-kun says. He plants his little fists on his hips, leaning down to stare into Mob’s face with huge eyes and a wry twist to his lips. He’s so calm—how is he staying so calm? “Follow my example—breathe in…”

Mob breathes in, wheezing a little. Dimple-san is eyeing the entire situation doubtfully from across the room, as if he doesn’t expect this to work, but Mob is out of options at the moment. He doesn’t have enough air to tell the kid to GET AWAY.

“…Now breathe out.”

Mob breathes out, still wheezing a little but getting it under control. He opens his mouth, only to find he still doesn’t have enough air to speak. He closes it again.

“…Breathe in.”

Inhale. Mob is starting to feel a little less tingly about the hands and feet now. Reigen-kun is leaning over him, exaggeratedly breathing by example, and Mob…

“…Breathe out.”
Exhale. Mob realizes, with the most damning realization of all, that he doesn’t want Reigen-kun to leave at all. It would be safer for the kid to be far far away, yes…

“…Breathe in.”

Inhale. But it’s been two months and Mob has come to rely on the kid. He leans on Reigen’s people-skills like a crutch, and maybe that’s a bad thing but…

“…Breathe out.”

Exhale. But here’s Reigen-kun, the least psychic person Mob has ever known, and he’s managed to calm Mob’s racing heart with just a series of well-spoken words.

“…Breathe in.”

Inhale. Reigen-kun is so utterly, painfully normal and he’s still better at grounding Mob than anyone else has ever hoped to be.

“…Breathe out.”

Exhale. That Reigen-kun is here, helping him through this…

“…Breathe in.”

Inhale. That means more than Mob can every truly express.

“…Aaand breathe out.”

Exhale.

Inhale.

Exhale.

And he’s back under control, his emotions locked away tight in the iron box nestled deep in his entrails. His chair hits the carpeted floor with a thunk, as do a number of other heavy pieces of furniture. Mob takes an experimental breath on his own, and Reigen-kun smiles when it comes back smooth and not shaky in the slightest. Crisis averted.

If only he could avert Reigen-kun as easily as Reigen-kun averted his panic.

“So if you’re an esper, like a real-life esper, can’t you teach me how to be psychic, too? Not that I’ll need much teaching—I’m already on the wavelength, you could say, I just don’t have any of the flashy stuff. It’ll be suuuper easy—you could even just show me some things and then BAM I’ll pick them up! Look—pick up this cup, right, and then—”

Mob breathes a sigh out through his nose. “I’m not going to do that, Reigen-kun.”

“But why not!” Reigen-kun pouts at a power-level of three hundred watts, staring his master down. “You have power at your disposal, so why don’t you, I don’t know, use some of it?!”

There are many reasons, all of which Mob has tried to explain before. There’s the part where Reigen-kun has no discernible aura—of course, so did Ritsu when they were kids, and Ritsu is now the second most powerful psychic Mob knows, aside from himself. Reigen-kun could be a late bloomer. Mob does not believe Reigen-kun is a late bloomer, but he could be.
There’s also the part where psychic powers are dangerous, exceptionally so. The fights Mob had as a kid… he and Teru tore apart Black Vinegar district’s original middle school so thoroughly that not even the foundation remained and they had to move to a new site to rebuild. It was not pretty. It was not cool. Mob has long since tried to stop using psychic powers altogether—if he focuses on doing what he can with other skills, he will eventually make up for the destruction he’s caused, or at least he plans to.

Really, the largest part in this equation is the fact that Mob… Mob scares himself, sometimes, most times, when he uses his powers. He’s scared of seeing powers used, and he’s scared of himself, and this is why he always asks Dimple to take care of curses and small time spirits that he comes across.

Even upon hearing this, however, Reigen-kun keeps pressing. He pouts a lot, and whines some, and one day he corners Mob with a frown that even Mob, king of impassivity, winces at.

“Look. Powers are… well, they’re cool, but they’re nothing special. Having psychic powers is just another way to be human. You know, like how some people can run fast and some have strong body odor or whatever. I don’t understand how your powers are any different. Why do you refuse to use them? It’s like… like… ah, like refusing to dance because you accidentally kicked someone once!”

Ending his little speech with a nod, Reigen-kun backs up and goes back to his desk, happy that his point has been made.

Mob still doesn’t show him any cool psychic tricks.

“It’s like a knife,” Reigen-kun finally says one day when they’re alone in the office, his chin resting on the edge of Mob’s desk. Mob flinches a little, both at the comparison and the fact that Reigen-kun is suddenly so close. Reigen-kun is undeterred. “Knives are sharp and you should never point them at other people, but when you use a knife in the kitchen to cut your veggies it’s just another tool. It’s not good or bad. It just is. So…”

That’s… that’s actually pretty smart. Mob tells the kid that he’ll take that under advisement, and then he does, mulling it over late at night while he’s enjoying a cigarette in the confines of his own musty apartment. The thought is on his mind, now, and it won’t go away.

Mob has grown so much. He’s learned how to work hard, how to hustle, how to push through. Training his muscles took time… and he had screw-ups along the way… and maybe, just maybe, psychic powers aren’t all that different?

Late at night, while no one is around, not even Dimple-san, Mob slowly reaches inside himself for the wellspring of his power. Like a surge of blue, of ocean spray and coral flakes, his powers bubble up under his fingertips. He feels it in his nail beds, in the roots of his teeth, in his optic nerves. Holding the power as gently as he possibly can, he reaches out beyond himself and… slowly lowers his burning cigarette into the ashtray beside the TV.

After years and years of nothing but droughts and storm surges, the gentle flow of power brings Mob a profound sense of something, deep deep in his chest.

Chapter End Notes

In this verse the incident with Ritsu definitely happened, and scarred Mob for life. He
holds in his power until he physically can't anymore, which is actually how he made friends with Teru and Dimple.
Love

Chapter Summary

Mob has two favorite people in the whole world—Reigen-kun, and his brother, Ritsu.

It's high time they met.

Chapter Notes

So spoiler alert—I have no idea what sports day is like. This is some hardcore guestimation right here.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Sunday nights are family nights, at least according to Mob’s mother. Every Sunday for as long as Mob has been out of the house (not too long—he was a late bloomer and went to college close enough to live at home) the Kageyama family has gathered come Sunday to eat some good food and commiserate about the good and bad in their lives.

The night always starts the same way, with the same greetings and the same insistence that the boys, Mob and Ritsu, help finish making dinner. Then there’s the same friendly chatter, the occasional groans as Mom starts in on her gentle pestering about grandkids, and a generally enjoyable meal. Afterwords Ritsu will always take the spotlight while Mob takes the dishes; his career is lucrative in all kinds of ways that Mob’s is not, and their parents delight in hearing about his escapades as an electrical engineer. Mob will listen, nodding along, a smile growing on his face when Ritsu talks proudly about design successes. Then they’ll all pack up, share some hugs, and Mob and Ritsu will head off back to their own separate lives.

Always. There are very few exceptions. Except, it seems, for tonight—when Ritsu interrupts Mob in the middle of a story about how Reigen-kun calmed a woman having a panic attack by confusing her with a riddle in order to inform him that he’s been monopolizing the conversation all evening.

“I haven’t heard you talk this much since Tsubomi,” are the exact words he says, a laugh curling at the edges of his lips. He flicks his fluffy hair out of his face to narrow a look at his brother.

The look and the comment both bring Mob up short. “Oh. Am I…? Is it too much?”

“No, no—go ahead, I don’t mind. I just think it’s funny, is all,” Ritsu says.

Mob clears his throat, taking in for the first time the fact that his parents both have a look of polite disinterest on their faces. How long has he been talking, exactly? He’s not sure—it’s been a while since he lost track like that. It used to happen more often. When he was in the Body Improvement Club in middle school, for instance. He used to info dump all the time about proper gaining and cutting techniques while his parents stared on like deer in the headlights.

“I’m done anyway,” Mob says, giving his mom a small smile. “Reigen-kun is a delight to have
around. That’s all.”

It isn’t all, but judging by the fact that his mother all but dives into a story about her garden, he’s been holding the conversation hostage for long enough.

After dinner, Mob cleans dishes and Ritsu talks about his life. Then they meet at the door, shuffle into their shoes, and bid their parents goodbye. This is normal. They’re back to the status quo.

Until, that is, Ritsu gives Mob an appraising look and claps a hand on his shoulder. “Nii-san. I was meaning to ask—you think I could meet this kid of yours?”

“He isn’t mine, exactly,” Mob says, ever truthful, but Ritsu is already waving him off.

“Six of one, half a dozen of the other. You can’t hear the way you talk about him—he’s yours and there’s nothing you can do about it. Now—how about introducing the kid to good old Uncle Ritsu?”

Uncle Ritsu. Mob tilts his head down, a smile on his face to match the teasing grin Ritsu is sporting. God, Mob loves his brother. Ritsu is so funny, and smart, and successful—and who is Mob to say no to letting his two favorite people in the entire world meet each other?

The perfect opportunity comes around a few weeks later, when he and Reigen-kun are nearing the six-month anniversary of their ‘agreement’. Reigen-kun comes to the office with news—Sports Day is coming up, and his mom is going to be busy. She’s offered her passes to Mob and his wife. Mob, who doesn’t have a wife, starts to sweat at the way Reigen-kun wiggles his eyebrows as he says the words, but agrees anyway, on the condition that he bring his brother.

“What about me? Did you even think to offer me the invitation?” Dimple-san asks, as Mob closes down the office the day of. He’ll be meeting Ritsu at the gate to Salt Elementary.

Mob waves a hand vaguely through the air. To be completely honest, he’s not sure why Dimple-san is even interested in going. It’s true that he doesn’t like to be left alone, but he seems about as fond of Reigen-kun as he is of the lint Mob rolls off his turtlenecks every morning. “You don’t need a pass, Dimple-san,” Mob says. In general, he tries not to condone Dimple-san’s occasionally-vaguely-evil inclinations, but in this case it just so happens that Dimple-san will not be breaking any rules by tagging along. There are no stated regulations about bringing spirits onto school grounds.

Dimple-san harumphs, loudly, before falling into line at Mob’s elbow. Time to head out.

As agreed, Ritsu is waiting just outside the school’s gate. He’s wearing a blue button down shirt and has a hand casually in one pocket. He waves as soon as he catches Mob’s eyes. “So,” he calls. “Where’s this kid of yours?”

“Patience,” Mob says, a small smile gracing his lips. Ritsu’s eagerness has him feeling light and excited. He actually can’t wait for Ritsu and Reigen-kun to meet.

This makes it all the more jarring when the two of them finally come face to face and they Do Not Get Along.

It starts with Reigen-kun and his inability to stop what’s on his mind from spilling directly out of his mouth. “Did you know that your collar is out of style?” is the first thing he says.

Ritsu pauses where he’s standing, looking down. He doesn’t get self-conscious easily—mostly because there’s no reason he ever should be self-conscious in the first place—but Reigen-kun’s words have obviously thrown him for a loop. “Uh—”
It only goes downhill from there.

“I know Mob has his whole… look… but I didn’t realize it actually ran in your family. I thought Mob was just like that on purpose.”

Ritsu stiffens, his mouth gaping open. Dimple-san snickers between them. “Oi, kid, do you always talk to your elders like that?”

Oh dear. “Ritsu, it’s fine—”

“He’s being a brat! On purpose, Nii-san.”

“It’s not on purpose—”

“You don’t have to defend me, Mob.”

“Yeah, don’t defend him! It’s him who’s being rude—”

“Am not! I’m being honest. I learned that from Mob!”

“No. I know my brother, and that’s not—”

“It is too—”

“It is not—!”

“Hey—!”

“Stop—!”

Mob throws his hands up, hoping to intercede before the whole thing comes to blows. Thankfully that’s when the whistle blows for all the kids to go line up. The games are starting. Mob pushes Reigen-kun off in the direction of his teachers. They’ll have time at lunch to do… more of whatever the heck that was.

Ritsu is still seething as they take their seats in the stands. Mob manages to distract him soon after, thankfully—the events are all the same things that Mob remembers from when they were kids. He lists off all the records he set for the family, records that Ritsu blew through the very next year, when it was his turn. Mob doesn’t mind that Ritsu was so much better at sports than he was—it was just a fact of life back then. Mob was the smaller one, the lighter one, the thinner one… people often mistook him for the younger one, as well, and that’s just how it was. He sighs, lost in nostalgia.

And then jolts upright as he spots a familiar head of not-quite-red hair crossing the line delineating the end of the first event. He’s too late throwing his arms up in the air but he does it anyway, and he doesn’t call out or cheer but Reigen-kun still seems to sense him. The two of them lock eyes from across the way and Reigen-kun raises his fists in the air, too, his grin contagious. He’s not in first place, or second or third, but he doesn’t do too bad and Mob has never had reason to be so proud of another person since his brother stopped doing sports in favor of pursuing engineering.

The morning goes on like that. Reigen-kun isn’t the best athlete, but he’s light on his feet and good enough at faking people out that he can sometimes get people turned all the way around while he zips past. Mob enjoys watching the games, and by the time lunch rolls around he’s knows Reigen-kun is going to be bursting with social energy.

He’s right. Reigen-kun only stops talking when there’s food in his mouth, and sometimes not even
then. He also has the unfortunate habit of poking at a tooth that’s this close to coming out, which Ritsu spends the entire meal wrinkling his nose at.

“Stop wiggling it! That’s disgusting!” he finally snaps, giving Reigen-kun a sharp tap on the wrist.

“The tooth-doctor said that it needs to come out,” Reigen-kun says through his fingers. Mob nods along. It is his last baby tooth, after all, and Mob has seen the adult tooth starting to grow in crooked behind it. Dimple-san rolls his eyes before getting bored and floating off toward the track. Ritsu follows a few minutes later, obviously at the end of his rope.

“I can’t believe your kid called you a style disaster and you just let him,” he says at the end of the day, after all the prizes have been handed out and the adults have all collected their kids. Reigen-kun is on his way home with his mother, tuckered out but still babbling away.

“Stop,” Mob says. “He’s not so bad. You know that he’s been cheering me on while I train my psychic powers?”

Ritsu grumbles something before blowing out an explosive sigh. “…Yes. You’ve said. Still doesn’t absolve him from—”

“And he’s so good with clients, Ritsu. You should see him.”

“Yeah, but—”

“And—”

“I know, Nii-san!” Ritsu bursts out. A lady walking next to him turns owlish eyes on the two of them for a moment before Ritsu smiles his charming smile and lowers his voice. “I just… do you think this is going to last?”

Mob breathes in.

He gives the thought its due concentration, thinking it through completely from end to end. Sometimes he wonders the same thing. He is, after all, essentially using the kid. He’s long since started paying him a little more, but Reigen-kun’s wage is still pretty paltry, and at some point Mob will have to come clean about the fact that he’s not even a real accredited psychologist. What will happen when that day comes? Will Reigen-kun leave him to his own sorry devices?

Mob holds the apex of the breath.

He and Reigen-kun have talked a little about the future… about plans to buy Reigen-kun a binder when he starts to need one so his mom doesn’t know until he’s ready to tell her, that sort of thing. They’ve talked about where Reigen-kun plans to go to school. But they haven’t touched on the subject of the two of them.

Mob breathes out.

Reigen-kun means so much to him… has already provided him with so much forward momentum that he feels like it could carry him into the next decade. Do his paltry lessons on philosophy compare? Will that be enough to keep the kid by his side? Reigen-kun has proven again and again already that he’s the real driving force behind the business, but has Mob done the same?

He doesn’t know. He supposes the answers will come in time. For now, he can’t help the fondness in his voice when he says, “Ritsu… you’ll always be my baby brother. I respect your judgment more than anyone’s.”
“…But you aren’t going to listen to me about this, I take it?” Ritsu says. His dark eyes are piercing.

“Nope,” Mob says, and that’s the end of that.

He’ll worry about all that when the time comes and not a moment sooner.

Chapter End Notes

It took a while to figure out what I wanted Ritsu to do in this AU. In the end, I went with something where he’d get to do a lot of problem-solving. That kid needs stimulation in his life, haha.
Trust

Chapter Summary

The boys are called on to make a house-call. Who are they going to find?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Things are good. Mob’s therapy practice is better than ever. With Reigen-kun’s help, he’s built up a fair number of repeat clients and recommendations, each more grateful than the last. Their methods may be… unorthodox… but people are happy, and Mob is making money, and things are good.

Three and a half years pass, just like that.

Reigen-kun grows. He shoots up his first year in middle school, gaining six full inches in six months, and by the time he hits his second year he’s shot up to his full height of five feet and six inches, where he stops short. He’s adamant that he’s not done, that he’ll beat Mob yet, but at fourteen years of age he’s still four inches behind and it’s looking like that’s just how it’ll be.

At twelve, he starts favoring sweaters over his school uniform. At thirteen, he’s graced with a clunky set of braces. At fourteen, Mob does good on his promise and buys the kid his very first binder—a simple black half-tank that Reigen-kun croons about for three weeks straight. And right here, right now, the two of them sit at their normal spots in the office, just like always, waiting patiently or not so patiently for their first client of the afternoon.

A call comes in. Reigen-kun—Arataka, as he’s chosen to be called—picks up the phone on the first ring. “Therapy and Such Counseling Office. How can I help you today?” he asks, putting on his best smile even though whoever is on the other end can’t see him. He claims that people can hear it in his voice—Mob hears nothing but the over-pronunciation brought on by a year of dealing with braces on top of the theater club diction training. “Oh, uh-huh. Is that so?” Arataka-kun pauses to jot something down on a note-pad, his other hand pinwheeling in the air and the phone pinched between his shoulder and his ear. “Well, you’re in luck! We do have a slot open today, and we’d be happy to accommodate your special needs. Just let me—”

Mob watches on from his own desk as Arataka-kun scrambles for an invoice sheet. It’s been slow today so he’s working on making ‘therapy packs’—little goody bags full of anything and everything he can find for cheap. Soaps, fidget toys, even packets of salt and pepper. They’re for emergency use, for clients dealing with sudden panic attacks and such.

He’s used them himself. Sometimes the perplexity of finding a rock in a sack is enough to knock the panic right out of your system.

A moment later the phone clicks into the holder and Arataka-kun announces to the room at large, “WE HAVE A HOUSE CALL!”

Interesting. Mob does not normally take house calls. Then again, he didn’t normally take on child cases, either, until Arataka-kun showed up. He’s learned to roll with the punches, so to speak.
He waits patiently as Arataka-kun outlines the case for him. Kid supposed to be in his first year of high school, shut in, troubled. The woman who called, his mother, is desperate. “She needs our help,” Arataka-kun intones, very seriously, and Mob can’t exactly say no when the kid uses that tone of voice.

So there they are, not two hours later, all three of them getting into the proper therapeutic headspace (or blob-space, in Dimple-san’s case) to deal with a troubled teenager. When they get to the door a woman is already pulling it open, ushering them inside. She sets three cups of tea on the table and starts to explain.

“He was a good kid. Bright. Happy. But when he turned eight, he… well, I don’t really understand it. Just that it kept getting worse and worse and then he refused to go to school.”

“Mm-hmm,” Mob says, scribbling some nonsense on a page of his notebook. “Go on.”

She does. “A child from his class came by, after he stopped going. Said he was a friend. I let him in. I thought it was a good thing, you know? Especially since Katsuya started leaving his room again, for little bits of time.” The woman sighs, frown lines creasing her face. “But… it became clearer, the longer it went on, that that… Suzuki… wasn’t a good influence on my Katsuya. He still won’t go to school, he’s out at all odd hours of the night, and he gets… well, he gets violent, sometimes, when people try to touch the umbrella that Suzuki gave him. He won’t leave his room without it.”

Mob keeps scribbling. A moment later there’s a knock on his shoe, Arataka-kun kicking him softly under the table. “Ah. Does Suzuki come often, then?”

“Not so much anymore. He was sent away to boarding school this year. But Katsuya… he’s not the same, and I still worry about him.” She pauses for a long time, turning and turning a ring on her finger until finally she says, “Can you… can you help us?”

“Oh, dear…” Ms. Serizawa says.

Then again… Arataka-kun’s optimism endears him to people for a reason. People like to hear that help is on the way. And more often than not, Arataka-kun has the answer, even if Mob doesn’t.

The woman leads them down a short hallway into a darker part of the house. All the lights are out down here, the smell mustier, as if there’s no air circulation. Ms. Serizawa gestures them forward when they reach the end of the hall, knocking softly on a door and murmuring to the occupant inside that some people are here to see you, Katsuya.

The response is immediate. A light—no, an aura—flares up and illuminates the edges of the door. It’s so sharp, so sudden, that Mob throws his hand up to shield his eyes. Arataka-kun looks at him oddly for a moment, unable to see the aura with his non-esper eyes. He, however, leans back, too, when a loud THUMP rings from somewhere inside the room.

“Oh, dear…” Ms. Serizawa says.

The realization slams into Mob like a beam to his chest. An esper. The kid is an esper. A child esper, one who has been locked away in his room near constantly for almost four years, lost and afraid of himself and his power. God, no wonder no therapist has ever been able to help this family.
“We’d better deal with this alone,” Dimple-san says, and Mob is about to turn and send Arataka-kun out when he hears Arataka-kun’s voice, gentle and sure, talking through the door.

“Hello, Serizawa-san,” he says, knocking softly.

The thumps get louder, things moving and shifting inside the closed space before them. The aura burns brighter, brighter—the door starts rattling on its hinges. Mob steps forward, preparing to shut down the flare of power, when all at once it cuts out.

“You aren’t scared of my power,” says a soft voice, through the door.

“Nope,” Reigen-kun says, popping the P. He settles down with his back to the door, patting the floor beside him until Mob gets the hint and sits down, too.

There’s a pause. And then: “Are you an esper, too?”

“Sure thing!” Reigen-kun says brightly, his lies seamless. “You’re talking to the kid who’s going to be the greatest psychic of the twenty-first century, and the master who is going to get him there. Reigen Arataka and—”

It takes Mob a moment to realize that Arataka-kun is gesturing to him. He clears his throat. “And Shigeo Kageyama.”

“—two powerful psychics, at your service!”

There’s silence for a long moment. Then comes a huff. “You can’t help me, no matter how powerful you are. Go away before I get mad.”

It should be a threat, and in a sense it is—but still, Mob isn’t afraid, and neither is Arataka-kun. Mob, because he’s confident his barrier—the only use of his powers he’s completely comfortable with at this point—will protect them, and Arataka-kun, because he’s already been distracted by the low jingle of music coming from the room. His eyes are huge and round, his mouth hanging open as he gasps, “Hey, are you playing Killbot Phantasm I: Journey to the Depths of the Demonsphere?!”

“…no,” comes the voice.

Arataka-kun is undeterred. He launches into a speech about his first time playing the game, going a mile a minute, and fifteen minutes of non-stop video game chatter from outside the door later the kid inside has stopped objecting to their presence and is actually… gushing back?

Mob shakes his head. Honestly if he had a penny for every time Arataka-kun pulled out some weird and obscure reference to talk to a client about, he’d be a rich, rich man. Not even weird and obscure, sometimes—Mob knows he’s farther out of the loop than he likes to admit. Still, whatever Arataka-kun is doing is working, as the scared-frustrated-angry aura inside the room calms to a rosy magenta color.

Until, that is, it flares up again, as if the kid realized all at once what was happening.

“You have to go, NOW,” he says. “You can’t BE HERE.”

The sound of furniture shifting and rattling comes through the door. This is starting to get dangerous. Mob raises one hand, preparing to throw up his strongest barrier just in case, but Arataka-kun grabs his wrist and forces it down. Biting his lip, Arataka-kun leans in closer to the
door. “Hey, it’s going to be okay—”

“How would YOU know?” comes the haughty voice from the other side.

“Because I’m going to be the greatest psychic of the twenty-first century,” Arataka-kun says, so matter of fact that Mob nearly believes him for a moment. “And if I can control my powers, then you can, too.”

Arataka-kun is good with people. It’s the reason Mob has kept him around all these years. Even with the cases that involve real spirits and real curses he’s good to have around, because he’s quick on the uptake and he’s always there to reassure people in a way that Mob never could. Mob has skated by taking up jobs where spirits and curses caused people to seek mental health help, using Dimple-san to take care of them, but he’s not so great when it turns out to be just normal people and normal problems.

Arataka-kun is good with people… and he proves it yet again when the shaking and rattling slows… slows… and stops.

“Can you really help me control it?” says the voice.

“You bet I can,” Arataka-kun says, and Mob can definitely hear a hint of steel in his voice this time.

Chapter End Notes

Me @ me: nice voltron reference, loser.

We’re getting into some plot now, boys! Also: the ‘therapy packs’ are this AU’s response to Reigen’s ‘graphic exorcisms’ from canon.
Faith

Chapter Summary

Friend or foe, follower or figurehead, it seems as if specters of Mob's past are in town today.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Hold.  Hold.  Hold…

Mob feels a drop of sweat roll down the side of his face.  His outstretched hands tremble slightly… still… tremble again.  To his left, Teru-chan breathes out a determined breath.

The spirit in front of them isn’t what Mob would call pretty.  Pretty was his childhood crush, Tsubomi—all long black hair pinned back by barrettes and big, expressive eyes.  Nothing like the creature in front of him.  No, the spirit is more of the dark and brooding type, made of inky-black storm clouds just barely hiding sharp, rancid claws and a long red tongue.  It’s small, thankfully—Teru’s already shrunk it to about a hundredth of its original size—but its gnashing mouth is still a force to be reckoned with.

“You can do it, Mob!” calls a far-off voice.  Arataka-kun sounds farther than he is because of the protective yellow bubble Teru-chan has placed him in.  His hair, previously whipping about in the gale-force wind, has fallen lank about his shoulders, his bangs in disarray.

Yes.  Mob can.  Do it, he means.  He narrows his eyes and FOCUSES the well of power inside him, drawing it forward and forward and pressing down until finally—

With an anticlimactic POP! the aka shita fizzes into nothingness.

For a moment the world is silent but for the rush of power in Mob’s ears.  He knows from experience that his hair is drifting straight up from his head, as if caught in the current of churning water.  His shaking fingers curl, searching, his eyes wild.  He wants.  He yearns.

Then, all at once, his powers recede back into his chest, where he locks them away again.  He lowers his hands, his hair falling back across his forehead, and takes stock.

Hands—all ten fingers still intact, fine tremors coursing through them.  Chest—tight but okay, breath heaving through his lungs.  Head—slightly dizzy, but still in the right place.  Eyes—check.  Nose—check.  Lips, ears, teeth—check, check, check.

Surrounding architecture?  Intact, except for a fine spiderweb of cracks spreading from his feet outward.  Better by far than the last time he attempted an exorcism.

He turns slightly to the left, finding Teru-chan with a close eye on him.  “How are you feeling?” the man asks carefully.

“Okay,” Mob wheezes, still breathing harder than he should.  He doesn’t know what’s more difficult—summoning his powers to the surface or making them stop once they’re there.  Letting go of the
barricade keeping them locked in place is like opening a siege gate and unleashing pandemonium, which is, understandably, stressful. But cramming the gale force of his powers back into a tiny box never meant to hold them for as long as it has? That’s just as bad, if not worse.

In the past,

(“Fight me!” “No.” “Come at me with your power, Kageyama! Come at me or I’ll MAKE YOU!”)

he did whatever it took to keep his powers locked down. It didn’t matter what the situation was, or who was asking—he absolutely refused to use them. The only problem with that was that the longer he held them in, the more he held them back, the more violently they rushed forth when he couldn’t hold on anymore.

One of the last times that he used his powers—before he started training again, that is—was the fight between him and Teruki-chan that cemented their friendship. Over ten years ago, that was. He’d come this close to losing consciousness because of Teru-chan’s grip on his throat, two middle schoolers locked in a vicious battle. Teru-chan was insistent, yelling in his ears. The sky had churned with immense power.

Mob doesn’t remember the end of the fight. All he remembers is a wave of eagerness so strong that his vision went completely and totally black with it, as if he’d been waiting all that time just to come out and play.

He’s been working on that, recently.

Today was good. A good exorcism, if Teru-chan’s beaming smile is anything to go by. Arataka-kun, too, is excited about it, even though he couldn’t really see the psychic parts of the whole thing, which were, actually, all of it. He hangs off of the sleeve of Mob’s turtleneck, talking about as fast as he possibly can. By the time they get back to the office, the excitement has started to peter off into a content fondness. Teru-chan and Arataka-kun hang around each other, each nearly orbiting the other, as they talk about whatever comes to mind. Teru-chan is thinking about adopting a kitten—Arataka-kun just got a sweater with a suit and tie embroidered on the front. The two of them both think this is hilarious.

Mob, meanwhile, collapses into his desk chair and takes a moment to just breathe, thinking about nothing in particular except the appointment with Serizawa-kun in a few hours time. They’ve been making good progress on that front, too, in recent times. Serizawa-kun is a strong esper, with the foundations of someone who may grow up to be as strong or stronger than some of the psychics Mob has always silently considered ‘the strong ones’. Mob, of course, is considered the strongest of all… though he himself isn’t so sure. Sure, his power comes out and it’s catastrophic, but that doesn’t make him strong, exactly. It makes him… desperate, maybe.

In any case. His session with Serizawa-kun will be about breaking down what triggers different emotions—which in turn trigger his powers—and how to break the cycle of Emotion Power-Surge Emotion. Until then, there is paperwork calling Mob’s name.

“Ah… are you the therapist?”

Mob looks up. A woman has entered the office while he was otherwise occupied. She’s older, wearing rather formal clothes and tight shoes that look like they’re pinching her feet, with her graying hair cut in a bob at her chin. She looks familiar somehow. Mob blinks—she isn’t looking at him. Her attention is on Teru-chan, who is lounging near the door.
“Nope!” Teru-chan says brightly. “You’re looking for my associate, Kageyama-chan. He’s right over there.”

Straightening up as Teru-chan’s hand waves in his direction, Mob puts on his best customer service smile. It itches at his face but the woman doesn’t seem to mind—she just smiles back and starts on her way over. Arataka-kun follows along and pulls out a chair for her with a murmur about getting tea.

“Right. Well, what can I do for you?” Mob asks.

The woman leans forward, eyes darting back towards the other occupants of the room. “I… well, I’ve heard that you, um… I’m looking for something off the menu, so to speak.”

Menu? “Ma’am, we don’t have a menu.”

Behind her back, Arataka-kun plants his face into the hand not carrying the tea tray across the room. Teru-chan seems to be holding back laughter. Dimple-san pops out of the wall to give Mob a Look. The woman purses her lips.

Ah. It seems that Mob missed a joke. Unfortunate.

“I don’t mean a literal menu,” the woman says, which, ah. Mob gets it now. Oh dear. “I mean… I was told that you do… other things, as well?”

