The Pursuit of Repeating History

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Summary

In their third and final year of high school, Yuki and Kyo learn the hard way where their zodiac spirits end and they begin.

Notes

This is currently being updated on fanfiction as well, but I thought I might post it on here too! As I have warned before, this fic is all about the slow build. While this fic mainly focuses on the relationship between Yuki and Kyo, I have to admit I love exploring Takaya's lovely universe more than is probably healthy. But I hope that what it leads to is worth your time as I have a blast writing these two sad boys. More notes to come as the story inevitably progresses, but for now I just hope you enjoy!
He was a lonely being, that's something we know for certain.

The giving nature and genuine generosity that he harbored for those he watched over was acclaimed all through the lands, and people would travel miles just to glance at the beautiful robes that wrapped around him.

They would gather at his feet and sing praises, things such as:

"Dear great and wise one, please bless us with good harvest."

"Beautiful spirit, grace my children with beauty and competence."

"Great being, give us wealth and success this year once more."

And as always, he would meet the wishes of each person who presented themselves before him. He wouldn't rest for days, even decades at some times, merely trying to comply with each wish that was laid down so desperately at his feet.

But his power weakened after some time, he grew weary and restless and his limbs ached, and he couldn't even lift his fingers from the strain he had put them under. It came the time to turn the people away, hoping they would be understanding after all he had given them.

Instead, the villagers who had traveled across seas and through terrible terrain turned against him. They cursed him, threw stones and torches, and demanded he grant their whims—for who had ever heard of a spirit growing weak?

Heartbroken, and weary from the cruel words of his former followers, he retreated, vowing never again to lift a finger for another mortal who asked favors of him. He spent centuries in solitary, where his fear and resentment of humans would build and solidify, until he was so unbearably alone but unable to venture past the very door of his own abode.

It was a passing chance that another spirit would find him—of the cat's. Oh, yes. The cat took pity on the spirit, a spirit who at one point could grant any wish he was so given and now would weep pathetically into his own beautiful robes. Seeing him so downtrodden and unhappy he promised to stay by his side.

They became great friends, and the spirit was very glad to have someone to cure his crippling loneliness, but after some time the cat, as well, became disheartened and distant.

"Dear spirit, I truly enjoy the pleasure your company brings, but I miss my brothers dearly. I wish to see them again, if you would so allow it."

The spirit, surprised by the cat's words, told him that he couldn't allow the cat to leave him. He had grown fearful of the outside world and he feared even more being trapped by his loneliness again. Instead, he offered that they all come to stay and live with him in his home. In return he would offer strength and riches to each and every one of his brothers.

The cat agreed, and shortly after his brothers came to live amongst them; one by one they came to the house starting with the rat, then the ox, the tiger, the rabbit, and so on, of course. They feasted every night with food so tender and delicious and rice wine so pure and rich that they wished for it to never end. They would throw festivals and parties with music that could be heard for miles and
dances that would last until dawn.

Yet, still, the gracious spirit quite obviously favored the cat. He would offer his right hand seat and would always pour his cup first.

His envious brother, the rat spirit, became quite perturbed by this and planned to conspire against him. He worked his way around his brothers, speaking subtle whispers against the cat’s name until they each found reason to hate and resent the cat—whether it be from jealousy or for other foolish and whimsical reasons. They cast him out one by one, and the cat could feel their sharp tongues and bitter eyes against his back. He grew to hate his own brothers as they spoke against him.

Though nothing was more painful than the words they spoke that reached the ears of his dearest friend, the gracious spirit. The rat spoke lies and slander against him, and his brothers would agree with nodding heads and encouraging words. It enraged the once lonely spirit and caused him to cast away his dearest friend.

The cat begged and pleaded for mercy at the feet of the gracious spirit, but that only reminded him more of the mortals who would once do the same to reap material pleasures from him. He allowed the cat to continue to live amongst him and his brothers, but he was no longer offered a seat at his feasting table.

For years the cat would hear nothing but cruel words against his ears and would watch simply as the gracious spirit turned to favor his hated brother, the rat. It was like this until he died, while all the others were away at a feast.

While the gracious spirit had fallen into the lies the rat had so expertly whispered to him, he couldn't bear to see his dearest friend depart. A moment of great mercy graced him and with his powers he revived the cat from his breathless slumber.

But what he brought back from the clutches of death was not the friend he once knew. After years of rage building against the unfair treatment from both his closest friend and his once beloved family the monster that was revived was blinded by his own anger and was barely even capable of coherent thought. The deformed spirit struck out against the gracious one, but spared him, a mercy he did not extend to his brothers. One by one he struck them down and killed his brothers in cold blood, soon after submitting himself to such a fate, as well. The gracious spirit was left alone again.

There is nothing quite as lonely as knowing the beauty of friendship and kindness and having it ripped away from you so cruelly. The gracious spirit was alone once again, each friend that he had grown so close with killed, and his home empty of music and dance once more. Of course that was until one da—Oh dear, Tohru. Are those tears I see?

"Dammit, that's what you get for telling her all that shit. It's no fucking wonder, with how much you like to hear yourself talk."

"Really Shigure, I don't know why you thought it was a good idea to tell Ms. Honda such an upsetting version of the tale."

"I-I had no i-idea that it was so... so sad...What a tragic story," Tohru sniffled through her breaking voice. Kyo reached to grab the tissues handing them to Yuki who handed them to Tohru at the end of the table. A smirk slid across Shigure's lips as he set down his notes.

"I warned you."

"Wipe that damn smug look off your face before I do it for you. AND YOU!" Tohru jumped at the
finger being thrust in her direction. "Don't cry at something so stupid. That just encourages this moron!"

She responded with a blow of her nose and Kyo rolled his eyes as he sat back against the wall in the dining room.

"You might as well have told her about the priest and the cat if you wanted to see Ms. Honda cry so badly," Yuki responded taking a sip of his tea.

"Ohh! That's my favorite story!"

"Th-the prie--"

"DON'T."

The responding slam of fist against wall resonated through the room, leaving behind a quiet enough air that allowed for the grinding of Kyo's teeth to breech the silence. Tohru sniffled again and Shigure smiled.

"Such a drama queen," Shigure placed his notes in his folder and slid them towards Tohru in the most tempting way possible. Yuki saw her eye the concealed papers and set his cup down against the table.

"You don't like that story, Kyo? What a surprise."

"Hey, back off! It's not like that last one painted the oh-so-fucking-precious rat in the best damn light, either."

"Yes, but there's a distinct difference here, Kyo. That being I don't care enough about children's stories to get worked up like a senseless idiot."

"YOU CALL THAT A STORY FOR KIDS?"

"Boys, calm down." Shigure said airily, reaching to grab a tissue from the box before Tohru and gracelessly blowing his own nose. "We were doing so well there, no yelling or fighting--"

"Yeah, because you nearly put us all to sleep," Kyo said with a huff as he relaxed against the wall again.

"I actually thought it was interesting," with a much steadier voice, Tohru turned her worried glance from the two boys back to Shigure. "I had no idea there was such a dark version of that story. And my mother told me that story nearly every night when I was a child!"

"Well I'd be surprised if she had known this version at all. You could say it's something of a Sohma folklore. A curse is a curse but it comes with good stories."

"I guess that would be true, huh?" She wiped her eyes and stood with a smile. "Even though it was sad, I'm glad you told me, Shigure! I'm always glad to learn more about the curse," when she turned her head to look over at Yuki and Kyo their faces were turned down and their eyes dark. There was almost a visible drop in her stomach as her eyes weighed against her smile.

She shook her head. It wasn't her business right now.

"I'm going to bed. Goodnight!"

"Goodnight, lovely Tohru!"
When Tohru left it was as if the room went dark. As if she were a match, an open flame in a room that would otherwise suffocate on its own darkness--Yuki was always keen to notice this. He loved her dearly because of this.

He was alone again and he couldn't breathe.

"Kyo."

Until he was reminded he wasn't. He felt air fill his lungs again.

"Kyo, there's really no need to pout. It's just a story, you know," Shigure would never manage to take on a tone that was comforting with the way the skin of his lips smeared across his teeth, and the way his eyes sparkled with mischievous indifference.

"Don't be stupid, I know that!" He snapped back.

"It really is a childish thing to get upset over," Yuki shot back, a dry itch forming in the back of his throat.

"NO ONE FUCKING ASKED YOU GUYS. Just--Goddammit, I'm going to bed too."

"Goodnight, lovely Kyo!"

"Oh shut up!"

The two listened as Kyo stormed up the stairs, Shigure making a faux expression of pain when the door slammed violently, leaving the air stale once again. Yuki tapped his fingers on the table idly, looking over at the folder laying menacingly on their kitchen table. Yuki’s eyes only diverted when he heard the familiar sound of a lighter meeting the edge of a cigarette.

"You’re welcome to read it if you want,” smoke sifted through his lips that contorted into their usual smirk. Yuki turned his head and pushed the folder away slightly as if he were a child. “The difference is that you don’t care, hm?”

“I don’t care,” Yuki reassured weakly. Quietly. “Do all your books plagiarize our family history like this?”

The dog gave a chuckle, blowing out another stream of smoke that Yuki inhaled deeply. Shigure slid the pack of cigarettes towards his younger cousin. Yuki reflexively moved towards the pack, only to hear footsteps patter above his head. He retracted his hand.

“In a minute,” Yuki responded.

“Sweet and beautiful Tohru. A girl who knows the darkest of our secrets, the intimate details of your past, and you’re scared she’ll find you indulging in a little tobacco. That’s sweet, Yuki. Really,” Shigure chuckled.

“Must you be so aggravating every time you open your mouth to speak?” Yuki sighed, his eyes drawing back to the folder on the table which didn’t go unnoticed by the dog.

“Really, Yuki, there’s no shame in wanting to know about your past,” Shigure said idly, sprawling out under the table as he sucked in another breath of smoke.

“It’s not my past,” Yuki said.

“Oh no?"
“Whatever it is you write, whatever it is you take from this curse and convolute in all your poetry is not my past, and it’s not my life.”

Shigure gave another easy laugh at that. Yuki responded with a glare.

“Tell me, Yuki, what have you read of mine?” Shigure rested his head on his hand, eyeing the rat with dark, playful eyes that seemed to gleam their strength from the still and restless night. Yuki didn’t answer, rolling his eyes as he heard lights click off, and restless feet pad into silence above him. He took a cigarette from the pack and pulled out a small book of matches from his pocket, quickly bringing to life the nicotine with a small flame.

With a deep breath he filled his lungs with smoke, savoring the taste that it left behind in his body. Wrapping himself in the smoke that he released. Shigure watched him with that same dim amusement he had whenever he looked at anyone. The dog laughed again and Yuki attempted to ignore the irritating sound that tried to overpower the smoke.

Shigure crushed his cigarette against the ash tray and slid the folder towards himself, opening it up and laying it out on the table before Yuki.

“You know, when I was 17 and about to take my entrance exams, I was suspended from school for two weeks. I’m sure Aya has told you, that little incident with us wandering into the red light district on our school trip.”

Yuki rolled his eyes, undoing the top button of his shirt as he also stretched his legs out under the table and took another drag.

“Well, anyway. I had taken a liking to exploring the Sohma grounds even as a child, and with all the free time in the world for a young man to use as he pleased I found myself in a dusty old storage room. In the most interesting of places too,” Shigure prodded waiting for Yuki to look at him expectantly as he flipped through his own papers of research. He smiled down at it fondly as a soft blanket of silence entrapped them for a moment. Shigure sighed.

“Oh come on, aren’t you going to ask me where I found it?”

“I figure you’ll keep talking whether I respond to you or not,” Yuki shot back. “It’s an irritating habit of yours.”

“Sticks and stones,” he sang happily.

“What’s your point, Shigure?”

“So forceful,” Shigure teased with a mock whine before lighting another cigarette. “I spent the rest of my suspension pouring over records, diaries, accounts, learning secrets you wouldn’t believe, dear Yuki. Everything about this little family of ours in one neat little pile. Sitting there, gathering dust. It was a tragedy. When I sat there in that little room, reading everything I could devour,” Shigure took a deep drag, face filled with ecstasy as he reminisced, “I knew that I wanted to become a writer, it was in my bones.”

Yuki stared at him, an eyebrow raised, arm draped over his bent knee that held his cigarette that gave off wisps of tobacco. Shigure wiped his nostalgic smile off his face and replaced it with the disconcerting smirk that Yuki had become all too familiar with. “Still not catching your interest, am I?”

“It’s a nice story, Shigure,” Yuki said. “But I don’t have to read your books to know you don’t concern yourself with nice.”
Shigure’s smile widened, eyes filled with an enthusiastic apathy and a warm disconnection that Yuki had been crushed under when he was a child. And then been drawn to when he first moved into this house.

“Every book I’ve written has been about the curse in some way, you know. That little treasure trove gave me the all the inspiration I could ever need. I hadn’t even planned on going to college before then. But by the time I graduated university with my writing degree, my first book had been published. Deep, intruding details on our own family exploited and bound in shops all over the city that people consumed just as I had that day. Of course, there was no need to claim it as fiction, our reality is more than unbelievable. So I wrote another, and another, and another.”

Yuki eyed the manuscript again, shifting uncomfortably on the floor as he blotted out his cigarette and lit another one immediately. The light from the match illuminating Shigure’s face in a way that seemed honest.

“I peddled our ancestors’ pain, longing, agony, and sold it to the public. Everyone wanted to know our family’s dirty laundry and I was perfectly happy to indulge them. I kept the wages, and you know what I did, Yuki?”

“What?” Yuki asked, taking the bait.

“I bought a house,” he said. “I bought this table, I bought those doors you and Kyo like to smash up. I bought these cigarettes,” Shigure grinned. Yuki exhaled and watched the smoke dissipate in front of them. “And then I invited three darling children to stay with me in my cursed riches.”

Yuki narrowed his eyes at Shigure’s gleaming ones. He remembered how his eyes felt tired and heavy under the roof of the Sohmas. He remembered how his lungs would feel weak and shaky, how his throat would feel parched, and his legs would burn with the journey of just waking up each day knowing he was still in the same place. He remembered Shigure’s offer to allow him to move in with him, gulping down waters from the oasis he provided and yet he was still thirsty, still tired, still aching.

Now he could feel the water in his stomach turn to swampy slime. Feel the walls melting like ice, smoke coiled around him like a snake, and Shigure’s eyes watching as Yuki drowned in the sand where he once thought his salvation rested.

Yuki took another drag of his cigarette to try and prove his indifference to this information, but he could see in Shigure’s houndish eyes that either he knew or he didn’t care. Yuki couldn’t tell which made him feel smaller.

“This curse of ours, Yuki, you should try and see the brighter side.”

Silence fell again on the two men, and Yuki balled his fist under the table. The atmosphere that felt as heavy as a soaked rag only broken by the opening of an upstairs door and rough, loud footsteps clobbering down the stairs. Yuki tensed and immediately put out the unfinished cigarette. Shigure’s eyes sparked.

“Oh, the dulcet tones of Tohru’s soft, and gentle steps,” Shigure said brightly and Yuki gave him a desperate look as Kyo entered the room. “Why, Tohru, you’re looking a bit manish this evening.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” Kyo said swatting at the air full of tobacco. “Damn, it smells like shit down here, how do you even put that stuff in your lungs?” Kyo directed towards Shigure as he stormed into the kitchen.
“How indeed,” Shigure redirected his gaze to Yuki whose shoulders were tensed and his eyes trained on the table before him.

Yuki and Shigure waited in silence as they listened to the faucet run and Kyo gulp down a glass of water before walking through the room again on heavy steps.

“Goodnight, Kyo!”

“Yeah, yeah,” Kyo responded heading back up the stairs.

Shigure stood, giving an exaggerated stretch, his playful and whimsical expression settling back onto his sharpened features. “I think I’ll head to bed too. But as always I do enjoy these little midnight chats. A shame we don’t get to have them as often anymore with the extra company. Still, small sacrifices must be made in exchange for housing such interesting characters. Wouldn’t you agree?”

“I think I’ll live without your constant late night chattering,” Yuki said, though not moving from his spot.

“Oh Yuki, you wound me,” Shigure said with a dramatized voice. “Go ahead and keep those notes, by the way. I think you might like some of what you find,” Shigure said, gathering the papers again and placing them back in the folder. “Considering where I found it all in the first place.”

Yuki looked down at the folder, laying carelessly next to the smoking ash tray on the hardwood table. His eyes glanced back up to Shigure.

“Goodnight,” Yuki said with an edge of finality in his voice and Shigure laughed again as he headed down the hall to his room in his tobacco soaked robe.

“Yuki,” Shigure called over his shoulder, pausing his steps halfway down the hallway. Yuki looked at his back with his features chiseled in a glare. “I know you enjoy playing house as much as I do, but let’s not get too carried away, shall we?” Yuki gulped, his fingernails digging into the skin of his palm as he watched the smoke that came from his cigarette fade in and out like the structure of his own mirage.

“Goodnight, Yuki,” Shigure didn’t even turn around as he closed the door to his room behind him softly.

Yuki drowned in the empty space, unable to break eye contact with the papers that taunted him ruthlessly.

He sat, back against the wall, lungs filling themselves with tobacco, and soft summer breezes tickling the leaves outside. The house was dark, only the faded moonlight and the stars that reluctantly peaked out from behind the menacing gray clouds. He could feel his fingertips soaking in the smell of cigarette smoke and something in him twisted guiltily.

*I bought these cigarettes.*

Yuki stared at the table, water-ringed and chipped in the most meaningless of places.

*I bought this table.*

He stared at the doors that contained patch after patch of silly shapes and characters. He stared at the sloppy glue that jutted out from the cracked wooden frames.

*Those doors you and Kyon like to smash up.*
He felt as though he was sinking into the floor, creaking with the house as the walls consumed him mercilessly. His ears picking up the sounds of Kyo’s restless form trying to tumble into sleep above him. He took another deep drag.

*I bought this house.*

*And invited three darling children to live with me.*

Yuki shoved the heel of his hand into his eye, trying to prevent the oncoming migraine that would surely make his senses feel even more claustrophobic.

“I already knew that,” Yuki mumbled to himself. Somehow the words didn’t comfort him. He eyed the folder on the table and crushed his cigarette onto the ash tray that sat so innocently next to it.

“Let’s not get carried away,” he repeated to himself with an exhausted snarl. With that, he opened the folder and removed the first page.
“He’s fine, he just needs a bit of rest,” Hatori said quietly, closing the door behind him. He looked over his shoulder for a brief moment, as if he still felt the soft, sickly breath on his efficient and stable hands. Akito’s voice still lingered in his ear, mundane and fevered though they were, and he let his own words lodge into his reasoning—quash the worried stream of blood that came with even the most banal of check-ups.

He wondered for a moment if the other man had left and turned his good eye to see him still standing there, broad shoulders almost mirroring those of a soldier who stood at obedient attention.

“He seemed so sick this morning,” Kureno said with a slightly furrowed brow. Hatori took a careful step back before walking down the hall, feeling Kureno follow behind him.

“Nothing particularly out of the ordinary, we’ve had worse scares in terms of Akito’s health,” Hatori reassured.

“I suppose,” Kureno sighed, still padding behind him. For a brief moment Hatori felt the presence of a young boy behind him. One that would call him big brother and stick to him like hardened glue, but when he turned to look over his shoulder once more that illusion faded in a flash.

He stopped and turned with a sympathetic sigh.

“I know you’re prone to worry about him, Kureno. But the truth is if anything truly terrible happens we’ll all be the first to know,” Hatori said and he can see that look of panic trying to be smothered out of Kureno’s cautious glance. He opened his mouth to respond to the doctor before a reckless padding could be heard on the wooden floors on the outer barriers of the house.

“Hatori!” Momiji bounced with a smile, promptly shattering any awkward tension between the two men.

“Momiji, I see you’re doing your best to cause a commotion this afternoon,” Hatori offered the boy easily to which Momiji gave a bright smile. Kureno tried to offer a smile as a greeting but faltered when he failed to meet the rabbit’s eyes.

“Hey, listen I was just looking for you!” His eyes flashed to Kureno for a second and his cheery tone is watered down only barely. “My ankle hurts!”

Hatori quirked an eyebrow and Kureno mirrored the expression.

“Your ankle?”

“Mhm. Could you come take a look at it for me?”

Hatori sighed, nodding to Kureno before walking down the hallway to follow the inappropriately cheery boy. Momiji looked over Hatori’s shoulder at Kureno’s retreating form with a scrunched up nose before turning on his heel and walking alongside his cousin.

“If your ankle hurts you shouldn’t be putting so much weight on it,” Hatori said, deadpan.

“Yessir!” Momiji said with a salute as they continued their walk down the corridor. Once they cleared the pathway of Akito’s lavish and traditional home deep inside the compound, Hatori eyed the cheery boy warily.
“What’s this all about now, Momiji?”

He stuck his tongue out to no one in particular, his filled out form walking peacefully with an easy smile on the blonde boy’s porcelain face.

“You’ve got a visitor,” he sang.

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Tohru sat patiently in Hatori’s office, idly rocking side to side in the swiveling desk chair opposite of the man’s desk. Her hands rested in her uniformed skirt as she eyed the clinical white walls with various medical posters hung symmetrically on the still somehow sparse space.

“It’s so professional,” she marveled softly to herself, admiring the setting she had oddly never seen the dragon in.

Her eyes flamed with attentiveness when she heard the door being pushed open and Momiji flinging his arms wide open in presentation of Hatori.

“Tah-dah! Look who I got!”

“Oh, thank you so much, Momiji!”

“Momiji, it’s nice to see you again,” Hatori said with a soft grin as he entered his office and sat at his desk. “Though I must say, it is a bit of a surprise to be meeting you here inside Sohma house.”

Momiji hopped on the desk and swung his legs that were almost too long for such a motion, leaning back on his hands.

“It’s nice to see you too!” She said immediately puffing up, only to deflate once more. “I’m sorry if you’re busy, though. I really didn’t mean to intrude on your work day.”

“Not at all,” Hatori reassured, though his lips don’t crack from their firm line. “What can I help you with? Have you been feeling sick?”

“Oh, well,” she hesitated. “Not exactly.”

His eyebrow quirked as Tohru briefly flashed her eyes up to Momiji before letting her gaze fall back to her hands. As if on cue Momiji jumped off the desk and placed his hands on Tohru’s shoulders, leaning in close with a bright smile.

“I’ll leave you in Hari’s good hands. But Tohru, stop by my house before you leave, okay?”

“Are you sure it’s alright?”

“Definitely, definitely! I’ll prepare some snacks so be sure to come by!” Momiji said with a wave. Tohru offered a bright, relieved smile back before returning the gesture until Momiji snapped the door closed behind him.

Tohru’s eyes sank again, her fingers fiddling with each other in her lap as her shoulders tensed slightly. Hatori lets her take a moment to steep into her courage before urging her to continue.

“Are you having trouble with Shigure?” he ventured the more likely guess.

Tohru looked up, almost confused before shaking her head vigorously. “Oh, no! Definitely not! It’s nothing to do with Shigure, he’s been wonderful these past couple of years!”
“Well if you don’t mind me asking, why are you here, Tohru?”

“Well… It’s. It’s Yuki,” she said finally.

“Yuki?” Hatori asked, his eyebrow lifting once more. He took the key ring from his pocket and used it to open the bottom drawer of his desk. Fourteen different manila folders rested neatly, separately, away from his other files. These he kept close. “His asthma?” He asked, opening a file with Yuki’s name scribbled on the tab.

“Maybe,” Tohru responded. “I think that’s part of it, but I think there might be something else.”

“Oh?” Hatori asked, trailing his fingers over a chart of dates. He sighed to himself when he noted that Yuki’s last check-up was over a year ago. “Go on,” he urged peaking up from his files to see Tohru staring back at him patiently.

“I… I know this might not be my place, but lately he hasn’t been eating much. He hasn’t finished his meals in over a week. He’s also been very tired lately, and seems so out of it at school and even at home,” Tohru said trying to form her uneasiness into words.

Hatori stared at her for a moment before leaning back in his chair.

“I’m not entirely sure those symptoms are all physical. Has something happened lately? Between the two of you,” Hatori asked. “Not to be blunt.”

“What? Oh no, everything’s fine! At least I think so,” Tohru said thoughtfully, thinking over the last few days. “I tried to talk to him, but…”

“He’s stubborn.”

“Well…”

“Just like his brother,” Hatori remarked, his eyes narrowing in an affectionate irritation. Tohru smiled a little at that.

“It’s not just that, either,” Tohru continued. Her fingers fiddled in her lap, her head bowed, and a soft red tinting her worried expression. “I think he might have collapsed the other day.”

“You think?”

“When I got home after work he looked very pale, and as if he had been laying on the floor for a while. And he was… he was coughing a lot,” Tohru said biting down on one of her fingernails. “I wish I could explain it better, especially since you’re taking time out of your day to speak with me. But I suppose… I suppose it’s just a gut feeling!” Tohru said with a determined look before tensing again. “Though that does sound a little crazy…”

Hatori smiled at her.

“I’ll be sure to stop by sometime tomorrow and take a look at him,” Hatori nodded.

“Thank you so much! I work tomorrow, but I’ll be sure there’s something for you to eat!”

“Don’t worry yourself,” Hatori said holding up a gentle hand. “I’ll make it seem like I’m coming over for a surprise visit. How’s that?”

Tohru nodded with a relieved smile.
With a soft sound the door slid closed behind Yuki, sunlight tumbling inside from the days that seemed to be getting longer and longer. He walked inside on an undisturbed peace that always seemed to engulf this particular room. His room. Even as he dropped his book bag carelessly on his desk and sat down with a sigh on the edge of his bed, the silence seemed untouched. The walls were too eager to absorb the noises that came with movement and life. The bed would creak as he sat. The floorboards would groan as he walked. The light would click and flicker. He coughed. Yet, the still air molded around him as if embracing him in its muteness.

Yuki’s hands go to undo his uniform tie, sliding it off his neck and falling to the floor. He coughed again lightly against his fist before resting his elbows on his knees. He slumped against the weight of the quiet spring air, letting it rest atop his spine and neck.

He focused on his breathing. In and out. In and out. In, out. As if breathing in the daylight and exhaling the flecks of darkness that created dusk. He wasn’t in any hurry to break from the solitude that was his room just yet.

But, as always, the world around him had different plans.

“Oh, welcome home,” he could hear Shigure downstairs through his door and Yuki wondered idly how long he’d been spaced out on his bed. He wondered why his ears had to strain to hear doors open, and footsteps on wood.

Yuki lifted himself from off the bed and creaked open his door. In that tiny open space it was as if a seal had been broken, letting in a refreshing air that surged through this house on the best of days.

“Not going to the dojo today?”

“Nah, I’m only going every other day now,” Kyo responded flatly as he took off his shoes.

“Oh, what a shame. Poor Kagura will be so disappointed,” Shigure said with a mock sadness tainting his voice. Kyo’s shoulders tensed.

“Why the hell do you think I’m only goin’ every other day to begin with?!” He brushed past him easily, Shigure trailing behind him making light conversation. Yuki narrowed his eyes from his doorway, closing it again when he realized that he still had his school uniform on.

He opened his closet, digging through his disorganized drawers before finding a shirt that wasn’t wrinkled and that still fit, and pants that fell under the same criteria. Changed, and feeling slightly more refreshed in clothes that didn’t feel so stifling, he walked down the stairs.

Through the open doors into the living room he could see Kyo’s back hunched over the table, mindlessly tapping his fingers on the surface. His body looked completely different when it didn’t have the supports of angry tension that stiffened his shoulders. Now he looked relaxed, deflated, like a puddle of water in the crack of a sidewalk. Yuki found himself admiring the aura that bounced off the cat’s back before his eyes narrowed again. With near silent and quick steps Yuki positioned himself behind Kyo, and with a fluidity as still as falling snow he bent down so that his mouth was at the same level as Kyo’s neck. Gently, he gave a soft blow.

“AHHHH!” Yuki smirked when he heard Kyo’s knee bang against the underside of the table, his spine snapped back up as rage shot through his bones and he whirled around to face Yuki whose arms were crossed as he stared down at him.

A deep crimson filled Kyo’s cheeks as his hand shot up to try and rub anything that remained from
Yuki’s soft breath off his neck. “What the hell was that for?!”

“My, Kyo, you look a bit red. I hope you’re not coming down with a fever,” Yuki said with a flat and easy tone. A smirk still placed on his lips. Kyo’s cheeks flushed even more.

“Yeah, because you care so much,” Kyo spat.

“What, you don’t think I’d care if that head of yours were to overheat entirely? Now now, you underestimate how troublesome that would be,” Yuki retorted with a shrug and a mocking smile. He walked to the other side of the table, taking a seat on the floor across from Kyo.

“I’ll try not to let that delicate pretty boy self of yours get too inconvenienced by it,” Kyo said on a snarl.

“How considerate of you, even though you seem to be just as determined to inconvenience me even when you’re healthy,” Kyo pounded a fist on the table at Yuki’s words.

“Dammit, why are you even here?!”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t realize I needed permission to sit at your table,” Yuki said, his bored words complimented by his head going to rest on his hand.

“It’s not my table, but if the only thing you’re gonna do is be a pain in the ass then you might as well do it somewhere else!”

“And if all you’re going to do is shout every time you open your mouth, you might as well keep it shut.”

“I’M NOT SHOUTING,” Kyo bristled.

“Aren’t we in good spirits today,” both boys lifted their heads to shoot surprised looks at the suited man who stood in their hallway.

“Hatori?”

“Ah, Hari! What a pleasant surprise,” Shigure said as he entered the hallway. “Here to pay a visit to that lovely housewife of mine? I knew you couldn’t resist a girl so cute!”

“Would you shut up?!” Kyo snapped at Shigure. Yuki rolled his eyes.

“I think that’s sound advice,” Hatori said. “I hope you don’t mind that I let myself in.”

“Not at all,” Shigure said with a wave of his hand. “I’ll get some tea ready.”

“That’s alright. This is a trip for business not pleasure, actually.”

“Hm? Is Akito having you play messenger boy?” Shigure asked, crossing his arms. Hatori rolled his eyes and entered the living room.

“Yuki, we can either have your check-up here or in your room.”

“Huh?” Yuki’s head snapped up, his attention flamed by the sudden words and his eyes narrowing into a confused glare.

“Well, which is it?” Hatori asked rather sternly. Yuki’s eyes fell on Shigure and then on Kyo before he let out a defeated sigh and pulled himself up from the table, brushing past the man and leading
him upstairs.

“Is this really necessary?“

“Yes, I believe it is."

Shigure watched as the two headed up the stairs before turning his attention to Kyo.

“Maybe if you’re lucky you’ll get to go next!” Shigure said with a cheerful tone.

“I don’t need any damn check-up,” Kyo responded.

“Don’t be so skittish, Kyo! I know Hatori’s needles are scary but if you sit through it like a good boy I’m sure he’ll give you a lollipop at the end!”

“Would you get outta here!” Kyo snapped back and Shigure retreated back down the hallway with a laugh. Kyo sighed. The air stilled, and he deflated once more.

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“Take a deep breath for me,” Hatori said with the stethoscope up to Yuki’s bare chest. Yuki did as he was told, ignoring the way his breath caught in his throat slightly. He was not going to cough here. “And another.”

“Did you really have to come all this way for this sort of thing?”

“It’s been awhile since your last check-up, and I thought you’d appreciate the fact that I didn’t come to your school this time,” Hatori replied.

“I’d appreciate it more if you gave me some sort of warning at least,” he said, taking another deep breath at Hatori’s command.

Hatori removed the device from Yuki’s chest and gave a somewhat aggravated sigh. Though it didn’t seem directed at the stubborn rat, who gave the man a curious look. Hatori scribbled something in a notebook as Yuki sat patiently on his bed, the doctor across from him on his desk chair. The man stood to bring the stethoscope to Yuki’s back, which broke out in goosebumps when the cold device touched his skin.

“Breathe again,” Yuki did as he was told only this time couldn’t contain the small cough.

“Hm,” Hatori mused.

“It’s just hay fever,” Yuki said.

“You haven’t been eating well lately,” Hatori said which earned a surprised look from Yuki. “Is that also hay fever?”

“Who told you I wasn’t eating well?” Yuki asked, his steady voice still flaring defensively.

“Someone you’ve been worrying.”

Yuki sighed at that, drooping his head a little bit. “Ms. Honda,” he breathed out. His face defeated, but unable to form into anything akin to irritation at the mention of Tohru’s name. He ran a hand through his hair as Hatori sat down again and jotted down a few more notes.

“Has something been happening in your personal life?” Hatori asked, his eyes serious and
unwavering and Yuki rolled his own and looked away from him.

“Are you asking me as my doctor or as my cousin?”

“Whichever one you’re most likely to answer.”

Yuki grabbed his shirt that hung off his bedframe and tugged it over his head, rebuttoning the top few buttons before straightening it out. His face was solemn and contemplative, and his dark gray eyes were hesitant to meet Hatori’s sharp green ones.

“Nothing worth mentioning,” Yuki finally said. Hatori eyed him for a moment before letting out his own sigh.

“Your condition is something you should be growing out of, not back into. And even so, it’s not something that should be effecting your appetite,” Hatori began, almost unsure how to maneuver his words. Yuki still wouldn’t quite meet the man’s eye, focusing on how his hands gripped at his knees. He always felt like a child being scolded when Hatori talked to him so directly.

A moment of silence passed between the two, and if it weren’t for the man’s burning presence that made itself known in the boy’s bloodstream, he would have thought he had left without another word. Hatori crossed his arms, causing the chair to squeak under his weight, but Yuki resisted the reflex to look up.

“Yuki,” the doctor finally said pointedly, causing the boy’s head to finally tilt up. “The curse isn’t just the ways in which we transform. It’s something deeply physical. If anything’s happened to irritate that balance inside you—”

“Irritate?” The word came off his tongue with a guarded disbelief, and eyes that narrowed easily.

“There are certain things our secondary forms are susceptible to, certain thoughts and ways in which we live our lives could cause them to lash out at the physical form they occupy,” Hatori said, as if reading off a text book. Yuki felt himself flush slightly in anger.

“So I’m not even allowed to think my own thoughts, is that it?” Yuki asked.

“It’s a curse, Yuki,” Hatori replied rather impatiently, not appreciating the anger that was being redirected towards him. “It’s something that can affect us even at our best. We learn to live with it, we learn to survive.”

“And hardly anything more, apparently,” Yuki mumbled to himself.

“You must have known this on some level,” Hatori responded. “It’s a part of you.”

Yuki pinched the bridge of his nose, his eyes clenched shut as he warded off an oncoming headache. He sighed, a way to keep his swelling vexation in check.

“I suppose I was foolish for thinking it was going to be this easy,” Yuki said to himself, which caused Hatori to quirk an eyebrow at him. He opened his mouth to reply but Yuki stared back up at him with calmer, understanding eyes. “You’re right. I do understand.”

There was a moment of silence that passed between the two. Hatori could feel something inside of him sink—regret, remorse, obligation. Helplessness. He glanced at his own hands that could heal in the ugliest of ways and tried to push away the guilt that sunk into the creases of each fingerprint. And even now, with all he knew, with all his intimate and clinical ties with the tragic bodies of his family, all he could do was lay forth advice that rolled off the coattails of each word he gave to Yuki.
“Give up.”

“Good,” Hatori said. “Then I trust that you’ll be able to improve your condition from here.”

Yuki stared up at him as the doctor stood, giving him confused almost relieved eyes. Hatori was never one to pry. A valuable trait that had been lost on his other two companions. Yuki nodded rather solemnly, his head dropping slightly under the weight of the room.

Slowly, hesitantly, Hatori brought his hand up to tousle Yuki’s hair in the most supportive gesture he could muster.

“You’ll be hearing from me,” he said, and with that Yuki watched him exit that room. A tense breath detaching from his lungs as the door quietly shut.

“I was wondering why there was an extra plate of food in the fridge,” Shigure said with a smirk as Hatori padded down the stairs. “What suspicious circumstances.”

“If you say so,” Hatori said flippantly, adjusting his tie. “I should be going.”

“Aww, come on, Hari. You just got here. Stay awhile, you don’t want Tohru’s food going to waste do you?” Shigure said as he led Hatori into the dining room. “Oh, I know! I’ll call Aya and we’ll really get this gossip session started!”

“Don’t you dare,” Yuki said from the doorframe, crossing his arms.

“Everything okay, Yuki?” Shigure asked with a smile. Yuki gave a small nod before quickly scanning the room.

“Where did that stupid cat go?”

Shigure gave a shrug. “If he’s not in his room, I’m sure he’s on the roof. Are the two of you going to pick up Tohru?”

“I think it’s the least we can do,” Yuki said as he turned to head back up the stairs.

“Don’t start any fights out on the street, you two,” Shigure called after. Yuki waved an elegant hand dismissively before completely rounding the corner.

“Is that common?” Hatori asked, taking a seat by the table.

“Hm?”

“The two of them going together?” He pulled out a pack of cigarettes from his breast pocket and placed one stick between his lips. Shigure sat by him, pulling a lighter from his sleeve and lighting it without a word. He pulled away when the smoke fell from Hatori’s lips and into the living room air.

“These days it seems so,” the dog said, lighting his own cigarette.

“Tohru really has calmed the air between those two, hasn’t she?”

“Something like that,” he responded with a bright smile. “I like to think I play a part, what with my role as the wise and ever-loving guardian.”

“You must certainly test their patience to a definite limit,” Hatori said breathing out the smoke that
swirled in his lungs. Shigure breathed in the familiar scent, letting a smirk crawl upon his lips once more.

“I like to think I do a little more than that, Hari.”

Kyo flinched when the ladder hit the side of the roof, his head whipping around in time to see Yuki’s gray eyes staring back at him with a smirk. Something inside his chest clenched as he sat up, his shoulders tensing and his fists balling. On defense. Ready for a fight.

“What do you want?”

“I’m going to pick up Ms. Honda. Are you coming or not?”

“What do you need me for? Go pick her up yourself!”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to cut into your very busy schedule,” Yuki said easily as he climbed the final steps up onto the roof. He stood above him, a hand on his hip, staring down at him as the rising moonlight caught in his hair. Kyo clenched his jaw as he looked up at him. Something unpleasantly familiar pumping through his veins.

“You got legs don’t you? Need me to carry you to Tohru’s work or something? Just piss off already if you’re so worried about her walking home,” Kyo snapped back, finally turning his head away from the rat.

Kyo’s ears flinched at the lack of response that followed, the silence weighing heavy between the two before Yuki took a seat right next to the aggravated cat. Kyo jumped again, his guard thrust up at full force.

“What the hell are you doing??”

“We still have some time before we need to go pick her up,” Yuki said, leaning back on his arms and staring up as the stars shone above the leaves of the surrounding forest.

“What we? I said go pick her up yourself! And if you need to kill time why don’t you do it somewhere else?!”

“What, so now it’s your table and your roof?”

“Dammit, no, it’s not!” Kyo could feel his voice begin to rise, his blood begin to run hot. And it occurred to him just how close Yuki was. The evening spring wind brushing their sleeves together, his words bouncing off of Yuki’s pale skin and falling back onto him all too soon. He tensed again and turned away. Damn, this guy had a knack for exhausting him. “Just... fuck, do whatever the hell you want. I don’t give a shit.”

Kyo laid back down, staring up at the sky as Yuki sat silently beside him. The wind streaming through the tops of trees as nighttime slowly sank in and nestled itself into the air. He closed his eyes, taking it in, letting his shoulders relax as much as they could when Yuki was in shouting range of him.

The reluctant peace only had a chance to settle in him for a minute, however.

A creak on the roof, the warmth of skin radiating by his ear.
His eyes opened, aware of the new presence, and he could see the peaceful view of the star speckled sky replaced by Yuki’s narrowed and dangerous eyes, his hand beside Kyo’s head to offer him support as he hovered above him. Kyo felt himself freeze, his teeth clenching together as his expression fought to stay neutral and angry and calm and in control.

He laid there for a moment, looking up at Yuki’s storm cloud eyes. The way they narrowed with such distinct purpose, the way his hair framed his porcelain features, the way his slightly rose tinted lips seemed so close. His body gave off a warmth that was so slight, so delicate against the dewy breeze, and for a moment Kyo felt himself drawn to it. Seeking it. Yuki released a soft breath, and Kyo was just barely out of range to feel it drizzle against his skin. It left a disgustingly disappointed feeling in his stomach. He sought to compose himself, pulling his gaze from those lips back up to his unmoving eyes. Kyo’s expression narrowed into a glare.

“What are you doing?” Kyo asked, his voice threatening and low, but not snappish and quick. For some reason, that seemed to make Yuki’s eyes flare with that poisonous spark even more.

“Whatever the hell I want,” he responded, though made no further move from where he was. An electric wave billowed through Kyo, one that could so easily disguise itself as rage, as he engaged in Yuki’s fatal starring contest.

After a moment Kyo sat up, and Yuki straightened his own posture, as if the sliver of space between them was as solid as a brick—pushing back Yuki’s face that pressed against that airy wall so persistently.

“Back off,” Kyo’s words were soft but laced with his threatening temper, and Yuki absorbed them easily as his glare broke into a small smirk.

“I thought you didn’t give a shit,” Yuki’s voice was so low, and something blazed in Kyo’s blood as his soft words collided into him. His fists balled, his face flushed, and he clenched his teeth with a vicious glare to hide his reddened face. “If you really want me to back off, you’ll have to make me.”

Those words, his tone, his voice, snapped something in Kyo like a taught thread as his fist reflexively swung to hit Yuki square in the jaw. His knuckle collided with Yuki’s hand, blocking the punch, and pushing him away roughly with the same hand, enough to send Kyo awkwardly leaning back as Yuki stood.

Kyo scrambled to his feet, standing toe to toe as he stared Yuki down. He let out a cry as he swung his fist again, Yuki deflecting it away with a graceful hand. Using most of the force in his body Kyo lunged at him, his arm aiming for his chest, which Yuki side stepped easily, though stayed close enough that Kyo could feel Yuki’s body heat against his arm.

Kyo retracted, immediately after swinging his fist at Yuki’s face who ducked, and then throwing his punch up in an uppercut, only to have Yuki catch his arm. With gentle, poised fingers, Yuki twisted Kyo’s arm uncomfortably, trapping it by his ear and above his head. For a brief moment Kyo caught himself off guard by the contact, his mind scrambled by Yuki’s face coming closer and closer.

“Shit,” Kyo hissed out as Yuki struck his stomach, sending him a few steps back on the roof. Breathing heavily, face flushed, as Yuki’s grasp still felt hot on his skin, even as he stood so many steps away. “How about you try and hit me, you fuck!” Kyo yelled, still clenching his stomach.

“You seem to be doing all my work for me,” he said. Kyo gave another enraged shout and lunged his body at Yuki once more.

His arm flung to collide with Yuki’s chest. Yuki stepped back anticipating the move. Kyo stumbled,
his feet unable to cope for the unexpected lack of impact and the awkward angle of the roof binding his feet from catching their balance.

A sudden flash of panic lodged in Kyo’s stomach at the realization that he was falling.

He braced himself for impact with the gravel laden ground two stories below. Instead his gut lurched as long precise fingers dug into his shoulders. He opened his eyes at the force that kept him from dropping, and realized he should have braced for much worse.

Kyo stayed there for a moment, completely still. Yuki’s hands holding him, supporting him, burning through the thing fabric of his t-shirt. He could feel his breathing coming quicker as he realized how close the rest of him was to the rat. His face close enough to Yuki’s chest that he could have rested his cheek against him to hear his beating heart. His heightened sense of smell overwhelmed by a scent of shampoo and earth, like the sweet smell of trees in a clearing. His clothes adding a smell of something dirty and burnt that hid in the woven fabrics of his otherwise well-kept wardrobe. It was a scent so purely Yuki.

Kyo could feel that panic that had manifested so suddenly spread through his body as everything in him seemed wired and warm.

And what was worse.

He could hear Yuki’s breath cycling as fast as his own.

Kyo jolted his body to work, roughly grabbing Yuki’s upper arms and stabilizing himself on the roof so that he could take a rough, immediate step back.

They faced each other. Flushed, flustered, and breathing quickly, with eyes hardened like diamond as they tried to assess the other. Yuki’s ash gray eyes sparked with a lightening that seemed so focused, and so dedicated to Kyo that he felt himself falter slightly. His body hummed, and this time Kyo couldn’t ignore it.

Neither dared to speak or move, caught in whatever web they had weaved for each other, in an air that promised a mutual destruction if they didn’t step lightly. It wasn’t until Yuki turned his head to cough into his hand that Kyo felt as if he could move his limbs once more.

It was as if something shattered. As if water that had been balancing on the edge of its container had spilled and washed Kyo away. The air flowed freer between the two, and Kyo could feel his heart pounding inside his chest as if desperately drinking up the blood that had not dared to move when Yuki was so close.

Kyo peered at his cousin, who now felt miles away, as he took a few steps further away to control the minor coughing fit.

He needed to move.

“Come on, let’s just go,” Kyo said walking to the edge of the roof and jumping down onto the patio. Yuki followed him, and Kyo could feel Yuki’s smirk on his back as they started their walk down the path.
“I thought I heard someone rummaging around the kitchen.”

“Oh no, did I wake you?” Tohru turned around with a jolt at the sudden voice that ripped through the silent night air. Her eyes caught Shigure’s features through the one kitchen bulb that only seemed to highlight the darkness of the late hour. The dog smiled, the expression sharing the small light with the rice that was being molded between Tohru’s small hands.

“Don’t worry, I was already up. You had the same idea I did,” Shigure said, walking forward with a pleasant smile and gesturing to the already completed rice balls that rested on a wooden plate.

“Help yourself, please!” Tohru insisted, smiling as Shigure plopped one off the plate and into his mouth.

“You’re too good to us, Tohru,” he said between satisfied bites. “But what, pray tell, called for such a late night meal?”

Tohru’s hands stopped their motion for a moment as she eyed the nearly empty pot of rice. Shigure’s eyebrow lifted as she twirled her head to give an especially forceful smile.

“I can’t seem to get to sleep, so I thought I might as well make breakfast for tomorrow!”

Those are all for breakfast?”

“I know, I made a lot…” she sighed. “Oh, but take as many as you’d like! I’d hate for them to go to waste!”

“Only if you insist!” Shigure dramatically rubbed his stomach, feigning a life-ending starvation. “But unless you plan to feed us rice balls for the entirety of this week, I think it would be best if you went to bed. The new term just started, best not to be robbed of your energy so early in the year.”

Tohru nodded, giving him an almost apologetic look. “I’ll clean up and then I’ll go to bed, I promise!”

Shigure smiled back patting her head affectionately, “sleep well, Tohru. And thank you for the delicious snack. I think I’ll be able to power through the rest of this manuscript thanks to your wonderful sustenance.”

She laughed as he waved another dramatic hand, leaving the kitchen with his plate of rice balls.

“Goodnight, Shigure!”

He smiled to himself as he walked down the hall, the small sounds of Tohru rustling around fading as he closed the door to his office behind him. The bright lights beamed unapologetically in the otherwise dim and peaceful house. He stretched, sighing at the piles of references, stray news clippings, and photocopies of journals and notes that swirled around the room. Their haphazard placement always more aggressive as he approached his deadlines. He breathed in the musty and confined air of his office before his nose caught a particularly familiar scent sneaking through the small cracks in the paper doors.

With an amused sigh he mumbled under his breath, “my, they’re all over tonight,” before walking over to the door that led to the open and narrow balcony, careful not to step on anything too important to his work.
When the door slid open under Shigure’s hand the yellow light from his office washed against Yuki’s back. The smoke from his cigarette transformed from a wisp of nighttime air to a reflection of the restlessness that seemed to plague the entirety of the household that evening.

“Tsk, tsk, tsk, Yuki. And after Hatori came all this way just to scold you not but two days ago.”

Yuki looked up at the man, exhaling the smoke in his lungs before putting the cigarette back to his lips.

“I’m surprised you didn’t tell on me,” Yuki said with a slight chuckle, his legs spilling over the side of the house as he sat innocently on the floor just outside Shigure’s office.

“I’m offended that you think I would do such a thing,” the dog sat next to the boy and pulled out his own pack of cigarettes, placing the plate of rice balls between them.

“Causing trouble for others seems to be your strong suit,” Yuki took one last deep inhale of his cigarette before he crushed it into the ashtray, eyeing the food that was placed between them.

“After all I do for you, your snark is the thanks I get,” he said on a laugh, flicking his lighter open and releasing the tobacco smoke into the air. “Besides, I wonder if this certain little tidbit of information would really change your diagnosis, anyway.”

“It wouldn’t. So let’s continue to keep it a secret,” Yuki pulled out another cigarette and placed it between his lips, taking a match from the small book that rested beside him and lighting it. “You made rice balls?” He asked skeptically, flicking his wrist to put out the match’s flame.

“Tohru did!” He sang. “Hungry?”

“No,” Yuki exhaled a lung full of smoke.

“Suit yourself.”

Shigure took a large bite out of the rice ball, making an overly exaggerated satisfied sigh as he chewed the food thoughtfully, eyeing Yuki’s determinedly quiet form. The boy responded by eyeing him through annoyed and exhausted features.

