Summary

"Please tell me today's date," Kaneki cracked his right index finger, by then a comforting habit. But her answer made his heart leap into his throat. It couldn't be.

...That was the day he went on his first date. A date with Rize Kamishiro.'

Notes

Hello! This my first multi-chaptered Tokyo Ghoul fic. However, I'd like to clarify that I have NOT read the manga, and this fanfiction contains events from the manga that I may have portrayed inaccurately. This story isn't meant to be realistic, it's simply written for fun. If any readers would please be gentle about inaccuracies, I would appreciate that.
Please enjoy!
The thick smell of blood and naturally, sewage, permeated the sewer that Kaneki Ken stumbled into. Through the tear in his bodysuit, drops of blood slid down his side in a disgusting caress of carmine. Delirious, he slumped down the nearest wall, landing in a heap of knees and elbows that felt too weighted for him to move.

There, he swam in and out of consciousness, a tourist in the waking world thinking such absurd things as 'I'm going to be late for school if I don't get up. Hide will be mad...'

In the odd moments of lucidity, Kaneki felt like he had kicked a dog. He felt like he had ripped someone's arm off. He felt like shit.

Kaneki wasn't sure if those were footsteps or heart beats. Maybe it was 4:44 AM and he was knocking on someone's door. He blinked open bleary eyes, felt the stitchings of bygone grit come unraveled from them, and watched a figure perch down in front of him. Was that Hide? He couldn't focus. Kaneki took in a breath and it smelled like sunlight and video game cases. Yeah, that was Hide.

He could see that his lips were moving. Kaneki wanted to tell him to stop speaking French, because that was Tsukiyama's job.

Hide kept talking. Each time the blond human would say something it was as if he would hear it, but it would only sound like noise moments later. His brain felt sluggish, delayed.

"No, Hide, you can't see me like this.

Kaneki's lips were parting again and again, words spilling out.

"—at me, don't look at me, don't look at me!"

"I've known for a while now, Kaneki. Who cares about that?" Hide's hands settled on the ghoul's shoulders. They weren't cold, never cold, because Hide didn't get scared. He was safety.

Kaneki took in ragged breaths, hyperventilation slowing down and leaving in its wake a pair of aching lungs.

Hide pushed something into Kaneki's twitching hands.

"Make things right."

A click of a briefcase, and a quinque curled around Kaneki, blotting out the dim light.

Kaneki woke up like he did on weekends. In stark contrast to the weekdays, when his eyes would fly open to the sound of the alarm and it would leave the lingering sense of falling, he woke slowly. But it wasn't the pleasant rolling over into soft sheets and lazy watching of dust motes drifting in the stream of sunlight coming from his window.

Awareness came with the hot pain in his side, and the stickiness of dried blood. Next, the sounds of cars speeding by, doors swinging shut, and people laughing, talking, crying and shouting turned from white noise to screaming in his ears.
The worst was the smell of people and ghouls. There were so many different scents: sweet, sour, spicy, tangy and savory, all catching Kaneki's attention and making him ache for want of something (human) to eat.

Kaneki decided against taking deep breaths and making it worse. He just clenched his hands and pretended he was a saint in sinner's circumstance.

With that most minute flex of his hands came a searing flash of pain in the white haired ghoul's back, and he came to realize that he was laying on something hard. His hair was hot, and his face felt somewhat sweaty. It felt like the sun was beating down on him, but that made no sense. He was in a dark, damp sewer, he knew. But where did this damn heat come from?

Kaneki opened his eyes and then wished he hadn't. The light of the sky seemed to drill itself into his skull and pound at his temples. His eyes filled with stinging tears and he clenched them shut.

When Kaneki felt ready to try again, he blinked and turned his head weakly. It seemed he was on a bench. Crowds of people passed by, some stopping and staring at the mess that was him. But people were people, and they eventually walked on.

The bench was facing the road, and so Kaneki couldn't see behind him. He braced himself, clenched his teeth and then sat up, reminding himself that he had been through worse. The pain from his side wouldn't kill him. Even when the injury tore open.

It took a moment for the ghoul to recognize what was behind the bench. When he did, he nearly fell off it.

That was Anteiku.

Terror building in his chest, Kaneki practically threw himself off of the bench. He careened towards the cafe, trying not to bump into the crowds of people walking by and into Anteiku. When he pulled the door open, he only heard the bell chime distantly.

Anteiku was pristine. There was no blood, no shattered glass, no screaming. Customers were sitting at tables, chatting inanely. Servers were cleaning plates and preparing coffee and meals.

Touka was serving a window-side table. She looked younger than she had in a long time.

Kaneki narrowed his eyes, "Touka?"

Her eyes snapped to him, and she looked taken aback, then furious. People in the cafe were cowering away. Away from him?

Touka seized his arm and began dragging him away, calling out over her shoulder, "Please excuse my friend here. He's just cosplaying!"

Cosplaying...? Kaneki looked down at the clean and almost reflectory floor, and abruptly realized that he was dripping on it.

Touka all but marched him through the black door that signified an employee only area.

"Who," she grit out, "the hell are you, bastard, and what are you doing scaring our customers? Do you want them to find out about us?"

Kaneki's head hurt. Why was Touka asking who he was? Where was the CCG?
"I'm-" the ghoul opened his mouth to speak, before shaking his head and thinking better of it. If Touka somehow didn't know who he was, then it would just make him look strange if he tried to tell her that she knew him. He needed to play his cards right before he could find out what was going on. "No one impor- aah!"

Kaneki drew in a hiss of pain, swaying on his feet. His hand shot to his bloody side as it throbbed.

"You're bleeding all over our floors," Touka let out a soft huff and crossed her arms over her chest. "You're hungry, right? Stay here."

Touka went ahead. Despite how she seemed to be annoyed, she walked quickly and returned quickly.

"Here," Touka lifted the package in her hands and tossed it over her shoulder to him. Kaneki fumbled to catch it, "Next time, take the back door or something. Anteiku helps ghouls discreetly."

The pangs of hunger that stabbed into his stomach were immense when the ghoul opened the packaging. He tore into the macabre meal.

As his side began to heal, the nineteen year old was finally able to think clearly and piece the facts together. It wasn't nighttime and it wasn't raining anymore. That meant...

Kaneki wiped his mouth on his wrist.

"Please tell me today's date," Kaneki cracked his right index finger, by then a comforting habit.

Her answer made his heart leap into his throat. It couldn't be.

...That was the day he went on his first date. A date with Rize Kamishiro.

Kaneki stumbled back, eyes wide. Was he dreaming? No, everything was too real.

Kaneki thought about Sen Takatsuki and his books, thought about that one odd story with the time loops in it. He thought about American TV shows, and he thought about the quinque that Hide had put in his hands.

Hide... He said that he knew about Kaneki. Maybe the quinque was supposed to help somehow.

Actually, where was the quinque? It wasn't on the bench, he knew there was no way he could have missed it.

"What year is it?"

"Do you live under a rock?" Touka asked, but she answered anyway. She stared at him strangely, focusing on his face.

And oh, things were starting to click into place. But these questions that were put to their grave only begot more questions.

Kaneki was in the past, somehow.

Man eating 'monsters', time travel... Once, it would have made him want to curl up in a ball. Instead, he wanted to laugh.

Kaneki remembered what his friend had said in those unraveled moments.
'Make things right'.

However this was happening, he had to go, didn't he? Because if he never went on that date with Rize, if someone stopped him, none of what happened would be that way. No one would be hurt because of him.

This was a second chance.

(And then what? He wondered. Without that day, the person he was then wouldn't even exist. Would he become his past self? Would he disappear?)

Kaneki turned towards the doorway of the meat storage room, throwing a hasty "I have to go," over his shoulder to Touka and darting out of the back rooms. He paid no mind to the people giving him strange glances when he burst into the public area of Anteiku.

Where would he have been at that time? Was he already out with Rize? No, that wasn't it. The Kaneki of the past was at his apartment getting ready.

The ghoul's feet carried him in a blur through a path that he used to know so well. Maybe it was to his death. It didn't matter, as long as he could save his human self, save his friends.

Kaneki wasn't a martyr, not anymore. This was his own, selfish wish. It wasn't 'I'd rather be hurt than hurt others'. It was 'I'd rather die than be alone'.

The pale blue apartment came into view, and Kaneki both wanted to walk faster and slow down.

This life... What would it really mean for him if he lost it? It was so easy to think back over his days and remember tragedy. In the story that was his life, the ink ran like blood.

He thought of Hide once again. If he was right, if he really was reversing the past, he hoped that his best friend could be happy with the Kaneki of the past.

All Kaneki could do was hope that he wasn't making a mistake. Time really wasn't something to play with. Maybe if his past self saw him, the world would come to a halt, broken by a breach in time. Or he really would disappear. It made his head hurt to think about.

Of all the things that Kaneki could lament, when thinking back... I wanted to be the best man at Hide's wedding. I wanted to teach Hinami more kanji.

Kaneki felt calm but regretful as he climbed the stairs. Whatever happened to him, he could accept it. It was the old Kaneki that his friends cherished, wasn't it? Not what he had become. It didn't matter if something happened to him.

Thank you, Hide... For accepting me. For helping me do this.

That first knock on his own front door would seal his fate, for better or for worse.
Kaneki didn't like the number seven. It was the number of sharp raps his knuckles rattled on the door anyway. He didn't like to think about why.

Doubt wasn't present all at once. It seeped into his bones slowly but certainly until he was left staring at the cheerfully colored door as if it would bite him. Life was not a book story, he decided then not for the first nor the last time, or else the door would open on the cue of his knocking. Books liked to glaze over the boring parts, after all.

If life was a book then it was the kind that you threw across the room.

Another set of knocks, harder this time, faster.

Nothing. Not the sound of footsteps, of a voice, of the slightest movement from inside. Kaneki tried the doorknob, not really expecting anything. To his surprise, it swung open.

Kaneki sighed and shook his head, mentally mouthing a mantra of *I won't kick my past self in the face, I won't*. But really, who left their door unlocked with ghouls around?

He stepped inside, surveying the room for a moment before shutting the front door. If he still had any doubts that this was his apartment, then they were gone, now. Because that was *his* copy of *The Black Goat's Egg* resting on the table, and *his* packaged burger on the counter.

When Kaneki walked further, it became obvious why the door hadn't been answered. He could hear the water cascading from the bathroom that indicated a shower was going.

Kaneki briefly entertained the idea of bursting into the washroom. He walked to his old bedroom instead. He could do without front row tickets to a showing of his past self's scrawny ass, or anything else for that matter.

A push of a bedroom door revealed memories. Kaneki remembered days and nights laying on that bed, counting bumps on the ceiling like they were braille, counting texts from Hide like they were for granted. He remembered panicking over the stains in the carpet when Hide and him got into a water gun fight—except the guns were filled with yogurt. Back when the idea of being shot with bullets was inconceivable.

And Kaneki remembered that white and red kitsune mask, the one that Hide bought for him for the upcoming festival... *Actually, wouldn't it be for the best if I put a mask on? That way, past-Kaneki won't recognize his own face on me. Things will go smoother.*

Kaneki nodded to himself and plucked the well-made mask from the corner of the room. He didn't have his old mask with him, having left it in the future, and his other mask only formed with his kakuja. He lifted it to his face and pulled the strap around the back of his head.

Kaneki moved to sit on the inexpensive bed and resisted the urge to bury his masked face in the pillow. It smelled like home and... Something delicious.

It wasn't very long at all before the door was being pushed open again.

Kaneki remembered a saying: that a person would never be able to see himself in anything but a photo or a reflection. And as his eyes settled on his own face, it left him feeling like he had just woken up from a falling dream.
The other Kaneki yelping broke the sensation.

"Who are you?"

_I can't say that my name is Kaneki, can I?_ Then... "Shiro."

He supposed that he was stuck with that name, from then on. Shiro laid back on the bed and put his hands behind his head to put Kaneki at ease. Hopefully he wouldn't try to hit him with a baseball bat or something equally stupid.

"If you'd sit down and listen, that would make things easier for the both of us," The ghoul made sure to keep his tone softer than Kaneki's, so that his voice wouldn't be suspicious.

Kaneki hesitated, fingers trembling minutely from their protective stance over his thin chest. He was wearing nothing but underwear.

"Did I stutter?"

"N-no," Kaneki warily inched his way into his bedroom. He settled right next to the door, tense and ready to run.

Shiro got straight to the point, "Don't go on your date today."

"I... What?" It was probably the last thing that Kaneki expected to hear out of his mouth, Shiro knew. He watched the eighteen year old scrunch his face up in bewilderment.

"You have a date with a ghoul named Rize Kamishiro. I think it's self-explanatory why you shouldn't go."

"What?" Kaneki asked again, clearly upset, "Rize is a very nice person! She... She even likes Sen Takatsuki's works. If you're her stalker or something, I'm not just going to-"

"I said," Shiro repeated calmly, "Rize is a ghoul."

Kaneki's breath was coming faster, after his little rant. He was so see-through, Shiro thought. It was too easy to tell that he was mad.

"Prove it. Prove that she is."

"...Don't you think I of all people would know?" Shiro pulled the mask down just enough to expose his eye, and he willed it to turn black and red, "Being a ghoul myself?"

Kaneki's eyes widened. He scrambled to his feet, "Stay away from me. I'll call the police."

"You could, but you're really not going to. You've opened the book, haven't you? You're not going to put it down until you find out what happens next."

Just like Shiro knew he would, Kaneki slowly sat back down, eyes still distrustful. Behind his mask, Shiro hid a small, triumphant smile.

"Here's what I want you to do. Don't go out at night. Stay with Hide at all times, _don't_ go into any alleyways," Shiro paused, then added as an afterthought, "and lock your damn door."

Kaneki furrowed his eyebrows, "Why do you care so much?"

"Let's just say that I have a self-beneficial interest in your safety."
There really wasn't much more to say, was there? Kaneki would do what he said. He wasn't stupid enough to believe that a ghoul would say that Rize was a ghoul if she wasn't. Shiro knew that Kaneki would think on it more, and eventually reach the conclusion that the ghoul was telling the truth.

His business there was done. Somehow, nothing strange or supernatural had occurred upon meeting Kaneki.

"Remember what I said," Shiro said simply. With that, he turned and left.

The weather didn't stay nice for very long.

After Shiro had left Kaneki's apartment, he found that he didn't really know what he should do. He wandered around, lost in his own thoughts. People steered clear of him and he steered clear of people. This was an unspoken agreement that he could agree on.

A drop of water hit the back of Shiro's hand, and he blinked up at the rapidly clouding sky. People were beginning to walk faster, complaining about how it had been so sunny earlier.

At least Shiro had swiped one of Kaneki's jackets on the way out the door. After all, he would have attracted too much attention wearing nothing but a skin tight body suit.

Shiro didn't feel like sloshing through puddles. He didn't feel like ducking into a store either. So instead, he sat on a bench, idly thinking that it had probably been a few hours since his conversation with Kaneki.

Shiro put his arm up on the back of the bench and rested his head on it.

*I'm alone,* Shiro thought absently, *No one knows me. Not the CCG, not Touka, not Tsukiyama...* 

Shiro felt the rain stop... But he could still hear it. He breathed in and with that breath came the scent of something familiar, something good. He blinked his eyes open tiredly and saw Kaneki in front of him, holding an umbrella over his head and staring at him shyly.

"What?" Shiro bit out irritably.

"You- you were getting wet. I thought..." Kaneki shook his head, suddenly taking on a determined expression, "Come home with me."

"Do you want me to eat you?" Shiro murmured half-heartedly.

"...No?" The damn fool said it like a question. Unlike earlier, Shiro noticed, he was dressed and wearing his cyan jacket. Kaneki's hand that wasn't holding the umbrella up was fidgeting, twisting and untwisting in the fabric of the hoodie, "Rize was going to eat me, right? Just call it repayment for
stopping me from going. You can stay with me for however long you need."

"I'm a *ghoul*.

"And you can't all be bad!" Kaneki interrupted, before looking away abashedly.

*I don't want to be alone.* No matter how strong Shiro wanted to be, he would never really escape his fear of abandonment. Not after his mother's death.

Shiro didn't think he could take it if even Kaneki walked away from him.

"Fine."

"What?"

"You heard me," Shiro stood and cracked his stiff neck before curling his hand into Kaneki’s jacket and literally dragging him in the direction of the apartment.

"I can walk by myself-!"

"You're too slow."

(Kaneki didn't say anything about the jacket.)

When they got to the apartment, Shiro dripping all over the carpets, Kaneki hurriedly tossed him a towel. Afterwards, he started to look like he had something stuck in his throat.

"Spit it out," Shiro said blankly, "Whatever you want to say, I really don't care."

"O-oh. Well... Could you please take a shower?" Kaneki looked sheepish.

Shiro remembered how he had taken refuge in the sewers. He probably smelled like shit.

"Right. I'm going to go use all your hot water," Shiro deadpanned.

Kaneki's eyes widened, and he reached after the ghoul, "W-wait, I have bills to pay-!"

Shiro slipped inside the bathroom and stifled a smile. Kaneki was strangely fun to mess with. No wonder Hide liked pulling his leg so much.

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Half an hour later, Shiro was laying backwards on Kaneki's bed. He was wearing the brunet's clothes, clothes that were a little too tight. (And if Kaneki's eyes lingered a little too long on his fit stomach every now and then, he paid it no mind. The human didn't know who he was, after all.)

Kaneki was in the kitchen, making coffee for the two of them. He had been surprised when Shiro had told him that ghouls could drink coffee.

Relaxing on a bed that smelled wonderful (*Really, it was no wonder Tsukiyama was always sniffing at him. And this was only what he had smelled like as a human. He wondered what he smelled like to others now*), letting someone else make him coffee... Shiro could get used to that. The ghoul felt a sleepy affection towards his past self just then. Despite his naivety, Kaneki wasn't so bad.

The nineteen year old was startled out of his thoughts by a faint buzzing noise. He looked towards the bedside table for the culprit, which turned out to be Kaneki's cellphone. Unable to resist
curiosity, he reached for it and looked at the caller ID.

*Unknown caller.*

Just with those words, Shiro felt apprehension weigh him down. It was nothing, he told himself. Just a telemarketer.

He answered anyway.

"*Kaneki! You never showed up for our date...*"
He answered anyway.

"Moshi moshi?"

"Kaneki! You never showed up for our date..." Rize's voice was subtly tinged with hurt. Towards the end of her words she added a soft quaver, as if she was going to cry.

*You're a good actress.*

Shiro took a deep breath and resolved not to drop the phone on the floor and grind it to pieces with the heel of his foot. He sat hunched over, unoccupied hand aggressively thrust into his jean pocket.

"I'm not Kaneki. For future reference, please keep away from him."

"Eeh?" Shiro could almost see Rize's pouting, and how she was twirling her hair around a finger, "What are you, his brother? You sound pretty similar."

Shiro thought fast. Rize was a binge eater, and not one to seek out a fight over food. If he just... 

"He's my dinner. I've had a claim on him long before you ever have."

"That's no fun. You're one of those gourmet types, right? How cute."

"Yes," Shiro glanced to the open door cautiously, "I've been preparing him for a long time."

"Have your pretty boy and eat him too, then!" Rize laughed. Shiro felt like raw sewage was being poured into his ear. Oh, how he hated that sound.

"Give me a call sometime, will you? Tell me how he tasted."

*You are what you eat,* Shiro wanted to spit, *and you, binge eater, are full of shit.*

The ghoul hung up instead. A nudge of the phone back where it was, and it was unnoticeable that it had ever been moved from its place.

The room filled up with the aroma of coffee shortly afterwards. Shiro watched Kaneki wobble in with the platter holding the cups in hand, his legs moving with the grace of a newborn deer. The cups were full and heavy, probably too heavy for the teenager's noodle arms.

"Never worked at Anteiku, huh?" Shiro mused, reaching for his own cup and bringing it to his lips. It was thin and more bitter than black coffee should be, the result of untamped coffee grounds and too much water. Cheap brand, too, but college would do that to you.
"What?" Kaneki's eyes flickered to Shiro, despite how distracted he was. The ghoul shook his head.

When Kaneki managed to manoeuvre the tray onto the bedside table, he took his mug and sat as far away from Shiro as possible. His earlier bravado in inviting the ghoul home with him had dissipated, and he once again seemed like he was ready to piss his pants if the other so much as looked at him oddly.

Even with the scent of fear underlying that of the coffee in the air, Shiro could still see seventy seven questions in the faint crease between Kaneki's eyebrows. The question marks were in the curves of his hunched in shoulders.

Kaneki kept gulping coffee because it was something to do, kept staring at Shiro. With his wide eyes and mouth with lips that were parted and turned down at the seams, Shiro wanted to tell him to stop looking like that while wearing his face.

"I'll bite," Shiro offered, before wincing at his own poor choice of words, "you have questions. I'll answer some."

Kaneki's hunched shoulders relaxed from their militant positions gradually, then all at once.

"Why have you been wearing my mask?"

Shiro didn't like lying, but the closest thing he could get to the truth... "I can't let you see my face."

"Is there something..." The human rolled his hands vaguely, as if he could pull a tactful word from the air, "Bad about your face?"

"Yes. It's ghoul tradition to wear a mask until one meets their lover. I don't think I'm ready for that kind of commitment with you, Kaneki..."

"Really?!"

"No."

Kaneki flushed and hung his head. Shiro really didn't care for candied words, but he couldn't help but feel like his sarcasm had kicked a puppy. He really did need to deflect the questions that he couldn't answer, though.

There was a soft silence that reigned before Kaneki spoke again.

"You talked about Hide, earlier..."

This time, the words caught Shiro off guard.

"I'm... A friend of his. But he wouldn't remember me."

"Hide?" Kaneki frowned, "Hide would never forget a friend."

"No," Shiro bit out, "even if I deserve it."

Shiro distantly stared into the inky surface of the coffee. Thinking about Hide, he didn't feel sad. He just felt empty. Even if (when) the ghoul saw Hide again, if he ever wanted that friendship back then he would have to build it all over again. It would still never be the same. He would never be the Kaneki that Hide knew and cared for.

Hide had been hurting too, hadn't he? Shiro remembered endless texts on his phone, clean slates that
"Nine hundred ninety three," Shiro didn't exactly wrap his arms around himself. It was more like he slammed shut the door that Kaneki had coaxed open.

Over the days, conversation fluxed and flowed like that between Shiro and Kaneki. There wasn't much to be done about it, when any word could be the one that dug a little too deep into Shiro's skin. Shiro could appreciate that it was a thin line Kaneki was treading—questions that meant something were the ones that would send him spiraling down into depression. On the other hand, questions like 'what's your favorite color?' were too insubstantial, too fragile and meaningless, or sometimes held the same risk.

Kaneki made the mistake of asking Shiro one of those personality quiz questions, once.

"Shiro? What did you want to be when you grew up?"

Shiro wasn't angry right away. He just grew stiller and stiller, until Kaneki glanced over his shoulder as if to check if he was still breathing.

*I wanted to be an author. I wanted to be a good person. I wanted to be a father to a little girl like Hinami.*

Shiro's chest hurt. Grief wasn't something immediate, like having his fingers wrenched off again and again. It was more like having splinters driven into his heart one by one until every breath hurt. He would forever remember his descent into what he was as a paper-cut death, one that bled every quixotic notion from him until he was acrid.

What right do you have to ask me that?

Anger on the other hand came out of nowhere, like bird shit dropping from the sky. Shiro rose from his seat on the couch and jerkily stalked over to an uneasy Kaneki. He wasn't seeing red, he was seeing nothing. He lifted a bare foot, placed it square against Kaneki's chest, and then kicked him out of the kitchen chair and on to the hard floor. The pained noise that spilled from Kaneki's lips didn't make Shiro feel any better. If anything, he felt more apoplectic.

Shiro straddled Kaneki's hips and wrapped his hands around the teenager's throat, watched his hands weakly scrabble against the vice grip on his neck.

"'M sorry," Kaneki coughed. Even with Shiro hurting him, the human didn't try anything violent, didn't claw his hands or knee him in the stomach. Because unlike him, violence wasn't in Kaneki's nature.

Shiro stilled when Kaneki's eyes became glassy with tears, probably a physical reaction rather than emotional. He loosened his grip but didn't move his hands, watched as Kaneki's chest heaved and he drank in gasping breaths, felt his pulse flutter like a bird's against his fingertips. The ghoul didn't want to see the marks he had left.

"I didn't want to be a monster, that's for certain," Shiro's voice was cold, "don't bother with someone like me."

The ghoul stood, stepped over Kaneki's prone body and shut himself away in the bathroom amidst cramped white.
A minute later, the doorknob rattled. Kaneki's voice rasped out, dismayed, "You locked the door...?"

"Well, one of us has to."

Neither of them talked about it, later, when Shiro wordlessly handed Kaneki a cold compress. Neither of them talked about it when Kaneki wore a scarf for the rest of the week, either.

On good afternoons, Kaneki would make quiet small talk, while Shiro would give one word answers. Sometimes Kaneki would read, and Shiro sat beside him and watched him. Kaneki looked at him strangely and offered him a book the first few times, before seeming to give up and accept Shiro being weird as a fact of life. They shared a quiet companionship.

Things would change, though.

Things would change when a loud crash resounded through the apartment, and the aroma of blood stained the air.

Chapter End Notes

I'm just gonna laugh when the next chapter totally isn't what you guys expect.
Finger Lickin' Good

Shiro was idly sitting on Kaneki's bed when he heard the sound of something breaking. In a flash, he was on his feet and running out the door, mind swimming to the worst conclusions.

*What if Rize attacked Kaneki?*

The ghoul remembered glasses breaking in Anteiku as he was slammed against counters, and he felt an even worse dread seize him.

*What if Jason attacked him?*

But when he rushed into the kitchen, where the sound had come from, Shiro just stared. Kaneki was sitting on the floor, wincing and clutching his bloody right shoulder, with the shards of a dish around him and on the counter.

"I... Broke a plate?" Kaneki offered sheepishly.

"How did you manage to hurt yourself so badly by *breaking a plate*?" Shiro hissed

"My favorite plate was on the highest shelf?"

Shiro felt his irritation draining away as he became distracted by the way the human smelled. He watched, transfixed, as blood dripped down his arm.

"Shiro?" Kaneki tilted his head to the side in that questioning way of his, before making as if to move.

"Hold still," Shiro walked towards the brunet and knelt beside him, ceramic crunching underneath his bare feet but not cutting his inhuman skin. He carefully removed the few pieces of plate that had landed on Kaneki, before easily lifting the teenager into his arms bridal style. He could feel the teenager shivering from the slight shock of the injury.

"Huh?" Kaneki startled, clutching onto the front of Shiro's shirt as if afraid that the ghoul would drop him, "I can walk..."

Shiro didn't even dignify that with a reply. He took short, brisk steps back to Kaneki's bedroom and carefully laid him down on the bed. He pulled a blanket up to the human's stomach before taking a black shirt out of their shared closet and pressing it against the wound.

"I'm going to get the medical kit," Shiro walked hurriedly to the bathroom. Out of sight, he slumped and pressed his forehead against the cool wall.

He shouldn't. He shouldn't. He *shouldn't*, but...

While removing the shards, Shiro had gotten Kaneki's blood on his fingers. He guiltily lifted one to his mouth and gave a tentative lick.

One of the many things that Shiro had learned about being a ghoul over time was that taste was really a much more intense feeling for them than for humans. It was a life and death matter, and most ghouls aside from binge eaters only ate the bare minimum of once a month.

When Kaneki's blood graced the ghoul's tongue, his mouth moved on its own to clean every last
drop off of his hand. He needed it, needed needed needed it like a relapsing addict. He let out a frustrated sigh and almost bit into his hand when there was no more, and felt his eye turn black.

Right. He should get back to Kaneki.

Shiro took out the medical kit that would wipe away the blood that he wanted so much. Maybe, he mused, he would keep the cotton that would soak it up. He immediately dug his black nails into his arms after the thought.

*No, I don't want to be like Tsukiyama...!*

He would control himself. He carried the first-aid kit back to the bedroom and held his breath.

"Wait," Kaneki extended his bloody hand to Shiro, and the ghoul's knees nearly buckled. *Why do you have to make this harder than it already is? "Ghouls like human blood, right?"

"Of course," Shiro eyed Kaneki warily, uncertain of what the question was leading to.

Kaneki smiled hesitantly, "Then... Want some?"

...Shiro's knees did buckle that time.

"I hate you," Shiro groaned, burying his masked face in his hands, "get over here right now or so help me..."

The brunet looked confused, but he complied, stumbling off the bed and then sitting in front of Shiro.

What Kaneki probably wasn't expecting was for Shiro to pull him forward so that he was kneeling over the ghoul's lap. He quickly wrapped his arms around the white-haired man's shoulders for balance, while Shiro's hands settled on the other's hips. Kaneki began a questioning sentence, but quickly lost it.

Shiro wasted no time in burying his mouth against Kaneki's shoulder. His mask fit there uncomfortably, but he didn't care. He parted his lips and licked, and felt Kaneki violently jolt.

It was so much better to taste the blood from its source, when it was warm and wet instead of thin and dry. It was so much better when the aroma of Kaneki was all around him, when their legs were touching and the human's hands were curling into the back of his shirt.

Pleased little hums escaping him, Shiro started to suck. Kaneki really wasn't bleeding that much, but the little that the ghoul did swallow felt like it warmed his chest.

Kaneki dipped his head down and drew in shuddery little breaths next to Shiro's ear, and that elicited an entirely different kind of reaction.

No. No. He couldn't be aroused by Kaneki's warm, damp breath against his ear, or the little ghosts of gasps that were slipping from his lips, how helpless he was or even his nails digging into his back. Even so, Shiro felt his skin warming, felt blood rushing somewhere else.

Shiro trailed his mouth upwards, past Kaneki's shoulder and up to his neck, where his natural scent was the strongest. The temptation to bite was overwhelming, so Shiro sucked, the soft skin bruising under his mouth.

*This is wrong, Shiro begged himself, pulling away, This is Kaneki, and this has been hurting him anyway.*
Or so Shiro thought, until Kaneki's hand curled in his white hair and pushed him against his bleeding shoulder again in a silent request for more. Shiro spread his legs wider for relief against the uncomfortable hardness in his jeans, which nudged Kaneki's knees apart until he slid forward.

Oh. Kaneki was just as hard.

The brunet whimpered, and Shiro felt something like violent butterflies in his stomach. He scrambled away from Kaneki and was on his feet in seconds, leaving the other sprawled awkwardly on the floor.

"I- I have to go," Shiro tripped over his words, not daring to look at Kaneki before he turned and ran.

He didn't stop running until he was far, far away from the apartment.

The first thing Kaneki Ken did when he heard the thud of the front door closing was shove his hand down his pants and get to business. The next, after he came in them harder than he had in years, was wonder what the heck just happened.

Eyelids heavy, Kaneki clumsily cleaned and bandaged his right shoulder. It hurt. It hurt a lot, actually, but at the same time the throb kind of felt good after... What Shiro had done.

Kaneki was too exhausted to put the kit away, so he left the supplies out and instead curled up on his bed. *Ugh, there's blood stains*... He turned the other direction and ignored them, then shucked his soiled pants.

Kaneki picked up his cell-phone and typed and retyped a text message to Hide. His face flushed as he tried to decide on how to write it without it being embarrassing.

*Do you think ghouls can get turned on by drinking somebody's blood?*

As Kaneki thought, Hide was most likely at home goofing off. The reply didn't take very long to arrive.