“Oh…”

She leans in close, closer than Mob is particularly comfortable with, and that’s when it clicks.

“Ah,” he says. “You must know Mezato-chan.”

Open, close, open, the woman’s mouth goes. Then a sharp grin takes over her features. “You are just as good as they say you are, Shishou,” she says, leaning back appraisingly.

“Shishou?!” Arataka-kun mouths in the background.

“Don’t ask,” Teru-chan mouths back.

Mob does not want to deal with this now. Or ever. It tends to bring up bad memories from middle school. “If you’re here to ask me to return to the congregation,” he say, hoping to instill a sense of finality in his usually monotone voice, “then I’m afraid I’ll have to decline.”

Her eyes are quick, jumping from his face down to his hands and back again in an instant. “And if I’m just here to view the visage of the Psycho Helmet himself?”

“Then the usual consultation fee will apply.”

“I see,” she says. She stands in one swift motion, straightening her skirt as she goes. She reaches into her purse and starts to count out bills—more bills than a consultation could ever cost. She folds them in half, in half again, and drops the entire wad into the tip jar sitting at the very corner of the desk. “Thank you for your time,” she says, pleasantly. Then she takes her leave, carefully shutting the door behind her.

“Um… what was that?” Arataka-kun says the instant she’s gone.

Mob sighs loudly in the hopes that it will take the stress out with it as it goes. “Just a cult follower from my middle school days.”
Arataka-kun’s jaw is nearly on the floor. Mob sighs louder, rubbing his knuckles into his eyes. He does not want to explain this.

That, thankfully or not thankfully, is what Teru-chan is around for. “Let me tell you the story of our dear Psycho Helmet, also known as White T Poison,” Teru-chan starts, and then, true to his word, begins to tell the story. Dimple-san appears again, as if summoned, to add his own input as it goes on.

“It all began in the year of our lord, two thousand and—”

Ah. They’re telling the embellished version. Mob tunes out, letting his arms flop to his sides. While it’s true that he once dismantled a laughter cult and subsequently accidentally created one of his own, and also that he once beat the shadow leader of Black Vinegar Middle school (Teru) unequivocally and became something of a shadow leader himself, it’s not really fair to tell the story as if he’s this unstoppable, omnipotent force. Yes, he won a few fights—so what? So did Ritsu, and Ritsu was younger at the time.

In all honesty, Mob eagerly awaits the day when no more Psycho Helmet culters come to his door at Mezato-chan’s urging. He doesn’t want anything to do with them. Never has. He’d rather it never come up in conversation again for as long as he lives.

Alas, it isn’t to be. He should have forbidden Teru-chan from telling the story, as Arataka-kun immediately latches onto it and starts demanding to be taken to the Psycho Helmet headquarters in the cafe downtown.

“It’ll be a learning experience!” says Arataka-kun.

“Don’t you want to rule over them all?” says Dimple-san.

Teru-chan watches from the background, this close to doubling over with laughter.

Mob sighs. Damnit, Mezato-chan. He was having such a nice day.

Chapter End Notes

A little bit of a filler chapter, haha. The next one will be somewhat filler, too, but after that, well... big things are in the works.
Calm

Chapter Summary

Mob’s day continues to get longer and longer. It’s not just the cult—something is brewing in Seasoning City, and they are this close to figuring out what.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

At one-thirty on Saturday afternoon, Mob bites the bullet and does what he swore not to do ten years ago—he pulls on his blazer, straightens his turtleneck, and heads out to visit the Psycho Helmet Cult.

“So, I’ve been thinking about this whole ‘cult’ story,” Arataka-kun says, sidling up beside him. He’s hunched over in a ‘deep pondering’ type of posture: elbow in one hand, chin in the other, the very picture of thinking hard. If Teru-chan hadn’t had to head off due to a prior engagement, he’d be smiling indulgently at the kid.

Mob nods along. He’s long since gotten used to the way the kid processes information. He’s chewing it over right now—once he’s done he’ll come back with some major insight that Mob will undoubtedly have missed, and that will be that.

Mob pauses at a streetlight, giving the kid room to continue. He’s expecting something along the lines of ‘what are you supposed to do with the power that people give you’ or ‘how do you atone when you’ve done something terrible’ or even ‘why would you do such horrible things, Mob, why’.

Instead, what Arataka-kun comes out with is: “We need to find a way to monetize Psycho Helmet.”

“I can get behind that,” Dimple-san says.

Mob, a grown man with full autonomy, really shouldn’t let a middle-schooler take the lead as often as he does. This fact hits him like a brick wall the moment he walks into the cafe on Seventh Street, sees the ever-burning plastic candle set in front of the Psycho Helmet shrine, and Arataka-kun’s words sink all the way in. It’s one of those things that happens every once in a while—that out-of-the-blue realization that oh, yeah, adults shouldn’t let kids be in charge. Therapists shouldn’t let fourteen-year-olds sit in on their therapy sessions. Psychics shouldn’t take advice about their immense psychic powers exclusively from a child. That sort of thing.

Sweat starts to bead on Mob’s temples. This is not good. He has made a mistake. Arataka-kun is moving in like a shark swimming straight for a poor, helpless fish caught on a hook, though in this case the fish is an avid church-goer and the hook is their spiritual leader who also happens to be Mob who, has he mentioned yet, has made a very big mistake?

Yes. He believes he has.

“Wait here,” Arataka-kun says, pushing Mob into the short hallway between the kitchen and the bathrooms. He then walks with determination toward the three cult-goers in the shrine’s booth—each nursing half a dozen cups of cold coffee—ostensibly intending to make a grand introduction.
Mob leans back against the wall, contemplating the urge to slide down it until he can never be found again. His only saving grace right here, right now, in this dimly lit 24/7 cafe, is the fact that Serizawa-kun’s appointment is only two hours away. They’ve already been paid in advance—they can’t possibly skip out on it, so their time with the Psycho Helmet Cult is, by design, somewhat limited.

Unfortunately, that only means so much when you’re trapped between Reigen Arataka and a group of cultists rounded up and guided by a certain Mezato Ichi. The only way this situation could possibly be worse were if Tome-chan were somehow involved.

“Hey, Mobbu, fancy spotting you here!”

Correction. There is no way for this situation to be worse.

“What are you doing here?” Mob finds himself asking, in a panic. Not for the first time he wishes his voice would portray his emotions as anything other than mild.

“Oh, just researching—you know that this place gets a strong signal from the Q-Alpha satellite every other day, right? I’m hoping to tap into the signal and use it to test a theory.” Tome grins, staring off into the distance for a moment. Then she zeroes in on Mob. “I thought today was going to be a fun day.”

God, her little lackey must be around here somewhere, too. Mob resists the urge to stare over his shoulder. Mitsuura-kun may be calmer than his boss by a long shot, but he’s just as driven, and monologues about his theories nearly as much. The fact that their goals don’t align in the slightest—where Tome-chan is looking to telepathically contact an alien, Mitsuura-kun just wants to become an esper—seems to bother neither of them.

Mob opens his mouth to make some sort of a comment to this effect when, as if they rehearsed it, the three cult-goers on the other side of the room rise in sync with a cheer that echoes through the entire establishment. “Where is he? Where is our savior?” wails one woman at the top of her lungs—the waitress standing at a table nearby gives her a glare that makes Mob want to melt into the floor. The very last thing he wants to do right now is actively announce his presence in the building, but he’s given no choice when Tome-chan, the traitor, goes, “Hey, I think that’s your cue,” and gives him a surprisingly strong shove from behind.

Dimple-san floats his way out, and Mob, against his better judgment, follows suit. The moment he steps out of the hallway and into the larger dining room, another cheer goes up, even louder than the last.

“What did I tell you?” Arataka-kun says to the cult booth in general, grinning away. He raises one hand and drags Mob into the booth by his elbow. Tome slides in on his other side, pinning him in.

It’s going to be a long two hours.

And it is. Just as Mob predicted. Most of the talk goes over his head, but he does catch numerous cheers, a dozen very personally invasive questions, and what seems to be a bid to create a system of indulgences in the style of the Roman Catholic Church with all indulgence funds going straight back to Mob’s bank account. Mob flashes back to Tome-chan’s speeches to convince him to join the telepathy club in middle school. He decides to tune all the way out.

They wind up late to the Serizawa residence. Go figure. While Arataka-kun stays behind to reassure a frantic Ms. Serizawa that no, they didn’t run off with her money, and yes, they do still intend to help, Mob heads to Serizawa-kun’s door.
“Sorry we’re late. Well, I am. Arataka-kun isn’t going to join us today,” he says to the wood grain. “At least… not for a while.”

There’s a long pause as they both listen to the panicky sobs coming from the kitchen, before—“Tell me about him.”

So Mob does. He tells Serizawa-kun about what Arataka-kun was like as a kid, how they began their relationship trading philosophical theories back and forth, about Arataka-kun’s strengths and a few of his weaknesses, even about what Arataka-kun looks like. He feels like he’s laid his heart bare by the time he’s done talking about his disciple—like he’s shown Serizawa-kun everything there is to see about Arataka-kun, barring the fact that he isn’t, actually, an esper.

So much for actual therapy work. Oh well.

In return, Serizawa-kun shares his memories of the high-schooler named Suzuki. How Suzuki offered him the umbrella as an extension of his room, how Suzuki ‘employed’ him, how Suzuki saved him. He talks the most about Suzuki as a savior… but not once does he ever imply that Suzuki loves and cherishes him the way he loves and cherishes Suzuki. Mob gets the sense that Suzuki… well, that he’s using Serizawa-kun.

Serizawa-kun is very careful not to mention what he does when he leaves the house on Suzuki’s request.

This is when it occurs to Mob: Serizawa-kun is in need of a friend. As they leave the house at the end of the session, Arataka-kun muttering about hysterical women and rubbing his temples like an old man, Mob takes a moment to inform his disciple of this insight. Arataka-kun stares at him for a long time.

“Mob… we are his friends.”

Well then. That certainly solves that problem. Mob endeavors to just… let Arataka-kun handle the social stuff moving forward.

Mostly. Most of it. Mob gets veto-power over any more impromptu trips to Cult-land. “It was nice to see Tome-chan, at least,” he mumbles to himself. “She’s easier to handle with a time limit.”

Arataka-kun gives him no indication that he heard, already moving on to the next topic, hands waving. Sometimes he really reminds Mob of his school days with Tome-chan, now that Mob is thinking about it—the way that Arataka-kun commands a room can be very similar to the way Tome-chan used to go about hustling for club members. Where Arataka-kun can talk just about anybody into just about anything, however, Tome-chan always had difficulty getting anyone interested in telepathy. Even the one actually telepathic club member kind of shunned her after a while.

Watching but not watching the passing faces on passing people, Mob lets himself sink down into memory for just a little while. Middle school wasn’t all bad—he made many good friends back then. Gouda-chan, Onigawara-chan, Kijibayashi-chan, Saruta-chan, Inukawa-chan…

They get to the office while Mob is still caught in nostalgia. He’s thinking about going to look for his old yearbooks—they’re around here somewhere—when the phone starts to ring.

Mob gestures for Arataka-kun to get it, pretending not to yawn into his sleeve as he leisurely looks around the room. It’s been a long day. And it’s about to become just a sliver longer, he realizes with abject dissatisfaction, when he catches sight of Arataka-kun’s face. “It’s Ms. Serizawa,” Arataki-
kun says. “She wants to talk to you.”

Mob takes the call.

“He said to tell you that he might not make it back in time for his session next week.”

The poor woman sounds this close to hysterics, which, while not uncommon for her, is still concerning enough that Mob presses the phone closer to his ear as if that will help him navigate the situation better. “Is that so. May I ask why?”

“Suzuki… Suzuki is back in town. Katsuya left with him just after you left the house. What are they doing? Where are they going for a week without telling me?! Kageyama-san… I’m afraid for my boy.”

Mob is, admittedly, at least a little concerned, as well. He lets a generic spiel drift from his mouth—he and Arataka-kun are going to do their best to help your son, don’t worry, do yourself a favor and drink some tea—and she seems reassured for the moment, but the feeling lingers. He puts the phone down, thinking hard. “Arataka-kun…”

Arataka-kun is already leaning forward into his space, putting the pieces together faster than Mob can put them down on the table. “Have you noticed recently how many child cases we’ve been asked to supervise on?” he demands.

Mob blinks, turning over their recent cases in his head as Arataka-kun stares him down. What does this have to do with…? “Ah, no, I hadn’t, but now that you mention it…”

“It’s weird!” Arataka-kun yells. He brings his hands down on the desk, jostling several rows of knick-knacks that he’s given Mob as gifts through the years. A puppy bobble-head starts bobbing along. “Something fishy is going on.”

“And you think our Serizawa-kun has something to do with it?”

“Maybe, maybe not! But I have a feeling about this Suzuki guy, and let me tell you, it is not a good feeling.”

Chapter End Notes

My take on Serizawa’s mom is that she’s still in the bargaining stage of grief for her son. You ever wonder what it was like before Suzuki came in canon, when she brought all those therapists to the house to try and get Serizawa out? Yeah.
Stability

Chapter Summary

While Mob struggles to put the pieces together, Arataka-kun... suffice to say he's in over his head.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Mob ponders what Arataka-kun said all the way home that night. He ponders it while guiltily puffing his way through a midnight cigarette. He ponders it through his day off, Sunday. Then he spends his family dinner, you guessed it, pondering some more.

It makes sense... and there is definitely something going on... but still, some small segment is out of alignment. Something is missing. Some piece hasn’t fallen into place yet, and it has to do with Serizawa-kun. Mob lays down the puzzle pieces once again, trying to figure out what he isn’t seeing.

The kids. Check. It’s been the same story for weeks, months, now. A normally well-behaved kid will suddenly start acting truant, skipping school and running with the wrong crowd. After some time of this, their parents inevitably become frustrated and worried, and seek outside help. Mob and Arataka-kun swoop in, do some talking, and... hm. Mob thinks harder. He’s still working with many of the kids, his schedule packed so tight right now that he can barely take walk-ins. That isn’t the issue. The issue is the timeline. When he compiles all the information he has on when the kids started acting up, he finds that the very first in this long string of truancy was, in fact, Serizawa-kun. The next event that occurred was Suzuki ‘saving’ Serizawa-kun. And then from there, like dominoes falling, came the other kids—patterns of behavior cropping up almost in response to those first two events.

What, exactly, did Serizawa-kun and Suzuki have to do with this more recent string of children being pushed through the practice by worried mothers and fathers? Even after a full day of pondering Mob doesn’t know. All he can do is keep on schedule until Monday afternoon, a time when Arataka-kun will hopefully have some more answers for him.

Only... Monday afternoon comes, and with it, no Arataka-kun. He’s been late often enough in his intern career, usually caught up in socializing with various clubs and groups, but he’s never flat-out failed to show. Mob is immediately worried.

The worry only gets worse when the kid’s phone goes directly to voicemail, and then again when Mob calls up Ms. Reigen and she informs him that she hasn’t seen Arataka-kun since he left for school that morning.

“Though come to think of it, I did have to chase some delinquent punks off the lawn just after,” she says, in her thick American accent. “They had a gallon of gasoline and were trying to pour it on the porch. Good thing I had the day off, or they could have done some real damage.”

Damage, yeah... Mob thanks her for her time, hangs up, and immediately starts dialing up his brother.
Ritsu is less than enthused about being interrupted at work. “Nii-san, seriously?” he says, over the sounds of someone welding metal in the background. “The kid probably just talked himself into some trouble on the way there, he’ll talk himself out of it just as fast.”

Not convinced, Mob digs his heels in. “Not two hours worth of trouble. Ritsu… something is wrong.”

“Nii-san—”

Mob stays silent. No argument Ritsu spins is going to convince him. Twenty minutes later, Ritsu is at the office, along with Teru-chan and the ever-present Dimple-san.

“Alright, so something is wrong,” Ritsu says, obviously resisting the urge to roll his eyes.

“Yes,” Mob says. “I don’t know what’s it is, but I… have a bad feeling.”

Teru-chan nods, Ritsu sighs, and Dimple-san… well, he mostly just floats around as they call everybody they can who can possibly provide backup. Tome-chan’s contacts at the Awakening Lab that’s funding her research, Ritsu’s friend Shou-chan, a few of Dimple-san’s old cult contacts… soon enough they have a veritable rescue party, ready to go out and rescue Arataka-kun from whatever misfortune has befallen him. A plan is formulated in minutes, put into action in less time than that—by six in the evening they are a dozen strong, marching up to an abandoned factory on the outskirts of the city, the beacon from Arataka-kun’s phone GPS lighting their way through the forest after the van none of them can actually drive couldn’t get any farther through the foliage.

The building is robust, a stalwart silhouette against the setting sunlight. It’s been abandoned for some years now, though it’s obvious that it was made to last a lot longer than that. “Let me do the talking,” Teru-chan says when they’re close enough to start spying figures standing outside the door. By the way he says ‘talking’ Mob is instantly sure he means ‘interrogating’, his middle school habits shining through. Mob is too far gone with worry to object. If these people have Arataka-kun… if a bunch of adults are holding a kid, a child, hostage… Mob shudders. He can’t even think about it without a sick feeling curling in his stomach.

Cutting through the last of the trees, he lets Teru-chan lead the way toward the front entrance of the crumbling factory, his heart pounding in his chest at the idea that Arataka-kun… small, wiry Arataka-kun, who can’t defend himself except with words… he’s in there somewhere, locked away, maybe hurting and maybe alone and—

Mob blinks, and the figures at the entrance of the building come into focus.

The reality of it is ten times worse than he imagined. It’s not adults guarding the front of the building. It’s not even teenagers. The guards in front are all, as far as Mob can tell, aged twelve and below. There are a couple dozen of them, all wearing the same pin with the same emblem on it—a stylized insignia that means nothing to Mob. Nothing except the fact that there isn’t a thing in the world that is going to stop these kids from jumping up, hands raised and powers sparking, the moment they catch sight of the group of espers (and Dimple-san) about to enter their territory.

Mob and company are surrounded in an instant, all their carefully laid plans dashed on the ground. There’s no forcing their way through children—they’re just children, for god’s sake. Ritsu’s mouth hangs open as he raises both hands in a gesture of surrender. Mob stands stiffly, his fingertips tingling. Even Teru-chan falters, staring down at the tallest of the kids, who only comes up to his nose.

“What do you want?” one of the guards prods. All the kids lean closer, in perfect synchronicity,
their eyes filled with suspicion.

Teru-chan glances over Mob’s direction, as does Ritsu. The Awakening Lab espers huddle together, waiting for instruction. Dimple-san bobs ever closer, eyeing a sparking hand near his ecto-antennae. And Mob… Mob doesn’t know what to do. They’ve tumbled into a world of school-yard gangs, of school-age violence—he wasn’t great with that stuff when he was involved in it as a kid let alone now that he’s nearly thirty years old. He’s never felt more lost than he does right now.

He has to do something. So he decides to take a leaf out of Arataka-kun’s book. “I’m here to see my disciple,” he says, standing tall and putting as much authority in his voice as he possibly can.

A murmur courses through the kids, quickly gaining traction.

“Does he mean…?”

“Ishiguro?”

“His disciple—?”

This is it. This is it. They’re going to let them in to see this… Ishiguro person. Mob isn’t sure who they’re confusing him with but this is their chance. Ritsu and Teru-chan can distract the higher-ups while Mob finds Arataka-kun and—and—

A giggle sounds from somewhere in the crowd surrounding them. “You think he’s the boss?” one of the girls calls, her voice high and scornful. “Come on, guys—our boss isn’t some grown man with bad hair.”

A chorus of ‘oh yeah’s and ‘duh’s rebound across the circle. Oh no. Mob feels Ritsu tense beside him, Teru-chan bending his knees in preparation. The tension, previously there like a low, ringing note in the air, ramps up to an unbearable crescendo.

And then, like an angel descending from the heavens, their savior shoulders his way to the front of the rescue party.

“Wait a second,” comes Suzuki Shou’s voice. The adult group parts to let him through, where he pauses, incredulous. “Oi, what are you brats doing out here?” he asks.

The brats in question disperse at the sound of his voice like rats from a sinking ship, sending wary glances and a few pleas to not call their parents over their shoulders as they go. Mob suddenly feels very stupid. Suzuki Shou. Suzuki Shou’s son, Toichiro. It all makes so much sense. How did he not realize that Serizawa-kun’s Suzuki was the son of Ritsu’s best friend, Shou-chan? Probably the same way that he got tricked by a fake love note more than once growing up. Oh dear.

Shou-chan beckons the group forward as soon as the kids are gone, pushing his way through the rusty front doors. “We need to hurry. If I know what’s going on, and I think I might, then the brats on the inside are gearing up for something bad. God, I can’t believe I’ve been trying to find this place for years and you people just waltzed right up on a whim…”

The feeling of disbelief is mutual. How long has Shou-chan been involved in this mess? Long enough to know to have sent his son away to boarding school in the hopes of turning him around, it seems. Long enough to know all or most of Suzuki’s little minions.

Long enough to know what fate awaits Arataka-kun behind the closed doors of the old, defunct compound.
“Shou…” Ritsu says, as they head into the building. All the kids in their path are sent packing at Shou-chan’s stern voice, same as the ones at the front. “This isn’t what I think it is… is it?”

Mob feels more and more nauseous as Shou-chan nods solemnly, continuing forward ever faster. “My son, Toichiro… I knew something was wrong. But I didn’t realize it had actually progressed to this…”

“And what,” Mob asks, mouth dry, “is ‘this’?”

Shou-chan takes a deep breath, holds it, then slowly breathes it out again. “Torture,” he says, his face intense in a way it usually never is. Mob is used to cheerful smiles, ribbing jokes, teasing laughter. Now, however, Shou is blank blank blank.

With that ominous confession, they go through the building just that much faster. They don’t find much resistance at first. Some comes as they start to get deeper inside—Mob learns to predict it by the scars on the kids’ faces. If there’s a scar, there’s a 100% probability that they’ll fight tooth and nail against the ‘intruders’. Still… they’re just children, and though they gnash and scream and claw, Shou-chan simply subdues each and every one. Mob has never seen his power used like this. So efficient—he takes them down like they’re nothing. The espers from the Awakening Lab carry them outside with the rest of the kids. They evacuate the building, one room at a time.

Eventually, they start to move downward, toward what Mob assumes is a sub-basement. The further down they go, the wetter the air, and the more frantically his heart beats in his chest imagining what’s down there. He doesn’t realize how tightly wound he is until Ritsu takes his hand reassuringly.

90%

“This is it…” Shou-chan breathes, coming up to a final set of double doors. “This must be where Toichiro has been awakening espers…”

Mob steels himself. He’s still not prepared when they force the doors open.

95%

It’s a pool, a deep underground chasm in the foundations of the building. Numerous kids stand around the sides—taller, buffer, older than the others. More powerful—their energy bubbles over, coalescing into a veritable force field. In front of them stands a lone figure, one wearing a childish facsimile of a rubber gas mask.

98%

And at their feet… at their rubber-clad feet lies a single prone figure, soaking wet and motionless. Familiar not-quite-red hair lies lank across a pallid face.

99%

Mob closes his eyes. His ears are ringing. He can’t escape. He can’t wake up. He sees the image of that figure imprinted on his very brain, inescapable.

100% Protectiveness, still climbing—

It’s too much. It’s too much.
Arataka-kun doesn’t deserve this.

…

This isn’t right, this isn’t—

…

—this is so, so wrong—

…

When he opens his eyes again, it’s with a blood-curdling wail and a silent, thunderous boom of power that shakes the very earth below their feet.

~???%~

Chapter End Notes

I hope I made Shou's involvement clear. He knows his kid has troubles, but he's still a little out of the loop of how bad those troubles really are. He was young when Toichiro was born—like, really young. Toichiro was a mistake baby. The fact that Shou managed to keep the kid alive at all is a miracle, probably. Not that Shou is a bad father, mind you—just inexperienced and dealing with a power-hungry high-schooler who never grew out of that 'I'm better than you so SUCK IT' middle-schooler phase.
Strength

Chapter Summary

???%

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Everybody… … ...back! Just stay out of… ... ...way!”

Syrup. The words swim in and out as if carried by pulsing waves of thick, oozing syrup. It doesn’t matter who’s talking. Their warnings mean nothing. The basement walls—so structured, so solid—start to warp and bend. ???% doesn’t understand where he is, what chaos he’s been called forth into, but that’s the least of his concerns—it’s the furthest thing from his mind. The gnashing of his teeth, the undoing of the world at the touch of his fingers, barely even registers as he walks forward, floating a solid foot off the splintering ground, to stand face to face with the being that hurt Arataka. He steps up to the small, rubber gas mask, crouching down until their eye holes are level.

There is a child underneath the gas mask. A monster of a child, one who does not move, does not flinch, as ???% closes the distance between them. Their pride wafts off of them like perfume. If he didn’t know better, ???% would think they were unafraid.

Unfortunately for them, he does know better—he can smell the tremble of their hands in their rubber gloves. A monster to face a monster.

Fitting.

“So,” croons a smooth, feminine voice. “You’ve come for this boy. You’ve disrupted our Division, sent our underlings home with their tails between their legs, overcome my Scars, and now you think you’re going to walk out of here with your prize.”

The gas mask obviously intends to continue talking. Monologuing, even. ???% hears the words… chews them over, swallows them back, and regurgitates them in a primal scream.

He will not listen anymore.

There is no more talking.

The gas mask will cower or he will MAKE IT.

Movement. It’s nothing. ???% bats away a paltry attack that might as well be made of soap bubbles for all the damage it does. His aura shines down on the form still lying there underneath them—so still, so still—and, with one hand, he bats the gas mask out of his way. The rubbery figure lands clear across the room. There is pandemonium—people running every which way, attacks coming from all directions—but ???% has but one focus.

Jaws creak open on a name—Arataka—and, vertebrae by vertebrae ???% bends down to cradle the unmoving form. He’s never felt so achingly, agonizingly, consumingly afraid before. The spiked edges of loss and fear invade everything he is. He is a creature made of pure emotion—of pure
pain. In hands sparking with unknowable power, in fingers designed to rip and crush, he holds the small boy—so small, so small—and lifts him from the cold, wet ground. Water soaks his clothing. He listens, desperate.

There, deep inside the chilled skin and unbreathing lips, is a pulse of life.

Good thing, too, or ???% knows there would have been no more reason to be gentle. He would have torn this world apart.

The power comes easily to ???%, so easily, like it was waiting just for his call. He coalesces the energy and reaches deep inside, gently pulling water from every crease and fold where water should not be. Lungs give up liquid like sponges wrung out over a sink. Arataka comes to life, hacking and gasping as brackish water passes his lips, spilling out and splattering in a puddle below them. It’s sharp, metallic, like the curve of a blade—warm and rust-red, like blood. There is so much of it. Arataka-kun coughs, and coughs, and coughs, and still more comes, his thin chest heaving under ???%’s hands, and—

——this is wrong, this is wrong, this is wrong——

On second thought, there’s still time to tear this world apart. He’ll start with the underground pool, where they hold kids under the water until they almost drown to tease out their psychic powers. The pool where they held Arataka until he stopped moving.

Hand raised, ???% watches with a manic glee as the water bulges forth from the confines of the pool. People are still moving, still crying and calling and screaming, but ???% pays no mind as he tightens tightens tightens his grip until, with an explosive BANG, the water bursts apart into a thousand trillion separate particles. In the same instant, the sides of the pool begin to shudder and peel away from the concrete beneath, curling into themselves as they’re pried out of the floor. With a series of awful groans and crunches, they become smaller and smaller, balled up like so much paper in the fist of a tantruming child. ???% smiles, wide and maniacal, as each ball falls from the air and hits the bottom of the rend in the ground with a solid THUNK.

Next to go are the upper floors of the building, taken apart piece by piece. Concrete and rebar are torn apart, old wiring sparking as it’s ripped from its housing. Screws and nails hail down.

Then go the walls, stripped apart seam by seam by seam. More concrete splinters like glass, windows all but disintegrating.

Then the floor, gone—the foundations, gone—the ground itself. Gone gone gone.

And then…

???% turns to the children huddled in the ruins of the factory, eyes two burning coals in a face wreathed by static. Their hands… their hands were the ones that held Arataka down. He’ll start with their hands. Pull them apart sinew by sinew, tissue from tissue—he’ll pop their tendons off one by one and unravel their bones until there is nothing left——

“Mob…”

???% twitches. He pauses, both hands raised out toward the kids cowering before him. His power swirls, inescapable and omnipresent, all around him. His vicious snarl freezes on his face.

He does not want to stop.

But that voice…
“Mob, please… don’t… you are better than this… Mob…”

A tremor courses up ???’s spine. That voice… hoarse and raspy and so, so quiet…

“Please… turn back… you don’t have to hurt them, Mob, please…”

It’s so close. So close. And there… a flutter, like a butterfly landing on his cheek. ??% moves a fraction of an inch at a time, the rictus of his face tilting so glacially slowly down toward his lap, guided by the hand of the boy still cradled in his arms as it presses ever so lightly on his cheek.

Arataka’s eyes are pained but bright, shining with emotion in response to ??%. He looks sad—determined—tired all at once. “You’re still you, Mob,” he says, voice barely above a whisper. “You can still go back to the light. You can run away. Do you understand?”

For the first time in what feels like a thousand torturous hours, ??%… no, Mob… breathes out. As he does, the swirling whorl of pure energy consuming him spins faster, faster, funneling down to the only thing in his field of vision—the haggard, half-drowned face of Reigen Arataka. In an instant the feeling of expansion, of churning power, ceases to exist. Mob is, for the first time he can remember, completely empty. They fall a foot to the dismantled floor, Mob coming aware all at once to what he almost did.

Almost… he almost tore children apart. He almost…

…but he didn’t.

“There we go,” Arataka-kun breathes, tired lips curling up in a smile.

“I… I didn’t mean…”

No, wrong. He did mean to.

“I didn’t want…”

He did.

“I…”

Arataka-kun is already shaking his head, pushing himself up with arms that are no longer shaking. As Mob watches, the burst capillaries in his face knit back together, the last wheezing in his lungs smoothing out. He flexes his hands, stretches them out before him—all the cuts and scrapes that Mob hadn’t noticed until now are mending themselves. “Wow, I feel… pretty good,” Arataka-kun says out loud. His voice comes back fuller and louder than before, as if that, too, is healing.

Healing. He’s healing. He’s got all the power of ??% and it’s healing him.

Mob laughs, a wet sound that catches in his throat. Wow… he’s never used his power to heal someone before. It’s always been destruction, violence—the closest he’s ever gotten to mending something broken was when he used his barrier to protect himself. He never even knew his power could be used like this.