“What?”

“Nothing, nothing,” Shigure assured. “I suppose I’ve just been wondering.”

The dog smirked when he saw Yuki’s shoulders tense defensively.

“About?”

“That little wager of ours,” Shigure grinned at the silence that emanated off of Yuki. His precise and careful fingers focused all their energy on his tobacco, and away from his indelicate words. “Any progress made?”

“Some,” Yuki stared at the end of his cigarette as he exhaled with a smirk that was unable to keep off his lips. “Do you have nothing better to do than get involved in something like this?”

“I’m a writer, I’m naturally curious.”

“I’m sure you’ll be the first to know if anything happens,” Yuki said. “Whether I like it or not.”

“Very well put! I do seem to have this incredible knowledge of the intimate details of our family,
unbeknownst even to me!” The rat rolled his eyes at the false innocence that dripped from his tone.

“What a victim you are;” he responded drily.

“Oh, you’re no fun. Any human would prod for the juicy secrets I hold!”

“We’re hardly human though, aren’t we?” His laugh was soaked in tobacco as Shigure smiled at the reply. “Besides, I know when to keep out of other people’s business. Something I don’t think you ever learned.”

“I’m incorrigible, aren’t I?”

“That’s not something to be proud of.”

“Fine, fine, I’ll keep it all to myself,” Shigure let out a languished sigh as he took another healthy bite of his rice ball. “Poor Hatsuharu will suffer alone, his own dear cousin so reluctant to hear anything that could help this poor boy through such a difficult time.”

“What? What happened to Haru?” Yuki’s eyes growing wide as he crushed his used up cigarette onto the porcelain ashtray.

“I thought you knew when to keep out of other people’s business.”

“Shigure,” Yuki warned. Shigure put up his hands defensively as he laughed.

“See Yuki? You’re human after all.”

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“The first years look so frickin’ young now!”

“Maybe you’ve just gotten old, Arisa.”

“That doesn’t change the fact that they look like a bunch of runts.”

“Oh, I think they’re cute!”

The group clustered together in their classroom, standing by the window and observing the new students who congealed in the courtyard three stories below. Kyo leaned back in his desk chair staring idly at the ceiling, while Momiji hovered over Tohru’s shoulder, enthusiastically listening to the girls’ chatter.

“It’s hard to believe we looked just as doe-eyed and clueless two years ago,” Uo remarked idly as she leaned her back against the window. “Though it’s comforting that carrot top still looks just as clueless.”

“You got somethin’ to say?” Kyo spat out as his eyes clenched shut, but still not exerting the effort to put all his chair legs back on the ground.

“I like to think Tohru has maintained a certain air of innocence to her,” Hana praised, hugging Tohru’s arm with a smile. Tohru beamed.

“A real mystery after staying in a house with three huge, unruly men,” Uo spat, crossing her arms. “Don’t ever change, Tohru!”

“Yes, Tohru, don’t you dare fall prey to their brutish waves.”
“Hey, hey! You make us sound like a bunch of perverts or something!”

The two girls sent Kyo a pointed glare to which Kyo flinched away from, grunting softly as he continued his idle eye contact with the ceiling.

“I think the person has changed the most though is Momiji!” Tohru said with a bright smile, trying to steer the subject elsewhere. “You’re so tall now!”

“Don’t forget devilishly handsome,” Momiji added with a smile just as bright as he pointed to himself.

“Hey, don’t go adding shit like that when it’s about yourself!” Kyo snapped.

“Don’t be grumpy, Kyo! One day you’ll be just as handsome too!”

“Hearing that from you makes me wanna snap you in half,” Kyo said, bringing a hand to his eyes and rubbing them as if a headache were fast approaching.

“Spoil sport!”

“Seriously, what’s got your panties in such a bunch today, carrot? Someone piss in your breakfast?”

“Do you gotta be so vulgar every time you fuckin’ speak?”

“My, my, tensions seem to be high today,” Hana commented, beginning to braid one half of Tohru’s hair. “Trouble at home?” Kyo opened one eye to peak at the psychic, feeling other eyes boring into him. Especially one particularly potent pair of kind, brown eyes. He sighed, and sat his chair up straight, resting his elbow on the desk.

“Of course not, I’m just not in the mood to deal with everyone’s shit today,” Kyo said simply.

“Then stop being such an easy target,” Uo commented with a smirk.

“I’ll show you who’s an easy target, Yankee!” Kyo said, pounding his fist on the desk.

“Oh Yuki!” Momiji called out, earning the attention of the whole group. “Yuki! Come hang out with us!”

Yuki looked up from the conversation he was having with a student at the door of the classroom, giving a small nod of acknowledgement. He bid the student a brief farewell before walking up to the group of friends.

“Good morning,” Yuki greeted easily.

“Yuki, who was that?”

“My replacement,” he responded.

“For student council president?” Tohru asked. Yuki nodded to her before turning his attention back to the rest of the group.

“I couldn’t be president forever,” he smiled, resting a gentle hand on Kyo’s desk. The cat felt his insides clench, and his blood begin to pump feverishly at such a minor and insignificant gesture. His dark and narrowed eyes shot up to Yuki’s who were so vehemently ignoring him.

“Much to the dismay of your ever growing female fanbase,” Hana said. Yuki gave a rather
exhausted laugh.

“Now that you’re finishing up student council, you’ll have more free time, won’t you?” Tohru asked with a bright smile.

“Oh, we can hang out more on holidays now!” Momiji added.

“Perhaps,” Yuki said, finally gracing Kyo with a stare. For a brief moment the passive look that rested in Yuki’s eyes dissipated and those same darkened eyes from the roof looked right back at Kyo. He could feel his throat go dry as he looked away to stare at anything but Yuki.

“If you’ll excuse me, though. I have a few more things to take care of before the day really starts.” With that Yuki gave a small wave and headed back out the door. Tohru gave a soft sigh to herself before resuming her conversation with Momiji.

Kyo’s eyes lingered on the door, however. His face upturning into an unpleasant expression as the world continued around him. His trance broke when Hana placed a hand on his desk in the same way Yuki did. He looked up at her, Tohru’s fully braided head catching the corner of his eye.

“Tensions are high, indeed.”

Kyo didn’t respond to that.

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Yuki rounded the corner that bustled with activity around him. Soft “good mornings” echoed back and forth off classmates and underclassmen. It was a refreshing vibe that was complimented by the spring sunlight that tumbled through the wide windows—the energizing feeling of a new school year. Yuki walked up to the window, softly placing his hand on the glass as he saw a familiar head of white and black hair.

“President!”

Yuki felt himself jolt slightly at the sudden voice. He turned his head, an already exhausted expression donning his face. Kakeru bounded up beside him, giving him a smack on the back.

“You know, you won’t be able to call me that for much longer.”

“That’s alright, I can always call you Yun-Yun!”

“You absolutely cannot,” Yuki retaliated pinching the cheek of the bubbly black haired boy until he cried out in pain.

“Ow ow ow, give! Give!” Yuki released his grip with an amused sigh. “Please, I’m still in mourning of our brutal and unjust end in the school defense force! To think! Another man being crowned Mr. Black,” Kakeru gave an anguished groan. “I can’t bear it!”

“Maybe the title will be passed onto someone it actually suits,” he teased.

“How cruel! How un-cute!” Kakeru said, taking Yuki in a headlock and mushing his hand into Yuki’s hair.

“Hey! Get off! Kakeru, get off me!”

“Alright, alright, princess,” Kakeru released him, bending his arms behind his head as he sighed. “So sensitive,” Yuki rolled his eyes and straightened his hair as best he could.
“I’m just not in the mood today,” Yuki sighed. He snuck another glance out the window with a sigh.

“Hm? Don’t tell me under that icy exterior you’re actually just as disappointed to be giving up your title,” Kakeru said.

“No, it’s nothing like that. I promise.”

Kakeru shrugged, “wouldn’t be crazy if that was the case, after all the work you put into it.”

Yuki looked at his friend, caught off guard by the sudden sincere words. He smiled, which Kakeru returned in full. “I suppose I’ll miss it a bit,” he said.

“Will you miss me?”

“I don’t think you’re someone who leaves long enough to be missed,” Yuki said. “Unfortunately.”

“Hey, hey! And here I was about to give you this really heartfelt speech about our deep, and unwavering manly bond that we’ve developed!”

“What a shame, I’m sure that would’ve been completely appropriate,” Yuki said with a laugh, still feeling restless as he looked out the window once more. “Listen, I’ll catch up with you later.”

“Off to do your presidential duties while you still got ‘em?” He gave a wave as Yuki started down the hall.

“Something like that,” Yuki waved a hand back dismissively. “You should too, Mr. Black.”

Yuki heard Kakeru’s snicker fade out of his ear as he gave a soft smile. Swiftly he traveled down the steps of the school, doing his best to avoid colliding with any students—even in his partially dazed and distracted state.

The ground below him faded from concrete to soft pads of grassy hills that many students had come to love during the warmer seasons. The gentle smell of spring gracing Haru’s deep and distant gaze into nothing. Yuki brushed a stray cherry blossom petal off his shoulder (the last of the season, he was sure) and sat down next to his cousin. Haru didn’t even spare him a glance.

Yuki joined his directionless stare that seemed so focused.

“I heard about Rin.”

The ox’s face didn’t move, didn’t react. But Yuki could feel how the air around him turned tense and chilled.

“Good morning to you, too.”

Yuki gave him a concerned look, yet Haru’s gaze still didn’t budge.

“I know it’s none of my business…”

“You’re right. It’s not,” Haru said easily, with no bite of malice or irritability in his tone. “But I like it when you get in my business.”

Yuki gave a soft laugh and rolled his eyes. “Do you want to talk about it?”

He shrugged. “I’m sure there would be more to talk about if anyone would let me see her,” Haru finally spared Yuki a soft gaze, apathetic only in appearance. “No one will tell me where she is.”
“What? Why?”

He shrugged again, “at first I thought Akito had said something, but not even Kagura’s mom would tell me. So it must have been Rin.”

Yuki felt a crick in his neck at the mention of Akito’s name, but shrugged it off. “Maybe she just needs some time to think things over.”

“I wouldn’t mind that if she were healthy,” Haru said easily, stretching himself out as he laid himself down on the grass, staring up at the blue sky. “But if she’s in the hospital I would rather be able to at least check on her.” He turned his head to Yuki, who stared down at him in return. “She hates hospitals, you know.”

“Shigure mentioned something like that.”

“Aha, so that’s how you found out,” Haru said, turning his face so that he was staring up again. “Sensei strikes again.”

“He’s pretty loose with information, I wouldn’t tell him these types of things anymore,” Yuki said with another roll of his eyes. Haru smiled.

“I don’t have secrets, Yuki,” his hand reached up with blank eyes to squish Yuki’s cheeks. “Especially not from you, dear.” Yuki swatted the hand away with an annoyed glare. Haru gave a small chuckle as he folded his arms behind his head as a pillow.

“I just wanted to make sure you were okay,” Yuki said, rubbing his cheek with a slightly impatient tone.

“Thanks, Yuki,” he closed his eyes. “I’m sure I’ll be fine.”

The rest of the day passed with an idleness that is only known on good-weathered days. The slow crawl of the fading daylight folded itself restlessly into Kyo’s chest until evening once again caked the night air that promised to soon be filled with humidity and a sticky Tokyo heat. He sat in the kitchen, reading over texts for class, listening as Shigure sipped his tea and flipped his newspaper next to him. He waited for Yuki’s arms that folded expectantly, and his soft gray eyes that hardened condescendingly.

When every last bit of sunshine had been dashed from the sky, the rat appeared from his room as habit promised.

“Are you going to help me pick up Tohru or not?”

Somehow along the way, this had become routine.

The two walked side by side down the streets of Tokyo on the way to Tohru’s work. The past couple of years it had just been Yuki who would trek the forty minutes it took to escort the cheerful girl back home, but somehow—somehow—Kyo had been roped into it the past couple of months.

He wasn’t even quite sure how that happened, if he thought about it. Yuki had a way of twisting his words all the way around until they were manipulated and contorted for a purpose that he couldn’t even fully understand. It irritated him. He hated it.

But he went along with it.
Some nights they would bicker back and forth, their words bouncing off one another like ping pong. The smile that would slide on Yuki’s lips would give away how much he enjoyed riling Kyo up in public, relished in his humiliation as passer-bys turned their heads and whispered to each other. Like Kyo was some sort of *game*.

But as infuriating as that could be, there were nights where he wasn’t too sure what to do with himself. Didn’t know how to act or speak without Yuki’s instigating words holding him up for support.

And what was worse an almost... comfortable silence. One that didn’t demand it be broken, but still monitored Kyo’s breath, still seared his blood slightly, still caught in his chest. Still kept him on guard.

Tonight was one of those nights.

Kyo looked to his side, and watched Yuki’s graceful strides—that transparent wall still resting between them, so thick and impenetrable that Kyo felt as though he could lean on it and still not have his shoulder collide with Yuki’s.

He didn’t like this, this growing comfort. One that was previously as simple as being capable of sitting in the same room together without throwing fists, and now was something that seemed so complicated and understood. He shook his head, and vowed to break the silence.

“I ain’t gonna walk with you when typhoon season comes in,” he said suddenly, earning a stare from Yuki. “So don’t get used to this.”

He laughed slightly in response, “even I know when not to bother you.”

“Oh really? Could’ve fooled me,” his tone more snappish than he intended, but Yuki seemed unfazed.

“Don’t worry when the rain starts, you’ll see less of me,” Yuki said. “Much to your relief.”

“What?” Kyo mumbled, continuing his walk down the path. Kyo smirked, chuckling to himself as he quirked a mischievous eyebrow at Yuki who gave him a puzzled look in response. “Dunno if you should even be exerting yourself like this anyway, rat.”

“What?” Yuki asked, annoyance flaring in his voice, which Kyo relished. He shrugged and gave him another smirk.

“What with Hatori comin’ all the way down to quarantine you. Bet he’s worried about that fragile girly body of yours collapsing again. Maybe you should start sitting these long walks out.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about,” Yuki snapped back. “And that only happened once.” Kyo gave a short laugh which Yuki retaliated with a glare.

“Alright, then. So what did Hatori want?”

Yuki looked at him, a shocked expression claiming his face before it quickly dissipated into something more neutral.

“He says my condition is getting worse,” a surprisingly honest answer.

“Huh?” Kyo asked, genuinely taken aback by the answer. He looked Yuki up and down, as if diagnosing him. He... well, he looked the same. To his knowledge he hadn’t been missing school, or
acting differently. He quirked an eyebrow. “How is that possible? And how would he know, it’s not like you’ve had an attack or anything,” Kyo said.

“Apparently I’m irritating it,” Yuki said with a laugh. “And I suppose it’s his job to know.”

“Irritating it?” Kyo asked raising his eyebrow as they approached the building where Tohru worked. Yuki rested against the railing that lay opposite to the entrance and gave a small nod.

“What? Now all of the sudden you’re worried about me?”

“You wish, asshole! I’m not worried!”

“I wish, huh?” Yuki asked, giving him a smile that caused Kyo to coil back. He focused on the road before his feet, his face flushing slightly as he rubbed at his eyes fiercely. Another headache, he was sure.

Yuki crossed his arms and gave Kyo a curious look, one that searched him for something Kyo wasn’t sure of. He looked away from Yuki’s scrutinizing eyes and crossed his arms too.

“Kyo, can I ask you a question?”

Kyo tilted his head, giving Yuki a confused look through his narrowed eyes, “whatever, I guess.”

“Do you sometimes have thoughts that aren’t your own?”

“Huh?”

Yuki shifted against the railing, his eyes staring straight into Kyo’s as people passed by them idly.

“You heard me. …Do you?”

“I don’t know,” Kyo snapped.

Yuki gave a dry chuckle at that, his arms uncrossing to rest against the railing, his head turning away from Kyo as that amused smirk crossed his lips. He mumbled under his breath, “idiot.”

“What did you call me, fucker?”

“Idiot. I called you an idiot.”

“Why you--!”

“You don’t even know which thoughts are your own,” Yuki said. His eyes turning suddenly serious from their previously bemused gentility.

“I know which thoughts are mine! Fuck you, why does it even matter?”

Yuki let Kyo’s anger simmer for a moment, the soft spring breeze that was chilled by the night air sopped into his skin like a wet cloth. He refused to shiver.

“So then it does happen,” Yuki said. Kyo jolted slightly, letting the statement wash over him unpleasantly as if it were a splash of cold water in January.

“…Yeah. It does happen,” a surprisingly honest answer. “Sometimes. Why the hell do you care?”

Yuki turned to him with a small smile free of condescension, humor purely and freely lifting the
corners of his mouth. “No need to get so defensive. I wouldn’t have asked if it didn’t happen to me, too.”

Silence fell again, only this time it felt uncomfortable. Yuki looked to Kyo. His eyes dark and directed away. His hands balled into fists. His cheeks tinted with a small flush that mirrored the fury that constantly crashed against every part of his body. It was as if Kyo was a kettle on a stove, and Yuki’s hand was tightly clenched over the spout—burning, muffling, feeling pains in his skin as it pleaded to melt against Kyo’s boiling thoughts.

It was suffocating.

“It’s normal,” Yuki tried in an attempt to clear the suddenly stifling air. Kyo lifted his head and stared him right in the eye and Yuki could feel himself falter slightly. “Not normal by normalcy’s standards. But normal for us. Shigure said it’s something that’s gone back for generations,” Yuki offered. “I know that man’s an idiot but he’s done his resear—”

“Normal,” he snarled. Yuki paused, looking up at the cat with dark, sincere eyes. “Don’t talk about this shit like it’s normal! Don’t talk like you know what goes on in my head!” Kyo grabbed his collar, pulling him forward forcefully with anger etching its way into his expression. “Don’t act like we’re so similar, rat!”

Yuki clutched Kyo’s wrists roughly, staring him right in the eye with a sharp glare. “We’re not so different, cat,” Yuki spat. “The only real difference is that I’m not so afraid of what goes on in my head.”

“You’re calling me afraid?” Kyo said, gripping Yuki’s collar harder before thrashing his wrists out of Yuki’s grip. “When you’re the one who can’t even talk to Tohru about whatever shitty problems you two have?”

“What!?” Yuki asked, taking a step back subconsciously. “What are you talking about?”

“I’m talking about you taking some petty shit out on Tohru! Whatever crap you’ve got going on figure it out. Because all you’re doing is making her worry!”

Yuki could feel part of his body stop as he stared at Kyo. He felt halted. Frozen in place. He took a moment to think back on the brief interactions he had had with Tohru over the past couple of days. He was… passive, sure. Maybe a bit unresponsive. And, well, perhaps a bit cold. He hadn’t even noticed. So how did…

“How did you…?” Yuki trailed off, feeling his hands ball into fists.

“You’re not that fuckin’ hard to read,” he shot back.

“You’re the last person I would ever want to hear that from, idiot.”

“You know I’m getting really sick of your shit!” Kyo shouted back, coming forth to shove Yuki back, who caught himself easily. Yuki retaliated by bringing his fist up, ready for a fight as he felt himself lunge forth.

“Kyo! Yuki!”

The two turn their heads to see Tohru clutching her bag tightly as she stepped out onto the sidewalk. “You two shouldn’t fight here! There… There are still people on the street!” The girl offered worriedly and Yuki peered at Kyo when he felt the grip on his shirt loosen.
“Whatever,” Kyo said, roughly shoving Yuki away who caught himself easily. Yuki sighed, looking at Kyo’s back as he began to storm away. “Walk yourselves home.”

“Wait, Kyo–!”

“Let him be, Ms. Honda,” Yuki said. “I’m sorry, we got a little carried away,” Tohru nodded, watching Kyo’s retreating form uneasily. Yuki placed a soft hand on her shoulder at her expression. “He’ll be fine. He just needs to cool down that head of his.”

Tohru looked up at Yuki with a small understanding smile before nodding and beginning to walk down the path, as well. He walked alongside her, taking slow deliberate steps by her side as they began their walk in silence.

Kyo’s words circled his head, needles of guilt stabbing him with each step he took in Tohru’s presence. He hated how perceptive that stupid cat could be, especially when it came to Tohru. It made him ache and made his body restless and irritable.

He looked to his side and took a glimpse of the girl’s face. Her eyes tired, her mouth shaped into a frown that would always accompany her worried thoughts. Her shoulders were tense and rigid.

What he hated most of all was that Kyo was right.

“Ms. Honda,” Yuki started. He faltered when she turned to him, her gentle brown eyes drenched in anxiety and guilt. She smiled at him, but the reluctance in her joints to face him completely made something drop in his stomach. He sighed, letting go of her shoulder and running a hand through his hair. “I’m sorry if I’ve worried you.”

She relaxed slightly, and Yuki could feel himself do the same “I promise I’ll be more careful.”

“You’re not… You’re not mad?” She asked, gripping her bag a bit. Yuki gave her a guilty smile.

“How do I put this… Whatever… anger I have—had—is something that came from a fruitless place. Like showing up late to your station and being angry at the train for leaving without you,” Yuki said with a sigh. “I’m sorry, Ms. Honda. I hope I didn’t upset you too much.”

“Please don’t apologize! I’m just happy you’re not mad at me,” she smiled. “Although…”

“Although?”

Tohru fiddled with the straps of her bag, concentrating on how her thumbs would twiddle the worn fabric. Her courage collected, she looked up at Yuki with serious and unwavering eyes. “I want to know what’s going on. I know I shouldn’t pry, but it seems like something’s wrong! Will you… she took a step towards him and Yuki leaned back, surprised by her sudden directness. “Will you talk about it with me?”

He looked back at her and his heart melted at her concern, her gentility, her sincere distress. He stopped his eyes from turning cold. He would at least return the favor of being direct.
“I can’t,” he said simply. “Maybe… one day I’ll be able to. I hope I will. But right now…” He looked to his side, focusing on a familiar misshapen tree branch that they passed by each morning and afternoon. “Thank you for worrying about me. Like I said, I promise I’ll be more careful.”

“Right,” Tohru said, deflating slightly.

“Ms. Honda,” her eyes came back to his, as he placed an affectionate hand in the hair above her ear. “When I’m ready, will you listen to me then?”

“Of course!” She nodded vigorously and Yuki felt a laugh bubble out of him.

“That’s all I’ll ask,” he smiled. She smiled back.

The remainder of the walk home contained its pleasant and relaxed air, but the weight in Yuki’s chest didn’t seem to fade for the rest of the night.

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“Gone to the main house for the night. Tohru left some stew in the fridge. Please do not burn down the house, break doors, break tables, or otherwise inflict harm upon my house. See you kids in the morning.

-Shigure”

Yuki set down the note on the kitchen counter, looking at the stove with an unwarranted confidence. Shigure loved his dramatics, at the very least he could heat up a pot of stew. He’d learned that much from helping Tohru in the kitchen.

It had been a week since he and Tohru had talked, and the air between them had cooled immensely. Though Yuki still caught himself being reserved and detached as the awkward air fizzled out between them, the comfort they shared in one another proved too strong to be truly affected. Yuki reprimanded himself for feeling so resentful at all, but brushed it off without dwelling on it too much. He had other things on his mind.

He opened the fridge and stared at the pot warily. He shut the fridge again.

“Maybe Kyo can be good for something,” Yuki mumbled under his breath.

Kyo. He had barely said a word to him since he had stormed off a week ago. Their careless conversations and heated encounters seeming to have faded away completely which built a frustration in Yuki’s chest. He would burrow himself in his room or at the dojo, making sure Yuki couldn’t catch him on his own. It built an aggravation in the rat. A restlessness. And he had to wonder if Kyo was doing it on purpose.

The thought was accompanied by feet padding on hardwood, and a grunt from Kyo as he invariably sat down at the kitchen table. Probably reading. He had taken to doing his homework in the dining room (usually when Shigure or Tohru were around), opening the doors up wide so as to let in the refreshing spring breeze. It was the beginning of May, and the last of the cherry blossoms were beginning to be replaced with the thick green leaves that seemed to capture summer’s heat each year. Yuki would be sad to see the season go.

He lifted the slight piece of fabric that curtained the door and stood below the frame. His footsteps and breathing near silent as he took in a welcome and familiar sight.

Kyo’s back faced him, hunched over the table as he flipped through his text book, idly making notes.
on his neighboring notebook. A gust of a spring breeze fell through the open doors and Yuki watched as Kyo lifted his head to greet the sensation. Yuki could only see the back of his head, but had he been facing him he knew Kyo’s eyes would close, and his nose would twitch slightly as a greeting to the fleetingly good weather.

Yuki greeted the breeze as well, but he made sure not to close his eyes. He shifted and a floorboard creaked under his feet, causing Kyo to turn around.

“What the hell are you doing?”

“Enjoying the weather,” Yuki said simply. “And making a bet with myself to see how long it will take your head to boil from the over exertion.”

Yuki walked to the other side of the table and sat across from Kyo who shot him a glare.

“What? No quick defense for your stunted capacity for intelligent thought?”

“Listen, you damn rat, don’t make me kick your ass!”

“And don’t make me listen to that track on that broken record again,” Yuki shot back. Kyo pounded his fist on the table as he stared Yuki straight in the eye.

“Dammit, why are you always trying to start shit with me?!”

A drop of silence fell as Yuki’s taken aback expression focused in on Kyo. The lack of response and the uninterrupted gaze bringing out another aggravated cry from Kyo’s throat.

“What?! What’s that look for?”

“You… You are asking me that?”

“Yeah! I’m asking you. Why are you constantly trying to fuck with me?!”

“I can’t believe what I’m hearing. This from a person who broke a hole in the roof to challenge me.”

“Look around, asshole. See any broken roofs lately? Any surprise attacks? Any attempt to fuckin’ talk to you at all?!’ Yuki’s eyes narrowed at that. “No! You got me, minding my own damn business, and you. Starting shit.”

Yuki crossed his arms, a dangerous look crossing his face as his posture straightened.

“You know, I originally wanted to thank you.”

“What?!” Kyo asked, still charged with exacerbation. “What the hell are you talking about? What does that have to do with anything?”

“I wanted to thank you for talking to me about Tohru,” Yuki said. “You were right. I was avoiding her and that was a mistake.”

“Good for fuckin’ you,” Kyo snapped sarcastically.

“But what a hypocrite you are. Lecturing me about avoiding Tohru, when you’ve been the one avoiding me.”
Yuki watched as a flash of alarm shone on Kyo’s face, quickly masked by glowering and fiery red eyes. Kyo snapped his book shut.

“I don’t know what you’re—”

“The only question I have is why,” Yuki said, standing up and walking over to where Kyo was sitting. “Why on earth would the cat ever avoid confrontation with the rat?” Yuki grabbed Kyo’s t-shirt by the collar and pulled him up so that he was on his feet. Yuki could see in him a sinking dread, confusion, panic, and something else that darkened Kyo’s eyes bore right into him. Yuki pushed him back roughly.

“Maybe I start shit, Kyo. But you seem to have lost your ability to end it,” Yuki hissed.

Kyo charged at him.

Yuki deflected his punch, grabbing his wrist and twisting Kyo’s arm around so that it was pinned awkwardly behind his back. Kyo threw his head back for a head-butt, and in Yuki’s dodge wiggled himself free before sending a straight and practiced kick to Yuki’s chest. Yuki grabbed his foot before it could strike him, twisting his leg so that it was pinned to the wall, partially cracking it down the middle. Kyo let out a loud cry as he pushed himself up, taking another blinding swing at Yuki who ducked and swept his leg so that Kyo would fall backwards, sealing the fate of the table that acted as his cushion. Kyo let out a groan of pain, but brought his head up to glare viciously at Yuki.

Kyo breathed deeply. Inhaling his fury and exhaling whatever pain that shot through his body from each blow. Yuki looked back into his bright red eyes. The fire that burned inside that piercing gaze that engulfed Yuki. That invaded him when he slept, when he ate, when the world moved around him like syrup.

That spark that at first he only allowed to light when Kyo was near. When he would shoot those passionate and enraged words his way. When Yuki, for those moments only, was the sole focus, the sole purpose, of Kyo’s world.

But now, he thought as his hands tightened their grip on Kyo’s wrists and as his eyes narrowed, he craved it. Nothing was enough. This calming air sickened Yuki and coiled his throat, halting his ability to breath.

He would grab on to what he could. He had long since admitted as much to himself.

Yuki leaned in closer, shattering that brick wall that had put the boundaries between them. That had hindered him so many times before. His mouth so close to Kyo’s that he could feel the cat’s now panicking and unsure breath on Yuki’s desperate and sure lips.

“I think I know why you’ve been avoiding me, Kyo,” Yuki whispered and he could feel him shiver under his grip.

He clenched his eyes shut, pressing his lips firmly against Kyo’s shell shocked mouth, feeling his shaky breath wash over his face. His lips worked against Kyo’s, but the lack of response caused fear to wash inside of him, right alongside an unbridled excitement that Yuki could barely contain.

He pushed himself back, but couldn’t bring himself far enough to look Kyo in the eye. Instead, his
lips traveled to Kyo’s ear, making sure he felt his heavy breath wash against him. His voice was a snarl half bitten by a bitter exasperation, half coated in an uncontrolled desire.

“I will not be ignored by you.”

He felt Kyo shiver and breathe a soft sigh of relief against his ear. He released the other man’s wrists, which had done little to ensure escape or instigate struggle anyway, and he took a step back.

Kyo stared at him, face flushed and eyes frantic and unshielded. He looked at Yuki, trying his best to form his eyes into a glare unsuccessfully. He brought a hand up to his hair to scratch at it roughly and looked away from Yuki.

“What the fuck,” Kyo mumbled breathily. “What the fuck, what the fuck,” he repeated again and again as he pounded his fist against the wall. Yuki swallowed a bit of anxiety but stood firm in front of Kyo.

“Was I wrong?” Yuki asked, careful not to keep his voice in check. Careful not to leak even the slightest hint of uncertainty. Kyo whipped his gaze to Yuki but said nothing in response.

Another wordless moment passed between them. Yuki looked Kyo up and down, his stance frozen and unsure, his legs bent and as firm as weeds that twisted under the slightest breeze. The gray haired boy took a step back, watching how carefully Kyo’s eyes followed him.

“Alright,” Yuki said softly, as he began to walk towards the hallway. He could feel an insatiable craving for nicotine burning through his lungs with each step he took, his eyes closing tightly as he walked away.

“Wait,” Kyo called after him, the word coming through clenched teeth. He stood still, not able to move from his position. Yuki turned around immediately to face Kyo. “Fuck, you’re such an assho —”

Yuki charged towards him, pressing his mouth against Kyo once more, swallowing his words. This time, Kyo kissed back instantly. He dug his long fingernails into Yuki’s back, enough to making the rat wince. His own hands going to Kyo’s neck and up into his hair as he opened his mouth to push his tongue past Kyo’s lips. Kyo scratched up Yuki’s back over his shirt, and Yuki responded by tugging his hair roughly. Kyo broke the kiss to cry out at the sudden sting, but delved right back into it, biting Yuki’s bottom lip enough to make it bleed.

Yuki took his hands from Kyo’s hair to his arms, pulling him towards him only to slam his back against the wall. They broke from the kiss, faces soaked in a red tint, and the faintest bit of blood trailing from Yuki’s lip.

Kyo banged his head against the wall, looking up at the ceiling, as Yuki’s warmth threatened to overwhelm him once more. He could feel soft lips on his neck, accompanied by another gust of spring air that did little to cool his humming body.

Kyo clenched his eyes shut as he wrapped his arms around Yuki once more mumbling a sharp, “fuck.”

There wasn’t much else to say after that.
When I was first coming up with the idea for this story, these little intermission tales were things I couldn't get out of my head. As I said before I have an almost unhealthy love for this universe. That being said YOU DO NOT HAVE TO READ THESE CHAPTERS TO UNDERSTAND WHAT'S GOING ON IN THE MAIN STORY. These "intermissions" will show up between each season, but won't extend past that.

If you take the time to read it I love you in ways you wouldn't imagine. If you want to say "fuck it, how many more OCs can this fandom honestly take anyway" I get you, man. And I respect your decision.

I've bulk posted these past four chapters because it's updated even further on FF at the moment, but it seems silly to post the whole damn thing all at once. Especially since the chapters are so long. So from this chapter on it will be following an update schedule of a chapter a week (usually sometime Saturday - Monday).

"Alright, already!" You're probably saying about now because honestly let's calm down with these wordy ass author notes. Get on with the wordy ass chapter, you're thinking. My apologies, and I hope you enjoy (I say to the maybe 7 people still in this fandom.)

It was a scream so agonized and tortured that it bled through the walls. Throughout the grounds of the house everyone could hear the shrieks and sobs of the young woman as she gulped in air, tears pouring down a face that had turned a violet red from pain. Her hand grasping her husband’s who sat beside her, allowing her to dig her fingernails into his skin.

“Push, Sayo! Push!”

“No, no, no please. I can’t. Please, I can’t, I can’t;” the woman sobbed, falling back onto her futon, sweat causing her robes and hair to cling to her as she wept.

“Keep her elevated!” The midwife snapped as the husband quickly propped the woman back up. Sayo breathed through the pain, the midwife taking a cold cloth against her forehead as she dropped her head on her husband’s shoulder.

“This child will kill me,” she cried. “I’ll die, I’ll die,” she chanted again and again. Her husband doing his best to shush her, stroking her hair, feeling his own tears fall from his eyes.

“Please, Sayo. You have to push,” he muttered, which earned him an exhausted nod from his wife. With as much effort as she could muster she pushed, clenching her eyes shut and grinding her teeth together until she cried out in agony once more. The sound of little feet shuffling caused her eyes to fall on the open door to her home. She gave another scream.

“Get them out of here!” She demanded.

Standing patiently with glassy and attentive eyes, 11 young children observed from behind shoji doors. Their crowding blocked the spring breeze from relieving the mother from her overheated
body. They stared as the woman’s womb opened. The blood spilling from between her legs as the head of a creature began to crown. The woman leaned forward, screaming again, this time to intimidate the children who had rooted themselves on the foyer of her house.

Ujinobu, the man who had delivered all the blessed children from their mothers’ grieving wombs, looked from the tuft of fur that had appeared between the woman’s legs, to the children who crowded the entrance of the room.

“Someone take those children away!” He commanded and servants bustled at his orders, doing their best to shoo the stubborn boys from their observatory. “Makoto!” He screamed to his son, the dragon child, who was amongst the crowd. “Makoto, go home! Go home!”

The doctor was torn from his scoldings when Sayo screamed again.

“You’re almost there, Sayo. You’re almost there!”

“Is my child a son?” The husband asked.

“All the blessed children are men,” the doctor responded quickly. “I expect no different from the boar.”

The husband kissed his wife’s hand happily, and with a final push the child was born. The woman fell back onto her cushions and wailed, allowing her body to relax. Quickly the doctor handed the child to the midwife who was careful to conceal it from the parents.

“I want to see my son,” demanded the husband.

“I would advise against it, Tadaaki,” Ujinobu said as he wiped his hands on a clean cloth. “It can be shocking to most parents of the blessed.”

“I want to hold my child,” came Sayo’s weak voice. “Give me my child.”

“Sayo, it can take some time for them to turn into their human form.”

“Uji, please. My child is a son, this is the only way I’ll ever be able to hold him,” Sayo said, her voice still catching in her throat as her tears calmed. “I will not allow my son to have a mother who does not embrace him.”

Ujinobu’s hardened eyes turned soft as he listened to her gentle voice. His sharp features contrasting with expressions so easily moved. He nodded to the midwife who gave a disapproving look to the doctor before following her orders.

Tadaaki, a devoted but simple husband, helped her sit up. His rounded out features forming into a smile that so easily rested on his healthy face. Carefully the midwife handed Sayo the child. The mother embraced him, peering into at the face in the cloth.

What stared back was the face of a baby boar. The eyes too new to open, soft snorts and whimpers given in the place of a crying newborn. Sayo rocked back and forth, crying soft tears as she stared at her son.

The children from outside each wandered into the room one by one, crowding the mother who was too tired to protest their presence.

Together they cried.
They were all here.

"My dearest family, today is cause for celebration. No occasion will be more sacred, more divine, than the day that the blessed have finally been reunited after so long. The birth of the son of the boar seals the fate for the Sohma clan. One of good fortune, of great wealth, and long and healthy lives here among these walls. This banquet we hold here today will last twelve days and twelve nights to honor each child. Starting, of course, with our first born. After which I will take the children up the mountain to pray at the shrine of the gracious spirit who watches over our family."

With these words the man who stood at the head of the table in his extravagant robes and his long white hair lowered his cup so that a servant could fill it. He had a face that was laced with serenity, and skin that was as smooth and undisturbed as that of fresh snow. He stood tall and proud with bright eyes that saw far and deep into the faces of each member of the family that gathered before him. He lifted his glass. Those with wine followed suit.

"To the blessed!"

"To the blessed!" Echoed the crowd.

Music blasted from the estate grounds and people cheered, danced, and drank as the sun began to fully rise in the sky.

Jirou, the head of the family, watched in delight as a bountiful joy spilled from his children. Watching as they celebrated and feasted with the plentiful harvest that they had been granted in this past decade. He drank from his cup, his young features speaking with eyes that were centuries old. With a rejoicing cry he turned to his right hand side, looking down on the gray haired child who sat next to him, sneaking a sip of wine with his still juvenile fingers.

"Tarou!" The head of the family called out, picking the boy up and spinning him around to bring him into an embrace. "Today is your day, child. Celebrate amongst those who owe you their lives."

The boy looked at him with slim mischievous eyes. His unruly gray hair pulled back into a small bun atop a head with pretty features that promised to blossom into handsome ones. Tarou, the rat child of twelve years, smiled bright and confident, dressed head to toe in traditional robes for his day of celebration. The elegance of the luscious fabric only being disrupted by a decorative scabbard that was always strapped to his hip, and the handle of a dagger that bloomed from it.

"My grandfather said that I’m the most fortunate of the blessed because the rat was first born!" Tarou cried out with a smile.

"Your grandfather speaks wisely. You amongst your brothers are the most honored guest," Jirou said, placing a gentle hand on his cheek. "Your birth was a sign from the gracious spirit that this family would no longer suffer."

"If that’s so my day of celebration should be longer!"

Jirou laughed, patting the boy on the head affectionately. "Don’t fret, young one. You will have many celebration days to come."

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"To my son!" Tadaaki exclaimed, lifting his cup as the men gathered around him cheered alongside him.
“One can only wonder how a son of both the boar and Tadaaki will grow up to be,” laughed one of the men.

“Though if Tadaaki were to have a son of the blessed, the boar would be the most suitable,” laughed another.

“Say whatever you like, my friends. But nothing can keep me from celebrating today!” He stood, swaying a little in his spot as he lifted his head again. “My son is the final link in the holy chain! I am a father of good fortune!” He finished the liquor in his cup with a satisfied sigh. “Today Tadaaki Sohma is also celebrated!”

“And here’s your offering, great and mighty one!” One of the men called as he threw a handful of rice into Tadaaki’s face, causing him to fall back into his seat on the floor. The men burst out laughing, and in his daze so did the new father. The men continued to laugh, making rowdy conversation as Tadaaki reached for the bottle of rice wine until a familiar face caught his eye.

“Ujinobu! Ujinobu!” He called out to the doctor who was walking through the estate grounds. He turned his head and somewhat reluctantly approached the table.

“I see you all are enjoying yourselves,” he said, greeting the men with a soft nod of his head.

“How’s Sayo? Is she well?” He asked.

“She’s resting,” the doctor responded. “Your wife is very resilient. She is one of only three to survive giving birth to a zodiac child.”

“That’s Sayo for you!” Cried one of the men. “I heard she even snarled at the other blesseds like a dog.” The men all gave an uproaring laugh again, excluding the doctor and Tadaaki, who with his flushed face still directed his attention to the doctor.

“Will she be alright?” He asked sincerely. Ujinobu gave a soft sigh.

“I have faith in Sayo, she is an incredible woman,” he said. Tadaaki beamed at the praise of his wife and slammed his fist on the table with another happy shout.

“Do you hear that? My wife is incredible! To my Sayo!” He lifted his cup again and the men all cheered again.

Ujinobu took the opportunity to slip away from the crowd, giving a parting smile to the raucous group of men, and continued his way through the Sohma grounds. Throughout the clan there was celebration, dancing, feasting. He weaved his way through, having grown tired of the noise since it began at dawn. Finally, he approached the modest house that neared the edge of the estate. Taking off his sandals, he opened the door to see Sayo’s form resting beside her child. The newborn boar had taken the form of a human, and Sayo laid a protective hand on its stomach. Her exhausted features seemed fastened onto her son.

“You’re awake,” he said.

“Who can sleep in this clamor?” Sayo responded simply. She turned her head to face him. Her strong features apparent on a humble face. Though what she lacked in beauty she made up for with a smart mouth and a resilient spirit.

“You shouldn’t sound so bitter. It’s a celebration for your child,” he said with a small smile. He sat beside her, gently taking a strand of her thick black hair and tucked it behind her ear. “How are you feeling?”
“I’m not sure,” she whispered, not taking her eyes away from her child. “Something doesn’t feel right about having a child I’m not able to embrace. It seems lonely.”

He stopped to stare at the peacefully sleeping child, his soft and gentle breath coming at such a contrast to screams and shouts that came from beyond the walls in the festivities. He was reminded of his own child, how the newborn dragon wrapped around his arm instinctively, how he held him tightly in his arms as the woman he had grown to care for so dearly, his beautiful late wife, breathed her last breath as his son breathed his first.

Sayo was right. It was lonely.

“I heard on the 12th day they’ll be coming to move you three into your new home,” he said. “Within the inner circle of the family.”

She nodded, waving a passive hand. “I couldn’t care either way, but Master Jirou insists. It seems ridiculous to move when we will be leaving this place soon, anyway.”

“He just wants your family to be comfortable,” Sayo shrugged at that, keeping her eyes on her child. “Your husband seems to be enjoying the life of a blessed,” Ujinobu said with far more spite in his voice than he wished.

“He’s a simple man impressed by simple things,” she sighed. “But he’s a loyal man.” Ujinobu looked away from the child for a moment before giving a soft sigh.

“It’s not usual that men stay during the birth of their children,” Uji said. “He cares for you deeply.”

She smiled, “Tadaaki is not someone who’s ever been aware of what’s usual.”

“I suppose that’s true,” he said quietly, before lifting himself up and walking towards the door. “I’ll come by and check on you later with the midwife.”

“Uji, wait!” Sayo called out to him, propping herself up on her elbows with an anguished look in her eye. “I want you to hold him.”

The doctor stared at the child still dozing peacefully, so unnaturally still in a world that always seemed to be moving. A troubled look crossed his face as he looked back to Sayo.

“I don’t think I should.”

“Please,” she said again, a tear rolling down her cheek. “You need to embrace your own child at least once.”

Always vulnerable to her expressive eyes, he nodded. Softly padding next to the child and picking him up with the practiced gentility of an experienced father. In his arms he rocked the boy softly as tears welled up in his eyes.

“What have you called him?”

“Saburou.”

“A handsome name for a handsome man,” he said as the child began to stir. “Hello, Saburou.”

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“Tarou watched as the beetle walked idly across the tatami floors, watched how its slow moving legs
yearned to reach the outside. With the tip of his still sheathed dagger, he pressed on the back of the bug, pushing down harder and harder until it burst underneath him. He wiped the residual slime off the scabbard and onto the floor before flopping on his back and letting out a bored groan.

“Masae, are you done yet?”

“Master Tarou, this won’t go any faster if you keep trying to interrupt the process,” an elder servant snapped from behind the elaborate shoji screen. Tarou let out another groan.

“Sorry, Tarou,” came the meek voice of a young boy from behind the same screen. The rustling of fabric filling the room until careful footprints emerged.

Tarou looked to his friend and how the delicate and beautiful robes tied around him in an elaborate fashion. Masae, a boy of eleven years, drowned in the fabric. His hands completely covered by the long sleeves, but complimenting his boyish face framed by locks of black and white hair.

Today was the day of the Ox.

“Finally,” anguished the rat boy. Masae took another few steps forward to his friend, the bells on his celebration day costume chiming with each sudden movement.

“Look at those bells!” Tarou laughed loudly, as he lifted one up and shook it back and forth. “It’s like you’re a real cow!”

“I must remind Master Masae that he is expected soon at Master Jirou’s table,” the elderly servant woman reminded sharply.

“I’ll take him over there myself, you don’t have to worry,” said Tarou with a beamingly innocent smile. The woman nodded and left the two in the room. The gray haired boy turned back to look at his friend. “You look like you’re about to trip.”

“It is a little hard to move around,” he sighed, taking a few cautious steps before catching himself from almost falling. Tarou laughed again.

“Are you going to be able to remember all your dance moves? If you trip you’ll dishonor the whole family, you know. It’s a sign of bad luck,” the boy reprimanded. “Cattle aren’t very light on their feet anyway.”

“I think I’ll be okay,” reassured the ox boy, looking nervously down at his feet. Tarou gave an exaggerated sigh.

“I think I should go up there with you and make sure you don’t fall,” commented the boy.

“What?”

“Yeah! If you fall it’ll be really embarrassing! I’ll dance up there with you!” Tarou said, stepping so close that Masae had to lean back.

“But I thought we could only dance on our celebration day,” he asked.

“Not for the rat,” Tarou replied easily. “The rat is the most special and the most blessed. I bet if I danced with you the fortune in your celebration day would double—maybe even triple!”

With unsure eyes Masae looked down at the robes the maids had dressed him in and echoed the steps in his mind that he had practiced in the room he and his father shared. His practice always earned
him a hearty applause from his father, but now the thought of falling in front of him seemed paralyzing. He looked up at Tarou with a smile. “Okay, if you think it’ll work.”

Tarou cheered, running to the entrance of the home and sliding on his sandals.

“I’ll have a maid dress me right now,” he called over his shoulder. “Don’t let them start without me.”

Masae nodded, waving his friend goodbye, as he stood alone in his empty house.

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As the sun rose in the sky, the drums echoed through the grounds of the Sohma estate as they had the morning before. With practiced and careful moves Masae presented his dance in tandem with Tarou. Their bare feet stepped and slid in time with a precise and quick beat, and their bells added to the traditional rhythm. While Masae’s arms were tense and gave only the most restricted movements as a product of nerves and deep concentration, Tarou moved his freely and gracefully—performing the dance as if it were how he learned to walk. The fabric that wrapped around him tightly moved like a second skin, flowed as if he had possessed the wind around him, yet the robes around Masae seemed to fall awkwardly, fighting to move out of the way of abrupt movements.

The speckled haired boy looked to the audience for the first time, something he had been trying to avoid, and met the kind eyes of his father. His attentive and encouraging nod gave Masae enough strength to inflate his posture, if only slightly. He quickly scanned over a bought of smiling eyes and soft whispers to neighbors when an unfamiliar movement caught his eyes in the crowd before the banquet table.

Masae looked to Master Jirou, who was vacating his seat next to the other zodiac children who were old enough to be separated from their guardians. He watched as he left, two servant men following behind him with alarm in their steps before he snuck a look at Tarou. He continued to dance with a bright and careless smile on his face.

With that the final moves of the dance came and the two boys finished, standing side by side. As those who had gathered to watch clapped and cheered, they stepped off the stage and headed back to their rightful seats at the banquet table—only to be stopped by several family members who crowded the stage.

“You boys danced so beautifully!” Cried one of the women who crowded around the boys as they bounded off the stage.

“And Tarou, what a treat to see you dance two days in a row!” Tarou beamed at the women, puffing his chest up proudly as Masae smiled politely, taking shelter behind his cousin.

“Hopefully you won’t be dancing with each blessed, you’ll outshine them all!” The women giggled and Tarou added his own bountiful laugh.

“Masae was really nervous about dancing, he kept messing up when he tried to practice! He pleaded for me to help him,” Tarou said giving Masae a bright smile. “It’s because he gets too nervous around everyone, isn’t that right, Masa?”

In an instant Tarou deflected all attention onto the small, timid boy who hid his arms inside the bright billowing sleeves of the traditional robes. The eyes of their family members boring into him so much so that it made him squirm. He gave a simple nod of his head.

“Excuse me,” Masae said, escaping the stifling group.
“Hey! Where are you going?!” Tarou clicked his tongue, “how boring.”

Masae quickly found his place at the table, sitting to the right of Genta, the tiger boy of only ten years age. His bright orange-gold hair waiting to express its vibrancy in the burning sun that threatened to peak over the mountains that surrounded their home. His eyes piercing and sharp and roared even in the rare occasions that he remained silent.

“You’re so soft,” Genta scolded coldly.

“Huh?”

“Letting that rat dance with you,” he replied quickly. “Learn to do things by yourself.”

“I guess so,” he murmured. Genta gave an annoyed snort.

“Just like your weak father,” he scoffed. Masae gave a small smile, relishing the comparison to his father even in its negative connotation. Leaning forward on the table he looked down to meet the eyes of his guardian to whom he gave a weak wave. The man returned the gesture.

“Where’s Master Jirou?” Tarou said suddenly sitting in his seat to the right of where the head of the family was supposed to be.

“He left,” Genta replied quickly.

“Where did he go?” Tarou asked, his patience always wearing thin in the presence of his tiger cousin.