*Wahaha, Kaneki, I knew you were a pervert! Think of it this way: Imagine your girlfriend naked and laying on the bed covered in chocolate. Now imagine that you're a ghoul and the chocolate is blood. ;)*

Kaneki frowned and felt like his face was glowing from how hard he was blushing. *But I wasn't naked*...

*Hide! I'm not a pervert! Just... What if, say, a human and a ghoul were just friends and the human said the ghoul could have some of his blood?*

Kaneki restlessly tapped his fingers against his thigh and tried not to remember Shiro's tight grip on his hips. Actually, it felt like he would have bruises...

The thought probably shouldn't have appealed to him so much.

*That's an awfully detailed question... You don't have anything going on, right?*

Kaneki nearly dropped the phone, panic rising in him. He scrabbled for a good cover.

*Of course not, jeez. I was reading one of Takatsuki's books and it had a scene like that in it.*
Kaneki let out his held breath upon seeing the screen light up with a new text.

>You thought I was serious, haha! Of course you don't have anything going on with you, you have the most boring life ever.

Yeah, there was nothing to worry about. Goofy, oblivious, dorky Hide wouldn't catch on. He'd probably never realize that his best friend was living with a ghoul, Kaneki thought with a smile.

Another text came.

>But hey, if a ghoul got hot under the collar 'cause of that, it'd be because the human's smokin'. B) The human should stay safe, though. People might worry.

Kaneki buried his face in his pillow and whined loudly at the idea of Shiro thinking he was hot.

_I just wish he would let me see his face..._ Kaneki thought. He hoped that Shiro would come home soon, even if things would be awkward. Even though Shiro was kind of violent sometimes, and crabby and weird, Kaneki liked him. He knew that Shiro was kind, even if the ghoul would never admit it to himself.

_Hide, I'm gonna go. Sleep is calling._

_Sweet dreams, 'Neki. Don't let the tentacles fuck._

* *

If Shiro believed in miracles, he would say that one had happened in that no one had been around when he first ran outside. Any sane person, if they saw him, would have called the police. He had blood on his shirt, smeared on his cheek and staining his mask.

So the first thing he did was take his mask and shirt off to carry them in hand, before licking his palm to wipe away any blood on his face.

Shiro continued walking, this time getting many disapproving stares for his shirtless state. He didn't really care.

_Why did I let it get that far?_ Shiro cracked his fingers one by one and mumbled subtractions of seven. _I can't do something like 'that' with my past self. It's wrong._

But Kaneki was cute and naive and everything that Shiro wished he could still have. _He was halcyon days, embodied in a person._

Well, one thing was for sure, Shiro needed to obtain food. It wouldn't be good if he was going out every month to hunt, he might draw attention to himself. If he could get a regular supply, then things would be simpler.

An idea came to mind. Yoshimura still had the sugar cubes, and Shiro was sure that he'd be generous enough to give them to him free of charge. On top of that, he could ask if he knew anything about the quinque that had supposedly transported the ghoul to the past in the first place. Since he had began living with Kaneki, Shiro hadn't found anything out about it.

With determination and a tent in his pants, Shiro set out on a mission.
Shiro, with a long-suffering sigh, rested his head against the back wall of Anteiku and turned resigned eyes towards the sky.

_Yoshimura knew literally nothing about any strange quinques... And it's not like I could bring up the subject of time travel, either._

Shiro glanced down to the bag with its drawstrings dangling from his fingers. At least he had gotten the cubes. The manager had offered him a job at Anteiku, as the ghoul had expected, but it was too risky. He couldn't take that job, when there was too much chance of repeating history.

Shiro shoved a hand into his pocket and began to walk aimlessly, weariness and agitation forming an itch under his skin. He couldn't go home, not when he knew there was a disaster waiting for him. (At some point, Shiro had started calling it home... He didn't know what to think of that.)

He felt exhaustion as an ache creeping at the back of his skull. He really just wanted to curl up on the couch, which he had firmly established as where he would sleep from the start, and be done with the world for a few months. He wondered if Kaneki would even let him back in, after what happened. Maybe he hated the ghoul.

Shiro didn't quite notice that he was wandering into a shut off area until it was too late. On the shady pathway that he had stumbled into, skewed shadows of trees covered a gruesome sight.

_A ghoul was desperately tearing into a human woman. But there was another smell..._

The white haired ghoul hissed a curse under his breath and ducked into an alleyway. Approximately four seconds later, a hooked quinque shot out and impaled the feeding ghoul. Blood sprayed the sidewalk. Shiro shuffled behind a trashcan and held his breath, blood pounding.

As the quinque pulled back, the ghoul fell to the ground. The plain looking man's kagune shot out and he stumbled to his feet like a ragdoll with blood dripping from the hole in his stomach.

Shiro's heart pounded as the battle progressed, with the ghoul gradually losing against the investigator. Slowly, the battle began to move away from the woman, who was making pitiful gurgling noises. When he judged the moment was right, he made a mad dash out of the alleyway and far away from the grotesque scene. He didn't look back.

As much as Shiro dreaded having to face Kaneki again... He would rather have an awkward encounter than be dead. Home it was.

Disturbed, Shiro kept his head low on the way back. He had never come into contact with the CCG of this timeline before. It was a macabre reminder that he had to keep Kaneki and himself safe.

As Shiro approached the apartment door, he pulled his mask back on.

Shiro pulled the door open and with the first step inside came the smell of coffee. He shut it behind him and watched a sleepy Kaneki rub at his eyes and wait for the coffee machine to drip, unaware that the other was there.
There were two cups on the counter.

Even after all that happened, even after Shiro had run out on him like that, Kaneki still expected him to come home. Kaneki would still make shitty coffee for him.

The answering rush of affection was overwhelming, and with it several other emotions broke the dam of his stoicism. Shiro could see messy bandages trailing a little ways down from Kaneki's sleeve, and it was a knife in his chest with messy guilt dripping down. He hadn't been there to help. The ghoul curled his fingers, feeling them aching with the need to touch the human, check that he was okay. Knowing Kaneki, it wouldn't have surprised Shiro if he had forgotten to disinfect his injury.

And even though he had hated him for it for so long, Shiro couldn't help but forgive Kaneki for being who he was. All it really meant was that Shiro would have to try harder to protect him.

Against his better judgement, Shiro stepped forward quietly until he was behind the brunet. He slipped his mask to the top of his head and leaned forward, burying his uncovered nose against the crook of Kaneki's neck and wrapping his arms around his waist.

"Sh... Shiro?"

It felt so much better to just press his unmasked face to Kaneki's warm skin, feel him start to blush. There was something tender, something soft about embracing him like that.

"I still think you're an idiot," Shiro mumbled.

Kaneki tried to turn and glimpse Shiro's face, but the ghoul gripped his chin, turned it back towards the coffee machine and said, in a tone that was anything but a request, "Hold still."

Kaneki froze. In that moment, Shiro stepped back and pulled his mask back down. Disappointment showed on the brunet's face, but it was quickly overshadowed by relief. He peered over his shoulder, "You're home."

Shiro nodded. He wasn't quite sure what to say, when it seemed like Kaneki was trying to tread cautiously.

"I made coffee..."

Shiro eyed the coffee cups that Kaneki gestured to warily, "I don't know if I'd call that cheap shit 'coffee'."

"It's not that bad," Kaneki's lips turned down in what he would no doubt refuse was a pout.

To prove his point, Shiro raised his eyebrows and lifted the mug filled with black coffee to his lips. He took a sip, and abruptly poured the rest of it down the kitchen sink, "Let me teach you how to make it properly."

Shiro set down the bag full of cubes on the counter, watched as Kaneki stared at it and asked, "What's that?"

"My food."

Morbid curiosity spread across Kaneki's face even as he looked vaguely disgusted. Shiro rolled his eyes behind his mask, "No, there's not a bloody human organ in there. They're coffee cubes."
"...Oh," Kaneki flushed, and Shiro could practically feel secondhand embarrassment, radiating from the glow of his cheeks.

Kaneki hesitated, then asked in a breathy voice that was really kind of cute, "Are we... Okay?"

Shiro just smiled lightly, and that was answer enough, "Get your ass over here and let me educate you."

* *

"Can't you cover that up?"

"Cover what up?"

"The thing."

"What thing?"

"The goddamn hickey," Shiro hissed. He lost his patience, not that he had ever held on to it very tightly those days, and pinched his middle finger and thumb together to flick Kaneki right where the bruise was. It was kind of intimidating how purple it was, kind of intimidating in how it reminded Shiro that he had literally marked the human.

"Ow," Kaneki winced and rubbed at his neck, before mumbling, "you were the one that gave it to me, you butt..."

"You want to repeat that?" Shiro raised his eyebrows. Kaneki sat up straight and yelped out a no, he did not, and would Shiro please not strangle him.

Shiro's lips curved at the corners. Despite his growing fondness for his past self, it was still one of his favorite pastimes to keep Kaneki on his toes.

The hickey really was irritating, though. It wasn't like Shiro meant to abuse Kaneki's neck, it just kept happening. The choking incident was bad enough, and from what the ghoul had heard it had been pretty difficult to keep Hide from pulling Kaneki's scarf off when they were at college.

So, plan B.

Shiro got up from the couch with no explanation. When he came back, it was with gauze, tape and scissors. He knelt beside Kaneki on the cushions and explained, "You were hit by a golf ball, got it?"

Kaneki nodded and tilted his head to the side to give easier access to his neck and... Well, that was distracting.

Shiro was starting to hate himself a little. He had tamped down those kinds of thoughts and wants since Aogiri Tree in the need to be stronger, and Kaneki of all people was becoming the one to reawaken them. His neck was all smooth, languid lines, warm pulse and pale skin. Shiro wanted to watch drops of blood pool in the dip between his collarbones.

It wasn't anything romantic, Shiro thought honestly, it was just that licking Kaneki's cut that day had been one of the most erotic things he'd done with someone. It was a psychological thing, probably. He was associating Kaneki with arousal or something.

Ever since the ghoul had offered to teach Kaneki how to make proper coffee, he had started waking him up in the morning with different types of coffee: iced coffee, black coffee, cafe au lait, lattes and
more. It was a unique kind of torment and made Shiro feel kind of depraved when his eyes lingered as Kaneki stretched. His shirt would often slide up, exposing a pale stomach that was almost feminine except for the trail of hairs leading down from his navel. He would make soft little noises, too, cheeks flushed from sleep.

Shiro cut the gauze and taped it over the hickey, feeling a little bit disappointed when it disappeared behind the dull white.

Yeah, Shiro groaned internally, I'm officially gross.

And then the front door opened, briefly letting in sunlight, and Shiro froze.

"Yo, Kaneki! Who's this?"

Shiro's hands dropped to his lap as his eyes drifted from bleached blond hair down to a grinning face. There was Hide, spare key dangling from his finger. The ghoul's stomach lurched.

"A-ah..." Kaneki glanced at Shiro like they had been caught red-handed doing something they shouldn't, "A friend."

"The ghoul friend you gave some blood to?" Hide asked cheerfully, as if this was an everyday question. Shiro shot a horrified look towards Kaneki, ready to be furious because he had to have told Hide- except that Kaneki looked just as confused and horrified.

"W-wh-what?" Kaneki squeaked, face becoming blotchy with a blush.

"Oh, come on, man. It's kind of obvious that it wasn't a scene from Takahatsu's book."

"Takatsuki," Kaneki corrected automatically, before making frantic shushing motions in Hide's general direction while casting nervous glances towards Shiro.

Shiro couldn't even find it in himself to be all that angry, not with the overlying shock of seeing Hide once again. What's he going to do? Will he report me to the CCG? How much does he know about ghouls, even?

"So?" Hide stepped closer, peering at Shiro with both curiosity and caution, "What's your name?"

It was in a hoarse voice that the ghoul murmured, "Shiro."

"I'm Hideyoshi Nagachika," Hide offered his hand and gave that blinding grin of his, and it was history all over again, "But you can call me Hide."

"I'm Hideyoshi Nagachika," They were in kindergarten. Kaneki was that one weird kid who didn't sing along to the abc's, and Hide was the one that everybody loved. Kaneki already knew his name, because everybody sang it. At recess, Hide had snuck away from all the people crowding him and wound up where Kaneki liked to sit, "Just call me Hide. What's your name?"

"Um, Ka... Kaneki," The little boy stared down at his shoes, feeling horrible. He hated being shy. He hated how he couldn't even get his name out right. It made him look stupid. Kids usually didn't pay attention to him, but one time a girl had said that if a ghoul attacked, he would be the first to be eaten.

"Kaneki, huh?" Hide beamed, "Will you be my friend?"

"Me?" Kaneki's eyes widened. He felt warm and excited all of a sudden.
"Mmhm. Can I tell you a secret?" Hide waited for Kaneki to nod before continuing, "I don't like the others, they're mean. But you're really nice."

"Okay," Kaneki nodded seriously, "Let's be friends."

Swallowing hard, Shiro took Hide's hand and shook it.

"You're... Not going to report him?" Kaneki asked uneasily.

"Have a little more faith in me," Hide scoffed teasingly, before slinging an arm over the brunet's shoulders protectively and looking more guarded, "Shiro, make sure you don't hurt my best friend."

"I won't," Shiro said simply. He pushed down the twinge of pain that came from Hide's words.

"Good," Hide settled on the couch between the human and ghoul and stared at Shiro, obviously fascinated. It made Shiro feel kind of uncomfortable, "So what's with the mask?"

"I'd... Prefer not to answer that."

"Then is it true that ghouls have tentacles?" Hide pressed.

"Hide! Don't ask him something like that," Kaneki flailed. If his blush had faded before, it was fast returning. Shiro blinked, wondering how Hide could have known that when information on ghouls wasn't made very public, but then he remembered. Oh, right. Hide had hacked into a CCG investigator's blog and read his messages sent to another official, back then.

Shiro nodded and gestured to his lower back, "They come out of here. For me, at least."

"Can I see?!" Hide leaned forward, face lit up like a child's on Christmas morning. Kaneki buried his head in his hands and murmured "Hide, no," at the same time that Shiro remembered that one tentacle porn magazine he had found under his friend's bed.

Even still, he's never been good at saying no to Hide. After closing the blinds and locking the front door, Shiro sat sideways and faced Hide and Kaneki on the couch, then lifted his shirt up a little bit so that the kagune wouldn't tear it, "You can look, just don't touch."

Traces of red flickered in the air, before the rinkaku began to form. Hide leaned over to watch, transfixed. Kaneki looked equally amazed. It didn't take long for the kagune to fully shape itself and curl around the ghoul.

"It's so cool," Hide murmured, turning to Kaneki with a serious look on his face, "Kaneki. Kaneki, it's official. Shiro is our new best friend."

The statement had Shiro's kagune twitching in reaction. He felt that same sort of warmth he had felt so many years ago. It seemed rather odd, he thought, that Hide had chosen to accept him so quickly. But then again, Hide had always been perceptive about whether or not he could trust people, Shiro knew now. He was just good at making himself look oblivious.

Kaneki smiled, seeming glad that Hide and Shiro were getting along well. They celebrated the occasion with pizza and Shiro felt like a little piece of himself had been fixed.

Shiro traced a black nail over the calendar on the wall, eyes dull. Four days until an x would mark an important anniversary.
He would have to get flowers.

Chapter End Notes

I'm sorry. All I've ever wanted in life is Hide being a pervy dork about kagune.

Also!! I just wanted to say thank you to everyone who's commented and left kudos on this, I'm so happy that this story has been so successful. The next kudo I get will be the 200th!

To the people I haven't replied to in the comments, it's not because I don't love you guys :( it's just that a lot of the comments only say 'I like this, please continue', and I don't want to get really repetitive and reply thank you again and again. So here's a giant thank you to you all <333
It was the day that Kaneki's mother had died.

It set in slow, a sort of lethargy. Gone was the usually comfortable atmosphere of the apartment, replaced by a sort of grim anticipation. The walls didn't seem unpainted, anymore. They seemed bone white.

The night before, both Shiro and Kaneki had gotten rather quiet as the evening wore on. Kaneki sat with his nose in a book but his eyes didn't move. Shiro thought it was likely that he was staring at a single word.

Instead of goodnights they exchanged nods before going to bed. Shiro sat on the couch, curled in a position that would look uncomfortable to anyone else. Wrapped up in his own grief, Kaneki didn't seem to notice that the ghoul was suffering too.

Shiro often had nightmares, but that night he wasn't the only one.

In the morning, Shiro made the most bitter espresso he could and chugged it, letting it scald his tongue. After that, he distantly prepared Kaneki's mug the way he liked it; chocolate, sugar and cream with a little bit of coffee. He knocked on Kaneki's door seven times and then padded in.

As he expected, Kaneki was already sitting up, dark circles underneath his eyes and lips turned down at the corners. His hair was a mess born of tossing and turning, and his night shirt was rumpled.

"You look like shit," Shiro mused, thrusting the warm, turquoise mug at Kaneki. Kaneki didn't say anything, because he became quiet when depressed. Shiro talked instead of shutting up, because if he didn't then he would hear his own screams in his ears.

"...Thanks," Kaneki finally mumbled. He drank an infinitesimal sip of his coffee, but his eyes remained dull and uncomfortable to look at.

Shiro wouldn't ask if he was okay. It was among the stupidest questions that anyone could ask.

"I don't know what's bothering you, but it wasn't your fault."

It was like throwing rocks at a brick wall and hoping it would move it.

* 

In the afternoon, Shiro put on his shoes and a jacket, pulling the hood far over his head to cover his masked face. The idea was to come home before Kaneki went out, but there was still the chance that he might run into him.

The ghoul left a brief note on the door, then grimaced at how his handwriting was too similar to Kaneki's. It couldn't be helped.
He was going to visit his mother's grave.

It was still hot outside, despite the promise of autumn. Shiro thrust his hands as deep in his pockets as they would go and walked along a back route to the cemetery.

With how hectic things had been... It felt like it had been so long since he had last visited her. The ghoul picked flowers along the way, supposing that she would have liked them better than any careful arrangement from a shop.

The tombstones rose from the grass in neat rows. Shiro pinpointed where his mother's was and perched down by it, carefully laying the odd assortment of flowers down. He took off his mask respectfully.

"Hey," Shiro whispered hoarsely.

And then he fell silent, because there was nothing he could say to his mother that wouldn't be a desecration. He hadn't finished his college years. He didn't have a job. He hadn't met a special someone. God, he wasn't even human anymore.

Kaneki would be the one to make her proud. But Shiro...

_I've lost who I am._

He stared at his mother's name engraved on the tombstone and wished he had a pretty speech prepared to make everything right. Instead, all he had was the palpitations of his heart and a lump in his throat.

It hurt. It felt like Shiro's body was too small for the crescendo in his chest. He wanted to break, wanted to combust, wanted to fall apart into a thousand little pieces and let someone else pick up the fucking pieces for once in his life.

It wasn't like Shiro hadn't had time to come to terms with his mother's death. It was more like he was grieving all of his losses in that moment.

He was kind of tired of everything being horrible.

Shiro stood and put his mask back on. He had nothing more to give. Even the prettiest speech wouldn't make everything right, wouldn't bring her back to life. Even flowers would just rot there.

He turned to leave but then there were footsteps behind him, a bewildered voice calling out, "Shiro? Is that you?"

And Shiro just wanted to laugh so hard, because apparently absolutely nothing could go right.

"Yeah."

"What the hell?" Kaneki's voice sounded injured, betrayed, "What are you doing here?"

Shiro said nothing.

"This is personal," Kaneki hissed. Shiro just stayed quiet, until he heard the human's steps behind him. And then there were hands on the ghoul's shoulders, spinning him around to face his past self, "Look, I've respected that you don't want to talk about yourself, but this is my mom. You have no right to be here because there's no way that you knew her-"
Shiro thought that Kaneki must have believed that only he, as her precious son, was allowed to pay respects to her, and he just-

"Get your hands off of me-"

"Just give me something, anything. Throw me a bone, here! I've had enough of how you think you're so much better than me-"

Shiro's hands shot out and he pushed Kaneki. The brunet stumbled backwards, eyes wide before they narrowed. Shiro turned to walk away, seething.

What the ghoul wasn't expecting was for Kaneki to literally throw himself at him. The sudden weight threw him crashing into a tombstone, forcing the breath out of him as it slammed into his stomach.

Shiro wanted to kill Kaneki.

Heart slamming in his chest, Shiro picked himself up and pushed Kaneki down to the ground. In seconds, he was on top of him. He punched Kaneki in the face, felt his fist connect with the human's cheek. It wasn't enough, he needed to make Kaneki hurt-

Coughing out a pained sound, Kaneki desperately jabbed his elbow into Shiro's nose. Behind his mask Shiro felt pain explode in his nose and heard ringing in his ears. He stumbled back with his hand under it, felt hot blood drip down his fingers. Fueled by rushing adrenaline, he flung himself back at Kaneki and scratched at whatever he could.

And then Kaneki threw his knee up to kick Shiro in the nuts, and the next thing the ghoul knew he was curled up on the ground drawing in pained gasps because that hurt.

When the pain finally receded, Shiro just lay on his back. Kaneki stared at him, and out of all the things he could do...

He started laughing.

"Oh my God you look ridiculous-" Kaneki was doubled over where he sat, eyes wet with how hard he was laughing. And Shiro just stared and stared until his own lips started quirking up.

Kaneki's cheek was turning a weird color and swelling up, and there were scratch marks all over his neck.

"Pfft- so do you," Shiro couldn't help but start to chuckle too. It was stupid and not even all that funny, but he just couldn't stop.

And so they just laid there like idiots and laughed.

Shiro felt a few last chuckles escaping from his lips before he stood up and offered Kaneki his hand. The human took it, and the ghoul pulled him up.

"Home?"

"Sure," Kaneki smiled, "I'll come back here later."

...Kaneki took two steps and then abruptly crumpled back down to the ground, wincing and gritting his teeth.

"That's what you get for fighting a ghoul," Shiro watched exasperatedly, "I'm stronger. You're just lucky that I didn't bring my kagune out, I could have killed you."
"You wouldn't have," Kaneki just looked at Shiro trustingly, and something in that was painful.

"Stand up again," Shiro ordered. This time, when the brunet stood on unsteady feet, Shiro effortlessly picked him up bridal style.

"You can't do this every time I get hurt," Kaneki chided, arms tight around Shiro.

"Well, someone has to make sure you don't get yourself killed."

It was silent for a while after that. Shiro took the back route once again, that way no people were around to stare at them. Kaneki eventually pillowed his head on Shiro's shoulder, his soft hair tickling the ghoul's cheek. With Kaneki so close and smelling so nice, the ghoul struggled against the urge to pull the other closer, tip his chin up and bite into his neck.

"Kaneki?"

The human gave a drowsy murmur.

"I'm nineteen. I grew up in Tokyo. I don't like to read books, because it reminds me of the past. I'm a virgin-

"What?" Kaneki blinked, "Why are you saying this all of a sudden?"

"You wanted to know more about me, didn't you?"

Kaneki's eyes widened, and then he smiled brightly up at Shiro.

And so Shiro spent the rest of the walk home telling Kaneki about himself. Even if it wasn't the major details, it was something.
Shiro needed information.

The ghoul had spent far too long just biding his time with Kaneki and occasionally Hide. It was time to take action.

At midnight, when Kaneki had been in bed for long enough to be asleep, Shiro crept out of the house and locked the door behind him. It was cool and dark outside, lit only by a sliver of moon. The ghoul confidently strode along the shadiest paths from the apartment, trespassing on what he could smell was other ghouls' territory.

Shiro remained hyper aware, kagune ready to shoot out at the slightest hint of danger. His eyes darted back and forth, his left already turned to black and red.

Near an abandoned building, he found what he was looking for. Three male ghouls who looked like rowdy college students were chortling obnoxiously, lazily kicking around a dying middle aged man. The scent of blood hung thick in the air. *Disgusting.*

Shiro stepped closer. One ghoul looked over his shoulder, calling out a wary warning to the other two, and then they all turned.

One of them, tall and lanky with an ukaku type kagune, stared at him in a clearly hostile way, "What d'you want? This is my territory."

"I want information," warning bells chimed in the crack of Shiro's index finger.

"Information? Ha, you can't *eat* information. Dumbass," another, with a koukaku, sniggered. His laugh sounded like chalk grating against a board. It was annoying. It pissed Shiro off.

Shiro tilted his head and cracked a serene, half-lidded smile, "I don't think with my stomach, unlike a pig such as you."

"You two just gonna take this?" The third, another koukaku type, snapped. He was too predictable, feet too heavy when he charged towards Shiro.

Shiro felt the bloodlust surging in him. His rinkaku ripped free of his back and he gracefully sidestepped the rushing ghoul at the last moment, caught him by the arm and shoved him to the ground with his foot on his back.

A single, harsh pull and the arm was dislocated. Koukaku Two screamed, body thrashing, and Shiro almost threw his head back and moaned from the rush of glee he felt.

The two other ghouls readied to sneak behind Shiro. *As if I don't notice.* Shiro swung his foot off the
ghoul's back and pulled him up by the arm, before he threw him at Ukaku and Koukaku One.

Koukaku One jerked his kagune up just before the body would have hit them. The metallic koukaku, shaped as a drill, impaled the other ghoul on it. He let out a faint gurgle and slumped over it. Koukaku One stared with his mouth gaping, eyes horrified, and shook his dead friend off of the kagune.

Shiro's smile widened.

The remaining koukaku user pointed a shaking finger at the white haired ghoul, terrified gibberish spilling from his mouth, before he turned to run.

Too late~! A strand of Shiro's kagune wrapped around his ankle and dragged him back, before another wormed its way into his mouth. Ukaku was frozen in place, unable to look away even as Shiro slammed his kagune up through the roof of the koukaku user's mouth before curving it to pierce into his brain. When he withdrew the tentacle, it was covered in blood, mucus and viscera. The ghoul lay twitching on the ground, blood pooling from his mouth.

Shiro shivered in delight, Rize there in his manic grin and Jason there in the curl of his fingers.

"Oh my God," The last ghoul whispered, falling on his ass and scrambling backwards, "oh my God, you're getting off on this."

Shiro brought the fine point of his gory kagune to the ukaku user's throat. He perched down in front of him, "I want information."

"I d-don't k-know anything," he stuttered. Shiro gently lifted the other ghoul's hand, holding it by the wrist.

"There are fourteen phalanges in one hand, twenty-eight in both. Will you scream when I break them one by one?"

"Pl... Please!" The ghoul begged, "What do you want to know?"

"I want to know if there's any special quinques around."

"Quinques? I-I don't know," his eyes widened as Shiro sighed, reaching for the ghoul's fingers, "wait, wait! There's, uh, a name going around the streets. A chick, she's getting well known real quick, maybe she'd know. Calls herself Mother Time."

Mother Time. That was all Shiro remembered before he felt the overwhelming want to drag the ghoul's intestines out and feast.

And oh, he feasted all right.

\*\*

Kaneki rubbed at his eyes, groaning as he heard persistent knocking at the door. Who was knocking at, what, two in the morning? Kaneki just wanted to sleep.

Kaneki stumbled out of bed, clumsily pulling on his pants before padding to the door. He unlocked and opened it.

What he had not been expecting was for a bloody Shiro to fall on top of him, knocking them both to the floor.
"Shiro?!” Kaneki panicked, wide awake all of a sudden.

"Dropped my keys..." Was all Shiro murmured, before he fell unconscious.

*Oh God,* there was blood everywhere. On Shiro's mask, his clothes, his hands, even in his hair. Shiro was hurt, he had to be hurt really bad for there to be that much blood. Kaneki squirmed out from underneath the ghoul and closed the front door, before pressing fingers to his neck. Shiro's pulse was slow and steady, and his breathing was deep and even.

*What am I supposed to do? I can't stop the bleeding if I can't tell where it's coming from!*

Kaneki frantically ran his fingers over Shiro's body, but he couldn't find any injury. There were no tears in the shirt he was wearing or anything.

*Uh... A bath. If I get all the blood off then I'll be able to see where it's coming from.*

The only problem was getting Shiro there. With a determined expression, Kaneki got behind the ghoul and wrapped his arms around him, under his armpits and over his chest. He half-dragged his friend to the bathroom, back aching with the strain of it. He had broken out in a sweat by the time he propped Shiro up against the bathtub.

It was two in the morning and it wasn't like Hide was going to barge in, but Kaneki abruptly realized that a bath would equal... Shiro. Naked. So he shut the door, face red.

Kaneki pulled Shiro's shirt up, struggling to get it over his head. It revealed bare, uninjured skin, and the human breathed a sigh of relief. He didn't notice Shiro starting to slip down the bathtub until he pulled his sneakers off.

And then Shiro slipped down and hit his head not once, but twice, on the bathtub lip and the floor. Kaneki squeaked and cringed away, guilty and hoping that Shiro wouldn't wake up and murder him. He felt mortified.

Moments passed and Shiro didn't wake up and murder him, so Kaneki returned to undressing him. It felt weird to lean over Shiro's unconscious body and unbutton his pants with shaking hands. He felt like a pervert.

There were no lower injuries, either. So that meant... *It's not his blood?*

Despite the unease Kaneki felt as he wondered where the blood had come from, or rather who, he was relieved. *I guess he still needs a bath, though.*

Stalling for time, Kaneki took off Shiro's socks instead of his underwear, tossing them into the pile of discarded clothing by the sink. He briefly considered taking off the mask, but decided to respect Shiro's wishes. The brunet looked away as he hooked his fingers in Shiro's briefs and removed them.

*Oh my God Shiro is naked and helpless-*

Kaneki sneaked a peak out of the corner of his eyes and then buried his warm face in his hands. But it didn't really matter, because he was going to have to get Shiro in the bathtub and there was really no way that he could not see everything.

Kaneki managed to seat himself in the tub and pull Shiro over and... Right up against him.

*Oh,* Kaneki thought dazedly, *his butt is soft.*
Reluctantly, the brunet pushed the ghoul off himself and went to sit beside the bath. He turned the water on and added shampoo for bubbles.

Shiro was really, really distracting. Kaneki had to restrain himself from letting his eyes drop down to the sharp jut of his hips. The human blinked at the ghoul's stomach, curiosity piqued by the thin and precise scar there.

After rinsing Shiro's hair multiple times to get most of the blood out, Kaneki pulled the other teenager close so that his back was to his chest and began to wash it. It felt nice to run his soapy fingers through it. Even while the ghoul's hair was dirty, he could still feel how soft it was.

It felt intimate.

And then Shiro sort of turned his cheek into Kaneki's palm while he slept, and the brunet's heart did a pirouette en pointe. With nervous lips, Kaneki pressed a tentative kiss to the crown of Shiro's head.

A realization was dawning on him slowly and steadily. His pulse thrummed like birds in his wrists as he dried his hand and fumbled a text on his phone.

*Hide, I think I have a crush on Shiro.*

Chapter End Notes

Please let me know if I got anything about the kagune wrong! Like I said, I haven't read the manga and the anime really doesn't give much information on them.
Kaneki woke up before Shiro, for once.

Oddly enough, it wasn't restlessness or noise that woke him. Instead, it was the lack of soft sound from the kitchen. There was no whir of the coffee machine, no mocha aroma sweetening the apartment.

Kaneki laid in bed for maybe half an hour, time blurring at its seams, before he pulled on jeans. He felt oddly peaceful as he pushed his bedroom door open and stole towards the kitchen. Saturday mornings always left his eyes bright.