Drip. Drip. Drip. Mob suddenly becomes aware of the clean, wet air surrounding them. He glances upward at the hole in the sky where a building used to be—water drips down the thick dirt sides, through mangled tree roots and mangled support struts and god knows what else. Then he glances around, aware that it’s too quiet, there’s too many people here for it to be silent enough to hear the dripping water.
There are kids, a lot of them, still hunkered down and cowering. Ritsu, Teru-chan and the others—all in various states of awe. Dimple-san, the unconscious gas mask kid…and, at the far side of the chasm, two figures that seem to melt out of the evening gloom.

“Impressive power,” calls a voice, from one of those figures. “…But I do have to ask that you refrain from destroying any more of my belongings. It took a long time to build my army.”

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the second cliff-hanger, I just had to, haha.

Just as an aside--my tumblr is the-ghost-of-kirishima-eijirou if you want to come say hi!
Certainty

Chapter Summary

Mob is tapped out, completely out of power. What can he do when a certain Suzuki shows?

Mob has always believed in the philosophy that all human life has value. Every life, every step someone takes and every choice they make, means something in the greater scheme of things. No one is insignificant. There is no such thing as a useless human being.

As the attention of every child, esper, and spirit still in the ruined basement of the abandoned factory turns toward the newcomers walking leisurely out of the darkness, Mob thinks about this belief. He thinks about the fact that he’s surrounded himself with people who share it with him. Some of them didn’t at first, but all of them, all of his friends and the various people in his life, eventually came to agree—all human life has value. They believe this strongly enough to stand up to him when he loses control, to bring him back from the brink when he’s about to go too far.

Mob wasn’t paying attention to a single word the gas mask figure was saying, but he has a sinking feeling that these people do not find value in human life the same way he does. They don’t have people who will bring them back from the brink. They are dangerous, violent, single-minded…and very, very young. The boy who finally steps forward into the dim moonlight of a night far above their heads can’t be more than sixteen.

His aura, scarlet red and reaching for the sky, is almost unbearably bright.

“Chiro…” Shou-chan says from somewhere behind Mob. His voice breaks on the name as if he had been holding out for someone else all this time, hopeful that his suspicions about his son were incorrect and someone else was the root cause of the pain and suffering they’d seen here tonight.

Instead, Suzuki Toichiro gives a small, almost fond smile, straightening the shirt of his school uniform. “Hi, father. Fancy seeing you here,” he says, coming to a halt some twenty feet before them. The second figure pauses just behind him, a taller boy who ducks his head as if trying to hide behind his master. A folded white umbrella is clutched in his hands.

This must be Serizawa-kun, Mob notes silently. Serizawa-kun and Suzuki. Mob has been hopeful their last few sessions that he and Arataka-kun would get to meet Serizawa-kun face to face sometime soon, but like this…?

A stone sinks in Mob’s gut. Serizawa-kun… he had something to do with Arataka-kun’s disappearance. His choices, the decisions he made, brought them all here tonight. That was the piece that was missing all this time.

“Chiro,” Shou-chan says, steadier now. He comes to stand at Mob’s shoulder, staring fiercely across the no-man’s land between them. Shadows are cast across the broken floor, reaching toward each other in splintered pieces. “Stand down. I taught you better than this—”

“You? Taught me? Don’t make me laugh,” Suzuki says, quirking one spiky brow. The smile slips from his face as if it had never been there in the first place. “You’ve missed a lot, father.”
“If you won’t listen, then we will have to stop you by force,” Shou-chan warns.

That aura—that blinding red aura—flares higher, higher. “Try me,” Suzuki says.

So they do. First goes Teru-chan, who is laid out flat in seconds. Then Ritsu—he fares the same fate. The Awakening Lab espers band together for their attempt, but their powers barely compare to Ritsu or Teru-chan on a good day, and they tap out almost immediately.

Shou-chan tries last, using the power that he so rarely lets loose. Suzuki just laughs. He doesn’t even have to lift a finger—just like the last time, and the time before that, an umbrella swings through the air and nullifies the attack before it can hit. Mob knew Serizawa-kun was powerful, but this…it’s astounding.

“Not that I wouldn’t love to have this conversation, father, but I have other things to attend to. I just stopped by to confirm that you took down Ishiguro—” Suzuki stares condescendingly down at the limp form of the gas mask kid. “—so I’ll be on my way now.”

With that, he spins on one heel, his massive, unused aura curling leisurely around him, encasing him in a bloody red cocoon.

“Wait.”

It takes everyone, even Mob, a moment to realize that it was he who spoke. Mob can nearly see the stars in Teru-chan’s eyes from where he’s struggling to push himself up into a sitting position—he’s expecting Mob to save them all, to take care of this with one incredible rush of his powers. Ritsu, while wary of Mob’s power ever since they were kids, probably expects the same.

Suzuki eyes him over his shoulder with disinterest.

Mob grits his teeth, leaning forward over Arataka-kun’s small form. He knows that he’s prodding at a bear, helpless in the face of all that power. Still, he can’t help himself as he says, “I have one thing to say.”

He waits. There is no explicit permission given, but Suzuki doesn’t move away and no one else dares to move, to breathe, to disrupt. After one unsure moment, Mob slowly disengages himself from Arataka-kun and stands up, stepping hesitantly forward into the space between worlds. “It’s, ah… actually for Serizawa-kun,” he continues softly. The figure behind Suzuki jumps and flinches, eyes flicking upward. His pajama-clad hands clutch at his umbrella. “Serizawa-kun… we’ve all done things we’re not proud of. The difference here is that we’ve all chosen to do better today than we did yesterday. …I just want you to remember that.”

The silence is deafening. Serizawa-kun swallows, glancing between his savior and the people he sabotaged to stay on his savior’s good side. The umbrella furls ever tighter between his hands, twisting and twisting and twisting.

For a long moment there’s nothing. No one moves. Not the hoards of kids still scattered around, not the adult espers still struggling to catch up, not Dimple-san who seems to have disappeared.

“Ah, I understand now,” Suzuki says into the oppressive silence. “This is that therapist you told me about, Serizawa. Mr…?”

“Kageyama,” Mob supplies. Heart beats a frantic rhythm in his chest—he no longer has any idea what he’s doing. All he knows is that he’s powerless, tapped out, standing between that incredible aura and everyone he loves. It’s like standing between a coastal city and an incoming tsunami.
“Kageyama,” Suzuki repeats. A smile starts to curl across his face—though wry, it is, perhaps, the first real smile he’s worn during this entire encounter. “Serizawa, were you aware that a certain Kageyama Shigeo was my idol growing up?”

Serizawa-kun shakes his head quickly, as if hoping to get himself out of the spotlight as soon as possible. “No, President,” he says.

Oh no. Oh, no. Mob has a very bad feeling about this.

“Yes,” Suzuki murmurs. “I grew up on the stories about the legendary shadow leader of Salt Middle. I modeled my own army after his. And now, having seen his power…” The smile grows into a wicked grin. “…I’m sure that I can beat him.”

At that, Suzuki raises both hands, his aura starting to writhe and twist around him. “Care to taste my power, White T Poison?” he croons, and the air becomes suffocating with heat as his aura expands once, expands again, inflating like a hot air balloon into the limited space of what was formerly the sub-basement. A spinning vortex forms, coalescing into the shape of an enormous grinning skull. Mob gasps, helpless, as red-hot flares of psychic energy ignite the air inside his lungs. His wet blazer whips about his back as the hum of power begins to vibrate in his fingernails, his teeth, his bone marrow. Behind him Arataka-kun yells something—and Ritsu yells back—and Mob desperately hopes that they’re leaving, getting out of here, saving their own backs because he’s not going to be able to do much to stop the surge once it comes and—

Laughter, loud and clear, echoes through the raging inferno. “I’ve been saving this for a long time,” Suzuki calls, and then it’s upon them, crashing down like a dam bursting.

Mob throws his arms up over his face, a paltry attempt to do anything to stop the flow of power. He expects it to hurt, when it hits—he expects it to feel like his skin is melting off and his bones are charring. The rush of sound is deafening, surrounding him, and he has just enough time to hope that Arataka-kun and Ritsu and the others made it somewhere safe before—

A blinding white flash of light, and then all is still again.

Mob drops his arms, amazed that he still has arms to drop. A figure stands in front of him—shoulders heaving, umbrella outstretched, pajama-clad back straight and true. In the sudden calm, the thin membranes of the umbrella softly disintegrate into darkness.

“What… you…”

Serizawa-kun stands up straighter, speaking over his shoulder even as he focuses determined eyes on the boy in front of him. “He promised me he would take Reigen-san in and help him, like he helped me. He lied. You hear that, President? You lied!”

Baring his teeth, Suzuki hunches forward, his hands curling into claws. “Of all the times for you to grow a spine…!”

Serizawa-kun grips the skeleton of his umbrella, unwavering. “I did it to protect my friends! My true friends!”

“You’ve RUINED EVERYTHING is what you’ve done! Four years of saving power and it’s gone—” Suzuki lets out a scream of rage. “I’m going to fucking kill you for that, Serizawa!”

Oh no. Oh, no. Not again. Mob lunges forward, desperately hoping he can get between the two of them before a fight breaks out. Shou-chan, fortunately, beats him there.
“You were saving power for four years?” he demands, grabbing his son by the ear. “Did it never occur to you how dangerous it is to save that much power?!”

Suzuki yelps, flailing, but without that immense aura behind him, he’s just another kid. It’s anticlimactic, but… they were, after everything, still only children. Shou-chan starts dragging him off toward the far side of the chasm, muttering the entire while about finding a real goddamn therapist for the kid. “Thanks, everybody!” he calls back once they’re almost at the place where Suzuki and Serizawa-kun descended into the chaos. “Sorry about this! You can take care of everything else, yeah?”

“Yeah,” Ritsu responds. He’s back on his feet, now, seemingly unaware that Arataka-kun is clinging to his vest. They didn’t run—go figure. But then again, Mob really couldn’t expect anything different.

Together, Arataka-kun and his rescue party take care of the last of the kids, sending them home, hopefully for good. Dimple-san pops up out of nowhere claiming one of the Scars caught him in a poison jar and he only just got out, which Mob finds very amusing. The factory is beyond saving—there’s almost nothing left of the original architecture. The best they can do is set up a sloppy barricade around the rift in the earth, high enough to dissuade any more kids from going in and exploring.

That just leaves one more thing to do.

“Serizawa,” Arataka-kun says, as if reading Mob’s mind. “How would you like a position as official second intern at Therapy and Such Counseling Office?”

…Okay, not exactly what Mob was going for, but heck. He can roll with it. When Arataka-kun realizes what he just offered and turns sheepishly to Mob to confirm that his sudden whim is not outside his bounds, Mob smiles and nods. “We’d love to have you,” he says.

And he would.
The van is just as cramped on the way home as it was on the way up. Ritsu ‘drives’, floating the vehicle several inches off the roadway as he barrels through yield signs as if he never even saw them. He just wants to get home, Mob knows. He’s exhausted. Everyone is exhausted.

“I think I’m coming down… I’m seeing some weird things…”

Mob glances down at Arataka-kun, who does indeed look like he’s coming down from the surge of Mob’s power. His face is very pale and his fingers are shaking just slightly as he sways with the motion of the van, symptoms that Mob recalls from extended use of his powers. Mob would bet a good amount of his dubiously earned money that if he were to touch the kid’s forehead, he’d find a low-grade fever. Go figure he gave that to the kid, too.

Arataka-kun is also staring straight at Dimple-san, who looks vaguely uncomfortable with the attention. Seeing weird things, indeed.

“Here,” Mob says, scooting a little closer to the boy and offering his shoulder. “Try to get some rest, okay?”

“Okay,” Arataka-kun hums, and promptly falls asleep. He’s completely out all the way through the rest of their trip home, and Mob has to carry him inside to his bed under his mom’s watchful eye.

The next time the kid sees Dimple-san is two days later, when his fever finally goes down far enough for his mom to let him out of her sight. Mob is already at the office, fielding a barrage of phone calls, when the kid walks in after school. Again, Arataka-kun stares straight at Dimple-san, and again, Dimple-san looks vaguely uncomfortable, and Mob is just wondering if this is the proper time to introduce them when Arataka-kun opens his mouth and yells, “I THOUGHT YOU WERE A HALLUCINATION.”

…It definitely seems as if introductions are in order.

One awkward semi-corporeal handshake later, Arataka-kun is just settling down at his desk for the day when there’s a knock on the office door. “Come in!” Arataka-kun sings, and in shuffles an uncertain-looking Serizawa Katsuya.

Huh. Mob wasn’t sure until just this moment that Serizawa-kun would actually show up. This is the first time that Mob has seen Serizawa-kun up close, let alone in daylight. One ear on his phone, half-listening to the rather insistent nun on the other end of the line, Mob takes the chance to study the kid from head to toe.

He’s… not really what Mob expected. He’s wearing what looks like his Sunday best, though the sleeves of his button-down are a little too tight and a lot too short, as if he hasn’t been shopping for
formal clothes in a good long while. He probably hasn’t, Mob muses, as Arata-kun shoots back to a stand, quickly circling the poor kid. He takes him in, too, hawkish eyes sizing him up from his fluffy, slightly-too-long brown hair to his at-least-a-size-too-small, clumsily-shined dress shoes.

One full circle later, Arata-kun plants himself right in front of Serizawa-kun, twirling one hand theatrically until it lands, palm outward, in front of him. “Reigen Arataka, at your service!” he says, foregoing the ‘Future Greatest Psychic of the Twenty-First Century’ part. The hand wriggles insistently until Serizawa-kun gets the hint and gingerly shakes it. Arata-kun pumps their hands up and down enthusiastically. Once freed, Serizawa-kun takes a nervous step back away from Arata-kun’s bold presence, twisting his shirt hem in his hands.

There’s a pause. A slightly awkward one. Then: “You can call me Katsuya,” the kid says, his intonation almost making it a question.

Arata-kun nods, satisfied, and guides him into a chair. Serizawa-kun—Katsuya, now—sits down like he’s waiting for someone to turn around and yell at him. His shoulders hunch, the posture of a kid trying to make himself smaller than he actually is, which is hard considering the fact that he’s going to be a powerhouse when he gets older. He’s just starting to grow into broad shoulders and big feet, already about four inches taller than Arata-kun and of a height with Mob. Not that a comparison to Arata-kun is fair to either of them, really; Arata-kun is spindly and animated, made of bird-fine bones and held together by charming smiles. He has none of the heaviness that already weighs on Katsuya-kun’s shoulders. He deflects, where Katsuya internalizes. Even nearly drowning in a near-ritualistic attempt to awaken his non-existent psychic powers couldn’t keep Arata-kun down for long.

Speaking of. “Yes… yes… he’s your…? Ward of the state, I understand. Well, we don’t have many openings, but… Tuesday will work just fine. One thirty? Okay. Okay. …Well, we’ll do our best. Thank you.”

Mob lowers the office phone, unwilling to hang up just yet in case another call comes in. His phones have been ringing off the hook all day, and his head is spinning. Runaways coming home, kids having meltdowns—Mob would bet everything he has to his name that the sudden influx of traffic has everything to do with the local kids’ gang base—CLAW, was it?—going under. Honestly, they thought they had a lot of kids before this? Well, it’s absolutely nothing compared to how many they have now.

With a sigh, Mob pulls his calendar up on his ancient flip phone. “We have several clients scheduled this afternoon,” he says, shuffling through dates. “Arata-kun—I know you’re feeling a lot better, but maybe you should take it slow and man the phones. Katsuya-kun can make tea today.” After a moment of thinking, he tacks on, “Try not to schedule any house calls.”

Arata-kun pouts out his lower lip, obviously unhappy. “Aww, but Mob—”

“Arataka.”

“Fine…”

Satisfied that Arata-kun is leashed for the moment, Mob retreats to the session room to prepare for the next few hours. His first afternoon appointment is an old regular, one who first came with a low-level spirit dogging her shadow and who’s subsequent visits have been, for the most part, nothing more than excuses to rant about her upstairs neighbors. Mob still jots down a few notes for Arata-kun to untangle later on—Mob takes his job seriously, after all—so that when there’s a lull in sessions, Arata-kun can look at the notes and Mob can bring Katsuya-kun up to speed on what he expects from him as an official intern. Arata-kun has undoubtedly shown him around the office
already, but there’s a certain professionalism they need to uphold in order to—

Wait.

Mob frowns, listening hard over the client’s chatter. He hears… nothing. No excited yammering as Aratakan talks Katsuyakun’s ear off, no clattering of tea trays, no tapping of feet on the legs of chairs. There isn’t even a phone ringing in the next room over.

Something is wrong.

“Could you hold on… just one moment, please…” Mob says to the client, accidentally cutting her off in the middle of a story about how she’s convinced the people living above her bought a new washing machine just to make her life miserable. He then marches to the door between his session room and the main office, opening it just in time to see Aratakan pulling on a light jacket, a pad of paper clamped between his teeth. Katsuyakun hovers uncertainly nearby, his head snapping over and his eyes wide at the sound of the door hinges.

“Aratakan,” Mob says, his mouth a thin line on his face that he hopes portrays his less-than-happy feelings about what he’s seeing. “I told you to warn me before you left to see clients. What happened to ‘no house calls today’?”

“Ah. Sorry, boss-man. But you see—”

Mob sighs, having heard every conceivable variation of the ‘but I wanted to’ excuse already. Aratakan isn’t a bad kid, he’s not—he’s just strong-willed and a little prideful and doesn’t always think things through before his impulses take him away to the next big thing.

“Wait half an hour and then I’ll go with you,” Mob sighs. Aratakan nods, dejected—he’s not very good at sitting and waiting, but between Katsuyakun and the phones Mob is sure he’ll stay occupied somehow. True to his word, Mob finishes up with Neighbor Rant Lady and pushes back his other two appointments, making room for a short house call. At a quarter to five, they set off toward the address Aratakan scribbled down, Mob in the lead with the kids following along like ducklings. A nervous duckling, in Katsuyakun’s case.

The address leads them to a barber shop, which brings Mob up short. “Wait,” he says. “Our client is—?”

“Oh. No client,” Aratakan says, needling his way past Mob’s immobile form. “Seri needs a haircut, right Seri?”

Katsuyakun twitches, half-shrugging and half-nodding.

“See?” Aratakan says, grinning. His smile falters only slightly at the look on Mob’s face. “…I guess maybe I should have mentioned that?” he tries.

Yes. Yes, he should have. Especially since the expenditure will be coming directly from Mob’s already pitifully thin wallet. He sighs, placing a gentle hand on Katsuyakun’s shoulder to guide him through the swinging door. It’s hard taking care of kids. If it weren’t for Aratakan’s help with clients, Mob isn’t sure it would really be worth it.

…Okay, alright, yes. That was lie. It isn’t just clients that Aratakan helps with. Aratakan’s consistent spirit and his incredibly astute social skills have helped Mob many a time. He is single-handedly the driving force behind Therapy and Such, and the only reason that Mob hasn’t given up on psychology and gone home to live with his parents. Mob wouldn’t trade him for the world.
Yes, even when he critiques the barber’s methods the entire time Katsuya-kun is under the clippers, demanding that the barber redo this or that until he’s perfectly satisfied with Katsuya-kun’s new cut.

They head back to the office after that. Mob takes his last two appointments, Arataka-kun mans the phones just like he’s supposed to, Katsuya-kun only breaks one teacup in a nervous slip of power, and then it’s time to close. It’s been a long few days.

It’s been a long few days… but Arataka-kun gives Mob an unexpected hug on his way out the door and Katsuya-kun has run his hands through his new hair-do so many times that an adorable little tuft is sticking up in the back and Mob is confident that they’ll be able to really help at least a few of the kids now on his therapy roster and—

—and for the first time in a long time, Mob takes stock of his life and realizes… right here, right now, there’s nothing he would change. Not for the world.

Chapter End Notes

Arataka did not bully Katsuya into getting a haircut, so no worries there. It was actually Katsuya's idea.
Late evening, long after Arataka-kun and Katsuya-kun have found their way home to their mothers, all is quiet. The flickering light of the television screen lights the small living room in blue. Mob, sitting alone on a small lounge chair, contemplates the pack of cigarettes sitting on the table at his elbow.

The news is going crazy. Still. It started the day they entered the CLAW base on the outskirts of town and hasn’t really died down since. Spontaneous destruction is a hot topic, Mob has found—it incites fear in the minds of average citizens, stirring up fresh opinions in everyone from politicians to conspiracy theorists.

Breathing out and pretending he’s blowing a lungful of smoke into the air to see if that will curb the craving, Mob stares through lidded eyes at the nightly newscast. There won’t be anything new—just more and more off-the-wall theories and wild accusations and general panic. The far-off footage of the factory coming apart—filmed from a security camera several miles away—has been playing on loop for days straight. The newscaster drones away.

“That turns out this is not the first time that this specific phenomenon has occurred in Seasoning City—”

Ah. Mob was wondering when they’d pick up on that. He’s going to have that cigarette after all, he decides.

He does not pay attention as another video fills the screen, flicking his lighter and going nearly cross-eyed to watch the tip of the cigarette. He knows what he’ll see—Black Vinegar Middle was a monolith of a school building, several times the size of Salt Middle, and it came apart like Styrofoam in a blender. He’d know. That was his first spontaneous destruction.

Fourteen years, and the guilt still curdles in his stomach.

Breathing out a true lungful of smoke, Mob lets his imagination conjure up Teru-chan’s haughty attitude, what he’d say if here were here right now. Something along the lines of ‘god, don’t they have any new material? This is tired.’ He wouldn’t stand for Mob’s guilt. He forgave Mob the same day it happened, fourteen years ago.

Mob clicks off the TV, crushes out his half-smoked cigarette, and gets his things organized for work in the morning. He has a new intern to guide, after all.

Getting used to Katsuya-kun hanging around the office is… incredibly easy. He officially takes on tea-making duties for good on his second day, helping out while Arataka-kun is at school. Katsuya-kun is good around the office—he’s a polite, if extraordinarily nervous, helper. The turn-around rate
on their teacups goes up nearly four hundred percent, but Mob finds it a small price to pay for good tea and good company.

His second day is also the day that Mob finds a spare minute between sessions to touch upon the idea of Katsuya-kun re-introducing himself to society in more ways than just helping out at a therapy consultation office. It’s been four years since Katsuya-kun locked himself away, and as such, he’s four years behind on his education. His middle-school career ended almost before it started. Going back to school would be a good way to get used to being around people again, especially now that Mob can work with him face to face on getting his powers under control. Not that he needs much help—he already has better control than he gives himself credit for.

“So maybe it’s time to…” Mob trails off, hoping Katsuya-kun will pick up where he left off. He stares over his desk.

The kid is quiet for a long moment, hunched over in the chair across from Mob. He looks like he’s in trouble in the principal’s office. He’s about to open his mouth when the phone rings.

“Oh, just one moment,” Mob mumbles, going for the phone. He has a quick conversation, does a quick intake, marks a new appointment on his calendar, and hangs up again. “Okay. You were going to say…”

“R-right. Um… well, I think…”

The phone rings again.

“One moment,” Mob mumbles. Another conversation, another intake, another appointment. He hangs up and looks to Katsuya-kun.

“Ah! W-well, I—”

The phone rings. Mob’s eye twitches. “I’ll… let that one go to voicemail,” he says.

Katsuya-kun nods, then blurs all at once, “Do you really think I’m ready to go back?”

Mob bobs his head, a small smile on his lips. “You’re a bright kid, Katsuya-kun—with some remedial classes and some hard work you’ll be back on track in no time.”

“But—”

“Katsuya-kun.” Mob leans forward, resting his hand on the boy’s shoulder the same way he did with Arataka-kun his first day in the office. “Being part of society is… hard. I won’t lie and say it comes easy to me. But I know for a fact that it’s worth a little effort.”

Ah. He must have said the right thing, because Katsuya-kun’s murky, unsure expression clears up instantly. “Right,” he says, straightening his back almost unconsciously. “Right!”

“Right,” Mob says back, and then flinches as the phone rings again.

Same as the last call Mob answered, and same as the one before that, and the one before that, the person on the other end of the line is the concerned parent of a CLAW kid. They just keep coming, slipping from the woodwork of the city like forest nymphs, so many of them that Mob has started scheduling three weeks out for the first time in his career as a therapist. There are just so many…

It occurs to Mob halfway through the day that some of these kids… well, they may have been in the sub-basement on that fateful night. And if they were in the sub-basement on that fateful night, then
they may have seen a certain side of Mob that Mob is not proud of. And if they saw a certain side of Mob that Mob is not proud of… if they were there to see the destruction of the building first-hand, if they are even marginally aware how close they came to a violent and bloody end at Mob’s hands…

Mob swallows, his face draining of what little color it normally has. He’s made a mistake. The last thing he wants to do is re-traumatize a bunch of children—what does he do to fix this? How does he—how does he right his wrongs when—?

Stop.

Mob shakes his head, swallowing down the itching crawl of panic up his throat. He focuses on his breathing, hoping that will ease it back. Letting out those emotions was what got him into this mess—he has to stay impassive. He has to focus.

If only the phone would stop ringing.

And ringing.

And ringing.

“I’m here!” Arataka-kun announces, walking through the door at the exact moment that Mob impassively yanks the phone cord out of the wall. “Uh… Mob?”

Mob fumbles for his desk chair, the cord slipping from slack fingers. His throat is sticky, his arms and legs heavy like lead, weighing him down. The world is soupy around him—his vision waivers. Arataka-kun’s voice swims around him.

He’s in over his head.

What has he done?

What can he possibly do to fix it?

What—

“All right, all right, stop that,” comes a voice in his ear. “You’re okay. You’re an all-powerful telekinetic, get it together. Come on now.”

Mob shakes his head, a pitifully small movement, as Dimple-san manifests at his shoulder. He feels frozen, locked in place—his body has stopped responding to him and is barely more than dead weight in his chair. His head hangs on his neck, fingers tingling. Time narrows down to the spaces between agonizing breaths. His powers don’t come out—instead they withdraw deeper and deeper inside of him until they feel like they’re compacted into the weight of a collapsing sun, a neutron star, a black hole.

He is, if he’s not mistaken, experiencing a shutdown.

“…Do you want me to come in?” Dimple-san asks, his voice low. He rolls his eyes as he says it, but Mob knows he’s offering because he cares. Mob nods as best he can, waiting for Dimple-san to phase through his aura and slip inside his head.

It happens the way it always does—slowly, slowly, slowly, and then all at once. Mob’s psyche puts up just enough resistance that Dimple-san starts grumbling about it, pushing inward an inch at a time, and then—boom, there he is. Mob’s cheeks flush high, his eyes going wide as Dimple-san makes himself at home. Their face turns leisurely, gaze lighting on Arataka-kun and Katsuya-kun.

The kids are both staring, Arataka-kun’s mouth gaping open. Dimple-san winks one eye.
“Alright,” comes Dimple-san’s voice through Mob’s mouth. “Let’s see what we can do about this mess.”

Mob retreats as his hands rise, stretching carefully. It’s nice being in the backseat—back here he doesn’t have to grit his teeth through the process of reanimating his body when it doesn’t want to be animated. Dimple-san does all the gentle stretches that Mob remembers from the Body Improvement Club in middle school, working Mob’s arms like taffy until they’re moving properly again. He then gets to work on the rest of Mob, working strategically from head to toe.

“This place is a disaster zone,” Dimple-san says, slowly levering Mob to a stand. “If I were in control of this body twenty-four seven, there would be none of this shit. It would be working at top efficiency at all times.”

Mmm, thinks Mob. Dimple-san rolls their eyes at the lackluster response, stretching out Mob’s spine.

Minutes later the physical stuff is done. Dimple-san does a quick cartwheel across Mob’s desk, landing in a victory pose on the other side just because, before he drapes himself across Arataka-kun’s shoulders and goes, “So, kid, you got any ideas on how to deal with the traumatized CLAW babies?”

“Uh, yeah—no, still processing the fact that Mob just let you possess him.”

Dimple-san waves a hand. “No biggie. We do this all the time.”

They don’t. Only when things get particularly bad in Mob’s head. When Mob starts to shut down completely, his entire world seizing up from stress or overstimulation such that even Arataka-kun’s breathing exercises can’t help, that’s when Dimple-san comes inside. There hasn’t been a need for it in several years.

Mob thinks about coming out to say as much but… no. Too comfy. He’s ready for a nice long nap. He stays conscious—barely—but it’s hard to focus as Dimple-san uses his mouth to talk and laugh and whatever else it is he likes doing when he’s in control. Arataka-kun’s voice responding to Dimple-san is soothing as Mob drifts… so colorful and bright, like rainbows dancing off the surface of the ocean…

Time passes slowly like this. Not the gripping slowness of a shutdown, but smooth and gentle. Healing. Mob wasn’t aware how much tension he’d been keeping in his body until Dimple-san took over—free from it he feels like he’s being rocked to sleep.

Wait.

“What are you… doing?” Katsuya-kun asks, unsure.

“Stimming, because this idiot forgets to do that when left to his own devices,” Dimple-san says. He continues gently rocking back and forth in Mob’s chair, the motion soothing something in Mob’s mind that he didn’t know was buzzing uncomfortably. Ah… he has forgotten. It’s hard to remember when everything inside him feels so distant, locked away in the box in his entrails with his psychic powers.

Speaking of.

“Yes, we figured something out for you. You can channel your gratefulness into a favor, the nature of which I will reveal when I cash it in.”
Oh?

“Yeah. Arataka-kun and Katsuya-kun will vet your clients for you, and if they think your presence is going to hurt the kid or whatever, they’ll send them over to that quack on ninth street.”

Oh. Mob… should have thought of that, honestly. Just goes to show how far over his limit he was.

“Yes. You were.”

Whoops.

“Yeah, yeah. Take better care of this thing for me—I’m outie.”

Mob’s consciousness floods back into place as Dimple-san wriggles his way out, taking his blushing cheeks with him. A deep breath in—Mob really does feel a lot better than before. “Hey, Dimple-san —” he says, before the spirit can float through the wall.

“What?” Dimple-san asks, not looking back.

“Thank you.”

A grunt, and then the snot ball is gone. Mob’s lips lift in a small smile.

It’s time to get back to business.

Chapter End Notes

Mob doesn’t stim even though he’s autistic because he’s so disconnected from his emotions that he forgets to do it. Also awwww, Dimple cares.
Next Tuesday comes and Mob meets it with gusto. As much gusto as he can produce, anyway—it’s really not much at all, but Arataka-kun makes up for his lack by entering the office cheerfully singing a song that he’s learning in his theater club. He doesn’t remember all the words, and forgets the melody halfway through, but that doesn’t stop him—instead he expertly transitions the musical mess into what Mob has learned is an English lullaby, finishing up with a crescendo and a bow. Katsuya-kun claps politely.