“How would I know?” He hissed back. Tarou furrowed his eyebrows and gave a pout as he crossed his arms.

“Did he miss my dance?”

“It wasn’t your dance, stupid,” Genta shot back.

“It was so! Masae asked me to do it with him!”

“Well, you’re not dancing with me tomorrow!”

“I wouldn’t want to! You’d probably fall on me!”

“I would not!” Genta smashed his cup on the table, standing up abruptly just as Tarou did. The two stared each other down over Masae who shrunk further into his seat. Quickly a servant woman came and touched Genta lightly on the shoulder before he wrenched himself out of his grip, hating the touch of any woman.

“Please, Master Genta, Master Tarou. Calm down and return to your meal.”

Tarou huffed and Genta did the same turning away from each other.

“It’s not my fault he’s crazy like his mother,” Genta mumbled.

In that instant Tarou threw himself onto Genta, taking his tiny fists and hitting anything he could as he sat on the tiger boy’s body. With a violent wail he hit him and hit him, hitting his nose and causing blood to spill, even as Genta brought his hands up to his face to try and protect himself, letting out a sob for help under Tarou’s crazed frenzy.
With clumsy hands, fueled by blind irrationality, Tarou reached for his dagger, ready to draw it onto his cousin. Quickly a pair of strong arms wrapped around Tarou’s middle, pulling him off the crying boy with the bloody nose as a pair of servants went to aid the tiger child.

Masae’s father, Yoshirou, held Tarou firmly as he struggled, kicking and punching the air and shouting and screaming through the scratchy and uncontrolled weeping of a child. He calmed, clinging to the ox boy’s guardian as he continued to cry relentlessly into the shoulder of the man.

The banquet hall went silent as Genta was hurried out of the room and Tarou was carried to separate quarters, Masae trailing behind. The bells on his shoulders chiming with every step.

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In the early hours of the day, the sky washed over the mountain homes in a faint and cautious blue. A color that knew of its own fleeting nature, and awaited its destruction under the powerful and sure pigments the sun would soon surely provide. The further away Jirou walked from the banquet, the more the noises of celebration failed to fill in for the restlessness that had plagued every stone and blade of grass under his feet.

Behind him fell the quick and fearful steps of his servants, daggers tucked deep into their belts, and sweat forming on their brow even in the chill of dawn.

A twig snapped under Jirou’s foot and he stopped. The men behind him followed suit.

“I can hear it,” he said quietly. The two servants exchanged a nervous glance. “I can hear him calling out to me.”

Deep on a beaten mountain path, nestled on the unpopulated outskirts of the Sohma inner family property rested a house made of rotting wood and splintered holes—the only way sunlight could leak through. With each movement it would creak, even with the slightest caress of the wind. With each night it would skulk unseen if not for the screeching cries that echoed past its weak foundation. Each day it would make a noise as if the roots of a great cedar tree were being viciously torn from its mother earth.

Two men stood outside this structure, cloth tied over their noses and mouths, spears pointed and ready. Jirou approached them with an ease that was unnerving to the men who served him.

“Master Jirou!” The two guarding the door called in unison when they spotted the head of the family nearing the structure—still leading the two other servant men.

“How long has it been like this?” He asked immediately, standing directly in front of the tightly sealed door.

“Three days,” replied one.

A deafening roar ripped from the insides of the hut and the four men flinched. Jirou closed his eyes, as if absorbing the sudden sound, letting it sink into each pore of his skin as he took a deep breath.

“We weren’t sure if we should send for you on the days of celebration, but its screams have been constant. Sunrise and sundown.”

“You were right to call for me. He needs me,” Jirou said as he approached the door. “Wait here, if I call for you, be ready,” he told the men who gave an obedient yes in reply.

With nimble and steady fingers the head of the family opened the door, releasing a scent so foul it
warmed the man’s face, and caused the youngest of the servant men to vomit as soon as he was sure his master’s back was completely turned. The sun was making its appearance, poking holes into the structure, dancing off splinters and dust that floated in the air.

Bouncing off the deformed and burnt flesh that warped around the jagged and misshapen bones of a beast.

With a particularly loud creak the being lurched forward, only to be held back by its restraints, a dirty and syrupy blood coming from where the ropes had broken his tightly constrained limbs. Jirou held up a hand.

“Be calm,” he said. The beast lurched forward again, snarling as it snapped its sharpened and yellow tinted teeth at the man’s hand, only barely missing its target by the width of a hair.

It roared again, its voice turning high and cracked as it whimpered out an enraged reply, snarling again at the restraints that kept it controlled.

With a careful step Jirou came forward, placing his hand on the snout of the creature, who huffed and growled and squirmed under the unfamiliar touch, breathing forcefully through its teeth. Its darkened eyes shining a violet color that resembled that of a severe bruise.

“I know your excitement, I know,” he said quietly. “Your brothers are all gathered here once more, on a day of celebration.” Another rough growl. “Save your energy, there are many celebration days to come.”

Under his graceful palm the form of the beast began to shrink. Bones sinking into their original shape, seared flesh being soothed into calloused and reddened skin, eyes closing only to blink open and closed with a dull red iris to replace its violet ones.

Within moments Jirou’s hand was buried in dirty orange locks attached to the figure of a naked boy, shivering and breathing at an irregular rapidity. The ropes loose on his now resting limbs that sprawled out onto the unforgiving planks of wood, but still held rough and chaffed patches of skin, so sensitive that the boy would twitch in his sleep at the feel of a grazing breeze.

Jirou sighed and kneeled down to observe the unconscious boy, his eyes burning like a white hot flame, adding more light to the room than the sunlight that threatened to slip through the cracks. His voice echoed against his own throat, and his joints bending and working as if beyond his own will.

“How many times must you kill your brothers until you are satisfied?”

With an ethereal grace he stood, leaving the slumbering vessel behind as he opened the door to return to his servants who waited on tense and careful breaths.

The head of the family took one step, then another, and by the third he was falling, quickly being lifted up by two of the four men.

“He should be calm now, but this will not end until the celebration days have finished,” he said with a weak voice. “Keep my family safe,” he demanded to the guards as he used his servant men as crutches, leaning against them the entirety of the walk back to his quarters.

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“Fujigorou has been bedridden for days now.”

Masae lifted his head from where they were resting on his knees to look up at his father.
Yoshirou nodded, “he’s a man who has lived for many years, and his body is beginning to fail him.”

Masae looked down at Tarou who was slumbering on the futon in the ox boy’s house. Red rings around his eyes visible from the weeping that tired his body out. Now he breathed evenly, laying on his back as his arm rested close to his mouth. He shifted in his sleep but did not wake up, even with the festival noises ringing throughout their village.

“Poor Tarou,” Masae said softly. “What will happen if Grandfather Fuji dies? Where will Tarou live then?”

“I don’t know,” Yoshirou said gravely, sitting cross-legged beside his son. Masae hugged his knees harder to his chest. “I don’t believe he’s handling it well, however.”

“Tarou and Genta are always at odds…” Masae trailed off, giving the weak defense for his friend. His father kept a stern gaze on the boy, gently lifting the sheathed dagger from the boy’s hip, displaying it on the palm of his hand for Masae to observe.

“This weapon was used during a time of war. It is a great mark of honor and pride. But more so than anything it is a mark of hope, one that Fujigorou provided us during such a tragic time. It shouldn’t be used like a toy at a child’s whim,” he sighed.

“I don’t think he meant it,” Masae said, looking to his slumbering friend. His father carefully placed the dagger next to the rat child and gently patted the boy’s head.

“I know, my son,” he said. “But it leaves me to wonder what will happen to him when his grandfather is gone.”

“Do you think Tarou’s mom will get better?” Masae asked.

“I don’t think so, Masa,” he said.

Masae sighed, recalling the one memory he had of the woman. Her long flowing black hair reaching her waist, her pale and beautiful face slightly blurred in the mind of an unsure child. He didn’t see her often. The woman, from what he had heard, was kept on a separate property far from her son. Her mind unable to comprehend how a rat had crawled from between her legs after days of labor so excruciating, she had fallen unconscious for three days after.

Tarou was the first of the blessed to be born.

No mother could anticipate such a thing.

His father stayed with his mother, devoting the entirety of his time to helping heal his wife—a woman he loved so dearly, he couldn’t help but resent even such a fragile and tiny body that had caused his wife to spiral away from him.

Instead, Tarou lived with his grandfather, a sharp-mouthed old man with a back that bent like a thin branch of a tree under a coating of thick snow. His body left no trace of the man he once was.

“In ten days Master Jirou will take you to the mountain shrine of the gracious spirit. I want you to watch over him, Masae,” Yoshirou began. The boy nodded immediately. “Most of the blessed children have the burden of living their lives without the embrace of a mother,” he sighed. “You cannot allow each other to suffer alone.”
“Yes, father,” Masae reassured. “I promise I’ll take care of Tarou.”

The man smiled, resting a gentle hand on his head.

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“Look at all the blood!”

“Go away, Makoto!” Genta huffed as Ujinobu carefully wiped the blood off his face. He sighed at how the now sensitive skin was already starting to bruise.

“Makoto that might be for the best. Why don’t you join the others?”

“No! I want to stay! I’ll be quiet, I promise!” The dragon boy asked, tugging at his father’s sleeve. He rolled his eyes but made no other move to kick him out, to which Makoto smiled—accepting the complacent invitation.

Ujinobu placed a small bandage on the bridge of the boy’s nose where a more obvious cut presented itself. He winced at the touch.

“Just a moment more, Genta,” said the doctor deep in concentration. The tiger crossed his arms and huffed.

“I should’ve punched him in the mouth,” he grumbled.

“Talk like that is why you’re here in the first place, if I’m not mistaken,” the doctor replied. Genta pouted in response. He smirked. “Well it’s not your first time here, and I doubt this will be your last.”

“Tarou’s gonna be in here next!” Genta said sharply and Makoto let out a sharp, hardly restrained laugh. The boy whipped a glare towards the dragon child. “Or maybe you’ll be next if you make fun of me like that!”

“No way! I don’t want to get scars all over my face like you,” Makoto said, sticking out his tongue.

“They make me look tough!” Genta said with a mischievous smile and Makoto laughed.

“The biggest scar you have is from when you fell over nothing,” Makoto pointed out.

“You tripped me!”

“You pulled my hair!”

“That’s enough,” Ujinobu scolded. “Genta, your celebration day is tomorrow, I suggest you get some rest. The swelling should go down in due time.”

“By dawn?” He asked expectantly.

“We’ll see,” he said. Genta rolled his eyes. “Don’t push yourself too hard during the festivities, either. Conserve your energy for the trip to the mountain shrine in the time you can.”

“Fine,” the tiger boy said with a mumble.

“How’s little brother going to get to the top of the mountain?” Makoto asked.

Ujinobu stopped himself, turning to face his son. “Who?”
“Auntie Sayo’s baby,” Makoto responded.

The doctor looked into the innocent eyes of his son. A boy eight years in age, with sleek black hair that fell like raindrops around his pale skin. His clever eyes that absorbed so much promised to narrow even more as he grew, and his features were beginning to mold into the sharp edges that Ujinobu’s face held.

The doctor turned to Genta, who had a curious look on his face—a far more relaxed expression than when his face would wrinkle and furrow in anger.

“Genta, go get some rest,” Ujinobu said.

The boy nodded, walking slowly out of the room, looking over his shoulder to Makoto before shutting the door to Ujinobu’s quarters behind him.

The doctor faced his son.

“Why did you call him that?”

“Who?”

“Sayo’s child. Why did you call him little brother?” He urged, trying to keep his patience in check.

“Because Auntie Sayo hasn’t announced his name yet,” Makoto said.

“Then why not call him your cousin?” He asked. The boy shook his head.

“Isn’t he my brother?” He blinked his eyes, asking as if it were a completely benign question.

“Why do you assume such a thing,” the doctor asked.

Makoto with his tiny hand brought it up to the chest of his father, above the formal robes he had dressed himself in for the festivities. Under the hand of his son he could feel guilty pumps working his heart faster.

“They’re the same,” the boy said simply. “Right here. You and my little brother are the same.”

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In the calm that nature promised, in the sweet smelling mountain skies where air turned thin and rigid, among the thick, rich grass, the Sohmas lived. They contented in the knowledge that the soil underfoot was secure in their name. The scars of war and battle grown over with thick branches, and tree roots that acted as if they were trying to invade the small forest path.

It was through these familiar leaves and friendly saplings that the family began their ten day journey to the shrine of the gracious spirit.

Jirou rode on a horse at the head of the group, his servants following shortly behind on foot. The other blessed children followed behind on their own steeds. The children too small to ride on their own being accompanied by male servants, who did not pose the risk of transforming the children. The only exception being the wet nurse that cradled the baby boar in her arms as she rode last in the procession.

She soothed and comforted the newborn as best she could, having a male servant hold the child up to her breast when the time came to feed the boy.
The wailing snorts and cries of a child using the mouth of an animal broke the peace that had settled among the sleepy travelers. It was the first day, and the children had woken up at dawn—just as they had been in celebrations. With the smooth terrain limited to the strip of land that snaked between trees, and often enough felt the pounding of human feet to keep its receding grass at bay, the horses walked one by one up the mountains.

Tarou released a yawn, tears forming in his eyes as he did, shielding himself from the sudden light that spilled over the clearing the path led them to. The trees were patchy and thin and the road widened to allow a clear view from the mountain. The sun was now well in the sky, hanging above head and boring through the spring air to bleed a heat that indicated a sign of the coming summer. He wiped the sweat off his brow, turning when he heard a horse grunting and galloping ahead of him.

Makoto was the youngest to ride without a servant strapped behind him. His eager new found knowledge manifesting itself in a reckless enjoyment of the animal as he urged himself forward so that he could ride next to Jirou.

“Master Jirou!”

“Hello Makoto, I see you’ve become accustomed to riding on your own,” Jirou said with a smile.

Tarou narrowed his eyes at the back of Makoto’s head, his irritation flaring further when Genta rode to join Makoto’s side.

“My father taught me!”

“Ujinobu is a very skilled rider,” Jirou said, nodding in agreement.

“He’s the best!”

“No way, my uncle is the best rider who ever lived,” Genta said sharply.

“Nuh-uh! I’m sure my father could outrace that old man any day!”

“If you’re so sure, why don’t you race me right now?”

“Yeah!”

Genta gave a competitive smirk to his friend who practically jumped up and down on his horse, gripping the reigns in his newly experienced hands and giving the tiger boy a bright, unhinged smile.

“Boys, you really should be getting back into your formation,” Jirou said with a laugh.

“Wait! I will, I promise!” Makoto said quickly. “But I wanted to hear the story about the gracious spirit again.”

“I’m sure you’ve heard that story hundreds of times,” the man said curiously, arching a brow.

“I want to hear it too!” Tarou called from behind, Jirou turned his neck to face the sudden voice. He stared at Tarou and the boys that followed behind on their horses and the servants on foot, before staring up at the blistering sun. He sighed.

“I suppose there’s no harm in taking a small rest.”

Jirou stepped to the edge of the path, a cliff tumbling below him as he stared out above the trees and into the clear blue sky that was scattered with soft white clouds. The bright yellow of the sun
bouncing off them and down onto their faces, the heat of their rays fighting to splash against the faces of the family and servants. The head of the family gave a melancholic sigh, drinking in each detail of the scenery before him as the servants and children bustled behind him. Stretching their legs, resting in the shade, and preparing the food for their rest.

Masae walked to the man’s side, staring up at him as he observed the solemn features of his god. Reflexively he put a comforting hand on the man’s sleeve, gripping onto it tight as he stared out at the scene, as well.

Jirou stared down at the boy with a smile before giving another sigh.

“I will miss these lands,” he said softly. Masae tilted his head in a question.

“Where are they going?”

Jirou gave a good natured laugh, “nowhere, my dear son. It is us that will soon have to leave.”

“Why?” Masae asked, suddenly feeling a jolt of sorrow at the thought that this sight would not be one he would be allowed to revisit.

“The emperor has ordered that each clan head is to take up residence in Edo,” Jirou said softly. “We will be traveling there before the snow falls.”


It didn’t sound like home.

“I’m sorry I was not able to see the last of your dance,” Jirou said suddenly looking down at the boy, his face contorting as if he had eaten something bitter. “I heard you performed beautifully.”

Masae looked up and smiled at him.

“Master Jirou!” The pair turned to see Makoto sitting in a circle with a number of his other cousins. Tarou and Genta sat at opposite ends of each other, crossing their arms and making it a point not to look each other at all, Genta’s bandage still sticking firmly across his nose. Makoto sat beside Akikane, the rabbit child, a boy with yellow hair that absorbed the sun in each strand, and bright eyes that always seemed so wide and curious.

Beside him sat Kinkiyo, the snake child. An easily distracted boy that wasn’t quite old enough to understand his older cousins, but not quite young enough to enjoy the company of toddlers and infants. He laid on his stomach, picking pieces of grass out of the ground and sniffing the wildflowers before tearing out the petals one by one.

Jirou approached the boys, kneeling on the cloth that the servants had laid out for them.

“Where is Sadahide?” asked Jirou as Masae took a seat next to him.

“He wanted to stay with the horses,” Akikane said, pointing a hand over to where the horses rested.

Sadahide, a young boy of five years, stood contently among the horses, patting them each absentmindedly. Jirou smiled.

“Leave him be,” he said.
“Master Jirou! The story, the story!” Makoto pleaded for again.

“Alright, young ones,” he nodded. Genta, with little interest, laid down on his back next to Makoto. The rest of the children turning their attention to the head of the family. “Decades ago, when my grandfather was still a young boy, a terrible drought plagued our family.

“War from the neighboring clans had devastated what little of the land that could be salvaged. We had no water, our plants would not grow, our animals would die of sickness and starvation. Our family rested on the edge of destruction.”

“Grandfather Fuji said there used to be raids on our fields, and said that he took down a whole group of men who threatened his life!” Tarou exclaimed excitedly.

“That’s true,” Jirou said. “That was before my time, however. Still, stories of your grandfather’s warrior days are stories the whole family have enjoyed since he was young.”

Tarou smiled smugly at his cousins who paid him little attention. Jirou patted the boy on the head lovingly.

“One day, my father heard a tale of an ancient spirit who lived in these mountains. A spirit that would grant the wish of any man worthy enough to survive the journey. He was a sickly man, with a weak body and a soft heart, and feared he would not be able to ensure the safety of his clan when my grandfather passed away. He climbed these very mountains in a last desperate attempt, following the same path we are on today, and went on a search for the gracious spirit that lasted from the bloom of the cherry blossoms, to the melting of the snow.

“It was when my father was close to death that he encountered the spirit. An apparition that had been in hiding for centuries. When he asked him to grant his wish the spirit turned against him. Nearly taking his life before he could finish his words.”

“That doesn’t sound very gracious,” Genta remarked.

“Centuries had tired him,” Jirou remarked with sad eyes.

“Still,” Genta said flippantly, still staring up at the sky. “Shouldn’t we call him the somewhat-murderous spirit? Or the bitter spirit, instead?”

“Shut up, Genta, you don’t know what you’re talking about!” Tarou exclaimed.

“I know more than you!”

“Boys, please,” Jirou said firmly. The two huffed and turned away from each other even more. “That is no way for family to act.”

“So what happened next?” Makoto asked, trying to steer the topic from their tired bickering.

“He offered something in exchange,” Jirou said, his sad eyes sinking into every curve of his smile. “His life.”

“So the spirit did kill him!” Genta remarked.

“In a way,” Jirou said. “As I said, my father was a weak man, and knew he would not make the journey back home. So instead he offered his life, allowing for the spirit to be reborn in our family. He offered the spirit a place where he and his brothers could live in peace, away from the prying eyes of those who could only take from the spirit and never give in return.”

“You are, my children,” he said. “In exchange for allowing his brothers to live again in our family the Sohmas were granted wealth, prosperity, rain once more, freedom from war, healthy bodies in the family. We were offered life in return for life. This is why you are the blessed ones. You are the bearers of fortune in this family.”

The children looked at each other, looked at themselves and inflated a bit. Smiling at one another as the spring air whirled around them.

“Do you miss your father?” Asked Masae gently.

“I never knew him,” said Jirou. “My mother was pregnant with me when he left for his journey, though she didn’t realize it at the time.”

“Are you lonely?” Asked Makoto. For his age, his eyes were perceptive, and absorbed the detail around him like a cloth being pulled from a riverbank. His eyes dripped with minutia he couldn’t quite understand yet, but knew was important enough to hold onto.

Things such as the look in his father’s eyes when he stared down at him. Observing the smile that his father had regarded on more than one occasions to be from his mother. A mother he never knew. A mother that none of them ever knew. All but Akikane, the child of the first mother to survive the childbirth with her sanity intact. Soon Saburou, the newborn boar, would grow to know his mother, as well.

“I cannot be lonely among you, my sons,” he said with a smile. “You, above all, are my family. My fortune.”

The boys looked around at each other again.

A bond between them as tight as a well taught rope that chaffed against their skin and pressed against their stomachs. Winding them.

“Then I don’t feel lonely, either,” Tarou mumbled looking up at Jirou.

The god smiled.

The other boys couldn’t bring themselves to.

The sounds of the mountain calmed in that moment. Birds didn’t squawk, the few eager cicadas didn’t chirp, the wind seemed to halt, leaving behind the burning rays of sun that couldn’t be whisked away by fickle breezes.

Makoto looked around as the rest of the boys sat in silence, pondering the words of Jirou’s story in young minds that still saw the world so simply. He stood and walked towards his younger cousins as Tarou tugged on Jirou’s sleeve.

“If I was the first born, does that mean that I’m the closest brother?”

“It does,” Jirou said simply. “The rat is the one who leads his brothers in fortune, in health, and in prosperity. You have a great responsibility to carry such a status.”

Genta rolled his eyes. He did his best to block out their conversation before the boys around him began to chatter. Plagued by a child’s boredom, he rolled idly from his back to his stomach, from his stomach to his back until his body collided with something sturdy. He looked up at Sadahide who
stared down at him in a slight daze and the tiger boy sat up, staring up at his cousin whose quiet nature had always puzzled him.

“Sadahide, my boy. Why don’t you join us?” Jirou said to the boy who had made his way to the edge of their circle. The horse child shook his head.

“Something’s coming.”

“What do you mean?” Asked Jirou.

“Something’s coming. They told me,” he said, pointing a finger to the group of horses who were beginning to whiney and stomp their feet, fighting their restraints.

Jirou’s blood ran cold.

“We must leave this place,” he said, standing up.

“What?” Tarou asked, panic falling into his eyes that was mirrored in the boys around him. Cautiously they all stood, standing with tensed joints, unsure of where to go or how to move.

“We are leaving now!” Jirou commanded, sending the servants into a confused frenzy, exchanging looks that did not nearly carry the weight that pushed down on the shoulders of the blessed.

“I can’t calm the horses,” cried a servant. “If I untie them they’ll run off!”

The boys stepped back from the horses, Sadahide feeling fear ripple through him at the cries of his kindred animals. He grabbed onto Kinkyo’s arm, and huddled with the rest of the children.

Something rustled in the trees and one of the horses lurched on its hind legs, trying its best to escape.

A blood-curdling screech pierced the sky, the sound of something so purely unhuman, so tortured and warped that it turned the taste on their tongues sour, and the spring air felt as sharp and cruel as winter wind. The servants that looked after the younger zodiac children picked them up, running to take cover in the bushes and in the trees further down the path.

But Jirou was frozen. The older children hiding behind him, unable to move. Unable to turn their gaze away. A sickening pull compelling them to keep their feet as grounded and rooted to the earth as the trees that arched overhead.

From the clearing came the snarling and deformed body of the creature.

Jirou could feel tiny hands clutching onto his robe desperately, and watched as loyal servants carefully placed themselves in front of the head of the family.

The stench from the being sunk into the dirt, contaminated the air, filled their lungs with spoiled oxygen. Akikane gagged, but covered his mouth with a shaking hand, careful not to make any movement, a fear so tangible it paralyzed all of them.

With its misshapen limbs the demon stalked closer and closer to the trembling servants, baring its teeth in what could only be a warning. Thick, red liquid dropping from its stained and sharpened fangs as it stepped closer and closer.

Tarou stared intently at the creature that had presented itself before them. In their years of celebration, of fortune, of prosperity, no one had ever told the children of the remaining spirit that never dined at their table. That never had a place within the estate. Whose existence never passed the lips of any elder, or any gossiping servant.
But staring into the eyes of the monster, they knew who he was. In this clearing, they were all here. One by one, they had gathered to be together. To fulfill a bond that ached in them all, that pulled them together so tightly that it strung them together with the same prick that would come with being stabbed through with a needle.


He craved such an indelicate balance even through the feeling of sick that rose in his throat.

Without thinking, the boy took a step forward.

The beast snapped. He lurched forward, giving a distorted roar as he dug his claws into the servants and flung them to the side, coming straight towards the group of children that began to scream and sob behind Jirou’s elegant robes.

The head of the family put his hand up, his fingers steady but his eyes pouring with terror.

“Spare them, please!” He cried, only to be thrown to the side by a violent blow to the stomach, weakening him and leaving him motionless on the ground. The blessed scattered, all but Tarou who could only back away step by step as he stared up into those violet eyes, the color of battered and bruised skin.

Tarou screamed as the creature dug its claws roughly into his shoulder, flinging him onto the ground and sliding him against the dirt until he lay underneath the creature. Shaking uncontrollably, Tarou’s eyes leaked with fearful tears as sobs spilled from his throat like vomit. The creature snarled, its putrid saliva dripping onto his scraped cheek where blood was beginning to bead.

He closed his eyes, and with a movement that was not his own, with a will that so fully controlled his body that it had to be foreign, he grabbed for his dagger in a split second, and as the demon pulled its claw back to strike a finishing blow Tarou stuck the dagger in its neck.

It shrieked. Again and again. Filled the sky with a sound so grim it became as deafening and constant as silence, itself.

With its final breath it fell.

Tarou clenched his reddened eyes shut, expecting the crushing weight of the monster to fall atop him.

It didn’t.

The rat boy opened his eyes carefully, and the first thing he noticed was bright orange hair. Pale, almost ghostly skin rested atop of him, blood spilling from where the dagger was still lodged in the neck of what looked like a child that couldn’t be much older than him.

Tarou’s breath came rapidly and heavy, unable to move as he looked to his sides again and again, silently pleading for help, for safety, for oblivion.

“Tarou! Tarou! Tarou, my boy! Tarou, please, are you hurt?” Jirou said, holding his stomach as he gracelessly rolled the body off of him so that it lay on its back just to Tarou’s side. He turned his
head to look at the features of a boy, his eyes brows furrowed, his mouth carved into an expression of agony.

“Tarou!” Jirou called again, taking his free hand to place on his cheek so that he could force him to look up into his eyes. “Tarou, are you alright?”

He looked up blankly into the eyes of the head of the family and couldn’t speak.

Instead, he could only cry.

Tears fell from Jirou’s eyes as well as he cradled the boys cheek, looking up at the rest of the children who had tears in their eyes as well.

From the bushes Jirou could hear the younger children crying into the arms of their keepers.

Panic washed over the man once more.

“Where’s Makoto?”

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Nighttime washed over the Sohma estate, scrubbing any yellow or orange that dared to stray from its setting sun. Where the streets were previously filled with music, dancing, and celebration, now a silence laid itself out on the roads between the houses. It settled in between each and every blade of grass. It echoed behind the rustle of branches that hurried to be still once more.

Ujinobu slid the paper doors open only slightly. Within the inner circle of estate houses the zodiac children lay in a restless sleep. While he peered further into a willful darkness that accompanied the late hour, the fitful crying of the younger children was complemented by soft candle light behind the neighboring doors. They resembled fireflies that had been trapped in a child’s hand, and if the doctor closed the door to his own home, the wails and sobs of children could be mistaken for the buzzing heard when those hands were brought up to his ear.

He stumbled to the middle of his home, slouching down over a rice wine that he never drank, and stared at the small cup in his hands, swirling it so that his reflection could be distorted.

Behind him he could hear the soft sound of his door being slid open and closed again. Though he didn’t turn when footsteps padded lightly behind him.

“Uji?” Sayo’s careful voice asked. He couldn’t help but release a shaking breath at the rare and complete gentility that textured her voice.

He clenched his eyes shut and tried to listen for the buzzing once more.

How he wanted to wail with each child.

Sob just as they had when he had first brought them to this world.

How he wanted to cry as if he were being born again.

Sayo placed a gentle hand on his shoulder and he let a quiet tear fall from his eye.

“How is Saburou?” He asked quietly, careful not to let his voice break.

“Tadaaki is tending to him,” she said. “He’s been fussing ever since he returned.”
Ujinobu nodded, taking his cup to his lips and drinking it all in one gulp. He poured himself another. “You shouldn’t be here,” he said. “It’s late. People will talk.”

“People have little else to do,” she said softly. “How are you doing?”

Ujinobu stared down at his rice wine once more. He watched as it rippled and stilled under his hand. Watched as he brought the wine to the very edge of its container, teasing his fingers with the threat to spill, only to slide it back down to its center. He drank. He refilled.

“I was there when he was born,” he said softly. Her hand didn’t budge from his shoulder.

“Makoto?”

He shook his head, “the demon. Or, no. Not a demon. He was a child. I saw him when he was born. He was a child.”

“Like the blessed?” She asked, pouring him another drink when he finished his again.

“That child is not blessed,” he said. “When he crowned he was human. I could see a tuft of soft orange hair. When his head came from his mother it was as if the first breath he took had made an enemy out of him. He changed… he changed into this… this creature.”

He brought his palms up to his eyes, as if to try to push the memory back inside. As if his eyelids weren’t enough to keep his eyes closed. Sayo sat beside him. Patient. Listening. Silent.

“He thrashed out of his mother, tearing her flesh, making sure those breathes were her last. I tried to calm him and he scratched my face, my arm, anything he could reach. But when a child finally rested in my arms the father approached me—told me to hand the baby to him. He wanted to kill it with his own two hands.

“I protected him. I wouldn’t let him come near us. I protected that child,” a strangled sob came from his throat and he quickly tried to suck it back in. “I protected it,” he repeated.

“You’re a good man,” Sayo reassured. He shook his head. “What man lets a child die?”

“What man watches a child be tied up in chains, exiled and denied? What man denies death but doesn’t allow life in return?” He turned to look at Sayo with anguish burning into his eyes. “I knew he wasn’t human. I knew, I knew.”

“He was,” Sayo said. “He was a child.”

“It used the form of a child to escape its prison. To kill the men who guarded him, to kill my son,” he choked on the last word. Tears falling freely from his eyes as he leaned forward, digging his hands into his hair. “My son.”

“You cannot blame yourself for what happened,” Sayo said, shifting so that she was sitting in front of him. She took his face in her hands and lifted him up tenderly so that she could look into those eyes. “Please, grant yourself forgiveness.”

He placed a hand over hers on his cheek and directed his eyes down at the sliver of floor that rested between them.

“I will not go to Edo,” he said softly.

“What?”
“I will go as far as when the mountains break, and then I will make my own way.”

“Why?” Sayo pleaded. “Will you punish yourself forever? Will you abandon everything you know to carry this burden?”

Sayo could feel angry tears spilling from her eyes, and then soothing lips calming her own. He kissed her, a dance that took its cue from sorrow and tasted of rice wine, and salt from the tears that overflowed from them both. He broke away from her.

“Thank you for letting me hold my child,” he whispered. “I will never forget the feeling of him in my arms,” he turned his eyes up to look at her. “Nor you.”

She nodded, swallowing back any noise that threatened to stumble from her chest. She stood, and with the same quiet padding of feet she was gone.

Ujinobu looked around the house that carried so much of Makoto in its walls.

His most blessed child.

So why did the air around him feel so cursed?
Changed the rating to explicit because ??????? I think that's the AO3 way?? Better safe then sorry I figure. Anyway, say hello to those lovely manga exclusive characters this chpater! This ridiculous student council gives me life. Thanks to anyone reading along, and I hope you enjoy!

Tohru stepped out onto the balcony and looked up at the thick blue sky. The humid air sucked her into a heat that broke through the threatening clouds even in the early hour of the day. It was summer now, and the cicadas refused silence to fall in any corner of the city not covered in the chatter and busy steps of crowds. Tohru’s summer uniform billowed in a breeze that felt like the sun was blowing directly on her neck, sure to be anything but refreshing.

She liked summer. The sun was early to rise, and late to sleep. She loved that elongated feeling of daylight, loved the way people moved freely in summer air, loved how children would suck it in as if charging themselves up with an electrical current that would feed into their energy until autumn leaves fell. She loved summer nights, staring up into the starry eyed skies with no chill to accompany the friendly hour. She loved how if she closed her eyes she could feel her mother’s arms wrap around her neck, resting her chin atop her head and searching for shooting stars.

The floorboard creaked behind her and she jumped, letting out a small squeak as she whipped around.

“Kyo!” She clutched her heart furiously.

“What are you doing spacing out over here?”

“Oh! I!” She snapped herself back into her own head and quickly shut the doors to the balcony as she reentered the house. “I was closing the doors. It’s supposed to rain today,” she said.

“Great,” Kyo grunted.

“Did you just finish your jog?” Tohru asked with a smile as she stepped lightly into the kitchen.

“Yeah, I’ll shower in a bit,” Kyo said. “Breakfast ready?”

“Yup!” She opening up the rice cooker and filled a bowl with a scoop of rice. “It’ll all be ready in just a second.” Kyo nodded, heading toward the kitchen table and resting lazily on the floor. Tohru hummed to herself, preparing the plates for the household when she heard the creak and rustle of footsteps upstairs.

Tohru tensed, giving a cautious glance to the ceiling. She waited, wondering if it was a fluke. A definite sound of footsteps leaked through the ceiling again and Tohru jumped a bit in place.

“A-Actually, Kyo, I still have a few things to do before breakfast is ready! Why don’t you go shower now!”

“Huh?” He looked over his shoulder and gave her a curious look. “Need help or somethin’?”
“No! No, I don’t!” She said with a nervous laugh, fluttering into the dining room. He rubbed the back of his neck and stood with a tired sigh.

“Alright,” he mumbled, treading up the stairs and Tohru breathed a sigh of relief.

Good. This was a good plan. Yuki would come downstairs and eat, and by the time Kyo was finished in the shower Yuki would go upstairs. Minimal interaction. Tohru nodded to herself. They just needed space.

SLAM.

“YOU FUCKING RAT.”

“Do you have to be so incredibly irritating this early in the morning?”

“HEY, YOU’RE ONE TO TALK!”

“At least I’m not the one screaming around the house like a barbarian!”

“DON’T START WITH ME TODAY, RAT BOY.”

Tohru jumped, rushing to the base of the stairs, and looked up into the hallway to see the two boys with aggressive stances, staring each other down. A tension ran through them, their knuckles easily bending into fists, their knees locking, their feet rooting into the ground. The serene looks she had come to know on both their faces replaced with the furrows of a harsh glare. She brought her hands up to her mouth as they continued to fight.

“If you’re looking for a fight you found one, asshole!”

“If I was looking for a fight you would be my last option,” Yuki spat back.

“THAT’S IT!”

“No, please!” Tohru shouted, holding up her hands as the two began to throw fists at each other at the top of the stairs.

“Don’t waste your breath,” Shigure said, emerging from his office and crossing his arms with a sigh. “Let them run out of steam.”

“But—” she cut herself off with a scream when Kyo’s body hit the stairs and slid down the rest of the way.

“DAMMIT,” Kyo screeched, clutching his head in pain.

“Kyo! Are you okay?! Oh no, your head! First aid! I’ll get first aid!” Tohru said rushing out of the room and into the kitchen. Shigure sighed as he stared down at Kyo.

“Could you boys at least make it out of the house next time?”

“Oh no!” Shigure’s ears twitched when he heard crashing sounds from the kitchen, surely caused by Tohru’s frantic and shaking hands. Shigure rubbed his forehead with a defeated smile.

“Coming, Tohru!”

Kyo stayed there on the ground, letting out angry fumes of breath through his nostrils as Yuki padded carefully down the stairs. Yuki stood above him, letting out an aggravated sigh. Kyo
responded by turning his burning eyes to meet his and then trailing down to the hand that Yuki was offering.

Kyo stared back up at Yuki’s serious and hardened features, taking in the deep gray of his eyes. The way they surrounded him like the eye of a storm.

He stood on his own and brushed past Yuki’s hand as he walked up the stairs.

Yuki let his arm fall, turning his back to walk to the kitchen and away from Kyo.

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“Her I’m used to,” Hiro said, pointing to Tohru’s back as she and Kisa discussed ice cream flavors. “But remind me again why you two have to be here.”

Hiro threw an annoyed finger at Haru and Momiji. Momiji gave a bright smile while Haru rested his head on his arms that bent behind him.

“Tohru said we were all hanging out today after school!”

“That ‘we’ didn’t necessarily include you two,” Hiro said between his teeth, clenching his fists as he tried to keep himself in check.

“What? You don’t want to hang out with us?” Momiji asked, looping his arm around Hiro’s and giving him a particularly bubbly grin. Hiro growled to himself, reflexively trying to move further away from the energetic rabbit.

“Here we go!” Tohru said, bouncing up to the group with two ice creams in her hand, giving one to Momiji. Kisa trailed behind her with two ice creams, as well, giving her second one to Hiro.

“Next time it’s on me, Tohru,” Momiji said, intertwining his hand with hers.

“No, please! It’s my pleasure, you all have already treated me to so much,” Tohru said with a bright smile. “Are you sure you don’t want one Haru?”

He shook his head at the girl, “lactose and I have a complicated relationship.”

Tohru nodded understandingly while Hiro shot him a disconcerted glance. The group moved from the small ice cream stand, walking along the street and into the nearby park that had become a favorite place for Kisa and Tohru. The heat beat down on the playground equipment and the children could only keep their hands on the structure for a few seconds, laughing as they twirled around the heat with childish resolve.

The five opted out of sitting on the burning benches, and instead sat beneath the shade of a large tree, stretching out under the deceptively cooler spot, and feeling relief as the occasional breeze sifted through them.

“So where’s Yuki?” Momiji asked.

“He said that the student council were all going out tonight to celebrate the end of their term,” Tohru said. “He left pretty quickly after class.”

“Oh, that sounds like fun!” Momiji said. “What about Kyo?”

“He went to the dojo…” Tohru’s smile faltered a little bit. Haru quirked an eyebrow.
“Again?” The ox boy asked, the girl nodded.

“He’s been going a lot more lately,” she sighed into her ice cream. Kisa gave her a curious look before placing a hand on Tohru’s as it rested in the grass. “I think it’s because he and Yuki have started fighting again.”

“Aren’t they always fighting?” Hiro asked dryly, finishing what was left of his ice cream.

“Not like this they don’t!” Tohru said suddenly, worrying etched onto her face. “Usually they don’t get along all that well or they bicker from time to time, but now they fight almost every day. Like they used to when I first met them.”

“Like they used to in middle school?” Momiji asked. Haru shook his head, picking himself up from where he laid on the ground to sit among the group with his legs spread out, and his arms falling behind him for support.

“I doubt they could be as bad as they were in middle school,” the speckled haired boy commented. Momiji wrapped his arms around his knees and rested his cheek on his legs, contemplating the dusty memory.

“What were they like in middle school?” Tohru asked, looking around at the cousins who surrounded her. Kisa turned her head to Hiro, who turned his head to Haru.

“Did you know Yuki and Kyo are in the same level of martial arts?” Tohru and Kisa shook their heads, as Momiji and Hiro kept their eyes on Haru. “Yuki stopped going a couple years ago, but when they were younger Kazuma Sensei had to make a separate class for their level, just so they couldn’t train together.”

“Wow…” Tohru glanced down at the grass and Hiro clicked his tongue.


“Their fighting used to be a lot different. Yuki would still win but Kyo wouldn’t know when to stop. He would just keep charging at Yuki again and again until someone came to separate them or Yuki knocked him out completely.”

“That happened?” Kisa asked, her eyes going wide.

“That happened?” Tohru glanced down at the grass and Hiro clicked his tongue.

“A few times,” Haru said.

“Is that how you remember it, too?” Tohru asked Momiji. He hummed at the question.

“I didn’t really know Yuki or Kyo all that well before high school,” Momiji said. Tohru tilted her head at that. “But I do remember this one time during New Year’s Kyo came at Yuki over an entire table of food. The whole thing came crashing down and Yuki ended up knocking him into whatever of the dinner was left,” Momiji chuckled. “That was at the big party too, where the whole family gets together!”

“That sounds so scary,” Kisa said and Tohru turned her head to look at her.

“You weren’t there?” Kisa shook her head at the question.

“We never even really talked to either of them until now,” Hiro added, waving a hand dismissively.

“Really?” Tohru felt confusion invade her voice at she looked at all of them. “But you all seem so…
Hiro gave a snort and Momiji shrugged. Haru rubbed at his chin as he looked to his side, observing how the children shouted and laughed on the playground.

“Those two used to be very different,” Momiji said. “It was hard to get close to them. They never really talked to any of us.” The rabbit pointed at the ox, who still had a neutral expression on his face. “Except for Haru!”

Tohru looked down in a daze, letting the sounds of cicadas wash over her ears as an uncomfortable silence washed over the five, their ice creams now long gone. The heat of the summer sun still persistently lingering on their backs and faces, even under the shade of a tree. Kisa shifted a bit at the girl’s obvious distress.

“But sissy was the one that helped them get along, right?” Kisa said in her soft voice. Tohru lifted her head to see Haru and Momiji smiling at her. She blushed slightly. “And helped us all get to know them.”

“I don’t know about that,” Tohru said.

“Tohru, before you they couldn’t even be in a 10 kilometer radius of each other. Now they live together under one roof without serious bodily harm,” Momiji said, lifting his pointer finger with a smile.

“But it was only a matter of time,” Hiro said. “It’s not like you could fix them forever.”

“Hiro,” Kisa scolded.

“Unfortunately, I think he’s right,” Haru said. “Maybe they could only be peaceful with each other for so long.”

“They are very different,” Tohru said with a sigh.

“Exactly!” Hiro said. “You’re worrying over nothing,” the ram child crossed his arms with a condescending nod to the group. “The bottom line is that, even with all of Tohru’s feel-good magic or whatever it is you use, those two will never ever get along.”

Yuki slammed Kyo’s back against a tree before covering his mouth with his own. With a growl Kyo allowed Yuki’s mouth to grind against his. Allowed Yuki to run those long sharp nails through his hair and grip it tightly.

Kyo could feel Yuki’s tongue push past his lips. Feel how it aggressively invaded his mouth. Feel Yuki’s hands on the back of his neck, pulling him closer, trying to completely consume his mouth with a raging passion that had sparked in them both. He was being devoured. Overwhelmed. Ruined.

He bit down on Yuki’s tongue, causing Yuki to yank away with a small yelp and a glare. In response he grabbed Kyo’s wrists, digging his fingernails into the skin sharply. His lips found Kyo’s neck and he sucked the tan skin harshly. Kyo struggled to free his wrists, but when that cause became futile he forced his hips forward, pushing his thigh up into Yuki’s crotch, causing the rat to break away with a gasp.

“Don’t leave marks,” Kyo’s voice was raspier than he realized. Yuki smirked.
“What would you do if I did?”

“I would kick your ass,” Kyo snarled in response.

“That I would like to see,” Yuki’s grip on Kyo’s wrists tightened. The rat’s mouth moved down his neck and onto the skin that rested above the hem of his black undershirt. Kyo struggled under his grip once more.

“I thought we only did this when no one was in the house,” Kyo’s spat, his growl turning into a grunt when Yuki’s hips pushed against Kyo’s.

“We haven’t seemed to have such an opportunity lately,” Yuki said, an annoyed bite infecting his words. He trailed his lips back up to Kyo’s earlobe, sucking lightly on the skin there. Kyo clenched his teeth, swallowing a gasp. “But if you want, I can stop,” he whispered. “And leave you like this,” he released one of Kyo’s wrists to palm the bulge that was growing in his uniform pants. Kyo snarled through his teeth, hoping it masked a whimper. It burned. It hurt. In that same way his chest would burst with a tension that squeezed itself around every organ and pumped every racing drop of blood as if running to get away from Yuki. Running to be closer to Yuki. Running and sprinting and needing Yuki to keep that adrenaline spiking through every jolted action he made. _He hated it._

Kyo grabbed Yuki’s navy blue tie with his now free arm, such an awful, pristine cloth that hung off his pale neck day after day, wrapping up his milky skin like gift wrap. He clawed through the knot with his hand, hoping it tugged on Yuki’s throat, and tossed it away.

His frantic hand did the best it could to undo the buttons of Yuki’s shirt, as the rat took Kyo’s bottom lip into his mouth, sucking and biting at it with soft barely audible sounds. When his shirt was open enough he tore at it, exposing Yuki’s pale shoulder. Freeing himself from Yuki’s mouth he bit down on the skin, causing Yuki to cry out suddenly.

Yuki clenched his jaw, releasing a pained grunt through his teeth, as he opened his darkened eyes to form a glare at the tree trunk he had trapped Kyo against. He released his grip on Kyo’s other wrist and grabbed the collar of his shirt, forcefully bringing Kyo’s mouth back up to his. The cat wasted no time with his new found freedom and immediately undid the rest of the buttons on Yuki’s shirt, popping it open and moving his lips from Yuki’s vicious kiss to his chest. He licked at Yuki’s nipple, savoring the shudder that he could feel under that perfectly unmarked skin, and bit down. “Shit,” Yuki breathed, moving his hands down from Kyo’s shirt to his belt buckle, doing everything he could to keep his hands from shaking with a raw desire that coiled in his chest. Kyo’s body was so warm. His skin radiated a heat that would put the burning summer sun to shame. He was a sickness. A disease. An influenza that overtook every part of his body, making him weak, making every function in his head fail—all but the desire for more, more, more.

He undid the belt buckle and quickly popped open the button and fly to Kyo’s pants, slipping his hand into the boy’s boxers. He wrapped his long and precise fingers around Kyo’s erect member and Kyo gave an unrestrained groan against Yuki’s chest. A sound that scorched itself into his skin and that would surely leave burn marks on his body. Ones that would make him ache each time he moved.

Kyo dragged his lips up to Yuki’s collarbone, biting hard on the skin in an angry retaliation. Hating how his bones seemed as functional as spaghetti, and how his skin seemed to tremble like the leaves that fluttered around a swift summer breeze. He hated how Yuki made him feel useless and how that damn rat made his hands feel _so necessary._
Yuki took his hand away from Kyo’s boxers, using both hands to grab onto his shoulders and angrily slam him against the tree once more, narrowing his silver eyes into a glare that resembled every hurricane, every earthquake, every typhoon known to man.

“I thought you said no marks,” Yuki spat out, his breathing heavy and his face flushed. Kyo rested his head against the tree trunk, trying to drink in any air he could gather into his lungs.

“You started it, asshole,” Kyo said, clenching his eyes shut as Yuki’s hand trailed up his under shirt, electric sparks trailing on the skin beneath his fingers tips. His other hand returning to Kyo’s cock, his thumb rubbing at the head of his erection as Kyo tried his best to restrain his groans from behind his clenched teeth.

“If you leave marks,” Yuki’s mouth trailed over Kyo’s neck, threatening, gentle, careful. “So will I.”

Yuki’s lips fluttered over the skin of Kyo’s neck, leaving light butterfly kisses, and soft licks up Kyo’s jawline. A stark difference to how his hand mercilessly began to pump him, running his hand up and down Kyo’s member with a tight grip.

Kyo let his head fall back onto the tree trunk, opening his mouth to release a moan that came from so deep in his chest it was almost painful to let go. With heavy breaths, Kyo reached down to undo Yuki’s pants. His trembling fingers opened Yuki’s fly, shoving down the hem of his pants and boxers to reveal Yuki’s own hard member.

Without a second thought, Kyo brought his hands to Yuki’s lower back, forcing the boy’s hips into his own. The two let out a cry in unison as their cocks rubbed against each other, sending that heat that curled in their groins to spread across their bodies like a fire. The two panted against each other, as Yuki pushed down Kyo’s boxers as well for more exposure. Yuki slammed his hips against Kyo’s, addicted to the friction that spread between them. Addicted to that overwhelming burn that consumed him so ruthlessly when Kyo was under him like this. Clawing at his back, strangling out his pleasure, clenching his eyes closed as his mouth hung open because it was just too much.

Yuki kissed against Kyo’s mouth, sloppy and wild and messy. Kyo’s lips tried to keep up with Yuki’s eager movements, but could only open against his mouth as his grunts became more defined.

Yuki grinded his bare hips against Kyo’s one more time before deciding he needed more. He brought his hand down and wrapped his fingers around both their cocks, squeezing them together and stroking them in unison as his hips still pushed against Kyo’s.

Kyo’s forehead fell onto Yuki’s, moans and pants dropping from his lips as Yuki’s eyes did all they could to stay open. Watching how Kyo’s expressions contorted into their pleasure, watched how his hands could cause Kyo’s limbs to tense, watching how Kyo’s eyes would squeeze shut and his teeth would bite down hard on his bottom lip.