The college student was met with the sight of Shiro stumbling barefooted about the kitchen, seemingly trying to make coffee. It was funny to watch the ghoul be so clumsy, when he was usually in perfect control of himself. He moved how Kaneki imagined a fighter or a dancer would.

But Kaneki liked this Shiro, white hair mussed, harsh lines of his mouth softened and the vague grey behind his mask half-lidded and bleary. He felt like he could catch up to Shiro, when he was like this.

Kaneki would have liked to say that he didn't laugh when Shiro walked straight into the fridge, he would never, except that a soft snicker gave him away.

Shiro, startled by the sound, turned to look at Kaneki. His lips curved down into a frown that was suspiciously similar to a pout, "I meant to do that."

Kaneki smiled, pointed to the cup in Shiro's hand, "Did you mistake the fridge for the coffee machine?"

"Don't make me mistake you for a burger," Shiro grumbled, but there was no threat in it.

Kaneki felt a rush of warmth, soft and tender. He wanted to embrace Shiro, comb his hair back into place with his fingers. It came as a startled remembrance that, oh yeah, I like Shiro.

"You want to make the coffee?"

Kaneki nodded, taking the cup from Shiro. If his fingers lingered over the ghoul's a little too long, well, no one could blame him. He busied himself with coffee, occasionally looking over his shoulder as if to check with Shiro that he was doing everything right.

Shiro pulled himself up on the counter and sat, hand lazily curling over his jaw. When the coffee was done, Kaneki passed Shiro's cup to him with tense fingers and watched him closely as he took the first sip.

"It's good," Shiro conceded, and Kaneki let out his held breath.

A shy but proud smile lingered on Kaneki's lips as he sipped his own cup. It was good, but he liked it better when Shiro made it.

Shiro snorted softly then, and lifted a finger to beckon the brunet closer. When Kaneki was in front of him, he ruffled his hair.

"What was that for...?"
"Nothing," Shiro huffed a laugh, and Kaneki thought there was an inside joke somewhere in his words, "you just remind me of myself."

There was a comfortable silence after that, Shiro sitting on the counter and Kaneki leaning against the stove while both of them drank coffee.

Kaneki thought about his conversation with Hide.

Hide, I think I have a crush on Shiro.

Kaneki, it's fuck-my-life in the morning. Please don't tell me you just woke up from a wet dream about him. uw(uw)

This is serious!

Are you pregnant? Is Shiro on fire? Then LET ME SLEEP, man. I already knew you wanted his d.

...Hide, you're the worst.

I'll talk to you tomorrow if you're still serious, okay? Call me.

Kaneki flushed at the memory. Was it really that obvious? Looking back on the previous night, though, he still didn't know why Shiro had fainted or why he had even been outside of the apartment in the first place. Or... Who he had killed.

"So about last night..." Kaneki began, fingers coming up to touch his chin.

Shiro looked away abruptly, something akin to shame in his expression, "Can we not talk about that?"

"Were they innocent?" Kaneki asked simply.

Shiro shook his head, seeming alarmed by the question probably until he remembered that he had blood all over him when he came home.

"Then don't feel guilty," it was easy for Kaneki to say, but he would be selfish for once and just want Shiro to feel better.

Kaneki thought he heard Shiro murmur thank you, but he was never quite sure.

* 

Kaneki was sitting on the couch reading a book when Shiro started to do the weird thing again.

'The weird thing' being staring at him intensely. The ghoul wasn't even reading over his shoulder, it was more like he was trying to read Kaneki.

Three chapters in, Kaneki felt a weight on his shoulder. He blinked, face heating up as he realized that Shiro had fallen asleep on him. He tentatively wrapped his arm around the sleeping ghoul. Shiro's breaths were soft and even, and Kaneki could feel them against his collar.

Shiro hadn't been getting enough sleep lately, had he? Kaneki could hear him having nightmares every night, sometimes doing that odd thing where he would count backwards from a thousand by sevens. He wanted to help, but he didn't know how. He wondered if Shiro would fall into a nightmare again.
Startlingly though, Shiro slept blissfully on against Kaneki.

Kaneki glanced down at Shiro's slightly parted lips. They looked really soft. He brought a hand up and traced his bottom lip with a thumb, feeling the ghoul stirring a little bit.

When Kaneki's back started to hurt from the position, he moved back and laid down, pulling Shiro down on top of him so that the ghoul's face was buried in the crook of his neck.

The book dropped to the floor, forgotten, and the two slept.

When Kaneki woke up, it was three in the afternoon, according to the clock on the wall. More importantly, Shiro was gone.

Kaneki sat up to find that he had been covered with a blanket. He smiled, and heard the sound of the shower going.

It was a good day.

* * *

After he had gone to bed, at four in the morning Kaneki woke up to the sound of screaming. He ran to the living room hastily, mind blurry as it tried to cling to sleep.

Shiro was violently thrashing on the couch, the pillow and blankets on the floor. His kagune was out, and it had pierced a hole through a cushion that was now spilling its fluff out on the floor.

He was still screaming, broken noises that made Kaneki feel helpless. He knew Shiro had nightmares, but they had never been this bad before.

"Shiro," he begged, "wake up!"

Kaneki cupped his hand over Shiro's jaw. The ghoul woke up, but not the way the college student had hoped- he threw himself at Kaneki and pushed him to the floor, kagune sharp and poised to kill at his throat. Shiro was panting, chest heaving with it, and his hands felt cold against Kaneki's shoulders.

A few tense moments passed before Shiro shuddered and just sort of... Went limp, "Kaneki?"

"Yeah?" Kaneki sighed softly.

"I'm sorry," Shiro mumbled into Kaneki's chest remorsefully, "I thought you were him."

Kaneki didn't ask who. He knew better than to think that Shiro would answer.

Shiro rolled off Kaneki, and maybe the brunet was imagining it but he seemed reluctant, "You can go back to sleep, I'll be fine."

"Like hell you will," Kaneki huffed, the words spilling out without him meaning them to. Shiro looked like a mess, jaw tense and fingers trembling. His kagune was almost curled around him defensively, "you didn't have any nightmares when you slept on me. So come to bed with me."

Shiro stared at him, the lines of his mouth harsh and bitter, "Like that will help. What am I, a little kid?"

Kaneki picked himself up and looked at Shiro earnestly, wishing for once he would stop being so stubborn, "Please. Let's just see if it helps."
Somehow, half an hour later, Kaneki found himself laying next to Shiro back to back once the kagune was retracted. Warm blankets were pulled over the two of them, and even though they were cheap, in Kaneki's tired state they might as well have been goose down.

There was a sort of comfort that came with knowing that Shiro had his back, and he had Shiro's. Kaneki felt safe, surrounded by nothing but Shiro, blankets and the sounds of even breaths and their hair rustling on the pillow.

Shiro slept peacefully.

And if Kaneki woke up in the morning with a leg slung over his hip, four tentacles squeezing him uncomfortably tight and Shiro's head tucked under his chin giving him strands of hair in his mouth, well, that was okay.
It seemed like it was becoming a trend for Kaneki to be awake during the wee hours of the morning.

"Kaneki," Hide whined on the other end of the phone the brunet held to his ear.

"No. You're going to be a good friend and listen."

"...Fine. But you're buying me coffee tomorrow, or I won't survive classes. It's Halloween tomorrow, I have to survive!"

Kaneki smiled slightly and glanced towards his slightly open bedroom door, where he knew Shiro was sleeping.

"So? What's the issue here?"

"I told you, I like Shiro. A lot."

"What am I supposed to do about it?" Hide teased, "Slip a note in his pocket for you?"

"No! I'm not going to do something like that," Kaneki protested. He was a college student, not a kindergartener. Shiro would probably punt Kaneki if he wrote him a 'Do you like me? Check yes or no' letter.

Hide wolf-whistled, "Well, you'd better, or I might go after him first. Them tentacles, though."

"Hide!" Kaneki glowered at his feet, face warm.

"Do you even know if he likes you?"

"I don't know..." Kaneki mumbled dejectedly, "I mean, we have been sleeping together, but."

"What?!" Hide screeched excitedly. Kaneki almost dropped the phone, "Did you use protection? Kaneki, I'm so proud-"

"No!" Kaneki hissed, "We literally sleep together. As in, in a bed. Sleeping."

"You sure? You didn't give Shiro the Kane-d?"

"I'm sure," Kaneki scrunched his nose up.

"He didn't tongue battle your purple-headed yogurt slinger? Shake hands with your one-eyed milkman? Squirt the mayo in your-"

"Hide!" Kaneki yelped and buried his face in his hands, holding the phone up with his shoulder, and wished he could sink into the floor and disappear, "It's just because he has nightmares."

"Okay, okay," Hide laughed, "just confess. The worst Shiro can do is say no."

"It's not that easy..."

"You dorks are already goners,"

You and I
"You really think so?" Kaneki asked shyly.

"Yeah. Have you seen the way Shiro looks at you sometimes?"

Kaneki blinked and tilted his head in thought, silent for a moment. The only times Shiro had ever looked at Kaneki in any irregular way, he had looked like he wanted to murder the brunet... "No?"

"He looks at you like he wants to eat you," Kaneki could almost hear Hide's sly grin. He muffled an embarrassed whine around his knuckles.

"Just tell him, nerd."

"...Okay," Kaneki breathed hesitantly, heart caught in his throat, "tomorrow."

"Come over if it doesn't go well, I have your favorite ice cream ready," Hide soothed.

"Night, Hide."

"Night, 'Neki."

* *

"Happy Halloween," Shiro heard, along with the sound of the door opening and the rustling of a plastic bag.

Shiro walked towards Kaneki, staring at the unknown bag which had the logo of some convenience store on it. "You too. What's that?"

Kaneki smiled and withdrew a mask. It was white but all the features were black, with an x for one eye and a heart for the other. The mouth was a pair of lips stretched and baring teeth. It was probably the ugliest mask Shiro had ever seen.

"Right," Shiro deadpanned, "I'm going to get the flamethrower."

"It's not that bad...!" Kaneki protested, "I'm a poor college student, what do you expect? Besides, you stole my festival mask."

"You didn't even go to that festival," Shiro snorted, "...So? Why the mask?"

"Ah," Kaneki shyly curled his fingers against his jaw, "Anteiku is having a Halloween event tonight. I was wondering if you'd go with me."

Shiro thought about it. It was Halloween, so it was normal for him to be wearing his mask. And the only ones who he had any adverse encounters with in this timeline were dead. Rize really hadn't seemed to care about Shiro's interception between her and Kaneki, so he doubted that she would try anything even if she was at Anteiku.

There was really nothing to worry about, as long as he made sure no one decided Kaneki would make a good dinner.

He wondered why Kaneki was acting so nervous about asking him, though. It was just an event.

"Sure."

An hour later, the two of them were sitting in Anteiku, admiring all of the designs and costumes. The cafe was decorated with faint cobwebs on the edges of some of the windows. Pumpkin chandeliers
hung from the ceiling, with realistic insects attached to them. Shiro shuddered and moved closer to Kaneki on the booth seat they shared when he saw a centipede.

The two talked. Shiro asked Kaneki about college and books he'd been reading, while Kaneki answered. Eventually, a waitress shuffled through the overcrowded cafe towards their table. It was Touka.

But... She didn't look right. She wore a vampire costume but no mask. There were dark circles under her eyes and her hands shook as she jotted down their orders. Her voice was quiet and cracked. She didn't even seem to remember Shiro's scent, distracted as she was.

Shiro ordered black coffee while Kaneki ordered hot chocolatey milk, taking his mask off and leaving it around his neck so that he could drink later. The two continued to talk after Touka left, but this time Shiro watched the Anteiku worker out of the corners of his eyes worriedly.

"Shiro?" Kaneki asked nervously but with curiosity, "So... How many people here are ghouls?"

Shiro sniffed the air and turned, arm on the back of the booth as he looked around. He sank back down after a minute and nodded to several people, whispering in Kaneki's ear, "The lady over there, you see her? The old one with the dog. She just came back from a meal, smells like it was a teenage boy or maybe her husband. The man getting interviewed for a job is a ghoul. So are the little girl and her father."

Kaneki looked overwhelmed and awed.

"Does that answer your question?" Shiro leaned away from Kaneki's ear, noticing that it was oddly red now.

"There's really that many?" Kaneki asked in a hushed murmur, "Anyone could be one."

"Which is why I need to keep a tight watch on you," Shiro replied, languidly draping an arm over Kaneki as he noticed that the old woman was staring. He cracked a finger and stared right back, "you're like a dog treat in the middle of a pack of starving wolves."

Their coffee and hot chocolate arrived shortly, and the two enjoyed their drinks. After that, Shiro idly watched the television in the corner of the cafe. It was set to the news, something about a girl in an accident having to undergo surgery. But his attention was quickly wrenched away from it by a flowery scent creeping closer to the table.

"Bonsoir, I was simply wondering if either of you would mind if I sat here," the distastefully dressed ghoul standing by their table made a grand, flowy gesture that encompassed the entire cafe, "seeing as there are no other tables available."

"I mind," Shiro objected disgustedly. He could stand the Tsukiyama he had come to know, the one who had become his comrade and sword and had matured as a person, but this Tsukiyama from the past was still disturbing.

"Shiro, isn't that a little rude?" Kaneki chided, "Please do sit."

Shiro grimaced and kicked Kaneki's leg under the table. The brunet winced but maintained a polite smile while the ghoul sat down across from them.

"Thank you. My name is Tsukiyama Shuu. May I ask your names?" Shiro could tell the amount of effort it took for Tsukiyama to act normal and not salivate over their combined scents. It was gross.
"Ah, um... I'm Kaneki, and this is Shiro."

"Shiro? What a magnifico name."

Shiro snorted quietly. It was annoying when Tsukiyama tried to be impressive by using words in different languages.

"This cafe is lovely, but stuffy, don't you think? Say, I own a gourmet restaurant. Would either of you like to enjoy a free, luxurious meal?" Tsukiyama smiled charmingly, "Your bill here is no issue. I already intended to repay you for your kindness."

That was it. That was the line. Shiro stood, grabbed Kaneki's wrist and said sweetly, "Actually, no. We were just leaving."

"What?" Kaneki protested, "Shiro, no we weren't-

Shiro didn't care, he just wanted to get as far away as possible. And so he leaned in close and dragged his tongue over the shell of Kaneki's ear, murmuring loudly enough for Tsukiyama to hear, "Don't you want to hurry home so we can enjoy ourselves?"

Kaneki shuddered and a dazed expression came over his face. He wentpliant, and Shiro used the opportunity to drag him away from the cafe, leaving a bewildered Tsukiyama behind to pay the bill. It wasn't until they were walking down the street that Kaneki finally asked weakly, "What was that...?"

"I know him. He runs a ghoul restaurant where he kidnaps 'choice' humans and makes a show out of killing them and serving them up," Shiro scowled.

"O-oh. I meant the... Licking thing."

Shiro blinked at Kaneki, "It was just to get Tsukiyama to leave off. I don't see what's the issue."

When they got home, Kaneki started to look like he was starting to say something. He kept opening and closing his mouth and staring at Shiro.

Just when Shiro was going to tell him to spit it out, Kaneki tugged on the ghoul's sleeve.

"Can we talk?" Kaneki bit his lip.

Shiro nodded, wondering what was so serious. The college student sat down on the couch, and Shiro followed his lead.

"What's the matter?"

Kaneki inhaled sharply and touched his face, fingers curling and uncurling in an anxious gesture before he blurted, "Shiro, I like you."

Shiro felt like icy water had been dumped over his head.

Kaneki was saying more, but Shiro couldn't hear him over the static in his ears. Kaneki. Kaneki Ken, his past self, liked him romantically, and he had no idea what to do. It was stupid and wrong for him to have a crush on himself. Shiro couldn't even understand how anyone could have romantic feelings for him in the first place.

Kaneki was looking at Shiro like he adored him, and it was too much. It was painful to have someone look at him like that.
"You can't have feelings for me."

"What?" Kaneki sounded hurt, "If you don't feel the same, just say so-"

"You don't get it," Shiro shook his head distantly, fingers coming up to the strap at the back of his head, "you and I..."

And the mask fell to the floor.

"Are the same person."

Chapter End Notes

Friendly reminder that I love you readers.
First, a beautiful person down in the comments drew fanart, then my favorite TG ask-blogger mentioned this fic on Tumblr, and just now I checked and this fic is the second most favorited TG fic on AO3. I'm amazed and really thankful to everyone for supporting my derp story and making this happen.
"What?" Kaneki whispered, wide eyes drifting from the discarded mask up to Shiro's face.

It looked... Just like Kaneki's own face. The same grey right eye, but also a black left eye with a red pupil, with dark lashes despite Shiro's white hair. His facial features were even the same size and shape. Aside from the ghoul eye, it was like looking into a mirror.

"What the hell is this?" Kaneki stood abruptly, stalking over to stand in front of Shiro. His fingers skimmed the ghoul's face, trying to find some sort of edge of a mask he could pull off, "Is this a joke?"

The same person? That made no sense. Shiro was as different from him as could be.

"It's not a joke," Shiro looked calm, blank. How could he be so emotionless when Kaneki had just confessed to him? "I don't know exactly how I wound up back in time."

All Kaneki could think was no.

"Shut up!" Kaneki seethed. His hands were clenched white-knuckled at his side, grasping nothing, "I don't want a cheap novel plot. I want a yes or a no."

Kaneki wanted to stop himself there, wanted to shut up before he said something that he'd regret, but ever since he had met Shiro he had become braver, more willing to speak his mind.

"I want you to explain to why you invaded my home, why you stopped me from going out with Rize. Why you barely tolerate my presence sometimes, and other times seem to need me like air to breathe. I like you, damn it," Kaneki heard his voice crack, "and I think you like me in some way too. But this," Kaneki waved to Shiro's face "is just sick. What do you want from me?"

"This isn't about your feelings for me;" Shiro was cracking the joints of his fingers one by one, seeming agitated.

"Then what is it about?" Kaneki could feel his legs threatening to give out, quaking with the weight of his anger, "Toying with me? I'm not stupid, Shiro. Time travel doesn't exist."

Kaneki felt a sick lurch in his stomach. Was Shiro planning this all along? Leading him on in ways like licking him earlier?

"Why would I toy with you?" Shiro started to look upset, brows furrowed and lips turned down. Kaneki hated that he was making such an expression using his face. Kaneki didn't even care how Shiro had the same face as him. He couldn't think of a logical explanation in his furious state.

"Because you're a ghoul," Kaneki spat, turning on his heel and moved to the door, "and I never should have trusted you."
It occurred to Kaneki that he would have followed Shiro anywhere, done anything he asked. *I'm such an idiot. If he was lying about this... What else has he lied about?*

Kaneki paused once his hand was over the door. Despite himself, his voice became smaller, miserable, *"Please just stay away from me."*

Shiro didn't say anything. *Of course not,* Kaneki felt the acrid words echo dimly in his mind, *he doesn't care.*

He didn't turn back, didn't see Shiro's stunned expression.

* 

Hide knew exactly who it was when the door bell rang.

*It's too bad,* Hide thought wistfully. He had hoped it would work out for his best friend this time. He opened the door.

"Hey, Kaneki," Kaneki's face was flushed, his lips were pinched with the effort not to tremble and Hide could see his hands shaking. His eyes were blood-shot and puffy. *Did he cry the entire way here?*

"That bad?" Hide murmured sympathetically, ushering the brunet inside with his hand on his back. It was worse than he thought it would be. How had Shiro managed *this?* It took a lot more than a simple rejection for Kaneki to look this bad.

Kaneki just nodded, eyes shutting and his brows furrowing together.

Hide led Kaneki to his bedroom, where he kept the television and movies, and let the other college student make himself comfortable while he brought out the ice cream. Chocolate chip cookie dough with whipped cream, chocolate syrup and sprinkles on top. If Hide was going to spoil the shit out of his friend, he was going to do it *right.*

Hide walked back to his bedroom and handed the bowl to Kaneki, who gave a weak attempt at a smile of gratitude.

"Pizza sound good?"

"Yeah," Kaneki answered quietly.

Hide called a local pizza place and ordered a large pepperoni, before throwing himself down on the bed next to Kaneki and propping himself up by his elbows.

"So? What happened?"

Hide couldn't deny that he was curious.

"Shiro said that I can't like him because he's 'me from the future','" Kaneki scoffed, drawing his knees to his chest to balance the bowl on top of them.

Hide raised his eyebrows. That... Hadn't been what he had expected to hear. But at the same time, a niggling of doubt crept at the back of Hide's mind despite Kaneki's disbelieving tone. He had always felt something about Shiro that he hadn't been able to put his finger on... Until now. It was *familiarity.*

When Hide watched Kaneki and Shiro while they were side-by-side, they were eerily similar. Shiro,
although he tended to walk with more confidence than Kaneki, still had the same gait. He was pretty much the same height and even his voice sounded like Kaneki’s. He even had that same tiny freckle on his collarbone.

"Hide, he took off the mask. His face looks just like mine," Kaneki agitatedly twirled the spoon in his hand, "I don't understand anything anymore."

"So, you think he was pranking you?" Hide asked lightly.

"It's not like what he said is true. He's a ghoul, how could I be a ghoul in the future? Maybe it was a mask."

Hide paused, before he thought of a loophole to that, “Were his eyes turned?”

“Actually... Only one of them was,” Kaneki answered. Hide wondered why, when Shiro was a ghoul. Both of his eyes should have been kakugan.

“They don't make masks with ghoul eyes."

“Maybe ghous can shape shift?” Kaneki tried again half-heartedly.

Hide didn't have the heart to tell his friend just yet that he had hacked into the accounts of the most informed CCG investigators, and never heard anything about shape shifting as something that ghous could do.

"I just... I don't get why he would mock me like that," Kaneki sounded dismal, his eyes wet, "Hide, what am I going to do?"

"Here's what you're going to do," Hide advised sagely, "you're going to sit here, eat pizza and watch a marathon of crap television with me."

And once the pizza arrived, they did. Every now and then Hide would glance over to keep an eye on Kaneki. Sometimes the brunet would get distracted by the television long enough to smile or laugh faintly at a lame joke, but his face would quickly fall again.

Eventually, Kaneki's head started tilting down from where it was pillowed, and Hide realized that he was asleep. His expression was still troubled, though.

Hide wondered how he was going to fix this mess. He knew one thing for sure: he would have to take things into his own hands.

Once Kaneki had been unconscious for long enough to be deep asleep, Hide lightly patted the brunet's jean and jacket pockets, feeling triumphant when they were empty aside from his wallet. Hide pulled his cellphone from his own pocket and walked out of the bedroom, closing it behind him silently. He stepped outside, knowing that Kaneki had left his phone at his apartment.

Nagachika Hideyoshi had a very important call to make.

* *

Shiro stared at the ceiling, distantly counting the bumps. His hand curled numbly on the cushion. He hadn't felt like moving from the couch since Kaneki had left, hours ago. He just laid in the same position: legs slung over the armrest, one hand limp at his side and the other curled in his hair.

He wondered why he was reacting this way, when it shouldn't have mattered what Kaneki said or
did. He was literally a figment of the past. No one Shiro should have cared about.

But guilt was a sickening sensation in the pit of Shiro's stomach. He wanted it to stop. He wanted to be able to think.

Shiro reached for his left hand and sharply cracked his pinky finger backwards, muffling an agonized hiss against his shoulder. But pain was something he was used to, pain was something he had control over.

Shiro's eyes lingered on the awkwardly angled finger with morbid fascination. But the deep ache wasn't enough for very long, and he broke another and another-

*Please just stay away from me.*

Shiro stopped. Kaneki was in his head, eyes sad and staring at him like he was everything wrong with the world- Kaneki was in his HEAD, KA NEKI I WAS IN HIS HEAD, HIS *HEAD*-

Kaneki's phone rang.

*Nagachika Hideyoshi,* the screen read. Shiro answered the phone, snapped out of it.

"Hide, is he there?" Shiro demanded. He needed to know that Kaneki hadn't been dragged off into an alley to be eaten by some ghoul. *Why? Why did I let him leave so late at night?*

"*Kaneki's sleeping at my place,*" Hide answered, without even having to ask who Shiro meant. Hide's voice was comforting just to listen to, reminiscent of late nights eating fast food, watching the sun waltz down and just talking,

Shiro's fingers twinged as they tried to heal in their crooked positions and he let out a soft cry that he hurried to bite down.

"*Shiro,*" Hide's voice cut through the fog that tried to settle over Shiro's mind, sharp and knowing, "*what did you do?*"

Shiro's words stuck to his tongue.

"*I'm coming over,*" Hide said simply, "*hang tight.*"

"Don't," Shiro pleaded a straining syllable. He wasn't sure if he could bear to be near anyone. His breath sped up from panic. It was caught in his throat, suffocating him, Shiro couldn't *breathe-*

"*Just listen to me,*" it was a gentle command. Hide waited for Shiro's breathing to even out before continuing on to talk about everything and nothing. About college friends, about jokes he had heard, about that one manga he had read.

And Shiro just relaxed against the couch, more listening to the bleached blond's voice than what he was saying. In the background he could hear the jingling of keys, and the rustling of paper- maybe a note left for Kaneki.

Shiro just laid there and listened, until Hide said, "*I'm outside your door, can you let me in?*"

"It's unlocked," Shiro answered softly before he ended the call.

The door opened, and there was Hide. The college student didn't wait, just pushed forward to kneel on the floor by the couch. Shiro clutched his left hand to his chest, eyes wide.
"You really do look the same..." Hide mused, "Show me your hand."

Shiro didn't want to, but Hide didn't sound like there was any room for argument. Reluctantly, he held out his aching hand.

"Damn," Hide swore under his breath, eyes lingering on the damage done, "are the bones already healed?"

Shiro nodded. He wondered if Hide would suggest going to the hospital, but chances were he knew better. Shiro was a ghoul, and if human doctors found that out then he was as good as dead.

"I'm not a doctor," Hide warned, "but I think we have to rebreak your fingers and let them heal in their proper positions."

"Go ahead," Shiro offered wearily.

"Okay," Hide's smile was reassuring as his hand inched closer to Shiro's, "Kaneki broke his toe, once. I guess you remember, though, if you are-"

Shiro grit out a gasp as the blond abruptly bent his middle finger forward and all he could think was fuck.

"-Kaneki," Hide finished.

"I do," Shiro drew in a shuddering breath, "We were kids, but you straightened it for me because I didn't want to bother mom."

"You really are him," the college student grinned, "remember when you took care of my injuries, though?"

"Idiot," Shiro answered fondly, "you picked a fight in high school just because somebody looked at me funny."

Another finger, more pain. Shiro felt a drop of sweat drip down his face.

"Almost done," Hide didn't wait for Shiro to recover, this time. He pushed Shiro's pinky finger back into place. The ghoul slumped into the couch now that it was finally over.

"So," Hide began conversationally, propping his elbows on the edge of the couch, "time travel?"

Shiro briefly went over the details of how he had become a half-ghoul, before explaining what he knew about how he had wound up in the past.

Hide listened attentively, hands propping his head up. When Shiro finished talking, the blond laid a hand on the ghoul's shoulder.

"You know, you're still my best friend. If you're a half-ghoul, if you go by a different name... Who cares about that?" Hide grinned, warm and slow and filled with simple affection that was hard to come by.

"I believe you, and I'll tell Kaneki that," Hide stretched and gave a wide yawn, "I wrote a note telling him to come here tomorrow. I'm staying, feels like you need it more tonight."

"Please don't tell Kaneki about..." Shiro vaguely gestured to his newly healed hand.

"I won't, this time."
“Hide,” Shiro caught Hide's hand, but was tongue-tied. He wanted to thank him. He wanted to apologize. He wanted to embrace him.

“I know."

If there was one thing that had been proven to Shiro time and time again... It was that he should never doubt Hide.

Chapter End Notes

I see u Tumblr people
I see u freaking out over the hot chocley milk
“-I can't do this.“

“You'll be fine.“

Hazy voices filtered through Shiro's ears. He blinked open his eyes, squinting against harsh morning light. The apartment looked washed out. Even just barely waking up, he wanted to go back to sleep... he had barely gotten any rest without sleeping next to Kaneki. Shiro let his eyes adjust and sat up, cracking his neck and announcing his wakefulness.

Kaneki and Hide were talking in the kitchen. The brunet looked over at Shiro, startled. The half-ghoul could see pinpricks of red around his eyes, burst capillaries from crying. He wasn't sure how to feel about that.

Hide edged towards the door, smiling at Shiro and nodding at Kaneki, "I'll let you two talk."

Kaneki kind of shot a not-so-subtle pleading look at Hide. The blond shrugged unapologetically, and walked away. The sound of the door shutting elicited a heavy silence.

Shiro sighed softly. He raked a hand through his sleep-mussed hair and rose, quietly making his way to the kitchen to lean on a counter. Kaneki seemed to shrink back where he was, standing in front of the fridge.

"How much did-" Shiro began at the same time as Kaneki.

"Hide told me-"

They had spoken at the same time. Shiro stared down at the spot on the floor slightly left of his feet and pretended he was busy thoroughly examining it. The ghoul curled his fingers against his cheek and mumbled, "...Want some coffee?"

"Coffee. Yeah, coffee is good," Kaneki paused, cheeks reddening probably because of his awkward speech, "I mean, I'd like some. Please."

Shiro brought out the coffee supplies, including his sugar cubes. The heavy air continued until Shiro, in his sleep-deprived state, turned the knob on the coffee machine to steam milk instead of drip coffee. It emitted an ear-piercing screech, and Shiro fell back on his ass, startled.

Kaneki was clearly trying not to laugh when he walked over to flip the knob, but he took one look at Shiro's highly offended face and lost it.

Shiro huffily grabbed Kaneki's ankle and pulled him down to the floor too, and he just laughed harder.

"I will piss on everything you own," Shiro threatened, his face burning.

"Sure," Kaneki smiled, his laughter dying down. He still looked amused.

Kaneki got up and offered Shiro his hand. The ghoul took it and stood. Despite his embarrassment, Shiro was kind of happy... all of this was a reminder that this was still Kaneki, and he clearly wasn't...
angry anymore.

"Shiro," Kaneki's expression sobered, "I'm sorry, I should have trusted you. Will you give me the chance to hear you out this time?"

"I can do that."

And so they talked. It seemed Hide had only told Kaneki the bare minimum, so Shiro retold his story while he finished up their coffee. This time, he didn't leave anything out.

Shiro talked about his date with Rize, how terrified he had been when she had revealed herself. He talked about being in the hospital, about coming home and being unable to eat, realizing he was a ghoul. He talked about being brought to Anteiku and working there, mentioning the death of Hinami's mother and Tsukiyama's attempts to eat him.

"You mean," Kaneki paled, "if you hadn't stopped me from going out with Rize, all of this...?"

Shiro just nodded.

Shiro told Kaneki about being knocked out and taken to Aogiri Tree. And, with a numb voice, he forced himself to recount what had happened there. Kaneki listened with a pained and horrified expression until Shiro talked about how he had changed after the stress and trauma.

"That's why I'm different from you," Shiro gestured to his hair and fingers, but he meant more than that.

Kaneki blinked, staring at Shiro's black nails, "I... They're natural?"

...Shiro buried his face in his hands and groaned, "What did you think? That I was sneaking off to a salon every week to get my nails done?"

Kaneki didn't answer that.