“All right now! Everybody ready?” Arataka-kun asks after the show, hopping up onto his desk. Katsuya-kun shuffles over to perch in the chair beside it, a fond smile on his face as Arataka-kun wriggles with excitement.

Yes. Mob, at least, is ready. Not any more ready than he was at lunchtime, or at opening time, really, but still. Ready enough.

Arataka-kun is satisfied with this answer if his holler of “Then let’s get this party started!” is anything to go by. With that, they set about preparing for an afternoon of therapy sessions. The first, Mob notes, looking at the schedule, is supposed to start in ten minutes—

“YOU!”

Mob looks up. He’s becoming accustomed to such greetings from the CLAW kids—it’s like a rite of passage to be accosted by each CLAW member as they arrive. True to their word, Arataka-kun and Katsuya-kun have been vetting the members coming through for kids from the sub-basement, but even so, most of the ones who make it to the appointment stage recognize one, two, or all three of them. The interesting ones are the ones who recognize Katsuya-kun—those usually result in a flustered Katsuya-kun and a whole lot of explaining that no, he’s no longer affiliated with CLAW, and no, this isn’t another initiation, so yes, this really is just a therapy session.

It’s been quite the week.

Back to the matter at hand—there is a boy standing in the office doorway, wearing glasses with square, black frames that accentuate the scar running up his left cheek. His hair is slicked back and his clothes look second-hand. He’s also holding a sword, of all things. He points it first at Arataka-kun, then at Katsuya-kun, before wavering between Dimple-san and Mob for a moment. He finally settles on Mob, the sharp-looking point aimed at his chest.

“Ah. Yes, I suppose I am me,” Mob says, standing up. He recognizes this kid—he’s one of the Scars from the CLAW base. “What can I do for you—?”

Before he can even finish the question, there’s a sharp WHACK and the kid yelps, dropping the
sword on the carpet. A nun has come up behind him, shuffling her way inside with the care of the very old. Her looks must be deceiving, because the kid is holding the back of his head like he was hit with a baseball bat. “Put that away, Sakurai.”

“Yes, ma’am…” the kid mumbles, going to pick up the sword which, Mob now realizes, is made of plastic. It’s got a wicked sharp point, but it’s clearly been mass produced on an assembly line somewhere. He slides it back into the plastic sheath on his back, shrinking away from the nun when she pushes past him.

“He’s here for his appointment,” she says to answer Mob’s question, the wrinkles in her face scrunching up in a scowl.

Right. “It’s a little early, but I suppose we could get started now—”

The nun cuts right across him as if she didn’t hear. “I’ve heard good things about your practice, Kageyama-kun. One of the preachers at a church near ours came here during a crisis of faith and you returned him right as rain. We thank God for that every day. But young Sakurai, here—” she grabs the boy by the shoulder, shaking him a little, “—is a piece of work. You will not go lenient on him.”

“Um—”

She does not stop. “He was orphaned at a young age and he’s been with us all his life. We’ve tried to do right by him and lead him onto the path of God but he’s—stubborn. I can give you some of the more effective methods we’ve used to deal with this stubbornness—”

Maybe she can’t actually hear him. Mob tries louder—“UM—”

“—but you have to understand that the devil’s will is strong and once a man has tasted sin he may be lost to it forever. We pray that it hasn’t reached that point for this boy, but that is the problem with free will—with it, going into God’s light is optional.”

Mob waits, but it appears that she’s done for now. He looks from the nun to the kid and back again, unsure if he’s allowed to speak. The kid looks murderous—the nun looks like she’s given this exact same speech a hundred times and is ready for a nap. Hm.

“…I will… take care with him?” Mob says.

The nun nods. “I’ll be expecting him back in an hour,” she calls over her shoulder, and with that, she spins on one heel and shuffles out of the office, leaving Mob thoroughly confused.

He’s even more confused when, five or so minutes into his session with the kid, the office door in the next room over bursts open and someone yells, “I SMELL YOUR AURA, SAKURAI, YOU DAMN DIRTY BASTARD! WHERE IS HE?!”

“Wh—language!” comes Arataka-kun’s voice, as if he hasn’t come up with half a dozen creative non-swears in the past half hour alone. Sakurai groans and sinks into his chair, eyes rolling. Mob leans out of the session room to find a new Scar sneering in.

Ah. Mob recognizes this one, too. He’s just about to say hello when the door flies open yet again, this time letting in a veritable horde of scarred children. They tumble in nearly on top of each other, gasping for breath and yelling complaints about Koyama running off again to fight his lover.

“He’s not my LOVER!” the second Scar—Koyama—roars. “He’s my RIVAL! YOU TAKE THAT BACK BEFORE I RIP YOU TO SHREDS—”
Oh, dear. “Welcome in,” Mob says, because he might as well at this point. The children continue screaming, attempting to untangle themselves. To Mob’s surprise, once the pile-up at the door clears up, a woman enters the room—and she, too, has a scar on her face. It’s the first adult Mob has ever seen in conjunction with CLAW, and he looks at her questioningly.

“I’m babysitting,” is all she says, before a fully articulated clothing store mannequin walks in behind her and promptly bops Koyama on the head.

“Mukai!” he yells.

“Don’t yell at Mukai!” a small girl barely up to Mob’s hip yells back. Her little fist hits Arataka-kun’s desk, which just so happens to be between her and Koyama, and Mob hears a loud crack. Arataka-kun yelps and falls backwards into Katsuya-kun. Chaos reigns.

A good ten minutes later, Mob has everyone sorted out. More or less. There are ten Scars and only six seats so half of them are sitting on the floor, Koyama keeps throwing paper balls at Sakurai from across the room, and he’s still got no idea what to do with the mannequin (politely asking it to sit down had no effect and now it’s just standing in the middle of the room), but it’s fine. Mob finishes with the last name tag—Muto—and clears his throat, calling everyone’s attention to himself.

“Hello,” he says.

“Hi!” says the littlest one, the girl who broke the desk. She’s sitting on the woman—Mukai’s—lap, bouncing energetically. Mob has learned that her name is Tsuchiya. She packs one hell of a punch.

“You don’t have to say ‘hi’ to him,” says a tall, spindly kid who keeps lighting his fingers on fire and blowing them out one by one. Miyagawa, pyrokinesis.

“I want to!” Tsuchiya stamps her foot on the ground, thankfully not hard enough to break through to the first floor of the building but definitely hard enough to make a booming noise. There’s a shout from below. Dimple-san laughs.

This session is not going how Mob imagined it would. “If I may ask…” he says, trying to be heard over a fresh round of arguing. “…is there a reason you are all… here?”

The response is mixed.

“Wanted to bother Sakurai,” Koyama says.

“Mukai made me,” one of the others says.

The rest of the answers come in almost on top of each other.

“It’s time for us VS. You, round two!”

“Don’t have one.”

“Came to see if Serizawa was really here.”

A shrug.

“You have Marshmallow.”

“I want you to teach me!”

Mob blinks at that last one, narrowing in on Tsuchiya. “Teach you…”?
She puffs out her chest, hitting her little fists together. “Teach me how to explode a building!”

Ah.

Mob should have realized that none of them actually want therapy. Not even Sakurai came here to listen to Mob talk about how to work through trauma and get your life back together. It’s what they need to hear, but they aren’t going to hear it through the brainwashing and Suzuki’s silver words and their massive, expansive egos. Mob has never met a more delusional bunch of kids.

Nor a rowdier one.

“For the love of god, do you ever stop acting like an idiot?!” Sakurai yells, standing up and producing the toy sword again after a paper ball knocks his glasses clean off.

Koyama, snickering, doesn’t flinch at the weapon suddenly pointing at his nose. Instead, he lets a tendril of psychic power wrap around his hand and arm, grabs the sword, and, with a rather pathetic sounding wheeze of cheap plastic, bends it right in half.

Sakurai goes very still, the cheek with the scar twitching. “This is the third jugan sword you’ve broken and it is the last straw.”

“Oh yeah?” Koyama cackles. “What are you going to do about it, huh—?”

He’s going to take out a can of cologne and give Koyama a good squirt in the face, apparently. Mob stumbles forward too late to grab it—one whiff and Koyama slumps, snoring, on Terada’s side. Terada grunts, pushing him off in the other direction.

This is the start of several (more) minutes of general pandemonium, during which the poison jar clutched in Matsuo’s lap is nearly tipped over, Murakai multiplies himself several times over, and, in exasperation, Arataka-kun yells, “Katsuya! Pull rank on them already!” causing Katsuya-kun to look helplessly from Arataka to the Scars to Mob, hands twisted in the hem of his shirt. Mob looks to Mukai for help—only to find her commanding the mannequin to put Sakurai in a headlock.

Koyama is stirring awake, there are too many of Murakai to count, one of Mob’s plants is on fire, and—

—This is not working. It’s time to unleash Arataka.

One look across the chaos and the imperative is understood. Swear words are now on the table. Arataka-kun nods seriously. He stands up from his seat, climbs up on Mob’s desk, and cups his hands around his mouth before bellowing, “LISTEN HERE YOU FUCKS. I HAVE SOMETHING TO SAY, DAMNIT.”

All of the fucks in question pause in various states of disarray, hands and even teeth all over each other, curiosity piqued.

“There, that’s better,” Arataka-kun says. He then plants his hands on his hips, staring down all the Scars, most of which are barely younger than he is. “Now. I have one chocolate bar hidden somewhere in this room. Don’t bother looking—you’ll never find it. I will freely give it to the first person to answer my question right.”

“What’s the question?” Muto asks, overly serious.

Arataka-kun raises a finger, pointing him down. “I was getting to that! If you’d paid attention for three more seconds I would have gotten to it! Now don’t interrupt me again!”
Muto snaps his mouth shut, chastised.

“Okay, good! The question is: what are you supposed to do with psychic powers?”

The response is immediate.

“PUNCH!” “Use them on people, duh.” “Rule the world.” “Fight!” “Take out weaklings.” “Create minions!”

Arataka-kun waits to hear them all out before scoffing and making a buzzer noise. “Eeeeeeeeh! Wrong! The only acceptable answer is to use them as a tool to help you do good in the world.”

The office is quiet. Everyone stares. Finally Mukai leans forward, Tsuchiya in her lap, and goes, “But… why?”

“Why?!” Arataka-kun plants his face in his hands, dragging his fingers down his cheeks. “Because that’s what you do in a decent society!”

Sakurai scoffs from the corner. “As if we live in a decent society. Walk my life for a day—you’ll see how cruel our world really is.”

“But it shouldn’t be!” Arataka-kun leaps down from the desk, raising his hands dramatically as he lectures. “No restaurant wants people who scream and tantrum and break things whenever they feel like it, just like no civilized society wants people who torture and murder and brainwash! If you want to go big, really big, and live a life worth living, then you have to live in reality. You have to realize that in order to reduce the level of cruelty in the world, you have to first look at the cruelty inside yourself, and work on fixing it. You have to be the kind of person you’d like to see! Understand?!"

There’s a stunned silence. Then:

“So who gets the chocolate bar?”

Arataka-kun sighs loudly. “Come back next week for another appointment and we’ll try again, I guess.”

Just as well, because Mob knows for a fact that he was lying about the candy.

Chapter End Notes

I love Mukai and Tsuchiya, in case you were wondering. Same with Sakurai and Koyama. They’re just so… *clenches fist* good.
Chapter Summary

Something happens several districts over. How long will Mob and Company be feeling the ripples from this one?

Chapter Notes

Warnings for talk about suicide and self-harm. Arataka-kun is a little callous about it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Mob is confident in most of his counseling. Actually, a correction: he’s confident that he won’t hurt anyone with his counseling. He wouldn’t offer it to people if he thought it would bring harm to them. His guidance is real enough—his advice is as sound as it needs to be. When he tells his client to bring a buddy with her to donate blood and distract her from her nervousness around needles, he is confident that he hasn’t done the wrong thing.

That said, agreeing to also donate blood when she asks him to be said buddy is, perhaps, not his finest moment. Neither is getting woozy during the donation and nearly blacking out in front of two kids who, after making sure he’s not dying, nearly die laughing themselves. Katsuya-kun, at least, tries not to do it openly—Arataka-kun has no such qualms. Ten minutes later he and Dimple-san are still giggling heartily, and Mob has a feeling that they’d be leaning on each other for support like a pair of old drunks if Dimple-san was not, in fact, an incorporeal being.

It all started earlier, in the office, talking to Katsuya-kun about the fact that his first day back at school is rapidly approaching. Mob had asked him how he was feeling about it.

“I’m ready, I guess… it’s just…”

Katsuya-kun clutched the hem of his shirt. His eyes were wide, staring at a speck on the floor as if he could see his future in it and it wasn’t going to be pleasant.

“Ah, stage fright,” Arataka-kun said wisely, after a moment of awkward silence. “Never had it myself, but I hear nerves can be brutal. Hey—you know what would make you feel better?”

“No, silly! A buddy! And who is a better buddy than Reigen Arataka, future greatest psychic in the world? Look, I’ll sleepover at your place tonight—”

“Uh—”

“And tag along with you in the morning—”

“Wait—”
“Drop you off at your class and then BAM there you are!”

And that was it. The creation of the worst idea they’ve had in a while: the buddy system. Mob runs his hands down his face, staring up at his feet, which the worker elevated to help blood get to his head. He’s never living this down.

He can definitely try, however. He’ll start by taking the kids out to ramen at that place Arataka-kun likes. Yes, good. A perfect plan.

Mob sips at his water, hoping to get his blood volume up high enough to get out of the donation chair any time soon. Yeah. They’ll go out to dinner, and then Katsuya-kun (with Arataka-kun in tow) will head off home, and in the morning he’ll attend his first day of school in nearly four years and—they’ll keep going. They’ll move forward. It’ll be on to the next thing, and the next, and no matter what happens Mob can be proud that they made it this far.

Mob has always been proud of Arataka-kun. It’s not a foreign feeling to be proud of the kids under his tutelage. But Arataka-kun, even at his most hesitant, his most vulnerable, was able to forge forward. He never stops—he doesn’t let anything hold him back. He’ll still be going at the end of the world, fighting onward with his sharp wits and his silver tongue.

Katsuya-kun, on the other hand…

Mob looks fondly at the kids as they’re distracted from his misfortune by a news alert about a puppy on Arataka-kun’s phone. It’s high time Katsuya-kun had something to celebrate, and his enrollment in remedial classes at Salt Middle is the perfect thing. Amidst the CLAW mess and the less-than-ethically-upstanding sessions with the Scars, it’s good to have something to look forward to, something to work toward, something to be proud of.

Even if Mob is still a little woozy.

A good half an hour and four mini-packs of shrimp chips later, Mob is finally back on his feet. Katsuya-kun hovers at his elbow like he’s a blind little old lady crossing a busy street, and he’d be lying if he didn’t say that he was very relieved to sit down at the ramen place, but he gets there in one piece and that’s what really matters.

“Chashu pork?” Arataka-kun demands the moment he gets his menu. “Yes? Do I hear a yes?”

Mob sighs. He himself orders two—Katsuya-kun gets three, and Arataka-kun gets seven, straining Mob’s wallet to the limit. He can imagine the stern look Ritsu would be giving him right about now —what can he say, though? It’s impossible to deny the kid what he wants. At least they have more revenue coming in these days. The dissolution of the CLAW base was good for that, at least.

Dinner is nice. Just what they all needed. Afterward, the kids part ways from Mob, heading for Katsuya-kun’s house. Arataka-kun is still very serious about inviting himself over to Katsuya-kun’s place for the night, even going as far as to plan out an itinerary that includes time for one (1) breakdown followed by plenty of sleep.

Mob shakes his head. These kids. He already misses Arataka-kun’s summer hours—now he’s going to miss Katsuya-kun during the day, too…

“Hello, Mob-shishou.”

…or not?

Mob lifts his head at the unexpected greeting. Arataka-kun and Katsuya-kun trudge into the Therapy
and such office in a single-file line, carting their school bags. It’s not even lunchtime yet—what on earth are they doing here?

“School got canceled,” Katsuya-kun explains. He shrugs off his brand new, barely used school bag and places it under Arataka-kun’s taped-together desk.

“Thank god,” Arataka-kun mutters from the other side of the room, flopping into one of the office couches and curling into a ball.

Mob blinks. The kid looks miserable. “You feeling okay?” he asks.

A groan. Katsuya-kun answers in Arataka-kun’s stead, going, “He didn’t sleep well last ni—”

“CRAMPS!” Arataka-kun yells suddenly, talking over him. “Because I have cramps and I’m in pain!”

“Oh…”

Ignoring, for the moment, the look Katsuya-kun is sending across the room, Mob gets up from his desk and goes to their small bathroom in search of the bottle of painkillers he left in there for just these sorts of occasions. Ever since the tender age of twelve, Arataka-kun has had to deal with menstrual stuff. Mob still remembers the menstruation crash course Ms. Reigen drilled into his head the week Arataka-kun started his first period. It was not pleasant for anyone involved, least of all Arataka-kun. The least Mob can do is try to make the kid comfortable. He shakes out two tablets and fills up a glass of water.

When he brings them over, Arataka-kun just groans again, rolling over the other way. Mob persists until the kid sits up and takes the pills from him. That done, Mob leaves him to nap on the couch until the meds kick in and goes to sit with Katsuya-kun. “Alright. Don’t keep me in suspense. Why was school canceled?” he asks.

“Ah, it was, um… apparently a kid from Miso Middle School committed suicide yesterday?”

…Oh.

“Yeah, so… even though it was a few districts over, the school board thought that they should do something about it. We had an assembly about, um, about what to do if you’re feeling like, um, that, and—”

Mob blinks as Arataka-kun kicks the arm of the couch. He thought the kid was asleep. “Ugh. They had no idea what they were doing, Mob, you should have seen it. They had no idea why the kid did it so they were all frantic, urging us to come forward if we felt like we needed to end everything. That’s how they phrased it, too—’end everything’. Like that’s how kids are thinking about it when they go to hang themselves or cut up their arms or whatever.”

Katsuya-kun shrinks in his seat, suddenly very interested in the sleeve of his new Salt Middle uniform. Mob sighs. “Arataka-kun…”

“Sorry,” Arataka-kun groans. “Not feeling well, shutting up now.”

The three of them sit in silence for a long moment before Mob takes a deep breath and asks, “Have either of you two thought about…?”

“Not me,” Arataka-kun says, shaking his head from the couch. Katsuya-kun stays silent. That in itself is answer enough.
Mob sighs, his eyes sad as he looks at the kid. Then a thought strikes him. “This kid… it wasn’t anyone involved with…?”

“CLAW?” Katsuya-kun asks, as if he was already thinking exactly what Mob was. “No, it was, um… Arataka-kun, do you remember his name?”

“Mogami Keiji.”

“Right.”

The name doesn’t mean anything to Mob, but Dimple-san suddenly goes rigid where he floats. “You don’t mean the Mogami Keiji, do you?” he asks.

“How do you know a middle schooler who just killed himself? That’s kind of creepy,” Arataka-kun says, eyeing Dimple-san.

Dimple-san manifests two hands to raise them in front of himself. “Hey, don’t look at me like that! I wasn’t preying on the kid, if that’s what you’re implying. In fact, it was kind of the other way around—kid was infamous for offing spirits like me in the Miso District. Every spirit knows not to go over there—even with backup, even in groups, you don’t come back.”

Dimple-san goes on to describe some experience he had on the outskirts of Miso where he was almost exercised for good. Mob is no longer listening. There’s something about this whole situation that just… sets his hair on end. Arataka-kun is obviously fine, always the type to power through and deflect, but Mob can’t help looking over at Katsuya-kun. He tries not to stare, but Katsuya-kun is so deep in contemplation that he doesn’t even notice. Katsuya-kun… the one who internalizes things…

The thing is, he’s obviously thought about it before. ‘Ending it all’. He only spent four years alone in his room, his only company his mother (scared of him) and Suzuki (using him), but that must have been long enough.

Long enough… Mob shivers a little under the air-conditioning vent. Long enough for a kid to consider making a permanent decision. Long enough to have that weighing on his mind even now. What this Mogami Keiji went through to even consider it let alone go through with it, Mob doesn’t know. All he knows is that he’s never felt more scared for the children under his care.

Chapter End Notes

Thinking about writing a little ficlet about their sleepover, anyone interested? Also... not sure if I'll be getting a chapter out tomorrow. We'll see.
Luxury

Chapter Summary

Mob and company get involved with some urban legends.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The skies open up at nine o’ clock on a Saturday morning.  Mob, already an hour into sorting out his weekly case files, doesn’t lift his head.  He listens to the rain with his pen scratching a rhythm on the papers spread out before him.  The kids talk quietly in the corner, bickering in low voices about how to do a math problem on Katsuya-kun’s worksheet.  It’s calm.  It’s nice.

“Ahhh… I need to get out of here.”

Mob glances up.  Near the window, staring wistfully out of it as if he’s locked in a prison cell and staring between the bars out to freedom, hovers Dimple-san.

“Pardon?” Mob asks, unsure if the spirit is talking to him.

It seems he was.  “I need to get out of here!  I need something to do.”

He hasn’t been right since the news about Mogami Keiji—on edge more often than not, and hovering closer to Mob more often than Mob is generally used to.  The news, it seems, really shook him.  Mob sets down his pen.

“Dimple-sa—”

“You don’t have anything scheduled today, I know you don’t.  So what do you say?  Why don’t we get out of here for a bit?”

The gentle needling is pretty convincing, Mob will admit.  He works six days a week, and the weeks past have been busier than most.  He intentionally left the schedule empty today just to get ahead of his housekeeping duties while he still had the chance.  He’s moving through it faster than he thought he would, though—it isn’t inconceivable to think that they could go out and do something else today.

Arataka-kun, as always, is on board in a minute.  He’s been particularly grouchy as of late, but at the mention of an adventure the pinch between his eyebrows eases instantly and he’s ready to go in no time at all.  Katsuya-kun takes a little more convincing—Arataka-kun has to spin it as a chance to test his control in an uncontrolled environment—but eventually he, too, is on board and ready to go.

This just leaves the problem of finding a place to actually go.

Mob frowns down at a map of the district, chin in hand.  His practice is local—he’s never branched out into neighboring towns or cities.  Never felt the need to, really.  Where would he even go—?

He’s saved from the pressure of decision-making by Arataka-kun’s hand, which slams down on the map.  “We’re going here,” he says, pointing at a dot.
Turns out the dot is a town a short bus ride away from Seasoning. On the way there, Arataka-kun lays down the plan. “The town is the origin of many urban legends, among them my favorite, the Dragger. Why is this important? It means the population is susceptible to anxiety and co-morbid disorders. No, I still don’t remember what co-morbid means. Save your questions till the end. First, we’ll set up a booth. We’ll advertise. We’ll offer same-day appointments… and then we’ll rake in the money!”

Mob nods along, all the way through the bus ride and the booth set-up (if it can be called a booth—Mob isn’t so sure at this point) and then, once they’re all set up with a sign and everything, all there is left to do is wait.

And wait.

And wait…

“Uh, Arataka-chan?” Katsuya-kun says, after twenty minutes with nothing but cold looks.

“Yes, Katsuya, my dear?” Arataka-kun says back, a twitch in his eyebrow.

“I don’t think people are—”

It’s at this moment that they’re interrupted by a teenager passing by. “Excuse me,” he says, “But are you aware that an evil spirit is following you?”

All eyes flit to Dimple-san, who stares with dead eyes at the overweight kid who is pointing directly at him. “Who, me?” he asks, finally.

“Yes, you.” The kid, all of seventeen years old, narrows his eyes, whipping a book from his back pocket and rapidly flipping through it. “According to the manual, I must have permission from the hauntees in order to exorcise a haunting presence. For two-hundred thousand yen I will gladly get rid of this spirit for you!”

Arataka-kun snorts, and Mob suspects that at least some of the amusement comes from the enormous psychic prayer beads around the newcomer’s throat. “Sorry, bud. We’re not here for that kind of thing. Buzz off and scam someone else with those prices.”

“Wh—I’m not a scammer! My name is Banshomaru Shinra, and there actually is a spirit there—!”

Arataka-kun is gearing up to retort when a second passerby passes… stops… and comes back. “Are you psychics?” she asks, getting right in the middle of a sure-to-be-heated argument about what constitutes scamming.

“Oh, not today,” Mob says. “I’m a therapist.”

“Oh. Then… you can’t help me.” The woman starts to turn away.

“I am a psychic,” Banshomaru-san says, pointing at himself.

As if smelling money getting away, Arataka-kun butts in between Banshomaru-san and this potential client. “He was joking!” he says, twirling a hand theatrically between Mob, himself, and Katsuya-kun. “Of course he’s a psychic. And we’re his apprentices! What can we do for you?”

Just like that, the whole group of them pack up and follow the woman, Banshomaru-san whispering, “You can’t just scam people on the street into thinking you’re a psychic!” as he goes.
“But we are psychics?” Katsuya-kun says, the picture of polite confusion.

Banshomaru-san squints at them. “Well, you do have an aura… as does the therapist… but I still I have my eye on you.”

Understandable. Mob nods along as he then goes on to mention some spiritual union that Mob has never heard of—Rising Sun something or other—that has jurisdiction around these parts. In minutes they’re all crammed into a booth at a nearby restaurant, a plate of fries in front of them, as the woman lays down her woes.

“Ah, yes. The spirit on your shoulder,” Arataka-kun says, forking two fingers forward. Mob surreptitiously exorcises the spirit between bites of fries, thankful that his psychic practice has been paying off.

“Wh—you’re supposed to ask permission first—!” Banshomaru-san says, aghast.

“Oh. I’m sorry,” Mob says.

“No, no! Don’t be sorry!” the woman cries. “I’m very grateful for even that small help! But the thing is… this town… it’s full of negative energy. It dogs me everywhere I go. The cause of it, if I’m not mistaken, are the urban legends running rampant through our streets. If you could get rid of those… perhaps I’d be able to live a satisfying life…”

The table is silent for a moment, either in shock or, in Mob’s case, polite consideration. Then:

“That task is impossible,” Banshomaru-san says.

“We’ll do it!” Arataka-kun says, lighting up, before pulling out a price negotiation sheet from god knows where.

So it goes. They enlist the help of Banshomaru-san in eradicating the local urban legends, starting with the human-faced dog, sending Dimple-san after the psychic to make sure he doesn’t get into too much trouble.

The human-faced dog is not really a dog with a human face, Mob finds. He’s not sure if he’s disappointed or not, but all the same he listens closely as Arataka-kun explains how rumors grow and grow to become urban legends. It all sounds a bit fantastic. Mob has never heard of anything like that.

In any case, they give Arataka-kun the pleasure of washing the marker off the dog’s face. He puppy-talks the old Terror the whole time, making Mob smile secret smiles with Katsuya-kun. It’s nice to see Arataka-kun in a better mood. They give some kids a smart talking-to, inform the owner that the deed is done, towel off Mob who has no idea how his turtleneck got so wet, and then they’re off again, on their way to the next legend to debunk. Here’s to hoping they’re all as easy as the human-faced dog.

The dragger, of course, is nowhere near easy. It starts with a frantic call from Banshomaru-san’s cell phone. “Hello?” Mob says.

“WHEN I SAID I NEEDED SOMETHING TO DO I DIDN’T MEAN POSSESsing A FAT GUY AND RUNNING FOR MY LIFE!”

Ah. “It’s Dimple-san,” Mob says to the kids. “Dimple-san—”

“I’m sending an SOS! The Dragger is here and I don’t know how long I can hold her off this
So it goes. It’s time to head out.

When they get to Banshomaru-san’s location, the riverside forest is in ruins. There are trees strewn every which way, some sliced to pieces. Gouges have been torn through the mud, the ground is slick and perilous, and on top of everything else, the rain just keeps coming down and down and down.

Mob takes the situation in all at once.

The Dragger—a swamp creature of writhing leeches and bloated skin, scraped together into the shape of a human girl. Her left hand ends in several-foot-long talons—her right arm is an enormous rusted blade. She’s inches away from turning Banshomaru-san’s body into so many cuts of meat when Mob throws his hand up and knocks her away.

She runs.

It’s just as well. According to Arataka-kun, Dimple-san, and Banshomaru-san, she’d be impossible to exorcise. Something about fear giving her power, forcing them to retreat until they can figure out a way around it? Mob isn’t sure. What he is sure about is that his feet are suddenly feeling very cold—he glances down.

The water, previously just puddles here and there, is up to his ankles. It feels like it’s sucking him down, thick and fast, like quicksand. And then, out of the gloom, comes a roiling figure: the size of a car—no, a building—all thick, slimy mud and a yawning mouth previously the shape of a young child’s.

Banshomaru-san screams. Katsuya-kun’s powers flare. Mob stares. And Arataka-kun…

It’s over in an instant. Mob, completely unaware of what makes the Dragger so scary, takes care of her just like any other spirit. He’s actually a little proud of himself, for using his powers not just once but twice in one day. It’s progress. It’s—

“Arataka-chan?”

Mob turns around. Katsuya-kun is at Arataka-kun’s side, holding tight to his elbow. Arataka-kun hasn’t moved in inch—not since before the Dragger showed up again, in all her frothing glory. His hands are planted over his mouth and nose, his eyes huge in his face, staring down… down…

…at the slowly receding water.

“Okay,” Mob breathes, splashing his way over. He should have expected this. “Okay… okay… Arataka-kun? Can you hear me?” He’s not sure the kid is breathing, let alone that he’s listening, but to his surprise he gets a small nod. “All right. I’m going to pick you up and carry you to dry land, is that okay?”

Another nod, smaller than the last. Mob leans forward and wraps an arm around the kid’s back, intending to get the other under his knees. The moment he touches the kid, however, Arataka-kun comes to life, hands scrabbling at his shoulders and wet legs wrapping around his waist like an octopus.

“Get me out of here?” Arataka-kun says, too high, too breathless. He shivers against Mob’s front and Mob holds on tighter. “Get me—oh god, please get me out of here—”
Mob complies, carrying him so carefully away from the marshy wetland and the overflowing river. “I’m here,” he says. “You’re not going in the water. You’re safe. You’re okay.”

“I thought—I thought she was going to drag me under. I thought she was going to—”

“You’re okay, you’re okay…”

“—thought she was going to—”

“It’s okay, I promise…”

“—I can’t, I can’t—”

“All right… here.”

Arataka-kun’s babbling comes to a halt as Mob stops, slowly lowering him down to solid ground. It’s still wet and kind of muddy, but there are rocks under their feet now and Mob has stopped slipping with every step. Arataka-kun clutches tighter to Mob’s shoulders until his feet touch the ground—solid, no water. He breathes out and lets go all at once. “Okay,” he says. His shivering hasn’t stopped, but he’s breathing easier now and his face is regaining color. “Okay. I’m okay.”