The pressure became too much, too hot, too overwhelming, and with another rough stroke and flick of Yuki’s wrist the two came. Kyo first, with Yuki’s eyes glued to that gorgeous expression of pure physical bliss, and Yuki a moment after with Kyo’s twisted expression playing again and again in his head.

Kyo slumped against the tree, his head resting against the bark, and his lungs struggling to take in enough oxygen. Yuki breathed in the summer air, allowing his eyes to close as he willed his bones to regain their strength. He gently took his hand away from their now limp members, his hand covered in their seed, and pulled a handkerchief from his pants pocket with his other hand. Carefully, he took a step back, though not enough to escape Kyo’s breath that rained on his skin.
He wiped his hand with the small cloth, bringing his pants up to redo the fly, and redoing each button of his shirt before he stared down at Kyo, who was doing close to nothing to fix himself up.

Yuki leaned forward, his index finger gently bringing Kyo’s chin up so that Yuki could take in his flustered and content expression.

*Ring. Ring. Ring. Ring.*

Yuki stopped a hair short of Kyo’s lips, sighing as the distinct sound of his cellphone cut through the soft aura that had enclosed them from his school bag. He didn’t move, his lips still aching to come that slight bit forward to take Kyo’s lips into a searing, soft kiss.

The ringing stopped. Kyo looked up at him with challenging and harsh eyes. Yuki stayed still.

*Ring. Ring. Ring. Ring.*

Yuki dropped his hand, stepping away from Kyo on legs he refused to expose as weak. He stalked over to his school bag, searching the pockets until he finally found the offensive object that shouted a graceless and inconsiderate ringing.

“Hello?” Yuki turned his back to Kyo, but could hear him shuffle around with his clothing. He sighed to himself. “No, Kakeru, I didn’t forget. I’ll be there soon…Right…Is it really that late?....No, that’s okay I’ll just meet you all at the restaurant. Just message me the address….Okay.”

Yuki flipped the phone shut, taking a moment to compose himself before turning back around to Kyo who was sitting slumped against the tree, taking in the bits of sunlight that peaked through the clouds. His clothes back in order and his breathing calmed.

“I have to go,” Yuki said, glancing down at the cat. Kyo peaked an eye open, looking up at Yuki before closing it again.

“Then go.”

Yuki stared at him for a moment, letting their words hang in the air for before giving a small nod that Kyo didn’t see. He grabbed his tie from off the ground and headed out of the patch of trees towards the dirt road.

He coughed into his hand as he walked down the path alone.

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“Well if it isn’t our esteemed president!”

“You’re forty five minutes late,” Nao said, crossing his arms.

“I’m so sorry. I hope you all ate without me,” Yuki said apologetically, taking his seat at the head of the table. He looked out onto the faces of his student council, feeling the relief of finally sitting down after a slightly crowded train ride. Kakeru sat to his right, lounging out in his chair as if sitting at the head of his own bed. Beside him was Machi, who focused intently on her food. Across from them sat Kimi and Nao, the shorter boy making it apparent that he had scooted his chair away from the rest of unruly crowd.

“No, no. We decided to wait. Starving ourselves until our fearless leader decided to grace us with his presence. Sitting here in total silence, not daring to speak until we were spoken to—ow!”
Yuki brought his hand back to the table from the chop he gave to the top of Kakeru’s head with a roll of his eyes. “I texted you to eat without me. And believe me, if I had any control on how much you spoke I would have exercised that power long ago.”

“You’ll miss Kakeru the least, right?” Kimi piped up suddenly with a raise of her hand.

“What! No way! Yuki loves me the most, don’t you, mommy?”

“Do not call me mommy,” Yuki said, rubbing his forehead in irritation. Noting how it didn’t even take three minutes for a headache to form. “I don’t even want to fathom the thought of having you for a child.”

“I like to think we raised these rabble rousers together. Just call me daddy!”

“That might make me physically ill,” Yuki said.

“Join the club!” Nao added.

“I’ll call you daddy!” Kimi said. Kakeru’s bright smile didn’t fade but he flinched away from the girl.

“I don’t think I want to be added to the list of people Kimi calls daddy,” he said, shifting himself so he could hide behind an annoyed Yuki.

“Aw, fine. Then I’ll just call Yun-Yun daddy instead. I would much rather have him for a daddy,” Kimi said with eyes far too innocent. Yuki flinched with Kakeru. Nao rolled his eyes. Machi lifted her head to give Kimi a passive look that she pointedly ignored.

“How about we don’t call me any strange nicknames and just refer to me by my name,” Yuki said flatly.

“Of course,” Kakeru said firmly, pounding a fist on the table. “Now, President Daddy Mr. Red Yun-Yun have you eaten yet?” The boy made a strangled choking noise when Yuki’s arm wrapped around his neck in a firm headlock. “Hey, hey, come on! That may be the last time I get to call you any of those adorable nicknames we came up for you!”

Yuki released him with a firm sigh. “Yes, I have eaten already. I assumed you all had already eaten, as well.”

“We did! But we can’t go until you make a speech!” Kakeru turned to a waitress with a raised hand, “one soda please!”

“A speech?” Yuki asked, looking out to the table. Kimi and Kakeru nodded enthusiastically as the waitress came and delivered the drink in front of Yuki. He sighed.


“Keep your voices down!” Nao scolded just as loudly at the rowdy pair. “You’re gonna get us kicked out!” Kakeru ignored the perpetually angry boy and pushed the cold glass into Yuki’s hand, giving him bright and beaming eyes. Yuki gave him an exasperated smile as he accepted, standing up. Kakeru clapped his hands and Kimi did the same.

“Well,” Yuki stopped to clear his throat. “I guess I should say it was an honor working with all of you.”
He looked out into each of their faces. The people he found himself working with every day after school until his neck felt tight and his bones felt tired. The problem children who drove him crazy and gave him migraines in record time and made ridiculous promises to the student body.


He couldn’t help but let out a laugh.

“Actually, you all were the biggest pains in the neck I’ve ever met in my life,” Yuki said honestly with a smile, trying to contain the laughs that shook his chest. Kakeru gave him a wide smile as the rest of the table focused their eyes on him. “I’ve never met a group of people more ridiculous than you four. I think I got less sleep in the last year than I have in my entire life. And I never expected my time as student council president to be as stressful as you all made it to be. But,” Yuki stopped, staring down into his drink. He smiled to himself. Softer. Genuine.

“I had fun,” he continued. “You all made my time as president something I won’t forget, and taught me lessons that I will cherish. I have faith that where you go from here will be successful, and I hope I served you as well as you served me,” he put a hand on Kakeru’s shoulder, who gave him a wide toothy grin. “And believe it or not I’ll miss you.”

Kakeru opened his mouth to say something.

“But don’t let that go to your head,” Yuki said dryly, before he could utter a word.

He sat back down, nervously looking out at the faces he had come to know so well. Kimi gave him bright, watery eyes that exaggerated her expression. Nao crossed his arms and looked at the table. Machi gave him the faintest of smiles.

“Cheers!” Kakeru shouted out. “To president!”

“To president,” was weakly returned by the group as they all clicked their plastic cups together. Yuki laughed.

“That nearly brought me to tears,” the black haired boy said, putting a dramatic hand over his chest.

“Kimi was crying real tears! Look! Look!” She said pointing at her eyes.

“Would you both shut up!” Nao exclaimed, rubbing at his eyes ferociously.

“Don’t blame us for getting all emotional, some of us don’t get to do this again,” Kakeru said, bopping Nao’s nose. The smaller boy slapped the hand away.

“Cut that out! And I can promise that this next council will be significantly less stressful than you bunch!”

“I did hear you got elected to be the treasurer. Congratulations,” Yuki said honestly.

“Don’t think I’m going to fall for your sappy act now,” he shot back, slumping back into his chair.

“The rebellious teenage son strikes out at his humble parent, unable to express the gratitude felt deep in his hollow and rotting heart,” Kakeru narrated sorrowfully. Nao glared at him.

“If no one is eating maybe we should stop disturbing the peace,” Yuki interjected mostly to his
“Oh wait! One other thing!” Kakeru said, holding up a finger and reaching under the table as he rummaged for something there. Yuki quirked an eyebrow, looking over to Machi who had decidedly looked in the opposite direction.

“Tah-dah!” Kakeru said, plopping a quart sized potted plant onto the table. The pot scribbled over with various messages and drawings with a big bow choking its circumference.

Yuki stared at it as if it were the first thing he had ever seen, before slowly reaching out to inspect it, reading each message that was written out to him.

“We got most of the club presidents to sign it,” Kakeru said. “Of course, we wrote a few words in there too. Look! Even Nao wrote something!” He said pointing to the small and neat handwriting that laid out a curt message.

“It’s a plum plant,” Machi said. Yuki looked towards her with a smile.

“I don’t know why president would want something so un-cool,” Kimi said, resting her head on her hand. “I told them to pick something else.”

“No, no, thank you. Thank you. It’s great,” Yuki said with bright eyes.

“It was all Kimi’s idea!”

The table fell into a conversation that faded into white noise. Yuki stared at the potted plant and gently touched one of the leaves. Maybe he was a little sad to be leaving.

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Yuki stared at himself in the dark bathroom mirror of the karaoke parlor. Loud, muffled voices spilled through the walls, dulling before they reached Yuki’s ears. The bathroom door acting as a barrier between him and the overpowering noise that already tired out his exhausted body. With a deep, shaky breath he ran the faucet of the sink, filling up his cupped hands until they overflowed so he could splash the water onto his face. The cool sensation did little to calm his body that felt fevered and sick, but he savored it anyway. He reached into his pocket for his handkerchief, sighing when he realized he had left it at home when he had changed out of his uniform, and went back to staring at his now dripping face. The water reached into the ends of his hair.

He wasn’t quite ready to return to that cramped room or to have Kakeru shove a microphone in his face, urging him to sing. Instead he listened to the sounds of unrelenting and echoing voices and the accompaniment of the overworked speakers from each separate room. He tried to slow his breathing, doing his best to keep the noises from upsetting his stomach, to keep the voices from irritating the sharp pain he felt behind his eyes. He coughed, clutching the sides of the sink before looking back up into the mirror.

With a cautious glance over his shoulder he used a damp hand to stretch the collar of his shirt to the side. There on his milky skin was a hickey that had defined itself over the past few hours. He ran a finger over it, closing his eyes and allowing brief flashes of their earlier encounter to flood his mind.

His hands, his mouth, his voice.

His eyes.

Yuki shook his head, snapping himself out of it as he heard voices approaching the door. He released
his shirt and brushed passed the rowdy group of college boys stumbling into the bathroom, not offering him a second glance. Yuki escaped to the exit of parlor on a top floor of a tall building near the station, revealing a stretch of narrow concrete stairs.

He sat, taking in a deep breath.

Yuki thought back on the past month, where the summer humidity crepted into his bones until he was choking on it. Where June had caressed the world in a warmth that cramped the city. To the boiling encounters it allowed with Kyo, how his body heat would mix with the summer sky so easily and make Yuki feel as though he were clutching onto the sun.

Their passionate meetings always ending with Kyo’s harsh and guarded eyes.

Not allowing Yuki to think that he had won even if he had writhed and moaned beneath him. Making sure it was clear that no matter what the result of the battle, the war was ongoing. They would walk away from each other without another word most times, only interacting if it was to shout curses or murmur pleasure.

Yuki had to be on his guard.

He couldn’t lose.

Even he wanted to.

He coughed into his hand, hearing the sudden blossom of noise coming from the opening of a door, only for it to fade away as it closed. He felt a presence sit a few steps behind him and he quickly controlled his scratchy throat, turning his head to his newfound company.

“Hello, Ms. Kuragi,” Yuki said with a smile. “Are you enjoying yourself?”

Machi shrugged, her posture determined not to spill from the small box she allowed herself.

“You’re all wet,” Machi noted. Yuki reflexively brought a hand up to his still damp face, giving a small sheepish smile.

“I forgot my handkerchief at home.”

Machi rummaged through the pocket of her skirt, pulling out a crumpled, but clean piece of cloth. She laid it out on her hand for him to take. He looked up at her insistent eyes, before smiling and accepting the gesture, using the handkerchief to wipe his face and hands.

“Thank you,” he handed it back to her. She nodded in response. He turned back around, resting his elbows on his knees and taking in a few deep breaths before coughing slightly into his hand.

“Are you alright?” Machi asked.

“I am, thank you for asking,” he said. “Sometimes these sorts of things can get to be a bit much for me.”

“Me too,” Machi confessed. “President had the same idea as me.”

Yuki nodded with understanding. “No shame in needing a break from that bunch,” he laughed. “Will you sing?”

“I did already,” Machi replied softly.
“And I missed it?” Genuine remorse filled his voice. “And I was looking forward to hearing you sing.”

“I can again,” she said shyly.

“I’d like that.”

They sat on the steps in silence for a moment, staring at the half-heartedly graffitied walls, and listening to the alternating sounds of the city life a few stories below, and the bellowing music from the karaoke booths. Machi was a tranquil girl. He was comfortable around her quiet nature, grateful for it, at times.

“President,” she started.

“Yes?”

“Did you really eat before you came to the restaurant?” Machi asked into her knees.

Yuki turned to look at her, a surprised expression on his face eating up the response on his tongue. Machi looked towards him, panicking at the lack of response only to be met with his smiling eyes.

“What’s that look for?” She immediately tensed.

“You’ve always been very perceptive of me,” Yuki noted, off-handedly. A dark blush covered her cheeks.

“I have not!”

“You have,” Yuki said with a laugh. “No need to be embarrassed, I’m grateful for it.”

She looked away from him, focusing on the wall right beside her, resting her aggravated forehead against the cold concrete.

“Two can play at that game, though,” Yuki said with a chuckle. “You’re upset.”

She looked to him with a look that so mirrored his own he couldn’t help but laugh. She blushed again.

“What makes you say that?” She asked.

“I like to think I’ve come to know you well enough,” he said. “Plus I needed to learn to keep up with you. I’m sure you’ve learned a lot more about me than I have about you this past year.”

“That’s not… true,” Machi trailed off.

“So?”

“So? So what?” The girl shot back.

“Are you upset?” He asked again, this time placing a gentle hand on her head. A moment passed between them, completely still. She nodded.

“I’ll miss you, president,” she said softly. “I… I had a lot of fun this past year, too.”

He smiled at her, removing his hand from her soft brown locks, before leaning his elbows on his knees to give her a smile. “I’m not going anywhere for the time being, Ms. Kuragi.”
“Machi,” she corrected quietly.

“Huh?”

“You can… You can call me by my name,” she said. “If you want.”

Yuki made a playful action of contemplation, his head rolling up his eyes as if he were thinking, and his finger going on his chin. “I suppose I could do that. If you call me Yuki.”

She turned to him and nodded. He smiled in response.
Yuki ground his hips into Kyo. His fingernails dug into the skin of Kyo’s hips as he rose and fell, grunting as he felt Kyo below him tremble under the sheer force of his desire. The rat leaned down, keeping the friction in his hips steady and consistent, and let his breath wash over Kyo's ear.

"Are you close?"

Kyo clenched his jaw, giving a frantic nod.

Yuki gripped onto him harder, bringing down his hips almost violently against Kyo’s. He took Kyo by his rough and sure grip and forced Kyo's hips up to meet his own, causing them to fall against each other with a slam of the bed against the wall. In a few more rushed grinds, Kyo sputtered out a satisfied moan as he came, Yuki following not seconds after.

He slumped onto Kyo, breathing heavily, allowing pleasured hums to escape with each exhale. He looked through unfocused eyes to see Kyo’s twisted expression as he came down from his climax, his exposed chest rising and falling as he worked relentlessly to catch his stolen breath.

The rat shifted, very aware of the sheets that bunched and bundled under them. The way the fabric would shift together and create an almost unbearably loud noise in contrast to how minutes previously the only thing that filtered into his ears were the breaths, moans, and whimpered pleas from the body below him.

Kyo’s eyes clenched shut, focusing every piece of energy he had left on regaining his composure. Yuki drank in the sight greedily, watching every angle of his jaw, every strand of his hair, every crease in his skin, the way the red flush of his cheeks would interrupt the tan plane of skin, a color that was surely the most erotic in this world.

Kyo opened his eyes and Yuki lifted himself up by his shaky arms to pull himself off so that he could pad over to his closet. He kicked his own uniform that had been discarded onto the floor with a lazy foot, opening the doors to an overstuffed closet, and searched for something to wear.

Kyo laid on his back, looking around the room of his sworn enemy, how the desk overflowed with books and papers, how clothes sprawled on his desk chair and on the floor, and how his worn sheets wrinkled at his feet easily.

“This place is a mess,” Kyo commented.

"You say that every time you come in here," Yuki responded, buttoning up a pair of slacks.

"Yeah, 'cause it's true every time."

Yuki turned to look at him with an amused smirk, pulling a collared shirt over his head and straightening it out. He walked back to the edge of his bed, sitting so that his back was facing Kyo, who continued to stare up at the ceiling, his body still unable to rid itself of the adrenaline that highlighted his skin. Yuki turned to look at him for a moment, and this time he let Kyo meet his eyes.

"I know. I'm goin'. Just give me a second," Kyo snapped.

"I didn't say anything."

"Doesn't matter," Kyo said. Yuki turned to look away from him, choosing to stare at his hands
"Hello! Is anyone home?"

Yuki immediately stood, his expression melting into panic as Kyo heaved himself up to sit. The two locked eyes again at the sound of Tohru's voice calling out through the house.

"Just a second, Ms. Honda," Yuki called out near the door.

"Shit," Kyo ground out as he pressed the palm of his hand into his eye.

"Don't panic. I'll keep her downstairs," Yuki said, letting the wave of anxiety pass through him. "Though you're more than welcome to stay here if you still need to catch your breath," Yuki looked over his shoulder with a smirk before opening his door to exit down the stairs.

Kyo watched him leave, the sound of the door closing behind him so loud it rung in his ears again and again. He let out a frustrated groan and fell back on the bed with his hands over his eyes.

"Shit."

"Welcome home, Ms. Honda."

"Thanks!" Tohru chirped, unloading the groceries onto the kitchen counter. "I got ingredients for your favorite today and--oh Yuki!" Her head did a double take as she turned to face him entirely.

"Are you okay?"

"What?" Yuki asked, taking a step back from her.

"You're all red!" She stepped closer, placing a hand on his forehead, moving her hands to feel his cheeks. Yuki flushed even more, backing away completely so that he could escape her worried hands.

"I'm fine, Ms. Honda," he said, trying to keep his voice light at her startled expression. "The heat just doesn't agree with me sometimes."

"Oh, okay," Tohru said, her voice going quiet. "That happens to your brother too, doesn't it?"

He flinched at the comparison, but forced his head to nod, "it... does."

"Then let me get you some ice water! Just sit down at the table and try not to move around all that much!"

He did as he was told, listening to her bustle around the kitchen, and accepting her water graciously when she placed it in front of him, sitting besides him with her own glass.

"Had I known you were going shopping I would have offered to help," Yuki said, gesturing to the kitchen.

"Oh, it's no trouble! It was sort of a last minute decision, anyway. Momiji and Haru said they'd come over tomorrow to celebrate the first day of summer vacation!"

"Did they now?" Yuki's tone was flat as he took a big sip of his water.

"Yup! So I thought we could all have a big cookout like we did last year!"
"That sounds like fun," Yuki said with a smile. "Though I'm sure those two are just finding an excuse to have Ms. Honda's cooking again."

"If that's the case I'm fully prepared!" Tohru said militantly, a wide smile on her face. Yuki chuckled at that.

"Is Kyo home?" She asked.

"I think I heard him stomping around, yes."

"Oh good," she said with a relieved tone. "The clouds outside were looking pretty bad, I was hoping he wouldn't get caught in the rain."

"Maybe the rain will finally calm him down," Yuki said passively, taking another gulp of his drink. Tohru responded with a nervous and unsure chuckle. His head turned towards the slightly open door, the blue sky being eaten up by the gray clouds that loomed threateningly over the house. The rain had been late this season, just now in the early days of July deciding that it would disturb the burning summer air.

He could tell. The monsoon season was written in the way Kyo moved. It made his limbs heavier, made his responses slower, made his moans longer, made his head tilt back further, made his kisses lazier, and his body weigh down heavier on Yuki's bed. He wondered if he was still there. His scent and his heat scalding his room like a hot iron. He wondered if it was the rain or him who had worn him out. Wondered if it was normal to be jealous of the weather.

"...ki? Yuki?"

"Huh?"

He snapped out of his thoughts and faced to the brown haired girl with a turn of his head.

"Are you sure you're alright?"

"Yes, sorry," he said with a smile. "What were you saying?"

"Oh, uh, I was just saying that I hope it doesn't rain tomorrow for the cookout."

Yuki nodded, "I hope not."

His quiet words were nearly washed away by the pitter patter of rain that began to fall against the house.

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“…Before you all rush out of here, remember that your entrance exams are coming up. We all expect you to take this time to work hard, and study. Especially for those of you who are planning on applying for top schools. Relax, but be sure not to waste your time. Finally, remember you have your summer homework and an essay due your first week back in the new term,” the woman paused.

Mayu looked out onto the eager and hopeful faces of her students, opening her mouth as if to say something more, but taunting them by closing it again. She hummed, as if forgetting what she was going to say next.

“Mayu, please!”

“Come oooooon!”
A few students wailed from the back of the room, and she grinned.

“And I guess,” she said, drawing out her words. “You are all free to have a great summer.”

The students cheered, standing up and rushing out of their rooms as the hallways filled with a carefree jubilance that came with summer. Tohru stood among them, immediately attaching herself to Uo and Hana, who chatted with other classmates that made messes of plans for the summer’s arrival.

“Be sure to be there on Saturday at 6! At 6, okay!” Called out a girl to the clump of students that stood together.

Yuki could hear Tohru’s chirp of a reply, watched her idly as she socialized so easily with her classmates, letting smiles fall on her face one right after another. The breath of summer in everything she said and did.

He turned his head to look towards Kyo, who sat with slumped shoulders, focusing on his desk as he waited for the crowds to disperse before he left the confines of his chair. Something Yuki mirrored in how he sat, being sure to only wave and greet from a distance.

The students filtered out, group by group, two by two, not wanting to waste another second inside the stuffy walls of the school, as they raced to their freedom. Yuki sighed in relief, and saw Kyo’s shoulder rise and slump, as well. He did his best to keep his eyes from going dark at such a simple gesture.

“Tohru!”

Yuki snapped his head over to Momiji as he bounced into the classroom, followed by Hatsuharu. He greeted the two with a nod and a smile.

“Happy summer!” Momiji called out to the group of girls.

“Right back atcha,” Uo held her hand up for a high five, which Momiji returned. Hana nodded.

“Finally, relief from such stressful work,” Hana commented.

“Yeah, for the people who actually do work,” Uo snapped back with a smile.

“Are you all ready to go? I have all the things we need for a cookout tonight!” Tohru said happily, letting Momiji bring their hands together.

“Yay! Tohru’s cooking! I’ve been waiting all day for it!”

Yuki watched the conversation with idle eyes, groggily resting his head on his hand as he took in the summer breeze from the open windows, smiling slightly at the energy that the group of friends were able to splash onto him. He took a moment to savor it before Haru sat in front of him on his desk.

“Hey,” the cow said.

“Hey,” Yuki gave back, tearing his eyes away from the still chattering group to look up at him.

“Everything okay?”

Yuki opened his mouth to respond, his gaze being caught by a flash of red hair that stood from the desk a few rows up and exited the room. He turned back to Haru, giving him a nod.

“Are we going? Oh! Where’s Kyo?” Momiji asked.
“Oh no, I didn’t even see him leave!” Tohru added, searching the room with worried eyes.

“I’m sure he just went on ahead, Ms. Honda. No need to worry,” Yuki reassured. Tohru’s concerned gaze didn’t fade until she felt a tugging on her arm.

“Yeah, I’m sure he’ll be home by the time we get there!”

“Carrot top always has to be off doin’ something,” Uo added.

“Yuki are you coming, too?” She asked, looking towards the rat boy. He gave her a smile, hoping to bend his wrinkled eyes in such a way that they matched her warm energy.

“I have a few things I need to take care of before I leave, but I’ll be at the house soon. I promise.”

“Then let’s go! Come on! You too, Haru!” Momiji urged, leading the teens out of the room. “We’ll see you soon, Yuki!” He called over his shoulder.

“Bye Yuki!” Tohru called out, before being pushed out of the room.

The room fell quiet. The two other odd students packing their things and wishing Yuki a pleasant farewell before leaving themselves. He sat at his desk for a moment longer, savoring the almost silence of the empty classroom, still straining his ears to hear the rowdy nature of those who congealed on the school grounds.

Yuki didn’t like the heat, nor the claustrophobic feeling of summer vacation. A fact he hated about himself. He let his mind wander to years before middle school. To sitting in his desk in an equally empty classroom, knowing that his days would be spent staring at a wall.

He thought about the room. The one that closed onto him like a wool blanket in the middle of July. He thought about summers spent in ties and button up shirts with Akito whispering putrid nothings into his lungs. He thought about Tohru’s bright smile, and the way she found the most pure and beautiful form of energy around his family.

He hated himself for not looking forward to what July now promised in exchange.

He coughed into his hand, once, twice, before pushing the feeling down and away. Yuki walked towards the window, shoving his hands deep in his pockets where his fingers collided with a familiar book of matches. Twirling it in his fingers, he stared down at the students who rushed as quickly as possible to enjoy the summer heat that encompassed them all.

Thoughts of conventional summers were interrupted when he heard the door open, the orange haired cat walking into the classroom as he familiarized himself with the lack of constant conversation. Kyo’s presence clenched his chest in a way that was so dissimilar to fear, to anxiety, yet still he could feel those emotions running through his blood. It was different this time, though.

Kyo was like a July he had never had, with all the terror that came with it. It was intoxicating.

“Where is everyone?” He asked, stalking over to his desk to collect his forgotten bag.

“They left for the house,” Yuki leaned against the window, facing Kyo.

“So what’re you still doin’ here?”

“I had some things to take care of.”

He walked to Kyo’s desk, placing a gentle hand on the faded wood, being sure to lock his eyes with
the cat. His pulsing red eyes watched carefully, not moving from where he was, only backing away when Yuki leaned into.

“What the hell are you doing?”

“Are you still asking that question?” A flash of irritation burned in Yuki’s eyes as Kyo took another step back, colliding with a desk.

“We almost got caught last time, idiot,” his harsh whisper clawed at Yuki’s ears.

“We won’t get caught. Everyone’s left,” Yuki took another step forward. Kyo took another step back.

“Fuck off, I’m not doing this,” Kyo snarled in as hushed a tone as he could manage. Yuki rolled his eyes.

“Do you know what summer vacation means?” Yuki asked, keeping his strides consistent, and causing Kyo to back up against the wall, a position just out of sight of anyone who might have peaked into the door windows. “It means visitors in the house, day after day,” Yuki trailed a hand up Kyo’s chest, sneaking under his black undershirt and stroking the skin there. Kyo shifted, his breath changing slightly at the touch.

“So?”

“So I thought it didn’t matter where, just as long as no one was around,” Yuki continued to stroke Kyo’s chest with light fingertips. He kissed his neck. “Well,” another kiss, “no one is around.”

Yuki felt a weight on his chest pushing him back against the desks. He looked up to see Kyo’s eyes blazing with a serious defiance that caused Yuki to feel that scratch in his throat again.

“What the hell is your problem, huh? I’m not here for you to fuck around with whenever you’re in the mood, asshole. Back. Off.”

Yuki stared at him for a moment, before stepping back, making his way to his desk to collect his things.

“Fine. I’ll back off,” Yuki closed the door behind him, leaving Kyo in the empty classroom. Kyo rolled his eyes, rubbing at his forehead as he felt an oncoming headache.

Yuki walked quickly down the hall and down the stairs. His mouth filled with a bitter taste. He could feel his knees move restlessly with eyebrows that creased into one another.

What he hated most about July in those times when he could only watch from behind paper doors, was how much he wanted summer. How much he would wait and wish for it to spill onto him carelessly like it did his other cousins, or the other boys in school. Yuki would sit there, day after day of his vacation, needing to feel a heat that was freeing, a heat that wasn’t stifling. But the weeks would pass by, doing nothing to aid him except to turn colder. And after another year, Yuki would realize he missed his chance once more.

And along the way he became scared of his desire for a season that would never need him back.

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Shigure tilted his head to take in the heat of the bright summer sun. He gave an idle smirk to the sky as it swirled with blues and whites in shining solar rays.
"I heard it might rain tonight, even with this nice weather," he said as he continued to walk down the outdoor hallways of Akito's estate. "If so I'll have to extend my visit."

"He'll be happy to hear that."

"At least wait to look me in the eye if you're going to lie to me," Shigure chuckled, turning to look at Kureno who followed a few paces behind him. They stopped walking, Kureno bowing his head to look away from him. Shigure let out a sharp, quiet laugh. "That's what I thought."

"He hasn't been well lately," Kureno said, as they continued their walk.

"So I've heard."

"And he's been a bit... sensitive lately."

"So I've experienced."

"Please," Kureno said, a dejected frustration reaching his voice.

"Please?" Shigure mocked, turning to face him again. "Please what? Please don't upset him? Please don't get him all riled up and leave him to cling onto you? Please leave?"

No response again. Shigure smiled.

"Don't tell me how to act around him," he said, the smile not leaving his voice. "Please."

Kureno sighed, and with a few final steps they reached the door. Shigure lifted his hand to knock before turning to Kureno once more. "You're dismissed."

He looked between Shigure and the door for a moment before giving a nod and padding down the hallway, out of sight. The dog spirit let his smile fade, waiting until he was completely out of his eye line before knocking on the door, only to let himself in.

"Akito?"

Shigure closed the door behind him and padded softly into the room. The lights turned down, the curtains drawn, the bedding scattered around the sickly and pale body of the head of the family--an inevitable reaction to the hot and cold flashes that would overtake the god in times of sickness.

Shigure looked down at the young, pristine, yet inelegant deity. Robes out of order and creased, an arm flung over darkened eyes to keep out whatever light seemed determined to dance inside the room.

"What do you want?"

"I think the better question is, what are you doing lurking around in the dark?" Shigure sat beside the futon, crossing his legs as he stared down at Akito.

"I have a migraine," Akito responded sharply. "So I have no tolerance for unnecessary noise."

"Thank goodness I seem to be necessary," Shigure said with a chuckle. "Otherwise I would have been turned away for sure."

Akito opened one eye slightly, peeking from behind a pale and fevered arm to look up at the dog spirit.
"Either that or you need to train him better," Shigure commented.

"I didn't train him. He's loyal. Something a defective dog like you should have learned to be a long time ago."

"Defective? Now, that's not very nice. I'm going to stop coming here if you don't control that temper of yours," he said, waving an idle hand.

"No one asked you to come here," Akito rolled away from Shigure, sprawling out under the dark rainy afternoon, savoring the sun's denial.

"Fine. Then I'll go," Shigure said, ready to lift himself up off the ground, only to be stopped by a sickly hand reaching behind to grab the edge of his robe. Shigure looked at Akito, his face still turned away, and his body still resting cautiously against the cushions of the futon. He smirked.

"Hatori says you've been getting your energy back."

"Tsh. What does he know," Akito spat. "Moving around is agony in this state."

"I'm sure you'll be able to manage," Shigure said. Akito flashed a glare at him. "I'd never bet against you."

Akito's expression softened, but cold, dark eyes stilled pinched in uncertainty as Akito turned away again.

"I'm not in the mood to be buttered up to," Akito shot.

"I can't imagine you ever would be with Kureno at your beck and call at every waking hour of the day," Shigure said, letting his arms rest inside his sleeves as he adjusted himself on the floor of Akito's room.

"Jealous?" Akito turned, giving a snide smirk that almost melted the god's flesh. Shigure returned the expression that he had so effortlessly taught him over the years.

"I am. But there are ways of fixing that."

Akito let the expression fall into one of budding rage, a deep resentment in his chest flooding up into every word that fell from thin lips. "If you're here to whine about Kureno, I'm not interested. Leave if you're going to act like a child."

"Actually I came here about something else," Shigure said easily.

"Oh?" Akito rolled onto his back, closing his eyes with disinterest.

"I heard Rin's back in the hospital," Shigure said.

"You're here about that horse?" Akito's eyes opened into another harsh glare. "Why? Have you fucked her too?"

"Just a little bit of writer's curiosity, is all," Akito sat up at Shigure's words, robes falling gracelessly against his slender body.

"Oh, you think I had something to do with it," he let out a dry laugh, lifting himself up onto his feet so that he could open the door. He gave a deep inhale, reveling in the scent of rain that spilled through the doors, and letting the sheets of downpour serenade the dull and darkened room.
"Is that such a ridiculous thought?"

"I had nothing to do with whatever happened to that little whore," Akito said passively. "Did you hear she's been sniffing around for ways to break the curse?"

"I have," Shigure said. "She asked me directly."

Akito whipped his body around to face Shigure.

"She offered me her body in exchange."

Shigure caught Akito's hand before it could strike his face. The god's expression twisted into one of rage and desperation. The grip on his wrist tightened and tightened until he could feel Akito trying to retract. Shigure threw the arm back and Akito stormed to the other side of the room.

"Why do you only come here to say cruel things?! Why do you come here at all?!" Akito shouted at the wall. "If you want to break the curse so bad that you'll fuck that woman, why should I even have to look at you?!"

"I didn't sleep with her," Shigure said. "I didn't tell her anything."

Akito turned, a small tear escaping his eye though the harsh expression stayed firm on his face.

"Why should I believe you?"

Shigure hummed, bringing a hand up to his chin in a contemplative expression, "it baffles me how much this family thinks I know. I'm really quite a simple man with many uninteresting talents."

"You don't sound all that upset by it," he hissed. Shigure shrugged and Akito rolled his eyes. "I didn't have anything to do with that horse being in the hospital. But I can't say I care all that much what happens to that terrible woman."

"Haru would be upset if he heard that."

"Hatsuharu is confused and easily seduced. It would be good for everyone if she stayed in that hospital. She brought it on herself, regardless."

"So you do know what happened," Shigure said with a grin. Akito smirked and placed a hand on Shigure's cheek, fingernails dipping into his skin in a way that was almost threatening.

"You may pride yourself in knowing nothing, but that gains you very little in life," Akito said. "People seem to forget who the head of this house is and how much I know." Shigure placed a hand on Akito's and returned the smirk.

"And what are these marvels that you know?"

"No one tries to break this curse and gets away with it," Akito dug his fingernails harsher into his skin. "Whether I lift a finger or not."

"Why do you come here if all you're after is to upset him?" Hatori asked with a sigh, rubbing a cotton ball of alcohol against the welts on Shigure's cheek. He winced slightly, flinched even as his smile didn't fade.

"It wasn't like that, really--ow!" He chuckled through his wince. "Hatori, a part of me thinks you're
hurting me on purpose."

"Only a part?"

The door to Hatori's office slid open with a loud crash, hardly even phasing the two men who sat still under the florescent beams of Hatori's office. Ayame flipped his hair back in the entrance of the office, storming in on loud and well-kept shoes.

"Gure!"

"Aya--ow!"

"Hold still."

"Who did this to your beautiful face?!"

"At the moment, Hari," Shigure laughed and Hatori rolled his eyes.

"Hari, please, be gentle with him. You know what a weak constitution for pain he has. Something I know quite intimately."

"Oh, Aya, please. You're embarrassing me in front of my doctor."

The two gave a hearty thumbs up to each other, which earned a sigh from Hatori.

"Do you two ever turn off?"

"Certainly not around each other," Shigure said.

"Oh, yes! That was a good one!" Ayame said with a clap of his hands, before grabbing a chair to observe how Hatori bandaged up the rest of Shigure's injury. With a relieved sigh Shigure turned to Ayame.

"What brings you to the main house? It's rare to see you around these parts."

"I've been enjoying the company of our dear, sweet Hari when he got your call. He was beside himself with worry, so naturally before I came to see you myself I had to make sure all the maids would be aware of his fragile mental state while our beloved friend was under such duress."

"You did what?" Hatori ground out.

"I told the maids to leave you in peace! Honestly, the way they crawl all over you for every single thing that may go wrong in this house! I told them you wouldn't have it this week!"

"How noble," Shigure said with a smirk as Hatori pinched the bridge of his nose.

"I'll deal with that later, I suppose," Hatori mumbled to himself before turning to Shigure. "You're done here, I hope it wasn't too traumatizing."

"I believe I'll live," Shigure said with a shrug. Ayame crossed his arms with an annoyed sigh, taking in the sight of his bandaged friend.

"So Akito did this to you?" Ayame asked.

"Yes, but I'm fairly certain I deserved it," Shigure said, keeping his voice light in the face of Ayame's serious tone.
"Does anyone deserve to have their face scratched up like that?" The three men sat in silence, exchanging looks, and taking in the buzz of the fluorescent lights around them. Hatori let his voice flow through, in a hopeful change of direction.

"So what did you do?"

"I guessed I asked too many of the wrong questions," Shigure said. "I thought he might know something about Rin."

Hatori gave an annoyed sigh, and Ayame's expression lifted into curiosity.

"Sticking your nose where it doesn’t belong again," Hatori commented idly.

"Isuzu? What's happened to her? Don't hold out, you know how much I love gossip," Ayame said.

"No one's heard from her in two months. We know she's in the hospital, but Kagura's mother won't tell anyone where."

"Oh my, that is intriguing," Ayame said. "That poor girl has had every medical problem in the book from what I've heard."

Hatori nodded, "historically, women in the zodiac tend to be more susceptible to illness. So I suppose it's not all that surprising."

"Makes you wonder about someone like Kagura who almost seems too healthy," Shigure said, leaning back in his chair.

"Kagura and Rin have had two very different lives," Hatori noted, his tone falling naturally short with Shigure. "That does remind me, how is Yuki doing."

"Hmm, what an interesting question you pose," Shigure said. He pulled out a pack of cigarettes from his sleeve, waving them in front of Hatori. "Can I smoke in here?"

"No."

"Yuki? What’s wrong with Yuki? Did something happen to him?" Ayame asked.

"Nothing serious," Shigure responded, shrugging and putting his cigarettes back.

"Just a little trouble with his asthma. I’ll be sure to stop by and check on him soon."

"Did something happen?" Ayame pressed.

"No, no, of course not," Shigure said. "He’s fine, Aya."

"Shigure, be serious with me, please. You’re caring for precious cargo over at that house of yours. God forbid anything happen to my sweet little brother. Oh, I know! I’ll call him! Just to make sure all is well!"

"Aya, there’s really no need—"

Shigure gave a light chuckle as Ayame slammed the door behind him, cutting off the dog midsentence. The sound of his deep booming voice fluttering through the walls every now and again.

"He’s nothing if not persistent," Hatori said.
“I don’t think Yuki appreciates that particular quality in his brother.”

The doctor gave an acknowledging grunt before standing up out of the guest chair and sitting behind his desk, rummaging through the papers that lay there. Shigure turned to watch him work, resting his elbow on the desk and giving him dark, amused eyes.

“What are you staring at?” He didn’t lift his head.

“I was just wondering if I should ask how you’re doing,” the dog said. “Considering it’s such a tender time for you.” Shigure gave mock sympathetic eyes to which Hatori shot back an aggravated glare. “How is Kana, anyway? Yesterday was your anniversary, wasn’t it?”

“I wouldn’t know,” Hatori said flatly, resuming his work. “She’s married with her own life, and it’s none of my concern. And it’s not our anniversary.”

“Aya doesn’t seem to think so.”

“Ayame has his own, very intense way of caring,” Hatori released a sigh. “For all the people in his life.”

“Hm,” Shigure hummed in agreement. He licked his lips, wishing to feel the taste of tobacco between them. He stood and went to the window, opening it slightly so he could light a cigarette, this time without asking the dragon.

“I told you not to smoke in here.”

“Relax, I’ll keep it outside.”

Hatori closed his eyes in exasperation, swiveling his chair back around to his desk to focus on his work, doing his best to keep the temptation that came from the smell of tobacco at bay. He inhaled deeply, keeping his hands steady and working. Ayame’s voice filtered inside the room as deeply and as gently as cigarette smoke.

“It never ceases to amaze me how different you two are.”

Shigure smiled and took another drag.

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The night air finally began to sink into a navy blue, the bright and clear day giving way to the warm and humid night. Kyo tread down the path slowly, letting the dirt crunch under his feet as he made his way back to the house, the smell of the dojo still on his skin. He took a deep breath when the lights from the house echoed shadows onto the path, and he steeled himself for whatever was behind those doors.

Half his family running amuck, Shigure trying to charm Tohru’s bizarre friends, Yuki.

It was all a worst case scenario.

He could feel himself tense at the implication of the summer holidays. His last summer holidays.

The house filled with people he would never see again in this season, in this house, laughing and shouting and doing everything Kyo most days had no patience for. Somewhere deep inside of his chest, however, he knew he should savor whatever interaction was brought his way.

Another part of him thought it was best to shut everyone out.
He didn’t know which would hurt more in the end.

Each day brought a new kind of tired, a new kind of exhaustion, and new kind of acceptance to his fate, to the point where it weighed so heavily on his shoulders he thought his body might break.

But the house filled with these reluctantly familiar faces for the next two weeks? Yuki’s words rang in his head of not being able to find time alone. That burning in his blood that he just couldn’t seem to rid himself of, whether it leaked through anger or rage or against Yuki’s skin, flared in his body again.

That was okay, though.

Because it was just… physical. When the time came when he had to go, he would have worked out the worst tensions in the world, and he would have done it against the warmth of another person. It didn’t need feelings, it didn’t need words, it didn’t need anything emotional or messy. Who even knew why Yuki needed the kind of stress relief, but he did, and Kyo wasn’t going to ask any further than that.

It was best that way. It was best not to dwell.

It was best to just be swept up by those long, thin fingers that left an ice burn on his heated body, and not wonder why it felt so good. Like running blindfolded down a mountain.

The door opened and he looked down to see only one pair of shoes in the entryway. He braced himself as he entered the house.

Yuki sat in the living room, staring idly at the rustling trees that rubbed their leaves together in the breeze. Cicadas still filled the air with their screeches, even as the sun faded, and Yuki seemed to be caught up in the white noise they offered—his stillness not quite as well described by silence. He coughed, giving a groan of irritation as his hand went to his pocket, twiddling with whatever was there.

“I’m home,” useless, disgusting words slipped off Kyo’s tongue before he could stop them. Yuki looked at him with distant eyes that pierced right through him.

“Welcome home.”

“Tohru?”

“She went to walk everybody to the station,” he said, turning his head back to the open doors. “You didn’t run into them on the way back?”

“The dojo is down the other path,” Kyo said.

“Right,” Yuki nodded. Kyo swallowed the silence that fell.

“Where’s Shigure?”

“Main house still,” his bored eyes not moving from what they stared at, and Kyo wondered if there was anything out there worth looking at, at all.

Yuki stood from where he was, and Kyo felt his body hum from such a small and simple gesture. Those frustration piled up into his throat as he waited for Yuki to touch him, waited for him to turn those steel eyes onto him in expressions he would never see outside of whatever bubble they had created for themselves. He waited, and watched as Yuki strode right past him for the stairs.
“Goodnight,” he gave a lazy wave, not even turning his head to look at Kyo.

He watched the rat head up the stairs, his red eyes boring into his back. The heat in his body fell into confusion and filth.

“Wait, wait, hold on. That’s it?” He shouted after him, following him up the stairs. “Today at school you’re all over me, but now that we’re actually home –”

“I’m tired.”

“Bullshit,” Kyo said, pointing a finger at him.

“Fine. Then I’m backing off, like you told me to,” Yuki said with a glare, turning back around so he could finish walking up the stairs.

“Are you kidding me?! That’s what this was about?” Kyo snarled when Yuki didn’t turn around, instead closing the door to his room behind him with a small sound.

Kyo gave an irritated grunt, loud enough for Yuki to hear, and used the side of his fist to punch the wall. He stared down at his feet, the air of the empty house wiring him, feeling like a totally different place when it was just Yuki inside.

Damn that stupid, stubborn, fucking rat.

Kyo slid the door open, slamming it closed behind him.

“What are you doing?” Yuki asked, giving him a cold glare. “I didn’t invite you in here.”

“Why are you walking away from me?!”

“Because I don’t feel like entertaining you right now,” Yuki snapped back. “If you need to get off that badly go do it yourself. I’m busy backing off.”

“Jesus, so because you’re pissed at me you’re gonna throw a fit about it?”

“I’m not throwing a fit. You’re the one yelling like a lunatic and letting yourself into my room!”

“Because you’re acting like a damn girl!”

Yuki’s eyes narrowed harshly, and his expression turned even colder than the one Kyo witnessed when he walked through the doors of the house. It chilled his spine, but he kept his stance tall.

“If I’m such a girl why are you the one who always seems to end up on his back,” Yuki stepped closer, shoving his pointer finger into Kyo’s chest letting a smirk slide onto his lips.

Kyo responded by grabbing the collar of Yuki’s shirt and pulling him close, smashing his lips onto the stunned rat. Yuki’s eyes fell open, and his hands felt limp by his sides before the sensation of Kyo pressing his lips against his ignited a familiar sensation in his body. His eyes fell closed and his arms wrapped around Kyo’s back, letting the cat consume him in his overwhelming kiss.

With Yuki’s lips responding to his, and his anger still fueling his movements, Kyo’s hands went for the hem of Yuki’s shirt, lifting it up and off of him in a frantic motion before pushing the rat onto the bed with a forceful hand.

Kyo watched as Yuki fell back, eyes going wide again at a side he had never seen before in Kyo. Already his breaths were coming short and his pale face was becoming flushed with need. An
expression that had always been controlled before. An expression that had always blurred in his vision as Yuki would bring him closer and closer to the edge. To see it so clearly now, so tangible and arousing, Kyo felt himself inflated by the desire to see more.

Kyo straddled the flustered rat, his knees sinking into the mattress that smelled so much like Yuki, and he pressed the palm of his hand against the crotch of Yuki’s pants. He moaned, looking up at Kyo with unsure eyes. Kyo repeated the motion, his touch far from gentle, and Yuki bit his lip to keep from uttering the noise again.

“Tohru… she’ll be back soon,” Yuki ground out, clenching his teeth as Kyo undid the fly of his pants, shoving down the garment along with his underwear, and leaving him exposed on the bed.

“Then I’ll make this quick,” Kyo said sharply, slipping the pants off Yuki’s legs. His hand found its way back to Yuki’s thigh, bringing it upwards so that he could close his fingers around Yuki’s member.

He hissed under Kyo, his mouth falling open as his eyes clenched shut.

Kyo stared down at him, looking at Yuki for what felt like the first time. He squirmed, and moaned, and was so taken in completely by every move that Kyo made. He pumped Yuki’s cock, unaware of how his own breath was growing shorter and shorter just by the expressions Yuki made. He leaned down to kiss him, feeling his head swell with the noises Yuki would slip into his mouth. His hand would trace over his chest, and he would feel shivers and goosebumps below him.

Is this what he looked like when Yuki hovered above him?

Is this what Yuki craved day after day, when he would push Kyo against a wall, against his bed, against his body?

Is this why the energy felt so tender and hot in the house the minute they were alone?

Kyo couldn’t breathe. He leaned down to capture Yuki’s lips once more, invading his mouth with his tongue as he desperately tried to steal any oxygen he could from Yuki’s lungs. His body hummed, and his blood raced beneath his skin in a way that was so foreign, and so in control.

Kyo unzipped his own pants, not having the patience to fully disrobe himself, before grabbing their cocks together.

They both gave strangled moans at the sensation, feeling the pleasure in unison as Kyo used his calloused and unpracticed hands to bring them closer and closer to climax.

Yuki opened his eyes to stare up at Kyo, and Kyo stared right back into him. He didn’t think he could close his eyes even if he tried, and he wasn’t trying.

He wanted every movement, every expression, every twist, and quiver, and tremble implanted on his pupil, and he wanted to play it over and over in his mind until it was burned over with a new memory.

Kyo gave a grunt against Yuki’s lips, and Yuki gave a deep moan that Kyo could taste.

In a frantic motion Kyo pressed their hips together, forcing a harsher pressure onto their members, copying what Yuki’s hips had done to him on so many occasions. Yuki’s back arched, and his nails scratched down Kyo’s back. He wanted it again. The motion repeated and Yuki let out a string of pleasured mumbles that sounded so close to a curse—words that were so rare on that rat’s lips.
He pushed his hips forward again and this time Yuki brought his whole body up into Kyo, his back arching, his skin fighting to come closer to Kyo’s, his mouth open and filled with sounds that couldn’t quite escape, and his face contorting into an expression that Kyo would never be able to forget. Within seconds, Kyo climaxed as well, hyperaware of how open his eyes were, of how much of Yuki he was taking in as every ounce of energy left his body. The burning need to collapse against Yuki filled his limbs.

He resisted, instead watching how Yuki took in breath after breath, laying bare and exposed below him, with their seed spilled across his stomach. Kyo could feel his ears burn, and with an energy he didn’t know he had, lifted himself up off the bed.

With shaking hands, and clumsy breath, he zipped up his pants and straightened out his clothes. He looked to Yuki, who laid there on the bed, giving Kyo surprised and hazy eyes. He turned around, heading towards the door, opening it slightly before turning to look over his shoulder.