By the time Shiro finished his story, Kaneki looked like he was about to burst with questions. The half-ghoul gave him the go ahead.

"You said Rize is called the Binge Eater, right?" Kaneki bit his lip, seeming doubtful about something.

"That's the name the CCG gave her."

"Shiro... I was watching TV with Hide last night and the news came on. The CCG said that Binge Eater is dead."

Shiro's eyes widened. How could Rize be dead? Who was strong enough to kill her?

"They didn't release the information on how she died."

"It's a good thing," Shiro said, despite his unease, "one less ghoul to worry about."

Kaneki sipped his coffee, "I guess so... So why do you think the quinque sent you back in time?"

"No clue," Shiro sighed, "Hide must've known it would help somehow, if he gave it to me."

They were silent for a little while after that, just drinking their coffee.
"It's kind of weird," Kaneki admitted, "I'm literally talking to myself."

The human stared into the depths of his latte as if he could find answers in the remainders of foam at the top, before muttering, "Does this make me a narcissist?"

Shiro choked on his coffee, wondering where the hell that had come from, and Kaneki's eyes flicked up.

"Did I say that aloud?" Kaneki flushed and ducked his head.

The ghoul wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, "I'm going to pretend that you didn't say anything."

Despite the awkwardness, it felt like things had been mended. It felt like things were okay again.

Outside of Anteiku cafe loomed a large man in a suit, with a hooked nose and blond hair. He sniffed the air, nostrils flaring.

He was close.

Chapter End Notes

Short ass chapter, sorry about that. It's because this was originally going to be part of chapter 10, but it seemed a bit clunky to have it all in one chapter.
"Shiro?"

Shiro was laying on the couch, head lazily lolled on the arm rest while his socked feet rested in Kaneki's lap. Kaneki had tried to shove them off. Shiro had threatened to kick him in the dick. They had come to an agreement that this was allowed.

"Mm?" Shiro's toes curled as he stretched a little.

"Aren't you hungry?"

The question had Shiro wide awake, snapping his head up to stare at Kaneki.

"I mean... I've never seen you eat or drink anything but coffee and water," Kaneki bit his lip, "and I really don't think that's good."

"I'm fine," eating was the last thing Shiro wanted to think about right then. If he thought about eating, he would inevitably think about the ache in his stomach, about the warm steady good pulse thrumming under Kaneki's skin.

"I heard on TV that ghouls can survive by eating only once a month. Just because you can doesn't mean you should."

"Drop it."

"But you need to take care of yourself...!" Kaneki protested.

"I can and I will. Drop it, Kaneki."

"What are you afraid of? Killing someone? You don't have to kill someone, and I won't think-" Kaneki stopped, staring intently at Shiro and seeming to notice something. Shiro turned his attention back to himself and realized that he was touching his own face.

Shit. Kaneki had been told by others in the past that he touched his face when nervous, and now that he knew who Shiro was...

"Oh. You're afraid of what I'll think of you. You're afraid that I'll think you're a monster," Kaneki's expression softened.

"No," Shiro turned his face away, uncomfortable that Kaneki was reading him so well. It felt like he hadn't even realized that himself, before Kaneki put it into words.

"I don't care if you're a ghoul. I know you've killed people, but I also know you've never killed anyone irreproachable," Kaneki's smile was all soft corners and trust.
"But you haven't even seen me eat," Shiro grimaced, "they're people, Kaneki. *Dead* people."

Kaneki's face became determined. Whatever it was, he was set on it... "Then go out to eat tonight, and take me with you."

"No."

"Why?"

"It's dangerous."

"So is living with a hungry ghoul," Kaneki stared at Shiro long and hard.

...Shiro gave in.

Kaneki pushed the one-eyed ghoul's feet off his lap and stood, walking towards the door to pull on his sneakers.

"Wait. I have to get some things first."

Kaneki made a questioning noise as Shiro busied himself with taking one of the brunet's backpacks and placing several large plastic bags and the sharpest knife he could find in it. After that he took a pair of surgical gloves from the first-aid kit to add as well.

Now fully prepared, Shiro put on his own shoes and tossed Kaneki a jacket.

The two walked outside and Shiro glanced sideways at Kaneki as the human fumbled to lock the door. He had an idea of where to go, but it involved walking the same route he had taken to get information. He would have to trespass in other ghoul's territory, but he didn't want to put Kaneki in danger.

It vaguely occurred to Shiro that he would probably die if Kaneki did. Somehow, that seemed to matter less than just making sure Kaneki didn't get hurt. They took the stairs down and walked, the street lights further ahead flickering and some even completely dimmed, signifying the beginning of a shadier area of Tokyo.

"Stick close," Shiro tugged at Kaneki's jacket sleeve, drawing him closer. He could smell slight fear from his past self. Kaneki was jerkily looking around as if a ghoul was about to jump out from any shadowed corner.

Remarkably, they made it to their destination with no incidents. Shiro paused at the gap between two buildings, eyes flickering up to the taller building looming above. There were old, rusted stairs leading up to it. The ghoul could smell blood most likely from a dead body far back in the alley. It smelled recent, maybe a few hours old. It was too dark to see unless he walked closer, but he hoped that rigor mortis hadn't set in.

"You're not going to want to get very close," Shiro gave Kaneki fair warning before walking forward. The human followed, a shaky hand clapping over his mouth as the smell of blood became thick in the air. Thankfully, that hand stifled the yelp he made when his eyes settled on the dead young man, whose head was surrounded by dried blood. Kaneki stood back, eyes wide, while Shiro only got closer.

"What happened to him...?" Kaneki whispered.

"Hope flew away from him, perhaps," Shiro murmured distantly. Kaneki just looked at him blankly.
Shiro sighed and bowed his head, eyes closing as he paid his respects. The dead person looked to be a teenager.

After a moment of silence, Shiro cracked his eyes open, gesturing to the building above, "He jumped."

"What...?"

"He jumped. It was a committed suicide."

The ghoul knelt by the deceased, shrugging off the backpack to place it beside him. He rummaged through it and withdrew the gloves, putting them on, before taking out the knife and bags. He checked the body- good, it wasn't stiff and the blood was still unfixed.

And then he set to work.

When Shiro glanced over his shoulder, Kaneki was watching with a sort of horrified fascination, seeming unable to tear his eyes away. Shiro carved a strip of meat out of one thigh, and Kaneki gagged.

"S-sorry, I just..."

"It's fine. Go wait outside the alley, I'll be out soon," Shiro couldn't blame Kaneki for being sickened. It was his first time seeing a dead body, after all.

Shiro found his mouth watering as he continued on, the smell of human flesh and blood strong around him. It was difficult to resist the urge to eat then and there, but he had to. It wouldn't be good if anyone saw him with blood on his hands and face.

Once he had filled all of the bags, Shiro stripped off the gloves, wiped the knife off on the dead male's shirt and put them back in the backpack. He stood and walked away without looking back.

"Kaneki, let's go," Shiro started to walk, but he and the brunet were barely a foot away from the alley before Shiro could smell something different... but familiar, moving closer.

He knew that smell, he just couldn't remember where-

"Oh."

"CCG," Shiro hissed to Kaneki. This was bad. *If we're seen next to an alleyway with a fucking carved up body in it, then...*

"Do we run?" Kaneki's eyes were wide and panicked. The half-ghoul shook his head, an idea forming rapidly. He didn't have time to think over it, he had to act fast.

Shiro pushed Kaneki against the nearest wall, slid his hands to his ass to lift him up and licked at his neck.

Startled, Kaneki wrapped his legs around Shiro's waist and fisted his hands in his hair, his breath hitching. "Sh-Shiro! What...?"

Shiro's plan had been for them to look like two drunk, horny college students who had chosen an unfortunate place to fuck. If the investigator- *Amon*, he recognized his scent, looked in the alleyway and said anything about the dead body he and Kaneki would act horrified and confused.

But it was a bad idea, such a bad idea. He could taste Kaneki on his tongue, skin and sweat and
sweet scent. The brunet's nails were digging into his scalp as he kept his tight grip on the white locks of hair, and it ached pleasantly. He sucked on Kaneki's jaw, wanting so much to just bite down. Instead, he grazed his teeth down to the human's collarbone.

Shiro could feel Kaneki's neck warming up as blood rushed to his face, and where his and Kaneki's hips were pressed together he could feel him getting hard.

The ghoul abruptly bit down, hard but not enough to break the skin.

"Oh god," Kaneki gave an involuntary little rock of his hips, head tipping to the side. Shiro shuddered, breath stuttering against the college student's neck. With his hands on the other's ass he pulled him harder against him, wanting nothing more than to just be closer.

His mind hazy, Shiro continued to leave little marks on Kaneki, whose pale skin easily bruised. Everything was a blur of lips, teeth and tongue, and Kaneki pressed against him.

Footsteps and an awkward clearing of a throat.

It almost physically hurt to pull away then, but Shiro did anyway, gently lowering Kaneki back down. The eighteen year old stood on shaky legs. He looked like a mess, face red, neck covered in darkening spots and his eyes blown wide. Shiro could only wonder how bad he himself looked. It was by sheer effort that he kept the sclera of his eye from turning black as he moved to face the dove standing nearby.

"This is a public area, you know..." Amon was dressed in the standard CCG outfit- a crisp suit. In his hand was a briefcase. His face seemed smoother, unmarked by the death of his friend and mentor, and Shiro couldn't see any stressed strands of white in his hair.

Some part of Shiro almost expected to see him missing an arm, but to his relief the investigator was fully intact.

"We-we're sorry, Investigator," Kaneki stuttered, bowing deeply. When he saw that Shiro wasn't bowing, he dragged the ghoul down too.

"What are the two of you doing out here, anyway? This place isn't safe," Amon sounded exasperated and likely a little bit embarrassed by witnessing the PDA, "besides, it's past curfew."

_Curfew?_ Shiro wondered, before realizing that Amon must have thought they were under eighteen. That was fine. He could use that to their advantage.

"We were just on our way home," Shiro wrapped his arm around Kaneki's shoulders, while the dove peered suspiciously at the backpack the ghoul wore.

"What's in the bag?"

"Toys," Shiro answered without missing a beat, his lips curving up into a slight smirk, "you wanna see? I used some of them on Kaneki earlier..."

Kaneki made the most pitiful, embarrassed squeak just then.

Amon grimaced and shook his head vigorously, "No thank you... I'll let you off the hook as long as you hurry along home. Try not to stay out so late."

Shiro nodded. With that, he turned and walked away, pulling Kaneki along with him. He could hear Amon muttering under his breath about terrifying teenagers and incest.
"Sorry," Shiro said in a softer voice once they were a ways away, arm falling from the other's shoulders, "I would have asked, but there wasn't time."

"It's fine..." Kaneki answered quietly, distantly. Shiro cast a sideways glance towards him.

"You okay?"

The two wandered back into the realm of lamplit streets, but something about Kaneki's face seemed shadowed anyway. The brunet was staring at the ground as they passed the cracks in the sidewalk by.

"Shiro, you know..." Kaneki abruptly looked up at Shiro, "I don't care if you're me."

Shiro stared questioningly.

"I know we're kind of not talking about it but I want you to know I still have those feelings for you anyway."

Shiro exhaled softly. He didn't know what to say to that.

"Just... Think about it. You never said you didn't feel anything for me," Kaneki's grey eyes flickered nervously from Shiro's face to his feet, "you owe it to me. Please."

"Okay," Shiro agreed hesitantly. He wanted to say no, wanted to run and hide, but Kaneki was right. He really did owe him that much.

It was just thinking about it. He didn't have to do anything, Shiro thought.

Even if thinking about it meant thinking about how appealing the idea of a relationship with Kaneki actually was.

* 

It was a pleasant kind of torture to wait for Shiro to finish eating (despite himself, Kaneki couldn't find it in him to watch like he had wanted to, to prove that he really didn't think Shiro was a monster or anything as absurd as that) and get in the shower.

But after the door shut and Kaneki waited a beat for the sound of the water to start running, he fished a bottle of lotion out from under the bed and settled back into messy sheets.

He probably should have been turned off by the fact that the object of his affections had recently carved up a body and eaten some of it, but Kaneki couldn't help replaying the scenes from earlier in his head. Shiro, so close, mouth warm and wet against his neck, hands firm on his ass, breath rough like it was so hard for him to not just eat Kaneki.

With a pleased little huff of breath Kaneki shucked his pants and briefs. He poured lotion into the palm of his hand and slicked himself with it, turning his warm face into the pillow and enjoying how good it felt.

The sensations from earlier were still clear in his mind, and Kaneki knew he wouldn't last for very long. He thought about Shiro's lips on his neck, mouth, cock, and stroked himself. He wondered how it would feel to have Shiro sucking him off. He wanted to bury his fingers in that pretty white hair again, rock up into his mouth.

And oh god, what if Shiro's kagune was out, wrapping around Kaneki's ankles and pushing his legs
up, maybe circling his ass?

Shiro would look up at Kaneki with one eye turned black, red and hungry, slide his mouth off his cock with a wet pop and crawl up to kiss him, slow, filthy and close-mouthed before he tongued the taste of his own precome into his mouth.

Kaneki twisted his hand and used his thumb to rub at that spot right under the head that had him squirming, sweat dripping down his thighs.

The blurry thoughts of Shiro's face and a weight on top of him and something sliding into him were fading, Kaneki couldn't focus on everything except the pleasure coiling tighter and tighter in his stomach.

"Shiro, Shiro, Shiro," Kaneki begged and he was so gone, breath coming hard and fast as he fucked his fist. One last tug, his hand so tight it was painful but good, and he was coming. His toes curled and he shuddered, hips stuttering. For a few sweet, blissful moments his mind was blank and all he could feel was the warm glow of euphoria.

Kaneki slowly but surely blinked his eyes open, eased back into reality. He turned his nose up at the mess on his hand but was too tired to really care much. He wiped it on the other side of the bed underneath the blankets before realizing that was a horrible idea, but some rebellious part of him decided that Shiro could deal with it unless he wanted to fuck him himself. Besides, he wouldn't notice. The sheets were white.

Kaneki pushed back sweat-damp hair from his forehead, sleepy and satiated. After a few moments just catching his breath, he reluctantly pulled his pants back on. He listened for the shower running and realized it had stopped.

A minute later, Shiro walked in, dressed in a t-shirt and sweatpants and toweling his hair dry. But a few steps into the bedroom and he froze.

Kaneki stared. Shiro was blushing. Shiro never blushed.

"You..." the ghoul cleared his throat, "you do realize that I can smell that?"

Oh. Kaneki hadn't thought... Oh god, he was stupid.

"Shower!" Kaneki yelped abruptly, jumping to his feet and pushing past Shiro, "I mean, I'm going to take a shower. Yeah. Bye."

Kaneki darted into the bathroom, shut the door and sank down with his back against it, burying his face in his hands with a groan.

*

It was a Monday. Kaneki woke up to the sound of his alarm and rubbed at his bleary eyes, confused when he didn't have to fight off a kagune wrapped around him and trying to keep him in bed instead of letting him go to college. When he got up and padded to his closed bedroom door, he saw that there was a note on it.

Be back soon. Visiting Touka. -Shiro

Kaneki sighed dejectedly. He had probably creeped Shiro out the previous night.

But then the sound of the door bell rang through the apartment, and Kaneki's spirits lifted a little.
Maybe it was Shiro, and he had lost his key again. Too half-asleep to remember that Shiro never used the door-bell, only knocked seven times, the brunet stumbled to the door and pulled it open.

"How was Touka-" the words died on Kaneki's lips abruptly.

That wasn't Shiro.

Chapter End Notes

So I had honestly no idea what to name this chapter. My only two thoughts were 'Come Runs Thicker Than Water' (Oh my god is this a porno? They're not even related) and 'Ding-Dong'. I swear I mean the doorbell. Not what Kaneki was playing with.

Edit: Upon request I have changed it to the first one.
Yamori is Coming to Town

He sees you when you're sleeping, he knows when you're awake...

"Touka."

The Anteiku waitress on break from work jolted involuntarily, eyes going wide before narrowing when they settled on Shiro. She was sitting down on a bench.

Touka was practically radiating suspicion as she stared the half-ghoul down. Shiro noted the dark circles under her eyes and decided that he had been right in that he needed to check on her, "It's you again. How do you know my name and what the hell do you want?"

Shiro opted for the easy way out, gesturing with a coffee cup in hand to the Anteiku uniform Touka was wearing, "It's on your name tag."

Touka abruptly looked down to see for herself and blushed, gnashing her teeth together, "I knew that! I was just... making sure."

Shiro forced back a smile and instead nodded seriously. He didn't want her to think he was trying to make a fool out of her.

"May I sit?"

"It's a public bench, idiot," Touka grumbled.

Shiro sat down, his lips quirking despite himself. God, he had missed her. The nineteen year old thrust one of the two coffee cups he held towards Touka, "This is for you."

"What's in it, Rohypnol?" the student scoffed.

"It's black coffee," Shiro set his down, then took the lid off Touka's cup and showed the coffee inside to her. He knew that Rohypnol was colorless, but this would show that it wasn't any colored drug. The half-ghoul tipped the cup back and took a large sip.

"Why?" Touka finally took the cup, seeming bewildered. She drank hesitantly.

Shiro shrugged, "You look like you need it."

Because I would break a hundred and three bones for you, and a coffee is nothing but everything.

Touka side-eyed Shiro, "You gonna tell me who you are?"

"No," Shiro answered, deciding that he might as well be honest.

"At least give me something to call you."

"Shiro."
"Like your hair. Nice alias, very original."

Shiro just snorted. It was fair enough, he really could have come up with something better. He didn't reply to that, just pulled a pen from his jacket pocket and reached for the ghoul's coffee cup, holding it still in her hands while he scribbled something on the cup sleeve.

"Is that your number?" If Touka had been at ease, she wasn't anymore. She scrunched her nose up at the numbers scrawled on her cup, "not interested. I like girls."

"It's not like that. I'm with someone," Shiro blurted, thinking of Kaneki. He flushed as his mind caught up with his mouth. It was too late to take it back. *Stupid, why did I say that?*

"Then why the hell do I need some damn idiot's number?"

"You don't, but I'd like to become your friend."

"Keep dreaming," Touka stood, "my break's over. Bye."

...She didn't throw away the coffee cup. Shiro counted that as a victory.

*Kaneki stood in the doorway, staring up at an imposing man. From the instant the college student saw his too-wide grin, he felt a sickened feeling in his stomach that told him something very bad was about to happen.

And then the suit-clad man cracked his index finger. Kaneki could see his mouth moving, but he couldn't hear what he was saying over the pounding of his heart.

Shiro once quietly told Kaneki that he had gotten his quirks from his torturer. *Jason.*

Kaneki slammed the door, or at least tried to, but then the man, no- *ghoul* shoved his thick arm through the crack and pushed it back open, advancing a step through the doorway.

"That wasn't very polite."

"What do you want from me?" Kaneki stumbled backwards, voice an octave too high.

"Where is Rize?" the ghoul, the disgusting *thing* that had tortured Shiro, shut the door behind himself and locked it. Kaneki's heart sank.

"She's dead."

"You're lying to me," Jason was already too close where he was, but all of a sudden he was in Kaneki's face. The eighteen year old tried to scream because maybe, just maybe, somebody would hear- but all that came out was a whimper that died in his throat, "this entire apartment stinks of her."

Jason began to pace circles around Kaneki and something told the brunet that he was enjoying this, "Do you think you will do, little rat? I'm supposed to capture Rize herself, or the person who smells like her."

Kaneki didn't answer, just backed up as the ghoul lingered in front of him. His back hit the counter top to the kitchen.

"Do you think you'll do?" Jason lunged suddenly, and Kaneki jerked away just in time before a large hand crashed into the counter. The college student turned and ran. If he could just get to his room
and lock the door, he could take his phone, climb out of the window and call the CCG-

Jason kicked a wooden chair in front of Kaneki, and the college student tripped over it. He winced when the floor harshly burned against his face as he hit the floor, but scrambled to pick himself back up.

Just when Kaneki was back on his feet, Jason picked him up and threw him into the coffee table. The brunet yelled as a vase was knocked over and crushed beneath him, shards cutting into his back. His eyes watered as he felt blood soak through the back of his shirt.

Kaneki struggled to get up. He tried to push himself up with his hands on the floor, but gasped when shards of the broken vase sliced into his palms.

And then there was a large hand wrapping around Kaneki's throat. Kaneki coughed, feeling his lungs burning as the hand squeezed tighter and tighter. Colored spots flickered in front of his eyes from the sudden suffocation and his hands scrabbled to get himself free, his nails barely even leaving a mark on the ghoul as they clawed at him.

"Do you think you'll do?" Kaneki felt his head be slammed against the coffee table and he choked out a pained noise, felt wetness trickle down the back of his head. It hurt, he couldn't breathe, he wanted it to stop.

"Le'... go," Kaneki slurred, weakly kicking at the ghoul. His struggling was dying down as his limbs grew heavier.

Jason threw him into the wall. Kaneki slid down into a crumpled heap, painting the wall red in his wake, and coughed for breath. His head spun, making him feel nauseous. His eyes slid shut.

"Are you passing out? Humans are so fragile," the glee was fading from Jason's voice, replaced by disappointment.

The last thing Kaneki remembered begging in a whisper was "Shiro..."

*

The first thing Shiro noticed was the smell.

As the half-ghoul neared the apartment, he noticed that it reeked. It reeked of someone he knew. But it couldn't be. Why would Yamori be in the area?

Shiro sped up, feeling uneasy. It would be fine, he told himself. Maybe Aogiri Tree had something to do in the area, but he and Kaneki would have nothing to do with it. Shiro had made sure that they kept their heads low.

Shiro climbed the stairs and fished a key out of his pocket to unlock the door, but stopped.

"Oh god," he whispered.

The door was unlocked.

*Please no, no, don't let it be-* Shiro pushed the front door open, dread pooling in the pit of his stomach. He stepped inside and shut the door behind him.

It smelled like blood. It smelled like Kaneki's blood. And when the half-ghoul turned around, he could see red on the wall, the table and the floor. The vase that had previously sat on the living room
"Kaneki?" Shiro shouted, running throughout the apartment to throw open doors.

"Kaneki?!" Shiro flung open the last door, the door to their bedroom, and scanned it desperately. But no one was there.

Shiro scrambled for the phone in the pocket of a pair of Kaneki's pants. He sank to his knees on the floor and dialed Hide's number with violently shaking hands.

"Hello?"

"Hide, Kaneki's gone, he's gone, I can't find him," Shiro felt his breath picking up, coming harsh and fast. What if Yamori had already killed Kaneki? Would that kill Shiro too, or...?

Kaneki could be dead.

"What's going on?"

Shiro tried to speak but all that would come out was "He's gone," over and over again. Kaneki could be dead. He choked on a sob. The world felt like it was spinning and his chest was too tight.

Kaneki could be dead. Shiro dry retched and heard Hide sigh softly on the phone.

"I'm in class, Shiro. I can't help unless you talk to me."

Shiro took shuddering breaths, forcing himself to calm down, "I came home and Kaneki's not here, his blood's on the floor, it smells like Jason-"

"Jason? Who's Jason?"

"A ghoul," Shiro swallowed hard, struggling against the panic threatening to overwhelm him, "a dangerous one."

"Shit," Hide whispered, troubled, "do you have any idea where he took Kaneki?"

Shiro dug his nails into his leg, staring at the wall with his left eye turned kakugan, "Aogiri Tree. The organization he works for. I need to go, I need to-"

"Don't you dare. You need a plan or you'll get yourself killed. What is Aogiri Tree?"

"A group of ghouls that are after Rize. They've been targeting CCG investigators."

"What do they want with Kaneki?"

Shiro froze, eyes wide as he realized it was his fault.

"I- I smell like Rize. It must have led Jason to our apartment."

"So this Jason guy is taking Kaneki to Aogiri Tree's hideout?"

"I think so."

"Listen, Shiro, I have a plan..."
Safe Now

It was night when Shiro stood outside of Aogiri's hideout. The half-ghoul adjusted his fox mask as he stepped closer, glancing around hurriedly. He darted through a back door into the interior of the building.

Shiro wandered until he found what he was looking for- a single flash of red amidst the darkened hideout. Feet light, he came up behind the lone Aogiri member. Shiro wrapped his hands around the man's throat, feeling him tense and struggle. Just as his kagune began to shoot out, Shiro wrapped his own around it, keeping the bikaku from attacking him.

Gradually, the ghoul became more and more lax, before he finally went limp. Shiro let him drop to the floor, unconscious but not dead. He removed the cloak from the Aogiri member, kagune retracting, and donned it himself. Lucky. He's not that much larger than I am.

Shiro dragged the body in the shadowed area behind a stairwell and hurried onward.

As he neared a group of cloaked ghouls, Shiro sped up and shouted, "CCG on the opposite side of the building! Get everyone you can!"

"I've never seen you around here before," one hesitated.

"Are you an idiot? I'm a new member under Ayato Kirishima's command. Now go!" the ghouls hurried off, to Shiro's relief. That had been almost too easy.

It didn't take long for him to see ghouls rushing past him to the opposite side of the building, shouting about CCG.

Amidst the commotion, Shiro neared his destination. The room where he had been tortured. The room where he expected Kaneki would be.

Inside, in the same chair Shiro knew uncomfortably well, sat Kaneki. He was wide eyed and shaking with his hands chained to the arms of the chair. Shiro shuddered. For a moment, all he could see was his own blood dripping down on the floor, all he could feel was a centipede in his ear, all he could hear was what's one thousand minus seven?

Shiro grit his teeth and forced the flashbacks away. He needed to focus, for Kaneki's sake.

Jason was next to Kaneki, a tool gripped in his hand that on closer look seemed to have been used to pry the nails off the human's left hand.

Shiro needed to kill him, tear his eyes out, break every bone in his body for ever touching Kaneki.

"Sh... Shiro?" Kaneki stared at his alternate self, eyes unfocused like he thought he was hallucinating Shiro being there.

"Eh? Who are you?" Jason stood, staring at Shiro with irritation at having been interrupted.

"You have something of mine that I want back."

"This?" Yamori gripped Kaneki's hair, pulling his head up. The brunet cried out. The ghoul's sadistic
"Let go of him," Shiro demanded coldly, the crack of his index finger echoing through the room. His kagune burst from his back, snapping forward in threatening points. He tensed, ready to attack.

Jason let go of Kaneki, his own kagune emerging. Shiro waited for him to make the first move, so that their battle would be further away from Kaneki.

And then Jason charged.

Shiro saw an eerie similarity to their first battle as he dodged and leapt onto Yamori's back, his rinkaku briefly cutting into the larger ghoul's shoulder. He threw himself off just in time before Yamori's kagune would have impaled him.

Their kagunes clashed together, the spikes on Jason's rinkaku cutting into Shiro's. The half-ghoul took the pain, gradually pushing Jason back until he seemed surprised.

"You're strong," Jason slammed his leg forward, sending Shiro crashing into the wall.

"Shiro!" Kaneki shouted, fear tinging his voice.

I don't ever want to hear him afraid. Shiro picked himself up, running back towards Yamori. But before he could attack, he saw Yamori changing directions.

Jason grabbed Kaneki's arm, "You're attached to this guy, huh?" his grip tightened until Kaneki was wincing, "what if I break him?"

Shiro lost it. He felt his kakuja forming, and he dropped his fox mask to the floor. And then everything became fragmented.

Blood, flesh, need to hurt him kill kill break tear

Was that screaming coming from himself? Kaneki? Jason? Shiro's hand felt warm, wet, and he pulled it out of something... a stomach?

"Stop, stop, Shiro, please stop," he heard someone begging hysterically.

Slowly, Shiro's senses came back to him. He blinked, felt the centipede kakuja disappearing.

The half-ghoul stared at Jason's lifeless body underneath him, eyes trailing to the intestines wrapped around his neck like a macabre necklace. Shiro's hands were covered in blood and he could feel the rotten taste in his mouth. He stood and wiped his hands off on the robes, a grimace on his face before he dropped them to the floor.

Shiro strode to Kaneki, hating himself as he took in the brunet's turned face and tightly shut eyes. He had horrified the human.

Shiro broke the chains around Kaneki's hands and feet and sank to his knees, pulling Kaneki down against him and wrapping his arms around him. He knew he didn't have time for this, but he needed it. Kaneki was tense for a moment, before he relaxed against Shiro.

Desperation built up in Shiro as his hands tried to be everywhere at once. He needed to check where Kaneki was hurt, needed to make sure he would be okay. His hands slid up Kaneki's shirt, feeling bandages there. They must have patched him up to keep him from dying during torture. He stroked his face, ran his fingers through his hair.
"I want to go home," Kaneki's voice cracked.

And on a sudden impulse, Shiro pressed his lips against Kaneki's in a soft, close-mouthed kiss.

When he pulled back, Kaneki's eyes were wide. Shiro found his mask on the floor and put it on, before lifting Kaneki into his arms.

"Hold on," Shiro warned, "I'm probably going to have to run."

Shiro felt Kaneki's arms wind tighter around his neck. He made his way outside of the torture room, leaving Yamori dead in a puddle of his own blood.

As soon as they were outside, Shiro ran for it, hearing Aogiri ghouls hot on his tracks.

"That's the guy!" Someone called out from behind. Shiro should have known that they would figure out his trick quickly. He sped up, searching for the door he had taken to get in.

He was tired out from the fight. They were catching up. Shiro silently begged that he'd be able to find a way out.

And then he saw the door up ahead. Relieved, he kicked it open and ran into the parking lot.

"Green!" Shiro shouted the code word. A car came speeding up to Shiro and Kaneki, the passenger door open. Shiro threw himself into it, landing awkwardly with Kaneki in his lap. He slammed the door shut just before a kagune shot out and scratched the side of the car.

The driver, Hide, slammed his foot down on the gas pedal. They drove off and left Aogiri's hideout behind them.

Hide threw his head back and laughed, "We did it. We did it!"

Shiro settled into the seat properly and wrapped his arms around Kaneki's waist.

"You okay, Kaneki?" Hide asked, concerned eyes flickering to the brunet sitting against Shiro.

"I... I don't know," Kaneki's voice was quiet and exhausted.

"We're staying at Hide's place for a few days," Shiro murmured into Kaneki's hair. Kaneki's head lolled and his eyes started to slip shut for longer and longer.

"You're safe now."
It's been a while, Shiro thought, sitting on a counter in Hide's kitchen. The place was familiar and homely. He listened to the sizzling of bacon in a pan, watched Hide deftly flip it. Shiro ignored the disgusting smell, used to it by then. Soft music was leaking from the blond's headphones, although one side was off of his ear in order to hear Shiro.

"You too?" Shiro murmured, voice quiet and strained as he made a vague gesture inferring the dark circles under Hide's eyes.

"I couldn't sleep." Hide shrugged one shoulder. Shiro hadn't even tried, he just sat by the door to the bedroom Kaneki was sleeping in and kept guard.

Hide placed the bacon onto a plate already filled with a pancake and scrambled eggs, before abruptly pacing over to Shiro and grabbing his shoulders, shaking them in a way that was reminiscent of old times.

"You took care of the guy who hurt Kaneki, right?" Hide demanded.

"I..." Shiro blinked, then coughed awkwardly, turning his head to the side, "I think I strangled him with his own intestines."

"Well," Hide raised an eyebrow, "uh, not the way I would have done it, but that works too."