“All right… here.”

“Okay,” Mob says back. “…Let’s go home now, yeah?”

They don’t get a picture of Dash Granny. They’ve had enough excitement for one day. One week. One lifetime.

Chapter End Notes

If only Mob knew what was coming next.

Didn’t think I’d get this chapter done, but here we are! Bet you can’t guess who’s up next...
Tact

Chapter Summary

A child comes to Mob looking for help with his mother. Mob doesn't know what he's getting into when he agrees to help.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“—so practice conceptualizing your appointment from start to finish beforehand.”

The girl sitting in front of Mob—barely more than eighteen—nods along, stars in her eyes as she takes in Mob’s final instructions. They’re good ones, he’ll admit, though he can’t claim credit for them. Arataka-kun is the one who keeps reminding Mob that mindfulness exists, not that the kid knew the term ‘mindfulness’ when he first suggested it. The things that come intuitively to Arataka-kun still blow Mob’s mind.

That said, and the girl’s copay paid, Mob waves her from the room with a small smile. He then slumps in his seat, exhausted beyond what is generally reasonable for a man still in his twenties. He made the mistake of giving Mukai, the Scar lady, his personal cell number—she must have handed it out to all the Scar kids because he keeps getting calls and questions in the middle of the night. It reminds him a lot of his first weeks with Arataka-kun, honestly—when Arataka-kun was quizing him on how to be good, all but bursting with inquiries about this and that and the other thing.

He sighs. What he wouldn’t do for a cigarette right now. It seems as if the entire world is tensed up, waiting for the other shoe to drop. Arataka-kun has been moodier and moodier lately, the number of actual spirits and curses is slowly on the rise, and Mob can’t even call up Dimple-san to talk his woes out because the fart ball keeps going into his ‘invisible’ mode, tired of talking to an irate Arataka-kun.

Not that Mob has time to talk, anyway. He blows out a breath of air, straightening himself up in his seat before he calls for Katsuya-kun to let in his next consultation.

It’s… a kid. A smartly dressed kid, but a kid nonetheless. Can’t be much older than Arataka-kun. Mob has been dealing with a lot of kids lately, but this one… this one is different. It’s in the set of his shoulders, the obvious money in his clothes. His shoes alone probably cost more than Mob’s entire wardrobe. Obviously from a well-off family, the kid sits primly on the session room’s small couch, the only teenager-like behavior he exhibits the crossing of his arms and the slight pout on his face.

“What can I do for you?” Mob asks.

“I… my name is Asagiri Masashi. You may have heard of my family.”

Mob has not.

“…In any case, I’d like to say right off the bat that money is no object. I have my own allowance and it’s not insignificant.”
Mob blinks along. Not the way people usually start consultations, but okay. He’ll bite. “And what is it, exactly, that you’re looking for?”

“…Help. For my mother.” The kid clicks his tongue, looking down. “She, um… she’s been acting different. Strange. I was convinced at first that it was something… spiritual… but no matter how many psychics I hired none could give me any proof. They all insisted that she was completely normal, that nothing was amiss.”

Ah. Mob can see where this story is going. Highly unusual—this is new territory for Mob. Usually it’s adults looking for help with their kids, not kids looking for help with their parents. He leans forward, waiting for the rest of the story.

A deep breath and the kid continues. “The thing is… I know my mother. She’s not acting like herself. And if it isn’t a spirit or a curse or something supernatural, well… can you help me?”

Blinking slowly, Mob thinks it over. It’s not as if they’re hurting for business at the moment. He could say no. But there’s something desperate in the kid’s eyes as they look up and meet his own—something helpless in the face of whatever is going on with the adults in his life. He has no power here—no way to handle the situation on his own. He can’t exactly shackle his mother to a bed and keep her out of trouble. He’s dependent on someone else realizing that something is wrong, and Mob is his last hope.

“Please,” the boy says.

Mob agrees to take on the job.

It’s scheduled for a Wednesday afternoon. The boy’s mother, Asagiri Minori, agrees to meet with Mob at the behest of her son. She sounds indulgent over the phone—as if it’s completely normal for a kid to call upon a therapist to talk to their mother, as if she’s just playing along like a good mother should.

“Little Masashi has had an active imagination all his life,” she says, once Mob has introduced himself and his interns and taken a seat near the decorative glass wall at the front of the cafe they’re meeting at. He neglects to introduce Dimple-san. “I’m sorry that we’re wasting your time like this. It can’t be helped, it seems—’Sashi just needs you to tell him that nothing is wrong and he’s been imagining things. He’ll believe you.”

The younger Asagiri shrinks in his seat. Mob clears his throat. “I understand. All the same, I’d like to get to know you a little better first,” he says.

The woman sighs. Then she stands, smoothing down her prim pencil skirt. Her hair, cut in a slanted bob, is impeccable. “If you must. If that is indeed the case, however, I’m going to get a cup of coffee. Come, Masa—I’ll buy you takoyaki.”

“Oh, yes, please do that,” Mob says. She smiles and—she seems so painfully normal. A little exasperated, a little annoyed about the situation, but nothing screams ‘off’ about her and her mannerisms.

Except, maybe, Arataka-kun’s reaction to her. He’s staring mistrustfully at her back, brows pinched and his usual easy smile nowhere to be seen. Some of the pinch may be attributed to whatever is making him so grouchy these days—Mob reminds himself to bring it up later, to see if he can help at all—but most of it is focused solely on the woman at the counter, her son beside her.

Arataka-kun’s eyes slip down to her hands. Mob looks, too—her nails are ragged, the polish
Mob is about to ask Arataka-kun exactly what he thinks about this when he’s interrupted by a call of his name. “Kageyama-san! Reigen-san! Serizawa-san! Dimple-san! Fancy meeting you here!”

The four of them turn to find a familiar round figure bounding toward them. Banshomaru-san. A decent ways from home, Mob notes.

“What are you guys up to?” the psychic asks, a little out of breath, as he stops by their table.

Tilting his head toward the lady at the counter, Mob hums. “Just a job. A therapy job, not a psychic job.”

“Ah. Asagiri-san,” Banshomaru-san says wisely. “So the kid hired you, too?”

Mob nods. Arataka-kun is quiet, eyes trained on Asagiri-san’s back. Katsuya-kun fiddles with his shirt, uneasy with all the people and the general chatter surrounding them.

“Yeah, he probably told you that he hired a bunch of psychics. I was one of them. It was a bit disappointing, actually—he offered a prize to whoever could get rid of the ‘spirit’ inside his mother. None of us could, of course—there wasn’t a spirit to exorcise. Bit of a bust, really.” Banshomaru-san sighs. “I hope you have some luck with her, at least—”

 “…There’s no way that lady is alone in there,” Arataka-kun whispers from the side of his mouth, without looking at Mob or the others, interrupting. Banshomaru-san stares, surprised. Arataka-kun shakes his head, still speaking to no one in particular. “Didn’t you see the way she kept changing her intonation? And the different ways she said her son’s name? She’s definitely possessed.”

“I haven’t sensed anything supernatural—” Mob starts.

It’s at that moment that the glass wall beside them bursts inward, shards of glass hailing down on the lot of them. Mob gasps as one grazes his hand—another has found Arataka-kun’s face, leaving a long, shallow cut across his cheek.

“All those psychics, and it takes a therapist’s intern to figure it out,” a voice calls across the room as the glass settles. It rises above the sounds of people scrambling for the exits, tables and chairs knocked asunder in the chaos, to say, “How sad.”

SLAM, SLAM, click, click. The doors, front and back, slam shut and the locks click into place. Cafegoers pile up at the doors, nearly trampling each other trying to get through as cries of ‘BOMB!’ and ‘AN EXPLOSION!’ rock the place. Mob stands up from the table, watching the figure at the counter closely. As he does, he finally begins to see it—a dark miasma of an aura, sickly red, rolling in like storm clouds.

“I guess there’s no point continuing this charade,” Asagiri-san continues, her back straightening to an impossible height. A smile, sick and twisted, curls across her face. “Go ahead and try to force me out of this woman!”

“Do something! Get that thing out of her! I’ll pay anything!” comes the younger Asagiri’s voice, scrambling away from his mother’s unnatural posture. “The demon is real, it’s—”

“—It’s Mogami,” Dimple-san says, his voice choppy and stuttering with fear. “I recognize that voice, I could never forget—even at eleven years old he nearly wiped me from the face of this earth for good. We have to get out of here—drop the job and let’s go!”
“Oh. You know who I am?” Mogami says in the woman’s voice, wide, blank eyes turning slowly across their table. A cafe patron lets out a yell and raises a chair above his head, obviously intending to strike her down, but with one flick of a finger he’s thrown clear across the room. “I didn’t think anybody would remember me. I was going to be a TV star, but in the end, I thought, why bother?”

Another patron tries to attack, only to meet the same fate as the first. Mob catches them before they hit the far wall. The rest cower near the doors, crying and trying to force them open. Mob grits his teeth—he has to think fast. This spirit is strong—it’s hold on Asagiri is incredible. Mob isn’t sure that his powers are refined enough to pry the monstrous energy out of her without hurting her in the process. What does he do? What does he do?

“Why’d you choose a woman to possess? It’s not a perv thing, is it?”

Oh no, Arataka-kun, don’t—no, don’t TOUCH HIM—

In an instant Mogami is across the room, the woman’s thin, ragged hand around Arataka-kun’s throat. He laughs, lifting Arataka-kun from his chair. The response, however, is immediate. All at once three attacks come at him—a wave of pale blue power from Katsuya-kun, a burst of kaleidoscope colors from Mob, and the clack of prayer beads from Banshomaru-san.

And—amid all the psychic powers—two small hands, taking Asagiri’s wrist.

“No, mama… please stop hurting them… come back…”

The world goes still. Mogami, caged by Banshomaru-san’s attack, freezes where he stands, his arms pinned to his sides. Arataka-kun falls, gasping, to the floor.

And—

And then—

The capture weapon falls away, disintegrating into the air. Mob’s ears ring at the sound of a hand tearing through flesh. Clean in one side and out the other, Mogami’s arm goes through the Asagiri child. He grins as the boy slides off his fingers and falls to the floor next to Arataka-kun, hitting the floor with a wet slap.

“No…” Mob wheezes, the fear-anger-rage making his chest go tight. He raises both arms, grabbing hold of Mogami and lifting him off his feet in the hopes of keeping him from hurting anyone else.

“Ah, finally someone with decent power,” Mogami crows. Blood drip drip drips from his curled fingers. He laughs, long and loud, and Katsuya-kun is kneeling next to Arataka-kun and the cafe patrons are screaming and Dimple-san is yelling in his ear to just let him go, to run away, to get OUT OF HERE AND—

The pressure begins as a headache at Mob’s temples. His eyes widen at the familiarity of it—Mogami is trying to possess him. He won’t allow this. He won’t—he won’t—he won’t become a plaything to evil—

“Too powerful, maybe,” the spirit muses. “Well, this will just have to do…”

With that there’s a BOOM of power and the spirit wriggles free, leaving Asagiri’s body hanging limp in Mob’s grip. Mob grunts, trying to follow the string of power, to grab onto it before it can enter anyone else, but he’s not dexterous enough, not quick enough, to stop the spirit from slamming full force into—
Katsuya-kun is thrown back—he hits the ground and rolls to a stop beside an unconscious cafe patron. Mogami rises to his feet, in the aftermath, grinning a crooked grin with Arataka-kun’s mouth. He raises one hand and twirls it, so like the gestures that Arataka-kun makes but still so wrong and Mob feels his powers rise up in a wave, his emotions slamming so hard against the lock caging them in that he nearly feels sick with it. But he can’t—he can’t let them out—he’s not practiced enough with his powers to separate Mogami from Arataka-kun without hurting them both—there’s nothing he can do—

—and—

—and—

—no. There is something he can do. One thing… one thing that he’s sure can work.

“Banshomaru-san—force the locks. Get everyone out to safety, and then leave. Do not come back.”

The teenager flinches, his raised fists shaking. “O-okay, but what about you—?”

Mob overrides him, turning to the floating green orb at his side. “Dimple-san… this is your moment. Protect my body. If I don’t make it out, you and Katsuya-kun will be the only things standing between this spirit and the rest of the world.”

Katsuya-kun starts, hauling himself back to his feet. His nose is bleeding. “Wait—but—”

“Katsuya.” Mob places his hand on the boy’s shoulder, calming the whirl of power starting to swallow him up. “I’m going to save Arataka-kun. I’m going to. I need you to stay out here and protect everyone else. Understand?”

“Out here—?”

There’s no time to explain, not with the way that Mogami is cocking his head in interest. “Katsuya,” Mob pleads.

A slow swallow, and then Katsuya-kun nods his head, his eyes wide but determined. “…Come back, too, okay?” he whispers.

Mob smiles. Then, with determination building to 100% in his blood, he sits down and—

he

lets

go.

Chapter End Notes

A few things. 1) The mindfulness and conceptualization things come straight from my own therapist. It’s a nifty anxiety technique—if you get anxious about doing things then you take a bit of time and you imagine doing the thing from start to finish beforehand in as much detail as you can. It helps you feel more prepared and emotionally ready to
handle actually doing it. 2) It completely slipped my mind that in an ageswap AU Shinra should be a kid, so I edited the last chapter to make him younger. Sorry about the confusion. And 3) …I’m sorry. Mogami is Mogami. There’s nothing I can do about it.
Power

Chapter Summary

Mogamiland.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Lungful of smoke in… hold… breath out. The cloud of ashy smoke streams between Mob’s lips and into the stale air of the office. The motion is rehearsed—he’s so used to it at this point that he could probably do it in his sleep. Sometimes he feels like he is—like he’s living a waking dream and nothing is real. Like he’s making all the motions but the day keeps resetting and there’s no way out.

He’s very tired of this life.

There’s a knock on the door. Another walk-in, Mob is sure—that or a salesman looking to pitch their wares. Either way, he quickly taps out his cigarette and turns with his best customer-service smile to—

It’s a kid. He lets his mouth drop back into it’s normal line. “Ah. Hello. Can I help you?”

“I… I think so?” the kid says. He sits down and—he stares up at Mob. His eyes are big and wide under a crop of not-quite-red hair. Mob gestures for him to go on, leaning a little further away from the ashtray on the bookshelf at his back, hoping to distract from the cigarette he tried to put out too hastily. It’s still smoking gently.

For a long moment there’s nothing—the kid stares and stares and stares and Mob is about to sigh and turn him away when he opens his mouth and a flood of words comes out. It flows like a waterfall, insistent like the current of a river, and Mob isn’t as good at listening as he should be but he tries his best. Eventually, however…

“Why don’t you tell me why you’re really here?” Mob says, cutting the kid off mid-sentence.

“Right. Um…” For the second time the kid falters. Really falters, voice fading into the sound of the white noise machine in the corner. He’s not looking at Mob anymore, instead picking at a hole in the knee of his elementary school uniform.

“Go on,” Mob encourages, leaning fractionally forward. The kid fiddles and fiddles and fiddles and finally says…

“I told a lie. I lied. It made someone feel better but it was still a lie. Does that… does it make me a bad person?”

It’s on the tip of Mob’s tongue to spit a spiel about ‘good’ and ‘bad’ and the fact that humans aren’t inherently confined to one category or the other, but what comes out instead is, “Are you kidding me?”

“I—what?”
“Nice prank, kid. Now go home to your mom and dad, you shouldn’t be out alone.”

“Wait, but—”

Mob gently takes the kid by the elbow and guides him up out of his chair, pushing him toward the door. “Don’t come back here,” he says, and that’s that.

Two big eyes stare at him until the door clicks closed. Outside, the wing of a moth flutters to the ground below.

The days are long. The days are long, and Mob doesn’t know why. Oh, he knows why the days are long—it’s because time is a drag and nothing feels real. What he doesn’t know is why he feels so lost every day, every hour, every minute. Why he finishes with clients and wonders how things should have gone instead.

Why it seems like something is missing.

Summer slowly melts into fall and he dresses the same way every day—a turtleneck and a blazer over top. His license grows slowly yellower and yellower in its frame behind his desk. He takes clients and some of them come back—his mother calls him on Sunday nights to say that their family dinner has been postponed. Postponed. Postponed.

There is an ache in his chest. It gets a little worse, a little less bearable, every single achingly long day.

Mob walks past LOL worshipers on street corners. He doesn’t speak to them. They have a new messiah these days—a Hanazawa Teruki? Mob doesn’t know the guy. He recalls his days as a kid, the weeks that he can’t remember. A hood thrown over his head and then nothing for nearly a month. He doesn’t know what happened then.

All the same, their pealing laughter puts him on edge. He walks faster under the spread of spiderwebs between street lights.

Espers are rare. Mob has never met one, except for his brother. He doesn’t like to think about his brother.

(“You’re weak, Nii-san. You’re weak and I’ve outgrown you.”)

Instead, he smokes and smokes and wonders if he’s really gone anywhere at all since the days of his school-yard bullies.

Fall. Mob shakes a late praying mantis off the sleeve of his blazer and raises a cigarette to his lips. The night is cool. He doesn’t usually go out at night—too exhausted by the end of the day—but tonight he couldn’t sleep.

“Give me all your money—!” the mugger says, a few blocks later. Mob recognizes him as a client who came in earlier this week.
He has nothing on him. Nothing to give. He gets a black eye in return.

It reminds him of milk poured over his head and the buzzing buzzing buzzing of a fly.

Lungful of smoke in… hold… breath out. The cloud of ashy smoke streams between Mob’s lips and into the stale air of the office. Sometimes he feels like he’s living a waking dream and nothing is real. Like he’s making all the motions but the day keeps resetting and there’s no way out. There’s no way out. There’s no way out. There’s no way out.

One day, Mob’s landlord comes up to him with a crooked smile on her face. She’s been given a lot of money for the building his office is in, she says. She’ll take this month’s rent and then he has to get out. Asagiri-chan is waiting to tear the whole place down.

He moves all of his things out in one day, with no help. Not into his own apartment—into his old room, at his parents’ house. His clients do not put up a fuss when he tells them he’s closing the practice. He refers them to the guy on ninth street.

He lays on his futon at night and stares at the ceiling. He doesn’t know what’s wrong with him.

Children are cruel. Mob learned this as a child himself, and then again when he watches the news one day only to find the Prime Minister held hostage by a gang of kids. Among them is a child, no more than sixteen, wearing pajamas and holding an umbrella. He smiles under unkempt hair, apparently thrilled to meet the Prime Minister himself.

Once, when Mob was fourteen, he fed a stray cat in an alleyway near his school. He did it again the next day. And then again. Again.

The kids who liked to pick on him saw him do it one time. He came out with bloody fists and wild eyes, the kids cowering and the cat limp in his careful hands. He’s never forgiven himself for that. For how much he liked it. Fighting them, he means.

The cat died later that night. Mob turns off the television.

Some days, Mob feels the desire like pressure in his chest. He wants to let it out. He wants to rot away with it, to let it decay him into something else. He’s been used all his life—he’s been tormented, he’s been bullied. There was no one there to save him.

He holds his stomach late at night and tries to hold himself together. He doesn’t know how long he’ll last. He gave in once—he’ll do it again. It’s just a matter of time.

Lungful of smoke in… hold… breath out. The cloud of ashy smoke streams between Mob’s lips and into the stale air of his room. It’s a dream, it’s a dream… there is nothing real here.

He desires, and yearns, and pines for something he cannot find.
Mob has never seen a spirit… until the day he does.

He’s at his parents’ house, scraping breakfast dishes clean to put them in the dishwasher. It’s the only thing he can do these days. That and smoke, smoke, smoke.

When he looks up, however, a… thing… is pushing its way out of the faucet like snot out of a nostril. It’s neon green, with rosy cheeks and wide eyes.

“Whoo, there you are!” it says. “Boy is it crowded in here—let’s blast this phantom and get out of dodge already!”

“Who are you?” Mob asks.

The green balloon thing stares at him for a moment before it puffs out what would be its chest and goes, “I’m your buddy Dimple! You know, from way back in the LOL days? We’ve been inseparable ever since?”

No… that’s not right. “You should leave. I have nothing for you,” Mob says, returning to his dishes.

“Wh—of course you do! We need your powers!”

“Mmm…” hums Mob. “Don’t have those. Never have.”

The green blob smacks itself in the face, dragging little wispy fingers down its cheeks. “Okay. Okay. So let me get this straight. You… think you’ve never had powers.”

“Mhm.”

“And that you’ve never met me before.”

“Oh, I might have. I just don’t remember.”

“Right. And… you don’t think there’s maybe… something you need to do?”

Mob frowns at that. He… has felt like he’s been missing something. For a long time, it’s just been a truth he lives with. How long has it been now?

Time is… sticky. It swirls past like old honey pouring from a jar, stopping every now and then as the crystallized particulates get caught on the lip. That’s where Mob is now—caught, caught, caught.

“We don’t have time for this,” the blob is muttering. “Come on, Mob—get it together! You need to remember! You need to save Arataka!”

Arataka… Arataka…

Mob searches, but the name means nothing to him. “I’m sorry,” he says. “But you really should go.”

“No.” The blob floats closer, until it’s staring straight into Mob’s eyes. “I need you to understand. There’s a kid—a child. He’s trapped. Just like you’re trapped. Worse, maybe—the spirit that has you trapped here is putting most of his energy into this kid’s nightmare instead of yours. If we don’t get him out… if we can’t help him… you will never forgive yourself.”

A child? Mob pauses, finally, his hands stilling on a plate. A child… a child like him, perhaps? A
child covered in spoiled milk, one who tore through his bullies one day and liked it? Or like the one who came into his office all those years ago asking if he was a bad person… a kid playing a prank…

A child like the terrorists who took over the city… a child like Asagiri Minori, who grew up to have everything she’d ever wanted and still had no scrap of good inside her…

A child…

…who could change. Just so long as one person was there to make a difference, perhaps.

And perhaps… perhaps Mob could be that person.

“Okay,” he says, setting the plate down on the counter. He looks the snot-ball in the eye. “Okay. Lead the way.”

Chapter End Notes

Cutting Mogami's life so short cuts out a lot of the nuance from Canon, but honestly it can't be helped. I'm going to try and fit some of it into the next few chapters but... we'll see.

Edit: I may not get a chapter out tonight. Sorry about that, but Mogami is being... Mogami.
The final fight in Mogamiland.

The fight is over in a matter of seconds. Mogami is strong—strong enough to merge himself with Arataka-kun’s psyche, to take over completely—but Mob is still stronger. He comes to life in a burst of color, so vibrant against a backdrop of gray. Before that, however...

The sprawl of the city is huge, but the further they travel, Mob and the spirit named Dimple, the less detailed the streets and buildings and the fewer people populating the space. It’s like an unfinished painting, fading into broader, less refined strokes the further they go. Until, that is, they reach the school.

Salt Middle School is gray, just like the clouds are gray, and the roads, and the people. The longer they stay here... wherever here is... the more the color leeches from their surroundings. Mob spares a moment to look at his own hands—gray, gray, gray. Like the smoke that he breathes out every day. How did he never notice the pink bleeding from his knuckles, the blues seeping from his clothes? How did he never realize he was becoming dull and desaturated? He walks past swaying stalks of gray grass with little gray caterpillars and wonders if he’ll ever see color again.

He wants to. He wants to so badly now that he’s realized that it’s gone. He wants the green of the grass and the orange of a sunset and the deep purples of summer shadows. And that, he finds, just makes the ache in his chest harder to ignore.

Something is still missing. Something important. If he finds the color, if he finds himself, then maybe... maybe he’ll find that, too.

With measured steps, they approach a field. And in the field, a girl. Or... a boy? Mob isn’t sure—their hair looks too long, their skirt seems wrong. They stand with their feet apart, looking up through unkempt bangs at the half-circle of middle schoolers surrounding them. A trail of black-ish blood seeps from beneath light hair, hair that may have been not-quite-red in another life.

“Come on, Reigen!” one of the kids taunts. “Speak, monkey! Speak!”

Reigen does not. They grit their teeth, baring them. Their eyes are dull, though—no matter how threatening they try to look, it doesn’t reach far enough to matter. The other kids laugh.

“Stupid Reigen.”

“Do you hear how she stutters?”

“Always lying—”

“—and always faking—”
“—trying to be a boy—”

“—don’t you see—?”

“—don’t you see, Reigen—?”

“—how cruel the world can be—?”

The voices twist and turn, blending into one another. Their faces melt, features dissolving into masses of empty flesh. Reigen does nothing as the faceless things reach down to the ground and pull up the grass, throwing handfuls of mud at them. Her. Him.

Mob watches until he cannot watch anymore. He’s been apathetic for so long that wrenching his muscles into motion is like turning the ignition on an engine rusted out and dusty. But the engine turns, after a few false cranks—it comes to life and he strides across the field to come to a halt before the bleeding child.

“Go home,” he says to the things at his back. “You are not welcome here.”

And then, in a motion that feels familiar despite him never having done it before, Mob raises one hand. The ache in his chest HEAVES, emptiness nearly overwhelming him before a cascade of color bursts forth and the things come apart at the seams, popping like balloons in slow motion.

Two wide eyes stare up at him. Dull. Mistrustful.

“I’m here to help,” Mob says. He remembers a small child, sitting in the chair across from him. He remembers wide eyes staring as the door swung closed. “I’m late, but I’m here now.”

“You keep surprising me. You’re stronger than you look,” calls a voice.

“Uh, oh,” Dimple says, backing away.

Mob turns. An aura, sickly red, is coalescing on the grass. It’s the only spot of color in this entire city, this entire universe. At it’s center, a figure—small, smaller than Reigen, with black black hair and a yawning mouth. It stares him down.

“We’re going to leave now,” Mob says.

“Back to a life where people only use you for your powers? Back to a life where you’re worthless except for them?” The figure’s open mouth twists into a sneer. “Go ahead. Your life won’t change and neither will society’s absurdities.”

“Why do you care?” Mob asks. He moves closer to the child, pulling him flush to his side. He doesn’t know who this strange figure is, just that he radiates something unsettling, something that wrenches at every nerve ending Mob has.

“I don’t. Your little student, on the other hand… he’s alone. Anger, rage, despair… they’re all building up inside him. It’s only natural after living in a world where no one believed a word he said.”

Mob holds the boy tighter. He so quiet—the silence bites at Mob’s heart. “Why would you do that?” he asks. He doesn’t know what to do now, he realizes with a start.

“It’s simple, really. I wanted him to realize how little the world actually cares about him. Without the ability to manipulate the world to his favor… well, he’s just another pawn. Just like I was. Just
like you are.” The spirit raises both hands in a shrug. “I’ll be honest—I, too, wanted to do good in
the world. I went about it the wrong way, and I made my mother sick—too sick to eat, too sick to
move. The sicker she got the more I did to try and help her, and the worse she became. The illusion
of good deeds—that is a poison. And with this—” hands up, gesturing around, “—I will rid poor
Reigen Arataka of that poison.”

The child trembles against Mob’s chest. Does he fight now? Does he try to talk his way out of this?
Why does he feel like the kid in his arms should have the answers that he’s looking for? “And
then?” Mob asks, buying time.

“And then,” the spirit hums, “he will be free. He could change the world, just like I’m changing the
world. One cruel, nasty human at a time.” A pause. The spirit cocks his head. “Did you think it
was a coincidence that I inhabited Asagiri Minori? No. I chose her because she uses the world
around her, plays with it like it’s a toy. She is a cancer to this world.”

This spirit sure seems to have things to say. Maybe it’s just what spirits do. Dimple had things to
say, too—and Mob has not forgotten them. Trapped, he’d said. They were trapped. Mob and
Arataka.

Arataka… Reigen… the child…

“How does Mob get out of here? “Reigen,” he says, voice low. “We’re trapped. Do you know the
way out?”

The child stays silent. The spirit laughs. “I told him that it was his choice, to speak or not to
speak—”

Mob stops listening. He never was that good at it, anyway—besides, if there’s one voice he wants to
hear, it’s not the spirit’s. “Reigen,” he says. No. Wrong. He tries again: “Arataka.”

Wide eyes find his own.

“If you know what to do… please tell me. I’m lost.”

The world has narrowed down. The gray buildings that previously caged them in melt into
textureless blocks, bleeding into the ground and sky. The gray grass has turned to putty, weighed
down by its own mass. Their shoes, gray gray gray, stick to the ground like it’s suctioning them
down. The aura in front of them is slowly building from a thunderhead to a maelstrom, the figure
inside monologuing to them about good and bad and Mob knows, he knows that he should be doing
something but he’s never felt more like he’s missing a piece that is right at his fingertips than he does
right in this moment, so he holds on, and waits, and finally… finally he hears a voice.

“I’m going to hurt you.”

God, he sounds so small. Too small. Mob can’t believe he thought that this kid would ever play a
prank just to laugh at him. “I don’t believe you,” Mob says back.

“I’m going to. I want to.”

“No. You don’t.”

“I do—”
“Arataka.”

The kid’s eyes fill with tears, and with that the illusion *breaks*.

Mob’s eyes slip closed, his blood pulsing through him at the resurgence of 100% determination. He is in Arataka-kun’s psyche, currently facing down with the spirit of the middle schooler named Mogami Keiji. He’s here to save Arataka-kun—he’s *going to save Arataka-kun*, he *promised*.

With that realization, Mob raises one hand before him and—

The fight is over in a matter of seconds. Mob comes to life in a burst of color, so vibrant against a backdrop of gray, and the force of his power tears through Mogami’s hold on the both of them. The powerful blast from Mob’s positive emotions at 100% annihilates the great evil spirit Mogami.

That is, of course, when the real fight begins.

“*Now that they’ve lost me, their vessel... all of the evil spirits that I’d taken in and controlled will all be freed at once. Not even I can stop them anymore.*”

Ah. Not good. Mob holds Arataka-kun closer, pressing the boy’s face to the crook between his neck and his shoulder with one hand. With the other, he grits his teeth and prepares to take on the veritable swarm of inky-red figures frothing forth from the place Mogami once stood. They surge forward, never-ending, bleeding into one another just like the very landscape around them is bleeding into itself, unavoidable and inescapable. In this world, everything Mob can see is a spirit.

The world around them is coming apart at the seams.

Arataka-kun clutches at Mob’s blazer.

The spirits lunge.

And Mob… he has to exorcise them all.

He tries to hold them off, he truly does, but there’s just so many. He’s overwhelmed. He’s been practicing on one spirit at a time, maybe two or three if he’s unlucky enough to get caught by a group of them, but never… never this. There are thousands. Thousands of single-minded once-beings, all crying out in anguish, their fear and anger lashing at him until he feels the tears burst from him and float off into nothingness. He’s never felt anything like this. He’s never experienced this kind of unfathomable depth before. He feels like it will swallow him whole.