“I’ll tell Tohru you fell asleep,” he said. He closed the door behind him, taking quick steps to his own room and shut the door immediately, sliding down onto the floor and burying his head in hands.

“What the fuck was that?” He growled to himself, his breathing still doing its best to settle itself.

He sat against the wall in the minutes that followed, replaying every little thing about Yuki in his mind. The strikingly silver eyes. The pale, rose kissed lips. The sounds of writhing and pleasure. The feeling of leaving it behind.

He dug his fingernails into his hair and grunted to himself.

He wondered if this was how Yuki always felt when he walked away from him, too.
This is definitely one of my favorite chapters I've written for this story. Awkward boys are my life. I hope you all are enjoying this story so far!

It was sunny.

It hadn’t been sunny for days, and even now the sadistic weather reporter from the TV called for rain in the afternoon. These days had been wearing Kyo out, exhausting him entirely, and keeping him locked up inside a house where the air was thick enough to chew.

But right now it was sunny, and Kyo ran through the bit of daylight that was allowed to him. The familiar feeling of sweat on his brow, and of his legs pounding against solid dirt relaxed him. His jogs were therapeutic, but with rain falling around him all he was left with were his own thoughts and no outlet to escape them.

It had been a rough first week of summer vacation.

He took in deep breaths, allowing his muscles to take in the fresh air and the exercise in the early morning. He sighed, running his hands through his sweat soaked hair.

One week and a long jog was still not enough to get Yuki out of his system. Every look he gave, the way his skin felt under his fingertips, the noises that still rang in his ear. Kyo growled to himself, jogging in place, and shaking the adrenaline out of his legs as best he could.

His body was exhausted, but he wanted to keep going. Keep running and sprinting until every single piece of that damn fucking rat was washed out of him. For good. Forever.

He slowed to a walk, approaching the house and standing outside the front door, looking up at each detail and chip carved into the wood. Each patch in the paper doors. Each mark and scratch from the short years of disproportionate wear and tear. He crouched down so he could regulate his breathing once more. He wasn’t ready to go inside just yet.

“Excuse me?”

Kyo lifted his head, looking over his shoulder.

“Excuse me, sir,” a man in a green uniform approached him, white gloves in place, walking a bicycle beside him. Kyo stood to look the man up and down. “Sohma residence?”

“Yeah, who’s asking?”

“I’m sorry to disturb you, I have your mail for today,” he handed the envelopes over to Kyo with both hands, bowing slightly as he did.

“Oh. Thanks,” Kyo took the mail, looking it over.

“My pleasure! Have a nice day!” Without another word the man hopped onto his bicycle and fled.
down the path, ringing his bell as he did. Kyo watched the figure move out of sight before looking
down at the mail in his hand.

One slim, white envelope with Shigure’s name in typed characters presented itself. A bill, no doubt.
Kyo flipped to the next one idly. A large, manila envelope filled his hands. It bulged with thick and
protruding documents in a way that seemed clumpy, yet still neat. YUKI SOHMA was written on
the back with flawless, careful letters.

Kyo examined the letter, flipping it over again and again, reading the return address with scrunched
up eyebrows.

“The main house?” He mumbled to himself, bringing the envelope up into the light, wondering if he
could read through the paper—

“Anything good?”

“AHHHH!” Kyo jumped, Shigure peering from the front entrance with a wide smile plastered on his
face.

“FUCK, where did you come from?!” Kyo shot at him.

“The house,” Shigure said, pointing behind him innocently. “Aren’t we jumpy today.”

“I’m not jumpy!”

“Sure, sure,” Shigure said with a wave of his hand. He came forward to peer over Kyo’s shoulder.
“Something come in the mail?”

“Here, just take it!” He tossed the mail to the dog, crossing his arms with a huff. Shigure took a
moment to look over the two envelopes, taking the one addressed to him and putting it into his
sleeve. He examined the second.

“Huh, for Yuki,” he commented. Kyo shrugged.

“Whatever, I got you your damn mail—” Shigure dropped the envelope addressed for the Yuki onto
the ground and began to walk away. “Hey, hey! What the hell? What are you doing?”

“What?”

“You can’t just do that to someone’s mail!”

“I can’t?”

“No!”

“But it’s not for me,” he said with a tilt of his head. Kyo clenched his fists.

“What the fuck, have you done this with every damn thing that ain’t yours?” Kyo leaned down to
pick it up, handing it back to Shigure. The dark haired man looked down at the envelope in Kyo’s
hand before looking back up at him.

“Well, what do you want me to do with it?”

“Give it to him!”

“If you’re so concerned about it, why don’t you?” Shigure asked. Kyo snarled.
“Aren’t you the head of this house?! Shouldn’t you do something as fucking simple as take people their mail?”

“You would think!” Shigure said, nodding along enthusiastically with Kyo’s words. Kyo let out another shout of aggravation.

“Whatsoever! I’ll give it to him myself if you’re gonna be such a pain about it!”

Kyo stormed past him, stomping into the house and up the stairs. Shigure turned to look at him stalking away. A smirk spread onto his lips as the cat fell out of sight. Shaking his head, he stared up at the fresh blue sky of the early morning and watched as gray clouds began to sneak up into the edge of the sky.

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It was too early. Way too early. There were not enough words in the human brain to describe how early it was. And yet.

**Knock knock knock knock knock.**

Maybe if he ignored it, it would go away.

**Knock knock knock knock knock knock knock knock knock knock knock knock.**

Yuki groaned, looking at the clock on his bedside table, before forcing himself out of bed. His groggy eyes and lethargic body slumped to his door where the offensive knocking would not stop. Tohru would never be so rude, and Kyo hadn’t talked to him in days. That left Shigure. Exactly the kind of person who would choose to be so completely annoying so early in the morning. With a growl he opened the door.

“You know, they call it vacation for a reason—oh,” Yuki stared back at Kyo. The presence of the orange haired teen immediately pulling his body from slumber like a bucket of cold water. Kyo didn’t look him in the eye, instead focusing on his hand that rested against the door frame that surely had seconds before been tapping incessantly on his door. Yuki did his best to form his face into a scowl. “It’s early.”

“Yeah,” Kyo nodded. He formed his face into its own halfhearted snarl. “It is.”

Yuki crossed his arms, suddenly very aware of his bed head and wrinkled pajamas that bunched around him awkwardly. Though not as aware as the way Kyo’s skin glowed under the sheen of light sweat, his scent invading his room that already held lingering memories of their previous encounter.

“Did you need something?”

“No. Yeah. You have mail.”

Kyo shoved the letter into Yuki’s chest, letting his arm fall once the rat had captured it by its sides. He looked down onto it with a curious and guarded look.

“Thanks.”

“Yeah,” Kyo nodded. “Okay.”

With that he walked away, leaving Yuki to stare at his retreating back as he stormed down the stairs. With a breath that had built up into his chest like a brick wall, Yuki exhaled and closed the door.
That was not at all the wakeup call he was expecting.

“We were informed that it’s courteous to call the owner of this household to inform you of Tohru’s wellbeing. Therefore, this is a ransom call. I won’t go any lower than 10 million yen.”

“That’s okay, Hanajima. I feel as though she’s in good hands,” Shigure gave a disconcerted laugh through the phone.

“I see. In that case she will be returned to you the next day.”

“Really, girls. Have fun and enjoy your vacation.”

“Tohru, they said we can keep you,” Shigure could hear a bubbly laugh in the background of the call and he smiled. “One moment. I have proof of life.”

Shigure waited patiently as the phone was transferred over, a smirk still on his lips from the sudden afternoon call.

“Shigure! I’m so sorry I won’t be there to make dinner!”

“Don’t worry about it, dear Tohru! You can’t feel guilt for living out your summer vacation!”

“Will you all be okay to find something to eat?”

“Of course, of course! Have fun with your friends,” he ensured. “I’m sure we’ll be able to figure something out.”

“Okay, if you’re sure. Thanks, Shigure!”

“Have fun!”

Shigure hung up the phone on the table, smiling at the girl’s bubbly disposition. For all he knew, she deserved a bit of a break from this house. His eyes traveled above him to the ceiling where an unnatural quiet overtook the house. With a fixed grin, he picked up the phone again and dialed.

“Hari! …Now, now, don’t sound so pleased to hear from me.”

Yuki-

I’ve sent you three different brochures for the universities to which you’ll apply. The dates for the entrance exams are also included, so put them down on your calendar and don’t forget. Start studying now. I won’t have you ending up in a university as disreputable as the high school you chose. Stop wasting your time and start thinking about your future. I’ll call soon about your job at the main house. You’ll need to start working under Master Akito if you want to become head of this house one day.

Mom

Yuki released a sigh. He hunched over the letter that he had laid out on his desk.

Those precise and elegant letters were among the few things he remembered so clearly about his time living with his mother. The smell of her perfume, the way her pin straight hair would part over her
thin shoulders. Her smile when she would leave him behind.

He hadn’t been in Shigure’s house that long, but being apart from her felt so easy that the distance between them seemed natural. As if this was how it had always been.

For that reason the letter had gone untouched on his desk for most of the day. Something as simple as handwriting doing enough to stir his deep seated anxiety. He changed, he brushed his teeth, and washed his face. He greeted Tohru, he ate the breakfast she prepared. He worked on his summer homework. He watched as the summer rain beat down on his window, alternating from a friendly drizzle to a relentless downpour. He resisted the urge to smoke the cigarettes that had been pressed under his mattress. He passed by Kyo in the hall and refused to leave his room since.

“You have a knack for terrible timing, mother,” he said to the letter, groaning into his hands before reluctantly picking up one of the brochures. Small. Exclusive. Pretentious. Close to home. Yuki could already feel his chest begin to tighten.

Knock knock.

“Ms. Honda? It’s open,” he called to the door, slipping the pamphlet under the opened envelope.

“Afraid it’s just me,” Shigure said, peeking his head into the room. “I’m here to tell you Tohru’s been kidnapped.”

“What?” Yuki asked with an impatient look.

“Her friends have abducted her for the night, so there’s no dinner. You boys will have to fend for yourselves.”

“Oh. Wait, where are you going?”

“The main house,” Shigure said. “Hatori and I are going to have ourselves our own little sleepover.”

Yuki rolled his eyes, suddenly feeling a pang of sympathy for Hatori.

“What’s this you’re looking at?” Shigure asked, striding into the room completely. Yuki raised his hand to cover up the rest of the brochures but Shigure was sure to snag one before he could.

“Do you invade everyone’s privacy like this?”

“College information?” Shigure let his eyes wander over the papers, a smirk falling onto his lips as he looked over to Yuki. The rat looked away.

“My mother sent them to me.”

“I guess your mother doesn’t know about our little bet.”

Yuki stood from his desk and snatched the pamphlet out of Shigure’s hands so that he could bury it under the pile of papers at his desk.

“Would you just leave?”

“Alright, alright,” Shigure said with a laugh as Yuki walked him to the hallway. “Call if you need anything.”

Yuki shut the door, staring at it blankly as this day tried to process in his system. He walked over to his bed, falling down on it as he tried to control the anxious lump in his throat. He looked to his desk,
Shigure’s invading comments only leaving an uneasy and guilty feeling residing in his gut.

He covered his eyes with his hands and sunk into his bed, his restless and tired eyes flashing back to the object of his inability to sleep.

Things were strange between them now. They hadn’t fought and had barely talked since Kyo had shown a more dominant side in this… relationship. If he could even call it that. Yuki let it be, he needed his own time to recover from exposing such a vulnerable side of himself. A side that arched and responded and moaned so easily because he had been so aware that every touch and stroke and kiss came from Kyo. It wracked his nerves to think of how he looked through Kyo’s eyes, of what came through his head as he watched with such a focused and intense gaze as Yuki climaxed under his inexperienced, yet demanding hands.

But he pushed that down.

Because in the end, it was Kyo who had made the first move.

That alone left Yuki reeling.

From the beginning of this whole turbulent shift in gears in their rivalry Yuki had made the first move. Had given the first kiss, had let his fingers be the first to touch. Yuki, the one to always act on such a crippling desire to have Kyo as fevered as him. But this time it was Kyo.

Kyo who got angry at the thought of being alone with him but not being touched.

Kyo who couldn’t stop himself from pushing him back onto the bed.

Kyo who watched with lust drenched eyes as his hands scorched his skin.

Kyo who in so few words admitted he wanted Yuki just as badly as Yuki wanted him.

The rain fell more intensely, even as the clouds broke and allowed unfitting strands of light. It brought drumming taps against the roof to play a repetitive melody. The weather was determined to give off one more gust of the humid downpour before retreating to come back another day. He coughed.

He coughed again. And again.

He sat up, trying to control the fit in his lungs that was being out sung by the persistent and heavy shower outside his window. After a few minutes he was able to get his coughing under control, letting out a few shaky but controlled breaths.

The rain stopped. He looked to his window and smiled.

--------------------------------

Why was he at the kitchen table? Statistically this was the worst place to be. He could be in his room or on the roof. Easy, escapable places that held no promise of running into anyone. Though, the roof was slippery and soaked and he hated that. And his room had no air conditioning, and opening the balcony door to let in the air was not an option in this weather that couldn’t seem to make up its mind. Sure. So he sat in the kitchen. Which should have been the logical place to be.

Yet here he was, lying on his back in the summer heat, soaking up the breeze from the fan, still lethargic from the rainstorm that hadn’t quite left his bones. Heart racing indefinitely.
He stared up at the ceiling, watching the shadows grow longer and not quite having the energy to turn on the lights just yet. He was comfortable here. Wired, but comfortable.

Until a head of gray hair popped into his vision.

He forced himself to sit up, snapping around to look at Yuki who chuckled a bit, but took his post at the entryway. Casually he flipped the lights on, and Kyo found he was cemented into his seat, staring back into those deep gray eyes that had held him captive so many times before. He took a deep breath, every hair standing on edge.

“What were you doing on the floor?” Yuki asked.

“Uh, comfortable. It’s comfortable,” Kyo sputtered, beating himself up for letting his words get caught up in his throat at all. “The A/C doesn’t reach my room.”

“Ah,” he nodded. “Just put a fan in there.”

“Yeah, good idea,” Kyo literally wanted to punch himself in the face.

He turned around, his back facing Yuki as he sat at the kitchen table properly. As if it were any normal and not sexually charged encounter with his undefinable enemy. He tapped his fingers on the table, wondering if turning around would make him go away. And if Yuki did go away, he wondered if his stomach would ever stop dropping three feet into his knees.

Why was this so much worse? Why all of the sudden had this become awkward? Yuki had seen him in… well, plenty of situations before their last encounter. Yuki had seen him moan and writhe and gasp. And that was humiliating. But he could accept that. Because he was used to being humiliated by the rat. He was used to losing the fight. He was used to that rage that flared up in defense of all that. He was used to being mad.

But whatever happened, whatever snapped in him and begged him to take control, whatever it was that turned the tables for the first time ever in the history of his even knowing Yuki… that was a part of him admitting that he liked it.

That whatever had been going on had been different from their bickering, from their hand to hand fights that sent Kyo flying. Whatever was happening between them Kyo wanted it, so it couldn’t be the same. And to see Yuki enjoy it just as much, to see him willingly submit like that…

Kyo shook his head, doing his best to keep the heat out of his face, realizing he hadn’t let his shoulders relax at all since Yuki had entered the room. Waiting for that first touch, waiting for that first heated look. He didn’t know if he had it in him right now to be the one who opened that door again. The head strain was too much.

But if Yuki did.

Fuck, why did he have to sit at the kitchen table?

Yuki walked around the table, standing against the wall so that he was facing Kyo. Guard down, eyes almost gentle, doing little to approach him too closely. Kyo looked up at him, waiting for him to say or do anything.

“Tohru’s out,” Yuki said, looking away from him.

“Yeah.”
“So is Shigure,” Yuki added, Kyo nodded, his eyes narrowing to give Yuki a confused glare.

“Do you want to get some dinner?”

Kyo felt as though he had been hit by a bus.

“What?” He asked, as if it were the most foreign concept in the world. “Dinner? Like… Like a da —”

“No. Nope. I’m hungry,” Yuki shook his head, not letting the disdain soaked word leave Kyo’s mouth. “And I figured you wouldn’t have the energy to cook.”

“Yeah, and I don’t really got the energy to spend on you either,” Kyo said through suspicious eyes.

“Fine, then I’ll cook.”

“Like hell you will.”

“Fine, then I’ll pay.”

“THAT’S A FUCKING DATE,” Kyo pointed an accusing finger.

“Then you can pay,” Yuki said with a smirk.

“Listen, I’ll pay for my shit and you can pay for yours!”

“That’s alright by me,” Yuki said heading towards the entrance way to put on his shoes.

“And it’s not a date!”

“I never said it was.”

Kyo huffed, stomping behind him to put on his shoes. Yuki waited patiently for him, opening the door for him and locking it behind them as they left. They carried on the path from the house.

Kyo felt his stomach flip.

He was going on a fucking date with Yuki.

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Most of the walk of silent, yet there was a familiar element to it. They had walked side by side before. To school, to pick up Tohru, on trips to the main house where Shigure’s nonstop chattering would cause them to speed up and leave the dog behind. How did they handle it then? Did they talk? Did they look at each other? Even for just a moment?

It was all a mess in Yuki’s mind, even though they now had years of practice acting civilized around each other. Yet a few months had caused that whole delicately built acquaintanceship to crumble like a house of cards. It left Yuki to wonder what was in its place—if anything was. He resisted the urge to sigh, and resisted the feeling of missing times when things weren’t good between them but comfortable. Where nothing needed to be said, but nothing was said.

Yuki snuck a glance at Kyo as the dirt under their feet changed to concrete, watching as street lights flickered on in the dusky glow of the summer night, reflected in the shiny gloss the rain water left behind on the roads. The area was residential and peaceful and kept to itself past a certain hour in the day. A perfect place to put a house that couldn’t decide if it wanted to be hidden.
“Where are we going?” Kyo asked, keeping his hands shoved deep in his pockets as he stared straight ahead.

“I have a place in mind, it’s just at the end of this block,” Yuki continued to lead the way, bringing them to a small restaurant with a tiny wooden sign by its door. Cradled into the edge of the neighborhood came the wafting smell of food and when Yuki opened the door Kyo could feel the soft caress of heat and humidity against his face—trying its best to be calmed by the overworked fan in the corner of the room.

It was small, with only a few tables and fewer customers making quiet conversation, and Kyo followed suit when Yuki took off his shoes and entered easily.

“Yuki!”

Kyo snapped his head up at the mention of the rat’s name, seeing a thin, tanned, older man walking towards him with a bright smile. He gave the boy a hearty pat on the back and Kyo almost snorted at Yuki’s awkward smile back.

“How’ve you been? I haven’t seen you in quite some time. Sit! Sit!” The man’s voice was booming and punctuated his sentences with sharp laughs and the clapping together of his hands. The two boys did as they were told and sat by the small, fogged up window that they couldn’t even see out of when they sat.

“I’m good, Mr. Negishi,” Yuki responded with a smile.

“What a polite boy you are. I wish my daughter had found a good boy like you. And Gure? Where’s that old man gone off to? You’ve replaced him with a younger, shinier model here, I see,” the man put a hand on Kyo’s head ruffling the hair too suddenly for Kyo to react. Yuki gave a small laugh.

“This is another cousin of ours. Shigure had other plans,” Yuki said. Mr. Negishi nodded with a loud acknowledging hum.

“Be sure you bring him next time, for now I’ll get the usuals!” The man tossed a dishcloth over his shoulder, shouting to someone else in the kitchen, which was covered by a thin, slit cloth. Yuki chuckled looking over to Kyo who had an almost perplexed look on his face.

“What are the usuals?” He asked skeptically.

“Leek soup.”

“What?!”

“I’m kidding,” Yuki said with a smile. Kyo slumped back in his chair at Yuki’s chuckles, crossing his arms. “You’ll like it, even with your picky tastes.”

“I’m don’t have—” Kyo stopped himself from flaring up at Yuki’s tone free of malice or spite. He rolled his eyes, calming his voice instead. “How come they know you here?”

“We had to do something before Tohru,” Yuki said with a shrug. “Don’t let Shigure fool you, his cooking might be worse than mine.”

“I don’t think that’s possible,” Kyo said, finally loosening up a bit as he relaxed in the cluttered, but cozy atmosphere. He looked around at the uncleaned tables, the patchy walls, the steam that spilled over from the thin curtains that covered the kitchen.
“You’ve never tried my cooking,” Yuki pointed out.

“And with luck I’ll never have to,” Kyo retorted. Yuki looked down at the table, an awkward air falling between them at the strange reminder of what little time Kyo had left.

“I want to learn,” Yuki said suddenly. “To cook, I mean.”

“Start with putting rice in the cooker,” Kyo said with a snort. “You do that right, maybe you can move on to some of the big boy steps.”

“I’m not too worried. You learned after all,” again Kyo was tempted to slam his fist and shout something back, but Yuki still gave him that soft, teasing smile. One he didn’t quite know what to do with.

Yuki watched as Kyo kept his gaze away from him and he gave a somewhat exasperated laugh.

“What?”

“I just feel as if this is all a little backwards.” Kyo arched an eyebrow at him, still not uncrossing his arms or letting his guard down. “Usually you get to know someone _before_ the…”

Kyo narrowed his eyes, daring him to finish the sentence.

“Physical stuff,” Yuki watched as Kyo’s face turned a slight shade of red, Yuki almost feeling a little flustered at his own words.

“What you’re saying makes it sound like we’re on a date. Which we’re not. So, there. Nothing backwards,” Kyo said simply.

“We’re not on a date,” Yuki reassured.

“Nope.”

“Not at all.”

“Right.”

“But I can’t get to know you at all?”

“Hell no.”

“Why not?”

“’Cause that would be a fucking date,” Kyo finished adamantly.

“Not even one thing? As mundane as wanting to learn to cook?” Yuki asked, his gentle prodding wearing Kyo down more than he realized. Kyo uncrossed his arms, resting his elbow on the table and opening his mouth to speak before a young boy in an apron, no more than thirteen years old, placed two small glasses of water before them.

Yuki nodded to the boy as a thank you, who retreated back to the noise of the kitchen that echoed the clanging of pans, and the senseless conversations of the very few employees.

Kyo took a long sip of his water before putting it back on the table with an aggravated sigh, “what’s there to know anyway?”
Yuki gave a small laugh, “I’m sure you could figure something out about yourself.”

“Yeah, but why should I?” Kyo gave a suspicious glare.

“Because I’m curious.”

Yuki immediately regretted the words as soon as they passed his lips. He was reminded of the first time he kissed Kyo, when his lips didn’t respond and his body went still. He was reminded of lying on his bed, looking at his ceiling, still feeling the weight of Kyo on top of him.

He didn’t flinch. He never had before.

Kyo kept his gaze on Yuki, treading lightly, crossing his arms again as he tapped his foot.

“When I got nothing else to do,” Kyo started. He stopped, the most mundane facts only leaving his tongue haltingly before Yuki. “Like, I mean it. Nothing else.” Yuki nodded. “I read some of those books up in my room.”

“Shigure’s books?” Yuki asked. Kyo shrugged.

“Sometimes. So there. Satisfied?”

“What do you think of them?” Yuki asked. Kyo arched an eyebrow.

“What, now this is a fucking book club?”

“I think ‘this’ could make time for it, seeing as how it’s not being tied up with being a date.”

Kyo cracked a small smile at that, uncrossing his arms again to take another sip of water. He gave a noncommittal shrug.

“They’re alright.”

A slight drizzle began to fall outside the restaurant, pacing itself into a steady, light rain that pattered against the pavement outside the restaurant. A couple opened the door with a loud “thank you” to the kitchen, allowing the smell of summer drizzle to mix into the restaurant. Kyo slumped slightly in his chair.

“You know most of them are about the curse,” Yuki said cautiously. “About… family tragedies.”

“Yeah, I figured when one or two Sohma ghost stories ended up in the damn books,” Kyo said. “At first they were just there and somethin’ to do.”

“And now?” Yuki asked.

“They help,” Kyo answered honestly. Simply. “With what’s comin’.”

“Here you are!” Mr. Negishi plopped the two plates of food down in front of the boys with a wide smile. “Hey, hey, when are you going to be old enough to drink?”

“Still a couple years to go, I’m afraid,” Yuki said with the best cordial smile he could manage, his eyes not able to leave Kyo who stared back at him. The man gave a long lamenting sigh.

“You come to me first when you can. First drink is on me!”

Yuki nodded, giving a small thank you as the man walked away, back to the kitchen.
Silence fell, but Kyo broke Yuki’s gaze to split his chopsticks and begin eating. Yuki didn’t think he could take a single bite.

_They help with what’s coming._

He had said such a phrase as if he were talking about the weather. As if he were talking about summer classes. As if he were talking about the food in front of him.

Had he been sad, had he been angry, had he been hurt…

Yuki had never seen Kyo resigned.

He looked down at his food, trying to force his appetite back. He shook his head.

“It’s not right,” Yuki said.

“Huh?” Kyo asked between bites.

“What happens to you,” his gray eyes colliding with cooled red ones. “It’s not okay.”

Kyo put down his chopsticks and gave another skeptical glare.

“Would a’ thought you’d be happy to have me out of your hair for good,” Kyo said.

Yuki did his best to try and hold a glare, but it didn’t work. His face couldn’t contort to anger even if he willed it to.

“Did you build me up to be that big of a monster in your head?” Yuki asked. Kyo averted his gaze.

“Didn’t you?”

Yuki sighed, turning his gaze away, as well.

“I guess I did.”

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Kyo opened the door to the house quickly, trying to flee the light drizzle that had followed them home, and flicked on the lights to illuminate the entryway. The rain pattered out towards the end of the night, but even with an umbrella keeping out the sinister sprinkles of condensation, Kyo found himself drained and languid. Yuki kept his pace quick on the path, and Kyo had opted for the rhythmic motion of watching their feet tap onto the damp earth.

It was strange walking on the path, not seeing the bright lights from the windows and thin paper doors leading them through the front door. But it had been a strange night anyway, and when Kyo took off his shoes and turned on the lights in the hall, everything still seemed dark. Every movement and sound seemed highlighted.

Yuki took his shoes off, as well, closing the door behind him as he made a small hum to himself.

“I guess Shigure really is staying the night at the main house,” he said. Kyo peered over, seeing their shoes lying side by side so casually. “I’m surprised Hatori didn’t kick him out of his house.”

“If he can handle that dumb snake he can handle anyone,” Kyo said idly, walking up the stairs with his hands still in his pockets.
“I would say Shigure can be worse than my brother,” Yuki followed behind him.

“You’ve gotta be joking,” he turned to face Yuki, a look of disbelief plaguing him as they stood at the top of the stairs. “No way is that true.”

“You just say that because you can’t handle him.”

“You can’t either!”

“No, definitely not,” Yuki agreed with an exasperated laugh at the thought of his brother. “But at least he listens to Hatori. I don’t think Shigure listens to anyone at all.”

“Yeah, no kidding,” Kyo said with a sigh, crossing his arms. Yuki gave another gentle laugh, lingering in the soft yellow light that broke free from the downstairs hallway. Kyo swallowed, hating himself for finding any part of the scene alluring.

He gave a departing nod, reaching for his door before Yuki reached out to grab his wrist, wrapping his fingers around the tan skin. Kyo looked behind him.

“Can I come in?”

And Kyo hated that he hadn’t been able to escape. He knew once the house had grown still, and the heavy summer night had settled, anything Yuki said or did would have made him burn. And this time he was saying, asking, wondering, forcing Kyo to respond in a way that wasn’t just with his breathy grunts and a forced apathy. Every nod and every yes forcing Kyo to remember what it was he wanted.

Or who.

“Sure,” Kyo snatched his wrist back but left the door open for Yuki to walk inside.

The small room was bordered with bulky bookshelves, stuffed with books and references and papers and old manuscripts from the writer that lived just below. But the floor was clean, and the desk was neat, and the futon wasn’t done up perfectly, but looked as if he had taken time to clear the wrinkles from the sheets.

“You keep everything so clean,” Yuki said.

“I don’t got much stuff,” Kyo walked over to his closet, removing his shirt so he could replace it with a dry one. He hated the feeling of wet clothing. “Besides, compared to that dump of a room anything would be clean.”

Kyo grabbed a shirt, ready to pull it over his head when pale hands came into his view, snatching the shirt and letting it drop on the floor. He had done it again. Sneaked up on him, trapped him, touched him. The soft, unsure air shifted between them as Yuki placed his hands on Kyo’s waist, spinning him around so he could slam his lips against his.

The cat responded immediately, somehow finding more comfort in urgency and desire and want than in conversation and staring and curiosity. Whatever that had been, it was dangerous, and somehow, even as Yuki bit his lip and grabbed his wrist roughly so that he could fling him onto his futon, this was safer.

Yuki straddled Kyo, running his hands up his chest as he took his lips into another frantic kiss, Kyo’s hands going to bury themselves in Yuki’s hair, grabbing desperately and making the rat grunt into his mouth. Yuki bit down onto his ear, down his jaw, onto his neck, and down onto his collarbone.
A familiar rhythm started between their hips, that friction that they had come to know so well building between them as Kyo thrust his clothed hips up into Yuki’s. Kyo laid his head back, closing his eyes and letting the beginnings of pleasure consume him like the rain that still dripped against the window. It made his limbs lazy, but it made the feelings Yuki sparked through him all the more defined. Each sensation billowed through his skin, raising his pulse as he clenched his eyes shut.

He reached up, sliding his hands onto the pale milky skin of Yuki’s back, bringing his shirt up further and further until Yuki pulled away with dark, steel eyes and breaths that tumbled from his parted lips, to take off his shirt and toss it away into the humid night air that engulfed Kyo’s room.

His hands went to Kyo’s belt, forcing it out of its loops and taking frantic fingers to Kyo’s pants. In a swift motion Yuki had rid Kyo of his pants, leaving him bare below him. Kyo looked down as Yuki’s hand began to tease up his thigh, ready to wrap those fingers around his erect member before he could feel Yuki’s weight beginning to come down on him again.

Before it could register Kyo placed a firm hand on Yuki’s chest.

“You too,” he demanded. Yuki looked down at him with serious eyes and nodded. Standing for a brief moment so that he could shed his clothes entirely. Kyo watched as the dim light from the window outlined Yuki. It softened his edges, made him seem ethereal in the light, as if he became part of the thick, heated air that caressed his skin.

Yuki laid down on top of him, the two boys hissing when their bare members touched. Their legs intertwined, Yuki’s breath on his cheek as he used his fingers to bring them together again, his other arm holding him up only slightly.

Kyo thrust his hips up into Yuki, and Yuki responded grinding into Kyo against the thin barrier that separated him from the hard floor. Kyo moaned, a deep noise that came from his rain relaxed muscles, and he could hear Yuki groan in response. The cat gave another sloppy and rushed thrust into Yuki’s hand that heled their cocks together, wanting even more of that friction before he felt Yuki slow in response.

“Wait,” he whispered into Kyo’s ear. “I want to try something.”

Kyo watched with hazy eyes in the near pitch black room as Yuki pulled away from him, the cat giving a grunt at the lack of contact. Yuki released their members, bringing his hand up to his mouth, taking two fingers in his mouth and sucking them thoroughly. It was an oddly erotic sight, and Kyo found himself fixated on the fingers that rolled around between his lips, seeing that pink tongue slide between the digits.

Kyo licked his lips, watching as Yuki removed the soaking fingers from his mouth, trailing them down his stomach, lightly touching his member, his thighs, before he could feel one begin to enter his hole.

“Woah, woah, woah, hey, what the hell are you doing?” Kyo demanded, suddenly sitting up in an attempt to escape the strange and terrifying rush a simple touch gave him. Yuki put a hand on his shoulder, coaxing him to lay back down fully.

“Relax. Trust me,” his voice dripped like honey from those pink lips and Kyo hated that he found himself reflexively following the advice as the slightest bit of tension released from his body.

He laid back down on the futon, feeling as Yuki’s finger pushed past the ring of muscle in his ass, stretching him in such a bizarre and intimate way. Kyo breathed through his nose as Yuki worked the finger inside him, pushing it further in, and bending it so that it rubbed against his inner walls. It
didn’t feel bad, but his torso couldn’t seem to relax.

“Why am I the one getting the finger up the ass?”

“You can do it to me if you want to,” Yuki said, amusement flush in his voice.

“Hell no, I’m not putting a finger up there,” he responded shortly. Still feeling how his upper body clenched at the sensation.

“Whatever you say.”

Yuki crooked his finger forward again inside of him and suddenly he could feel his whole body react to such a sharpened sense of pleasure rushing through his body. He opened his mouth, giving a loud groan as his back arched. He could almost feel that stupid rat giving him a smirk.

He whipped his gaze up to Yuki, who indeed had his lips crooked into a devious smile, leaning down a bit further to grab Kyo’s lips with his own, rubbing his finger against that spot once more, cause Kyo to arch again, breathing heavily against the kiss. Again he could feel his finger press against that spot inside him and a deep moan detached from his chest, causing Kyo to bite his knuckle in response.

Yuki put his lips to Kyo’s ear.

“No one’s in the house,” he said in a deep whisper, teasing that area so that Kyo gave a sharp inhale through his nose. Yuki’s other hand went to Kyo’s fist that was trapped between Kyo’s teeth and pulled it away. “You don’t have to hold back.”

He added another finger, both digits working inside Kyo’s ass, rubbing and teasing and pressing against him in a way that brought out deep, humiliating moans that came from a sensation Kyo had never experienced. His fingers were numb, his legs were jelly, his chest felt as though it might explode, and his cock felt so hard he didn’t know how much longer he could take this.

Yuki wrapped his fingers around his member, still working his fingers inside of Kyo to stimulate him, and the combined feeling was too much. With a loud, almost painful, cry Kyo came on Yuki’s hand, arching his back hard, and collapsing into a pile of skin and bones that surely weren’t connected together.

A moment passed and all Kyo could do was breathe in and out, staring at the pitch black ceiling of his room. Yuki’s fingers slid out of him and he was left with an odd feeling of emptiness, though his body finally relaxed. He looked up at Yuki, who was still poised on top of him. His breathing hard, his cheeks flushed, his chest rising up and down rapidly.

“Did you finish?” Kyo asked, his mouth still struggling slightly to form words.

“No,” he shook his head. “That’s okay.”

Kyo’s face contorted into a snarl, a sour feeling resting in his stomach at Yuki’s selflessness. He growled, running a fevered hand through his hair.

“Fuck it.”

He grabbed Yuki’s arm, pulling him down fully on top of him so he could roll him over so that Kyo was on top. With the chaotic movements that came with post orgasmic bliss, Kyo shoved a hand onto Yuki’s chest, forcing him to lay back as Kyo lowered his mouth on to Yuki’s member.
Though his body demanded rest from the drizzle and from whatever the fuck Yuki just did he kept his mouth working up and down the erect cock, licking and sucking until he could hear those same uninhibited moans coming from Yuki.

That’s what he wanted.

He peered up to see Yuki’s face, taken off guard and mixing with a raw arousal, as he watched Kyo through half lidded eyes, and a mouth that hung open to allow his own groans to escape him. Kyo worked his tongue up his member, licking the tip, before bringing as much as he could into his mouth again, hollowing his cheeks and enticing another deep cry from Yuki’s lips.

He hadn’t done this before, they hadn’t done this before. But he had been curious, always (reluctantly) aroused by the way Yuki’s tongue would work against his, the way their mouths would bruise and suck and lick. And after last week, silently wondering what he would have to do to make the fucking rat make those noises again.

He had found it.

“Kyo stop, I’m—” Yuki interrupted himself with another throaty moan, though Kyo heeded the warning, giving one last full lick before using his hand to slide up and down his cock until Yuki came hard.

The release left Yuki lying on his back, half off of Kyo’s futon, half allowing the fabric of the sheets to absorb the sweat that broke off his skin. Kyo wiped his hand on the top of the sheet before crashing down next to Yuki, finally allowing his body the recovery it demanded.

The two laid there, side by side, staring up at the ceiling, breathing deeply, soaking in each other’s company. No one making any move to walk away.

After a moment Yuki turned his head lazily to look at Kyo and laughed.

“What?” Kyo asked on a breath.

“I can’t believe you won’t put a finger up there but you’ll put your mouth on that,” Yuki laughed, turning his head back up to the night soaked sky.

“Shut up, don’t make me kick the shit out of you,” Kyo said lazily, closing his eyes.

“I’m not moving,” Yuki said, his words cutting through the silence.

“Whatever,” Kyo responded. “Stay if you need to catch your breath.”

They both let out a soft laugh before sleep overtook them both.
Chapter Notes

I started posting this fic about four weeks behind the FF version and now we're all caught up. LOVELY. Basically now that we're all caught up those few who have been tuning in to this ridiculous and lengthy little piece will now have to suffer the same updating anomalies as those who read on FF. My apologies in advance.

Anyway, this is the last of the summer chapters (besides the next intermission chapter), and I hope you enjoyed these two seasons so far! It occurred to me that I haven't thanked my beta on here yet who is the lovely Rollingoffheads on fanfiction but to me she's just Matty the wonder editor. If you're reading this let it be known that I love each and every single one of you. Intimately.

Extensively.

7:16 AM.

At first, Yuki couldn't process the number that shone in bright red beside his face. He felt rested and fogged, and cemented down into place. He could feel the hard floor pressing into his arm that spilled over the futon, and in the summer morning he felt a slight chill.

This wasn’t his bed. He had become acutely aware of that from the moment he first opened his eyes, but sleep controlled lethargy wouldn’t allow him to do anything with that information.

He watched the clock that stood firmly in the way of his vision.

7:17 AM.

It hit him. Kyo’s skin, Kyo’s lips, Kyo’s tongue exploring him completely. The sharp edges of his figure tearing through the night air. God, the memory swept him up like a tornado, like a tidal wave, and washed him up onto the shore of Kyo’s bed. He closed his eyes, savoring the feeling of the wrinkled sheets, of the stale air in the cramped room. Of Kyo surrounding every single inch of the oxygen he breathed.

He shook his head, turning over gently to be faced with Kyo’s broad, tanned, back. The expanse of his skin overtaking his vision like a full blank canvas. He reached a finger up and gently let it slide down slowly, through eyes that couldn’t fully open.

He needed to leave.

Whatever this was, it was dangerous. And if he fell asleep again, he knew he wouldn’t be able to wake up before the early rising cat. Or before Shigure and Tohru returned from their overnight trips. That thought was terrifying enough, and most likely what allowed him to wake up this early anyway. He could sleep in his own bed. It was comfier and bigger and not in this room.

As quietly as he could, he pushed himself up and pulled on his underwear, slipping on his button up shirt without bothering to fasten it up. He looked down at Kyo for another second, his sleeping form still and peaceful. His usually furrowed brow now relaxed and carefree. His body kept tight and still
into its own area of the futon. It was gorgeous and it was rare. And as the sunlight spilled down onto Kyo he knew it was a sight he would most likely never be allowed again.

He opened the door, closing it softly behind him, clutching his pants to his chest so that even the fabric couldn’t make sound, and carefully started his long journey across the hall.

“Good morning!”

Yuki froze. His eyes clenched shut as the vile words cut through his system. With a hesitant turn of his head he looked down at the base of the stairs where the cheery sound originated.

“Why don’t you get changed and join me down in my office.”

Shigure walked away, bright grin on his face, and Yuki felt his stomach drop. He doubted he would get another wink of sleep for as long as he lived.

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Paper doors had never been so terrifying before. The whole house felt thin and exposed, and with each footstep that creaked or echoed in his ear, Yuki could feel himself becoming more and more humiliated. He took a deep breath, looking over his shoulder, hoping Kyo was still sleeping soundly upstairs. With a clammy hand Yuki slid the door of Shigure’s office open, a defensive glare now fully awakened in his shell shocked body.

“You’ll be the first to know,” Shigure said with a shake of his head, smile still in place. “What happened to that cheery bit of optimism from a few months ago?”

“Why aren’t you at Hatori’s?”

“I cancelled! Decided to come back home after dinner.”

The biting realization dawned, and Yuki’s empty stomach turned as his skin leaked all the color from his face.

“You were here?” He asked through his teeth. “All night?!”

“I had a hunch,” Shigure said with a dark smile. “I don’t think I’ve ever been so right in my life. I’m surprised my house didn’t come down.”

“You’re a disgusting man,” Yuki spat.

“Maybe, and that’s a burden I’ll have to bare for the rest of my life,” Shigure grabbed a cigarette from his pack with an amused grin, placing it between his curved lips. He extended his hand offering one to the rat. Yuki gave a firm shake of his head. Shigure shrugged. “Either way, it had gotten obvious.”

“Obvious?” Yuki felt winded, taking a seat on the other side of Shigure’s desk. “Does anybody else know?”

Shigure lit his cigarette, looking over the flame at Yuki as if he had asked what the ocean looked like. He gave a laugh. “No. People wouldn’t know what obvious was if it bit them on the arm.”

The flame of Shigure’s lighter flicked away with a sudden sound that was enough to startle Yuki in his frantic state. He flinched slightly in his seat before slumping with a deep sigh.

“I can’t believe this,” Yuki buried his face in his hands. “I can’t believe you heard us.”
“I don’t know why you’re so embarrassed, Yuki,” Shigure said with a grin, blowing the smoke out so that it danced around the office air. “You know, generations back homosexuality was encouraged among the zodiac. It was believed to keep the bonds stronger and pure. There are even versions of the story that suggest the priest and the cat were lovers.”

Yuki peered up at Shigure, listening with a reserved interest though the humiliation didn’t fade from his bones.

“So, what Kyo and I are doing,” Yuki started with a skeptical voice. “That would be considered…?”

“An absolute worst case scenario,” Shigure grinned and Yuki rolled his eyes.

“I don’t know what I expected when you give an example like that,” Yuki said with a glare. How did he always let Shigure bait him?

“You two are still the cat and the rat. Years and years ago, those two worlds intentionally never crossed. The darling of the curse and the dirty cat could only ruin each other.” He let out another laugh. “Can only ruin each other.”

“Is this all you wanted to say?” Yuki responded sharply.

“Not so fast. Let’s talk logistics,” the dog rested his chin on the back of his hands that were intertwined together. Yuki stared up at him with a look of nausea that reflected deep beneath his skin. Guilt burrowed itself into the pit of his stomach. “What school have you decided on? You have your pick of the litter with brains like yours.”

“School?” Yuki echoed, irritation edging into his tired voice.

“That was the deal wasn’t it? You get that little kitty put to bed and I pay for wherever your heart desires,” Shigure smiled. “So Yuki, what do you want to be when you grow up?”

Yuki closed his eyes, running a slightly shaky hand through his hair as he processed the almost too gleeful words that sank into his ears. He shook his head.

“No.”

“No?” Shigure asked.

“No, I,” Yuki sighed, looking Shigure head on. “That wasn’t the deal.”

“It wasn’t?” His smirk stayed as he crossed his arms, leaning back as he contemplated the memory in his head. “Well the deal was if he returned your feelings, wasn’t it?”

Each smile from the smug dog felt like a stab wound, and each time he could feel himself averting his gaze, Yuki could feel the gashes burn deeper. He resisted the urge to cough. The urge to smoke. He couldn’t respond.

“Oh, I see,” Shigure chuckled. “You’re playing a dangerous game, Yuki. One that doesn’t have much time left.”

Yuki whipped a glare to Shigure, thinking he would meet his unfazed, toothy grin, and was instead swallowed by deep, serious, brown eyes. He could feel his system rejecting even the air in his stomach and he desperately pushed down the feeling.

“I know what I’m doing,” Yuki said.
“I’m sure you do,” Shigure said, his tone feeling heavy in contrast to his usual, joking demeanor. “But you need to be careful.”

“You should be too,” Yuki shot back. “You almost sound like you care.”

A second passed as the two stared each other down, the moment only shattered by the curve of Shigure’s lips.

“You sound like such a resentful teenager,” Shigure laughed. “But I suppose if the shoe fits.”

“Are we done?” Yuki said standing up, anger brimming on the edge of his words.

“You’re excused,” Shigure mocked. “Come back when you’ve sealed the deal in a less biblical sense.”

Yuki shot him a glare over his shoulder before shutting the door behind him. With shaking legs, he carried himself up the stairs and into the bathroom. He stared at himself in the mirror. His pale face, his tired gray eyes, his tensed brow. As quietly as he could manage, he gagged and choked up nothing into the sink, his stomach twisting and twirling, and his head matching each dizzy step.

He coughed, his hand going over his mouth trying to keep the noise down, but it bubbled up and out of his throat again and again. He calmed himself down, clenching the sides of the sink with all his might as he forced his body back into working order.

Just like that all his energy from his restful night’s sleep had been drained away.

“Goodbye wistful days of youth. I watch as you slip away, stolen from my shaking hands. Grasping for just one more little taste of freedom.”

“Don’t you have a way with words,” Yuki remarked.

Kakeru placed a hand on the window as he stared out of it, his eyes staring longingly out into the horizon. “To be caught up in the winds of time is to be caught in a tragedy.”

“This coming from the guy who spent his entire vacation playing video games.”

“Yes I did! And I got used to this lifestyle! I don’t want to be back! Not with sadistic teachers like mine!” Kakeru shoved his face into his hands letting out a cry as students in the hallway gave the pair funny looks. Yuki crossed his arms and rolled his eyes.

“They say the more fun the vacation, the worse it is coming back to school,” Kakeru slumped as the two began to walk down the hall taking in the last of the first day back in school. “I didn’t realize boxing yourself up in your apartment was so fun.”

“Maki was there too!” Kakeru said. “Nothing beats staying inside with the woman you love!”

“That’s actually kind of sweet.”

“And destroying her at video games.”

“What a romantic you are.”

“They called me Cassanova back in middle school, you know. So you can eat those words!”
“Somehow that doesn’t surprise me at all,” Yuki said idly.

“So what did you do all break? You have a vacation hangover at all?”

Yuki looked at Kakeru before giving a contemplating look at the ceiling. A smile crossed his lips before he could even register the change in his expression.

“What’s that smile?” Kakeru softly elbowed Yuki in the side with a suggestive grin. “Don’t tell me you met someone over the break? Summer affairs do have a poetic twist to them.”

“Shut up, don’t be an idiot,” Yuki said swatting Kakeru’s arm away, his smile still in place.

“I knew it! No wonder I couldn’t get a hold of you for two weeks! Come on, spill. What’s she like? Oh man, was it Honda?”

“Ms. Honda? No, no, of course not. We’re just friends.”

“Yeah, she doesn’t seem like a summer fling kinda girl either. Was it an American? Tourist season does get pretty hectic this time of year.”

“Stop. Stop it, now you’re just spouting nonsense. I didn’t meet anybody. It was just a nice break,” Yuki said firmly.

“Yeah, yeah, sure,” Kakeru said folding his arms behind his head.

Yuki would admit to feeling a bit lighter, to no one but himself of course. It had been a nice break spent mostly from inside the house. So maybe he shouldn’t have rushed to judgment so soon on Kakeru’s seemingly directionless vacation. And it was spent with someone else. That part was almost surprisingly nice as well.

As if on cue a spot of orange hair trickled out of the corner of his eye, causing him to turn his head suddenly.

“What?”

“Nothing, just…” Yuki trailed off. “I should be heading home. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“I thought you were going to help me turn in these forms to the student council!”

“I’ll make it up to you, I promise.”

“This is not over, Sohma!” Kakeru called out as Yuki started off in the opposite direction. Yuki waved a dismissive hand over his head as he rounded the corner towards the shoe lockers. Quickly he replaced his school shoes with his own sneakers, putting them on as he looked around the room. Students shuffled in and out as the afternoon encouraged those without clubs or commitments to hurry out of the school.

Yuki walked a few steps out of the school, turning his head around, scanning the leaving crowds before letting out a disappointed sigh.

“What’re you lookin’ for?” Yuki stopped himself from jumping at the familiar voice, before turning to see Kyo resting against the wall.

“Ms. Honda,” Yuki recovered quickly. “I thought the three of us could walk home together.”

“Three?” Kyo quirked an eyebrow up. Yuki looked away to sling his backpack over his shoulder.
“What are you waiting for?”

“How. To walk home.”

Yuki gave an amused smile to Kyo who looked away with a halfhearted roll of his eyes.

“No dojo today?”

“No,” Kyo said with a shrug. “I’ll go tomorrow. Shishou’s been gone on a trip for about a week anyway.”

“You two aren’t fighting!” The two turned quickly to see Tohru standing with a bright smile and her hands clasped together.

The two looked at each other then back at Tohru before Kyo gave a noncommittal shove onto Yuki’s arm with a deadpan expression. Yuki rolled his eyes.

“We thought we’d walk you home today, Ms. Honda.”

“Oh, I’m sorry but I took an extra shift at work today.”

“We can walk you to work if you want.”

“No! I mean, no that’s okay. School just started and it’s so out of the way. Besides! I don’t mind the walk! It’s… nice!”

The two boys looked at each other again before directing their gazes back to Tohru who stood firm in her words.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes! Totally sure! In fact I should go, I’m running late!” Tohru quickly walked away from the two, turning around frequently to wave before disappearing behind the school gate altogether. The two stood there for a moment before Yuki turned to Kyo.