Shiro watched as the coffee machine beside him dripped its last drops. He poured it into a mug and added the milk he had steamed earlier, before he drew a rabbit on the foam. Hide watched him add the coffee art with fascination.

"Shiro," Hide began, "I think I should stay home from-

"No. Go to your classes, I'll stay here."

"Are you sure?" Hide fretted.

"Go, Hide," Shiro gently pushed his best friend, "or you'll be late."

Hide gave in. He handed Shiro the plate of food for Kaneki and walked to the door, "I'll see you later, then. Call me if you need anything."

Shiro nodded. The door shut, and he turned to take the food and coffee to the bedroom. It was actually Hide's, since there was only one bedroom, and Hide had taken the couch the previous night so that Kaneki could have the bed.

Kaneki had been passed out by the time they got to Hide's. Shiro had carried him to bed and bandaged the nails on his left hand as well as the back of his head. He was glad that he hadn't been tortured in a more permanent way, but the head injury was problematic. Shiro suspected that Kaneki had a minor concussion.

Shiro pushed open the bedroom door and quietly sat down by the bed, setting the plate and mug on the floor. He rested his elbows on the bed and observed Kaneki's sleeping face.
Maybe it was the bluish morning light, but Kaneki looked too pale. His face didn't look relaxed while sleeping, like it was supposed to. Shiro falteringly reached forward, the backs of his fingers skimming over the brunet's jaw before he threaded them through his messy black hair.

Shiro didn't get why he found Kaneki so attractive when they literally had the same face. It wasn't like he ogled himself in the mirror, it was just Kaneki.

*What the hell am I doing?* Shiro wondered, his fingers wandering closer and closer to Kaneki's lips. He felt himself flush a little when his thumb rested on the human's lower lip.

*I kissed him last night.*

Kaneki stirred and Shiro flinched back, hand drawing away.

"Shiro...?" Kaneki's eyes flickered open, pastel grey dulled into gun metal by exhaustion. For all the sleep he had gotten, the brunet didn't seem rested.

"Sorry. I didn't mean to wake you," Shiro remembered the breakfast on the floor and reached for it, "hungry?"

"Not really," Kaneki sat up, wincing, and took the food and coffee anyway. He set the plate on his lap, peered into the mug and admired the small, wide-eyed rabbit in the foam. Shiro had drawn a butterfly resting on its fluffy ear.

Shiro had a tendency of drawing coffee art that symbolized people he knew. This one was Hinami, he thought privately.

"My head hurts," Kaneki murmured, "Shiro, I can't remember much."

It was probably a good thing if Kaneki didn't remember everything, Shiro thought.

"Wait..." Kaneki blinked and tipped his head to the side, giving the half-gouhl a measuring look, "you kissed me."

"So you do remember yesterday?" Shiro recalled Kaneki screaming and begging for him to stop while he killed Jason, and he felt a stab of fear. If Kaneki remembered that, the half-gouhl had no doubt that he would be a monster in the human's eyes.

Kaneki stared blankly, "I kind of just remember being kidnapped? And... the torture," his voice quieted at the end, and he subtly covered his injured hand with his right hand, "We're at Hide's, right? Where's Hide?"

"He's going to his classes."

Kaneki drank some coffee, his throat probably dry from all the shouting he had done, "Why did Jason come here, anyway?"

Shiro clammed up, stricken as he was reminded that it was his fault. He felt something cold, something empty in the pit of his stomach.

"Shiro?" Kaneki pressed.

"Because of me," Shiro grit his teeth, his left eye turned kakugan, "Aogiri wouldn't have kidnapped you if you didn't smell like me."

"It's not your fault-"
"It is!" Shiro stood up, eyes harsh and nails digging into the palms of his white-knuckled fists, "I should leave, I should've left a long time ago and none of this would have happened-"

"What the hell are you saying?" Kaneki's eyes widened, "You can't just leave."

Shiro paced, aggressively raking his hands through his hair. He could wait until Hide got home and then go. Kaneki would be safe. Everyone would be happier if he disappeared without a trace. He just had to get it over with quickly, like ripping a band-aid.

"Of course I can."

"You're being stupid!" Kaneki stumbled to his feet, leaning heavily against the wall for support, and knocked over the coffee mug and plate onto the floor, "I don't care what happens to me, I don't want you to go. Haven't I told you that I fucking love you?"

Kaneki's eyes were dark with anger and hurt, eyebrows furrowed over them. His face was flushed and his hands were trembling.

"Don't you get it?" Shiro pleaded. He blinked, and felt warm tears spilling over his cheeks, "I can't protect anyone. I couldn't protect you."

Kaneki's expression softened, and he sat back down, "Come here, you idiot."

Shiro hesitated, before reluctantly sitting next to the brunet. Kaneki wrapped his arms around him and pulled him close. "I'm sorry," he shuddered, "I'm so sorry,"

"It's fine. You've saved me countless times..." Kaneki murmured, thumb stroking over Shiro's cheekbone, "thank you for all you've done."

Shiro's eyes widened before he collapsed against Kaneki in a sobbing and hiccuping mess, face buried against his shoulder. Kaneki's hand moved to the back of his neck, a warm and comforting presence there.

Kaneki sighed softly as Shiro's crying gradually died down. He laid back down, pulling Shiro down on top of him.

"Let's just rest a bit."

Chapter End Notes

don't look at me I couldn't think of a better title
comments make me happy
Easy as That

Shiro found himself in a predicament.

Kaneki was laying on the couch, knees slightly curled. One hand cupping his cheek, the other under his head. His eyes were shut and his chest was rising and falling slowly yet steadily. The t-shirt he wore was slightly rucked up over his hip, exposing a line of pale skin above the waist of his borrowed sweat-pants. A book had fallen from his hand and was resting on the floor, half open.

Sometimes the human twitched, his eyebrows drawing downwards and his mouth becoming a harsh line, but it always passed quickly. Shiro envied the soft peace Kaneki seemed to be wrapped in.

And watching him, Shiro felt an old but familiar itch in his fingers to hold a pencil over paper. He wanted to capture the shadow over Kaneki’s left eyelid, the curl of his fingers, the dip between his clavicles.

But at the same time, he was scared. Scared that if he left for even a moment, the fragility would shatter. It was irrational, but Shiro really wasn’t sure if he could take anything for granted anymore.

Shiro shifted closer, breathed in the scent of Kaneki and sleep. It wasn't like he hadn't gotten used to how Kaneki smelled, but it was still dizzying to be that close. Shiro closed his eyes, his breath coming shallow and his heartbeat small and rapid like a bird's. It was overwhelming. Kaneki was overwhelming.

The pencil and paper could wait. It wasn't like Shiro could jot down the entire contents of his heart. He felt too full, like affection was going to come spilling out from his lips and finger tips if he even twitched. Like he was going to grin or sob because it was almost too much.

Kaneki slept on, oblivious to how Shiro craved him. The ghoul wanted to tangle his fingers in his dark hair, fuck him, eat him, sit in his lap and lay his head on his shoulder, to the point where it was almost a physical ache.

On impulse, Shiro sat before slowly laying down and holding his breath as he tried not to let the couch creak. The nineteen year old could feel the warmth from the brunet’s body. With a cold hand, he cupped Kaneki’s face and hesitantly leaned closer.

Their noses brushed and Shiro shuddered, barely able to hear anything over the rush of blood in his ears. He could feel soft, warm puffs of breath against his lips. In his head was a mantra of *oh god oh god oh god oh god oh god oh god oh god* as he swallowed and tilted his head.

Shiro brushed his lips over Kaneki’s, feather light, and leaned back with a blush creeping over his cheeks.

*I want to do it again...*

Shiro pressed their mouths together firmer this time, longer. He inhaled breath that tasted sweetly of coffee. Kaneki’s lips were chapped but soft, and they were warm. Shiro wanted to melt into it.

Shiro blinked his eyes open. Kaneki was looking right back at him.

*Holy shit—*

...Shiro yelped and jerked backwards, but Kaneki quickly grabbed his wrist and dragged him back
before he fell off the couch. The ghoul felt his face burn uncomfortably.

"Hi," Shiro mumbled. Mortified, he wondered how long Kaneki had been awake.

"Hi to you too," Kaneki stared at him.

"I wasn't- I was just..."

"Kissing me? It's not like I mind, you know," Kaneki sat up and rubbed at his eye, face flushed with sleep, "help yourself."

Shiro hesitated for a second, before he gently pushed Kaneki back down. His kagune emerged and tangled around Kaneki's ankles, moving the human's legs to wrap around his waist.

Shiro reached for the eighteen year old's fingers to entwine with his, but was stopped by a distressed noise, "Don't, not my hands."

"Sorry," Shiro flinched back as if he'd been burned. He placed his hands instead on Kaneki's shoulders, guilt making his chest ache. He should have known that Kaneki would have some sort of trigger after the torture.

Kaneki drew in a breath, steadying himself, before gently tangling his hands in Shiro's hair. His face was reddening more as he pulled the ghoul closer, as if it was finally dawning on him that his crush was pinning him to the couch. The earlier sleepy confidence was fading fast.

"Wait, uh," Kaneki breathed, tongue darting over his lips, "I don't... I don't think I know how to kiss."

"I don't have any more experience than you do."

Kaneki hesitated longer, eyes avoiding Shiro as he swallowed back a nervous laugh. His fingers twitched in Shiro's white hair before he finally dragged him the rest of the way down.

It wasn't amazing. Their noses kept bumping and Shiro was getting a crick in his neck, but there were butterflies kicking about in his stomach anyway. He was kissing Kaneki. He was kissing Kaneki.

But then Shiro, fueled by impatience, licked at Kaneki's mouth and then it actually was kind of amazing. Kaneki tasted good, so good, Shiro wasn't sure he could ever settle for eating ghouls or even other humans again. Kaneki parted his lips with a soft little noise and Shiro licked further, slick tongue brushing against Kaneki's.

Kaneki's hands tightened in Shiro's hair. They mapped out each other's mouths. When Kaneki eventually pulled back for air, one of Shiro's eyes was turned and the other was dilated.

"Good?" Kaneki asked, a shy smile spreading over his lips.

Shiro nodded, ducking his head to bury it under Kaneki's chin before blurting, "I like you."

"What a coincidence," Kaneki smiled wider, cheeks red, "I like you too."

They kissed again, and it was as easy as that.

*  

Hide neared his home, backpack slung over one shoulder. He walked hurriedly as usual, wanting to
make sure everything was okay. He was still worried that Aogiri Tree would come after them- after all, they knew what his car looked like.

Hide opened the door. He wasn't sure what he was expecting, but it definitely wasn't... Kaneki and Shiro making out on the couch. And he was talking *full on making out*, as in the tongue in mouth, hands in hair, *is that a little bit of dry humping* kind of making out.

*Oh. They finally hooked up.*

The bleached blond was hoping to sneak off to his room (the room that he was letting Kaneki and Shiro sleep in, technically) and avoid embarrassing them, but just his luck- he accidentally slammed the front door shut. Two pairs of eyes snapped toward him, both of them looking like deer caught in the headlights.

"Hide, it's not..."

"We were just..."

"It's fine!" Hide interrupted cheerfully, "I'll leave you to it."

And with that, Hide took his stuff up to his room, leaving Kaneki and Shiro alone again. The two exchanged sheepish but satisfied glances, eyes darting down to each other's reddened lips.

Shiro was pretty sure he had found his new favorite thing to do.
The shrill, incessant ringing of Kaneki's cell broke into Shiro's sleep. With a groan, he stumbled out of bed and answered the phone before the sound could wake Kaneki up. It was cold outside of bed.

"Hello?" Shiro padded out of the bedroom, one hand rubbing the sleep from his bleary eyes.

"Hey, nutjob," a quiet but confident voice crackled through the cellphone. Shiro found himself smiling, suddenly much more awake. He leaned against the wall next to the bedroom where Kaneki still slept on.

"Touka."

In all that had happened in the past several days, if Shiro was to be honest with himself he had forgotten about giving his number to Touka. The call was unexpected.

Still, did she have to call him so early?

Touka didn't waste any time in cutting to the point, "Want to get coffee?"

"Of course I do," Shiro let the warm, affection-tinged words fall out before he could think it through. It was hard to pretend that he hadn't known Touka for so long. It was painful to act unfamiliar with her.

"Don't get me wrong, we're not buddies," Touka had clearly caught his too-friendly misstep, judging by her derisive reply, "it's more like I've taken it upon myself to find out what your deal is."

Shiro was too used to Touka's biting attitude to let it bother him. He shrugged it off.

"Time and place?"

"Anteiku, half an hour from now."

"So soon?" Shiro questioned, glancing towards the cracked open bedroom door. Without looking at a clock, if Shiro had to guess by the soft bluish light trickling into the apartment through the blinds, he would say it was somewhere around seven in the morning. It was a Saturday.

"You got a problem with that? No? Good. If you're late, you're dead," The beep of the call ending rang in Shiro's ear before he even had the slightest chance of replying. The half-ghoul snorted. Same old Touka.

Shiro slipped back into the bedroom and sat on the bed. He leaned over Kaneki and gently shook his shoulder until the human blinked his grey eyes open.

"Hey," Shiro murmured. His gaze traveled down to Kaneki's soft, naked shoulders left uncovered by the blanket, and the urge to stay in bed and just touch him left him reeling for a moment.

"Morning," Kaneki struggled to push himself up, sleep-weak hands scrabbling at the sheets for only a moment before Shiro put a hand on his chest.

"You don't have to get up," Shiro reassured, "I'm going to go get coffee with a friend."
"Who?" Kaneki relaxed back into the warm blankets, eyes falling shut. His voice was rough with drowsiness.

"Touka. Will you and Hide be fine by yourselves?" Shiro stood up and got dressed, glancing over his shoulder as he tugged socks over his ankles.

Shiro doubted that Kaneki, in his lethargic state, remembered who Touka was. He'd have to remind the brunet when he came home.

"Of course..."

"You're sure?" Shiro couldn't shake the unease he felt at the thought of leaving Hide and Kaneki by themselves when Aogiri Tree was still a threat.

Kaneki nodded, "Go have fun."

Shiro tugged one of Hide's hoodies over his head. He was ready to leave, but Kaneki's voice stopped him before he walked away.

"Wait, come here."

Shiro turned around and knelt by the bed, wondering what Kaneki wanted. But then warm hands were cupping his face and Kaneki clumsily brushed his lips against Shiro's in more of a nuzzle than a kiss. Oh.

"I'll see you later."

"Yeah, uh... Yeah. Later," Shiro stumbled over his words. Even after he tugged sneakers on and headed out the door, the nineteen year old could still feel a jittery warmth in his chest and a flush on his cheeks.

* *

Anteiku wasn't very crowded, seeing as it was seven thirty on a Saturday morning. The few that dropped by were probably the poor souls who were working on the weekend, and they took their coffee to go rather than staying.

Shiro easily spotted Touka at a table for two. He pulled out the tall chair across from her and sat down. Touka, dressed in an odd combination of a thick hoodie and short shorts that she somehow pulled off, pushed a cup of coffee towards him.

"You didn't have to buy for me..."

"I work here, dumbass. I get free drinks."

Touka drummed her fingers against the surface of the table. Shiro sipped his coffee and waited, knowing that Touka had never been very patient when there was something she wanted to know.

"So? What is your deal?"

"My deal?" Shiro smoothly feigned ignorance.

"Considering that the first time we met you asked me what year it is, you're either a nutjob or you have some interesting things to tell. So," Touka pinched her middle finger and thumb together and flicked her already drained coffee cup over, letting it fall on its side upon the table, "$spill."
"I was delirious from blood loss," it's not like I can tell her that I somehow time traveled. I'm pretty sure she would kill me.

"Bullshit, you were completely healed when you asked."

Shiro paused, uncertain of how to rebut that. He was saved by another voice cutting into their conversation.

"Onee-chan, are you being rude again?"

"Hinami...!"

"Please don't take Onee-chan too seriously, Mister. She's nicer than she acts," Hinami stepped closer, short honey-colored hair bouncing around her shoulders and her face earnest. Shiro felt something twist in his stomach. She looked so much younger, unmarked by the death of her mother.

"Hinami, please go-"

"No!" Hinami bit out, eyes bright and defiant even when she was holding back tears, "You can't keep pushing everyone away. You've been acting weird since that lady disappeared-"

"I'm fine!" Touka hissed. She stood up abruptly and knocked her chair back, her hands clenched tightly in a white-knuckled grip on the edge of the table. She attracted several passing glances from people ordering coffee.

Hinami flinched back. Silence hung heavy in the air, and Shiro's eyes flickered back and forth between the two of them. ...That lady?

"Sorry," Touka's shoulders slumped and she sat back down, "Hinami, this is Shiro."

Shiro held out his hand, and Hinami hesitantly shook it. Even though he was expecting it, it still stung to see the lack of recognition in her eyes.

The half-ghoul closed his eyes and steadied himself. It would be okay. He'd just have to rebuild his relationship with her, like with everyone else.

"It's nice to meet you, Hinami."

Chapter End Notes

how 2 Hinami?

so I have to admit that I was planning on abandoning this fic for a while, but I changed my mind. Merry Christmas? This is a short chapter, but I'm just crawling back out of writer's block, so it's a start.

On another note, thank you all for 1000 kudos! ♥ It's amazingly flattering that this story is the most favorited TG fic on this site and I freak out every time I see people talking about it on Tumblr. (Don't think that I'm not watching you... (°_°))
December came around and Shiro still found himself treading lightly, unsure of what would have Kaneki freezing up or curling up into a ball. There were good days and bad days. The first few after they had returned had been good, probably because Kaneki had been pretty dazed due to a minor concussion. But after that...

Shiro lost track of how many times Kaneki woke him and Hide up in the middle of the night thrashing and crying out.

Shiro wondered if the way he felt now was how the people he knew felt after his own ordeal at Aogiri Tree. Maybe it wasn't as bad, maybe Kaneki hadn't endured days of having his fingers and toes wrenched off again and again, but Shiro still felt helpless seeing a certain, ever-present fear in Kaneki that hadn't been there before.

Many times, Shiro didn't even know what to expect when it came to what would set Kaneki off. Like the ringing of the doorbell on a Sunday afternoon.

Kaneki had been in mid-sentence, something about a book he had been reading, when the ringing of the door sounded. He trailed off, eyes darting to the door as he tensed like a deer in the headlights.

Oh. Kaneki had told him what he remembered about being kidnapped. He had been home alone, and the door bell rang.

"I'll get that-" Hide started, starting to get up from his place on the couch.

"It could be them," Kaneki protested, eyes wide and voice high. His hand shot out to grab Hide's sleeve before he could go.

"It's okay. Hide got a paint job and a new license plate number, and I wear a hood when I go out. There's no way Aogiri could find us," Shiro reasoned. It was mostly true, but it was possible for a ghoul with a strong sense of smell to track him by scent, like Yamori had. Still, Kaneki didn't need to know that.

Gradually, Kaneki relaxed. His fingers slipped from Hide's tee-shirt and his shoulders unhunched.

Hide stood up and and smiled reassuringly at the brunet, "Hey, whoever it is, they're probably gone by now anyway."

"Sorry..." Kaneki looked away while Hide walked to the front door, his expression uncomfortable.

"It's not your fault," Shiro pulled Kaneki towards him so that his chest was against the human's back. Their legs tangled together over the couch cushions, an open display of affection. They had talked to Hide about their... Whatever it was they had that so happened to involve copious amounts of kissing, and he hadn't minded.
"Seriously, whatever makes you happy. Even if that's dating yourself from an alternate timeline," Hide said, "Wait, but who tops?"

*Both Kaneki and Shiro spat out their coffee simultaneously.*

Shiro watched Hide open the door, but was confused when there was no one outside. Just a large package at the bleached blond's feet.

"But... There's no mail on Sundays," Hide scratched the back of his head. He bent down and picked up the unassuming brown package.

"Is there a label?" Shiro frowned. Everything about it screamed suspicious.

"Yeah... Either of you know a 'Mother Time'?

Shiro stared, his eyes wide and his eyebrows raised. He untangled himself from Kaneki and stalked to the front door to take the package from Hide and push him back.

"Go sit down. Please," Shiro urged as he shut the door. All he knew was that Mother Time was a ghoul. There was no telling what was in the package, or if it was dangerous.

"What is it? Who's Mother Time?" Kaneki questioned. The brunet drew his knees to his chest to allow Hide to sit down on the couch.

"I don't know. That's the problem," Shiro frowned. No matter which way he turn it, there was no further marking besides the black, cursive writing that spelled Mother Time. He tried shaking the package, but still couldn't tell what was inside.

Shiro gave in and opened it, tearing off the packaging and slitting the tape on the box inside with his nail. Inside was... clothing, shampoo, conditioner, boxes of food and other necessities.

After rifling through the items, Shiro found a small, plain note, handwritten in a feminine scrawl.

"To help you through the winter," the half-ghoul read aloud.

"But those are..."

"Things from our apartment," Shiro finished Kaneki's sentence. The brunet had walked over and now perched beside the nineteen year old, inspecting the contents of the box. Kaneki still wasn't fully healed, but he was now able to walk by himself.

"You really don't know who sent it?" Kaneki's face screwed up in confusion, his brows furrowed.

"I've heard of her... Someone told me that she's another ghoul," Shiro strained to remember the exact words of the ghoul he had received the information from. What had he said, that she was well known?

"This is a good thing, right?" Hide joined them on the floor, "I don't have the money to get you guys things, and right now going back to your place is a Bad idea with a capital 'B'."

Shiro continued to stare at the package as if it would bite him. *But what if this 'Mother Time' is working with Aogiri?* He shook his head. It still wouldn't make any sense, why would she help them?

Hide continued rifling through the box until he reached the bottom, but then he cleared his throat, drawing Kaneki's and Shiro's attention to him.
"Whoever she is, I think she knows you guys a little too well," Hide coughed. He was holding up...

Is that?-- Shiro stared, mouth opening and closing as he lost any and all coherent speech. Hide was holding up a box of condoms and a bottle of lube, both new and unopened.

Kaneki flushed and buried his face in his hands.

He needed to find out who Mother Time was, Shiro decided.

"You're sure?" Kaneki heard Shiro ask for what felt like the tenth time. The brunet pulled a sweater over his button up, the motion ruffling his hair.

"I'm sure. I want to."

Shiro curled his knees up, languidly stretching across the bed so that his arms were draped over the vacant pillow beside him. He peered at Kaneki through sleepy grey eyes, clearly unconvinced.

Kaneki wished Shiro would stop worrying about it. Yeah, it had been difficult lately. Kaneki had a lot of nightmares and sometimes panic attacks, more than he'd had ever since his mother died, but he really felt that he was ready to go back to college.

The cuts from the glass on his back were healing without infection, and he could just carry his bag in hand rather than on his back. His head was healed, but the nails on his left hand had barely grown at all. Kaneki really, really didn't want anyone to ask about that, so he'd just wear gloves. He didn't understand why Shiro was so against him returning to college life.

Even if it turned out badly, it was only a week or two until winter break began.

I just want something normal again.

Besides, Kaneki felt like he was losing his mind staying inside all day.

"If you say so."

Kaneki leaned against the wall and smiled at the half-asleep half-ghoul. It was still sort of hard to believe that Shiro returned his feelings. What they had, now... It was good. Kaneki liked it.

"I'll be okay. Trust me."

Kaneki walked away, headed to the kitchen to fix himself breakfast. He toasted a piece of bread and started some coffee. When the toaster popped (he did not jump, by the way, definitely not) he spread butter over it.

The brunet glanced at the microwave clock. Good, he had plenty of time before he had to leave.

Kaneki almost made breakfast for Hide, too, but then he remembered that Hide had said he'd be going to the store, ridiculously early that morning, before he went to class.

"I maaay be getting a few gifts," Hide had hinted with a wide grin before he left.

Kaneki sat down with his toast and coffee. Before he was even half-way done, he heard the faint creak of the bedroom door. Shiro padded into the kitchen.

"It's too cold," Shiro grumbled, making a bee-line for Kaneki. Instead of pulling out the chair across
from him, like Kaneki expected, Shiro sat straight in his lap.

"H-hey," Kaneki protested, pushing at Shiro futilely. *I'm not a chair!*

The other male didn't get off. He did what Kaneki was pretty sure was the opposite of get off. He turned to face Kaneki and loosely wrapped his arms around his shoulders, nose against the dip beneath Kaneki's ear.

"Come on, I can't eat like this," Kaneki's cheeks and ears went warm. Shiro was... really close. And he was still only wearing a shirt and underwear.

Shiro stayed silent.

Kaneki sighed and gave up, eating the toast around Shiro as best as he could. His free hand settled on the small of Shiro's back, fingertips rubbing circles there. He idly dragged a thumbnail over it through the half-ghoul's shirt and felt Shiro tense up, suddenly digging his nails into Kaneki's shoulders.

"What's wrong?" Kaneki tilted his head and bit his lip. He set the toast down on the plate. He hadn't done anything, had he?

"You probably shouldn't touch there," Shiro's voice sounded oddly strained. Kaneki frowned, wondering if maybe Shiro was hurt.

Ignoring the warning, Kaneki slid his hand up the back of Shiro's shirt and touched the same area. He didn't feel any injuries. Come to think of it, wasn't that where Shiro's kagune came out of?

"Why?" Kaneki stroked the skin firmer, lightly scraping his nails over it.

Shiro sucked in a sharp breath and abruptly sat up, batting Kaneki's hand away and curling his fingers in the hem of his shirt to pull it up and over his head to land somewhere on the floor.

"What..." Kaneki started to ask but trailed off, his question answered. Shiro's kagune was unfurling from his back, the rinkaku sprawling downward to relax against the brunet's legs. Even through the fabric of his pants, Kaneki could feel how warm the kagune strands were.

"Touch them," Shiro demanded, staring down at Kaneki with his hands on his shoulders. Kaneki blinked but moved his hand to one of the tentacles, feeling the scaled surface. His hand moved along it until he reached its base, where it connected to Shiro's back. Around the base it felt softer, and there weren't any scales. Kaneki curiously stroked there, and...

Shiro shivered and rocked his hips a little, pressing something that was definitely not soft anymore against Kaneki.

Kaneki jerked his hand back as if it had been burned, eyes going comically wide, "What- why are you...?"

"The area where the kakuhou is and the base of the kagune are erogenous zones."

"Why'd you tell me to touch them, then?!" flustered, Kaneki looked away. He really hadn't known.

"I told you you probably shouldn't touch my back," Shiro chided exasperatedly, "but you did it anyway. Too bad, so sad, now you have to continue."

"But I haven't even finished eating-"
"Kaneki," Shiro narrowed his eyes, bringing his index finger up to rest on Kaneki’s lower lip as he leaned in closer.

Kaneki sighed and gave in, offering a half-smile as his hand settled back over the velvety base of Shiro’s kagune. The half-ghoul gave an appreciative little sigh. Kaneki’s stomach twisted into nervous but excited knots knowing that Shiro was in his lap and hard.

His left hand was free, so Kaneki tentatively splayed it over Shiro’s stomach, admiring the muscles there. His fingertips traced the paler slice of scar tissue that marked the surgery that had turned Shiro into a half-ghoul. The abrupt urge to trace it with his tongue instead caught Kaneki off guard.

Shiro’s hands roamed to Kaneki’s hair, gently tangling in it and dragging him forward until they were kissing, and maybe Shiro tasted kind of like morning breath but he also tasted like breathlessness.

Their kisses were always a little too much tongue, a little too much teeth, but Kaneki didn’t mind. The slick motions of their tongues left the brunet breathing harder, feeling the slow burn of desire. Kaneki liked the firm weight of Shiro on him, liked the feeling of his thighs on either side of him. Something about it felt comforting, grounding.

Kaneki’s hand was stuck on repeat, petting Shiro’s kagune until he was barely conscious of it anymore. Shiro was squirming against him, cock rubbing against Kaneki’s stomach through his briefs.

Kaneki shifted, leaning back so that the back of his head was resting against the top of the kitchen chair. It wasn’t the most comfortable, but when Shiro took the hint and moved slightly backward it had the benefit of letting their clothed cocks nudge together.

And... oh. Kaneki was pretty sure that his brain had just short-circuited. His hands shot to Shiro’s hips and held him there while he rocked up against him, grinding them together.

"Oh god," Kaneki hissed through his teeth. All of a sudden, he felt like the air had been knocked out of him.

Shiro dropped his head down, gasping against Kaneki’s neck. His kagune wound their way around any part of the human they could reach, from his waist to his ankle. He reached back behind him to settle his hand on Kaneki’s knee and steady himself.

Shiro’s breath was warm and damp against his skin. Kaneki’s head was swimming, everything felt almost too good. The half-ghoul licked Kaneki’s neck, reminding him of that time next to the alley. Shiro sucked on a patch of skin and Kaneki was pretty sure he was going to melt. Too aroused to be shy anymore, Kaneki slid his hands under the waistband of Shiro’s briefs and cupped his ass.

The nineteen year old huffed out a laugh, and Kaneki could feel his lips curved upwards against him, "Grabbing my ass? Really?"

Kaneki started to defend himself breathlessly but then Shiro bit him, hard, and he trailed off in a high whine, "It's a nice a-aaah..."

Kaneki brought one hand up to fist in Shiro's pretty white hair and pull his head back, baring his throat. Kaneki couldn't help but think that Shiro looked good like that: chest heaving, face flushed, hair mussed and one eye dilated, the other turned kakugan. His kagune was still unfurled from his back, beautiful red against his pale skin.

Kaneki lowered his head to Shiro's neck to return the favor, sucking a mark onto it. Shiro moaned,
grinding more desperately on Kaneki's lap. But when Kaneki pulled back and let go of his hair, he watched with disappointment as the mark faded and disappeared. Regeneration abilities were so unfair.

Shiro brought a hand down between them and palmed himself through his briefs, his mouth finding Kaneki's again to kiss him messily. His movements were getting erratic. Kaneki could feel himself getting closer, too, losing himself in the sweet friction.

Kaneki stroked his hand down Shiro's back, finding the base of his kagune again and caressing it. It felt wet with RC fluids. Shiro panted and tensed up, face screwed up in bliss, and that was all Kaneki needed before he felt like he was about to come.

He was so close, just needed a little more, and-

Kaneki caught the numbers on the microwave clock out of the corner of his eye and froze, "I'm gonna be late!"

Shiro sighed but got off of Kaneki, slumping against the nearest wall and yawning. Kaneki hurried to get his bag from the bedroom, almost falling over because his legs felt like jelly.

"I'm sorry, Shiro," Kaneki called guiltily before running out the door. The brunet wanted nothing more than to stay and finish, and he was pretty sure his dick agreed, but he'd missed more than enough college already. He couldn't afford to fail his classes.

Kaneki ran to the bus stop, breathing hard by the time he was close to it. It was cold outside, and the air burned his lungs. The brunet stopped, panting for breath, but nearly jumped out of his skin when someone rushed at him and hugged him.

At least the cold had killed his boner.

"Yo, Kaneki!" Hide smiled and pulled back, several grocery bags in each hand.

"That's... a lot of bags," Kaneki blinked, "you do realize you'll have to carry those around all day?"

Hide's smile faltered, "Oh, crap. Think you can carry some?"

Kaneki reached for some of the bags, but Hide shook his head, "Not those."

Hide handed him the bags in his other hand. They began to walk the rest of the way to the bus stop, and Hide offered by way of explanation, "Birthday presents, the ones I handed you are Shiro's. Promise you won't tell him what they are?"