Except… except for the fingers clutching at his jacket. They ground him. They silently tell him to hold his ground. Just like the Body Improvement Club in years long past, Mob fights on—and on—and—

He feels it like an inhale, a breath deeper than any he’s ever felt before, when the clawing spirits begin to tear apart the ‘self’ holding him together. The extraneous parts of himself that he’s always taken for granted slough away, leaving behind nothing. Nothing but ???%.

He becomes ???%. ???% becomes him.

They are *free*.

“I see. *Your vessel has been shattered, and that’s what is inside*?”

???% turns to face the swarm, the child in his arms.
“—coming to! Mob-san! Mob-san! Hey, are you okay—?”

Mob blinks heavy eyes. He’s… tired. Sleepy… but he’s awake now. He looks up, lifting a heavy, aching head only to find Katsuya-kun looking down at him, wringing his hands together.

Ah. The kid asked him a question. Belatedly, Mob nods his head, putting his hands on the floor to prop himself up. His body aches, but he really is okay.

Katsuya-kun breathes out a sigh. “Good.” He then glances back, to where Dimple-san is hovering over another figure spread out on the ground. “Did it work? Is Arataka-chan okay?” he asks.

“He’s out of it but I think he’s coming around,” Dimple-san says.

Arataka-kun. Mob pushes past his own aches and pains to sit up properly, coming up onto his hands and knees. The kid—there is nothing more important than the kid right now. He has to be okay. He has to.

Hand over hand, Mob starts to pull his way across the floor. There’s shattered glass everywhere (god, the wall shattering feels like a lifetime ago) and Katsuya-kun quickly reaches down to help him up. Mob finds his feet in the shaky manner of newborn foals, but find them he does, and then, with a few unsteady steps, he’s there.

Arataka-kun is lying curled up on his side, his head cushioned on Katsuya-kun’s sweatshirt. He blinks slowly, eyes staring at nothing, the thin cut on his cheek now scabbing over. His hands curl in toward his chest.

“Yeah, I reckon he’ll be okay—” Dimple-san is saying. Mob gently brushes him aside and, with all the care he can muster, hoists Arataka-kun’s limp torso up onto his lap. The kid comes without a fight.

“Okay,” he says. “I’m here now. I will always be here.”

And, with that said, Mob holds the child in his arms and does not let go.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the delay! This chapter kicked my butt. Making Mogami into a child was harder than I thought it would be ahhhh.... if you have any critiques or criticisms, or if anything is unclear, just let me know!
Chapter Summary

The beginnings of the aftermath of a certain Mogami Keiji.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The Mogami house is a fair way from the city. It’s still technically in Seasoning, but more in the forest sprawl than the city proper. It takes a decently long bus ride plus a short, fairly pleasant walk to get there from the office.

Mob senses the spirit long before he arrives.

“He took his mother’s death pretty well,” says a Mr. Mogami, handing Mob a half-empty tea cup. He seems to be in a daze—running on autopilot. No doubt he’s been asked about his son and his son’s suicide a lot in the past few weeks.

Mob hums along, encouraging him to continue. He wasn’t sure, at first, how to approach this meeting—should he introduce himself as a therapist, or as a psychic? In the end he chose both. He’s here today as a therapist specializing in psychic children, a man hoping to get to the root of Mogami Keiji’s continued existence on their plane of existence. Because let there be no doubt—Mob may have won that fight, but he was nowhere near ready to end a being like Mogami on his own. Mogami may be a wisp of what he was at the peak of his power, but rest assured, he’s still around. Mob needs to be ready. Needs to have a plan of action for the next time the spirit shows. He cannot go in so unprepared again—he CANNOT let children get between him and the spirit he’s supposed to exorcise.

Arataka-kun is okay. For the most part. The unnatural silence resolved for the most part the moment he saw Katsuya-kun—as if Katsuya-kun were never part of his nightmare, which in all likelihood he never was. Not the way Mob was. In Mogamiland, Mob didn’t take house calls nor children’s cases, leaving Katsuya-kun to wile away in Suzuki’s hold. It was a strange and unnerving part of that little alternate world—an army of kids taking over Seasoning City was not something that Mob would have expected to happen, if he had been told beforehand to expect something when he dove into Arataka-kun’s commandeered mindscape.

He digresses. He’s here for Mr. Mogami…and that spirit he mentioned before.

“He took her death better than I did, in any case,” Mr. Mogami is saying. His eyes are distant as he stares at Mob. “I was barely making ends meet between her medical bills and Keiji’s school fees and everything… in fact, it’s only because of an anonymous donor that we managed to make it through at all.”

Anonymous donor… that must have been Mogami the junior, sending money from his underground exploits. Mob takes note of this, scribbling in his notepad.

“In any case… I thought… well, I thought he was fine. Which was obviously wrong of me. I’m ashamed to admit that I missed all the signs. It’s my fault that my son took his own life.”
Tears are welling in the man’s eyes, and Mob does his best to stem them, offering tissues from the inside pocket of his blazer. He suggests that Mr. Mogami take a breath of fresh air, and the man agrees, his face still contorted in pain.

It’s while Mr. Mogami is gathering himself on the front porch that Mob approaches the dark spirit hovering in the very center of the room. The one spirit that Mogami Keiji didn’t consume.

“Hello, Ma’am. Mogami-san, is it?”

The mass of blackish fog doesn’t answer. It rests as if dormant, floating leisurely above an old rug.

“You may have heard…” Mob pauses, stopping himself from reaching out to her, afraid that his touch would frighten her, or, worse, cause her to lash out. “…That I’m here about your son.”

Movement… but just slightly. A pulse here, a quiver there. Like an enormous beast turning over in its sleep.

“Please. I’m just trying to understand…”

“What is there to understand?” comes a voice, a whisper. It’s so reminiscent of her son that Mob recoils as if it’s a physical sensation. As Mob watches, the spirit seems to yawn and stretch, a face—twisted and nearly unrecognizable—spreading across it’s front in inky black tendrils.

“Your son has caused us much trouble. I’m trying to understand why he became what he became.”

“My son…”

“Yes. Keiji. Can you tell me about him?”

“He was making me sick. He was…”

Ah. “What exactly do you mean by that?”

“Yessss… sick, so sick… evil things inside meee…”

Hm. “What was Keiji doing to make you sick?”

“Hurting me… the pain, the suffering…”

“But—”

As if tiring of the conversation, the spirit suddenly flares up, rising to an impossible height. “He hurt me! Is that not enough?!” The top of its smoggy body hits the ceiling and fans outward from that spot, like thunderheads rolling in. That, too, is so reminiscent of her son—they are two of a kind, and Mob knows, more and more each second, that this woman was part of the cause of her son’s demise, just as he was part of hers.

She can’t stay here. She cannot continue to hold her impossible grudge against a dead middle schooler. She needs to move on.

And Mob… Mob can help her along.

Half an hour later Mob leaves the Mogami house with no intention of ever returning. He hopes that the resolution of Mrs. Mogami’s spirit can, perhaps, give the man inside some peace… but he doubts it. He heads back to the office alone, alone, alone.
“Dimple-san,” he calls, hanging up his overcoat in the corner. After a moment of buzzing silence the spirit pops up at Mob’s shoulder.

“You rang?” he drawls.

“Yes. How is…?”

Dimple-san sighs. “Still the same. Quiet. Mother circling over him like a helicopter. We’ll be lucky to see him in the office at all this week.”

Mob sighs, too. Not exactly unexpected news. It’s just that he had hoped… well, he’d hoped that Arataka-kun would spring back just like he did after the CLAW incident.

No such luck. Not this time. And maybe not last time, either, not really—there were so many signs that Arataka-kun wasn’t doing as well before Mogami as Mob thought he was… Mob sighs again. It’s the mood of the afternoon.

At least Katsuya-kun is with him. That was the only compromise they’d been able to make with Ms. Reigen—that his friend stay with him. They didn’t tell her everything—of course not—but they did get enough across that the woman’s mother hen instincts kicked into overdrive.

If only Mogami’s mother had done the same. If only tragedy after tragedy hadn’t dogged the family, chasing after them like a neurotic church grim. If only…

“I’ve been here for hours now, you know,” says a voice from one of the couches. “You can’t get rid of me as easily as you seem to think you can.”

Mob nearly sighs again, just because he can. He goes to the window and reaches into his pocket, pulling out a crumpled pack of cigarettes. He starts to light one and… ugh. He feels sick just looking at it. All those months spent mouldering away, smoking his life into a gray, ashy wasteland… he crushes the cigarette in his hand and shoves the twisted remains back into the pack. It’s time to quit.

“Hey. You saved my life—the least you can do is acknowledge me.”

Mob stares up at the sky, his eyes nearly rolling, before he turns around again. “Asagiri-san. Is there something I can help you with?”

“Yes, in fact. I want to know how to repay you for what you did for me.”

Mob stares. He’s tired—so achingly tired. He’d rather not deal with this. And yet, no matter how many times he tells her that he doesn’t want her money, doesn’t want her praise, the woman will not leave him be. The real Asagiri Minori is very much like the projection Mogami made of her, Mob is learning. She’s pushy, she’s insistent—she doesn’t take no for an answer. Things go her way or they don’t go at all. Every moment not spent in the hospital at her son’s bedside is instead spent camping out in Mob’s office, waiting for him to cave and… he’s not even sure why she wants to pay him so badly. So that she doesn’t owe him anymore? So they’ll be on an even playing field? Her intentions are unfathomable. Mob is bewildered.

He still refuses the money. He won’t take payment for this particular job. After everything that went wrong, all the people hurt, he just… he can’t.

“Asagiri-san…” he says.

“Asagiri-san,” she says back. Her voice is harder, steadier. A touch condescending still, even
after everything.

Fine. She can just… sit there. Mob has things to do. People to call. Appointments to reschedule. Without Arataka-kun he’s all but useless, anyway—why bother trying to run the practice without him? It isn’t going to work. Has Mob mentioned yet that he’s tired?

“Hellooo!”

Mob looks up from rubbing his closed eyes, squinting through the fuzziness. “Ah. Teru-chan. I’m glad you could make it. And… um, I don’t believe we’ve met…”

Teru-chan laughs, gesturing the other man forward. “Neither have we! I found him on the stairwell looking for your office.”

Oh. Mob nods, standing up. “How can I help you?” he asks, hoping he doesn’t sound as tired as he feels.

The man bows slightly. “I have heard great things about you, Kageyama-san. I was looking for something, ahem… off the menu?”

Off the menu? Now where has Mob heard that one before…?

After a moment of hard thinking it comes to him. The last Psycho Helmet cult member who came to the office. He nearly groans aloud. He doesn’t want to deal with this on top of everything else. Why do they insist on intruding into his life at the worst possible times? Just… why?

Mob shakes his head. It will forever be a mystery. Still, he’s as polite as he can be as he says, “I’m sorry, there’s nothing I can do for you. Unless, that is, you’d like a regular consultation. The normal fees will apply.”

The man wilts a little, but Mob’s short reply doesn’t slow him much as he reaches for his wallet. He pulls out a wad of cash—more than any consultation fee that Mob has ever charged—folds it in half, in half again, and shoves it into the tip jar. He then nods to Mob, going to take his leave.

He’s stopped by Asagiri Minori, who’s eyes suddenly contain a sharpness that Mob does not like. “Let’s talk,” she says, standing up. The man blinks, unsure, before she takes him by the elbow and forcefully leads him outside.

Mob really does not like where this is going. Asagiri-san getting involved with the Psycho Helmet cult sounds like a recipe for catastrophe. Before he can object, however, the two of them are out the door—and out of reproach range. Mob sighs, more forcefully this time, and sinks back into his chair.

“How’s that your phone?” Teru-chan asks, jerking Mob from his thoughts.

It is indeed. Katsuya-kun’s number flashes on the screen and Mob nearly drops the damn thing in his haste to answer.

“Yes?” he says, suddenly breathless. “Yes, is everything okay?”
“It’s fine. Arataka-chan is in the bathroom. I’m just checking in.”


“Like I said, everything is fine. I just, um, had a question? Unrelated to Arataka-chan, I mean.”

Oh, it is totally related to Arataka-kun. Mob encourages Katsuya-kun to ask away.

“It’s just, um… if someone were… having troubles. But they didn’t want to, um… tell anyone about it. And they told you not to tell. What… should you do?” is what the kid comes out with.

Mob’s heart rolls over in his chest and he takes a deep breath. Arataka-kun… he’d be so much better to answer this question. But if the question is about him, well… Mob can do his best. “I’d say…” he starts slowly. “…Let them set boundaries. Offer support, but don’t push. This person will seek that support when they’re ready for it, and in the meantime they need to know they can trust you. Katsuya-kun… can you do that?”

“…I can. I, um, I’ll do that. Thank you, Mob-san.”

Mob closes his eyes, feeling his heartstrings taking another tumble. “You’re welcome, Katsuya-kun. And… and please, take care of him.”

The voice on the other end of the line is quiet but determined. “I will.”

“Thank you,” Mob murmurs. He ends the call and sets his phone down on his desk. He feels like he’s lived a thousand lifetimes in the span of a few long days. “God, this week…” he says, massaging his closed eyes again.

He jumps as a hand finds his shoulder.

“Tell me about it,” Teru-chan says, rubbing his shoulder for a moment before pulling back to tie his long hair into an I’m-getting-serious ponytail. He means business, that ponytail says. He’s going to listen until Mob has nothing else to say, and then some more just for good measure.

Mob smiles just slightly. He has good friends… that’s something that Mogami’s gray world could never fathom. He’s so glad that this is the reality he’s been given. As he starts to talk to Teru-chan, as Katsuya-kun and Dimple-san look over Arataka-kun, as the world turns and the sun sets in brilliant oranges, he knows things will get better.

It may take some time… some effort… but this life is a good one, and Mob is content to live it.

Chapter End Notes

WHOOP IT’S LATE, SORRY ABOUT THAT.
Arataka is back... but is he really?

Aight I've been staring at this chapter long enough.

Arataka-kun returns to the office nine days after Mob ‘quits’ smoking. Mob, hands shaking and jitters coursing through him from the nicotine withdrawal, almost drops a stapler on his foot at the sound of the door opening. He looks up from where Ritsu is lounging against the windowsill and—there the kid is, as if he was never missing in the first place.

Well, almost. The kid isn’t shy, but his hesitancy as he crosses the threshold makes it seem that way, as if he isn’t quite as sure of himself as he wants to be. “Hi, Mob,” he says from just inside the door, Katsuya-kun standing behind him. He’s fiddling with the cuffs of his favorite suit-and-tie sweater. “I, um… I hope it’s okay that I wasn’t here this week? I tried to come but my mom, you know how she is—”

God, the sound of that voice fills a void that Mob hadn’t even realized was festering in his chest. Ignoring Ritsu’s eye-roll, Mob rises from his chair and walks forward as the kid keeps going, rambling on in that way he does. Face to face Mob can clearly see the nearly-healed cut across one pale cheek—he runs his thumb over it gently before cupping the kid’s shoulders and drawing him in for a hug.

“—and yeah,” Arataka-kun finishes. He hugs back, tentative and unsure but solid, there, all the same. A moment later he pulls away again and twirls a hand in an achingly familiar gesture. “Ready when you are,” he says, grinning that charming grin that’s been so absent from the office the past week and a half.

Katsuya-kun smiles fondly and Dimple-san shares an eye-roll with Ritsu and with that, everything slots back into place, more or less. Arataka-kun still edges around the office like he hasn’t been there in a year and he’s not sure where to put his feet, and Katsuya-kun still hovers too close to his elbow, tripping him up, but that’s okay. Rome wasn’t built in a day. You can’t shore up the damage from an emotional upheaval of Mogami-magnitude with a couple of hugs. They’ll have to talk about it eventually, but in the meantime getting back to their routine is the best thing for them.

With that decided, Mob goes back to what he was doing before the kids walked in—namely, discussing Kamuro-san’s campaign for mayor with Ritsu. Or strategically not discussing it, as it so happens. Mob is trying his hardest to stay away from campaign details and the help Ritsu is giving Kamuro-san as a respectful gesture to Onigawara-chan. The two of them made up about their middle school drama many years ago but to say they don’t get along to this day is… a bit of an understatement. They both come to Mob’s for good deals on the already cheap therapy bundles, and
the days where they meet in the waiting room are tense, to say the least.

Part of it, Mob knows, is due to the persistent rumors that dog both of their heels, Onigawara-chan slightly more than Kamuro-san. Some people just won’t move past the panty-sniffer delinquent and the crooked politician personas that may or may not have been truth way back when. Both of them, Mob knows, have become different people—better people, even. Onigawara-chan’s dedication to the Body Improvement Club during and after the whole ‘pervert accusations’ debacle helped fuel Mob’s own dedication in the same, which carried over to many different aspects of his life. He learned a lot of good life lessons from Onigawara-chan. And Kamuro-san…his honesty has inspired Mob to be more honest, more open, lessons that he’s turned around and taught to Arataka-kun and, now, Katsuya-kun. It’s a shame, really, that not everyone can see them the same way that Mob does.

Ritsu, at least, is on the same page as Mob, about this and many other things. When they were kids, eh… not so much. But now? As adults? Mob would be lost without his brother. Just as he’d be lost without Katsuya-kun, and he actually was lost without Arataka-kun. He owes the people in his life so much…if Mogami-san taught him anything, that was it.

He’ll be carrying that lesson with him for a good long while, he thinks.

And he does. He carries it through the day, hanging closely onto Arataka-kun’s every word. He carries it the next day, too, making sure he listens very closely to everyone he cares about when they tell him even simple, mundane things. He carries it through the rest of the week, letting everyone know that he’s trying to be better because they deserve his best. He screws up a couple times, slips off the wagon and smokes a cigarette or three, but the determination in his blood hasn’t faltered yet and there’s only one thing that could possibly get him down—Arataka-kun himself.

It happens on a Friday afternoon. Mob can’t say it comes out of the blue, because really…it doesn’t. He sees it coming from a mile away—sees the frustration building in Arataka-kun day after day and is powerless to stop it. He tries—god, does he try—but every time he starts to bring it up Arataka-kun shoots him down with a smile until suddenly the smile curls into a sneer and he—
—just—
—snaps—
—And out comes: “Mob, why are you so concerned about me? Just—out of curiosity.”

Mob blinks, taken aback by the sudden intensity of Arataka-kun’s eyes. “Ah. I only saw a little bit of what Mogami did—”

“Yeah, and that was Mogami,” the kid says, that twisted smile still on his face. It’s unsettling in a way that Mob can’t quite pinpoint. “That was his problem, his stupid world—I survived it and I’m just fine!”

He finishes the declaration with his hands thrown wide, head cocked to the side, teeth showing. He’s certainly putting on a good show, Mob will admit that—but he knows for a fact that it’s only for show.

Mob makes the mistake of trading an uneasy look with Katsuya-kun.

Arataka-kun bristles, his smile twisting harder, nearly a snarl. “Oh, would you look at that! Giving each other glances, talking behind my back! Wow! It’s almost as if you two have forgotten that you yourselves are hot fucking messes!”
“Arataka—” Mob starts.

“Language—” Dimple-san says gleefully.

“Nope, not listening! Not to a bunch of hypocrites, anyway. Fix yourselves before you come after me! Actually, even better, let’s forget about fixing the buttload of shit that’s wrong with you—let’s get to the real meat of the problem—”

“Wait—”

“—which is that you’re using me. Mob, you know it. I know it. We’ve both known it for years. And maybe I’ve reached a point where I’m tired of it! I’m tired of—of—just, helping you out because you can’t do it yourself. You’re going to hold me back just like you’ve always held yourself back.”

The words are pointed, nearly sharp enough to cut. In fact, Mob notes, it’s almost as if Arataka-kun is purposefully trying to make the words hurt. Mob opens his mouth, stunned. He knew there was something brewing, but this? Where are these words even coming from?

He doesn’t know. Arataka-kun, however, doesn’t give him a chance to ask for clarification.

“I get it, Mob—you were the loser in school.”

Arataka-kun is a good kid.

“Your brother hated you and you got love letter pranks.”

Arataka-kun is a good kid.

“You learned how to be helpless as a kid, and you never grew out of it.”

He’s a good kid.

“Why drag me down with you?”

A good kid.

…So why, oh why, do his words cut so deep?

Mob is still halfway toward formulating a response when Arataka-kun shakes his head, the twisted smile finally dropping. With a huff, he scoops up his school bag and marches to the door in utter silence, his back straight and his hands still. Mob sees the tears forming in his eyes before he swings the door shut behind him—or at least he thinks he does. It’s hard to tell between the pounding of his own heart and the damning silence of the room around them.

“…Never thought I’d see the day,” Dimple-san remarks, offhand, into that silence. His voice is jarring, driving needles into Mob’s ears. He continues, heedless. “That kid has been hanging onto your every word for how many years now? Mogami must have done a real number on him to—”

“Dimple,” Mob says, and even he can hear the dead dead dead tone of his voice. The space between his fingers aches for a cigarette. He takes a deep breath, as deep as he can, before blowing out between his lips and shaking his head.

This is wrong. It’s very wrong. But there’s nothing Mob can do about it except give the kid space. Well, that and… “Katsuya-kun.”
“Um! Yes, Mob-san?”

“…You’re free to go. Don’t let him get too far.”

Katsuya-kun nods, glum, going to pick up his own bag. “I’ll do my best,” he mumbles, biting at the skin of his lower lip before he steels himself and walks out the door, following in Arataka-kun’s footsteps.

There. That’s all Mob can do.

He just hopes it’s enough.

Chapter End Notes

Let me just pepper in some angst here.

In canon, the separation arc is driven by both Mob’s growth and Reigen's insecurity. Here Mob didn't have as much growth, and Reigen's insecurity doesn't come out the same way, but the mechanism is mostly the same. Reigen lashes out in response to seeing someone doing better than he is, this time with the added addition of trust issues instilled by Mogami. It has to get worse before it gets better. Ahh...

Let me know what you think of this chapter! Sorry for the delay getting it out, I just didn't feel... right... about it. Still don't, but eh.
Late at night, while no one is around, not even Dimple-san, Mob slowly reaches inside himself for the wellspring of his power.

It’s familiar now. Like a surge of blue-purple, of sea foam and flitting fish, his powers bubble up under his fingertips. He feels it in his bone marrow, in the drums of his ears, in his vocal chords. Holding the power as gently as he possibly can, he reaches out beyond himself and slowly lowers his burning cigarette into the ashtray beside the TV.

This will be his last cigarette. He’s tried so many times already, christened so many cigarettes as The Last, but this one… this one will be it. He knows it deep down. Just as he knows that right now he is alone, alone, alone, and there’s nothing he can do about it.

*I’ll do it,* he types laboriously into the text box of his flip phone. He sends the text and sighs to himself, slipping further down into his seat.

The next day, he doesn’t bother opening the office. It would be empty anyway—Arataka-kun is gone and Katsuya called out in the morning. Mob’s number is posted on the door—anyone who requires him or his services desperately need only call.

Instead, he heads off to the Suzuki residence.

It’s impressive, to say the least. Shou-chan inherited quite a bit of wealth from his late father, Toichiro Suzuki the senior. It’s no Asagiri village-sized mansion, but it’s still larger than Mob’s apartment by a rather ridiculous margin. As he walks past impeccable landscaping, gardens bursting with flowers that almost seem ready to reach out and grab him if he moves wrong, Mob gets the distinct sense that he’s being watched, in more ways than one. There’s psychic energy all over the estate and the grounds, more than just Toichiro Jr. and Shou can account for.

He’s almost at the front steps when he catches sight of the drone following him. One eyebrow raised, he looks its camera dead in the face. “Can I help you?” he asks.

The drone buzzes once, twice, before backing off a short distance. If that’s a response, Mob isn’t sure what to make of it. Nor is he sure what to make of the flashes he keeps seeing in his periphery, as if someone is there. Whenever he turns to look, there’s no one.

There is, however, a wall of muscle standing just outside the front door. “Hello,” Mob says. “I’m here to see Toichiro-kun.”

At that, the drone closes in again. The flashes speed up, and the plants seem to huddle in closer, ready to spring. Mob contemplates raising his hand and pushing against their obvious psychic energy, but before he can the door swings open, nudging aside the massively muscled boy standing...
guard outside it.

“Glad to see you, Mob!” Shou-chan calls, striding casually down the stairs. Mob bows slightly. Shou-chan is tactful enough not to mention the empty space at Mob’s side, instead looking away and snapping two fingers with a reproachful look. The drone, the plants, the boy, and the flashes all seem to slow and wilt. “Sorry about that,” Shou-chan says, reaching out for Mob’s hand to drag him into the building. “I’m housing a few of my son’s, ah… advanced guard, you could say.”

“It’s no problem,” Mob says.

“Maybe not for you,” Shou-chan muses, a smile quirking up his lip. “Anyway, let me get you some tea and I’ll give you the lowdown.”

Seven minutes later they’re sitting across from each other in a rather comfy sitting room, steaming teacups set on saucers on the table between them. Mob floats his cup for a moment, spinning the tea in a little amorphous ball in midair to cool it off, a feat he’s taken to doing just recently. He’s learned his lesson about hot liquids. He usually does it for Arataka-kun, as well, but…

Anyway. The lowdown starts like this:

“My father… he was much like ‘Chiro. Headstrong, charismatic, condescending… he, too, tried to command an army, and with the same incredible power that both me and ‘Chiro inherited. He saved his psychic energy for thirty years, waiting for someone, anyone, who could challenge him. It never happened, and one day, he just… couldn’t hold it anymore. It all slipped out, caused a nuclear-sized explosion, and that was it.” Shou-chan sighs, swirling his tea.

“I’m sorry,” Mob says.

“Nah.” Shou-chan grins, looking up. “It wasn’t like he was father of the year. I was more concerned about the district he wiped out than I was for him ripping himself apart. Largest esper-made crater ever recorded, did you know that? He’s the reason people are so scared of espers, the reason we have to brand ourselves ‘psychics’ to get work as espers.”

Mob has heard this story before. It happened when they were kids—it was part of the reason Teru-chan turned his life around, in fact. The esper theirslef was never named in any of the news coverage—just long lists of casualties and immense property damage. It was the third worst man-made disaster in Japan’s history.

Mob breathes out slowly, testing his tea to see if it’s cooled down enough to drink now. Ritsu always told him that Shou-chan had a bit of a dark past, but Mob never had enough information to put the dots together. This news… well, it’s not so much news as it is a dawning realization, facts slotting into place. This is the history, and if they don’t want history to repeat itself, well…

Something has to be done about Toichiro-kun.

Mob follows when Shou-chan leads him deeper into the house, to a rather cozy hallway decorated in framed pop-culture posters. Mob doesn’t recognize any of them. Arataka-kun would, surely, but…

Mob can’t keep doing this. He can’t. He just… he has a job to do, and it’s time to do it.

With his mind set and his back straight, Mob knocks on the door that Shou-chan indicates. Inside is Toichiro Suzuki, sprawled across the bed in a bored haze that clears up the moment Mob walks in. “What are you doing here?” the kid demands, sitting up. His eyes are sharp, chilled—he barely resembles Shou-chan with that expression, his dark hair, his spiky eyebrows. Mob wonders if maybe he resembles his grandfather more.
Possibly. Either way, though, it’s time to begin—and Mob starts by reintroducing himself. At this point he’d introduce Arataka-kun, as well, but not today. Today, the old fashioned way it is. Mob has relied on Arataka-kun long enough. Maybe the kid was even right, in a way—Mob leaned on him to get through his sessions, used his smarts and quick-wits and intuition. Well, no longer—it’s time to go back to what he was doing before the kid came along. Taking notes, pouring over them. Cracking open his old text books. He’ll do right by the Suzuki family even without Arataka-kun’s help.

…And then he’ll do right by the four kid espers who approach him afterward, demanding what he’s doing to their boss. Shimazaki, Minegishi, Shibata, Hatori… four of Toichiro-kun’s Ultimate Five, he takes them on, too. Maybe he’s stretching himself thin, maybe he’s trying to prove too much, but he knows—he doesn’t need Arataka-kun to do his job. He got on just fine before the kid came around. He needed this reminder—he needed to be put back in his place, to be the adult he’s supposed to be. If it’s a grind, so be it. If it’s hard and laborious, so be it. This is what he’s meant to do and he’ll do it.

Mob talks with Toichiro-kun, talks with the Ultimate Five (all except for Katsuya-kun), talks with the Scars… and, ever so slowly, he starts to make progress. It takes many late nights and more research than he’s done in years, but he does it. There’s no media coverage—not for this. He works behind the scenes, hidden, invisible, and that’s just the way he likes it.

On the day he breaks through Toichiro-kun’s chilly outer layers, Mob decides a celebration is in order. He trades his turtleneck for a dress shirt and his blazer for a vest and goes out to the ramen place on the corner, treating himself to a ramen dinner all alone, with only Dimple-san at his side. Just like old times. He’s returning to his roots—he can’t say he wasn’t changed by Arataka-kun, but if this is the end of an era, then he’ll take the good and he’ll go back to where he was before, no fuss.

Unlike old times, however, are the looks he’s getting. Not too many—he doesn’t look quite like himself without his usual turtleneck/blazer combo. It’s a good thing he switched it up, it seems, because that’s when he sees it—the TV in the corner of the restaurant is playing the local news, and on it… a picture of his own face.

Mob would have jolted back if he weren’t frozen in place.

Why is his face on the news?

Who is that scarred child talking about him?

Why does the crawler beneath him call him a brainwasher?

And why, oh why does he have a feeling that things have only just begun to spin out of control?

Chapter End Notes

Cheers!
Honesty

Chapter Summary

Rumors.

“Nii-san… this doesn’t look good.”

Mob hums, pressing his flip phone into his cheek. The collar of his blazer bunches under his chin as he uses his other hand to massage the bridge of his nose, hoping to ward off the tension headache plaguing him alongside the half-a-dozen other things plaguing him.

The story has been all over the media—not just the television talk show, but in magazines, newspapers, online articles… It took off because of the one CLAW member that Mob wasn’t able to get through to, to get help to—the gas mask kid. Without his mask, the kid—barely ten, one of the younger CLAW kids—is covered in scars. It paints a ghastly picture of a child victimized by a local therapist, a therapist who is also an esper, one who brainwashes his clients into ‘feeling better’ so that he can control their lives and induct more people into his cult and oh, yeah, has Mob mentioned that they think he has a cult? No? Well, news of Psycho Helmet and their fancy new headquarters, no thanks to Asagiri-san, hit the airwaves at just the right time for the public to connect the dots. Go figure. He had to unplug the office phone for the second time ever just an hour earlier, unable to handle the sheer volume of calls coming in. ‘Victims’, they’re calling them. Victims who keep calling him to cancel appointments or to ask for refunds for past services or, sometimes, just to yell at him.