“Shall we?”

Kyo reluctantly followed behind him.

“You’re not gonna make a move on me while we walk, are you?”

“I think I can wait until we get home at least,” Yuki said with a smile as Kyo caught up to walk beside him. “Have you painted me as a person with that little self-control?”

“You really want me to answer that, rat boy?”

Yuki laughed as they walked out of the school gate and onto the sidewalk.

“Well I can at least make it to the woods,” Yuki looked around for a moment making sure no uniform clad faces were looking his way. He leaned into Kyo’s ear. “If you can wait that long.”

He blew a feathery breath onto Kyo’s ear and the cat leaped away, his face turning a slight shade of red.

“Oh shut up!” Kyo shot back. Yuki smiled as they walked the rest of the way home.
The sidewalk was damp with the overnight rain, but the sun shone brilliantly, evading any clouds that dared to encroach on the deep blue summer sky. It created an extra layer of humidity that rose from the pavement, creating a particular hot day. Tohru wiped her bangs away, already feeling the heat of nerves rise into her neck, and the spike in temperature only served to make her feel even more stifled in her uniform shirt.

She liked the sunshine, she told herself, a firmly manic smile fitting onto her face as she clutched at her schoolbag. She loved the heat of summer days too. But what she wouldn’t do for a slight breeze or the sudden shadows that came from a drifting cloud.

Her footsteps continued leading her to a tall, white building, people moving easily around her as she loitered for a moment. Staring at the expanse of windows from the front side of the building before looking at a piece of paper that was folded carefully in her bag.

With a firm resolve and a determined nod of her head, she stepped inside the building, feeling a slight relief at the blast of cool air that was so sudden she let out a small shiver from the change.

Tohru walked carefully down the hallway where a sign labeled **Visitors** marked her path. She flinched as men and women in scrubs and clean white lab coats passed around her without a second glance. Finally, she was greeted with a room lit by fluorescence and a woman sitting with her legs crossed as she flipped through a magazine. Tohru breathed in a sigh of relief.

“Kagura?” The boar looked up at the mention of her name, and immediately her tired eyes brightened as she stood up from her seat to give the girl and aggressive hug.

“Tohru! Oh, it’s so good to see you!”

“It’s good to see you too!” She hugged right back before Kagura broke away and held Tohru’s hands tightly as she led her down another hallway of the large hospital. Tohru followed, almost swept away by Kagura’s eager energy that always had such a high voltage. “How are you? How’s Shigure’s place? How’s Kyo?”

“Good! Everyone’s good,” Tohru said with a nod as Kagura linked arms with her and almost forcibly led her down another corridor.

“I heard Kyo and Yuki were fighting again,” Kagura said and Tohru visibly deflated at the comment. “It has been a bit… tenser between them lately,” Tohru said. “Everyone says it’s normal.”

Kagura laughed, “it definitely sounds normal. Don’t worry so much!”

Tohru nodded, the words barely registering as they rounded another corner, slowing as they stood in front of a closed door. Characters that read **Sohma Isuzu** occupied the plastic nametag to the right of the door. Tohru took in a deep breath.

“Are you sure she wants to see me?” Tohru asked. “I always got the impression that… well, that she didn’t like me too much.”

“Please, that’s just her resting personality. In fact on some days I tend to think she doesn’t like me,” Kagura gave an almost manic laugh. Her eyebrows wanting to bend into aggravation but her smile still wide.

“I’m sure that’s not the case,” Tohru reassured with a small laugh. “I just can’t believe Rin asked to
“Right,” Kagura gave a slight laugh. “Well, Tohru, about that…”

Kagura opened the door and pushed Tohru inside, following behind her. The girl tripped on her own feet barely catching herself as she peered up between locks of hair that spilled over her face at deep, glaring, nearly black eyes.

In the hospital room with morning sunshine that splashed in relentlessly, even with a curtain obscuring half of the window, Rin sat on her clean white bed in her hospital gown. Her hair tumbling down and pooling into lakes of raven black. A sharp contrast to her pale skin that complimented the white of the sheets.

Tohru smiled. Rin did not.

“What is she doing here,” Rin pointed at Tohru who straightened herself up at the finger.

“What?” Tohru flinched. “I thought… Kagura said…”

“You told her where I was?!” Rin directed her finger to Kagura who crossed her arms with a frown. “What was the one thing I asked you to do?! And you can’t even do that!”

“Um…” Tohru tried.

“You told me not to tell anyone from the family! She’s not family and she can keep a secret,” Kagura said intertwining her fingers with Tohru’s and upturning her nose to Rin’s spiteful eyes. “Besides, I need help keeping an eye on you! Who’s to say you won’t jump out the window like last time you were in the hospital! Or the time before that and the time before that!”

“Anyone would want to throw themselves out a window with you here!”

Kagura gave an offended gasp as Tohru looked between the two. “Rin, I swear, if whatever this thing you have doesn’t kill you I will!”

“I would like to see you try!”

Kagura put her hands on her hips and gave an aggravated sigh before turning to Tohru with apologetic eyes.

“I’m so sorry, Tohru. I didn’t mean to drag you into this whole thing—”

“Hah,” Rin said dryly. Kagura rolled her eyes.

“But I need help here. Somebody won’t let me tell anyone else that she’s here and somebody happens to be a very big handful.”

“I can’t believe you dumping me onto little miss sunshine,” Rin said through her teeth.

“So… so you didn’t ask to see me?” Tohru asked, still trying to process the whole exchange between the two women. Rin crossed her arms and sat back on her bed, avoiding her gaze.

“Come on, Tohru,” Kagura said taking her hand and leading her out of the hospital room into the hallway.

Tohru looked over her shoulder at the door, Rin’s image still burned into her mind. Though she was angry and on defense she seemed so… fragile. Something about her seemed chained to her hospital
bed, and the IV that stuck from her body seemed like an exposed vein that was trying its best to hold her body up.

“Is she alright?” Tohru asked.

“She’s fine,” Kagura said with a sigh. “The doctors don’t really know what’s wrong. At least here they can make sure she eats.” A flash of worry fell on Tohru’s face as she stared down at the floor. “Please don’t be mad at me, Tohru. I really shouldn’t have tricked you like that.”

“No, no, it’s okay. But I don’t think she wants me to go back in there.”

Kagura clapped her hands together and bowed her head in a pleading position startling the brown haired girl. “Please please please go back in there.”

“H-Huh?”

“…You see the way we are with each other,” Kagura straightened back up and gave Tohru sad, frustrated eyes. “She doesn’t talk to me or my mom. And we’re the only visitors she lets in. She won’t even let anyone else know where she is!” The boar leaned against the wall of the hospital. “I love Rin like a sister, but all we do is get on each other’s nerves. I think she needs a friend, someone who will actually listen to her.”

Tohru looked back at the door of the hospital room, almost feeling the brooding energy from the horse through the thick walls. She hated hospitals. The last time she was in one her mother stopped breathing. It was the loneliest feeling in the world. And it broke her heart to think of Rin by herself, passing the days staring out the window with nothing but that feeling.

“I’ll come see her every week!” Tohru said with a nod. Kagura smiled.

“I knew I could count on you,” Kagura hugged Tohru tightly and the girl hugged back, only breaking away when a sudden realization dawned on her.

“Wait, why did you call me? Why not…” Tohru looked around as if they were in the hallways of a school and lowered her voice. “Why not Haru?”

“No, no, no,” Kagura said shaking her head and crossing her arms to form an X. “She would kill me! And she would kill you! I think it’s best to leave any other zodiacs out of this.”

Tohru nodded.

“Personally I think she’s being a big baby about the whole thing, and if it were up to me I’d call up Haru in a second. He’d probably be here in three minutes if I told him where Rin was,” she sighed. “He’s pestered me enough already, that’s for sure.”

“I promise I won’t tell,” Tohru said.

“Good! Now all you have to do is tell her that.”

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Rin stared out the window of the hospital giving a long, deep, aggravated sigh. She would kill Kagura the minute she felt as though she could swing her fist again. Nosy, irritating, loudmouthed Kagura. At least when they were living together she could ignore her, walk out the front door and leave that suffocating house until the lights were dim and every breath came in softly and quietly. At least when she was healthy she would have the strength to walk away.
Now that terrible loving air would trap her in this tiny room. Kagura’s mother would come and hold her hand and swipe her bangs away when she was sleeping, but sigh and leave after only a moment or so. It was nice, and it was aching, and it made Rin feel sick. That desperate want to be loved by a mother.

At least she had told them not to tell a soul she was here.

She knew her mother wouldn’t ask, but still, it kept her hopes in check.

With a slight creak the door opened again and Rin turned her searing eyes to the girl who stood nervously by the door, Kagura peering in from a safe distance before the door swung shut completely.

Tohru was all soft edges and careful waves of hair. Bright colors and skirts that bunched around her slender legs that had as much strength as whatever expression Tohru wore on her face. Rin never felt so much like gravel. Rough and messy, uncontained, filled with dark colors and sharp edges that did their best to dig into skin. She looked away from the girl.

“What do you want?”

“I… I won’t tell anyone you’re here. I promise!” Rin peaked over at her. “I just thought… maybe… I could visit you. I’ll bring you food you like! Or magazines or books!”

Rin didn’t respond and Tohru took a seat in the chair by Rin’s bed. Her tense shoulders giving away her nerves. Rin marveled at how easy she was to read. How simple she really was.

“I hate hospitals enough already without you hanging around,” Rin said looking away again. “Just go back to Shigure’s house and leave me alone.”

A moment of silence passed between them, but Rin could tell that Tohru did nothing to move from where she was. She wondered if she had made her cry. She doubted it would be that hard.

“I hate hospitals too,” Tohru said.

Rin turned to look at her.

“They’re scary,” she said looking down at her hands with a serious tone. “And lonely. I know they’re supposed to be clean and they’re supposed to help and that it’s silly to dislike them but,” she gulped. “But when something really terrible happens you know that it’ll be cleaned away. Like it never happened.”

Rin watched as Tohru stared at the edge of the bed. She wasn’t crying. And she wasn’t moving. Rin moved her long legs up to her chest where she sat, resting her head on her knees. Her hair avalanched over and gathered together by her feet. She wanted to throw up.

“I didn’t know you could hate anything,” Rin spat out and Tohru looked up at her curiously. The horse rolled her eyes. “I mean, you always seem so positive.”

“I didn’t mean to be a downer or anything!”

Rin snorted, “you’re in a hospital. There’s not much that could make this place more depressing.”

Tohru gave a smile up at Rin and Rin reluctantly accepted the expression, though her own features didn’t move out of their locked up position of skepticism.
“Is it okay if I ask you a question?” Tohru asked.

“Depends.”

Tohru tensed again and Rin almost wanted to laugh at how easy it was to make her nervous.

“I was just wondering… well,” Tohru fidgeted in her seat. “Is what you have serious?”

Rin gave her a scowl as she mulled over the question in her mind and Tohru nearly jumped in place.

“You don’t have to answer that if you don’t want to! I didn’t mean to pry or anything! I was just curious! If it’s really serious than I think maybe you should let people who really worry about you know and--!”

“Who’s worried about me?” Rin cut in.

Tohru gulped. “People? People.” She concluded more affirmatively.

“Well people better not find out about me.”

“I swear on my life!” Tohru said holding up her hands as a pledge. Rin took in Tohru’s determined and serious face before letting out a sigh.

“The doctors don’t know what I have,” she said. “But I do.”

“You do?”

“It’s the curse.”

“What?” Tohru said. “What do you mean? Is it making you sick? If this has something to do with the curse shouldn’t you tell Hatori? He would know what to do!”

“Are you kidding me? Hatori only knows what he’s told. Telling him would be the same as telling Akito, and who knows what he would do to me if he found out about this. It’s bad enough that Kagura knows.”

“But… Kagura wouldn’t say anything. I’m sure she wouldn’t,” Tohru reassured.

“You don’t get it, do you? If Akito asks one of the zodiac for something they have to do it. That’s the bond. There’s no saying no to him, no exceptions. He could tell us all to run a car off a cliff and we’d probably do it. That’s how obedient our animals are.”

Tohru looked down at her hands, processing the information.

“But I am not an animal. I don’t want to be anymore. That’s why I have to break this curse.”

“Break?” Tohru looked up at her. “You can do that?”

“I don’t know,” Rin said honestly, her hand balling into a fist as she gave a desperate glare onto her hand. “But I’d rather spend the rest of my life here than go back to Sohma house.”

“Can I help?” Rin looked up at Tohru with a surprised look. “I want to help. I’ll do anything I can.”

“Why do you care?” Rin said with a scowl. “Is this your little miss sunshine way of looking down on us?”
“No!” Tohru said, her eyes forming themselves into a glare she couldn’t control. Rin’s face softened at the expression and Tohru quickly calmed herself. “Please let me help.”

“Fine,” Rin said curtly. “Maybe there is something you can do.”

“We’re home!”

Yuki closed the door behind them, taking off his shoes alongside Kyo.

“Hello?” He called out again as Kyo lingered beside him.

“Don’t think he’s home,” Kyo said slinging his bag on the floor as he walked into the kitchen.

Yuki let out an annoyed grunt as he opened the door to Shigure’s office and then to his bedroom.

“I guess he isn’t,” he mumbled, walking into the kitchen. Kyo stood by the kettle, watching idly as the fire licked the sides of the metal.

“Are you making tea?”

“Yeah,” Kyo sniffed. “Want some?”

“Sure,” Yuki responded, resting against the wall of the kitchen. What was this strange air that had settled between them? It was like how they were three months ago but this time he didn’t feel so… ignored. That peace that he would watch from afar that settled on the back of Kyo’s shoulders when no one else was around, it was as if he had clung onto that bit of tranquility. Clawed his fingernails into the edge of that bubbling, tensing as he waited for it to pop.

He was here, in Kyo’s space, and Kyo knew that. He allowed that.

Yuki racked his brain for what that meant.

“Everyone at the dojo must be missing you today,” Yuki crossed his arms, watching the muscles of Kyo’s back beneath his shirt. Watched how the shoulders tensed and dropped in a shrug.

“I told you Shishou was on a trip.”

“I didn’t mean Shi-han,” Yuki said. “You train the new recruits don’t you? And you must have friends at the dojo, too.”

Kyo gave a dry snort, still keeping his attention on the kettle. “Friends?”

“I’m sure you’re familiar with the concept, aren’t you? Do you need a dictionary definition?”

“Very funny, you dumb rat. But I don’t know why you think I have any.”

“You’re telling me you spend nearly every day at that place and you haven’t made one friend?”

Now that Yuki thought about it… he never really saw Kyo with anyone other than this tiny cluster they had managed to arrange for themselves. Tohru had expanded their world almost as far as it would go, and they were grateful for that. But from there Yuki had used the platform Tohru had given him as a jumping off point. As a way to reach into something inside him that was darker and deeper and terrifying. It had rewarded him in the form of friendships he cherished and acquaintanceships that challenged him more than he’d care to admit.
But Kyo always seemed to be with them or without them. A concept that Yuki couldn’t quite wrap
his head around. Kyo, who was surrounded by friends and noise and movement as a child. Kyo who
was wrapped up in that same world as a teenager. Kyo who could attract the world to him like a
magnet by purely turning his eyes up to look at you.

“I don’t go to the dojo to make friends,” Kyo said, turning to give Yuki a patronizing look.

“Have you made friends at all since you’ve started school here?” Yuki asked, walking towards him
so that he could settle himself on the counter beside the kettle. “Besides Ms. Honda’s friends, I
mean.” He smirked. Kyo’s face flashed red.

“What does it matter to you if I’ve made friends or not! Jeez, this coming from the guy whose only
friend is a fucking loudmouth idiot who never stops hanging off of you!”

“‘Loudmouth idiot.’ That’s a pretty extreme case of the pot calling the kettle black, don’t you think?”
Yuki said with a laugh.

“Hey!”

“And Kakeru doesn’t *hang off of me*, he just…”

“Never shuts the hell up?” Kyo offered with a snappish tone.

“If I didn’t know any better I’d say you were jealous,” Yuki said with an amused hum.

“Wha--?! Jealous? Of that guy? No, wait, there’s nothing to even be jealous of here!”

“Definitely, nothing to be jealous of at all,” Yuki agreed with a smug smile. “Because this thing
between us is?”

“Not romantic or any shit like that it’s just…”

“Physical?”

Kyo jumped when the water began to whistle and he snapped himself out of the conversation to pour
the water onto the tealeaves in the pot. Angrily he shoved the lid on top and stormed into the kitchen
with two teacups.

“That’s right, it’s just *that*,” Kyo spat. Yuki watched him with a slightly amused expression. He
followed after him, sitting himself down right next to the cat who nearly bristled at the nearness.
“What there’s not enough room around the damn table?!”

“I would be jealous,” Yuki said suddenly, his voice going low and his hand sneaking onto Kyo’s
knee. “If someone was hanging off of you.”

Kyo swallowed a knot in his throat, feeling his face burn again at the words. He licked his lips,
looking at how Yuki’s eyes darkened in an oh so familiar way. Watched as they honed in on him so
completely.

“Yeah? And why’s that?” Kyo nearly cursed himself for matching Yuki’s tone, looking him straight
in the eye as he came even closer.

“For a few months now I’ve gotten to touch you,” his hand moved up his thigh, “taste you,” his
tongue on his ear, “listen to you,” his voice fell into a whisper. Yuki brought a single finger up to
Kyo’s throat and slid it up to the tip of Kyo’s chin, who tilted his head back reflexively.
Kyo shuddered at the feeling, his skin going hot and his knees feeling a bit weak.

“I think I’d be upset if someone else got to see all that too,” Yuki placed a gentle kiss on Kyo’s neck. Another on his jaw. Another on his throat. “Physical or not, can you blame me?”

Kyo felt Yuki’s hand sliding into the top of his partly unbuttoned shirt, stroking the skin that stretched over his collarbone, working Kyo up so precisely, so carefully that he hated himself for responding at all. Kyo closed his eyes as Yuki nibbled on his ear, letting his breath shower his skin.

“Don’t you think you’d feel the same?” Another stroke up his thigh, another suck on his skin. “Just a tiny bit?”

Kyo fell into the soft touches, feeling the note of arousal it brought to the surface of his skin. His breath becoming a bit shallow as he braced himself for what always came next.

“Well?” Yuki prodded.

“I don’t know,” his distracted mind offered as he focused on the tongue that lapped the sensitive area of his neck. “Maybe a little.”

Kyo waited for a kiss that never came and touches that stopped in their tracks. He opened his eyes to see Yuki’s hands by his side and a smug smile on his stupid, dumb, erotic face.

“I knew it,” Yuki said getting up from the table.

“Hey, hey, you asshole!” Kyo followed behind him as Yuki headed up the stairs.

“Don’t blame me for getting the truth out of you,” Yuki said, smile unable to be wiped from his lips.

“Only ‘cause you lied about you bein’ jealous!”

“I didn’t lie,” Yuki turned around to face Kyo as they stood in the hallway before his room. His face light, but serious in his words. “I would be jealous. Is that a problem?”

Kyo scanned him up and down with a skeptical look, crossing his arms with a defeated roll of his eyes.

“I don’t get you sometimes,” Kyo said. Yuki smiled at him, stepping closer to take Kyo’s face into his hands. With gentle lips, he brought Kyo into a kiss. Working their mouths together in a slow dance as his tongue rubbed against every part of Kyo’s mouth. Deliberately tasting him, exploring him. Keeping the pace slow so that their lips could melt together.

He pulled away.

“Then why don’t you get to know me a bit better?”

Yuki opened the door to his room and pulled Kyo inside by his arm.

“Who would want to get to know you?” Kyo said with a small fleck of amusement in his own tone as he shut the door behind him.

Vacation may have ended, but summer certainly hadn’t.
This chapter took me way more time than I would like to admit. Goodness gracious. Next week will be back to the awkward boys and, again, this chapter is NOT necessary to know what's going on in the rest of the story. Though this chapter is one that is near and dear to me and will probably be the only one that's mentioned outright in the main story itself.

Thank you to anyone who is reading this story. You are my sunshine.

The air felt stale here. That was the first thing he noticed. He grew used to bright, gleaming dawns with crisp air that caressed his skin like water. He became used to sunlight that caught on tops of trees, and through blades of rich, green grass. He became used to living his life free and apart.

He couldn’t think of that now, however. It made his stomach too uneasy, and he was anxious enough. He looked over the tops of houses and past the tip of the gates that were so intrusive to the land around them. Sunlight hit his features. Milky, pale, and disrupted by three diagonal scars that started at his forehead and stretched just over his lips. Time had smoothed them, calmed them, but nothing more.

He hardly noticed them anymore.

He tilted his head farther back, the wide brimmed hat that was strapped to his chin blocking the top of his peripheral.

There, he caught a glimpse of the color the sun had dyed the summer sky.

A color so peaceful, yet still surged with energy. Calming and alive.

“I’m home,” he said to no one in particular.

Kazuo Sohma sighed as he stared down onto the estate. His gray hair was tied back behind his head, his holy robes clinging to his firm build with sweat.

The rat had finally returned.

- JUNE -

“How are you feeling? Are you comfortable?”

“Not particularly,” the man said, sitting on his knees as he watched with suspicious eyes as the woman wrote something down into a well-worn notebook.

Her slender hand wrote elegant characters across the page, her hair, black as ink, spilling onto the floor behind her, even as it was gathered in a feeble tie at the base of her neck.

“I promise this won’t last much longer,” she said without moving a muscle in her face. He became irritated at that.
“If you were sent to sleep with me, you should at least smile,” he grunted. His robes were pristine and neat, his hair done in a warrior’s bun to mirror his appearance. His stance firm and unmoving, just as his expression was. She closed the book carefully and placed it aside.

“Excuse me?”

“That’s what you’re doing, isn’t it?” He said. A disgusting smile fell on his face. “In exchange for my silence?”

She took a deep breath and shut her eyes to help collect herself, letting the moment slither out of her system. She looked up at him with a forced smile.

“Of course, my apologies,” she said, standing up to walk towards him. He nodded as if to say ‘that’s better’, his guard coming down as she sat beside him. He moved to remove the obi that tied her robes together but she frantically put a hand on his arm.

“Wait, wait,” she said suddenly.

“What?” Annoyance trickled into his voice. She closed her eyes again, opening them again to spill a seductive gaze on him.

“Close your eyes,” she whispered. He did as he was told.

Her hand trailed up his clothed chest. Goosebumps broke on his skin when her finger slid up his neck. He smiled when he felt the pad of her thumb rest against his lip.

“Keep them closed,” she whispered as her hand rested over his eyes.

“I do enjoy a woman who knows how to take her time.”

She let out a disgusted noise and tightened her grip over his eyes. Before he had a chance to panic a flash of white burst through the room and the man fell backwards onto the ground.

Miho Sohma, the woman born of the dragon and the first woman to be born into the zodiac, stared down at the man with an unimpressed crease of her eyebrows. She wiped her hand against her robe and sighed as she lifted herself up off the ground.

“Come in,” she ordered. Two servants immediately rushed inside from behind closed doors. “He’ll be asleep for the next few days. Keep him in a quiet and undisturbed area of the estate. When he wakes up tell him he’s in the hospital and make sure he leaves quickly.”

“Yes, Lady Miho!”

The two servants grabbed him by his arms and legs and quickly shuffled him out of the room. She sighed as the doors closed behind her and she was left standing alone in the room.

In the summer air the cicadas screeched amongst the rustling of the trees. The heat battered down against the immaculate and large Edo estate of the Sohmas. Even as some members of the family straggled behind in their mountain estate, miles and memories away, the years had nearly allowed the surrounding forest to grow over it. Edo was now home. Everything felt busier because of it. People no longer walked leisurely, and people’s voices would blend into the encroaching noise from over their high, thick walls.
Miho enjoyed the energy of the city, and enjoyed more the satisfaction when she could find her sudden and welcome moments of silence.

“Your grandfather never used to take as long,” the man said as she exited her work space outside onto the half hooded hallway.

“I take care in my work, Master Noboru. Just as my grandfather did.”

Noboru Sohma presided over them all. His tough and masculine expressions seemingly strange in comparison to the gentle spirit that rested inside of him—a spirit she knew but did not know how she knew. His eyes were deep and narrow, almost as sharp as a sword, and his posture was as straight as an arrow. Every part of his body was built like a weapon.

“Did you tell that man I was going to sleep with him?” She asked, trying her best to keep her indignant tone in check. He began to walk and she took it as a sign to walk with him.

“What does it matter what I tell them if they’re not going to remember anyway?”

“I make them believe they’re in a hospital, not a brothel,” she said sharply. “Even if the memory of the encounter is gone, if they awake and feel something’s amiss it could lead to a relapse. They’re very sensitive when they wake up in such a disorienting state.”

“He wouldn’t have believed that you were a doctor,” Noboru said, almost exasperated by her words.

“He didn’t or wouldn’t?” She asked, this time her tone biting back slightly. He sighed and stopped walking to face her.

“You do very good work, Miho. And you’re much respected among this family. But you must consider how the outside world thinks,” he placed a gentle hand on her shoulder and she shifted her eyes away. “You are still very young. Don’t let your pride control you.”

She nodded tentatively and he continued walking.

“Who was it that was caught this time?” She asked quietly.

“We’re still cleaning up that mess from when Youta “fell” on that woman in the city,” he said between his teeth. “Or so that dirty snake says. It’s taken weeks to round up everyone who saw the incident without making ourselves look even more suspicious.”

“I see,” Miho said.

“People are beginning to talk about us,” Noboru said, servants opening the doors to his quarters. The two fluidly removed their sandals as they walked inside. “The Sohmas with the secrets.”

“People talk,” she said flatly. “It’s what they do, and soon they’ll find other ways to entertain themselves.”

“They better,” he said with a growl. “This family could be in danger if we don’t learn to conceal ourselves better. It’s gotten to the point where some of our own family aren’t aware of the spirits.”

“I know,” she said earnestly. He looked at her with a passivity that cut right through her. As if he were bored by her very presence. She did her best to stand tall when she was around him. “I promise they won’t remember anything after I’ve seen them.”

“Don’t be arrogant, just do your work.”
“Yes, Master Noboru.”

“What else do you have scheduled for today?”

“Takeo has an appointment with me. He hasn’t been feeling well,” Noboru rolled his eyes.

“Again?” His voice was gruff with irritation and Miho gave a small nod.

“It’s not surprising, anyone born into the bloodline of the gracious spirit has troubles with health. Takeo is no exception, even if he is your son.”

“Don’t give that boy additional excuses for his weak demeanor,” he sighed. “I don’t know what to do with him anymore.”

“I could try and speak with him.”

“What good would that do?” Noboru asked sharply, almost reflexively. Miho suppressed a sigh.

“Kazuo could?”

“Kazuo does seem to have a good effect on that boy, but I’ve barely seen him since he’s returned from the mountains.”

Miho stiffened, “oh?”

“I’m worried he won’t even show up for his own banquet tonight, what with how absent he’s been.”

“He’ll be there,” Miho said with a nod. “I’m sure.”

“See what he’s up to, anyway. Once you’ve finished with Takeo.”

“Yes, Master Noboru,” she turned to walk back towards her quarters

“And, Miho.”

“Yes?”

“Make sure Kazuo hasn’t been getting himself into trouble. His common sense has been as absent as he has lately.”

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“Found you,” a head full of gray hair popped into the eyesight of the man who laid out on his back in the grass, blocking the sunlight from spilling on his tan features. With a jolt the man with hair as orange as an evening sunset sat up, using his arms and legs to carry him away as far as possible on a reflex, which earned a laugh from his surprise visitor.

Daiki Sohma had the spirit of the cat living inside him. His body was thin, but his skin had absorbed the color of the sun, and his bare feet had taken on the color dirt and grime at its soles. His face was thin with sharpened features, dulled by the timid expressions that always sat clearly behind his eyes.

Daiki gave a sigh, releasing the sudden tension that found its way into his bones at being startled. He shifted even further away to sit himself back, upright. “I wasn’t hiding,” he said. “What are you doing here?”

“I brought you fish,” Kazuo said, placing a plate between them. “I know the servants don’t feed you
very well."

"Thank you," the boy grabbed at the plate and tried to pace himself. But the moment the fish hit his malnourished stomach the taste that lingered on his tongue became less important than filling his empty belly. "You don’t have to keep doing this."

"Stop eating it and I will," he said, obviously unconvinced by his lackluster words and the hungry bites Daiki took out of the welcome meal.

The two sat in silence for a moment. Enjoying the summer air that wrapped around them like a thick coat. Daiki loved the heat. Loved the way it beat down on his skin. Loved the harshness of the summer sun and how the cicadas would scream and chirp, never silent. Quiet wasn’t something he could do and this weather never seemed to allow for it anyway.

He peered over at Kazuo, who seemed to be taking in the summer sun as best he could. He smirked to himself when Kazuo held up an annoyed hand to block out the bright rays of the sun. His face contorted into distaste, as if the weather was personally offending him.

"I’m sure the heat was much more manageable in the mountains," Daiki said, the corners of his mouth going up only slightly when Kazuo sighed.

"It was," he said. "I can’t believe I came back during this season."

"Don’t turn into a rat now," Daiki said. "I won’t help you if you do."

Kazuo let out a laugh at that. "I won’t," he promised. "I can at least handle this much."

Daiki nodded to himself, drawing his knees up to his chest as he stared up into the bright blue sky, cloudless and ruthless. "You hate the heat," he muttered.

"That still hasn’t changed," Kazuo confirmed.

"Why did you come back?" He asked as if the world was really that simple. As if all that existed within the walls of the Sohma estate was the sweltering temperature that revitalized his skin, but burned and scalded the man opposite him. Kazuo shook his head, clearly amused, and gave him a smile years would never erase.

"I told you I would, didn’t I?" Kazuo said easily. Daiki wanted to move himself further away. "I always keep my promises."

Daiki pulled out the grass at his feet, keeping his head down even as he felt Kazuo’s eyes on him.

"Will you come to the banquet tonight?"

Daiki snapped a particularly large chunk of dirt from the ground, "what? Of course not! I’m not going to your banquet."

"Why not?" Now it was apparently Kazuo’s turn to act as if the world was mind-numbingly simple.

"Because I’m not invited," Daiki said, his brows furrowing down.

"I just invited you," Kazuo said. "Isn’t the fish enough of a bribe?"

Despite himself, Daiki laughed at the joke. Though it was dry and disbelieving.

"There’s not enough fish in the ocean," Daiki mumbled under his breath.
The rat spirit looked at him with those clear gray eyes that seemed so clear of doubt or fear. He wanted to fall into such a warm feeling like a child wanted to be held by their own mother. Daiki had long ago berated himself for ever wanting either.

“Kazuo!”

A distant voice broke the moment as Kazuo looked over his shoulder to find Miho calling after him. Daiki took his chance and fled from the scene, running on swift feet before Kazuo could stop him. The rat spirit watched with a sigh as he disappeared into the trees that surrounded the property and turned to Miho with a rather impatient look.

“I knew you’d be here,” she said, matching his impatient eyes.

He crossed his arms, “you’ve scared him off.”

“Who? The cat?”

“Daiki,” he corrected. She shifted uncomfortably.

“What does a demon know of being scared?”

“He’s not a demon. He’s a scared child.”

“He’s my age,” she said dryly.

“And yet you have been given the opportunity to grow up,” Kazuo said with a smile at his friend. He was taller, and a good eleven years older at age 31. She rolled her eyes, motioning for him to follow her down the dirt path and back into the civilization of their world.

“Just because you’ve become a priest doesn’t mean you have to be kind to everyone,” she said. “There’s such a thing as being excessive. Especially to something—”

“Someone,” he corrected.

“Something that did that to you,” she pointed at the scars on his face, and he brought a reflexive hand to the marks on his face. He shook his head.

“He’s sorry. He just doesn’t know how to say it,” he said.

“You really are too kind,” Miho said, taking the turn in the road that lead them back to the main estate.

“I don’t see it as kind,” he said, tucking his arms into his sleeves.

“It doesn’t matter what you see it as, it’s how other’s do,” she said. “And one person’s kind is another person’s delusional.”

“Do you think I’m delusional?” He asked with a smug look on his face. She sighed.

“Well something’s not right in that head of yours,” she said with a small smile.

“How cruel,” he laughed with her.

“Be careful, Kazuo. I mean it. Master Noboru has already started to take notice of your absences. What would you do if he found out it’s because you keep harassing a demon?”
“You’re worried about me,” his voice was light and teasing and Miho rolled her eyes. He gave a
laugh, a soft sound from the core of his chest that radiated off him—just like everything else he did.
“I promise. I’m always careful.”

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“Here in this family we find very little limits us. Our children are beautiful and successful, graced
with good fortune and health. But there are a few special few among us that are particularly blessed.
Kazuo, you are a child to me by spirit—a bond much stronger than blood. And it’s been a long two
years since you have left your family behind for the mountains.

“And now you have come back to us a successful holy man. Enlightened and pure, the gracious
spirit truly lives within you as he does your brothers of the zodiac. I speak for everyone when I say,
we are truly glad that that same spirit has guided you back home to us. Everyone, enjoy the banquet.
Kazuo, a toast for you.”

“To Kazuo!” The crowd echoed, raising their glass. The gray haired man gave a humble smile as he
reluctantly took in the overwhelming praise. He sat to the right of Noboru, his cousins falling in line
beside him by year. He looked across the table at Miho who mocked him by tipping her glass and
taking a long gulp. He laughed to himself.

“Thank you for your kind words, Master Noboru,” Kazuo said with a smile. “I have missed you in
my travels.”

“As have I, my son,” Noboru said, filling Kazuo’s drink once more. “I am proud of you for the work
you’ve done.”

“You are?” Kazuo asked, genuinely. “When I left I was under the impression that you disapproved
of my decision to become a priest.”

“I did,” he said flatly. “However, you held a firm backbone, and followed through on the plans you
had laid out. That takes a true man. I wish Takeo would behave more like you.”

“Takeo’s a good boy,” Kazuo said with a smile. Noboru gave a dismissive hum as he drank another
cup of wine. Kazuo cleared his throat over the noise of the banquet as he gathered himself in front of
the head of family. “I felt as though there was work to be done here,” Kazuo said.

Noboru slapped a strong approving hand onto his back with a booming laughing.

“Right you are! I’m glad your senses have been cleared,” Noboru said. “This family needs your
leadership, Kazuo. Your place is at my right hand, helping run the business of this family.”

“Of course, I’ll help in whatever way I can,” Kazuo filled Noboru’s cup. “However, I meant I would
like to continue my work as a priest here. Among the family.”

“Dress however you like, your place in this family does not change,” Noboru said with a shrug,
drinking from his glass.

“Of course,” Kazuo said. He poured the head another glass of wine. “Then you won’t mind if I
pursue my own… personal projects here within the estate?”

“Do as you wish. As the rat you should be a leader among your zodiacs and among the Sohmas,”
Noboru said firmly. His voice was deep, and boomed and echoed like a drumbeat. It was enough to
strike a kind of intimidation in Kazuo’s bloodstream. He pushed Noboru’s glass towards him, which
he took gratefully. Kazuo filled it once more.
“I’m glad you think so,” Kazuo said. “Because I would like to start with the cat spirit.”

“This again?” Noboru sighed, placing down his cup and looking at him through narrowed eyes. “No holy man can cleanse that thing. Don’t meddle with that kind of danger,” Noboru dragged his thumb from his forehead down to his lower cheek, mirroring one of the longer scars that slashed through Kazuo’s otherwise unblemished skin. Reflexively the rat spirit touched the mark on his own face.

“Don’t you wish to find a way to keep everyone safe from him?” Kazuo asked, refilling Noboru’s wine once more.

“During the rainy season the boy stays in the cellar under my quarters. What more is needed?”

“Much more,” Kazuo assured. “What if the weather turns bad one day? What if Dai—the boy becomes injured or exhausted and the demon takes over? Our family is close to the city now, we can’t afford these sorts of possibilities.”

Noboru took another sip of his wine, humming contemplatively.

“I suppose I see your point,” he said. “Alright, Kazuo. I’ll think about it. I promise nothing more.”

“That’s all I ask, Master Noboru,” Kazuo brought the cup to his lips but stopped when he felt heat pooling onto his knee. He peered down to see a small, stray dog resting its chin on his leg, wagging its tail as it looked up with bright, hungry eyes. Noboru gave an uneasy smile before allowing the dog to eat a bit out of his hand.

He looked down the table at Hideki Sohma. The dog spirit with a tall form, and thick black hair that was beginning to gray with age. His dark eyes trained onto the head of the table, and he offered Kazuo a tip of his glass. Kazuo nodded before looking away.

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It was late into the night, and the festivities still flowed through the main courtyard of the estate. Servants scrambled to bring out food and wine to satisfy the family members who had gathered to welcome Kazuo back. The zodiacs, and those who were trusted enough to know about them, sat closest to Noboru, while the rest formed their own circles, where they sang and danced and drank.

Kazuo didn’t quite like the taste of wine, certainly not enough to find his body impaired, but found amusement in his cousins who couldn’t seem to control their rambunctious thirst.

“Ryota is acting like a fool tonight,” Miho said, taking only small sips of her wine. Her cheeks were flushed with red, but her words were firm and clear. Kazuo laughed, looking over at the horse spirit who spoke loud, slurred words to his other cousins.

“Ryota acts like a fool most days,” Kazuo said. “You don’t find his demeanor endearing?”

Miho gave him a cold look, to which Kazuo gave another laugh.

“Alochol makes you bitter, Miho.”

“Alcohol makes me honest,” she said with a smirk.

“I should leave before you direct that honesty towards me,” he said.

“That might be wise,” she retorted. The two laughed together, the light atmosphere creating a festive air where it was easy to relax.
“Though I was hoping to find Takeo,” Kazuo said. “Have you seen him tonight?” Miho shook her head.

“I’m sure he’s around here somewhere,” Miho said. “The boy is good at staying hidden.”

Kazuo nodded at her with a smile, departing from her side to leave the banquet hall and out into the outdoor courtyard where his relatives gathered in just as rowdy of a group. He passed through crowd by crowd, reaching the outskirts of the festivities where houses began to cluster together once more. He ran a hand through his hair, looking around the estate grounds, before a mop of black hair caught his eye.

Kazuo smirked.

“You know I’ve been looking for you, Takeo,” he said to a well-built shed. A small head poked out from behind the wall.

“Really?”

“Were you following me?” Takeo nodded, and Kazuo gave him a smile. “Why didn’t you sit at the table by your father?”

“I made him mad this morning,” he said softly, coughing into his arm.

“I see,” Kazuo said. “You were frightened?” Takeo nodded again. Kazuo gave an acknowledging hum. “Well, I would have hoped you would have come to see me anyway.”

“I’m--!” Takeo stopped his voice from rising. “Sorry,” he said much more monotone. Kazuo gave him a strange look. The boy sighed. “Father says I shouldn’t raise my voice like a woman’s. He says that my laugh sounds like a girl’s, and that when I jump around the estate I looked like an idiot child.”

“Is that so?” Kazuo said. He kneeled down so that he could meet the boy’s eyes directly. “I don’t see an idiot children here. Just a young boy,” he poked Takeo’s side, who let out a yelp of laughter. “Who is very ticklish.”

“No, stop!” Takeo devolved into giggles, laughing with the carefree grace of youth.

“Now that is a booming and wonderful laugh,” Kazuo said, putting his hands on Takeo’s shoulders, and allowing the boy to calm his chuckles. Takeo looks up at the rat spirit’s welcoming smile, and fell into the arms of the man.

“I’ve missed you, Kazuo,” he says softly. The priest wrapped his arms safely around the child in a tight embrace.

“I’ve missed you too, Takeo.”

“Master Takeo.”

The two lifted their heads at the sudden voice. Kazuo released the boy, standing so that he could face Hideki, the older man’s arms were crossed and his expression was darkened by the light from the house that burned behind him, making him look like an ink silhouette. Takeo reflexively rooted himself behind Kazuo, gripping on the man’s robes as subtly as he could.

“Hideki,” Kazuo greeted. “How have you been, I’ve seen very little of you tonight.”
“I know. What a pity,” Hideki’s flat tone echoed Kazuo’s as they stared each other down with careful and apathetic eyes. The dog turned his direction to the boy. “Your father has been looking for you all night. Stop lurking in the shadows and report to him.”

“Yes, sir,” Takeo gave him a bow and ran towards the house without a moment of hesitation.

Hideki clicked his tongue as he watched Takeo disappear into the crowd, the sound of voices and laughter dulled this far out into the estate grounds. “At least he’s obedient.”

“Takeo has a kind heart for a boy his age,” Kazuo said, his tone neutral, but his eyes sharp and defensive.

“He does seem to have taken a particular liking to you,” Hideki said. “Just as Master Noboru does.”

Kazuo shrugged. “Master Noboru is close with all the zodiacs.”

Hideki nodded, “how diplomatic for the favorite of the family to say.”

“The favorite?”

“Oh please, Kazuo. You’re a lot of things, but naïve is certainly not one of them,” Hideki’s lips were upturned into a permanent smile, but his eyes flared dangerously whenever he spoke. Like the blue center of a flame. “Don’t you think it’s rather odd that you abandoned your family for two years and are welcome back with such open arms? Sitting at the right hand of Master Noboru once more?”

“While you’ve been so loyal to him all this time?” Kazuo asked, folding his arms. “Pettiness is a strange color on you.”

“Don’t get me wrong, Kazuo,” Hideki smiled once more. “You are where you belong. The rat is a heavy burden to bare, and belongs at the right hand of God. But be careful, not all will continue to be so trusting through your erratic behavior.”

“I promise I’ll keep that in mind.”

“Good,” Hideki said, turning to head back towards the feast. “Now come and rejoin the banquet. It’s for you, after all.”

-JULY-

Takeo coughed into his hand, looking out at the cracked open doorway as he laid, propped up, in his futon. The day seemed to be moving around him, racing at a speed that exhilarated him. The summer sky always seemed to move as quickly and with just as much energy as the people who filled the city.

But he was stuck here. Inside. Light blankets covering him that felt sweltering but also like they weren’t enough. The sky was beginning to grow dark with clouds and he could feel the first drops of rain from the summer season beating down on the earth outside.

It smelled good. Comforting. Summer rain was its own kind of warmth, and Takeo buried himself further in his sheets to try and replicate the feeling. Eyes shut tight, breaths coming in as deep as they could until they were scattered by coughs.

It wasn’t unusual for Takeo to be sick, but he hated his body for not following the strict example of his father’s disciplined health. But in him he housed the gracious spirit. Each day his connection with the spirit grew more powerful as it grew comfortable in its new host. Sapping the energy of both
heads of the family as it left the weaker for the younger.

That’s what Kazuo had told him one night after his father had lashed out at him when his lethargic limbs couldn’t move from Takeo’s futon.

“It’s good,” Kazuo had said. “It just means your connection with the zodiacs—your zodiacs is growing stronger.”

Takeo touched his own chest, mimicking the feeling of Kazuo who had taken Takeo’s much smaller hand and placed it over his beating heart. Takeo had nodded, his fingers digging into the fabric of Kazuo’s robes and tried to keep himself from crying.

He buried himself in those memories as he listened to servants walking outside on the balcony that tied all the rooms of the estate together. He listened as people chattered in ways that mirrored the sound of the falling rain.

He listened.

*Let me out.*

He snapped his eyes open at the sudden thought that wasn’t his own. Takeo sat up, looking around the room. Had his father come in while he had drifted off? No, definitely not. His father avoided him when he was sick, turning his disappointed eyes away from the weak body of his son.

A servant? Or maybe Kazuo?

Takeo stood, fueled by curiosity and wrapped a blanket around his shoulders as he carefully peered out the already open doors. He let his bare feet collide against the wood of the pathway, squeaking violently to Takeo’s ears that had grown accustomed to the silence of his own room in these past few days.

He followed the feeling, trying to stay light on his feet. He followed the tug in his chest. The ringing in his ear. The bitter taste on his tongue.

*Let me out.*

He stood before his father’s room. Looking at the intimidating doors with a shaking breath that tried its best not to catch itself in a cough. Carefully, he looked inside. No one. It wasn’t surprising, but it still made Takeo’s breath come easier.

Carefully, he walked into the room. The door letting in the sound of the pouring rain that drenched the estate in its humidity. Takeo felt sweat break out onto his forehead, even though his chest and stomach still felt cold. He stepped into the middle of the room.

*Let me out.*

It was louder.

*Let me out.*

The floor below him shook. Suddenly, sounds of scratching, clawing, pounding ruptured against the floor. It reverberated against his feet, into his ears, until he felt as though the room was collapsing under the force of an earthquake. A deep, guttural roar screeched from beneath him. Pained and desperate. A cold strike of fear flashed though Takeo’s body as he fell on his behind, his feet feeling as though they might start bleeding.
He covered his face with the blanket, paralyzed by fear. The sounds closed in on him.

Takeo screamed.

LET ME OUT.

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Hideki took a deep inhale of his pipe as he stared out into the drizzling rain. The soft patter of it a stark contrast to how it rained in heavy sheets earlier in the week. He blew smoke into the gray, humid air, letting only some of his tension roll off with it. His robe hung on his loosely, his bones still too tired to compose himself completely.

He turned his head when he felt a pair of lips on his shoulder, and arms slide around his middle.

“What are you thinking about?” Youta stood bare behind him, not having the decency to cover himself up. The room smelled of rain and smoke and sex. Hideki rolled his eyes when Youta’s hands traveled up and down his chest from underneath his robes. He slid the doors shut sharply.

“I’m thinking about how loud you were,” Hideki said flatly.

“Oh my, how dirty.”

“You were too loud,” he rephrased, sending Youta a weak glare. “Hopefully no one heard you.”

“Are you so desperate to keep me a secret? I’m heartbroken,” Youta laughed.

Youta Sohma was the man of the snake, older than most of his zodiac relatives, but still considerably younger than Hideki, a man of 54 years of age. His long, shimmering, silver hair splayed over him, almost never tied back but always perfectly groomed. His porcelain skin hid the years that had been burned onto him, and made the childish, thoughtless smile that always rested on his face seem as though it was perfectly placed.

His body was slender and tall. It moved with the flexibility and fluidity of his spirit animal, just as his words did on his slick tongue.

“I don’t want to invite more trouble than you’re worth.”

“I must be worth quite a bit if after all this time you still can’t keep your hands off me,” a mischievous smile spread across his lips. “Though you did seem rather… troubled today,” he kissed the back of his neck seductively. “Is my body that therapeutic?”

Hideki broke free from his arms and gave him an aggravated glance as he sat back down on the futon.

“Don’t fool yourself. You come with enough trouble, especially after that fiasco you caused in the city last month.”

Youta rolled his eyes and laid down beside him. “You sound like Master Noboru. I don’t see the problem, we have Miho around for just this reason.”

“How careless you are to leave something like that in her hands,” he said.

“What? She’s capable,” he chuckled. “Or are you just jealous that I turned my attention to another woman?”
Hideki smirked and cupped the man’s chin between his fingers, “I don’t think it’s possible to be jealous over such a useless man like you.”

“Sticks and stones, Hideki,” Youta said.

“You’re so irresponsible,” he said with an aggravated grunt. “If you can do it with men, why do you risk yourself to lay with a woman?”

“Men are good, don’t get me wrong. Especially when they take a sort of… authoritative roll,” Youta let a finger circle Hideki’s knee. He looked down at him with a glare. “But women have their own charms, you know. I can’t help myself when I see such a gorgeous specimen.”

“Hah. ‘A gorgeous specimen.’ Is that how you see me?”

“Certainly not,” Youta said with a laugh. “But you make up for it in other ways.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Hideki said, eyeing his pipe. Youta watched him, head resting on his hand as he laid on his stomach. Free and relaxed. He sighed at the dog’s expression.

“Is this because of Takeo? That wasn’t his fault, you know.”

Youta recalled the memory from a week ago. Heavy rains pouring, his leisurely steps changing to frantic ones as he heard screams, screeches of both a child and of something deeper. More disgusting and wretched. Youta hadn’t been the only one who had heard, and by the time a small crowd had gathered around Master Noboru’s quarters, Takeo was curled tightly into a ball. The boy sobbed as even more frightening sounds came from below.

For a moment, no one could move their legs forward. Terrified by the sounds that surrounded Takeo on the ground. They had let him lie there, sobbing, panting, filled with the purest form of fear a child could face.

In the end, Noboru was the one who scooped his child off the ground, handing him off to one of the servants with a growl. The noises had calmed when the head’s presence had stepped into his room, but it lingered in the air like a sour aftertaste.

Youta couldn’t help but feel pity rising in his throat for Takeo. He had let it slide, however. The servants were much more apt at handling children than him.

“He shouldn’t have been wandering around the house.”

“It was his father’s room,” Youta said with a wave of his hands. “You’re too hard on the boy.”

“He was too weak to handle that demon having a tantrum,” Hideki clicked his tongue. The cellar was where the cat resided when rain plagued the estate. Out of sight, out of mind, and close to Noboru who held the only ability to calm the cat’s true form. But Takeo had crumbled so easily. It had only confirmed every fear Hideki had about the boy. It was hardly surprising. “But Takeo doesn’t concern me. Kazuo does.”