Kaneki nodded, starting to complain that they weren't kids anymore and Hide didn't have to make him promise, but realized midway that Hide wasn't paying attention. The blond was staring fixedly at his neck.

"I take it you got some," Hide grinned widely and clapped Kaneki on the shoulder. Oh. The hickey. Kaneki reached up and covered it self-consciously.

Kaneki groaned and his shoulders slumped, "Don't remind me."

"It was bad...?"

"No," Kaneki flushed and glanced to the side, feeling embarrassment catching up to him, "it was amazing."
Kaneki explained what happened mournfully. Hide laughed, the traitor, and made a joke about clockblocking.

"Seriously though, Kaneki. If you and Shiro have sex in my bed I'm kicking both of you out."

Chapter End Notes

ugh I'm kind of rusty at writing smut, that did /not/ flow well.
Kaneki liked mornings.

Weekend mornings meant curling up and hugging Shiro's arm or kagune to his chest, mind blurred at the edges. They meant rays of sunlight kissing his face through the cracks in the blinds and breathing amusement in more of an exhale than a laugh as Shiro would inevitably hook a leg over his hip and groan, hiding his face from the bright sun in whatever part of Kaneki was closest.

Mornings meant Shiro eventually stirring, quietly announcing his wakefulness by gradually easing his kagune back under his skin. He would lean over and give Kaneki morning breath kisses and Kaneki would shove him away after a minute or so, complaining that it was gross.

Mornings meant coffee and sitting on the sofa, Kaneki burying his nose in a book and listening to Shiro and Hide talk, occasionally adding his own distracted comments.

The college student had tried before to convince Shiro to read again, but the ghoul remained stubborn.

"I told you. They remind me of the past."

"But I'm literally your past self. You're reminded of the past all the time."

Shiro had sighed and glanced at the name on the cover of the book, Takatsuki Sen, "That's different. I'll put it this way. Takatsuki's works are too morbid for me to enjoy after... the things that have happened."

The morning of December 20th didn't follow the pattern of previous mornings. Instead of slowly drifting into consciousness, Kaneki was woken by a face inches from his that was decidedly not Shiro's.

"Wake up! It's your birthday!" Hide was practically bouncing up and down. Kaneki wondered, disgruntled, how the blond was more excited about their birthday than he and Shiro were.

Kaneki didn't mind too much, though. He was used to waking up early, and he supposed he could call himself a morning person or something close. Just... not as much as Hide. He was pretty sure Hide guzzled an entire bag of sugar every morning.

Shiro, on the other hand, seemed torn between looking murderous and forgiving him because it was Hide.

"Yes, happy birthday to me, can we go back to sleep now?" Kaneki questioned, amused despite himself.

"Absolutely not! We have places to be."

"I didn't get the memo. Doesn't our birthday mean we get to, you know, sleep in?" Kaneki was protesting for Shiro's sake more than his own. The brunet glanced beside him. Shiro had pulled the blanket over his head.

"Please?" Hide whined obnoxiously.

Kaneki caught Hide's eye and glanced to the ghoul-shaped lump under the blanket, shrugging
helplessly. The blond frowned, before getting a determined look on his face. Kaneki had the feeling that he should get out of the line of fire.

And then Hide grabbed the blanket and began pulling it away. Shiro scrabbled to get it back, looking like an angry cat. When the blanket slipped from Hide's grip due to Shiro's superior strength, he went for the half-ghoul's ankle.

"Shiro, I will drag you out of bed, don't test me."

...Kaneki took that as his cue to slink off while neither of them were looking. He headed to the kitchen, the sounds of the two of them squabbling fading behind him. He heard a few thumps and what sounded like angry squawking, but decided not to worry. The brunet shrugged it off and began making coffee for the three of them.

Several minutes later, Hide and Shiro emerged, the former looking triumphant and the latter sulking but now dressed. Kaneki hid a smile and offered them mugs.

The three of them settled on the couch after Hide kicked his blanket and pillow off. The bleached blond practically chugged his coffee in his impatience, while Kaneki was pretty sure Shiro drank his especially slowly just to spite him.

Almost the second Shiro swallowed the last in his cup, Hide burst out with, "So! Do you want your presents now or after cake?"

Shiro shrugged. Kaneki was curious yet didn't mind either way, but he was pretty sure Hide would combust if they waited until after cake, "Now, I guess."

Hide grinned and gave two thumbs up. The blond walked over to the coat closet near the door and rummaged around all the way in the back. Kaneki found himself rolling his eyes. Of course Hide had hidden the presents, even though it was obvious that Kaneki and Shiro wouldn't open them early.

The college student returned with two bags and two boxes in his arms, clumsily wrapped with way too much tape. He sat back down and after settling the various presents on his lap, thrust a medium sized rectangular box towards Kaneki and Shiro, "This is for both of you."

Despite his attempts, Kaneki couldn't get all the tape off. Shiro took the present from him and easily ripped the wrapping open.

It was... condoms. Again.

Kaneki groaned. He was getting a little tired of people butting into their sex life. They hadn't even gotten that far yet. The furthest they had gone was the Kitchen Incident, as Kaneki had taken to mentally calling it.

"We already have some," Shiro pointed out, faint color in his cheeks, "how much sex do you people think we're having?"

"Do you really trust some random ghoul chick you've never met with condoms?" Hide protested.

"Hide, the box was sealed," Kaneki was trying very hard to stare at his feet, but he glanced at the box anyway and flushed.

"She could have used her weird ghoul juju to reseal it," Hide protested, wiggling his fingers to apparently indicate weird ghoul juju.
"I don't think ghouls can give or get STDs anyway..." Kaneki mumbled. He and Shiro had talked about it a little bit after the Kitchen Incident, and they theorized that since ghouls seemed impervious to illness, it was unlikely that they could carry diseases or infections.

The brunet glanced at the box again from the corner of his eye, noticing the word regular and blurting, "Wait, how do you even know what size--?"

"I guessed? Hey, at least I didn't get small ones."

"Thank you, Hide, we appreciate your concern, now can we stop talking about my dick?" Shiro interjected, setting the box of condoms on the floor by his feet.

To Kaneki's relief, Hide nodded and reached for two other presents, both in bags. He handed one to each of them.

Kaneki fumbled inside the bag, tossing aside the wrapping on top, and his fingers met soft fabric. He pulled it out and unfolded what he now saw was a sweater.

...It was the most hideous thing Kaneki had ever seen. It was a v-neck sweater that seemed Frankenstein-ed together, with neon pink, orange, green and leopard print all in completely different fabrics patched together. The front had Santa, a reindeer and several stockings on it. It was also way too big for Kaneki.

Next to him, Kaneki could see Shiro unfolding his. The ghoul's Christmas sweater was meant to look like a Christmas tree. It was dark green and there were strips of rainbow tinsel around the torso with different colored balls and candy canes sewn on. It was also several sizes too small. Kaneki was pretty sure it wouldn't even go past Shiro's stomach if he wore it.

Kaneki glared at Hide. The blond was busy trying to keep a straight face. Idiot. The corners of his mouth are twitching.

"What's the matter? Don't you like them?"

"Of course not. They're terrifying even to me," Shiro pointed out, smiling despite himself. Kaneki figured that the half-ghoul had finally been hit by the caffeine, if he was in a better mood.

Hide dramatically placed his hand over his heart, his expression exaggeratedly stricken, "Ah, my heart! I just wanted to make my best friends happy..."

After seeing that his over-dramatics had gained him no sympathy, Hide let his hand drop and a grin returned to his face, "Okay, fine, they're ugly. Try them on!"

"No way in hell."

"No!"

"I will make you wear them on Christmas," Hide grumbled but let them be for the time being.

Hide passed the last gift over, once again saying that it was for both of them. This time, Kaneki managed to get it open by himself. When the wrapping was off, he saw that it was a book- no, a photo album, or so the cover said.

"Go on, open it," Hide encouraged.

Kaneki opened the album between him and Shiro so that the half-ghoul could see. When his eyes settled on the first photo, it took a moment for him to realize it. It felt like the breath had been knocked out of him when he did.
Kaneki heard a sharp inhale beside him and knew Shiro felt the same way.

"Hide, you- you didn't," Shiro's eyes were glued to the photos on the first two pages.

"Where did you get this?" it was... a photo album of their mother. Kaneki never had any photos of her, because when his aunt took him in she took the album. He never saw it again, but he knew that she used it to get sympathy from men and milk money from them. People ate up the story of the grieving woman who lost her sister.

"Let's not talk about that," Hide suggested lightly, "trust me, you don't want to know."

Kaneki hesitated for a moment, but then nodded. He trusted Hide.

The college student reverently traced the photos through the plastic protecting them. They were pictures of his mother in high school, a few with friends or family. He figured that closer to the end would be pictures of her with him as a little kid.

Shiro slipped a photo out, one of their mother and aunt standing together, and pointedly folded it in half so that their aunt was out of the picture.

...Kaneki couldn't agree more.

"This means a lot," Shiro murmured softly.

"Thank you," Kaneki added, although it didn't feel like enough with the weight of the gift.

Hide just grinned and opened his arms, "C'mere, you nerds."

After carefully setting the album on the living room table, Kaneki moved closer and hugged Hide. Shiro hesitated for a moment before joining them.

"Happy birthday. Guess what, Shiro?"

"What?"

"You're an old man now," Hide answered cheekily, "you're twenty today, right? Kaneki and I are still teenagers."

"Rude," Shiro snorted. Hide released the two of them.

"Well, what are we waiting for?" Hide stood and stretched, then went to grab a neon colored coat from the still open closet.

Kaneki and Shiro blinked at him, equally confused.

"I told you, didn't I? We have places to be."

...After that, Hide dragged the two of them to the bookstore. During the walk there everywhere seemed to be crowded with people, probably because Christmas was in less than a week. The bookstore he took them to, though, was a small and not very well known one. Barely anyone was there besides the cashier.

Despite Kaneki's protests, the blond insisted on paying for whatever books he and Shiro wanted, "I've been budgeting for the holidays for months, Kaneki, I'll be offended if you don't let me pay."

"My birthday isn't a holiday," Kaneki grumbled.
"It is too."

Kaneki got the latest book from Takatsuki Sen and eventually convinced Shiro to get a book of American fairy tales that had been translated into Japanese. Although, the method of convincing may have been a little... dubious.

"Please, Shiro? We can read it together."

"Fairy tales, though?" Shiro didn't sound convinced. The half-ghoul studied the cover of the book Kaneki was holding towards him, "I don't know if I have time to read, anyway. I still need to find out who Mother Time is."

"You said you didn't want to read something morbid. Fairy tales are the opposite of morbid," it wasn't entirely true, considering that many fairy tales contained stories about animals eating people or other animals, but Kaneki had looked through this collection. It seemed fine.

Kaneki just... really wanted Shiro to be able to enjoy reading again. It seemed unthinkable that he could ever dislike books.

When Shiro still hesitated, Kaneki pushed his shyness aside, took a breath and pushed the half-ghoul against the nearest book shelf. He wasn't entirely opposed to dirty tactics.

"Please," Kaneki murmured against Shiro's lips, feeling the twenty year old go tense with startlement before he closed the distance and kissed him thoroughly.

At first there was the reluctance that came with knowing they were in a public place, but eventually that detail faded from his mind and he just relaxed, kissing Shiro slowly and curling his fingers in the half-ghoul's hoodie. It filled the brunet with satisfaction that spread through his chest, like drinking hot chocolate on a cold day.

"Have you two found anything- oh," Hide's voice came around the corner before trailing off, and Kaneki jolted, breaking the kiss. There was a thin strand of saliva between his and Shiro's lips. The human flushed and hurriedly scrubbed at his mouth, backing away.

"Gross," Hide made gagging noises, "way too much PDA, guys."

Shiro quickly recovered from the startle and stalked over to the blond, voice mocking as he puckered his lips, "Sorry, Hide, did you want a kiss too?"

Hide yelped and smacked the palm of his hand straight into the middle of Shiro's face.

...They got the book.
Once again, smut in this chapter.

“Hide, are you going to spend Christmas with your family?”

The bleached blond turned to face Shiro, caught off guard by the question. He scratched at the back of his head, where the brown and blond strands of his hair met. The two were standing in the kitchen, Hide cooking dinner for himself and Kaneki while Shiro watched him.

“Ah, maybe?” Hide furrowed his eyebrows, glancing at Shiro for a moment before back to the burger patties he was cooking in a pan, “Last time I called my parents I told them I’m helping a couple of friends get back on their feet. They won’t be mad if I spend it here.”

“You should go see them,” Shiro pressed. He leaned back against a counter, breathing through his mouth to avoid the revolting smell of what used to be his favorite hamburger brand.

“It’s still risky. I’m worried just going out for the day that while I’m gone some ghoul will break in.”

“I don’t think any will,” Shiro admitted.

“What do you mean?” Hide pushed hair back from his forehead and flipped the burgers. His voice told Shiro that he already suspected the same thing.

“It was so easy for them to find us the first time. Yamori couldn’t have been the only Aogiri ghoul who has a strong sense of smell.”

“So that means—?”

“They’re not trying,” Shiro confirmed. The half-ghoul frowned and cracked his fingers, the sound mixing in with the popping of the grease, “Whether that means they have a plan or they don’t need me anymore, I don’t know.”

“Do you think Kaneki heard anything?”

“His memories of the time are still fuzzy,” Shiro resolved to ask him anyway.

Hide hummed resignedly. He turned the stove off and dropped the patties on buns sitting on two respective plates.

“Kaneki, food’s done!” the blond called loudly. There was no response and Kaneki didn’t shuffle out of the bedroom.

“He’s probably still asleep.”

“Yeah. Classes have been exhausting him…” Hide turned to go wake Kaneki up, but Shiro caught his sleeve.

“Think about going to see your parents. I’m not going to take that from you, and I can keep myself
and Kaneki safe.”

Hide nodded, “Maybe New Year’s.”

“I’ll wake him up.”

Shiro let go of Hide’s sleeve and left the blond in the kitchen. He walked to the bedroom, feeling the carpet against his bare feet, and tapped lightly on the door before opening it.

Instead of lying down, Kaneki was sitting up against the wall with a textbook still open in his hands. For a moment Shiro almost thought he was awake, but the brunet’s head was slumped and his eyes were closed. His breath was soft and even.

“Kaneki.”

Kaneki jolted a little, his eyes fluttering open and his head lifting up. He blinked at the book in his hands and frowned, “I was… oh.”

Shiro sat on the bed next to Kaneki, “Hide made dinner for you.”

“Can you ask him to put it in the fridge for me? I need to keep studying--”

Shiro closed the book and tossed it aside. Kaneki made a startled noise and reached for it, but the half-ghoul stopped him with a hand on his chest, “Come eat.”

“You know I have a lot of makeup work, Shiro.”

“You’re not going to remember any of it if you’re half-asleep and hungry.”

Kaneki looked like he wanted to argue further, but he sighed and his shoulders slumped. The brunet rubbed at his eyes and slid over to let his legs dangle over the side of the bed. They both knew Shiro was right.

* * *

“Sure you guys don’t want to come?” Hide stood by the front door, keys in hand and fixing Shiro and Kaneki with a questioning look.

“A-ah, parties aren’t really my thing,” Kaneki smiled apologetically. Hide had been invited to a college party by an acquaintance in his classes, so he had told them. The blond had agreed to go, saying that it would be good to let loose and make a few friends around campus.

Kaneki knew that he should do the same, but he couldn’t find it in him to deal with a party. The thought of awkward conversation, sitting in the corner by himself watching horny young adults grind on each other, and the disgusting smell of alcohol and drugs everywhere was really unappealing when he could just stay home, maybe work on some papers and read more of the fairy tale collection with Shiro.

Hide glanced at Shiro. The half-ghoul shook his head.

Hide grinned and waved the keys in his hand, “Well, I’ll be off then. Sorry in advance if I come home shitfaced. Ah, we really need to get a futon, having a hangover on the couch would not be fun…”

The door shut behind Hide, cutting off his trailing words. Kaneki glanced at Shiro before turning around to shuffle to the towel closet.
“Where are you going?”

“Oh? To take a shower,” Kaneki opened the door and pulled out a fluffy white towel, “why?”

When Kaneki turned around, Shiro was standing next to him, voice sounding kind of off, “Hasn’t Hide been complaining about the bills lately? The water bills are very high.”

“Oh,” Kaneki bit his lip, eyebrows furrowed. He had hoped to spend some time in the shower just relaxing and letting his thoughts wander, “I guess I could wait ‘til tomorrow, then?”

Shiro was saying something, again in that weird tone of voice, and Kaneki felt a twinge of worry that maybe he was sick. The brunet set the towel aside and pressed the back of his hand to Shiro’s forehead, “Are you okay? You sound like you have a sore throat.”

The half-ghoul sighed, sounding disappointed for a moment. And then he… grabbed Kaneki’s hand? What?

Shiro’s fingers lightly gripped Kaneki’s wrist and guided it to his cheek so that he could lean into it, “I want to take a shower with you.”

“Oh,” Kaneki said again, this time with a flush rising to his cheeks. He brought his hand up and curled it against his neck in a nervous, defensive gesture. His grey eyes were wide and darting around anywhere that wasn’t Shiro’s face.

“Do you want to?” It wasn’t… It wasn’t that Kaneki didn’t want to; it just caught him off guard. And even if they had fooled around before, (cough, cough, the Kitchen Incident) the brunet had always had clothes on. Somehow the thought of being completely naked in the shower with Shiro made him feel really vulnerable.

But at the same time, it was very appealing.

“Yeah. I… I do.”

Shiro released Kaneki’s hand and picked up the towel Kaneki had set aside along with another one for himself. He walked to the bathroom and paused at the doorway, looking over his shoulder when Kaneki continued to awkwardly stand there, uncertain of whether or not he was supposed to follow, “Are you coming?”

Kaneki made his way to the bathroom, watching Shiro toss the towels aside. Then the one-eyed ghoul shut the door behind the brunet and abruptly pressed him against it, hands firm on the his shoulders.

Kaneki squeaked, because even if he had gotten the memo that showering together meant not-so-clean activities, he hadn’t expected said activities to happen that quickly. But then Shiro’s lips were pressed to his ear, and something warm and wet traced the shell oh god that’s his tongue and Kaneki’s stomach did a pleasant, dizzying flip. Yeah, he could get on board with this.

Distractedly, Kaneki wondered if there was a guidebook on where to put your hands when the you from another timeline who you were possibly dating was putting the moves on you. Maybe if he survived, he would write one himself. The human settled for wrapping his arms around Shiro’s waist.

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The half-ghoul brushed his lips further down, trailing barely-there kisses from Kaneki’s earlobe to his pulse point before he licked again. Kaneki’s breath left him in a shuddering exhale. Shiro made a noise in his throat like Kaneki’s taste and smell was too much for him, and that was… Good. Nice.
Shiro pressed Kaneki harder into the door, and then he was sucking and biting at the other’s skin hungrily, teeth and tongue so good that all Kaneki could really do was melt into the door and grip Shiro’s shirt like an anchor. With the way Shiro was sucking at the corner of his jaw and the side of his neck, Kaneki knew he’d be wearing a scarf for the next week or two.

*I should tell him to stop, I should tell him not to give me hickeys-* Kaneki sighed, face flushing as he tilted his head to give Shiro more access anyway.

Then Shiro broke away and Kaneki barely resisted the urge to whine something like *why’d you stop?* Before the half-ghoul yanked his own shirt over his head and made for Kaneki’s, fingers hooking in the hem.

Sudden, overwhelming panic hit Kaneki and he caught Shiro’s hands before he could lift his shirt up, “Wait wait wait!”

Shiro jerked his hands away and backed away immediately, looking kind of stricken, “You can say no, you know,”

“No, it’s just… I’m not…” Kaneki frowned, involuntarily staring at Shiro’s fit body before he wrapped his arms around his own. Instead he settled for saying, “I’ve got scars on my back.”

“That doesn’t matter. I don’t mind any part of you. And… I don’t want to suck your back off, or your stomach. I want to suck your dick,” it was blunt, even for Shiro. Kaneki was never sure whether the ghoul was going to be vague and poetic or bluntly honest.

“Wait. You want to do what?”

“Go down on you.”

In his entire life, Kaneki had never gotten undressed faster than he did then. He pulled his shirt over his head and tossed it into the growing pile of clothes, his pants quickly following. When he glanced at Shiro, the twenty year old was watching intently. Flustered, the brunet resisted the urge to hide his face in his hands.

“Can you look away for a second?” Kaneki huffed, fingers lingering at the waistband of his boxer briefs. It wasn’t like he was embarrassed about what was underneath this time; he was almost completely certain that he and Shiro were the same in that department. Kaneki just wasn’t sure anyone could step out of underwear or socks without looking ridiculous. At least, if they weren’t a stripper.

“It’s not like I haven’t seen it before,” Shiro grumbled.

“Just do it.”

Shiro obliged and turned around to face the sink. Kaneki quickly finished undressing, eyes flicking up to Shiro’s muscular back as his last sock was dropped to the floor, and… oh. Kaneki hadn’t thought that he was all that attracted to backs, but something about Shiro’s shoulder blades and the curve of his spine was making Kaneki’s mouth go dry. Shiro still had jeans on. That would have to change.

Kaneki stepped forward, reaching to trail his fingertips down Shiro’s back to the sensitive area Kaneki knew his kakuhou was in.
“Nn—” Shiro let out a startled, breathy noise, jerking forward for a moment before relaxing and leaning into the touch.

Kaneki fit his hips against Shiro’s so that his half-hard cock was up against the ghoul’s ass, exhaling unsteadily at the brief friction. Kaneki’s fingers continued their caress, and he didn’t miss the way Shiro’s arms were pebbling with goose bumps.

Then Shiro rocked back, slowly and deliberately, and glanced over his shoulder at Kaneki, “Shower,” he demanded.

With no small amount of reluctance, Kaneki moved away. The brunet stepped into the shower and turned the water on so the temperature would be somewhere between warm and hot. He stepped back so that the still-cold water wouldn’t hit him and waited with outstretched palms for the water to heat up.

Kaneki watched as Shiro unbuttoned his jeans and slid them off along with his underwear, cock springing free. The water dripped warm on his hands, so Kaneki stepped under the spray.

Kaneki thought that Shiro would join him, but the half-ghoul just leaned back against the wall and watched. Kaneki sighed exasperatedly when he realized that Shiro was enjoying the view.

“Narcissist.”

Shiro just shrugged the comment off, not moving from his relaxed position.

Okay, fine. Kaneki could be a teasing jerk too. He reached for the bottle of body wash that wasn’t Hide’s and flicked the cap open, pouring a generous amount into his hand before setting it aside. He lathered it between his palms and then slowly spread it over his chest and stomach in the hope that it looked something vaguely resembling sexy.

Kaneki’s fingertips slid down his stomach and then his hip, just missing what he actually wanted touched, and then back up. He slid his index finger over a nipple, face and neck feeling hot not just because of the water but because of how lewd this was.

The water rinsed away most of the body wash on his torso, so Kaneki brought his hands down to his thighs to trail the last of the suds on his palms over them. An involuntary little ah escaped him when the back of his thumb brushed his cock. Even if it was more for Shiro’s benefit, Kaneki couldn’t deny that all this touching was arousing him further.

Kaneki swallowed hard and then nervously dared to trail his fingers further, dragging the soap on his thighs to his balls and then further, further back. The motion pressed his arm against his cock and he gave an involuntary rock of his hips, slick fingers sliding over his hole. He experimentally pressed a little, exhaling a shaking breath, and was startled when the tip of his finger slid in easier than he expected.

The college student reluctantly withdrew his arm, cock twitching at the wet slide against it, and finally looked to the side to see Shiro’s reaction. He was startled when he was met with a black and scarlet eye as well as a grey one. Kaneki knew that his eye only turned when he was hungry or excited… Am I really affecting him that much?

Kaneki’s gaze went lower, and that answered that question. Shiro was definitely much harder than he had been before.

Shiro finally moved, stepping into the shower and drawing the curtain closed to finally halt the water that was getting on the floor. And then he pushed Kaneki against the wall underneath the spray,
Shiro’s arms wound around Kaneki’s neck and he kissed him, a soft press that gradually deepened until Kaneki was licking into Shiro’s mouth.

And then all coherent thoughts left Kaneki as Shiro sucked on his tongue, and he felt an answering throb of arousal that almost had his knees buckling. The brunet’s hands shot to Shiro’s hips and pulled them forward so that their cocks slid together. They moaned into each other’s mouths.

Kaneki pulled back to drink in a breath of air, feeling breathless after the kissing and the humidity of the shower, but he was barely away for a second before Shiro was kissing him again, roughly biting and licking at his lips.

After a particularly hard nip Shiro went still and pulled away. With his face and lips already feeling wet from the water dripping down their bangs, Kaneki didn’t notice until his bottom lip throbbed and he brought a finger up to touch it. His fingertip came away red.

“I’m sorr—” Shiro started, but Kaneki refused to let him finish. He tangled his fingers in Shiro’s wet hair and pulled him back, kissing him enthusiastically and licking his lips and teeth and tongue to encourage the same.

Shiro gave in and sucked at the bleeding spot on Kaneki’s lip. It hurt, Kaneki couldn’t deny that, but it was good. Kaneki felt hopelessly turned on.

Shiro finally pulled away with a small, obscene pop that shouldn’t have been as hot as it was. To Kaneki’s disappointment, he stepped back. The spray of water from the shower head now trickled down his hair rather than his back.

“Turn around,” Shiro murmured, half-lidded eyes fixed on Kaneki’s.

Kaneki didn’t argue, just turned around and pressed himself against the shower wall again. He was glad that it was still warm from his back being pressed against it.

The brunet was confused when he felt Shiro’s hands on his thighs pulling him backward, until he realized that Shiro was positioning him so that he was bending over with his ass out. And then whatever blood wasn’t already there, or further down, pooled in Kaneki’s face.

Kaneki pressed his palms to the wall to keep from slipping. Shiro leaned over Kaneki and pressed open-mouthed kisses to the steps of his spine, moving lower and lower until he reached his tailbone. Then Shiro stopped.

Kaneki felt the loss of Shiro’s warm chest against his back and was just about to look behind him when he felt hands spreading his cheeks. Something warm and wet slid against his hole, and Kaneki felt his stomach flip again. Was that—? Kaneki did glance over his shoulder, this time. Shiro was licking him.

“Oh my god,” Kaneki breathed heatedly against the shower tiles. Shiro was flicking his tongue and rubbing the flat of it against him. Kaneki was pretty sure he should have been disgusted but it was good, so good. Kaneki felt lightheaded. He reached down, wanting to stroke his almost painfully hard cock, but Shiro pushed his hand away with a disapproving sound.

And then Shiro pushed his tongue in and back out, and Kaneki made a noise that he refused to admit was a whimper. Shiro was fucking him with his tongue.

Just when Kaneki was sure he was going to come embarrassingly quickly, Shiro stopped and
breathed, “Wanna suck you off.”

Kaneki turned around once again on weak legs, and Shiro was on his knees in front of him looking unfairly appealing with wet hair and water dripping down his body.

Shiro leaned forward and experimentally licked the tip of his cock. Kaneki sucked in a harsh breath when he sucked it into his mouth, lips wrapped around the head. His mouth was wet and soft, and Kaneki could feel Shiro’s tongue under him.

Kaneki figured that the head was the furthest Shiro would take, considering that his own gag reflex was sensitive, and he would’ve been more than okay with that because it was the most sensitive area. But then Shiro took him further, and further, and—

“Ah, ah, ah—“ Kaneki gasped, because Shiro was deepthroating him. His legs almost buckled, but Shiro steadied him by holding his hips against the wall in a firm grip. The twenty year old looked just as surprised as Kaneki figured he did that he wasn’t choking.

Then Shiro pulled back and sucked it down again, and Kaneki’s hands shot to his hair, not pulling but just gently tangling there. Kaneki was pretty sure the image of his cock sliding in and out of Shiro’s mouth would be burned into his mind for the rest of eternity.

Over his heart pounding in his ears, Kaneki could still hear the obscene, wet noises that accompanied the blowjob. It was dirty, and that just made it feel hotter.

It was messy and sometimes Shiro’s teeth came too close for comfort, and even if Kaneki had no prior experience to compare to, it was clear that Shiro had never done this. The half-ghoul still seemed to be getting the hang of using his tongue, sucking and breathing through his nose at the same time, and he occasionally had to pull away to breathe. That didn’t stop it from feeling amazing.

Kaneki wanted so badly to thrust into Shiro’s mouth, but the ghoul’s hands kept him still. Then Shiro pulled one hand back to palm his own cock, but with his inhuman strength just one hand was still enough to hold Kaneki there.

Shiro moaned around Kaneki as he stroked himself, and the vibration had the human desperately throwing his head back against the shower tiles, abruptly close to the edge.

Shiro pulled back and sucked on the head hard, tongue finding the sensitive places, and that was enough to tip Kaneki over before he could even think about trying to last longer.

“Gonna come, I’m gonna come, Shiro.” Kaneki moaned and tensed up, expecting that Shiro would pull back, but he just kept sucking. Kaneki felt like he was falling, dissolving into Shiro’s mouth as he shuddered and forgot how to breathe. He came on Shiro’s tongue, and—oh god, the half-ghoul swallowed.

Kaneki slumped back against the wall, feeling boneless as he recovered his breath. Shiro let his hip go and pulled back, and Kaneki dropped to his knees next to him.

Shiro was still stroking himself off, so Kaneki batted his hand away and replaced it with his own. He wrapped his fingers around the half-ghoul’s cock, his grip loose because he didn’t have the strength in his muscles back yet. It was weird, and felt sort of like jerking off backwards, but Kaneki gradually got used to the angle as he stroked Shiro.

Kaneki leaned over and kissed him, slow and languid. Shiro’s arms wrapped tightly around his shoulders, and the brunet absentmindedly thought that he liked the way Shiro smelled right then; like clean, damp skin.
It didn’t take too much to make Shiro come all over his hand. A few fingers teasing over his balls, a twist of his wrist and a hard rub at the head and then Shiro was falling apart with a moan muffled by Kaneki’s mouth.

Kaneki held his dirtied hand under the water until it was clean, and they relaxed for a bit after that. Shiro dropped his head to Kaneki’s shoulder and sighed, basking in warm, contented feelings.

Eventually, Shiro insisted they stand up so that he could wash Kaneki’s hair. His fingers were soothing and gentle while they rubbed over the brunet’s scalp, spreading the lather.

“How’d you do that?” Kaneki asked, his voice quiet and sleepy. He leaned into Shiro’s touch.

“Do what?”

“Uh,” Kaneki’s cheeks warmed a little bit as he contemplated the least embarrassing way to say it, “Suck… all of it.”

“Oh. I’ve had to get used to eating regular food, which tastes bad to ghouls. I don’t have much of a gag reflex anymore,” Shiro blinked, then looked away with a faint flush on his own cheeks, “also, I may have done some… research.”

Kaneki contemplated the phrasing of embarrassing question number two before half stating, half asking, “You swallowed.”

“It tasted good,” Shiro mumbled. When Kaneki glanced over at him, he noticed that the half-ghoul kept rubbing at his jaw.

“Does it hurt?”

“A little. It’s fine.”

Shiro gently tipped Kaneki’s head back so that the water would rinse away the hair wash. Kaneki breathed a pleased sigh, glancing up at the shower head. Wait, that was a good one. Kaneki snickered.