It’s… it’s a lot. Mob has always downplayed his psychic powers in order to preserve his legitimacy as a therapist and now, in an ironic twist, it’s coming to bite him in the ass. ‘A terrible secret’ they’re calling it. As if he hid away in the darkness and preyed on children. They’re half a step away from calling him a closet serial killer at this point, and the press coverage is not doing good things for Mob’s blood pressure.

Mob has never felt more isolated than he does right now.

It isn’t just the accusations. He’s had a few of those—disgruntled clients and frustrated parents and whatever else are… were… uncommon, but they did exist. The problem, the real problem, is that it was one thing to miss Arataka-kun when his mom was keeping him home and it’s quite another to feel an emptiness in his chest knowing that Arataka-kun… he feels the same way as these people. He feels frustrated, he feels used, and Mob… he’s made mistakes but he never thought he’d do permanent damage. He never thought he’d hurt someone so close to his heart.

Mob curls up a little more in his chair, pressing his phone ever closer to his ear as if that’ll bring his brother closer as well. “Ritsu, I… I don’t know what to do,” he says into the darkness of the office. The only light in the room is Dimple-san’s faintly glowing form, hovering near the window and looking out at the mobs of people gathered at the front of the building.

A sigh across the line. “Look, just… be honest. You’re good at that. They’ll be outraged for a while and, let’s face it, the practice may never be quite the same, but—”

But Arataka-kun is gone and Katsuya-kun might be gone with him and Mob hasn’t felt this kind of
pressure in his chest in years. The tears surprise him when they come, but only in their timing—that he’s feeling down enough to cry in the first place sounds just about right.

“Oh, Shige…” Ritsu sighs.

“He said I was using him and he was right,” Mob says, his voice wavering. “I used him in the practice and I used him to help me with my powers and—”

“No, Shige, no… he chose to do those things. I promise you he helped out of his own free will. And, look—he’ll come around. Soon, I’ll bet. He can’t possibly watch this fucking media circus spout bullshit about you and take it sitting down. Not the Reigen Arataka that I know.”

This would be the perfect chance for Ritsu to gloat, to say ‘I told you so’ and ride the satisfaction of telling Mob for years that Reigen Arataka was bad news, but the words he says instead… Mob nearly smiles. It doesn’t make him feel much better—he’s not sure anything would at this point—but it’s the kindest thing Ritsu could choose to say in a situation like this and that means everything.

“Thanks,” Mob says softly, still sniffing slightly. Ritsu huffs at him, fond, and he’s so, so grateful that he still has his brother, at least, because he doesn’t have to imagine a life without Ritsu and Arataka-kun both. He’s seen it already. Mogami’s mindscape was exactly that. Without them, without Teruki and Tome and Mezato, he became a husk of a person, smoking himself into a gray oblivion—he had no drive, no peace, no love. He was empty.

He doesn’t think he could survive that life a second time.

As if he knows exactly where Mob’s mind went, Ritsu sighs. “Shigeo. Even if you don’t think the kid will come around—which, he obviously will, so I don’t know why you’re worried—you still have so many people who love and support you. You know I hate saying it out loud like that, but it’s true. I love you, I support you—I’ll kick the ass of anyone who takes these rumors seriously. You’ll be okay. Okay?”

“Okay,” Mob whispers.

“All right. I’ll call you tomorrow, okay Shige?”

“Yeah. Hey, Ritsu, before you hang up—thank you. I love you.”

“I love you, too, Nii-san. Now go home, take a bath or something. Take care of yourself.”

Yeah. That sounds nice. Mob is definitely going to do that.

“A channel four news van is here!” Dimple-san calls gleefully from the window.

…Okay, so maybe Mob will wait an hour or two to see if the crowd outside will disperse a little first. He sighs, swiping a hand over his face. He’s probably blotchy and gross anyway. The media would go nuts over a picture like that. He can only imagine how they would twist that around —‘Fraud Therapist Cries Crocodile Tears as Allegations Come to Light’ probably. Yeah, no.

He’s had no appointments all day, which means no paperwork. He contemplates plugging the phone back in, but… no. He’s not ready for that just yet. He’ll just play a game on his cell for a little bit and—

He has a voicemail.

Biting his lip, Mob closes his eyes and forces himself to breathe. So someone called him while he was on the phone with Ritsu. That’s fine. Most of his clients have his personal number, just in case
—someone decided to try that number instead of the office phone, that’s all. Mob doesn’t have to listen to it. He doesn’t have to look at it, even. He can leave it for tomorrow.

He should leave it for tomorrow. He really should just take the night off from the whole mess, do as his brother says, take a bath, take care of himself.

He should.

He should…

…And yet a moment later he’s opening his voicemail, biting the inside of his cheek to prepare himself for whatever it is he’s going to find.

It’s from one of his contacts. The kanji of the name take an entire minute to slot into place as he stares because he… honestly did not expect to see contact from this particular number ever again.

Arataka-kun… called him.

And left a voicemail.

And Mob can’t help it—he tears up all over again, his hair beginning to float off his face as a whirlwind of emotions bursts through the latch locking them inside. Every piece of furniture in the office lifts off the ground at once, including the chair he’s curled up in. The misery of the past few days squeezes at his throat, making him swallow back the hope trying to flood up and out, because what if Arataka-kun called just to laugh, or to say that Mob deserves all this, what if the kid has sided for good with all the people Mob has supposedly victimized? He’s a good kid, but is Mob really a good man? Is Mob really someone who should be taking care of teenagers, of children? Ritsu seems to think so but Mob’s world is upside-down right now and he—just—he wants everything to go back to normal so bad. He wants Arataka-kun’s laughter, he wants Katsuya-kun’s timid questions, he wants the challenge of a new client and the familiarity of the old ones and Dimple-san at his shoulder and the office and he doesn’t know if he deserves it—

“Yeah, yeah, we get it. For a dude who lives like he has no emotions you sure are a drama queen,” Dimple-san says, cutting off the words Mob wasn’t aware he was saying aloud. The blob floats around the file cabinet currently hovering a foot above the floor, coming up to Mob’s side, amused in the way only a spirit looking down on mortal follies can be amused.

Mob swallows, pushing against his powers to force them back down. Down, down… and the furniture finds the floor again all at once. Dimple-san is right—he doesn’t even know what Arataka-kun called about. It could be as simple as needing something from the office. Really, why is Mob getting so bent out of shape?

Still, he can’t quite make himself hit the button to play the message. Dimple-san rolls his eyes and, mustering up his corporeal form, hits it himself.

Arataka-kun’s tinny voice fills the office almost immediately.

“Hi, Mob, um… I’m at a party?”

…Not the voicemail Mob expected to get. Not today, not during everything that’s going on.

Arataka-kun sighs on the other end of the line. “They’re drinking alcohol and I tried some but it just made me kind of dizzy and I… I, um…”

Mob waits, his heart beating hard and fast under his collar bones.
“I…”

Arataka-kun is a master of words—he’ll say what he wants to say eventually.

“Um…”

Mob keeps waiting. There will be more. Arataka-kun never runs out of things to say.

“…”

Except, perhaps, today? There’s nothing but a sniffle or two on the recording. Mob realizes all at once why Arataka-kun called—he misses his internship. And the office, probably. Free ramen dinners, definitely. Dimple-san… maybe, maybe not, but the green snot ball does tend to grow on people.

And judging by the way he held onto the voicemail, unwilling to hang up even though there was no one on the other end of the line… he misses Mob, as well.

The thin line of Mob’s mouth relaxes just a tiny bit. As lost as he feels right now… Arataka-kun probably feels worse. Mob unfolds his long limbs, planting his feet on the ground and wiping the last of the tears from his face as Arataka-kun mumbles a quick ‘sorry to bother you, bye’ and hangs up. That voicemail was sent ten minutes ago. A quick check of Arataka-kun’s GPS reveals that the kid is nearby—he’s in one of the neighborhoods near the office, barely a five minute walk away.

Looks like Mob has somewhere to be. He straightens his blazer and slips on a pair of sunglasses. Time to face the media swarm.

…Actually, on second thought, maybe not. There’s a way around this. With a deep breath, Mob climbs his way to the roof, slipping through a maintenance door that’s generally locked. He stands for a moment on the ledge at the back of the building, shaking his head—he hasn’t done this in literal decades. Is he ready? No, not really, but desperate times call for desperate measures. Spreading his hands for balance, he bends his knees and, holding his breath, jumps off the edge of the building. His powers catch him in midair, and with that, he starts to walk.

The house with the party is, as predicted, just a few minutes away. Some of the kids whisper and point as Mob touches down on the front lawn, entering through the unlocked door, but he pays them no mind. The rumors swarming around him like angry hornets don’t actually matter right now—what matters is the bent head of not-quite-red hair he sees in a corner, limbs huddled up around a phone in a way strikingly similar to how Mob was curled up in his office not ten minutes ago.

“Excuse me, but, uh. What are you doing here?” asks a voice off to the side.

Mob brushes past. He’s not unkind about it, but his sights are set on Arataka-kun and he won’t be deterred. Not now, not ever—not when Arataka-kun needs him. Not when he’s so close, and those eyes shift up to meet his, and he sees relief and gratefulness and sorrow and guilt all at once and—

Mob comes up to Arataka-kun’s side, resting a hand on his shoulder. “…Let’s go,” he says softly, an apology and forgiveness all in one. Arataka-kun nods, climbing to his feet and, well… that’s that.

At the end of the day, that’s all either of them need.
Mob reaches out to the media and makes plans to tell all the afternoon after Arataka-kun comes back to the office for good. With the outcome of the whole ordeal uncertain, he gives the kids the day off. It’s better this way. They won’t have to see him make a fool of himself in person. Honestly, it will be a miracle if he doesn’t freeze up and choke at the microphone.

On the way there Ritsu is silent, hands at ten and two. He’s probably thinking the same thing, hoping and praying that Mob gets through this, as he pretends to focus on the ‘borrowed’ company van. It may in fact be the very same van that took them to the seventh division base, everything about it familiar all the way down to the tension in the air. It feels like it’s been a lifetime since that day, the day that everything first began to change—it’s been a short eternity since Mob set foot in that factory, since he crossed into the sub-basement, since he nearly lost everything he’s spent years building, nurturing.

He wasn’t innocent back then. He hasn’t been innocent since the day he lost control for the first time, decades ago. He was, however, naive—naive to think that he’d found permanency, that he’d have Arataka-kun forever, that the only thing that could stop him from having everything he wanted was his own self. He’d forgotten that others have wants, needs, desires—that the world turns, and you can’t control everything. That day in the sub-basement of CLAW’s seventh division base, and the events that came after it… that was a wake-up call. A reminder. You have to cherish the people in your life—you have to listen to them.

Mob is ready. Maybe not for the microphones and cameras, his suit old and rarely worn and his hair rejecting the side-part he spent so long gelling down… but for whatever comes afterward. If this is it for his therapy practice, well… so be it. He was never that great of a therapist anyway. If it’s time to move on, then he’ll move on. Arataka-kun had a thing for private investigators for a while—maybe he’ll try that on for size.

His phone rings, drawing him out of his musings and reminding him that he’s about to face down one of his worst fears: public speaking. He swallows heavily as he picks up his cell and brings it to his ear.

He doesn’t have to say anything before Arataka-kun goes, “Look, I know you’re nervous, so take a deep breath.”

Mob does as instructed. He only wheezes a little bit on the exhale.

“Good. Good. Keep doing that. Now listen—I don’t have much time but I wrote some index cards for you. They’re in the pocket of your jacket.”

Mob nods along. Index cards. Yeah.
…Wait.

“What do you mean you don’t have much ti—?”

The kid clears his throat loudly, cutting off the end of Mob’s question. “You—you’re cutting out, sorry, I gotta go, Mob, just—remember the index cards and keep breathing and you’ll be fine—”

“Arataka—”

“Whoops, would you look at the time, I gotta—whoo, I have things to do, errands to run and all that so—good luck! Good luck, break a leg, and—”

“Wait, Arataka—”

“—just nail this thing in the eye for me, okay Mob? Okay. Nice talking to you, buh-bye now.”

“Wh—”

A click, and the kid is gone, just as quickly as he’d come. Mob frowns down at his phone. This means one thing and one thing only: Arataka-kun has a plan. What kind of plan Mob has no idea, but there is definitely something in the works. There’s no use worrying about it now. With a short huff of air, Mob returns to his breathing exercises. A quick look turns up the index cards, just as Arataka-kun promised—he’s officially prepared to stand up on the stage, put himself on the stand, and open himself up wide for the masses to dissect.

“Just imagine them all naked,” Dimple-san snickers as Mob mounts the stairs, holding on with a shaking hand. This does not help. Mezato-chan is somewhere out there, armed with her recorder, and the last thing Mob wants to do is imagine her naked. The breathing exercises are barely doing anything anymore, Mob finds, but there’s no turning back now—he’s already there.

He pries his gaze off his hastily-shined shoes and—wow, that’s a lot of people.

He knew this going in. He coached himself for several hours about how to deal with so many people looking at him. He isn’t going to freeze like he did in middle school. He’s not.

And he doesn’t, thank god. He gets out his index cards, opens his mouth, and, lo and behold, words come out—stuttering words, but words nonetheless. That’s a decided improvement from his younger days. It’s not much to be proud of, considering the fact that he’s currently being scrutinized like a bug under a microscope, but he’s proud all the same.

Or he will be. Afterward, when he can look back on this with some distance. For now, however, it’s not going well, and he is intimately aware of that fact. He reaches the end of the first index card and—god, how many of these are there? How long does he have to talk?

Oh, god, what’s going to happen when he reaches the end?

The lights are so bright on his face—he’s starting to sweat. Is he supposed to smile? No, no—these are serious allegations against him. Smiling would be creepy. He’s hyper aware of the fact that his every move, his every motion is currently being judged by the hundred eyes on him, a thousand more waiting on the other side of their television screens. He’s surrounded, he’s trapped, he’s—

—not expecting the doors to burst open just as he reaches the fifth index card.

“—Arataka-kun?” he says, dumbfounded, as the kid marches in. And on his heels, Katsuya-kun. And on HIS heels, a long line of kids and one (1) adult.
Mob’s jaw drops as the journalists and media people part for the procession. Arataka-kun smiles his way through, excusing himself politely until he’s reached the front, where he promptly slides himself over the microphone table and nudges Mob aside.

“You did good,” he says in a whisper, before turning his attention to the microphones and cameras. He looks right at home as he calls out a greeting, projecting his voice.

A murmur runs through the crowd, each of them questioning their neighbor about this odd turn of events. Arataka-kun smiles on.

“I know you’re all very interested in hearing Mr. Kageyama defend himself, and he will. First, however, you should listen to a few of the people whose lives he’s touched. Let’s start with Koyama Megumu—come on up!”

Mob watches in awe as Koyama—cleaned up, his punkish hair swept back and a bowtie cinched around his neck—marches up to the microphone. He clears his throat and—he tells a story about learning to appreciate his friends, and unlearning violence as a first reaction. It’s clipped, and he’s obviously struggling to keep his cursing in check, but by the end the murmurs have died down. The crowd is leaning in, the cameras refocused.

Koyama steps aside, and Sakurai steps up.

And then, when Sakurai is finished telling a story about a poor orphan boy who once cursed the world and who now wants to be part of it, up steps Mukai.

And after Mukai, Tsuchiya. Then Muto, Terada, the rest of the scars—the other CLAW kids, Katsuya-kun, the rest of the Ultimate Five, and, last but not least, Suzuki Toichiro himself, dressed up in a freshly pressed uniform. They each spend a minute or two talking, some nervous some serious some flippant, a show of force, of the strength of numbers.

And then, finally, Arataka-kun takes the stand. He takes a deep breath, clears his throat, and…

…he tells the story of a small child, ten years old, walking into a therapist’s office and asking what it means to be a good person. It’s simple and honest, no big flourishes or tall tales. There are no lies in sight. It’s nothing but the truth—a gesture of support for Mob from one of his best friends and favorite people.

Mob has never heard so much raw emotion in one voice before.

By the end of it the crowd is silent. Mob stands, offers to bring out his index cards again, but Mezato-chan comes up to the stand and gently takes them from him. “I think we have enough,” she says, and her smile is genuine, as if to tell him that he did it, he did good, but it wasn’t him at all—it was all Arataka-kun.

Arataka-kun, who is content to smile and back away as the newsies take pictures of Mob with the Scars and jot down last-minute notes and ask questions of the kids. As they finish up and everyone piles into the school bus that Mukai apparently drives, Arataka-kun grabs hold of Katsuya-kun and follows Mob to the van with Ritsu, who has a small, secret smile on his face.

By now the news stations are undoubtedly debating whether or not the kids are brainwashed and how to tell the difference, but it doesn’t matter. Mob is… content. Happy. It’s enough to break free from the locks and bars inside of him, fills him from his toes to the tips of every strand of hair—so much he almost can’t contain it.

It’s all thanks to Arataka-kun.
Arataka-kun, who, once they’re nearly at the office, clears his throat in the back of the van and says, “I never did apologize for, uh… saying what I said to you. You don’t have to forgive me for that, by the way, I just… I’m sorry. You’re not bringing me down and you’re not helpless—you’ve actually helped me more than just about anyone else ever has. So…”

Being part of a society… it’s not easy. Mob said this to Katsuya-kun once, and he meant it. It’s a lesson he learned after he tore apart Black Vinegar Middle School, as he was trying to piece his life back together in the wake of destruction. When he floated along on the buoyant feelings of a childhood crush. When he discovered his brother fighting hordes of gang members. When he bowed to apologize to the hordes of gang members on behalf of said brother. When his powers endangered everyone around him, even the people he loved most, and when they saved his life. The weight of humanity—the good and the bad both—is incredible, and Mob has had an entire lifetime of reminders letting him know exactly that.

That said… things are a little easier when you have people you can lean on. People you can trust. People who see you in a time of need and come to back you up.

People like Arataka-kun.

Mob pulls the kid into a hug. Arataka-kun hugs back, grip tight, secure. He doesn’t let go. “…You are a good person, Arataka,” Mob says. “I’m so happy you’re back.”

And he means it. So, so much. He could have a choice between the entire world and the kid in his arms and he’d chose the kid, every time.

Ritsu clears his throat, pulling up in front of the office and cutting the engine.

…most times. Doesn’t matter. What matters are the hands that clutch the back of Mob’s old suit jacket, the hair pressing up under Mob’s jaw, the warmth against his chest. The way that Arataka-kun grunts, saying, “…you smell different,” into Mob’s collar, a hint of suspicion in his voice.

“What the heck. Mob. Why do you smell different—?”

Mob can’t help it—he laughs, and after a moment the boy in his arms starts to laugh, too, and then they’re rocking from side to side together, each following the other. “I quit smoking. For good, this time,” Mob manages to say between giggles, still holding as tight as he can.

It’s like taking a breath of fresh air, to feel Arataka-kun hold him back, humming a noise of pride.

“Okay, okay,” Mob says a few minutes later, clearing his throat as the laughter dies down. “We still have things to do. Are you up for calls today?”

“You bet!” Arataka-kun says, letting go. He raises a fist in the air, pumping it up and down enthusiastically.

The rumors may never die down fully, but Mob is content to mark this down as another success. They persevered today. All the anxiety, all the fear—they lived through it, moved beyond it, told their story and lived on to tell another tale after that. They did everything that Mob could ask for and more. And not just that—knowing, seeing all the lives he’s touched… Mob has never been prouder of Therapy and Such.

He’s never been prouder of the boy standing at his side.
Trying to write Mob having emotions but not feeling them is... a challenge, lmfao. Let me know if you see any inconsistencies! Cheers!
Chapter Summary

Vacation time! This is the pool episode, folks.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

It’s been years since Mob took a vacation. He hasn’t had much time for things like that, in all honesty, not with his desperate scramble to keep his practice running, to keep himself going, and eventually to keep up with Arataka-kun. Right now, however, as the world finishes deciding whether or not he’s fit to continue his work—this is the perfect time to take a week off.

Okay, so ‘off’ is stretching the truth a little. The maybe-good-maybe-not publicity of Therapy and Such netted them an offer of one week at a psychology conference several towns over, an offer Mob accepted because if this whole fiasco has taught him anything it’s that he has to at least pretend to be competent in his field. But the hotel they’re staying at has a pool and Mukai brought the Scars along as an excuse to socialize them a bit and honestly the point is that everybody could use a break and this is the perfect place to take it.

The first day they spend as tourists, gawking at local landmarks and checking out the large, well-kept shrine at the edge of the town. Arataka-kun convinces Mob to take on an exorcism case he finds in a newspaper, a bird steals a bite of Katsuya-kun’s lunch, and they nearly lose Tsuchiya when they pass a wrestling gym. It’s good.

The second day Mob attends a four-hour seminar on child psychology that leaves his head ringing, leaving the kids with Mukai for the day. He’s not really on board with Mukai being in charge seeing as she acts like a child herself most times, but Katsuya-kun makes up for what she lacks in maturity and Arataka-kun makes up for what she lacks in authority and between the two of them they can keep ten Scars in line. Thank god.

The third day is workshops, as many of them as Mob can cram into a seven hour spread—and the fourth and fifth are about the same. It isn’t until the sixth day that they have time to do what Mob has been meaning to do for a while—namely, laze about and do absolutely nothing.

The day starts off on a high note: sleeping in, followed by a room service breakfast. Nothing fancy—just shushoku and some veggie sides, but as Mob watches Sakurai and Koyama fighting food out of each others’ bowls while Arataka-kun eggs them on and Katsuya-kun pretends not to laugh, the majority of the Scars in the room next door with Mukai having a similar meal, he’s sure that this is the start to a good day.

And it is. For the most part. After breakfast they stay in for a while, playing games from the hotel’s common area. Miyagawa sets off the fire alarm once, Koyama almost breaks Sakurai’s nose, and Tsuchiya puts a minor dent in the floor, but aside from that nothing much of note goes down.

Until, that is, the Scars start clamoring to go swimming.

Arataka-kun rolls his eyes as they start chanting about it, climbing all over each other to change into
swimming gear. He’s lounging on a futon eating fruit like a glutinous demi-god, and Mob will be
damned if they manage to move him from his throne.

“Did you maybe want to go the pool with us?” Katsuya-kun asks, nervous, standing in his swim
trunks at Arataka-kun’s side.

“Sounds great!” Arataka-kun says. He doesn’t look up as he continues. “Yeah, sounds pretty
fantastic, except, actually, for the fact that I’m not that into water and the chemicals they put in it.
Also I’ve never met a bathing suit that didn’t crawl from the pits of hell just to torment me. It’s not
worth the pain and suffering—go on without me.”

“…Oh.” Katsuya-kun is quiet for a moment before: “You don’t have to get in the water, you
know.”

That seems to sell Arataka-kun on the outing. Half an hour later he’s dressed in swim trunks and a t-
shirt, lounging by the poolside, his fruit mysteriously replenished and a pair of enormous shades on
his nose. He looks perfectly at ease. Of course, he can look perfectly at ease just about anywhere he
goes, so the poolside lounge isn’t special in that regard. It’s just another location blessed with one of
his many gifts.

The rest of the kids, meanwhile, waste no time clamoring into the pool, Katsuya-kun included.

From there it’s a mess of splashes and yelling and random bursts of psychic energy that threaten to
blow the water out of the pool, scaring the rest of the patrons away. They start a game of chicken,
everyone clamoring to be on Mukai or Muto’s broad shoulders to get the advantage. Even Katsuya-
kun, who never struck Mob as a water kind of person, is content to splash around, though he keeps
sending glances back at Arataka-kun the entire time. It’s obvious that he wishes his friend would
join in, and Arataka-kun must get the message because between one page of Mob’s book and the
next he’s suddenly standing at the shallow end of the pool with one toe in the water, staring down at
it with an unreadable expression on his face.

“It’s cold,” he says, backing up.

“Ah, yeah, sorry about that,” Katsuya-kun calls. “You don’t have to—”

Arataka-kun waves him off, clearing his throat and adjusting his shades. “No, no! It’s not an issue, I
just—am going to—ah—”

By this point Mob has given up the pretense of reading in order to watch. Arataka-kun slides
forward, one foot at a time, until the water is lapping at his ankles. He’s biting his lip, now, hands
out to the sides as if he’s trying to keep his balance. The Scars pay him no mind, keeping up with an
animated game of tag. The only ones watching are Katsuya-kun and Mob himself.

And Koyama. Koyama has caught on, his shrewd eyes watching Arataka-kun’s slow progression
into the water. He’s up to mid-shin, now, feet planted as he shuffles forward.

“Hey,” Arataka-kun calls to Katsuya-kun. “This isn’t that bad, actually. Give me a minute and I’ll
come to you.”

“More like a century,” Koyama says, splashing over to the boy. “You’re going so goddamn slow.
You’ve got to just jump in all at once.”

Arataka-kun’s nose turns up, and he sniffs. “Everyone does things at a different pace,” he says,
waddling past Koyama. Koyama rolls his eyes. Then he leans over and, both hands in the water,
slashes Arataka-kun from behind.
The world slows down. Arataka-kun flinches and yelps, his eyes going wide behind his sunglasses. And then—then Mob explodes.

He can’t help it—he goes from wariness to panic in two point seven seconds. The fear bursts out of him like a sudden tsunami, crashing over every rational thought in his brain because Arataka-kun can’t go under the water, he can’t he can’t he can’t—

In the blink of an eye, Mob’s powers sluice through the water and cinch around every being in the pool. Like a net full of fish they jerk upward, rising out of the water all at once, taking everybody caught in the net with them. There are screams and cries of surprise, protests, psychic powers unleashed in self-defense, but Mob’s powers are unbreakable, untouchable, even to a bunch of elite esper kids. Mob is resolute. Mob is single-minded.

“Heh, Mob?” Arataka-kun calls from where he’s caught upside-down, his shades dangling off one ear. Pool water drips down off his nose. “…You mind letting us down, buddy?”

Mob blinks through the static at the scene before him.

Pool, empty. Koyama squirming in mid-air at Arataka-kun’s side. Tsuchiya in the back kicking madly, the nearest Scars narrowly avoiding her feet. Katsuya-kun with his hands outstretched, contained in a brilliant white barrier.

None of them look particularly scared, but all the same… Mob is, perhaps, overreacting.

“Sorry,” he mumbles, slowly lowering all twelve bodies back into the water. He takes special care with Arataka-kun, flipping him right-way up before standing him in the shallows. It’s only when Arataka-kun turns with a thumbs up, sunglasses righted and a smile on his face, that Mob realizes his heart is hammering.

That was close. That was too close.

…Arataka-kun is fine.

But the water—water in his hair, his clothes, his lungs—

…He’s okay.

But Mob still feels it under his fingers; the cold, damp skin, the tremors, the wet, wet hair and—

…Arataka-kun survived, he’s alive, alive, alive.

But that night—so long ago, a lifetime ago—

It hasn’t left. Will it ever truly leave? Mob doesn’t think so. Not with the care Arataka-kun still takes as he wades into the water, the way he clings to Katsuya-kun once he reaches him, the way all the Scars now give them a splash-free radius of several feet just in case.

And Mogami’s world…the dreaded silence, the mud, the muck. Will that leave? Will the scars from Arataka-kun’s words? Will anything?

Does Mob… really want it to?

Yes, of course he does… on a surface level. But if he could take away every moment Arataka-kun has suffered, if a jinn appeared in front of him and gave him the opportunity to give Arataka-kun a life with no pain… would he really?
…Would Arataka-kun even want him to?

For the rest of the afternoon and through dinner Mob is lost in thought. He thinks about trauma and coping mechanisms and self-identity. Maybe those workshops are doing him some good after all, he considers, as he thinks about Arataka-kun and the damage he’s sustained, the headway he’s made, the progress he still has in front of him. Bedtime comes and Mob is still thinking about it. He stays awake a little too long, watching over Arataka-kun’s slowly rising and falling back under his blanket… and after hours of thinking all he has left is a sense of faith.

Arataka-kun will let him in soon. Just like Mob had to lean on people to get through the hard times, Arataka-kun will learn to lean on him. The kid has been lost, but he won’t be lost forever because Mob is here. Katsuya-kun is here. Dimple-san, Teru-chan, even Ritsu is here for him in the end.

They’ll be ready. When the time comes. When Arataka-kun is finally ready to let people in, they’ll be there. Mob drifts to sleep with that final thought on his mind.

Chapter End Notes

You didn't think I'd let Arataka-kun off so easily, now did you? ;D
Willpower

Chapter Summary

That night...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It happens sooner than Mob expects. Arataka-kun reaching out, he means. It happens that very night, in fact. Before that, however, Mob wakes in the inky blackness of deep night to the sound of a familiar voice speaking an unfamiliar tongue.

This room is not his own. The beds in it are strange. The shadows, the echoes, the voice—nothing is as it should be. The darkness is all-consuming. Mob opens his eyes and through the drifting tendrils of sleep tries to grasp the words as they just—keep—slipping—away—

Arataka-kun. Arataka-kun is crying. He’s crying, and that isn’t right.

For the span of an instant, that’s all Mob knows. All that he is is that thought—that this is wrong, wrong, wrong. Then, like breaking the surface of a roiling ocean, he wakes all the way up.

“Shhhhh… shhhhhhhhh… you’re okay, you’re okay… it’s okay, Arataka-chan…”

Mob rolls into a sitting position, rubbing the sleep from his eyes. “Katsuya-kun?” he calls.

Katsuya-kun jumps, twisting in the darkness. “Ah! Mob—”

Before he can finish whatever it is he’s about to say, there’s another cry and Arataka-kun speaks—not in tongues, as Mob’s sleep-Addled brain had first suspected, but in English. He’s panicked, gulping air like he’s never heard of it before, his eyes huge and shining in the barest sliver of moonlight coming through their curtained window. Katsuya-kun returns to stroking his hair, murmuring soothingly, responding to the jumbled English as if he can understand it.

It’s intimate, something that Mob almost feels like he shouldn’t be seeing. Mob bites his lip, watching, wanting to turn away and yet wanting to move forward, to comfort Arataka-kun, too. The thought of making it worse stops him. He wants to help so badly, but it feels like it’s not his place. He feels so distant—he doesn’t understand a word Arataka-kun is saying, unlike how Katsuya-kun seems to. It’s foreign, alien—all he knows in English are a few random words Arataka-kun has explained to him through the years, and even those, he suspects, he wouldn’t be able to understand at the sheer speed Arataka-kun is speaking.

After a moment he does, however, catch his name. Once… and then twice… and then Koyama rolls over in his sleep on the futon beside them and Arataka-kun flinches away and Mob just… stops thinking. On autopilot he kneels beside the kid, murmuring nonsense the entire while, and gently lifts him from the futon, blanket and all.