“Kazuo?” Youta said with a hint of amusement. “That harmless wisp of a man?”

“He’s not harmless, he’s manipulative. He’s scheming.”

“That sounds like someone I know,” Youta said and Hideki offered him a bored glare.

“He has plans for that demon and I don’t know what they are,” Hideki said through his teeth. “This
is exactly what he needed for Master Noboru to agree to whatever ridiculous ideas he’s had.”

The snake man stared at him, an eyebrow raised at the tension that had returned to the dog’s body. He smiled, lifting himself up so that he could sit behind Hideki, his hands traveling to his legs. Slim fingers traced light, maddening patterns on the inside of the older man’s thighs, but Hideki only replied with a sigh. He rose, breaking away from Youta’s grip and composing himself as he tied his robe tighter around his body.

“You’re leaving?” Youta asked, making no move for his clothes.

“I have things to attend to,” Hideki said, opening the door.

“Will you be back?”

The dog looked over his shoulder back at Youta who splayed himself out seductively, as his narrow and sharpened eyes fixated on him. Hideki closed the door behind him without a word.

“I’ll take that as a yes,” Youta chuckled and laid his head down on the inviting futon.

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Kazuo was a patient man. He moved with the world around him, like a stream with a carefully planned path. He would bounce against rocks, and scuffle through grass, and immerse himself in dirt and mud. It was nature. Kazuo was like nature. The way he breathed seemed like a refreshing breeze itself. But nothing seemed rushed or hurried in his manner. It was different from the city outside the walls that they had closed themselves away from.

He had always been like that, though. Daiki could remember it clear in his mind. When Daiki was young and everyone seemed as tall as the gates to the estate, Daiki felt as though shadows loomed over him. Binding his flesh and words. While inside he was doing his best not to burst, not to let the stench of something so wicked burn through his pores and spill out into the open air.

But Kazuo’s shadow didn’t slink around him like snakes and never suffocated him. He always seemed so tall but never threatening. Always soft. Always gentle. Those were the few memories he could cling to from his childhood years. When the world had only given him cruelty, unkindness, and fear.

And those brief moments of safety.

That he had… ruined.

Daiki looked down at his hands, sitting isolated on the hill he had claimed in the Sohma residence. Far and away, but still trapped. He was so caught up in the dirt that was trapped in the skin where his too short fingernails should have been that he didn’t notice the presence behind him.

“You’ve been avoiding me,” Kazuo said. Daiki looked up at him, quickly tucking his hands into his armpits as if they were something to hide.

“No I haven’t,” but it was too hard to lie and look at the scars that marred that rat’s skin, so he quickly flicked his eyes downward to the thin, flat, but wide boxes that were tucked into Kazuo’s arm.

“Is that so?” Kazuo said, his tone so understanding it ached. “If that’s truly the case you won’t mind accompanying me?”
“Accompanying—where?”

“I want to show you something. A gift from the mountains.”

Curiosity overweighed his guilt, and he stood following behind Kazuo silently. Being sure that his steps were always slow enough to stay behind him, never beside him.

Kazuo led him back to the dirt path but didn’t lead him closer to the nests of houses and movement that rested in the center of the property. Daiki immediately relaxed at the realization. Instead, they walked further along the path that outlined the hills that Daiki loved so much. Silence wrapped around them as they walked, until finally they reached a small house. Isolated and quiet, save for the sounds of summer that rested in the panes of wood.

Kazuo began to walk inside but stopped when he realized Daiki’s hesitation. He turned to look at him.

“No one lives here. You’re allowed to come in,” he said. Daiki nodded and walked inside, not needing to remove the shoes he didn’t wear or own.

“Where are we?” Daiki asked, looking around the threadbare, but clean, house. The wood creaked and moaned, but stood sturdy. The doors slid open easily, but wind passed through the few pieces of rotted paper that marred the edges.

“It used to be…” Kazuo paused. “Living quarters for servants. But all the residences have been moved closer over the years. Now it sits here untouched.”

Daiki looked out the cracked open doors. They were surrounded by trees, bushes, leaves, nature. A small stone path snaked around the side that led to nowhere. It was nice. Almost too nice for a servant.

Kazuo motioned for him to sit in the center of the room and he obeyed, watching as Kazuo sat across from him, laying the thin box before him.

“I have a present for you,” Kazuo said again, opening the box. Daiki felt his breath hitch immediately, though he couldn’t put his finger on why. His chest felt tight and his breathing felt like it was struggling to escape his tensed lungs.

Kazuo removed the contents. Charms. Talismans. All the same shape but with different writing embroidered on each. They were lavish and delicate and felt like the pull of a strong magnet. His heart beating in strange intervals as they processed each one. Daiki looked up at Kazuo, whose normally serene face looked troubled and strained, and even saw a sweat break out on his forehead.

“What—”

“They’re for you,” Kazuo cut him off. “This house is too.”

Daiki furrowed his brows, his expression dumbstruck by confusion, but his voice too weak to voice what was already so apparent in his eyes. Kazuo continued.

“These are sealing charms, they’re meant to ward off evil spirits. Demons. If we hang them on the walls this house will become a place where the spirit inside you can’t escape. You will have full control. And a roof over your head.”

“I don’t… I can’t,” but his words were caught inside him. Welling up like tears would. Kazuo kept unloading each charm, one after the other, as if there was a never ending supply. He surrounded him
with them until he was at the center of the circle, and even then there were more to spare.

“I know the house is run down, but we can repair it to be anyway you like,” Kazuo reassured.
“You’ll be safe when it rains.”

When it rains.

“I can’t live here,” the words were forced out. “I’m not… allowed. The cat doesn’t have a home. When it rains… when it snows I go to the cellar beneath Master Noboru. I can’t have a house.”

He hadn’t realized, but with each word a lump was released in his throat, accompanied by waves of tears that blurred his vision. His body was overwhelmed with the feeling of falling back on the strange sensation. He felt as if he was finally letting his muscles relax after years of tensing, clenching, holding onto himself for dear life.

But now he was just tired. All he wanted was sleep.

Had he ever rested before?

The surrounding feeling made it feel as though he had never even known the word existed.

His eyes drooped.

“I’ve talked with Master Noboru,” Kazuo said. “He’s allowed it.”

“Why?” He choked out.

Why are you doing this? Why are you so kind? Why would you bother? Why would you even care?

“I told him you were dangerous,” Daiki could hear the laugh that Kazuo attached to the statement, but it drifted away as if it were a dream. In an instant he felt himself change. Transform into something he had never felt before. It didn’t stretch his skin, it didn’t burn his nose.

A pile of orange fur was left before Kazuo, resting in the sun that spilled through.

Kazuo smiled.

Finally, the cat could sleep.

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Takeo could feel his knees beginning to wobble from keeping their bent position from behind the bushes. He watched carefully as Kazuo slid the door of the isolated house open and carefully closed it behind him. It had been hours since he had entered with the cat demon, but Takeo couldn’t muster the strength to approach the house any closer. His courage only allowed him to wait, keeping his ears open for a scream or crash or disturbance of any kind.

He shook like a leaf against a snow storm as he waited, trying to calm himself, and awaiting the blooming anxiety to subside with each passing moment. He hated that he could do so little in the face of danger. In the face of a demon that he could command.

Kazuo, however, looked unscathed. His head was held high and he walked as gracefully as ever. His holy robes contorted around him so perfectly and undisturbed that it was as if not even the summer breezes could touch him.

Takeo looked back towards the house, glad to see that the cat demon wasn’t making any attempt to
follow Kazuo before he crawled his way from out of the bushes, trailing behind the rat spirit unseen.

Takeo was a boy with a lively and restless spirit, but a spirit that he had learned to keep quiet and hidden to avoid beatings and scoldings from his father. He had learned to become invisible, the best possible scenario he could think of when trailing around the Sohma estate grounds. No servants to hassle you, no father to condemn you, no rules to adhere to. The only person in the world he wished and hoped could see him was walking away. Back to the center of the estate. Back to where the noise was almost unbearable.

Takeo peered from behind a tree as he continued to watch Kazuo slide away. Quickly he grabbed onto the branch and hoisted himself up, choosing to hide in the leaves, giving him a grander view of the earth around him.

“I can hear you, you know,” the sudden voice caused Takeo to still as wrapped himself in a ball atop the branch he had found. “Your father wouldn’t be happy with you horsing around like this.”

Takeo peered down to the bark of the tree to see Kazuo staring up, his eyes searching for the boy’s slender figure against the foliage.

“He’s not happy with anything I do,” Takeo replied back, still trying to keep himself hidden. He could hear Kazuo sigh. “Did he hurt you?”

“Who? Your father?” Kazuo asked up to the branches, still unable to see the source of the voice.

“No,” Takeo said. “The demon.”

“No, of course not,” he replied with a smile. “Were you worried?”

“Yes,” he said honestly.

“You have no reason to be,” Takeo could hear the smile in Kazuo’s gentle voice but it was negated by the incident that had happened nearly two weeks ago. Those roars had stuck to his ears ever since, and each time they made him shiver with fear. “Are you going to come down from there, Takeo?”

“I’m not Takeo. I’m a tree spirit,” he said. Kazuo laughed.

“I see. Well, great tree spirit, thank you for worrying about me. How about I bring you an offering for your troubles?”

“I accept sweet bean paste!”

“Is that so?” Another laugh. Takeo smiled into his knees. “I did have some bean paste but, you see, I was going to offer it to a dear friend of mine named Takeo. But I suppose I can give it to you instead.”

“Uh, well, you can give it to your friend if you want. That would be okay.”

“You are most generous, kind tree spirit. And if you see Takeo tell him that I would love to see him soon.”

Takeo rustled the branch he sat on, causing the leaves to clash together in a soft summer rustle. Takeo held onto the laughter of Kazuo even as he walked away, feeling the joyous sound bring warmth in the depth of his chest. For a moment he sat in the tree, feeling his hands collect dirt and sap, before climbing out of the tree and walking onto the path alone.
“Why does he have to be so nice to that demon?” He mumbled to himself, pouting as he kicked a rock that stood in his pathway. An odd sensation of discomfort flooded his young mind. Something that went beyond an initial and intense disgust and fear that was inherent with the very mention of the cat demon. Something that was far more honest and raw made him upturn his lips and slump as he walked.

Kazuo always had such kind eyes, such a wonderful smile that made him feel so welcome—far more than the rare and fickle smile of his father. To see those precious eyes leaving the presence of that thing...

He kicked the rock especially hard and it collided against the side of a house. Takeo followed after it, feeling the dirt path fade under his feet and turn to stone as he found himself back in the vast estate, where the houses posed as a suffocating maze, and servants could be seen ducking in and out of rooms and out onto the wooden hallways that wove outside the homes.

He lifted himself onto the wooden slates, rock in hand and laid down on his back as he stared up at the ceiling.

He didn’t want to go back to his father. He didn’t feel as though he could move any further than right —

“Yes,” his ears perked up.

“Haa, there, there, again.”

“Keep your voice down.”

“Mmm, I like it when you tell me what to do.”

Takeo lifted himself off the ground at the sound of the familiar voices flooding his ears. A deep crimson flooded his face as curiosity fueled his movements forward. He inched closer to the paper door where the sounds leaked. A primal panting, skin connecting together, moans falling against his young ears. With a tiny finger he poked a hole through the door and peered inside.

Flushed skin flooded Takeo’s view, a constant movement of entangled limbs that Takeo couldn’t quite understand but couldn’t quite tear away from. He shifted and recognized the face of Youta, the snake spirit, writhing against the floor. His eyes pinched shut and his mouth hanging open. A deep moan escaping his lips.

“You’re quite submissive today,” a husky voice was heard, one of a man’s, but Takeo couldn’t see from who. He shifted again, trying his best to get a view and felt his skin crawl when he spotted Hideki. The cruel face of the dog spirit was twisted into a type of pleasure, but Takeo still couldn’t contain the cold chill of anxiety he felt whenever he saw him.

He moved again but this time when he turned his eyes landed on Youta’s. Open, searing, knowing, staring right back at him.

With a sudden, adrenaline fueled motion Takeo pushed himself away from the door and ran as fast as he could down the hall. His face drenched in a dark red. His body responding in ways he had never been familiar with, his eyes wanting to cry at such a sudden and shocking sight. He ran as fast as he could until Kazuo’s house came into his view.

It was one of the few places in this world where he felt like he could breathe.

-AUGUST-
“Kazuo’s gone mad,” Hideki Sohma, the spirit of the dog, remarked. Noboru gave him a side-eyed glance, doing little to acknowledge the statement.

Noboru sat in his quarters, sipping at rice wine as he spilled over family records. Hideki sat to his right, a man nearly fifteen years his senior, and tall and thin, unlike Noboru’s shorter and built form. He smiled like the slither of a snake with eyes as biting and as cunning as that of practiced thief.

“What have you heard, Hideki?” Noboru asked, seemingly uninterested.

“I’ve heard Kazuo’s converted the abandoned house up the hill into a sanctuary for that filthy being,” Hideki said. His voice as smooth as warm honey, his tone darkened and firm. Noboru had always responded well to a certain level of directness. Hideki had learned this early on.

“It amazes me the things you’re able to find out without my knowledge,” Noboru kept his eyes trained down on his work. “I’m starting to think those stray dogs that lay around the house are more trained than you let on.”

“I just feel sorry for the poor creatures,” Hideki said, chuckling at his own words.

“I told him he could,” Noboru said flatly. “Does that bother you?”

“It does,” Hideki said, smile still greased onto his face. “You’re too soft on that boy. Even if he’s your favorite, a line should be drawn.”

“The creature will be contained, and Kazuo is being kept busy. Perhaps enough time in this ill-fitting priest role he’s stumbled himself into will remind him of his true place among this family.”

“That’s quite a risk to take, especially now,” Hideki said. Noboru slammed a fist on the table and turned to the dog with cold eyes.

“What are you getting at?”

“What do you think?” Hideki raised an eyebrow. “A woman spawned into the zodiac, no rabbit born at all—even seven years after its intended year. And now the rat denies his place in the family to build a shed for a demon.”

“I’m aware,” Hideki snapped back.

“We all know Takeo is a boy of low ambition and skill,” Hideki said. “The hold of the zodiacs and the gracious spirit will only continue to weaken under his hand. He’ll barely be capable of fixing this damaging reputation we’ve gained within the city.”

“He’ll be trained. I’ll mold that boy with my own two hands. I will not leave this world without assurances that this family has found its strength once more.”

“Forgive me if I’m skeptical,” Hideki said. Noboru snarled.

“You have a loose tongue today,” Noboru bit back. “Learn to hold it in before it’s cut out.”

“Of course, Master Noboru,” Hideki said. “I’m only here to advise.”

“Then what do you advise? All you seem to be doing is meaninglessly running your mouth.”

“Master Noboru seems very short with me today,” Hideki said with a grin.

“Say something useful or leave.”
“Double Takeo’s courses. Keep him away from Kazuo until his head is screwed back on. Teach him what it means to be a man—what it means to be a Sohma.”

Noboru looked towards Hideki with a harsh gaze, but took in the words thoughtfully. He thought of his cheerful boy, with his bright smile and his timid coughs. Such an incredible difference from Kazuo. Kazuo, who he had kept under his wing in hopes that he would inherit the family one day. Kazuo, who years ago he could trust with this family of secrets. Kazuo, who overshadowed Takeo in a million different ways. Kazuo, who had gone mad. It made him click his tongue.

“I suppose you have a point,” he said.

“Who knows, he might become an even more frightening leader than you.”

“Am I frightening?” Noboru asked, taking a sip of his wine.

Hideki smirked, basking in the presence of his god.

“Terrifying.”

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The walls had become firmly embedded into Daiki’s bones. He had become all the more grateful for it. His body felt at ease. His mind felt like his own. He no longer felt weak under the charms that were now plastered carefully into the walls of the house and out of sight. The demon was still there. Lurking, growling at its inability to escaping, attempting to claw its way out of him. But it couldn’t. It wouldn’t.

But people still made him anxious. Kazuo came to visit him almost every day, and approaching him still felt dangerous. As if something might snap and he would wake up from this horrendously pleasant dream, straddled above frightened eyes. Blood mixing with rain water as it spilt into the grass below.

He kept his distance, but he was become accustomed to him. To how he would turn his attention to certain problems around the house that he now moved himself into. How he would be saddled with his own tasks.

The paper on the doors was replaced. The floors were cleaned. Used linens filled the closet that Daiki was allowed to use. And the roof was repaired of its holes.

Holes Daiki was able to see.

Rain would fall on the roof and drops would plop onto his nose. He would tense and let out startled noises, and his limbs would feel tired and heavy… but nothing more would happen.

For the first time in years he was watching the rain fall.

He had placed his arm out the window and marveled at the wet drips that clung to his skin. It was almost too surreal.

It was proof that he could live here.

However, that didn’t make him feel any more comfortable when someone stepped into his now home.

In fact, he was feeling distinctly uncomfortable as sharp, hazel eyes pierced directly into him. Long,
beautiful black hair framing the face of the fiercest woman he believed he would ever encounter.

Kazuo had left him alone with Miho Sohma.

“I’ve agreed to bring your meals to you,” Miho said. “The servants are too frightened to do it themselves.”

Daiki bowed low, his forehead touching the ground. “Thank you very much, Lady Miho.”

“Sit up,” she demanded, and Daiki did as he was told. “This will only be until the servants are convinced that you are no longer dangerous, which Kazuo insists you are not.”

Daiki nodded, swallowing at how intimidating her presence was, even with her soft spoken voice and ladylike posture.

“I am not so easily swayed, however,” she glared at him and Daiki felt a sweat break out onto his forehead.

“Thank you very much.”

“Don’t you have anything else to say?” She asked, clearly annoyed. He stiffened again.

“I suppose I’m just confused as to why you would agree to this,” he said. “You obviously fear me.”

It wasn’t meant to be condescending or threatening. It was a simple observation. One that she flinched at. But it was true. When Kazuo had left them a dread had formed in her eyes that was so apparent. Her hands were balled into fists, and her eyes constantly went to the closest exit at every spare moment.

“I don’t want to hurt you,” Daiki said in a low mumble, bowing his head. “I will try my best not to. But I also need convincing that I’m no longer dangerous. Please don’t put yourself at risk for me.”

A moment of silence passed between them until Daiki heard the woman sigh.

“I’m not doing this for you. I’m doing this for Kazuo.” Daiki looked up to meet her now softened eyes. “I trust him more than I distrust you.”

He nodded, understanding.

“He’s a kind man,” she said. “And a good friend.”

“Yes,” he said. “He is.”

Miho sighed again. She still hated it when Kazuo was right, though.

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“You shouldn’t have done that,” Daiki scolded. Kazuo lifted an eyebrow as he turned to look at him, busy with cleaning the dirt off the higher beams of the house. “Forcing her to do that for me.”

“You two will get along well, I’m sure of it,” Kazuo said. “I wouldn’t have asked her otherwise.”

Daiki rolled his eyes at the relentless optimism that he had grown use to in these past couple of months. “She doesn’t seem to like me at all.”

“You both come from a similar place,” Kazuo said, turning his attention back to his task. “You’re
both punished because you’re different. Because no one cares to stop and understand.”

Daiki looked down at the floor. Kazuo made it sound so simple, it was frustrating. His kindness was frustrating and he felt his fingers dig into his palms as he balled his fists up tight. It was too much, too overwhelming. He calmed himself by opening a window, letting the sunlight flow in, caught in the sky in the moments before sunset engulfed the land, but the shadows were still long, and the heat had subsided slightly.

“I always catch you in the sun,” Kazuo said.

Daiki felt Kazuo walk up behind him as he stared out into the summer air, an air that he hadn’t really cared to venture out into now that these protective walls were built around him. But the feeling of sun bathing his skin, the humid air breathing through his pores, the feeling of cool dirt and warm tree trunks and soft grass. Daiki lost himself in the feeling again.

“I love summer,” he said. “I love how warm the air feels, even at night.”

“You’re lucky,” Kazuo said. “Being able to handle this heat. There were a number of times I almost transformed during my time in the mountains.”

“Rats can’t handle heat, but they don’t mind the rain,” Kazuo said, staring blankly out into fading daylight. Kazuo watched him carefully. “The outdoors is my home, I’ve never minded it. Living outside or making my own shelter,” Daiki began. “I may not have had a house, but I was never homeless. What I wouldn’t give to stand out in a summer shower. As me. Not as it.”

Kazuo’s heart broke as he watched the shadows grow longer under the burning sun. He seemed so small, so compact. Even in the expanse of the place he was now allowed to call home, he still was aware of the small amount of space he took up. It was as if he wasn’t comfortable stretching his legs out, or detaching himself from the charmed walls of the house. Kazuo placed his hand on Daiki’s shoulder and the cat flinched, a deep flush coming through his skin.

“Sorry,” he said. “I didn’t mean to speak so casually. After all you’ve done.”

“It’s alright. Can’t we speak like friends?”

Daiki didn’t respond.

As the sky blurred into a deep red, an orange, and spots of yellow, they crashed against the skin of Daiki. It was as if this was his natural state. Sun-kissed, drenched in sunset, watching with tired eyes as the day faded away. It was a tragedy shrouded in the most unexpected beauty, and Kazuo felt himself tense at even the brief thought of Daiki being anything more than just a broken man.

“Just one more thing to fix and then this house is completely ready,” Kazuo said trying to direct the cat’s attention elsewhere and walking out to the hallway where a definite creak in the floor cried out under his feet.

“Do we really need to fix that?” Daiki asked. “It’s already good enough. You’ve done plenty.”

“A job isn’t finished until it’s finished,” Kazuo said sharply, leaning down to work the panels of the floor under his fingers. “It’s strange that it’s this one particular spot,” he said idly. “There must be…”

He cut himself off when his fingers dug into a loose panel on the floor, and Kazuo lifted it up with a grunt. From the opening a set of stairs tumbled to a dingy, cold floor that was only barely illuminated by the sunlight outside. A chill came up from the cellar and wrapped itself around the two as they stared down into it. Kazuo’s eyes brightened.
“I didn’t think such a small house would have a cellar like this. Daiki, fetch a candle and bring it down here,” Kazuo commanded. Daiki obeyed quietly as Kazuo walked down into the room below.

He gave a content sigh at the cool air that had been trapped underneath, how it sank into the bottom of his feet, and folded into his clothes. He began to walk cautiously with his arms out until he reached a wall. It didn’t feel terribly spacious, but it certainly was large enough to be comfortable.

His hand on the wall was suddenly illuminated by the light that Daiki brought along with him. He handed the candle to Kazuo, his head trained onto his feet as Kazuo shone a light against each nook and cranny of the newfound room.

“Look at this, Daiki,” Kazuo said, throwing light onto an old, well-built desk that was covered in layers of dust. Shelves filled with old, miscellaneous scrolls and records bookended the sides of the desk against a gray, cracked wall.

The rest of the room was unimpressive, other than a small table in the opposite corner of the desk that could serve no other purpose than to hold a lantern.

“Daiki isn’t this incredible, you have a whole other—”

Kazuo stopped himself when the light fell onto Daiki’s crumpling form. His head was bent, his hands balled into tight, tight fists. At first, Kazuo felt a flash of fear, wondering if he was far enough away from the talismans to feel the urge to transform.

That idea was slashed away when a small drop of water fell between them on the floor below. Daiki was crying.

“Daiki… Daiki, are you alright?”

He nodded his head, weakly. Doing all he could to not bring his eyes up to Kazuo’s.

“It’s just…” his voice broke, and Kazuo could see him bite down harshly on his lip. “It’s dark.”

Kazuo felt like a fool.

At every sign of rain. At the beginning of each winter.

The cat was placed in the cellar below the god.

Without light.

Sometimes without food.

With only the burning sensation to give in to a creature that would scratch at the walls, and shriek the cries that he never could.

Kazuo dropped the candle, and on instinct pulled Daiki into a hug. His arms wrapped around him tightly, his body protecting him, shielding him, from the world he was so intricately a part of. He brought him closer, closer, held him tighter, tighter, until he felt arms wrap around him in response.

Daiki pulled away violently.

“Stop.”

Kazuo felt his blood run cold at the sudden scream that tore out of Daiki’s mouth.
“Stop it!” He screamed again, wrenching himself away from those arms that seemed so safe. “Why do you bother? Why are you… Stop being so kind!”

The darkness surrounded him. Making memories flash through his head that he wished, god he wished, didn’t exist. But they did. Its memories were his memories. They were the same.

The cold cellar air was a reminder of that.

He remembered how his claws would dig into the walls, how his teeth would gnash against anything that might free him. That might allow him to *hunt to kill*. He remembered wanting to feel flesh underneath his misshapen bones. He wanted to know what it would feel like to crush it, to let blood spill on his already corrupted skin.

He remembered staring down at Kazuo. His young, horrified eyes silently begging him for his life. The blood that spilled from his face causing his pale skin to go crimson.

The grass was red.

His hands were red.

Everything was red and dark and smelled so terrible.

Daiki clutched at his stomach and fell to the ground, allowing honest, and guttural cries to escape his mouth. He flinched when Kazuo put a hand on his shoulder, slapping it away. Here he was, every day, flaunting those scars to Daiki. And he didn’t care. It hurt. It hurt so much.

“*LEAVE ME ALONE!*” Why was he so kind after all these years? Why was he so frustratingly good? Why was he such a shining example of everything he *wasn’t*?


“I could kill you!” Daiki screamed. “I could kill you!”

His shoulders shook and he wept like a child. Wept like he had never been allowed tears before. And suddenly, Kazuo’s arms were around him again. His head was buried into the shoulder of his robes. He was crying into his arms.

He felt his tears spill onto Kazuo’s holy robes.

He felt his cries release against him, freeing themselves out into the open door of the cellar, into a sky washed with dusk.

“I’m sorry,” Daiki breathed out.

Kazuo held him closer and felt himself respond in ways he had been trying to ignore since he had first encountered him ten years ago.

He wanted to be here. By his side.

Something inside him fought with a violence he didn’t know was possible.

In that moment he knew he would never be as strong as Daiki.

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“It’s time for you to focus your attention elsewhere,” Noboru said firmly.
“Master Noboru?”

The summer air was beginning to fade, finally cool breezes could be felt at night, caused only the smallest of shivers in contrast to the heat that would still beat down during the day. But fall was coming. Kazuo was aware of this as he sat opposite of the head of his family in his quarters. His hands fidgeting. His mouth turned down.

“Enough of your playing priest up on that hill with the demon,” he said firmly. “It’s time for you to take your future more seriously.”

“Master Noboru, being a priest is my future. This is what I’ve devoted my life to be.”

“And I commend you for achieving this ridiculous dream up in those godforsaken mountains. But these silly ambitions do not come before our family.”

“I returned home, is that not good enough?” Kazuo asked, trying his best to keep his voice calm and neutral.

“Oh, my son,” he began. “You are a charmed, intelligent man and an excellent leader.”

“Thank you, sir,” he said quietly.

“As you know, I will not live much longer. That’s the curse of the god,” Noboru said gravely. “I realize my time is limited, and that I will need to leave a clear path for my dear family. That’s why I would like you to become head of this family when I’m gone.”

“What?”

“And I would like to train you to fill this position until then.”

“No, no of course not. How could I accept? I could never take that place from Takeo.”

“Takeo is a weak willed boy, who acts more like a mistress’s son than a god’s. He wouldn’t last as head of this family, not even with you by his side.”

Kazuo felt a pull in his stomach. Something familiar and raw that had always been there. That had always pulled him in the direction of his family. Of his duty and his obligation. But now it felt so weak. There was a voice inside him that was completely his own and it felt… rusty. Small. Incomplete. But now it was louder than the primal need that rested beneath his skin.

He thought of Takeo. The gentle boy with a soft, careful spirit within him.

He couldn’t.

“Master Noboru, I refuse you.”

“You do not. You will do as I say.”

“I won’t!” Kazuo snapped back, feeling an uneasy rush of adrenaline fill his bones at defying the head. He felt sick, and as if he would vomit on the floor before him. His head felt muddled and confused and his limbs felt weak.

“What has spending time with that demon done to you?” Noboru asked, his voice dark, and his eyes matching. “What happened to you, Kazuo?”

What had happened to him?
That violence returned in his stomach as a pressure built behind his eyes.

“Nothing has happened,” he lied.

“You’ve become too close with that demon boy. It’s done things to your head,” Noboru’s voice was verging on a yell. His fist pounded the table, trying to get the distracted attention of Kazuo back to him. “You’ve completed your project. Become head of this family or leave this place. The Sohmas have no need for a priest! We have need for the rat! For you, Kazuo!”

Kazuo looked down at his hands.

He was an adult, with experience weaved into his eyes. Noboru was not that much older than him. But he felt like a child. A silly child being scolded by their father. His chest felt tight as he kept his eyes down and away. The words on his tongue heavy as they slipped out.

“Then perhaps… Perhaps I should leave again,” he said softly. “On another journey.”

“Kazuo,” Noboru sounded wounded. The rat couldn’t bring his eyes up. Because he knew what would rest behind those sharp eyes would be the unbridled expression of betrayal. It made Kazuo sick to even think about it.

“Maybe that is for the best.”

“Master Noboru, I—”

“I will not discuss this any further. I want you out of the estate by sunset.”

He finally brought his eyes up to look at Noboru, their firm and frightening glare paralyzing him.

On what strength was it that he finally rose from his seat? On what strength was it that he nearly fell into his own quarters?

On what strength was it was he looking back at the gate to the Sohma estate?

He followed the familiar path to the mountains.

The sunset before him, and he knew he left Daiki a stronger man than he could ever be.

He couldn’t even bring himself to say goodbye.
FINALLY this chapter is done. It feels good to get things back on track with the boys once more. Thanks to anyone who's reading this, and I hope this chapter was worth the wait!

With a throaty yell, Kyo aimed his foot right for Yuki’s stomach.

Yuki placed his palm as a block before any true impact could happen, stopping Kyo’s momentum and shooting the leg up in the air with one swift movement. Yuki’s arm stretched through the crisp autumn afternoon, biting at his skin that was heated by the match. He watched as Kyo stuttered backwards. Kyo quickly regained his balance, and without a moment of hesitation brought his fist slicing through the air.

Yuki dodged, feeling the side of Kyo’s fist grazing his silver hair, keeping his eyes from widening at the most he had ever felt Kyo hit him in a fight. His face stayed calm, his forehead didn’t break a sweat, and Kyo either didn’t notice or brushed off the feeling of the ends of Yuki’s hair tickling his fist because that still wasn’t good enough.

Instead he took the opportunity to grab at Kyo’s wrist, spinning him around and pinning his arm painfully behind his back. He jumped when Kyo’s leg jutted backwards, and Kyo took the opportunity to escape. Breathing heavily, he charged at him. A move Yuki had determined to define Kyo’s frustration. Desperation. Impatience.

Honestly, he had expected it at the beginning of their fight, nearly six minutes ago. But Kyo had stayed composed enough (if that was a word he could even use to match Kyo’s blindsided energy) to keep his moves mostly in check and disciplined.

Yuki stretched his leg straight into Kyo’s chest in a flash. The force of the impact doubled by Kyo’s eager strides forward. He flew backwards, falling gracelessly.

Yuki stood above him, trying to keep his labored breaths at bay as he pinned Kyo with his foot.

“Give?”

Kyo growled at the word as if it stung him and swiped at Yuki’s ankle with fingers sharp like a knife. Yuki jumped back with a roll of his eyes as Kyo pumped his arms forward so that he could balance himself on crouched feet. He lunged again, this time swiping his muscular leg in an attempt to knock the rat off balance.

He let out a bark of frustration as Yuki avoided the attack. Kyo sprung to his feet while Yuki was still distracted with getting away and with a curled up fist his arm extended, locked in on Yuki’s cheek.

Something pushed Yuki.

No, maybe it had pulled at the back of his collar.
Or blew him back like a strong wind.

All Yuki knew was that the tanned skin of Kyo’s arm filled his vision like a swipe of paint over a camera lens, and his cheek was left unharmed. A useless sort of panic bundled in Yuki’s chest that was easily squashed by an unhuman confidence and a voice that wasn’t quite his.

_He can’t hit me._

Kyo gave another cry, his brows furrowing, and his eyes blurred with burning focus that was so incredibly counterproductive Yuki was almost impressed.

Gray eyes narrowed, tired and irritated. He caught Kyo’s momentum, grabbing the arm that still carried Kyo’s fist at full force and pulled Kyo almost completely around him until the back of his knees violently hit the balcony of the house.

With a loud *thunk* Kyo’s upper body collapsed onto the wooden slates outside of Shigure’s empty office. Yuki kept Kyo pinned now with both arms, straddling him so he couldn’t move as Kyo’s legs spilled off the side of the house hopelessly.

He watched Kyo squirm under him, his face flushed red, and his breathing heavy from the fight. But Kyo’s eyes were still focused, still on, dilated from something more than just the fight, Yuki thought. Yuki felt frustration bundle in his chest at feeling his focus being pulled to how Kyo’s movements were causing a friction against his thighs. How his skin seemed so warm under his fingertips. How his face that was flushed and breathing hard from the match looked so erotic.

“Give?” Yuki asked again, masking the desperation in his voice and hovering over the trapped cat.

Kyo thrashed as much as he could, but Yuki held him tighter, dug his nails into his skin, placed even more pressure atop his body, and leaned even closer.

“Give?”

Kyo gave an aggravated sigh, letting his head drop down on the floor as he rolled his eyes. They did their best not to meet with Yuki’s.

“Yeah, yeah, I give.”

“Good,” _finally_. Yuki leaned in with a pleased sigh.

Kyo’s response was immediate. His chapped lips fell into time with Yuki’s, a soft friction igniting between them as their mouths worked together. Still, he could feel Kyo’s resentment in the kiss and Yuki made sure to bite down on his pouting lip. It was the only complaint Kyo could give before Yuki urged his mouth open and slid his tongue against Kyo’s.

Kyo filled his sense completely, overwhelmed him with his earthy scent that was lined with sweat. His hands moved from where they had pinned his arms and traveled up into those messy locks of orange hair that Yuki adored.

He could hear Kyo give a soft groan as he teasingly licked at the roof of his mouth, and Kyo roamed his hands onto his back and onto his neck. Calloused skin creating fiction through his shirt, and burning through the fabric. His hands were hot, fire sparking in each fingertip, and Yuki shivered when his hands would move away, replaced by the autumn breeze.

He pulled back, the chill in the air a little too bitter for his liking.
“Your room?” Yuki grazed his lips against Kyo’s neck.

“What is this, some kind of fucked up foreplay now?” Kyo growled, though his words were distracted by the teeth that dug into his tanned skin.

Yuki chuckled, “it’s hard to believe you’re actually angry when you’re this turned on.” Yuki accentuated his point by letting his hand travel down to Kyo’s groin, cupping his half hard length through his pants. Kyo gave a frustrated groan.

“Shut up. My room.”

“Finally, something sensible comes out of your mouth,” Yuki finally leaned off of Kyo, allowing him to stand and follow that rat that was already inside the house.

“Hey, that just sounds like you’re looking for another fight!” Kyo called out as he stormed up the stairs behind him.

Yuki turned, his eyes narrowed, his pupils dilated, as he firmly grabbed onto the collar of Kyo’s shirt. “I don’t think I could make it through another fight,” he whispered, smirking when he watched the muscles in Kyo’s jaw tense.

“How the hell is that my problem?!” Kyo contested, cheeks flushed red as he slammed the door shut behind them.

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Kyo closed his eyes and focused on the feeling of his body vibrating. His arm draped across his eyes, the sounds of Yuki shuffling around his room and gathering his clothes, the suffocating feeling that clung to how relaxed his body felt and how short his breath was. Minutes had passed and he still couldn’t quite compose himself. It was infuriating. He moved his arm to peer up at Yuki who was faced away and buttoning his fly.

“You’ve lost weight,” Kyo remarked.

He watched as Yuki turned his head to stare at him from where Kyo was slumped over the futon. His breath making no rush to return to his body, his legs still feeling weak and tingly. Yuki was already half-dressed, though. And with Kyo’s comment he quickly let the fabric of his shirt fall over his slender back.

“Oh?” Yuki let the remark slide off of him, tucking in his t-shirt that went under his button up. Kyo grimaced.

It was such a pointless comment, but it was true. Kyo almost marveled at how well he had gotten to know his rival’s body. He had been attentive before, with each kick, punch, and block that Yuki would effortlessly thwart him with. He would watch how he moved, his fluid motions so opposite of his own it was almost fascinating. Kyo couldn’t comprehend that kind of grace. So he watched it, despised it from afar.

Now that grace toppled him. Overwhelmed him. His observations were so close now, and included so much data that was utterly useless.

Things like… if Kyo slid his hands far enough down Yuki’s back, he knew where he would find the dip in his lower back. If he slid his tongue just behind his earlobe, he knew Yuki would tense his fingers into any part of Kyo’s skin he could reach. If his calloused hands slid their way up his milky thighs, Yuki would make this sound.
But now there was something else that cluttered his brain. Things like…

The way he could see Yuki’s skin cling to the bones in his back. The way he would cough into his hand a bit too roughly when the air turned bitter. The way the skin under his eyes became so dark and haggard once summer officially saw its way out. The way Yuki just seemed… tired.

What was he supposed to do with that?

If he were naïve and if it were three years earlier, maybe he would have mistakenly tried to take advantage of how weak Yuki seemed. That wasn’t the case though.

Kyo punched his pillow, letting out a frustrated groan into the air, surprising Yuki.

“You’ve become so damn scrawny and I still can’t beat you!” He pointed to Yuki accusingly, who rolled his eyes with a smile as he finished buttoning up his shirt. “You don’t even go to the dojo anymore, what the fuck.”

Yuki laughed, “I’m not as weak as I look, Kyo.”

“Obviously! That’s why you’re such a damn pain!”

“I don’t look that weak,” Yuki said under his breath, his eyes narrowing down into a glare. Kyo smirked. Glad to find any vulnerability on that damn rat. It was addictive.

“Here I thought you were gonna grow out of that girly form of yours by now. Guess you’re just a late bloomer, huh?”

“Do you want this girly form of mine to send you flying again?” Yuki threatened, crossing his arms over his chest.

“I thought you couldn’t take another fight,” Kyo retorted, resting his arms under his head as he laid victoriously on the futon. He could feel Yuki approach him. He could feel how his own words turned into bait and how the rest of him waited anxiously for Yuki to be reeled in.

He could hardly admit it to himself, but after all this months it was something as raw as instinct. A type of muscle memory that was only good for getting him in trouble. Another instinct he had to dull before he did or said something he would regret.

It was like playing with fire.

Kyo opened his eyes and Yuki’s face was hovering above him, smiling as if he could read each begrudging thought in Kyo’s head.

“If we’re going to treat it like foreplay, I just want to see it through to the end. But if you’re that much of a masochist, I don’t mind going another round.” Kyo felt his face burn, but kept his eyes narrowed and sharp. “Anyone would get impatient watching you move,” Yuki’s lips were on his again, punctuating the comment with soft, gentle kiss.

Kyo was glad. If he was this close he couldn’t see the deep crimson that flooded his tanned cheeks.

Yuki pulled away and Kyo was left glaring up at him.

*Suave motherfucker.*

“Tohru’s gonna come back soon,” Kyo said lamely. Yuki nodded, picking himself up off the floor
and dusting himself off.

“I’ll see myself out then,” Yuki said with a smile. With little ceremony, he closed the door behind him.

All the tension in the room followed Yuki, and Kyo finally felt as if he could breathe. Though when he did, his nostrils were still flooded with Yuki’s scent, his room marred by the memory of another afternoon with him.

He rolled onto his stomach, roughly ruffling his hands through his hair as he suppressed another frustrated grunt.

Kyo wanted to strut around with that same kind of confidence when it was just him and Yuki. When they were stripped raw and so beyond embarrassment. When they were in a tangle of limbs and breaths and touch. It bothered him how Yuki would win their fights, how much he could destroy Kyo’s composure as if Yuki were pulling on a loose thread of a scarf.

But, in the end, no matter how many times they tangled themselves together, no matter how familiar Yuki’s skin and scent were to the pads of his fingers, no matter how much his back would arch when Yuki did that thing with his fingers…

He couldn’t get used to it.

He couldn’t relax.

Every touch sent him deeper down in an ocean of confusion, the murky black water only allowing him sensation and the far off cry of his subconscious mind. Too far and faded to be anything than a dull ache inside his chest.

Kyo took a deep breath and realized he couldn’t breathe.

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There was a heavy silence that weighed in the room. Unfortunately, it was a silence with which Tohru was becoming intimately acquainted. It didn’t change the fact that it made her legs want to twitch. She pulled on her pigtail, staring up at Rin’s concentrated face on the book open before her.

It was almost frightening how much of a home Rin had made for herself in this tiny hospital room. Books were stacked up on her bedside table, papers sticking out of them haphazardly with careless handwriting. A deep green blanket rested over the clinical sheets that could only be mused so much from being tightly tucked into the mattress.

The ledges of the windows held a pile of hair ties, earbuds, and snack wrappers. Two cards laid flat on their back that were given to her from Kagura’s family and Hiro (she was able to sneak a peek when Rin was sleeping). The curtains were always only half drawn so that the sunlight could still spill in, but the glare wouldn’t reach the eye line from the bed.

Tohru looked at the setting of the room, the way it had molded around Rin.

Those deep creases in the horse’s brow were also becoming familiar.

“Um,” Tohru tried. Rin flicked her eyes in the girl’s direction. “Have you found anything useful yet?”

Silence again. Tohru felt her nerves flutter and billow beneath her skin. Something she was learning
to endure with these weekly visits. Rin turned her agitated expression back to the words on the pages before snapping it shut.

“No,” Rin said. “Have you?”

Tohru shook her head. “I’m not quite sure what I’m looking for, though.”

Rin clicked her tongue, “I guess I should have expected that.”

Tohru looked down in her lap where the soft bound pages rested, her face never able to hide disappointment in herself. With gentle fingers she traced over the words Sohma Shigure that were engraved into the cover of the book.

“Are these books really about the curse?” The words are out of her mouth before she realized she said them, and she’s almost surprised by the exhausted look Rin gave her in exchange. “I-It’s just! When you said that Shigure wrote about the curse, I thought they would be stories about the zodiac animals! But the stories don’t seem like they relate at all,” Tohru stuttered out, trying to dispel Rin’s intense gaze that she could never quite hold.

“They are,” Rin answered simply. “They’re stories about what the curse has done to us.”

“Oh…” Tohru said, unsatisfied with the vague answer. “I see.”

“What’s wrong?” Rin’s voice is flat and distinctly unconcerned.

“I guess,” Tohru started, circling her finger over the name again and again. “Would Shigure really keep something as big as how to break the curse a secret? Especially from the other zodiac animals?”

The look on Rin’s face mirrored a bewilderment that Tohru had never seen in her expressions before. The sure, clear, confident, yet desperate looks were so deeply etched into her skin and Tohru had learned to familiarize herself with those. But this was completely different.

A look that asked if Tohru could really be that stupid.

Tohru felt her fists clench, “I don’t think he would hide something like that! He can be mysterious, and teasing, but… he’s not cruel.”

“You’re so naïve,” Rin snapped back. “That idiot dog is only loyal to Akito! To this curse!”

“But you’re a part of that curse!” Tohru felt her voice rise. “So are Yuki, Kyo, Hatori… You told me that the curse is a bond. Wouldn’t Shigure want to help if that were the case?”

Rin stared right at her, emotionless eyes that always seemed downturned into some kind of expression of irritation or mild anger. Tohru had gotten used to this look just as she had gotten used to the whole in the fabric of the chair she would push up against Rin’s bed.

The horse sighed again. She seemed to do that a lot around Tohru.

“Which one are you reading?”

“Um,” Tohru stuttered, caught off guard by the sudden, softer tone. She inspected the characters on the cover of the book. “Summer Snow, is what it says.”

Rin reached her hand out as a sign for Tohru to hand the book to her. She watched as Rin’s slender and malnourished fingers gracefully flipped through the pages, tucking overflowing strands of hair behind her ear.
“This man here is based off a dragon spirit from generations ago,” Rin pointed to a line of text in the book, and Tohru peered over her shoulder to see clearly. “Did you read all of it?”

“M-Most of it!” She declared, determination deep in her voice.

“The story is about a man who slowly goes insane the longer he stays in his house. The voices he hears eventually tell him to kill his neighbor. When he isn’t caught, the voices abandon him and he’s left to deal with the consequences of being completely alone.”

“…What a good analysis!” Tohru praised with bright eyes.

“You idiot, that was just a summary! You said you read it!”

“W-Well, I guess I didn’t retain it as well as I had thought… Shigure’s writing is gorgeously complex!” Tohru said, overenthusiastically.

“Don’t try and sound smart now,” Rin said with a click of her tongue. Tohru deflated.

She sighed, “so… a long time ago the dragon spirit murdered someone?”

“No. A long time ago, the dragon was murdered,” Rin explained. “By the dog.”

“The madman?” Tohru asked, eyes going a bit wider. Rin gave a soft grunt of confirmation.

“There’s an old Sohma folklore. The dog betrayed him by bribing a maid to hug the dragon. By then the dragon was appearing in the form of a seahorse and was completely defenseless. While he was still in his zodiac form, the dog killed him, knowing the dragon couldn’t fight back. That’s the kind of spirit that’s living in Shigure.”

“Is that story true?”

“Probably,” Rin said. “We all grew up with these stories. Most Sohmas know them in some form or another, even if they don’t know about the curse.”

Tohru’s eyes were drawn back down to the pages of the book, “but, he had to live with his consequences. In the book. The madman didn’t feel good about what he did.”

“Of course not,” Rin said. “If the dragon’s dead there’s no one to erase memories. All the zodiacs had to go into hiding afterwards, even from their own families.”

“That’s not what I mean,” Tohru said, feeling her eyes begin to well up. “In the book the madman felt bad.”

Rin turned her head to look at Tohru who still hovered over her shoulder. Small tears slid down her face as she kept her focus on the words under Rin’s thumb. It was that silence again, and it settled in the air until Rin leaned towards the windowsill to grab a box of tissues, shoving them into Tohru’s face.

“Your reading comprehension is definitely low,” Rin said as Tohru blew her nose. “And you’re such a crybaby, too.”

Tohru smiled into her tissue at the lack of venom in Rin’s words.

That’s the kind of spirit that’s living in Shigure.
Tohru’s legs had already carried her almost completely home and she still couldn’t get the words out of her head. The way Rin’s words were so sure and defiant. The way Rin made her feel almost foolish for believing that Shigure could have even a sliver of a conscience (Tohru believed it was definitely more than a sliver).

Where did that unwavering assurance come from? Where did that complete lack of faith start? Especially in a family that was bound together so intimately.

Tohru sighed at her thoughts, the way they ran around in her head making her dizzy. She could feel a fever just under the surface of her concentration, threatening to give in to the stress these past few months had loaded onto her shoulders.

“I’m home!” Tohru called out.

Shigure poked his head out of the dining room to give her a smile, “welcome home. How was work?”

“I-It was good!” Shigure gave a soft hum of pleased acknowledgement before turning his attention back to his paper. Tohru breathed out a sigh of relief. She almost hated how easy it was getting to lie about her Monday shifts at work. The same spark of anxiety would ignite in her stomach, but her breathing and her words had finally calmed after three months of this new routine.

Tohru held the bag tightly to her chest, the books Rin had finished weighing them down. She would have to return them to Shigure’s office somehow. She would have to steal new ones by next Monday.

All this time, and still there were books left to read. Still metaphors and characters to decipher. Still more to know. The curse seemed so big now, so insurmountable. So beyond a hug and a puff of smoke.

“Are you going to stand in the entryway all day, Tohru?” Shigure sang from the dining room. Tohru jumped at his playful voice.

“Right!” Removing her shoes, she shook the thoughts out of her head and walked into the dining room.

How much did she really know about Shigure, she wondered. All she really knew about him was his kindness, his generosity, his funny and comforting way with words. That seemed like enough to her. But now something tugged at those thoughts, causing an unwelcome doubt to sink from her toes to her ears.

“Everything alright?” Tohru doesn’t even realize she’s staring at the back of his head until he spoke again, his eyes curious and gentle.

“Um, yes,” Tohru said, but not even she was convinced by her tone. Shigure didn’t look away. “I was just wondering… have you…” she fidgeted with her bag. “Have you had anything to eat yet?”

Shigure smiled and Tohru felt relief flood through her somehow, “I ate at Hatori’s. I just got back, actually.”

“Oh, good,” Tohru said, much more cheerfully this time. “I'm going to get ready for bed.”

“Tohru,” Shigure called as she turned away.

“Y-Yes?” She squeaked.
“Don’t work yourself too hard. You’ll end up catching a cold if you keep that serious expression on your face,” he smiled.

“Right. Of course,” she smiled back at him.

“Much better,” he said. “Goodnight, Tohru.”

“Goodnight.”

She trudged up the stairs, bag still clutched to her chest, and lips still lingering in a faint grin. Maybe she didn’t know much about him. For now, she thought, that was fine.

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Time was beginning to move unbearably slow.