“Hey, what do you call a blowjob in the shower?” When Shiro hummed questioningly, Kaneki answered, “shower head.”

Shiro stared at him blankly. Oh well, not everyone could appreciate puns.

Before Kaneki could return the favor and wash Shiro’s hair, the water started getting cold. The two got out and dried off, wrapping towels around their waists since they hadn’t brought any clothes to the bathroom.

And then, abruptly, Kaneki felt himself be scooped off his feet. He blinked, startled as he was suddenly face-to-face with Shiro and in the white-haired ghoul’s arms.

“You really need to stop doing this,” Kaneki complained half-heartedly even as he wrapped his arms around Shiro’s neck, “I’m not a princess, you know.”

Shiro just smiled affectionately (that should be illegal) and pressed his nose against Kaneki’s in an eskimo kiss. And then he carried Kaneki off to bed.
For a second time, Shiro found himself preparing to hunt for more information.

There was so much he needed to know: how did he time travel? Who was Mother Time? Why did he still exist despite the obvious time paradox of Kaneki existing without becoming him? It seemed strange, that he had gone this long without answers. His first excursion hadn’t gone very well, leaving him with only a name and bloodied hands. This time, Shiro was determined to get more successful results.

This time, he also wasn’t going to sneak out and come back covered in blood. He wouldn’t do that to Kaneki again.

“I need to find out who Mother Time is,” Shiro told Kaneki forthright as he zipped a dark jacket up, “I’ll be out for a while.”

It was a dark evening, the moon an unimpressive sliver in the sky whenever the clouds over it moved away. It was alternating between raining and sprinkling. So far it had been a wet winter without any snow yet.

“Can’t you just stay?” Kaneki frowned, clearly worried.

“I can’t,” Shiro laced up his sneakers, then straightened and looked Kaneki in the eye, “I really think that if I can find her, I’ll find the answers to all of my questions.”

Really, how obvious could it be that she was connected, with a name like Mother Time?

“Just…” Kaneki sighed. His shoulders slumped and he stared down at his feet, “don’t get hurt.”

“I won’t,” Shiro promised. I won’t let myself. He pressed a chaste kiss to Kaneki’s lips, and then turned around. He patted his pocket and felt the shape of his key to the apartment reassure him it was there. And then, with one last glance over his shoulder at Kaneki, he stepped outside and into the drizzling rain.

Shiro shut the door behind him, the stream of light in the dark outside disappearing behind it. He pulled his hood up, and began to walk.

Shiro wandered into the city, until he was surrounded by bright lights and tall buildings, people still walking around under umbrellas even though it was beginning to hit the later hours of the night. When he picked up a scent, he followed it.

It disturbed him to no end how a freshly dead corpse, to his ghoul nose, smelled just like his mother’s cooking used to.

The smell led Shiro to an abandoned and deteriorating building for once, rather than an alleyway. The half-ghoul pulled his mask, which had been around his neck, over his face. He moved cautiously, body tense as he pushed open the creaking door.

It could have been a regular murder or perhaps a suicide, but Shiro had apparently gotten lucky. Inside was a middle-aged ghoul, red hands buried in a young man’s stomach. Her widened eyes shot to him as soon as he stepped in.

“This is my territory,” the ghoul stated, her voice more curious than hostile. But then her eyes softened as something seemed to occur to her, and she held out some of the dead man’s entrails towards Shiro, “poor thing, are you hungry?”

“No,” Shiro said simply, “I want information.”
“Can’t say I have much of that.”

Shiro frowned, already getting the feeling that she would have nothing useful to offer. “Do you know who Mother Time is?”

The ghoul opened her mouth, but was cut off by the creak of the door opening once more. Shiro whirled around, kagune coming out to curl around him and end in defensive points.

Another female ghoul stepped in. She seemed to be a young woman, and on her face was a black mask with a gold hourglass painted under the eye. It covered all of her face from the nose up, sort of like Shiro’s.

“No, but I do,” the newcomer glanced to the middle-aged ghoul and, with no room for argument in her voice, stated, “Scram.”

The ghoul, who seemed to be non-confrontational, didn't argue. She lifted the dead body she had been feeding from before pushing past the other to walk out.

The door shut once more, leaving silence in its wake. Shiro eyed the masked ghoul warily. Something about her voice seemed familiar.

“Ah, that felt really badass of me!” She grinned, gesturing wildly with her hands, “I was like, ‘scram!’ And she was like, ‘I don’t want any trouble!’”

Shiro blinked. *What?*

“Anyways, you were looking for me, right? I’m Mother Time,” her grin softened to a smile, “It’s been a while, Kaneki. Or should I call you Shiro?”

‘Mother Time’ reached for her mask, pulling it from her face.

…The mask dropped, and so did Shiro’s stomach.
‘Mother Time’ reached for her mask, pulling it from her face.

The mask dropped, and so did Shiro’s stomach.

“But that— that doesn’t make any sense,” Shiro furrowed his brow behind his mask, voice quiet. His eyes were glued to the face of the… ghoul? Human? In front of him, “you’re supposed to be in high school. You’re supposed to be human.”

The strange thing was, he couldn’t really tell if she was a ghoul or a human. Her scent was odd.

Standing in front of him was Touka’s friend. Shiro had only seen her once or twice, so he was surprised he still remembered her face. Green eyes, honey colored hair that as he remembered had been a bob, but had now grown past her shoulders. She had a small frame and pale skin. And… she definitely seemed older than he recalled, maybe by a few years.

It wasn’t just her face he remembered, Shiro realized when his mind supplied a name. Yoriko.

“I’ll explain,” Yoriko glanced around the decrepit old building, “but we should find somewhere else. It was pretty easy for me to eavesdrop on you here.”

And that was how, ten minutes later, Shiro found himself sitting on a rooftop with Yoriko Kosaka.

Shiro had withdrawn his kagune, but continued to eye Yoriko warily and was tense, ready to fight if he needed to. The two of them stood by the rooftop railing, wind ruffling their hair. The rain from earlier was still going but barely noticeable, feeling more like pinpricks than droplets against Shiro’s bare hands braced on the railing.

The view from the roof-top was a pretty one. In the distance Shiro could see the glowing lights of the city and, if he looked down, the pinpricks of rain hitting puddles on the ground far below.

When the half-ghoul felt that Yoriko had been silent a beat too long, he prompted, “So. Time-travel.”

Yoriko crossed her arms at the top of the damp railing and rested her chin in the crook of her elbow. She kept glancing at Shiro with sad eyes when she probably thought he wouldn’t notice, kept looking at him as if he was a living, breathing tragedy.

With a glance, Shiro checked the stairs they had taken, but they were empty. It was just the two of them up there.

“It’s a bit of a long story…” Yoriko murmured, sounding as if she was talking to herself rather than Shiro, “You heard about it, right? A girl getting surgery to replace her kidney after an ‘accident’, and Rize’s death.”
Shiro didn’t remember when he had heard it, but the surgery part sounded familiar. And if he thought about it… It clicked.

Yoriko had been the girl. Instead of Kaneki going on a date with Rize, it was Yoriko. She had ‘taken his place’ in a sense, surgery and all.

“Then… you’re a half-ghoul,” Shiro tested, waiting for her to deny or confirm his suspicions. It would explain her scent.

“Eeh?” Yoriko exclaimed, but it sounded like a courtesy; the olive eyes she cast him held no trace of surprise, “No wonder you went to a place like Kamii. You figured that out quickly.”

The exclamation made her seem more like the girl he had met what felt like so long ago. It made it easier to tell this was the same girl who had seen Kaneki in Touka’s house and given two thumbs up and a grin.

She kind of reminded him of Hide.

“You’re right. Rize tried to eat me, and Kanou made me a half-ghoul, just like you. But unlike you, he… kept me,” Yoriko looked away, “experimented on me. I don’t know what he did, but he was experimenting with temporal things. In other words, time travel. I think he put something in my kagune, maybe a chip, but I haven’t been able to find anything. One day I just lost it. I guess I attacked him, I don’t remember, and I woke up some place I didn’t recognize.”

“Why did he keep you for experimenting, but not me?”

“Who knows?” Yoriko shrugged, “Since then, I’ve been able to travel through time.”

It was a pretty farfetched story. Shiro wouldn’t believe it if it weren’t for the fact that he had time traveled himself.

“Then, the quinque…” Shiro’s eyebrows furrowed, and he stared at Yoriko intently.

“In the timeline I first traveled to, everyone died,” Yoriko stated the grim sentence with the matter-of-fact tone of someone who had experienced tragedy many times, “When I realized that I could time travel, I wanted to find a timeline where the least innocent people die. So I searched, and I searched, and I searched. And then I realized it.”

“You’re the catalyst. In each and every timeline, the tragedy begins with you.”

Yoriko began to pace, hands shoved in her coat pockets as she exhaled condensation through the cold air, “So I thought, what if that peace I was searching for was here all along? What if, to keep Anteiku… to keep Touka safe, all this timeline needed was a catalyst? Kaneki… no, Shiro. Have you ever heard of a time paradox?”

The abrupt question and halt in Yoriko’s pacing caught Shiro off guard. Her words hung in the air for a beat, then two before he answered, “Of course.”

“I don’t think they exist. From what I’ve experienced, time isn’t a straight line. There’s so many different timelines. I think… instead of a paradox making an action or event impossible, the action or event creates a ‘glitch’ in time. The quinque made from my kagune wasn’t supposed to exist, it was a glitch I created. I explained things to the Hideyoshi of the timeline you came from, and asked him to give it to you. And that’s how you’re here.”

“You knew that I would stop Kaneki from going on that date with Rize,” Shiro mused. It was strange, knowing that his actions had been manipulated like that. And by Yoriko… she was the last
person he had ever expected.

A thought occurred to Shiro, and he winced at the resulting confusion and almost instantaneous headache, “But if I hadn’t gone back in time and stopped Rize from going on a date with Kaneki, then Rize wouldn’t have gone after you instead. And if she hadn’t gone after you instead, then you wouldn’t have become a half-ghoul and sent me back in time—“

“Don’t think about it too much,” Yoriko advised sagely, “You’ll just hurt yourself.”

Shiro decided he might as well take her advice. He was there, and if Yoriko said there was no such thing as a paradox then it didn't matter.

He had so many questions, but one in particular weighed on his mind; he never had asked Kaneki about it, “Do you know why Aogiri hasn’t come after us?”

“Kanou doesn’t need you anymore, he has Rize. Don’t worry yourself; I’m going to take care of that.”

She can’t mean—

Her meaning dawned on Shiro as a sickened feeling in his stomach. Touka had told him so much about the girl who wanted to be a cook, who liked the color pink, who visited Touka when she was sick and brought her home-made food, who cheered Touka up when she was sad.

And now, she was talking about killing someone.

“Didn’t you say this was a peaceful timeline?” Shiro hissed.

“The timeline where the least innocent people die,” Yoriko corrected, “and Kanou is far from innocent.”

“How can you just decide who is or isn’t innocent? Who gave you the right?” the twenty year old’s knuckles turned white, clenched tightly on the railing, “You aren’t even going by ‘good’ people and ‘bad’ people. You’re picking and choosing who you want to live and who you want to die. I bet it wouldn’t matter to you how many people died if it meant you and Touka survived.”

“Maybe,” the honey blonde agreed amicably, “but I know you would do the same for Hide. I have these powers, whether I know how they work or not, so I’m going to use them for my own goals.”

“Who do you think you are, a god?”

“Let’s change the subject,” Yoriko suggested lightly, “since we can’t agree on this.”

Albeit reluctant, Shiro agreed. As infuriating as it was that Yoriko seemed fine with manipulating him and others, he honestly didn’t want to argue with her. So he asked instead, “Why did you send us... that stuff?”

“Oh, condoms?” a cheeky grin returned to Yoriko’s face, looking more natural than the previously somber expressions, “You see, I guessed. You have an interesting tendency of dating yourself in any timeline where you meet another you.”

Shiro rubbed at his reddening cheek. He wasn’t sure why he was feeling embarrassed about it only now, “There have been other times where I’ve met myself?”

“Usually only in hallucinations, but yep.”
“Is it…” Shiro glanced aside, roughly scrubbing at his cheek and hoping the flush wasn’t that obvious, “is it weird?”

Yoriko shrugged, “If you want to date Kaneki, that’s your choice. It doesn’t affect me. And… I think the two of you are pretty different. Sure, there would be no chemistry if you were the exact same, but you’re not. Besides, it’s cute.”

*Cute?* Shiro wondered with raised eyebrows.

“I don’t think it’s weird. Actually… I envy you,” Yoriko smiled again, a strained curve of her lips that conveyed more bitterness than joy, “I wish Touka and I could have what you do.”

Shiro remembered how off Touka seemed after Yoriko’s surgery. He remembered the dark circles under her eyes, the argument she had with Hinami, and wondered, “Have you told her the truth?”

Yoriko shook her head, “As far as she knows, I went missing after the surgery.”

“You want her to be happy, don’t you?” Shiro wasn’t sure why he was trying to help her, but he pressed on, “If you’re not there, she won’t be.”

“Maybe you’re right,” Yoriko mused.

Silence hung in the air when Shiro didn’t reply. The white-haired ghoul pondered the information he had been given with a feeling of heaviness. He stood on the graves of his questions and wondered if maybe, maybe he didn’t want to know anymore.

Shiro knew there was something wrong with what Yoriko had done. Even if the people at Anteiku were safe, even if Hide and Kaneki were happy… Shiro had killed Yamori, for a second time.

As much as Yamori disgusted Shiro, the ghoul had at least one person who loved him. Who was Yoriko, who was he to decide whether people like Yamori should live or die?

But Shiro was selfish, too, because even if he could somehow convince Yoriko to do something different he wouldn’t. He liked his life with Kaneki and Hide, didn’t want to give it up.

“Hey, Shiro,” Yoriko broke the silence with a sigh and raked fingers through her rain-damp bangs, “Spend more time with Kaneki and Hide tomorrow.”

“What?” it seemed like such a strange, non-sequitur request. Shiro already spent a lot of time with Kaneki, considering that they lived together. The only thing special about tomorrow was that it was Christmas.

“Please,” Yoriko dodged the query. Shiro was uncertain whether it was a plea to do what she asked or a plea to not question it. Whatever the case, he nodded.

Yoriko turned around and began walking towards the stairs. When she reached them, she glanced over her shoulder, “That’ll be all, Shiro. I’ll see you around.”

*It’s been a long night,* Shiro thought.

At the sound of the door opening, Kaneki looked up from the book he had been trying to read. He’d had no success because halfway through a sentence, he kept spacing out and worrying over all the potentially bad things that could happen to Shiro while he was out.
Kaneki breathed a sigh of relief when he saw Shiro at the door, reaching behind him to shut it, “Welcome home.”

Shiro didn’t reply, just quickly walked to the couch Kaneki was sitting on, “Any luck with finding—oof.”

All of a sudden, Kaneki had his arms full of damp half-ghoul. The brunet raised his eyebrows, but set aside his book in favor of wrapping his arms around Shiro’s back. The twenty year old buried his face against Kaneki’s neck, nose pressed to one of the lovebites there.

For a moment Kaneki was confused as to why Shiro’s hair and clothes were dripping, but then he realized he could hear the pitter-patter of rain drops outside.

“I’ll tell you later, just… don’t ask,” Shiro groaned.

Kaneki hummed his assent. He could bide his time until Shiro was ready to talk, as undeniably curious as he was. One thing he would insist on, though, was that Shiro needed to get off of him, “You’re getting me wet…”

“No lesbian sex on the couch!” Kaneki looked up and saw Hide leaning against the kitchen island. The brunet spluttered, the tips of his ears flushing. *When did he even get there?*

Hide sauntered to the towel closet and slung a towel over his shoulder. He shut the door, walked towards the couch and dropped the towel on Shiro’s head. The twenty year old gave no response, so Kaneki took it upon himself to dry his hair.

“It’s Christmas Eve,” Hide pointed out.

Kaneki looked up from towel-drying Shiro’s hair, “So?”

Hide looked back with an expression that seemed to say that his meaning should be obvious and Kaneki was a complete and utter imbecile for not understanding.

“So,” Hide continued on with a long-suffering sigh, “you know what that means.”

“No, I really don’t.”

“Christmas movie marathon!” Hide grinned from ear to ear and made for the DVDs underneath the television, even as Kaneki groaned. Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer was going to be stuck in his head for weeks.

“Hey, c’mon. It’s family bonding time. You guys are probably going to move out in a month or two and go live in marital bliss—“

“We’re not married—“

Hide continued on loudly, ignoring Kaneki’s interjection, “While I’m all alone. When rabbits get lonely, they can die!”

Hide popped in a movie, then stood by the couch and pushed at Shiro’s feet, which were taking up the cushion on the end and whined, “Mooove.”

Kaneki could feel Shiro’s lips quirking up where they were pressed to his skin, “No.”

After a moment of deliberation, Hide sat on Shiro’s foot.
“Get off.”

“No.”

Shiro spent most of the movie loudly revenge-making out with Kaneki, to Hide’s complaints.

…Kaneki didn’t mind.

Chapter End Notes

So... four more chapters until this fic is over, and then I'll probably start a HideKane fic.
Kaneki woke up to a warm kagune strand draped over his face, suffocating him. With a muffled yelp, he shoved it off to instead trail down the side of the couch.

Kaneki felt a twinge of irritation. He kicked Hide’s leg as hard as he could with Shiro sprawled across him, and with his leg buzzing with pins and needles. With the kick the bleached blond stirred, eyes fluttering open before he squeezed them shut again. Just for good measure, or so Kaneki told himself, he kicked Hide again.

“Ow ow ow,” Hide complained, squinting at Kaneki before he threw his arms up and stretched. The tentacle he had been hugging dropped to his lap. His voice slurred by drowsiness, Hide murmured, “Wh’d you do tha’ for?”

It was weird to see Hide half-asleep when usually the blond seemed to be such a morning person. Kaneki thought of his speculation that Hide guzzled an entire bag of sugar after waking up and mentally noted an increased possibility of that being true.

“Just to wake you up,” Kaneki half-lied, because he was a grown man and no he did not just get jealous of Hide over Shiro.

“Well, good morning to you too,” Hide snarked. Then his expression brightened and he said with more sincerity, “Merry Christmas!”

“Merry Christmas,” Kaneki muttered. He sat up and winced at the ache of his neck and back. Shiro’s arms shot out and wrapped around the college student’s waist, ensuring that he would remain in his place lying against Kaneki’s chest.

“You awake?” Kaneki questioned. Shiro gave a shake of his head, but sat up anyway, arms falling to his sides. His tired eyes were half-lidded, his eyelashes shadowing his irises into a darker grey. Kaneki spied sleep in the corners of his eyes and grinned, wiping the gunk away with a thumb. He mused to himself with a strange sort of happiness that even ghouls weren’t immune to that kind of
human oddity.

“He will be soon,” Hide commented, and was intercepted by a yawn, “we’re going to a café today. Not Anteiku, mind you.”

“Why not Anteiku?” Kaneki wondered aloud.

“It’s closed for today. Actually a whole ton of places are, but I think I know where we can go.”

“How do you do it, Hide?” Shiro pondered, the first words he had spoken since he woke up, “You always find all these places nobody’s heard of.”

“I know a few people,” Hide winked.

Shiro finally slid off Kaneki’s lap, bare feet hitting the carpeted floor. Kaneki was both disappointed and relieved. At least now he could move his circulation deprived legs and feet.

Kaneki watched as the half-ghoul withdrew his kagune into his back, and with the tentacles no longer holding it up, his shirt fell back into its proper place.

Hide also stood, so Kaneki followed. The three made a beeline for the bathroom, hip-checking each other while getting past the doorway. They brushed their teeth side-by-side.

When they finished and walked out of the bathroom, Hide slowing them down when he insisted on styling his hair, Kaneki put on a straight face and said, “Shiro, you’ve got some toothpaste on your cheek… there,” the brunet pointed to a corner of Shiro’s mouth, fighting back a mischievous smile with every word.

Hide craned his neck to look and seemed confused when he noticed the conspicuous lack of any toothpaste on Shiro’s face, but then he caught on and shot Kaneki a thumbs-up from behind Shiro.

“I do?” Shiro blinked, and then brought up a finger to wipe at the place Kaneki had pointed.

“No, a little higher,” Kaneki lied. Shiro tried again, then again, “more to the side. Never mind, let me get it for you.”

Kaneki finally let his sly grin show as he pressed a kiss to the corner of Shiro’s mouth. When he pulled away, he could tell the half-ghoul had caught on by his exasperated expression.

“Gross domestic married couple,” Hide sang.

When Kaneki and Shiro told him to shut up, it was simultaneous.

* *

Hide made them wear the hideous Christmas sweaters, in the end. It was awful, but the blow was softened by the fact that there were plenty of other people around wearing Christmas sweaters. On their way to the café, some people even complimented them. Shiro wasn’t entirely certain whether they were being sarcastic or not.

As it turned out, Hide knew the owner of the café because she was the daughter of one of his International Studies professors. They had barely stepped inside before she and Hide were making enthusiastic conversation.

A few minutes of Kaneki and Shiro shooting awkward glances at each other while watching the owner and Hide from the side, and then Hide introduced them.
The three ordered their drinks and, in Hide’s and Kaneki’s cases, food, and Hide paid. After a wait that was short even considering the lack of many other customers, their orders were passed over the counter. Hide led Kaneki and Shiro to a booth table tucked away in a corner, next to a window. Kaneki and Shiro sat on one side, while Hide sat opposite them.

The café was a small one, sparsely decorated with Christmas ornaments here and there and even a tree in a corner, covered with white lights. The coloration of the place was pleasant, with espresso colored wood flooring and cream walls. It gave off a homely feel.

While Kaneki and Hide conversed about college with bright and animated gestures, Shiro lost himself in his own thoughts and let their voices and laughter fade to a comforting blur. The half-ghoul rested his elbow on the windowsill, and tucked his chin into the palm of his hand, occasionally breaking from his position to sip at his black coffee. Outside were crowds of people, some walking and some standing around. It was Christmas, after all; the streets were bound to be crowded.

The roads and sidewalks were covered in puddles from the previous night's rain. It was cold outside and pale grey clouds covered the sky, but it still had not snowed.

Shiro watched for a while, amused by the interactions of strangers on the street, before something in particular caught his eye. The window offered a straight view into a narrow alleyway, and pressed up against a wall were a couple making out and groping each other without any care for the fact that they were in public.

And then a horrible, awful, wonderful idea hit Shiro and he hid a smirk in the palm of his hand. The half-ghoul tuned back into the conversation between Hide and Kaneki but kept the pretense of looking out the window and not paying attention.

“—telling you, she’s not that old! I think she just started teaching at Kamii last year.”

“But- but she’s your teacher, Hide,” Kaneki protested, sounding utterly scandalized by the corruption of education Hide was implying.

“Ah-ah-ah, ‘Neki,” Hide waved a finger in rebuttal, “you’re in a relationship with yourself—“

“No so loud!” Kaneki interrupted with a hiss.

“—so you’ve got no room to talk. Besides, all I do is enjoy the view.”

Shiro took his chance and slowly slid his free hand under the table. It started innocently enough on Kaneki’s knee, just resting there. The brunet shot Shiro a confused glance, tensing up from the sudden and startling contact, before he relaxed and turned back to Hide.

“C’mon, haven’t you ever thought a teacher was hot?”

“No way,” Kaneki spluttered.

“Oh?” Hide wiggled his eyebrows, “What if Shiro was a teacher?”

“I don’t—!”

“Ooh, Mr. Shiro! I’m so sorry for forgetting my homework. Is there anything I can do to… make it up to you?” Hide squealed in a high falsetto, hands clasped together, before he moved to the other side of his booth seat and took on a stern, commanding pose, deepening his voice, “You’ve been very bad, Kaneki. I’ll take a lot of convincing. Maybe you can… study biology with me after class. I prefer hands-on learning.”
By the end of Hide’s little solo act Kaneki’s face was so red he rivaled the noses of the café’s Rudolph ornaments. Shiro snorted, and his lips quirked up as he listened to Kaneki’s flustered complaints that he did not sound like that, and he would never forget his homework.

With the two of them distracted by their bickering, Shiro took his chance. He slowly slid his hand further and further up Kaneki’s leg until it was high up his thigh.

Kaneki shot Shiro flustered glances and his side of the conversation with Hide became clipped.

“Hey, I’m going to get another cinnamon roll,” Hide announced with a wave of his hand towards his empty plate.

Hide stood and walked back to the cashier. Once he was out of earshot, Kaneki turned to Shiro and glared. He didn’t look very intimidating with flushed cheeks, “What are you doing?! Hide was right there!”

“Which is exactly why you’re going to be quiet,” Shiro informed Kaneki, thumb rubbing back and forth over the brunet’s inner thigh.

Kaneki didn’t have any more time to argue, because Hide had returned with another cinnamon roll. The blond slid back into the booth, and kicked up conversation once more.

“So! What’d you two get me for Christmas?” Hide grinned, his question playful.

“A dash of modesty,” Kaneki mumbled.

“What was that?!” Hide huffed.

“I said- shit—!” Kaneki yelped suddenly. Shiro had squeezed his cock, deft fingers kneading over the front of his jeans. The half-ghoul figured the exclamation was more from surprise than pleasure, but it still had him hiding a half grin.

“You okay?” Hide blinked and raised his eyebrows.

“Y-yeah! I’m fine, I just bit my tongue,” Kaneki laughed, rubbing at his chin with his index finger.

“How do you bite your tongue in the middle of talking?” Hide snorted, “Nerd.”

Shiro kept rubbing Kaneki through his pants, feeling him gradually get harder under his hand. Kaneki shot him desperate, embarrassed glares whenever Hide wasn’t looking, but Shiro didn’t let up. The brunet was digging his teeth into his lip, probably to keep from making any more involuntary noise.

“Sorry, though,” Hide said with more seriousness, “I couldn’t really get you guys anything for Christmas in the end.”

“It’s fine! Even if you gave them to us on our birthday, the sweaters were kind of a Christmas present, weren’t they? Besides…” Kaneki’s voice went quiet, “the photo album means a lot.”

“It does,” Shiro agreed.

“Aw, shucks,” Hide laughed and rubbed at the back of his neck.

I’m not doing a good enough job if he can still speak clearly... Kaneki’s pants weren’t extremely tight, so Shiro unbuttoned and unzipped them slowly enough that the sound wasn’t audible, then reached inside his boxer-briefs and gripped his cock.
Kaneki’s breath hitched in his throat and his hips jerked up. Shiro felt a warm blanket of satisfaction settling in his chest coupled by arousal when Kaneki’s legs spread for him.

“Seriously, are you okay? You look kind of feverish,” Hide frowned.

“F-f-fine!” Kaneki yelped. He shoved Shiro’s hand away and yanked his sweater down. Thankfully, it was long enough to cover his unzipped pants, “Actually, I have to use the restroom!”

With that, Kaneki darted out of his seat and made a dash for the bathrooms. Shiro counted five seconds, exchanged worried glances with Hide, and then stood up as well, “I’m going to go check on Kaneki. He’s acting off.”

“I just hope there wasn’t anything wrong with the food…”

Shiro felt the slightest twinge of guilt at deceiving Hide, but it was quickly overshadowed by excitement as he made his way to the men’s bathroom.

Inside was surprisingly pleasant for a public bathroom. The lights were bright rather than dingy, and the mint green paint on the walls was still intact rather than peeling. It smelled like bleach and hand soap instead of mold. The sinks were joined together to form counters between them. Shiro felt deprived when his first thought was that they would make a good surface for bending over.

Shiro’s eyes had barely fallen on Kaneki before the brunet was shoving him into the nearest wall and kissing him. Startled, Shiro quickly glanced around the bathroom to check that it was empty before he kissed back.

Usually their kisses were softer, but this time it was full of teeth. With no small amount of smugness, Shiro noted that he really must have riled Kaneki up.

Shiro wrapped his arms around Kaneki and did his best to fit every inch of his body against the human. He pulled back to rest his forehead against Kaneki’s and breathe in his quick, unsteady breaths, letting his lips brush feather-light against Kaneki’s but drawing back whenever Kaneki tried to chase his lips.

“Tease,” Kaneki muttered.

It was worth it when Kaneki threaded his fingers through Shiro’s hair and pulled. In stark contrast, the college student’s other hand was cupping his cheek soft and tender. Kaneki held Shiro still, to the half-ghoul’s delight, and claimed his kiss.

One of the things Shiro liked about kissing Kaneki was the taste. The brunet, he had come to notice, bit his lips while concentrating on studying. The half-ghoul smiled into the kiss at the thought of how morbid it was that Kaneki wore blood, not cherry chap stick.

The taste made Shiro hungry in more than one way. That combined with the pleasantly overwhelming scent of Kaneki when they were this close, and Shiro felt a sort of pulling in his eye that he had come to associate with his kakugan.

Shiro broke the kiss and pushed his lower half against Kaneki’s. He leaned in, let his lips brush against the human’s ear and urged, “Come on, fuck me.”

Shiro barely had time to take in Kaneki’s startled, aroused expression before the sound of the bathroom door opening made him go still. Shiro exchanged wide-eyed, panicked looks with Kaneki.

Two men, one young and one old, walked into the restroom. Just as their eyes turned to Shiro and
Kaneki, the half-ghoul blinked, and the sensation of his kakugan disappeared.

The younger man, dressed in the telltale formal wear of a CCG investigator and carrying a quinque, stared at the two with shock, while the older man fixed them with an uncanny gaze.

*Amon and Mado.* Shiro felt sick. He had to get Kaneki and himself out of there.

“Y-you two again!” Amon hissed.

With their mussed hair, red lips and flushed faces, it wasn’t that hard to tell what Shiro and Kaneki had been up to. Amon didn’t seem to be pleased at witnessing their ‘incestual’ exhibitionism again.

“You know them, Amon?” Mado questioned.

“I'll explain later.”

Shiro didn’t bother sticking around. Without any further ado he rebuttoned Kaneki’s pants. He snatched Kaneki’s wrist and hurried past the investigators.

“Excuse us,” Kaneki said curtly as they exited the bathroom.

Doves were bad news. That Mado guy was still alive as well… No, *Ryoko’s murderer* was still alive, and for all Shiro knew, history could repeat itself.

The only thing Shiro could do was put his trust in Yoriko, and he didn’t even know how much he could do *that*.

When Shiro arrived back at their table, Kaneki in tow, Hide took one look at them and then huffed, throwing his arms over his chest and whining, “You guys *sexiled* me to have a quickie in the bathroom.”

“Sorry, Hide,” Shiro said with no shame, “anyways, we need to go. Right now.”

Hide picked up on the urgency in Shiro’s voice and dropped the teasing. He downed the rest of his coffee then stood, asking in a hushed, serious voice, “What happened?”

Shiro shook his head. It was better to wait until they were outside.

When they pushed past the front door of the café, Kaneki beat Shiro to the chase with a quiet murmur of, “Investigators.”

Hide's face paled, “I- those were investigators? I didn’t see the briefcases. I’m so sorry.”

“It’s fine. There was nothing you could have done,” Shiro reassured the blond. They began walking in the direction of home, their pace quicker than usual.

The half-ghoul grimaced; with all traces of his previous arousal gone, his actions from earlier seemed stupid and reckless. If Amon had seen his kakugan, he and Kaneki could have lost their lives, all for a fuck in the bathroom. It wasn’t worth it.