Arataka-kun doesn’t fight it, even as his narrow chest heaves and he gasps for air. His hand finds the collar of Mob’s sleep shirt and Mob clutches him tighter, straining just a little to carry the fourteen-year-old from the room and into the hallway. Katsuya-kun follows close behind as they head down
the hall, past rows of doors and homey decorations and the occasional odd painting until they reach the hotel’s lounge area, where Mob gently lowers Arataka-kun onto one of the couches.

It’s clear, now, in the better-lit common space, that Arataka-kun is having one hell of a panic attack.

“Oh, okay, deep breaths…” Katsuya-kun says as Arataka-kun curls up over his knees, gasping and gasping and gasping.

Mob sees what’s going to happen before it does. He gets the trash bin from the corner under the kid’s chin just in time. The gasps turn to coughs turn to retches and then suddenly he’s emptying his stomach, hunched over and making noises that are an odd and painful-sounding combination of heaves and sobs.

It’s not pretty. On some level Arataka-kun must know that, because in the middle of the mess he manages several stuttering apologies, in Japanese this time, that taper off into sobs. He then cries into the bin for a good, long while.

And then, all at once, he sags back onto the couch and goes, “I’m good. I’m good.” He takes the tissue box that Katsuya-kun hands to him in one shaky hand, wadding up several in his hand and shoving his nose into them. “Just had to, I-like… get it out of my system,” he says, muffled, and here it is. This is the moment. Arataka-kun is finally opening up.

If only Mob knew what that meant.

Mob isn’t sure what’s on his face when the kid looks up again, but it must be something rather baffled because Arataka-kun sighs and, still muffled, goes, “You never feel like that? Like your emotions are all just… jumbled up inside you and you have to let them out however you can?”

“I do,” Katsuya-kun says, thoughtfully. “I don’t usually throw up, though…”

“…You let out your powers instead,” Mob says, the realization dawning on him that he knows exactly what that feels like. To have everything packed so tightly inside that it can do nothing else but explode outward. It happened earlier today, at the pool. And during the fight with Mogami’s demons. And before that, at the CLAW facility. At Black Vinegar Middle School. The day he hurt his brother.

He’s been experiencing that violent 100% release all his life.

As if he know exactly what is dawning on Mob, Arataka-kun nods. “Yeah… like that,” he says, and Mob pulls the shaking boy into a hug.

They sit like that for a long time, Arataka-kun’s residual tremors dying down until he’s sitting limply in Mob’s arms, his sweat-damp temple resting against Mob’s collar bone. Sitting next to them, Katsuya-kun shimmies under Arataka-kun’s blanket with him and leans gently against his other side, his warmth pressing against Mob’s hands. Mob hums—not really a melody, just a low, soothing note that keeps the darkness beyond their little bubble at bay a little bit more, for a little bit longer. It’s sweet, and it’s sad, and the not-quite silence of a space and a time not meant to be inhabited is tender under Mob’s fingernails. He hardly dares move lest he rent it apart, spill it’s innards across the floor. It’s too late to sleep again but too early to be up doing things and while Arataka-kun feels solid enough in his arms there’s still the scent of a lingering ache on the air that makes tears rise to Mob’s eyes.

He dares not let them fall. Does not, will not, break this moment before its time.

He need not worry very long, thankfully, for Arataka-kun breaks it himself. “I have nightmares a
lot,’’ he says, and the bubble pops, the not-silence splitting open into something more sensitive, raw nerve endings exposed in the night. He shudders in Mob’s arms, like the words themselves hold the power of terror in the grip of darkness.

“How long has this been going on?” Mob asks softly, so softly.

A deep breath in, a deep breath out, and: “Since the… since the CLAW base. Um. They started a little after that.”

The confession illuminates a pattern of behavior that Mob had taken note of but hadn’t otherwise had time to look into. The grouchiness, the tired yawns, the odd exchange between the two of them after his sleepover at Katsuya-kun’s house… it all makes sense now. Mob can only imagine the kind of nightmares that would bring Reigen Arataka down to his knees—the pain of burst capillaries and lungs screaming for air, maybe. Lifetimes spent with a leaden tongue, every person he once trusted turning on him. Going under, piercing silences, a world awash in a tidal wave of gray, inescapable and cloying and thick like cement in his open, screaming mouth.

…Or were they more like Mob’s own nightmares, lurid dreams of swallowing supernovas and watching as they tore him asunder from the inside out? Were they more like the sensation of coming apart seam by seam, his vessel cracking into shattered pieces as it struggled to contain the monstrous explosive power crammed inside?

Or even Katsuya-kun’s nightmares, the ones he tells Mob about on days when he’s too skittish to hold a tea tray steady, when he spends hours sweeping up broken teacups off the office floor? Those made up of closed rooms padded with brambles made of itching, buzzing static? The feeling of being trapped in it, mired in it, unable to hear his own thoughts over it? Of crying tears that instantly solidified around him, caging him into a world where the only thing he could do was cry harder?

Were they like that?

Mob may never know. Arataka-kun doesn’t share, and Mob doesn’t push. It’s too raw to the touch right now. He’s only just stopped shivering in his skin—they don’t need to pry this wound open. It deserves to be bandaged, it deserves time to heal, to scar over.

There is, however, one thing Mob needs to say:

“I’m so glad you told me.”

Chapter End Notes

Reigen Arataka gets pukey when he's stressed. See: canon.
Growth

Chapter Summary

Mob takes care of the Honeido Tunnel.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

That night marks a turning point. Not only for Arataka-kun, but for Mob as well. He comes out of the darkness with a new understanding of repressed emotions, the mechanisms by which those emotions are released, and—most importantly of all—he can now help when Arataka-kun is feeling shitty.

It’s a nice feeling.

“You’re in a good mood,” Teru-chan comments as they approach Honeido Tunnel, a spirit hotspot on the fringe of Seasoning City.

Mob hums, ignoring Dimple-san scrutinizing his face very closely. Perhaps he is. No thanks to the media, mind—apparently the paparazzi got wind of the hotel they were staying at and caught a snapshot of the pool fiasco, which was featured front-page on the newspaper this morning. It’s sparked yet another debate, this one about esper laws and public power usage. Is it okay to use powers to save another’s life? Is it okay to use powers if you THINK you’re saving another’s life? Does it even really matter?

Mob isn’t sure. All of this is beyond his pay grade—he’s here to help people, and if he exorcises a few spirits along the way, well…

Speaking of. Arataka-kun leans forward in his seat, watching as the bus rolls to a stop at the nearer end of the tunnel. He’s been waiting for this moment for several years now, egging Mob on in anticipation of the ‘Big Event’. “We’re here!” he sings, now, jumping out of his seat and prancing to the doors before they even have a chance to open. He walks backward off the bus with his arms spread wide, a grin on his face. “Here we are, at the location of the city’s worst documented automotive accident! Over twenty people died at once, the story goes—and their spirits still plague the tunnel where they died to this day!”

“Do they, now?” Teru-chan says, a smile quirking up the corner of his lips.

“Oh, without a doubt,” Arataka-kun intones, as Katsuya-kun nods seriously. “Twenty violent deaths in the span of just a few minutes… their tortured souls, unable to move on… cursed ground, black soil… this place is haunted and you’d better believe it.”

As he finishes, there’s a change in the air, as if the haunted ground itself heard his words and exhaled a single cloying breath. The wind stirs—leaves flutter, sucked into the sky above their heads. The clouds, previously white and fluffy, have started to converge into a gray monolith on the horizon.

There is something big in the Honeido Tunnel. That is plain to see. The energy emanating from it is massive, swarming. And Arataka-kun walks right in, a grin on his face, Katsuya-kun hot on his
heels.

Well. Can’t let them go in alone. Mob pries his eyes from the anthill in a crack in the road that’s caught his attention and nods Teru-chan along, following the kids into the inky darkness.

The first spirits are nothing to write home about. Mob whizzes through them—five, eight, a dozen, more. Arataka-kun is closer to the back of the tunnel, talking to… ah. That would be the spirit boss. Mob raises two fingers just in time to halt what would undoubtedly have been a ferocious attack, saving the kid’s ass. Arataka-kun grins back at him, flashes a thumbs up, and pulls out—

Why. Why does he have a bag of table salt. It’s not going to do anything unless it’s purified, and Mob hasn’t seen the kid bring salt to any holy places any time recently. With a sigh, Mob reaches forward and gently tugs the salt from Arataka-kun’s grip, causing him to yelp. He then turns to take care of the spirit.

He’s nearly finished when the spirit boss’s screaming words register in his mind.

“We were just being forced to do this!” the spirit boss squeaks, and Mob pauses.

“What—Mob! Melt this guy!” Arataka-kun yells, pointing a finger at the small blue blob, but if there’s anything Mob has learned from running a therapy business it’s when to recognize the difference between people lying to save their own butts and people who are desperate for completely fair reasons.

This spirit… it’s been forced to haunt this tunnel, held back from moving on to its next life. It isn’t lying. The largest aura of this place hasn’t yet receded. There is something else here.

“I’m going to check it out,” Mob says, and steps around the puny spirit boss.

It doesn’t take long before a groaning noise rises from the depths in front of him, rancid air pulsing past in choking bursts. Arataka-kun is yelling for him to come back, Teru-chan is getting into a fighting stance, and Dimple-san hangs a few steps back, watching closely. Mob keeps going. He feels no fear nor worry. He steps forward into the gloom, planting one foot and then the other.

With a flare of aura, the creature appears.

Hunched body, gnashing teeth—the thing facing Mob is a veritable monstrosity. It snaps it’s jaws like it means it, like it’ll tear Mob limb from limb if he dares step forward, as if it’s taunting him to do it anyway so it can do just that. He stares down into it’s roaring, rot-filled mouth, raises his hand, and—

There’s still a rush as he releases his powers—he supposes there may never come a time when they’re completely mundane—but the exorcism itself is somewhat underwhelming, especially recalling Mogami. That’s okay, Mob finds. That just means he’s getting better, stronger, more controlled. He’s mastering his abilities, coming to terms with things he’s been struggling with since he was a small child. This is good. This is what he’s always dreamed of.

He acknowledges the spark of pride that makes it past the barriers caging in his emotions. He did good. He walks back to the others, not a scratch on him, and accepts the high-five Arataka-kun offers.

“So, what else do you want to do for your birthday?” Teru-chan asks as they exit the tunnel.

Arataka-kun’s light-speed reenactment of the exorcism comes to a halt as he pauses to think, whipping a hand to his chin. “Can we get ramen?” he asks, his face lighting up.
They can, so they do. Arataka-kun gets his usual—with seven pieces of chashu pork, as always—and the five of them settle in. Dimple-san drifting between the two conversations that are running parallel: Arataka-kun and Katsuya-kun griping about an upcoming math test, and Teru-chan and Mob just going on about anything that comes to mind.

Mob appreciates these afternoons with Teru-chan. They don’t have them very often—they’ve been especially rare lately because of the rather traumatic events of the past few months. Teru-chan has always been there when Mob needed him, but they haven’t really had time to relax together, to chill and talk and laugh.

As if hearing his thoughts, Teru-chan turns to Mob with his mouth open, something obviously on his mind.

“Hey, I, um,” he starts. Pauses. Clears his throat. “I don’t usually take on exorcism cases because, well. I have a day job, thank you very much. But a friend asked me to clean up a spirit infestation and I—you’ve improved so much and you should keep up the progress and—you know, the buddy system and all that, right? Yeah?”

If there’s a question in there Mob doesn’t hear it. He blinks, trying to figure out what, exactly, Teru-chan wants from him as Teru-chan sits there nervously spinning a lock of hair between his fingers, waiting.

“I… don’t know what you mean,” Mob finally says.

Teru-chan bites his lip. “Yeah, I… didn’t articulate that very well, did I?” He laughs at himself, rolling his eyes before sitting up straight and focusing back on Mob. “What I meant to say was—would you care to accompany me on an exorcism?”

Oh. “Is that all?” Mob asks, a small smile gracing his face.

“Yeah, that’s all,” Teru-chan breathes. His face breaks into a wide grin as Mob nods his assent. That smile… that smile looks good on him. It suits him. Just like his long hair suits him, and his blue eyes, and the funky outfits he puts together.

It’s been a good day. A good birthday for Arataka-kun. And, Mob thinks, watching Teru-chan try to daintily slurp a noodle, he’s glad Teru-chan was here, too.

Chapter End Notes

So you may have noticed that I added some new tags... and you may also have noticed that there are two chapters left... do with that information what you will.
Courage

Chapter Summary

Teru-chan takes Mob on an exorcism-turned-date. It goes not so well.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The exorcism comes around on a Wednesday morning, while the kids are at school. It’s just as well, Teru-chan explains, as they prepare their train route to the site. He eyes his phone for a moment before continuing. “…I’ve been told this spirit is especially violent toward children. Arataka and Katsuya are pretty old, as far as kids go, but it’s best not to provoke it if we can.”

Mob nods along, adjusting the collar of the dress shirt Teru-chan procured for him the moment he walked into the office. It’s fancier than his usual turtleneck, suave in a way that feels foreign but not necessarily uncomfortable. It’s a deep, wine red with black pinstripes—Teru-chan is wearing a matching one in turquoise and gold. They both fit perfectly.

Mob is starting to suspect that Teru-chan has been planning this for longer than he’s letting on.

“You look good in that,” Teru-chan says, again speaking as if he’s reading Mob’s thoughts. Mob hums his thanks. Wherever they’re going must have a pretty strict dress code. Teru-chan’s eyes linger on him for just a moment—checking for hairs from his cat, most likely—and Mob glances down as well. It really is a nice shirt. It goes well with the skinny black jeans he usually wears to work. It doesn’t go with his white sneakers, but Teru-chan had a replacement for them, too, in the form of a pair of black dress shoes with red stitching. Teru-chan is a magician when it comes to fashion.

Teru-chan looks away after a long moment, eyes flicking down to his phone. Mob starts digging his lint roller out of the junk drawer of his desk. One quick lint roll later, the two of them are impeccable and just about ready to head out. Teru-chan checks his phone—is he doing that more often than normal?—before declaring them ready to go.

They leave Dimple-san at the office. Today is a day just for the two of them. The train ride is quiet. That’s not entirely unusual, but the silence isn’t usually so… tense. Teru-chan seems to have something on his mind as he fidgets with his phone, and his long ponytail, and the pockets of his white pants—nerves for the exorcism, maybe?

That doesn’t seem right. Mob has never known Hanazawa Teruki to be nervous, not before, during, or after a fight. He’s strong—one of the strongest espers Mob has ever known, and he doesn’t back down, not ever. Whatever they’re up against must be big. Bigger than the Honeido Tunnel spirit, for sure. Hopefully not as big as Mogami-san, but Mob should probably be prepared for anything at this point. This isn’t a generic exorcism. It can’t be.

Mob endeavors to be as vigilant as possible.

The fancy clothes begin to make sense as they come upon the neighborhood where the infestation has seeded itself. Seasoning City isn’t known for its ritzy locales, but there is just enough demand
for high-end venues to fund a strip of restaurants and clubs for the ritzier crowd, and that’s where they’re currently heading. As they start to pass bigger, fancier establishments Mob starts to feel significantly out of place. He could never hope to afford a dinner or a night out at one of these places—they’re in a part of the city that is well out of Therapy and Such’s price range. He watches from a metaphorical distance as they pass by the beautiful facades, wary of any sudden spikes of spiritual activity that may come from inside the stylish buildings.

Teru-chan, meanwhile, is checking his phone again.

“Are we lost?” Mob asks. He wouldn’t be entirely put out if the answer were yes.

“Hm? Oh, no, I was just checking the time,” Teru-chan says, hastily stowing the cell away. “This way.”

Mob follows him around a corner and up a set of steps that he’s pretty sure are carved from solid marble, or at least a convincing replica. Their destination is a restaurant—the fanciest one Mob has ever set foot in, barring the one Ritsu took the family to the day he was promoted to manager of his engineering team. This one has a distinctly Mediterranean theme to it—Italian, if Mob is placing the flags right. He never was very good at geography. In any case, it’s the type of place that Arataka-kun would feel right at home at, considering that it smacks of fine service and good food, which are two things the kid can’t resist.

They’re greeted at the door by what Mob assumes are the greet staff, none of whom seem particularly haunted except, perhaps, by the stern eye of the floor manager behind them, and by this point Mob is on high alert. Something is very wrong. The low-level energy he senses permeating the back of the restaurant, where he assumes the kitchen is, must be masking something much, much larger because Teru-chan—Teru-chan is now sweating through his shirt.

“We, um—we have a reser—I mean, an appointment?” he says, voice high and thready.

“Ah,” says a woman who may or may not be the head server. Mob isn’t rich enough to know for sure. Mob returns the polite bow she gives them. “Hanazawa-san? Right this way.”

Teru-chan—and, in response, Mob—nearly vibrates in his fancy shoes as they’re led down a hallway adorned with plush rugs and marble statues. Back and back they go, passing entryways to what look like private dining areas, all empty. Empty, empty—there is space for at least a hundred patrons and yet the place is completely barren. The server is silent as she leads them—she’d look the picture of professionalism with her primly pinned black hair and her sleek black vest… if it weren’t for the tremor of her fingertips on the menu in her arms, anyway.

She’s scared. Teru-chan is nervous. Mob flexes his hands, creeping closer to Teru-chan’s side, ready to put his back to his friend’s on the chance they’re suddenly surrounded. He won’t be taken by surprise—he won’t let this thing get the better of him—

—even if it turns out to be nothing more than a wisp floating leisurely in the middle of the kitchen. The kitchen is utterly empty but for the languid blue light drifting from its almost jellyfish-like form.

Mob stares. The wisp seems to stare back. He raises a hand and—that’s it. It’s whisked away into the eternal nothingness, its light fading slowly from the stainless steel counter tops.

“So!” Teru-chan squeaks, more nervous than ever. “In return for doing this exorcism the head chef offered us a dinner on the house and—I—”

He trails off, his huge blue eyes beseeching and…
…Oh.

Mob understands now. Teru-chan was nervous this entire time because this was a set-up for dinner. A ploy to get him to a fancy restaurant. A ruse… for a date.

A *date*. Mob wheezes suddenly, his mind going blank. How long, really, has Teru-chan been planning this? Weeks? Months? Years? The way he’s looking at Mob—god, it’s as if his happiness, his well-being, lies in Mob’s perpetually sweaty hands. Like he’s waiting for Mob to give light to the universe. Nervously waiting, but waiting all the same—as if he’d trade all his devotion and love to have Mob smile down at him just once. And Mob…

…he wants to deserve that devotion. He wants to deserve Teru-chan’s love. He wants to, god he wants to, but he is a hollowed out facsimile of a human being and he will never be able to love Teru-chan back the way Teru-chan seems to love him and—

—and oh, god, he *needs to get outside*. The emotions are building up inside him, straining against the iron box locking them up tight, and if he doesn’t get control over himself they are going to burst out of him and he—can’t—let—that—*happen*—

“Whoa, whoa, I—let’s not take this too fast,” Teru-chan is saying. “It’s just dinner, it’s just a meal between friends, right? Right? We don’t have to make it mean anything, and the fact that I want it to mean something shouldn’t force your hand because it’s completely your decision and—”

Mob whines low in his throat, lower than human ears can hear. His entire body is shaking, his lower lip clamped between his teeth with the effort of trying to reconcile irreconcilable truths—the truth that he can’t have this, and the truth that he wants it, he wants it *so bad*—

“—*and just breathe, Mob, just breathe, we can still be friends, we’ll just be friends, oh god okay it’s okay*—”

—It’s not okay. Mob chokes on a sob and he knows. Not again, he begs. Not *again*.

His pleas do nothing. From one moment to the next his emotions rip from their bindings, howling at 100% misery.

He is helpless.

He is the eye of the storm.

Chapter End Notes

Look at me, finally updating. >:O

Also I’ve been thinking and… I know a couple of the people reading this fic have also read my Psychotic!Reigen series. I want to do a crossover. It won’t necessarily be canon for this verse, and it definitely isn’t canon for And Such, but… I like the idea of Reigen taking on his illness with a proper support system. It changes the narrative a lot to have Mob be there for Reigen when he’s first experiencing hallucinations. You know what I mean?

In any case, look forward to that at some point in the future.
Once, when Mob was fourteen, he tried to confess his love to a girl.

Tsubomi, her name was. They had been in the same school for years, nearly their whole lives, and he’d been in love with her for just about that entire time. It wasn’t until it was announced that she had to move away that he found his resolve and decided to actually do something about it.

His family and friends were supportive. They encouraged him, gave him advice, offered him gifts to boost his morale and to offer to her for her hand. He set off with determination. Before he ever reached her on that fateful day, however, he was hit by a car and… well.

That wasn’t the first time ??%, the part of himself that existed in a state of pure, unfiltered emotion, was set free. It was, however, the most destructive. Black Vinegar Middle School’s deconstruction was nothing compared to the ‘freak storm’ that assaulted the city that day. Mob had always been scared of himself and his powers, but that day was the first and only time he considered doing something… permanent… about it.

Thankfully, nothing came of it. He wore himself out and his brother was able to come talk him down. Still, he’ll never forget the aftermath—Tsubomi crying, terrified so badly that she left the Seasoning with her family and, as far as he knew, never came back; half the city in shambles; everyone he knew shaken and wary of his powers, of him. No one wanted to accidentally provoke him into doing it again. They were scared.

Except Teruki. The day after the event, Teru-chan marched right up to where Mob had holed himself up in his room and demanded he come out.

Mob, at first, refused. ??% had torn him apart and all he had left were scraps. He was dead-eyed, his face blotchy from crying, and he couldn’t imagine ever returning to normal, day-to-day life, not with how little of himself was left. But Teru-chan was insistent, leaning on the door and talking to him like it was any other day, and eventually Mob had to smile, had to laugh. He left his room and they went out for ice cream at the only ice cream place that still had a roof on its walls and even though he never again let himself use his powers, too scared of what he might do, he wasn’t completely lost. He came back, rebuilt himself almost from scratch.

He never expected to be adrift like that again. He never expected to feel that stress, that maelstrom, building again in his chest. He worried—of course he worried. He knew what he was capable of. But he never, ever thought something would set him off in such a way, not with the safety of Therapy and Such and the care he spent every day just making sure he never overstepped his bounds. He was fastidious in his endeavor to keep himself in check.

…Until Arataka. Arataka-kun and his wide-eyed, child-like wonder. His needling and his
metaphors. His insistence that Mob COULD control it, he just had to learn how. Mob was
carried away by his silver words—he started to use his powers again, to free them from the vault in
which he’d hidden them. A small slip here or there was okay because he was learning—he couldn’t
expect everything to be perfect.

It was a mistake. That lenience. Freeing his powers, letting them come to the surface, turned out to
be his downfall. It was a path that always led back to that day at the park with Tsubomi, a typhoon
of uncontrolled power, people he loved caught in the cross-fire, forced to try and stop something
unstopable.

Mob clutches at his chest, and he wails as the power slips between his fingers. His vision is going
black—he’s being forced out of consciousness to make room for the other part of him, the ???%,
that's clawing its way out. He can’t hold on much longer.

This is it.

This is the culmination of the last five years.

His every mistake laid bare in the shape of wind tearing through concrete and stone.

He goes under…

…and ???% rises, explosive black static filling every empty space.

…

…

…

There are two things ???% knows.

One. Indisputable, he hurts.

And two… that hurt must go somewhere.

He doesn’t have a measure for how long it’s been, except for the number of stones torn from the
walls around him and the expanse of the churning sky above. Forever, it seems, he’s been funnealing
out the pain into the atmosphere beyond. People have come, and people have gone—one of them
make it close to him. ???% is pressure, forcing them back, always back—they cannot stray too far
into his orbit. He will not let them.

He does not know what happened. He is lost. Lost. Lost.

Like foam rising on the surface of a frothing ocean, the atoms of the storm above push and push up
into the heavens. The clouds have long since turned black and heady, thunderous. They spill across
the curve of the upper bounds of the atmosphere.

How long until he runs out of power and the water trapped inside bursts free? How long can he
continue to push, push, push?

He doesn’t know that, either.

Voices. Small, far away. He turns his head—he does not know the name for the head of spiky
black hair. The blond locks whipping in the relentless wind. Their faces, so pale against the utter
darkness of a stormcloud blocking out the sun itself. They’ve come to him before, beseeching—
long, long ago they came. He didn’t listen to them then, and he can’t listen to them now. They’re standing too close.

???% tightens the whirlwind encasing his body and forces them back one more step, one more, one more. He hurts. He howls.

And then, pushing between the two figures, comes another. Smaller, thinner—feet bare and back bent to accommodate for the intensity of the gale. Unbidden, ???% thinks a name he thought once before—Arataka.

There is blood running down his temple.

No. No, no, no—???%’s pain is infectious. Any closer and Arataka will be hurt again, hurt worse—he’ll be torn apart. ???% hurts but the last thing he wants is to hurt someone else in turn—

—Only he does, he wants to RIP and SHRED and TEAR—

—there’s so much inside that needs to come out, so much anger and grief and fear—

—so much fear—

—and the teenager, the child, has not stopped—he’s still moving forward, an inch at a time, his determination burning in his eyes behind the arm thrown up to protect his face as the others fall farther back—

—and ???%—no, he’s Mob, Mob—???% can’t stop it, can’t stop the storm or the child or his own howling voice—

—he is caught between two worlds, two realities—

—one where he’d tear the universe and everyone inside it apart to assuage the pain inside him—

—and one where he never, not once, would intentionally inflict pain on another human being—

—and he doesn’t know which reality is the truth—

—he doesn’t know—

—he doesn’t know—

—but maybe he doesn’t need to.

“Mob!” Arataka’s voice yells, lost to the storm.

???% hears him all the same.

“Mob!”

…

“I didn’t know—”

…

“I didn’t know…”

…
“Is this what you’ve been dealing with? Something like this…?”

“Mob…”

“I know you’re hurting, and I think I know why…”

“But just let me talk for a little bit, okay?”

“It’s very human to have two sides, to feel torn, like you don’t know what to do or how to handle things.”

“You’re not alone with that, Mob.”

“I think… I think for a long time you’ve held yourself back because you’re afraid…”

“…and that’s okay. It’s okay to be scared.”

“Everyone is a little bit afraid of what they might do.”

“Everyone has two sides.”

“And I… don’t tell anyone, but I hate my hidden self a little bit, too?”

“I hate that I have to lie to make myself seem better than I really am…”

“But even my lies are good, in a sense, because they brought me to you.”

“My lies made me who I am today, just like your power made you who you are.”
“So, uh…”

…”The point is, um…”

…”You’re fine the way you are.”

…”And I think you just have to accept that.”

…”All the parts of you.”

…”That’s all.”

…”

As the child speaks, as the words permeate ???%’s ears little by little, he feels his powers slowly relax until the air is still again. The clouds above their heads swirl a moment longer before raindrops begin to fall, fast and then faster. In moments they’re soaked, and ???%… he’s been like this for a long time. Wild, destructive. He nearly won, once—nearly tore Mob into pieces and became the true Shigeo Kageyama. He thought he would feel better once he did, but he just ended up scaring everyone and then wanting to hide away again. Without Mob he’s just emotion, and without him Mob is empty.

But together… together…

In the darkness a hand reaches out, and ???% grasps it. When they come together it’s like surfacing from the depths of the ocean, darkness making way for light making way for air and breath and freedom and—

Shigeo ‘Mob’ Kageyama sucks in a lungful of air and becomes whole. Well, more or less.

…”And then he looks around, at the remains of the restaurant, the street beyond it, at Ritsu and Teru-chan huddled up on the far side of a chunk of asphalt. Arataka-kun is smiling, blood running down his face, banged and bruised but okay.

It’s okay. The destruction, well… he’ll have to help fix up the street, but the damage wasn’t as bad as it could have been. The last time this happened Teru-chan saved everyone who was in Mob’s way, and this time Mob has faith that the man did the exact same thing. He’ll just use his powers to put some things back together and—

“The storm is over,” says a voice. Mob looks up and finds a familiar spirit hovering just there.

“Hello, Mogami-san,” he says.

The spirit stares down at him. “I’ve been following you and your disciple,” he says.

“Oh?”
“Your journey... intrigues me. I feel...”

The spirit bobs in the air for a moment, looking for words. Mob waits. Finally, the spirit just shakes his head. “If you took less pity on people, you’d be unbeatable,” he says, and fades away into the air, gone between one blink and the next.

Intrigued... hm. Mob isn’t sure what that means for Mogami-san, but still... he has faith. Faith that by setting his own example, by living a kind and accepting life, he can influence even twisted, nearly-gone souls like Mogami-san to be better. To be good, and kind, and accepting.

And speaking of acceptance...

“Teru-chan,” he calls, suddenly nervous.

His friend... if they are still friends... dusts off his shirt and walks up to him through the downpour. Mob clears his throat.

“I, ah... I’m very sorry for today,” he begins, but Teru-chan is already waving him off.

“I sprang it on you. Should have thought that through a little better—you’re not interested, so—”

Ah. “No, that’s not it at all,” Mob says. He clears his throat, brushing his wet bangs off his face. A flick of his wrist and a barrier goes up—like an umbrella, diverting the rain from them. He then reaches slowly forward and wipes a soaked lock of blond hair from Teru-chan’s cheek, tucking it behind his ear.

Teru-chan stares, and Mob stares back. Mob is still afraid—he’s so scared that his heart is beating triple-time in his chest. But he’s also happy. Happy that Teru-chan feels the same way about him as he does about Teru-chan.

All that’s left is to let Teru-chan know.

“I...” Mob breathes.

“Yes?” Teru-chan breathes back.

Mob leans in and—Teruki could pull away at any moment as Mob comes closer and closer but he doesn’t, he doesn’t, and—

Their lips meet, for just a moment. A gentle brush, barely a real kiss, but that’s enough.

“Oh,” Teruki sighs, breaking into a beaming smile.

“Yeah,” Mob says back.

“Oh, was this a date?” Arataka-kun says, a little too smug, and Mob feels his cheeks color as his soul just about leaves his body in embarrassment.

Shigeo ‘Mob’ Kageyama is very good at listening.

He wasn’t always. And he hasn’t always been good, or kind, or accepting. But he’s learned... and grown... and this is not an ending. Not for Mob, nor for Arataka-kun, or Teruki or Ritsu or Dimple. They’ll keep going because that’s what they do. Their journeys aren’t over, even if the story is.

Chapter End Notes
So in the manga, everyone and their mother tries to talk ???% out of his rampage. In this verse... that's already happened. Arataka is the only one who hasn't tried yet, so he's the only one who gets through.

Anyway, it's been a journey! Thank you all for reading! And thank you SO MUCH for all your comments, I treasure each and every one of them :D

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