Shiro was startled out of his thoughts when he felt a hand brush his. When he looked to the side, Kaneki smiled at Shiro then slid his hand into the half-ghoul’s. The message was clear, even if Kaneki didn’t say a word. *It’s not your fault.*

Shiro squeezed Kaneki’s hand back.
The walk back was quiet after the scare with the investigators. But when Shiro’s eyes wandered to a shop as they passed by, his eyes widened as he caught a flash of bright clothing and honey colored hair. *Is that…?*

“Hide, Kaneki, wait,” Shiro slowed to a halt and let go of Kaneki’s hand, “I’ll be right back.”

Shiro ran to the window of the shop before the girl gazing into it could turn and leave. At the sound of his footsteps she turned, eyes widening as they met his.

“Hinami!” Shiro smiled, and she returned the sunny expression, “Is Touka with you?”

“Shiro… right? I’m by myself today!” Hinami held her head high, clearly proud of that fact.

Shiro glanced to the window again, and was startled when he realized that what Hinami had been looking at was a mannequin wearing a girls’ high school uniform. The half-ghoul gestured to it and wondered, “Are you going to go to school?”

Hinami’s expression dropped, and Shiro immediately regretted his apparent tactlessness. The ghoul shook her head bitterly, “Onee-chan says it’s too dangerous. It’s not fair… she goes to school.”

Shiro’s eyebrows drew together. He wasn’t sure how to comfort her, when to the younger ghoul he was only an acquaintance.

It turned out he didn’t have to, though. Hinami forced a brighter expression and said simply, “I know that she’s just looking out for me. It’s okay. Shiro, do you want me to tell Onee-chan merry Christmas for you?”

“That would be great, Hinami. Thank you. And… please be careful.”

Shiro exchanged goodbyes with Hinami, and then turned to walk back to Hide and Kaneki. Even as he walked away, he still found himself worried.

*\*

Shiro and Kaneki laid in bed on their stomachs, side by side with an album open in front of them. The air of the room was quiet and solemn, bittersweet. The two went through the photo album page by page, voices and soft laughter blending together.

One by one, they folded their aunt out of the photos. They were nearing the end of the album when they turned yet another page, and both of them went still.

There was a picture of their mother holding a baby. Holding *Kaneki*. After that were pictures of him growing older and older, pictures of her holding his hand or reading with him.

Before Shiro even realized it he was crying, an involuntary sob wrenched from his throat. He clapped a hand over his mouth and felt tears drip down his fingers.

“Sorry,” Shiro whispered.

Kaneki shook his head wordlessly. With careful, reverent hands the brunet closed the photo album and set it aside. He laid back down, this time on his side, and just as carefully and reverently he pulled Shiro against him to wrap his arms around the half-ghoul.

Shiro shivered and buried his face in Kaneki’s shoulder.

“Let’s look at the rest another time, okay?” Kaneki murmured and stroked Shiro’s hair.
Shiro mumbled his agreement against Kaneki’s shirt. They had time.

*A*

Amon’s eyes lingered on the bathroom door even after it shut, almost as if he was trying to bore a hole in it.

“What is it?” Mado asked, easily catching on to his partner’s unease.

“The one with the white hair, I could have sworn his eye…” Amon frowned, then shook his head, “no, never mind. It must have been my imagination.”

Mado fixed Amon with a hard look, one eye squinting and the other wide. He turned to the urinals; they hadn’t stopped at the restrooms for no reason, “If that’s what you believe, I have faith in you. However, do trust your senses. Sometimes they’re all we have when telling the difference between humans and those monsters.”

Amon nodded vigorously and smiled. He was lucky to have a partner as intelligent and intuitive as Kureo Mado.
Sitting on the couch watching television on a weekday morning was both peaceful and boring. With Kaneki and Hide off attending Kamii, Shiro was left to his own devices. Shiro's fingers were stuck on autopilot, pressing the buttons of the remote to flip to the next channel.

Truthfully Shiro wasn't paying much attention to the TV at all, but the voices of people he would never know on movies, shows, commercials and the news blanketed the silence of the apartment well.

*I haven't told Kaneki about Yoriko,* Shiro thought. The half-ghoul had intended on it, but the time never seemed right. In a way, it felt like their life would disappear if he revealed the truth behind it. What would Kaneki think, knowing that their peaceful existence had been guaranteed by the suffering of those in other timelines? It scared Shiro to think about but those timelines... they didn't disappear, did they? They just kept on going.

The half-ghoul heard soft pitter-pattering, and he blinked out of his reverie to glance up at the screen. The sound didn't seem to be coming from there, so he untangled the arm wrapped around his knees, dropped his feet to the soft fluff of the carpet, and stood. The twenty year old padded to the window and lifted a blind to peer out. Thin flurries were falling from the clouds above to land with noises too heavy to be snow. Hail, then.

*I wonder if it will snow tonight.*

Through the thin slot of window revealed by lifting the blind, the window reflected a vibrant red from the television. Shiro's eyes flickered back to the screen to meet a red banner at the bottom declaring 'breaking news'.

"We interrupt this program with news from Kiyomi High School. Fifteen minutes ago, the Commission of Counter Ghoul received a call from a shaken student detailing that a ghoul, disguised as a freshman, is within the school grounds. The student prefers to remain anonymous."

"Kiyomi?" Shiro breathed, his throat suddenly tight. He swallowed hard, and the noise of it seemed deafening over the sudden static in his ears. Kiyomi High School... was where Touka went.

"The school is currently being evacuated, and the CCG asks for public cooperation. The area will be cordoned off," the reporter continued on, and gestured to a grainy photo that appeared in the top right corner, "the school cameras captured an image of the ghoul, shown here."

The blurry image showed a girl turning startled eyes with black sclera towards the camera. A girl Shiro knew.

"Hi... Hinami," Shiro whispered in a strained voice. He shot a cold, clammy hand to his mouth as he fought back nausea.

"For the safety of students and staff, all other schools in the area are to be shut..."

Shiro didn't waste any more time. He found his mask and yanked it on. Without bothering to put on a coat or even shoes, the half-ghoul ran to the front door and threw it open, stepping out into the cold weather. The door banged behind him, but he didn't care.
The hard concrete was cold and wet. It flew underneath him as he ran, barreling past any people he came across. The street name of the school had been on the television when the reporter mentioned the cordonning off. It was a neon sign in Shiro's mind.

Shiro barely registered the icy hail hitting his skin. It was just another thing that mattered far, far less than his need to get to Kiyomi.

Shiro passed street sign after street sign until he found the street he was looking for.

Too slow too slow I'm too slow—

The tops of the school's buildings came into view, and Shiro began to wonder how he would get in. As he got closer he could see countless armed CCG bureau investigators with guns locked and loaded, aimed in unerring lines towards the school. The thought of any of them hurting Hinami made Shiro's blood boil, but he knew better than to attempt to fight all of them.

Shiro slunk into the shadow of a building near the school. He didn't need the doves seeing him before he even made it into Kiyomi. The half-ghoul took a breath, closed his eyes and willed himself to calm down. Being rash wouldn't help Hinami.

There was a fence around the school, which was a problem. Scaling it would take too long; he would be seen and killed before he even made it over.

The investigators are blocking off the exits and entrances, which are in the front and back. That means... the sides will be less heavily guarded. Shiro looked towards the sides, and saw a large tree next to the fence. He darted toward it, and climbed the side facing away from the investigators. Once he was high enough in the branches, he glanced both ways, then dropped down past the fence.

Shiro shot a wary glance towards the lines of armed men and began to move. He stuck close to the shadows of whatever he could as he got closer to the buildings. Kiyomi was large, and that was both an advantage and a disadvantage.

Shiro made it to the cars parked by the school without a hitch. If anyone glanced in his direction he was gone before they could see him. He kept his movements quick and low to the ground, ducking behind cars.

Just as Shiro made it to the side of the school, where as he had hoped there were fewer men, he brushed too hard against a car and the alarm went off.

With a quiet curse Shiro ran for it. The CCG positioned outside the side of the school aimed their guns and began to fire at him, but the half-ghoul's kagune shot out to block the bullets.

Shiro hissed as the Q bullets tore through his rinkaku. The flesh knitted itself back together. Should I kill them? No, any more of a commotion will draw others.

Instead, Shiro turned and ran. More bullets were fired but to his luck, they only grazed him. His kagune repaired itself easily.

Shiro charged at the nearest window and kicked it down. The glass shattered with a deafening noise, shards scattering from inside the school to the bushes outside and doing no harm to his skin. Shiro wasted no time in climbing in and making a break for the door of the classroom he had landed in.

Outside he could hear the CCG calling for backup. So much for being stealthy.

Shiro threw the door open and dashed out just as several Q bullets buried themselves in the
woodwork of it. Stealth wasn't on his side, considering that the halls were lined with cameras, so Shiro made do with speed.

*Where is she? I don't even know if I'm in the right building!*

Shiro heard echoing footsteps behind him and he sped up. His lungs burned. His kagune fanned out behind him like shields and he snatched a glimpse behind him, taking in a blur of pale floors and dark helmets.

Under the pressure of being pursued, his thoughts moved as fast as his feet.

*Somewhere without cameras... Somewhere to hide...*

Shiro hissed in triumph. He knew exactly where Hinami would be. But first, he would have to lose his pursuers. From the corner of his eye the half-ghoul caught a glimpse of a bathroom sign. He made an abrupt turn to the hallway with the bathroom, and the sound of boots screeching against the floor came behind him as the men changed their direction to match.

The half-ghoul ran into the men's bathroom. Once he reached the wall, he spun around with kagune poised to kill. The men in all black uniforms stormed into the room, their guns pointing unerringly, and fired.

The divider between the urinals dented when Shiro leapt onto it, then dived at the sea of CCG. A strand of his rinkaku shot out and pierced an investigator through the stomach, his armor bending around it.

Shiro withdrew his kagune with a squelch and the man crumpled to the ground. Shiro took a breath and shut his mind off, distancing himself from the gore he was creating. It was sickening how easy it was to kill them.

Their weapons were made for long distances. If they fired now, they had more of a chance of killing each other than injuring Shiro. He was lucky that there was no ghoul investigator with them, who could attack with a quinque.

The kagune made quick work of eviscerating the men. It was when Shiro was turning, ready to face his next adversary, when he realized that they were all dead.

The men's bathroom was a grisly scene. Blood and viscera painted the walls, urinals and stalls.

The half-ghoul searched for a bureau investigator with the most intact armor and found one whose gear was untarnished besides the helmet. The man was close enough to his size. Shiro had killed him with kagune through both his eyes, shattering the glass protecting them. Kaneki hurried to take the armor off, then retracted his rinkaku to put it on. He took an intact helmet from another investigator, but stopped. My mask...

After a moment of hesitation, Shiro pulled the mask down to hang around his neck. If he ran into anyone, he could say that it was a trophy from the 'dead' ghoul. He put on the helmet, then took the gun as well. He lifted the dead man's communication device to speak into it.

"Secondary target subdued and being restrained. Permission to search for main target ahead of the unit?"

A voice soon crackled in Shiro's ear, "Ambitious, I see. Proceed."

Shiro had been lucky. He hadn't used the wrong jargon in the relaying of his message, and it seemed
the man the armor had belonged to had been influential in some way, or he doubted he would be allowed to head on.

Shiro hurried out of the bathroom. He kept a quick pace as he searched for the gym. Eventually he came upon a hallway that split in two directions, and one led to a basketball court. Having found the gym Shiro broke into a run. Thus began the first and last time Shiro would ever break into the girl's locker room.

Inside, he stopped. The room seemed deserted, filled with random scattered items like book bags, snacks and laptops that had been left behind during the evacuation. It smelled like sweat and perfume.

"Hinami?" he called. He strained his ears, and heard panicked, stifled breathing, "Hinami, it's me. It's Shiro."

The half-ghoul lifted the CCG helmet from his head and tossed it to the ground. Finally, a hint of movement from the corner of his eye caught his attention. A broken locker door was pushed the rest of the way open, and a girl stumbled out from her cramped position inside. Her eyes were wide and her face was streaked with tears. She hesitated for a moment, then ran toward Shiro.

"I'm going to get you out of here," he promised, wrapping Hinami in his arms. It didn't matter why she had come to the school. It didn't matter how she had gotten caught. Touka or her mother could deal with that issue later, but Shiro's top priority was keeping her alive.

It was as if Shiro had broken a dam. Hinami's shoulders began to shake with sobs, and she muffled her cries against his chest.

"I'm s-sorry— I didn't mean to— I just wanted—" Hinami's hiccups and sobs interrupted her. Shiro petted her hair and shushed her. As much as he wanted to comfort the girl, they needed to leave.

Just as Shiro was about to voice that thought, the locker room door creaked open once more. Shiro whirled around to stand in front of Hinami, kagune bursting through his outfit yet again and pointing toward the door.

The door opened, and in came Touka.

The surprise Touka showed when she saw Shiro was almost comic, until it changed to fury. In an instant, her wings were out and she shifted into a defensive stance.

"You," Touka said, "why are you in the girl's locker room, you damn perv? Why are you wearing CCG armor? If you're working for them—"

"I'm not," Shiro cut her off, "I'm trying to get Hinami out of here," the half-ghoul shifted aside and retracted his rinkaku. Hinami stepped out from behind him.

"Onee-chan, it's okay. He's telling the truth," Hinami was looking anywhere but at Touka, visibly shame-faced.

But Touka didn't yell, or scold her, or show any anger at all. She rushed forward, dropped to her knees, slid off her mask and hugged Hinami. She whispered in a tight voice, "Thank god, you're not hurt..."

"I hate to interrupt," a new voice called from the door, "but we need to go. There's an entire squad heading this way, and fast."
Touka whirled around and ushered Hinami behind her just like Shiro had, but she sucked in a sharp breath as she saw exactly who was standing there.

"Yo...riko?" Touka stared at the girl in the doorway. Shiro watched a plethora of emotions shift her expression. Shock, confusion, hope, joy, before it finally settled on terror. Touka's hands shot to her ghoulish eyes and she shrieked, "No! Don't look at me!"

"It's okay. I already knew."

Shiro felt a strong sense of déjà vu, then. The situation was strangely similar to what had happened between Hide and himself.

"You can't know, you can't, I would have to—" Touka's voice broke as her distress grew, "I can't kill you."

"Touka," Yoriko took the ghoul's hands in hers and tugged them away from her face. She cupped Touka's cheeks in her own hands. With a smile, she allowed her ghoul eye to shift to black.

Touka's protests died in her throat. She stared, wide-eyed and slack-jawed, "How...?"

"We'll talk about it later," Yoriko promised. She slid Touka's mask back over her face, then put on her own, "but we need to go."

"Stay close," Shiro warned Hinami. He put his own mask back on. But before they left the locker room, Yoriko peered out the door and murmured that it was too late. The squad of CCG men was already marching through the court. And what was worse? They weren't just bureau investigators. There were Doves with them.

"There are too many," Shiro said, horrified, when he looked through the door himself. Maybe if he was in his kakuja form they could take the investigators on, but there was no guarantee he would stop at just the CCG...

Yoriko spoke up.

"I'll hold them off while the three of you escape."

Shiro stared at her for a tense moment. He knew what she was going to use, and he didn't like it. Like it or not, however, he didn't have much of a choice. It was the only way, "Promise me this will be the last time you'll use your power. This timeline doesn't need tampered with anymore than it already has been."

Yoriko hesitated, then gave in, "I promise."

Touka looked between them, confused but disliking the way things were developing, "you can't fight them alone," she begged, "I won't let you."

To Touka's surprise, Yoriko laughed, "I'm not going to fight them, trust me. Go, Touka."

Touka planted her feet down. In her own way, Shiro supposed, each girl was equally stubborn. The ghoul grit her teeth, "I'm not losing you again, Yoriko. Damn it! You were gone for months, and you come back like this... I can't lose you."

Yoriko's eyes softened, and she murmured tenderly, "Forgive me," before cupping her hand and bringing it down hard on the back of Touka's head.
Touka crumpled to the ground, and Hinami cried out.

"She's just unconscious, don't worry," Yoriko turned to Shiro, "get them out of here."

Shiro picked Touka up in a fireman's carry. They walked out the door and the CCG, much closer now, stopped. The men in front began barking out orders, and guns were aimed at the ghouls and half-ghouls.

Yoriko stepped in front of them, and her rinkaku emerged. Shiro blinked, and the Doves were still. It was uncanny, seeing so many men not even breathing, just standing there frozen in their actions.

"Go," Yoriko said, and they did.

Chapter End Notes

there aren't even words in the english language to describe how late this is
They ran.

They ran through the court, through the hallways, into an empty classroom. Shiro planned to leave the same way he had entered. He wasn't sure how many people Yoriko had frozen, or how long the effect would last. Walking straight out would be risky.

Shiro knew that Hinami must have been dying to know what Yoriko had done, why the men were frozen, but to his relief she didn't ask. The half-ghoul held the back of Touka's head as he lowered her to the ground a safe distance away from a window. He asked Hinami to stand back, and she did.

Shiro used his rinkaku to strike the window. After it shattered, he cleared away the remaining pieces of glass on the edges of the frame. He beckoned Hinami over and helped her through.

Getting Touka out was a little more difficult, but with Hinami's help, he managed.

Outside, Shiro and Hinami glanced around. The few investigators around were frozen still. *The range of Yoriko's power is impressive,* Shiro thought. To be able to selectively freeze only the CCG around Kiyomi's campus...

Somehow, he doubted it would last long.

Shiro took Hinami's hand once more and hurried as fast as he could with Touka over his shoulder and Hinami's pace slower than his. Once they were to the fence, he poised his rinkaku to tear a hole in it.

Before he could, however, something came rushing towards him. Shiro had just enough time to throw Touka to the ground and push Hinami away, before it struck him. A clawed, spine-like quinque.

The force of the blow towards his head cracked Shiro's mask in half. It fell to the ground.

*Nononononono*—Shiro brought a shaky hand to his bare face. In front of him was his attacker; Kureo Mado, wearing a predatory grin. Beside him stood Amon Koutarou.

"So you are a ghoul, after all."

*They knew his face. They knew Kaneki's face.* Shiro clenched his teeth in a feral expression and glared murder at the Doves. *How dare they put Kaneki in danger.*

Just as Shiro moved to attack, however, a loud noise came from behind him. He jerked his head to look, and saw a gaping hole in the fence. Irimi and Koma stepped forward.

Koma knelt beside Hinami to murmur, "This man is a friend of ours?" with a meaningful glance at Shiro.
When Hinami nodded, he straightened and turned to Shiro.

"We'll handle this. Please take care of them."

*No. No, I don't want you to die again, please...*

Shiro bit back what he wanted to say. He had no choice, it was doubtful that they would let him stay behind while they took Hinami and Touka. And if he stopped to argue with them... well, Mado and Amon were already reaching for their weapons.

Shiro took a shuddering breath in and nodded because his throat was too tight to speak. He grabbed Touka, took Hinami's hand, and ran.

*Maybe running away is the only thing I'm good at,* Shiro thought bitterly.

"No, we can't leave them— they'll die!" Hinami protested, struggling to yank her hand out of his grip.

"Hinami," Shiro said, "you trust Irimi-san and Koma-san, right?" he gave the girl a meaningful look. Her struggling stilled, and she finally mumbled a soft, reluctant yes.

"Then trust them. Trust that they'll make it back alive. Trust that you'll see them again."

Shiro wondered whether he was saying it for Hinami's benefit... or his own.

Hinami's eyes filled with tears, and she finally began running with him. Without her digging her feet in, their pace was much faster. They left the school behind them and didn't look back.

* Shiro had gotten Hinami and Touka to safety. After escaping from the school, he took the two of them to Anteiku. Yoshimura had thanked him and promised to watch over the two of them.

Shiro had saved Hinami. *But at what cost?* he wondered, numb as he stumbled back home. The door had only just shut behind him when Kaneki was on him. The brunet hugged him tight around the waist and asked an endless stream of questions.

"...n't you call us? Are you hurt? Shiro, answer me!"

"I'm not hurt," Shiro said finally. His attention was drawn to the television, which was still on. With a sense of dread, he looked and saw the scene from earlier captured on the news. He was standing by the fence, Hinami behind him and Touka unconscious on the ground. His mask lay in pieces at his feet. His face, the same face he shared with Kaneki, was exposed for the world to see. There must have been more cameras on the building nearby.

A cold weight sat heavy in Shiro's stomach. He buried his face in Kaneki's shoulder.

The half-ghoul soon heard footsteps drawing nearing. Hide, who had been sitting on the couch, came to stand next to him. He laid a comforting hand on Shiro's shoulder.

"It's not your fault. You were just protecting that girl, weren't you?" Hide soothed.

"Hinami," Shiro's voice was muffled against Kaneki's shirt. The college student stirred in recognition of the name. Shiro had talked about her before, after all. Shiro explained, "she... she didn't know what she was doing. I think she just wanted to see what high school was like. I had to protect her."
"We'll figure something out, I can look for somewhere to go—" Hide began. Shiro wrenched himself away from Kaneki and backed away. His back hit the wall and he slid down to bury his face in his hands.

"You think we can find somewhere to go? Hide, it won't be long before the CCG are knocking on our door," Shiro spat. He gnashed his teeth. He was furious, but not with Hide or Kaneki. He was furious with himself. How could he have let them see his face? He should have tried harder, he should have done something. He couldn't stand to look at them, when it was his fault they were in danger.

Someone knelt in front of Shiro—Kaneki, he could tell by the smell. Kaneki reached for his hands and gently pried them away from his face.

"It's not your fault."

Shiro stared down at his knees.

"We'll figure something out," Hide repeated.

Shiro said nothing. The murmur of the television, saying something about the CCG promising to track down the unknown ghouls, spoke volumes.

*

Three AM. Shiro knew what he had to do.

The half-ghoul listened for Kaneki's breathing, and it was soft and even. He began extricating himself from the human. When he stood from the bed, Kaneki's serene expression became a frown, and the brunet curled up in the space where Shiro had once been.

Shiro watched him with an aching chest. He reached over, his hand trembling, and stroked Kaneki's hair. He didn't kiss him. If he did, he would never be able to leave.

Shiro dressed himself and walked to the door. His fingers on the handle, he whispered, "I love you."

Shiro gathered his things with a sense of numbness, but purpose. He pulled on shoes, walked to the front door, and cast one last glance back at the dark apartment. He slipped out into the cold night.

It was snowing. The fresh layers of it crunched under his feet, and he wrapped his arms around himself. He turned his face to the sky as he walked, cold snowflakes melting on it.

He didn't know where he would go. Another ward, possibly. Somewhere, anywhere, far away.

Before Shiro had left the apartment far behind him, he felt warm fingers wrapping around his wrist.

"Don't go."

Shiro looked back at him with pleading eyes. Don't make this harder for me. If you say that, I might...

"I have to."

Hide looked down at the ground, his expression unreadable for a moment. When he lifted his head again, there was a chagrined smile on his face. Hide's free hand scratched the back of his head, "Yeah, I didn't expect that to work..."
"You know I have to, Hide," Shiro wasn't sure why he was pushing on, but he felt the need to explain, "Kaneki has less of a chance of being found without me around."

"I don't like this," Hide's voice became quiet, and pained, "you're always sacrificing yourself. When I try to help... it's never enough."

"I'm sorry."

"I know. You're still going to go, aren't you?" Hide sighed, "well, at least come here."

Shiro was confused, until Hide pulled him forward by the wrist into a hug, "Stay safe," the blond murmured, "promise me you'll stay safe."

"I will," Shiro's voice was tight. Hide's arms were warm, and comforting. I don't want to go.

"And I know you're worrying, but don't," Hide's laugh was soft against Shiro's ear, "I'll watch over him for you. We'll change his appearance, change his name, move to a different area, whatever it takes."

"Hide..." Shiro whispered, "take care of yourself, too," the half-ghoul swallowed, hard, and admitted, "I don't know what I'd do without you."

Shiro waited another moment, then two, and finally let his arms drop to his sides. They regarded each other for a moment, then turned, one walking back to the apartment, the other walking away.

Shiro stopped and looked over his shoulder. Hide was looking back at him.

"This isn't goodbye," Hide called, that glint of determination back in his eyes, "I will see you again."

Shiro turned, and walked away from one of the few happinesses he had ever known.
"So," said Touka, regarding Shiro with narrowed eyes from across a steaming cup of black coffee.

"So," came Shiro's amicable reply. They were sitting at a table inside a cafe in another ward.

There was one thing he would keep to himself, lest he incur Yoriko's wrath; it had been two years, and Touka had only grown more beautiful. Really, Shiro thought, she could be a model.

"How's your girlfriend?" Shiro dodged Touka's kick from under the table with a chuckle.

"She's not my girlfriend!"

"Whatever you say," Shiro hid a smile behind his hand. All these years, and Touka still refused to admit that time travel was real. She stuck to the idea that there was another explanation for what happened. However, she and Yoriko had only gotten closer.

Touka continued to mock glare at him, before her expression softened. She fidgeted before asking, "Have you thought about...?"

Shiro's smile became a hard line. He warned, "Don't."

"Shiro, why can't you—"

Shiro stood up, the screech of his chair against the floor harsh in the quiet of the cafe. He threw down payment for the coffee and hurried away from the table.

"It's been two years, you can't just walk away like this—!"

The slam of the cafe door behind him cut off Touka's protests. Shiro picked a spontaneous direction to walk in. Touka should mind her own business, he seethed.

A few minutes of walking, however, and Shiro's anger had dissipated. Instead he felt like crap for being so rude to Touka. He sighed. He'd have to make it up to her somehow.

It was true, it had been two years. But regardless of whether it was safe or not, how could he come crawling back? He was sure Kaneki hated him by now.

Besides, Kaneki had become a famous author by the name of Haise Sasaki. There was no telling how much he had changed.

Shiro's blood ran cold. He had been distracted, but it finally occurred to him that he could hear footsteps behind him. He was being followed. The half-ghoul did his best to act natural, but the footsteps increased their speed.

Shiro saw an alleyway up ahead. I'll take care of this quickly and quietly. He turned into the alley and whirled around, only to raise his eyebrows.

"Gotcha! Sorry, Shiro, but your face was worth it," Hide grinned his blinding grin. "I finally found you. It took me long enough, with how much you move from ward to ward. Seriously, couldn't you be a little more helpful to your old pal?"
"Hide?" Shiro stared, mouth half-open.

"Shiro," Hide walked forward, and clapped his hand on Shiro's shoulder. His smile softened, "it's over. It took a while, but I joined the CCG and worked my way up. Just a few months ago, I found a rinkaku type dead ghoul. He was mashed up beyond recognition, so I convinced them that you were dead. They won't be looking for you anymore."

Shiro sank down to the ground. This was so sudden... and it seemed almost too easy.

"I can come home?" the half-ghoul whispered.

"Haise— well, Kaneki misses you. He doesn't exactly talk about it, but I just know," Hide winked and tapped his temple, "best friend powers."

Hide seized Shiro's wrist and pulled him back up to his feet, "Come on, I'll take you to his place."

"He... misses me?"

"Of course. You should see his cat—" Hide started, then shook his head, "well, you'll see for yourself."

Hide walked with Shiro out from the alley, still holding onto his wrist as if the half-ghoul would run away if he didn't. Shiro didn't know that he wouldn't.

Hide hailed a cab and ushered Shiro inside, giving the driver directions to an address. Hide seemed to pick up on the fact that Shiro was too stunned to speak, because he filled the silence with chatter about his job and Haise's insatiable fans.

When Shiro's brain finally began to work again, they were at their destination and Hide was paying the cab fare.

"—and so then Haise had to wear a dress just to get out of that clothing store without the crowd recognizing him as a famous author!" Hide was saying as he herded Shiro to the door.

"Hide, wait... I can't do this," Shiro halted and bit his lip, "I can't just do this after three years! He'll hate me."

"You won't know until you try," Hide countered. The blond was a force to be reckoned with, because in a heartbeat Shiro was dragged to the door.

Hide pressed the doorbell an obnoxious amount of times before stepping back. Shiro's stomach gave a sickening lurch. This situation was unreal.

The door opened.

"Hide, how many times do I have to tell..." Haise stopped, finally noticing the half-ghoul on his doorstep. He trailed off.

Haise first seemed shocked, before his expression hardened. Shiro had barely marveled at how much different he looked, before Haise kicked him. Between the legs.

Shiro doubled over, wheezing, one hand against the wall of the house to steady himself. To his irritation, he heard Hide give an impressed whistle and announce, "Well, I'll leave you two be."

*Traitor*, Shiro thought daggers at Hide.
When the pain subsided and Shiro straightened up, he saw Haise sigh, "You did deserve that. Come in."

Haise stepped aside in the doorway. Shiro hesitated, then walked in. Haise had a nice place, all mahogany wood and matching furniture. But being a famous author would do that for you, he supposed.

The tension in the air was so thick it would take a carving knife to cut through it. When the door shut behind Shiro, Haise simply stared at him, opening his mouth several times as if he was about to say something but thought better of it.

Finally, Haise settled on asking, "Coffee?"

Shiro nodded, not trusting himself to speak. He followed Haise to the kitchen, staring curiously at the striped pants and dress shirt he was wearing. Haise's fashion sense had certainly changed. Another curious thing was... there were posters of bananas everywhere.

In the kitchen, Shiro leaned against a counter and watched Haise start the coffee. He was just about to say something, anything to break the silence, when he felt something butt against his shin.

Shiro looked down, and saw a sleek white cat winding around his legs. One of the cat's eyes was blue, the other was brown.

"Ah, she likes you. That's..." Haise began, but trailed off and looked away. His cheeks were flushed. He muttered something that Shiro didn't catch.

"What?"

"I said, her name is Shiro."

Shiro tried to stop a pleased smile from curving his lips, but didn't quite manage. He felt a bit too much like a dog that had been thrown a bone. Haise turned back to the coffee, radiating embarrassment.

"Should I call you Haise?"

"Kaneki is fine," Haise mumbled.

Shiro searched for something else to say to keep the silence filled, "I've read all your books, you know."

"Shiro," the statement was abrupt, and harsh. Haise turned around to face the half-ghoul, "what do you want me to do, jump into your arms? I trusted you, and you left me."

"I had to."

"No, you didn't! We were going to work something out," Haise sounded miserable. Guilt choked Shiro, making him want to turn and run, "what do you want from me? It's not like this... can work. I'm sure we've both changed."

Shiro swallowed and gathered what courage he had. He walked up to Haise and embraced him.

"I want a second chance."

Haise was tense, "And why should I give you one?"
"Because it doesn't matter whether I had to leave or not. What's done is done, and that's not going to change. But what does matter is this; I care about you, no matter how different you are, and I want to start over," Shiro could only hope that he had said the right thing.

Haise stayed unreadable and unmoving for another moment, before he finally returned the embrace and said, in a small voice, "Okay."

"Meet me for coffee at Anteiku tomorrow?" Shiro tried his luck, smiling against Haise's neck. Maybe things weren't hopeless. Maybe, this time, it would work out.

"I'd like that a latte."

Chapter End Notes

so, this is it! the end of stitch in time. thank you to everyone who read this and stuck with it even through my sketchy update times.
to be honest, what got me inspired to finally finish the dang thing was rereading all of my kind comments from way back when. haha i'm a sap //hides face
i hope you all enjoyed the ending! i'm too much of a sucker for happy endings to give it a sad ending, oops.
please do expect more fics from me in the future :)

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