Granted when he was at school, time always seemed to capture Kyo as if he were wading waist-deep in damp sand, but lately things had gotten so much worse. Kyo noticed this when he realized he was checking the clock on the classroom wall every two minutes almost exactly. Kyo groaned to himself, sliding down in his seat as the teacher continued to droll on about something he couldn’t even fathom paying attention to. His hand occupied itself by spinning a pen between his thumb and index fingers.

The worst part was that he knew exactly why he was so anxious and so damn fidgety. And the reason was sitting only two rows ahead of him to his left.

His head turned to stare at the back of Yuki’s head like a magnetic pull. As if that damn rat were a black hole, sucking his attention from Kyo’s eyes, commanding his goosebumps to rise from his skin, slowing time in the space around him.

Kyo dug his fingernails into his desk.

Yuki was leaning forward as he took notes, and his hair was parting like waves over the back of his pale, milky neck. His slender fingers were tugging strands of hair behind his ear. His lean muscles were moving under the thick, clunky fabric of their uniform shirts. Kyo was responding to each tiny detail that Yuki left carelessly like a trail of breadcrumbs.

He turned his head away quickly.

Stop, he thought to himself for about the twentieth time that period. Get a fucking grip.

But, shit, Kyo was getting teased by these stupid, insignificant pieces of skin that Yuki was revealing. His hands were clear in his view, and just the thought of what they did to him alone was enough to have Kyo ducking his head down and counting from 100 backwards. Which was so stupid because they were just together last night.

A pang fell into his stomach at the thought. That meant they would have to wait another week. Mondays were the only days that Tohru had work and Shigure would visit Hatori, and getting the house to themselves beyond that just wasn’t a reality anymore. It had settled them into a routine, but Kyo felt his leg bounce up and down on the ball of his foot at the thought of having to wait.

Get a grip. Get a grip. Get a grip.

The bell rang, signaling lunch and Kyo felt his shoulders relax. Finally, he could get out of this damn stuffy room. Maybe he could run a few laps around the track until the bitter fall air cooled him down completely. Hopefully forever. Every damn time he was with Yuki now it was like it wasn’t enough.
Yuki would leave and Kyo’s skin would still buzz.

Each time they touched it would burn hotter, and his head would get dizzier. His breathing would come shorter, his voice would rumble louder. What had Yuki fucking done to him?

He closed his eyes and tried to focus on the background noises of the classroom. Tohru and her friends had spent the first minutes of their lunch break peering out the window at the first years.

“They have their distance run this week,” Tohru said. “I hope it doesn’t rain on them.”

“Whatever, I’m just glad we don’t have to do that shit anymore,” Uotani said.

“If I recall, Arisa, you called in sick that day.”

A guffaw of laughter followed as the voices chattered away from him, thankfully. And he felt himself finally beginning to relax.

“Hey.”

Kyo jumped at the sudden voice that invaded so quickly, opening his eyes carefully. He looked at the pale hand on his desk, the same hand he had been watching so intently just seconds before. But now it was so close, Kyo could even feel the heat radiating off each fingertip.

He chanced a glance up to see a very smug, very dangerous look in Yuki’s eyes.

“What do you want?” Kyo said, a definite bite in his tone.

“Do you realize you’ve been staring at me all day?”

“I have no--!” Kyo reeled in the volume of his voice because, fuck, Tohru was right there with her two weirdo friends. He felt something burn on his neck and his cheeks. “I have not, you conceited prick.”

“Really? That’s strange,” Yuki said, faux innocence salting his voice. “I could have sworn I felt you watching me. I guess I got all worked up for nothing.”

Kyo tensed, not here, not here.

“I guess you did,” Kyo wanted to slap himself at how low and soft his voice came out. Wanted to run right out of the classroom and run ten miles when Yuki gave him those all too familiar darkening eyes in response. “I don’t see how that’s my problem, though.”

“It can be, if you want.”

“You seem to make a lot of your shit my problem,” Kyo retorted but Yuki just gave a small smile. In the corner of his eye he could sense a pair of eyes on him. The freaky psychic girl, if he had to guess. He couldn’t quite tear himself away from this vacuum of energy that Yuki always seemed to be.

“I’m going to the bathroom,” Yuki said. To him, and him alone. “But you’re more than welcome to join me.” With that, Yuki slid past him, letting his fingers graze his bicep as he walked by and Kyo gnashed his teeth. What he wouldn’t give to just throw his desk right at the back of Yuki’s head.

“Yuki!” Kyo was forced out of his thoughts by a voice that was still impossibly grating on his ears, even after it had deepened and matured. Momiji stood by the door with Haru, watching as Yuki carried himself out of the room. “Yuki, where are you going? Join us for lunch!”
“Sorry, I have something to take care of,” Yuki said with a smile. Momiji gave a whiney complaint which was jumbled on Kyo’s ears when Yuki turned to give him one last sultry look.

_Fuck._

“You’re spacing out,” Haru said simply as he approached the desk.

“Don’t think too hard now, Kyo!” Momiji chimed in, and Kyo felt his fists clench.

“Would you guys stop coming up to the third year’s floor already?! Go eat lunch with your own class!”

“Awww, but we wanted to eat with Tohru and everybody!” Momiji whined, crossing his arms.

“Momiji! Haru!” Tohru called with a wave, approaching Kyo’s desk. Suddenly he was surrounded by his two pesky cousins and Tohru’s friends. He felt claustrophobic and tense, tapping his finger on his desk to alleviate some of the frustration that crawled under his skin. “Where did Yuki go?”

“He said he had to do something,” Momiji said with an over-dramatic sigh.

“Woah, you look pretty wound up there, carrot top,” Uotani just had to chime in. “Breathe in, breathe out, breathe in, breathe out.”

She laughed loudly at Kyo’s obvious growing rage.

“Now, now, Arisa, don’t confuse him with such complex instructions,” Hana added and Kyo slammed his fist onto his desk.

“Dammit, why are you all ganging up on me today?!” Kyo shouted.

“Sorry, Kyo!” Tohru apologized and he rolled his eyes.

_“You don’t have to apologize. Just, dammit, I gotta go,”_ Kyo said standing and pushing his way past his cousins and heading toward the door.

“Wait, Kyo! What about lunch?”

“I got stuff to do!” He slammed the door behind him, shoved his hands in his pockets and headed down the hallway.

Only to stop dead in his tracks when he realized he was instinctively heading towards the bathroom.

He let out a loud, enraged groan in the middle of the hallway, causing a few students around him to jump away, before turning on his heel and heading the opposite direction.

He was not going to play his game. He was not going to get sucked into this. He was not going to give him the satisfaction.

Kyo pictured Yuki waiting alone in a bathroom stall, jumping slightly whenever he heard footsteps step inside. Wasting his lunch break on Kyo who would never show up. The frustration that Yuki would wear on his face for the rest of the day. Kyo snickered to himself at the thought. Stringing Yuki out seemed like a much better use of his time.

Then his fantasy went too far.

Yuki alone in the bathroom. Horny and fidgeting. Face upturning and flushed from arousal. The way
his teeth would clench whenever he suppressed a groan, his long fingers giving in and sliding beneath the waistband of his underwear. Yuki biting his palm to stop himself from making any noise. Yuki thinking of Kyo.

Kyo rested his head against the cool of the hallway window, exhausted by his own inability to just chill the fuck out. Was this how the rest of the week was going to go?

Today is Tuesday. Kyo thought to himself. That knot in his stomach came back. Today is Tuesday.

He turned around again and headed towards the bathroom. If all his body needed was release then, dammit, what the hell. Maybe making Yuki wait a good fifteen minutes would be a big enough blow to his ego.

By the victorious look on Yuki’s face when Kyo finally (cautiously) entered the boy’s bathroom, he guessed probably not.

“Just for the record,” Kyo started, “this doesn’t mean I was watching you.”

Yuki smirked, pulling on his arm so that they both stumbled into the far off stall of the bathroom.

“Of course not,” Yuki said, and suddenly his lips were hot on Kyo’s. Kyo’s back being pushed up against the grimy wall of the bathroom, and inwardly Kyo cringed at the feeling. But in front of him was Yuki’s warm body, pressing closer, closer, hotter. It was so much easier to focus on that instead.

Kyo opened his mouth when he felt Yuki’s tongue running against his bottom lip, sucking on it lightly so he could hear Yuki groan. When he did, Kyo clutched his hands into the back of Yuki’s shirt, the one that had been hiding the flex of his muscles all class. The one that seemed just the slightest bit too big on him. His fingers swam through the fabric until he was clutching tightly onto skin that burned warm through the fabric.

Yuki gave a soft, desperate hum against his mouth. Kyo could feel Yuki’s small breaths coming through his nose and landing on his skin. He could hear the sound of their clothes rustling together and sounding way too loud in this public space.

Anyone could walk in, Kyo thought in the back of his mind, as Yuki bit down on his bottom lip. Anyone could hear them going at it in this cramped little stall, he told himself more firmly as Yuki’s fingertips traced up his stomach under his shirt.

It was no use, the anxiety of being caught only pulsed through his skin as adrenaline, causing his skin to be all the more sensitive, and his breaths to waver through their harsh pants. And Yuki definitely didn’t seem to mind.

He really hated how that comforted him.

Yuki pressed his thigh against Kyo’s already hardening length and abruptly stopped any train of doubt Kyo might have been having. A sudden groan ripped through his lips and he banged his own head against the wall in an attempt to silence himself. The sound of skull against tile echoed through the bathroom and Yuki flicked his eyes up to him.

“Hey,” Yuki said, half amused and half concerned. “Making more noise won’t help the situation.”

“If we get caught I will kill you. I will absolutely kill you.”

“Just keep your voice down,” Yuki didn’t seem phased as he pressed a kiss against Kyo’s neck, his hand undoing the button of Kyo’s pants. “If you can, at least.”
“You arrogant shit,” the bite of Kyo’s words were lost on the heavy breaths that replaced his voice. He could feel Yuki’s fingers dragging his zipper down, sneaking past his waistband and grabbing hold of his length.

Kyo hissed, tossing his head back, much more gently this time. Yuki smirked against his neck. He could fucking feel it. And in a last ditch effort to wipe that smile off Yuki’s face, a feat that he had challenged himself with for years, he ripped his hands from Yuki’s back and eagerly tugged at Yuki’s pants.

Kyo couldn’t quite describe it, but even with Yuki’s hand wrapped around his dick, even with Yuki’s lips sucking on his neck, even with their clumsy grinding into each other, Kyo was only feeling increasingly frustrated. He felt like he was back in the classroom, watching Yuki lift his pen to his lips, watching Yuki play with the ends of his silver hair. Watching, squirming, waiting, tensing.

This was hardly relieving, and Kyo could feel his fingers start to tremble at his own body’s tension.

With aggressive and still quivering movements Kyo tugged down Yuki’s pants, bringing his underwear down with it, and does the same with his own. Kyo felt his hips twitch up, seeking that pressure, seeking that heat. Yuki complied as he got caught up in Kyo’s pace.

Kyo let out another frustrated groan because why was this still not enough, why was he still feeling so unsatisfied and teased.

Yuki wasn’t doing it deliberately, that much he knew. He knew what it felt like to be teased by the rat, to be on his back with Yuki trailing bites and licks up and down his body. Taking his time as he lingered on the spots that made Kyo gasp and squirm. He knew what it felt like to have those taunting and calm eyes on him, watching every single move, every detail of Kyo.

Kyo felt his cock twitch at the memory, opening his eyes. Yuki was so close to him, his eyes clenched shut and sweat breaking out on his forehead as he wrapped his hand around both of their members and pumped them in a steady rhythm.

The strokes weren’t as frantic as Kyo needed, but they were deliberate and bold and Kyo still couldn’t help the feeling that squirmed under his skin and caused him to shake and flush with an even heavier need.

With a growl, Kyo dug his fingers roughly into Yuki’s hair forcing his mouth onto his in a sloppy kiss, while his other hand rested on Yuki’s lower back, driving his hips to come forward and collide against Kyo’s.

They both let out a groan against each other’s mouth, and Kyo tried to force the motion again. But this time when their hips met, Yuki’s lips were sealed tight and his free hand has lifted up to cover Kyo’s mouth, cutting his labored moan short.

Kyo tensed, resting his head against the bathroom wall gently, Yuki’s hand still warm over his mouth, while his other hand still grasped at their weeping cocks, though the movement had stopped now.

“—ou hear? Kota got confessed to yesterday after school,” a faceless voice said. Kyo swallowed, Yuki did the same.
“Woah, seriously? Did he say yes?”

There was the sound of a stall door opening and closing as the two boys continued their conversation, oblivious of what occupied the farthest stall. Yuki took a steadying breath, his hand clutching Kyo’s mouth even tighter.

Kyo looked at Yuki, his eyes pinched closed, his lips sucked between his teeth, his cheeks flushed, his clothes rumpled. He was nearly vibrating with anxiety. Kyo wanted to roll his eyes. Yuki could talk big, but in the end he was still the former class president. The most well-known student in this whole damn school. He stood to lose way more than Kyo if they were caught feeling each other up like this like a couple of hormonal teenagers (which he figured they were).

A toilet flushed, a stall door opened. Conversation continued.

Kyo’s body still hummed, and the thought of continuing where they left off once they had the bathroom to themselves again both excited and exasperated the cat.

Fueled by arousal, and just a tiny bit of spite, Kyo let his mouth open his tongue sneaking out to work against Yuki’s fingers.

“Man, if a girl that cute ever confessed to me I would say yes in a heartbeat.”

“A girl would have to confess to you first.”

Kyo could hear the voices laugh as they lingered by the sinks, chatting idly. Kyo’s tongue continued to slide against Yuki’s fingers, as he licked them with eyes blown wide with arousal. Yuki pinched his eyes into a desperate glare, one that asked what the fuck are you doing, we will definitely get caught, but his grip still loosened on Kyo’s mouth.

Kyo took his tongue and urged the fingers into his mouth, sucking on them, slicking them with sweat. His eyes trained on Yuki as he did, watching as his breath was coming harshly through his nose. He wanted to tease Yuki. He wanted his body to agonize over every touch and every lick that Kyo placed on him. He wanted.

But more than anything he hoped the message would come across as Kyo sucked on Yuki’s fingers, licking between them and drenching them in his saliva, because the words were way too embarrassing to tear from his lips.

The voices faded. Footsteps turned into something distant and weak.

But their loud, flushed breathing and throaty groans didn’t bounce off the walls either, even if their shoulders relaxed.

Instead, Yuki watched intently as Kyo sucked on Yuki’s fingers, licking between them and drenching them in his saliva, because the words were way too embarrassing to tear from his lips.

Yuki leaned into him, pressing their chests together, everything touching, everything hot and pulsing between them as if they shared the same blood. He brought his mouth right next to Kyo’s ear and whispered, “is this what you wanted?”
His tone sounded genuinely curious and almost completely bewildered, though it didn’t push down the thick coating of lust his words carried. Kyo couldn’t bring himself to answer, so instead he tried to bring his hips forward, tried to force Yuki’s fingers inside of him.

Yuki got the message.

With a fixated look on Kyo, Yuki slid his finger inside of him. Kyo hissed at the sensation, his spine tensing against the wall. He could feel his breath start to quiver, feel how his body trembled, feel how the blood that had previously rushed to his head to make him dizzy was now going straight to his dick still in Yuki’s hand.

Yuki stared right at Kyo as a second finger entered him. Why was it so quiet now? Why was it so much hotter? Kyo didn’t think he could detach himself from Yuki if he tried. With a soft groan that was definitely not a whimper, Kyo moved his hips.

It was as if they were starting again completely. Yuki hand began to move again, pumping them together as he had been, and his fingers were curling inside of Kyo, causing the cat to groan and writhe beneath him.

But Yuki’s reactions were just as strong. His hands were shaking, his body bending slightly as if he couldn’t withstand the pleasure that was riding through him. His head was bowed, though Kyo could tell he was trying desperately to meet Kyo’s eye line. He was so caught up in Kyo’s pace, in Kyo’s movements, in his body, that Kyo could tell that Yuki was losing his control.

Kyo suppressed a smirk. His hips moved even faster, grinding himself down on Yuki’s fingers hungrily. Yuki moaned, and he released their cocks so that he could hold himself stable against the wall. Kyo immediately took his place.

His hand wrapped around them both and with quick and frantic movements he was pumping them closer and closer to the edge. His hand wasn’t as rhythmic or as disciplined as Yuki’s, but his erratic movements and wild fingers caused Yuki to let out another deep groan.

Kyo mirrored the sound as Yuki’s fingers crooked forward, hitting that spot inside him so carelessly. His entire body shuddered and his mouth hung open as Yuki repeated the motion again and again. Abusing that tiny bundle of nerves inside him relentlessly.

The cat released another guttural moan, but bit his lip trying to keep himself quiet. His thumb rubbed over the head of Yuki’s weeping length, and he knew they both wouldn’t last much longer.

He could feel Yuki’s fingers inside of him, working to push Kyo off that edge, sliding in and out of him until it was just too much. Too much, too much, too much.

But not enough, Kyo angrily thought to himself as he came. His breathing was heavy, but Yuki’s fingers weren’t stopping and Kyo frantically pumped Yuki’s cock and in just a few strokes he came heavily.

Silence fell onto both of them. Their chests heaving, their breaths trying so hard to calm down. Their exposed flesh flushed and sweaty.

Kyo rested completely against the wall, wincing when Yuki slid his fingers out of him. A chill almost as cold as the quiet October air filled him when Yuki took a step back to rest against the wall behind him. They stared at each other for a minute, hyper aware of the sounds of the ongoing school day around them.

“Class is going to start soon,” Yuki said, his voice hoarse and his breathing not back to normal yet.
“Right,” Kyo wasn’t in a much better state.

With fingers that tried to disguise their trembles, the two arranged their clothes into proper order and walked out of the stall.

Side by side they ran the faucets, washing their hands and avoiding looking directly into the mirror. Yuki stopped the water and grabbed a handkerchief from his pocket, drying his hands before offering it to Kyo who had just turned off his own sink.

He accepted it wordlessly, and watched as Yuki undid his tie so that he could do it again.

Kyo chanced a look in the mirror. He ran a thoughtless hand through his hair to bring it back to its former nonchalant messiness and wiped his face with Yuki’s damp handkerchief. It still burned with a post orgasmic flush, but the thought of splashing cold water into his face in front of Yuki didn’t seem like an option.

He handed the piece of cloth back to Yuki, who was now in mostly perfect form. Kyo swallowed.

“Listen,” Kyo treaded gently. “Don’t… Don’t talk to me in public anymore.”

Yuki raised an eyebrow at him, “people aren’t going to know we’re screwing around just because we exchange some small talk.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Kyo said firmly. He could not get himself this riled up during the day again. They had even almost gotten caught. Whatever these eager and overwhelming feelings in Kyo were, he was going to have to power through them, and Yuki approaching him whenever he damn pleased wasn’t going to help that. “Let’s just keep it to Mondays.”

Yuki’s eyes narrowed, his expression flashing into one of clear offense and anger. Kyo opened his mouth, already on the defense, but Yuki just looked him up and down before he gave a reluctant nod, “fine.”

“Fine,” Kyo echoed.

With that he left the bathroom and walked down the hall back to class.

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Autumn was getting colder every day, and the sharp winds sunk past the school walls and into thin panes of glass to set a distinct chill over the hallways. In a way, Yuki thought it felt colder inside. When he was outside the air had a chance to feel refreshing, inside it was just a reminder of how inescapable the chilly air was. Usually he would keep himself wrapped in a light cream sweater, but the idea of being chilled to the bones in all the layers the school dress code permitted sounded fruitless when even colder days were ahead.

He leaned against the school building, looking out towards the courtyard, trying to pretend that the cold absorbing into his skin from the wall didn’t cause him to shiver. A sharp, careful breath was sucked into his lungs, but a kind of disappointment floated in his exhale when tobacco couldn’t accompany the icy burn of an oncoming winter.

He hadn’t smoked in a while. A familiar urge tugged at his lungs.

Though it wasn’t as if he could smoke here, anyway.

“Eat.”
Yuki was pulled from his thoughts when a plastic wrapper pressed against his cheek, warm from being held. Haru held the bread against his face, letting go when he was certain Yuki’s reflexes were attentive enough to catch it.

“What’s this?” Yuki asked.

“Curry bread,” Haru said simply. “They were out of the yakisoba, sorry.”

“You don’t really have to apologize,” Yuki said with a strained smile. “What’s this for?”

“You didn’t eat anything at lunch again,” Haru said. “You’re losing weight.”

Yuki instinctively looked down at himself as if he hadn’t noticed. He had. His eyes weren’t quite keen enough to notice the changes in his face, but he could feel how his uniform sagged on him. In the morning, he would fasten his belt a notch or two tighter. His casual shirts also didn’t fit the way he liked anymore.

He sighed, opening the bread, “how did you know I didn’t eat?”

“Hmm,” Haru mused, face stoic as he leaned against the wall next to Yuki. “Call it a mother’s instinct?”

Yuki gave Haru a wary glance, “what you’re my mom now, too?”

“You don’t think I’d be a good mother?”

It was said with such a serious face Yuki couldn’t help but let out a slight chuckle. He bit into the bread, forcing himself to swallow.

The greasy snack flowed down his throat and landed uncomfortably in the pit of his belly. His stomach churned uncomfortably, protesting the bite that Yuki took.

Ah, right. That’s why he hadn’t been eating.

It wasn’t really anything he did on purpose. And his body never felt hungry anymore, so it never bothered him until food was placed in front of him. But there was a nausea that followed Yuki with every bite he took. At dinner he did his best to finish everything in front of him, but usually had to calm his raging stomach with extra helpings of plain white rice just to keep the well-seasoned, home-cooked meals down. A strategy that only lasted for so long, until even such a staple sat uneasily in his stomach.

Maybe that’s why he had been so tired lately, so desperate to pull himself awake in class or doing homework or doing anything, really. Truthfully, he tried not to dwell on it. Not wanting to face the inevitable consequences that awaited him if he tugged on that string.

Instead, he took bite after bite of the bread Haru had given him, ignoring how his throat seemed to constrict with each swallow. There was no need to make people needlessly worry.

“Thank you,” Yuki said when the bread was finished and the taste had stopped souring on his tongue. “It was good.”

“No problem,” Haru said. “You looked like you needed it.”

“Did I?” Yuki asked with a dry laugh.

Haru nodded, “did something happen?”
Yuki’s expression fell reflexively and Haru made a sudden, deliberate hum.

“That’s the face you’ve had since lunch.”

“I didn’t realize. Sorry for worrying you,” Yuki said. He meant it. A particular kind of guilt weighed on him whenever Haru gave him those glassy and all-knowing eyes.

He looked back to his cousin, his lips taut in a firm line and his eyes unwavering from where Yuki stood. Yuki could tell Haru was waiting for his answer to continue. He was waiting for Yuki to unload this horrible, messy knot that was resting in his chest. This creeping paranoia. This unsettling feeling that consumed him ever since he had placed that first stupid kiss in May.

“Don’t talk to me in public anymore.”

The words died on his tongue. His throat closed. He couldn’t speak. All he could do was slide down the wall, bending his knees so that he could rest his elbows on them and duck his head. He could feel Haru’s eyes on him.

“I’m tired,” Yuki said. He hoped that would be enough.

He felt rustling of clothes next to him, and felt a warm hand on his back. It coaxed out only a few more words.

“I’m tired of living like this.”


All he could do was pretend the words hadn’t reached Haru’s ears. Even as he stayed by his side until he lifted himself up on weaker, thinner legs and forced himself to make the journey home.
These chapters are getting so ridiculously long, like, I am so sorry. I'm glad to see that people are reading and enjoying this fic though, even if it's a small number! My goal is to at least get this thing updated twice a month now, so I just sort of barely slid into home this time.

Everything about this fic is completely planned out, it's just a matter of actually sorting it out in my brain.

Sometimes that doesn't even happen and then there's this mess of words that I can't keep looking at cause my brain might actually melt out of my ears.

It was Thursday, and Rin’s words still hadn’t left Tohru’s head. The whole conversation left her thoughts dizzy and her mind blank. Tohru’s interactions with Shigure had helped some. They kept bits of her anxiety at bay, only for it to spike back as soon as their moments passed.

It was a blessing and a curse that Shigure seemed so exceedingly, impressively, normal. As if Rin hadn’t just accused him of being something so dangerous. As if Tohru hadn’t been stealing the books off his shelves and hiding them in her book bag each week. As if he didn’t know anything at all.

Well, Tohru lamented, she supposed that was sort of the point…

Tohru wondered if she could just ask for the books normally. But going through two or three books a week would seem suspicious, especially for a third year student piled with exams and self-study (even if she wasn’t planning on taking any entrance exams). The routine of her literary search would certainly seem strange, too, for the girl who was too disorganized in her own studies to keep up with her assigned reading.

At all costs, she knew she couldn’t reveal Rin. And she didn’t trust her stuttering lies to become too complex.

But the guilt was beginning to eat away at her. The sudden stress and accumulating lies were weighing low on her shoulders, and now a good night’s rest seemed like an impossibility. Three nights in a row now she wandered through the house in the late hours of the evening trying to will her nervous body back to bed.

A sudden gust of wind rattled the shoji doors of the living room and Tohru jumped, her pulse all too eager to rise. Her hands ripped through the tissue in her hands, and she sighed at having ruined the craft she was working on.

She put her hands on the table and stared out towards the doors, listening to the wind whistle between the shedding branches. Shigure was right, she might get a fever if she kept her thoughts so serious.
“Weather charms?”

Tohru pulled her head towards the voice, looking up at Kyo who was watching over her shoulders. His hair was wet, fresh from the bath, and he looked relaxed in his sweats and t-shirt. Tohru smiled at him as his eyes flashed over the tissues that had been molded into charms. Their sharpie-drawn faces smiled back up at him.

“Ah, yes!” Tohru said with a bright smile. “The first years have their distance run tomorrow, and I heard it might rain so I thought it would be a good idea!”

Kyo hummed a response, sitting adjacent to her at the table. “It’ll rain.”


“I can feel it,” he said, simply.

“Wow, that’s kind of incredible,” she said. “Oh, wait, you mean you feel tired?”

“Kind of,” Kyo said with a shrug. “I’ve just learned to know when it’s coming.”

“Will you be alright tomorrow? Do you need to take the day off?” Tohru asked. He clicked his tongue in response.

“I’ll be fine. I’m not gonna run and hide away every time it rains,” he said. Tohru gave him a smile. “Besides, summer rain is way worse. The humidity just gangs up on me, it sucks. But this kind of rain isn’t so bad, so stop worryin’.”

“Roger!” Tohru said with a salute, relief filling her from his reassurance. “Do you want to help me make some weather charms?”

“I already told you, it’s not gonna matter.”

“Then we just have to fight with all we’ve got!” Tohru rose her fist in the air with a determined smile, as if going into battle. Kyo let a laugh fall from his lips.

“Yeah, yeah. Hand me the tissues.”

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Yuki blinked his eyes open blearily, staring up at the dusk coated ceiling of his room.

“I dozed off again,” he reprimanded himself, softly.

There was a sour taste in his mouth, and the back of his neck and forehead felt clogged and drowsy. He rubbed his eyes, wiping away the film around his eyelids that came with sleeping at strange hours. With an energy that he wasn’t all too eager to expel, he lifted himself up so that he was sitting on the edge of the bed.

This week had been terrible.

The weeks before this one hadn’t been much better, though.
Yuki’s body was exhausted. His limbs felt heavy when he woke in the morning from hazy, non-existent sleep, and they felt stiff and sore from having tensed his muscles upright to keep his focus during the day. With a broken will he would command himself to stay awake until the evening had waned itself to a decent hour at night, but his eyes were so dizzy and his head so muddled and off-kilter that any intentions of doing schoolwork were thwarted by the heavy droop of his eyelids.

He’d wake up not refreshed, but awake enough to give his merciless and overwhelming thoughts a loud enough voice at night, when his pajamas were on and his teeth lazily brushed. They would bog him down and sap his life force, and leave him muddled and irritated until he succumbed to a raging exhaustion. Often times that would be at 3, 4, or even 5 in the morning.

Wake up. Rinse. Repeat.

Don’t talk to me in public anymore.

Yuki groaned helplessly into his palm, shaking off the greeting he had woken up to this past week.

He wanted to hurl his head through a window, or walk for hours until his body carried him out of the prefecture, or maybe release this curled up ache in his throat. Yuki didn’t have the energy for any of those options, though.

Why was he even getting so bent out of shape about this? It’s not as if they talked all that often in public, anyway. It’s not as if they were chummy with each other in the halls or even exchanged greetings in the morning.

They barely even talked to each other when they were corralled into group lunches or dinners, opting to cast down side-glancing insults to rile the other up. Over the past year, not even that was common anymore.

Alright, so when did they talk?

More importantly, when could they?

A sharp pang bubbled in Yuki’s stomach, quickly exterminating any possible hunger pains he might have had from his groggy belly. Yuki placed a careful hand on his mouth, the vague possibility of throwing up sinking into him. Of sending up the bread that Haru had given to him again at lunch (the cow had waited until he finished before he left Yuki on his own in the courtyard for the third day in a row).

Yuki felt a sudden anger at his own body. A quiet, teeming rage that had been building grain by grain since the first time he coughed into his mother’s collarbone as an infant. He dared to entertain that thought again, this time more aggressively.

When can we talk?

Yuki gagged, but his feeble lunch stayed down. He rolled his eyes, lifting himself up on sleep-heavy legs and opening the door to head downstairs. Dinner would be ready soon, he was sure, and maybe he could help Tohru in the kitchen. If anything, the welcome distraction might help wake him up.

His footsteps were quiet on the stairs, avoiding the creaks and bends in the wood so that he could walk by Shigure’s room undisturbed. He was not in the mood for dealing with that dog right now (or ever).

“—ow, yours is so cute!”
“It’s just a normal weather charm,” Kyo’s voice said. He could hear Tohru’s words roll of Kyo’s shoulders like beads of water on an umbrella.

Yuki stopped, just short of the dining room. Keeping his back pressed against the wall on a reflex. He wasn’t quite in the mood to deal with Kyo, either.

“Yeah, but it’s so evenly done. Do you make them a lot?”

“Who still makes weather charms besides you and fifth graders?” Kyo said, Yuki could hear the smile in his voice. Tohru laughed cheerfully. “I used to make them with Shishou.”

“Really?” Tohru asked, tone brightening at just the mention of Kyo’s guardian. Yuki gave a soft smile to himself at the overwhelming fondness that Tohru could never disguise.

“Yeah,” Yuki hated how soft Kyo’s voice sounded, how gentle and still. He could hear the rustling of the tissues under two pairs of hands. He couldn’t tell which was which. “I wasn’t too good at dealing with the rain as a kid. I’d fall asleep in class, get fevers, stuff like that.”

“And he made them with you so you’d feel better?” Tohru asked. Yuki could hear her smile reverberating across the house.

“I was a big pain if I couldn’t run around all over the damn place,” Kyo said. Yuki smiled at the thought. “Whenever they said there’d be rain I’d whine about it like a brat. So Shishou and I would make them together whenever it looked like the weather would turn.”

“What a nice memory,” Tohru said. “Did it ever work?”

“Of course not,” Kyo said, a fond exasperation in his voice. “But he still insists on making them.”

“Even now?”

Yuki could hear an affirmative hum from deep in Kyo’s chest. That familiar pang filled his stomach.

“That’s so cute!”

“Like hell! What kind of grown man still makes weather charms? It’s embarrassing,” Kyo said with a huff. Yuki had to cover his mouth to keep himself from laughing. The shift in his weight, however, caused the floorboard below his feet to creak. Yuki cursed silently under his breath, knowing his hiding spot had been compromised when the voices went silent and one pair of hands stopped rustling the paper fabric.

As best he could, he regained his composure and walked into the room.

“Oh, Yuki!” Tohru chirped. He tried his best to smile at her.

“Good evening, Ms. Honda,” Yuki said, pleasantly. “You’re making weather charms?” He eyed Kyo, his back facing him, stiff and rigid.

“Mhm, for the first years’ distance run tomorrow!” She glowed in her seat. “Oh, you look tired.”

“I guess I fell asleep,” Yuki said bashfully.

“I’ll go make some tea, then! It might help wake you up,” she offered.

Yuki watched Tohru pad into the kitchen before looking down at Kyo again. Kyo’s head was turned
slightly, giving him a defensive, nervous glare.

“Cute,” Yuki said. Kyo’s shoulders tensed as he banged a fist on the table.

“What were you doing, eavesdropping??”

Yuki met Kyo’s eyes. He thought to himself how easy it would be to say yes, he had heard everything. He now owned Kyo’s memory from his childhood—a world that had always seemed so foreign and exotic to him—and nothing could scrub it from his brain. He wanted to say yes, he had won because that vulnerability was now being clutched tenderly in Yuki’s thin fingers.

He also wanted to say that it was okay.

Because he would care for it in just the same way Tohru had. With a gentle smile, and a breath of warmth in such a fragile exchange.

Yuki broke his gaze, walking over to sit across from him at the table.

Yuki couldn’t do that, even he knew that conversation was not (and never would be) for him.

“Of course not,” Yuki said. “You look tense, were you saying something stupid?”

“No!” Kyo snapped.

“Then I must have really missed out,” Yuki said, his pinched eyes directed away from Kyo, but he could see the cat relax out of the corner of his vision.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Kyo grumbled, his hands resting under the table and away from the tissue crafts.

“It means it’s a miracle if anything somewhat intelligent comes out of your mouth,” what was this? Yuki was getting so agitated. His sleepless body and empty stomach weren’t doing anything to help his mood.

He wasn’t doing anything to help his mood.

“What’s your problem, huh?” Kyo hissed, his voice going low instead of raising like Yuki hoped it would. “Are you still pouting because of what I said a few days ago?”

Yuki’s eyes widened for a brief second before they narrowed down frantically, slicing right into Kyo from across the table.

Kyo had noticed he was upset?

Kyo had noticed he was upset because of him?

Yuki’s mouth opened to reply before he could even process the words.

“Who would be upset over a pathetic cat like you?!”

His voice sounded so loud in the silence that followed. Maybe it’s because he had yelled without realizing. He wasn’t quite sure, but the empty weight on the back of his throat suggested his voice had risen to a level that was not common.

Yuki chanced a glance into Kyo’s blood red eyes.
Narrowed and angry, but not overflowing with a familiar wrath or a short temper like it usually was.

“U-Um...” Tohru stood in the doorway of the kitchen, clutching the tray that held their teas tightly.

Kyo stood, and without a word he walked away. Yuki could feel the tension in his stomach ease, but it was quickly replaced with a gushing sense of dread. It amplified only as Tohru quickly placed the tray on the table and chased after the boy.

“Wait, K-Kyo!”

Yuki buried his face in his hands, peering through his fingers and his fallen strands of hair at the weather charms on the table.

Yuki finished his dinner that night. Kyo didn’t come down at all.

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“How have you been feeling this week?” Hatori asked, riffling through his medical bag.

“Wretched. The medicine you gave me does nothing. And it makes everything taste sour.”

Akito lounged on his stomach, head buried into the pillow of his futon. The windows were shut and the blinds were drawn. Another migraine, Hatori noted. They were becoming more and more frequent. He watched the god with soft, protective eyes.

“Give me your arm,” Akito did as he was told, stretching out the arm closest to the doctor and flipping it over to expose the soft, fleshy section of skin. “Have you been taking the proper dosage of the medicine?”

“Don’t treat me like a child, of course I have,” Akito winced into the pillow when Hatori’s needle punctured the vein but made no other movements. It was routine enough.

“With the last medicine I prescribed you didn’t do as you were told.”

“That’s because it didn’t do anything but make me feel worse,” Akito snapped back. “If you call yourself a doctor, find me a medicine that does its job!”

“Right,” Hatori breathed out a soft sigh of annoyance. Letting the stubborn god stew in their own misery as they had been these past couple of years. It was all formality, anyway. Kureno had been employed by Hatori to keep a watchful eye on the quick-tempered deity. It had worked much better than letting Akito be.

Hatori carefully disinfected the prick of skin, placing a bandage over the area with precise, practiced fingers.

“I’ll be going, then.”

“What?” Akito’s head popped up from the pillow, the first time since Hatori had first arrived. “Why
are you leaving so soon? Where are you rushing off to?"

“I have other business to attend to, Akito. I’m sorry to cut the visit short. I’ll be back next week, too."

“Do you only come to see me because you have to?”

Hatori recognized those eyes.

Slight, desperate, childish ones. Eyes that only knew how to latch on or push away. Eyes that cried so easily. Hatori set his bag to the side but didn’t move. He took Akito’s hand in his own, his dark serious eyes hoping to bring a breeze of comfort into his expression.

“Of course not. Things have just been busy lately.”

“Do you mean it?”

“I mean it.”

“Then why are you leaving?! Tell me where you’re going after only being here briefly!”

Hatori felt the words being pulled out of his mouth, as if Akito was summoning them straight from his tongue and rolling them around his finger.

“I was going to check on Yuki.”

“At Shigure’s house?” Akito’s eyes narrowed, and the grip on Hatori’s hand tightened. Hatori nodded.

“What does Yuki need a check-up for?”

“He’s not been feeling well, lately. His asthma and other symptoms have been acting up.”

“He always was a weak boy,” Akito said flippantly, releasing Hatori’s hand and curling into his pillow.

“He was growing out of—”

“Don’t go.”

Hatori stared down at the figure that was now facing away from him, knees drawn up to his chest, robes wrinkling to meet each slender curve of the god’s body, hair dull and listless with skin too pale. His body was so fragile, so slight.

His voice was not. Hatori could feel it reverberating against his ribs, binding his tongue.

“Excuse me?”

“Don’t ever go to that house again.”

“Akito…”

“If Yuki’s so sick he can come here! He doesn’t need your constant attention, anyway. He should be coming to the main house for these sorts of things anyway!”

“He does have school. He’s a third year now.”

Hatori hoped the insistence was clear in his voice. The fact was he was surrounded by reluctant
patients. Yuki would never approach him on his own. He still kept quiet of his symptoms in the times that Hatori had checked on him earlier in the season and over the summer.

All he knew was that Yuki was gradually becoming worse.

All he knew was that Yuki could be scraping up breaths at the edge of his life, and he still wouldn’t reach his hand out for help.

Certainly not to the main house, at least.

“Don’t argue with me. I said you’re not allowed to go back there. You heard me, right!”

Akito whipped a gaze to Hatori that was as much threatening as it was threatened. It weighed heavy on Hatori’s stomach. He couldn’t move.

“I heard you,” he said.

Akito smiled.

“Good. Then do as you’re told.”

Hatori knew he would.

Pardon the intrusion!”

Oh, Yuki. Over here,” Mayu called from a sea of desks.

Yuki entered the room, closing the door behind him and nodding to his math teacher as he passed by his desk. The room was stuffy with the smell of stale coffee and convenience store packaged foods. It reminded Yuki of his time living with Shigure in the months before Tohru or Kyo came to live with them. The stacked up clutter that was unique to each desk certainly helped that memory, as well.

Mayu’s desk was neat, however. Though there were books and papers flooding the desk, everything seemed orderly and perpendicular. He took a second to peer at some of the books, recognizing only half from the curriculum.

His attention was soon drawn away when he noticed a piece of paper on the desk. His name scribbled at the top, but otherwise it was blank and clean. Realization struck him, and he realized that this is not where he wanted to spend his Monday morning.

“Sit down,” Mayu coaxed, motioning for Yuki to borrow the chair from the neighboring desk. He did as he was told.

“What did you want to speak to me about?” Yuki asked, his eyes focused on the floor below him. Mayu sighed.
“You know, Yuki, I feel like I should apologize to you. You always seem so capable and disciplined, I haven’t badgered you about your plans for the future like I have some of your classmates.”

“Oh, no, that’s…” Yuki felt the words die on his mouth. How had he not expected this conversation?

“Why have you left your list of potential colleges blank? You are planning on going to university, right?”

Yuki nodded. He could feel how she crossed her arms, feel her unease and disappointment. He couldn’t look.

“I’ll go… to university.”

“I know you will,” Mayu said. “But even a great student like you has to prepare properly. In just a few months the entrance examination process will start. Will you be ready?”

Yuki nodded again, only to feel something hit the back of his head.

“Hey! Look at me when I’m talking to you!”

“Sorry!” Yuki snapped his head up, the offending piece of paper that had struck him none other than his college list. He wasn’t sure how to feel about that.

“Don’t be sorry just take this seriously! You’re one of the good ones, you know!”

“I’m sorry, I promise I’ll take this more seriously.”

“Maybe that’s not the problem,” Mayu rested her elbow on her desk, letting her head fall on her hand as she gave Yuki a hardened stare. “Do you know what you want to do in the future?”

Yuki fisted his hands in his uniform pants. He wouldn’t hang his head out of fear of making her even angrier (a terrifying sight). But how he wanted to. How he wanted to curl up into himself until there was nothing left.

“You know,” she started when the answer to her question hung in the air. “Last year, your brother was very eager to show you that you could do anything you like.”

Brother…

The memory flooded him of the parent-student conference. The feeling of having no words left on his tongue, of his stomach being crushed, of his windpipes being stolen. Of his throat closing and closing and closing until not even a pitiful whine could escape his useless lips. That’s what it meant to be near his mother.

But he somehow still managed to speak after Ayame said that his future was something precious.

“I let it slide that you hadn’t put any specific university on your form at the time, for obvious reasons. But I was hoping you would have found the strength to find a path for yourself that you can be excited about.”

“Yes, of course.”

“You can choose from anything you like. Your science and math scores are some of the highest in the class. Your English teacher says you’re one of the most capable students she’s had, and your
work in my class has been outstanding, as well. Especially the essay you turned in after the summer vacation.”

“My essay?”

Mayu nodded. “Did you enjoy writing it?”

“Not… Not particularly,” Yuki answered, honestly. Mayu gave a small laugh. “Why do you ask?”

“Your writing is very expressive, Yuki. You have a way of conveying what you mean in a concise and rich way.”

“Really?” Yuki looked down at his knees, sorting the words his teacher had given him in his head. “But… They’re only my words.”

Mayu gave him a confused sort of look that Yuki mirrored.

Perhaps Mayu hadn’t realized how useless his words were. They fell from his mouth listlessly, diving off his tongue and fading from view before they could even crash against the ground. They were quiet and meek and only reached the ears of those who strained to listen.

Words couldn’t stop his mother from turning her back. Words didn’t stop his brother from brushing his hand away. Words only turned distorted and mutated around Kyo.

So he confined them in a prison behind his teeth and kept his jaw locked tightly.

“Isn’t that self-defeating?”

“Huh?” Yuki brought himself out of his daze and reflexively looked into Mayu’s serious, unamused eyes.

“You said they were only your words. But if that’s how you treat all your accomplishments you’ll never go forward. You could say they’re only your answers on a test, or only your words on an essay. If you do that, however, the gifts and talent you have will never be polished into something you want. With your future on the line, you can’t afford to have so little self-confidence. Especially when it’s unfounded. Do you understand?”

“I…” Yuki looked back down at his hands. “I understand.”

“Then I want you to think seriously about this. And by the beginning of next months I want your list of colleges.”

“Yes, Ms. Shiraki.”

“You’re dismissed.”

Yuki left on legs that felt a bit weaker. He bowed once he reached the door letting out a light ‘excuse the intrusion’ and avoiding the gaze that Mayu still kept on him. When the door closed he felt a breath detach from his throat, but the heavy feeling on his chest didn’t seem to be something that could be dispelled so easily.

“Yo, Yuki!”

The rat turned his head to see Kakeru bounding down the halls, rushing to meet him with a wave. Yuki smiled, finally tearing his hand away from the door handle of the teacher’s lounge.
“Hey, Kakeru.”

“What’s up, were you just in the lounge? Don’t tell me you were getting chewed out by a teacher!”

“Sort of…” Yuki began walking down the hall, Kakeru followed magnetically giving him an overly shocked expression.

“Wha—you’re kidding! You were getting scolded? Aw man, I would have liked to see that! Talk about the mighty fall of the prince.”

“It was nothing serious—or at least nothing you would get in trouble for.”

“I know not of what you speak. I am a saint among men.”

“I think calling yourself a saint is an insult to every religion that’s ever been conceived,” Yuki ignored the pointedly offended look on Kakeru’s face before they both broke out into humorous smiles.

“So what did you get in trouble for then? You gotta bang erasers or sit out in the hall?”

“Nothing like that,” Yuki waved a hand dismissively, leading Kakeru to the side of the hallway where he could stare out the large windows.

Autumn seemed so… gray this year. The clouds lurked so ominously, and the trees were quick to shed their leaves, leaving them bare and lifeless. If it were a few degrees colder, and if the rain sliced a bit harsher, it would be no different from winter.

“Do you know what you want to do with your future?” Yuki asked, still watching the bustle of students in the chilly courtyard below.

“Sure. I’m going to uni so I can help with Maki’s family’s business,” Kakeru said. “I’ve told you that.”

“Is that… what you want to do? Or is it something that you feel obligated to do?” Yuki felt a shiver of anxiety flow through him when his usually boisterous friend fell quiet for a moment. Yuki turned his head to see Kakeru giving him serious, but curious eyes. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean—that was rude of me.”

“Nah, it’s fine,” Kakeru still held those serious eyes. “I want to do this. I like Maki’s family, and I’m planning on proposing once we graduate.”

“Seriously?” Kakeru laughed at how big Yuki’s eyes went.

“I know, I sound like such a grown-up, huh!”

“For once, you actually do.”

Kakeru let that one slide, leaving his smile firmly in place. “I have an idea for my future. I’ve had one for a while, since middle school when I finally told my parents to basically screw themselves.”

Yuki allowed himself to laugh slightly along Kakeru, feeling a twinge of jealousy settle into him.

“It doesn’t really matter what I’m doing, or what job I have, just as long as I can live the way I want. I mean, maybe for some people finding what they want to do is that last missing piece of the puzzle, but that’s never really been the case for me.”
“That makes sense,” disappointment fell clearly on Yuki’s words as he stared back out the window.

“Doesn’t really help you, huh?” Kakeru smiled.

“Not especially.”

“Sorry, man,” Kakeru patted his back sympathetically. “You’ll figure it out.”

Yuki hummed in response, pushing off the wall so he could head back to his classroom. He was done with this topic for now. The future was too complicated to think about, caused too much stress that highlighted his sleep deprivation.

“How about I help take your mind of things, huh?” Kakeru offered cheerily. Yuki sometimes marveled at how well his friend could read him. On more than one occasion he wondered if they were simply getting too close. “Come have dinner with me and Maki tonight, huh? She makes a mean hot pot. And she keeps asking about you.”

“She does?”

“Oh no, what’ll I do if she’s fallen for you?! Do I stand a chance against the high school’s greatest prince? A duel! We’ll have to have a duel!”

“I’m good,” Yuki said, loitering outside his classroom door to continue his conversation with Kakeru. “Besides, I think Maki is only attracted to that certain kind of weirdness you have.”

“You make it sound so romantic,” Kakeru pouted. “So will you come or not?”

“Tonight?” Yuki pondered for a moment. *It was Monday.*

Yuki peered into the classroom. Kyo’s bright orange hair shone against the classroom, sucking every color out of the gray autumn air and splattering the energy the season should have all over his skin and features.

He was surrounded again. By boys from the class, by Tohru, Hanajima, and Uotani. He could hear their rambunctious conversation from here. He could hear Kyo’s snappy tones being met with laughter and conversation.

He could feel it coming closer and closer to him only to have it fall flat before it could reach him. He could feel that foreign sort of interaction pool at his feet like a puddle in a pothole.

“I can’t do today, sorry,” he said.

“What do you mean you can’t do today? Did you get a part time job or something? Oh!” Kakeru whined. He put his hands on his hips, leaning down at the waist to closely inspect Yuki’s bottom. With an angry flush he reflexively chopped Kakeru right on the head. “Owwww!!”

“What are you doing?!”

“Just checking to see if that silver spoon was still up your ass!” Kakeru said with a laugh, still rubbing his head. “That’s the only reason I could imagine you getting a job.”

“I don’t have a job,” Yuki said through his teeth, dangerous smile in place as he clutched Kakeru’s collar. “Very soon I don’t think I’ll have a best friend either.”

“I’d like to see you try and kill me, princess,” with a mirthful laugh Kakeru wrapped his hands around Yuki’s neck in response.
The two continued to shoot playfully threatening looks at each other until Yuki caught Kyo’s gaze out of the corner of his eye. It was brief, and just as cold as his looks had been since two days ago. Quickly he dropped his hands from Kakeru’s shirt and stepped away from him, even though Kyo’s hardened glance had already turned away from him. The other boy gave him an amusedly curious glance.

“Sorry, did I hurt you?” He teased.

“You wish,” Yuki said with a sigh, leaning against the wall. A part of him was waiting for Kakeru to fill his vision, to pester him for the sudden drop in mood, to tease, poke, and aggravate him until he was ready to throw the boy out the window.

Instead Kakeru put his hands on his hips and cocked his head to the side as if to examine his friend, “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” the response came too quickly. “I’ll talk to you later. I’m going back to class.”

He brushed past Kakeru who didn’t say a word and entered his classroom. The closer he came to Kyo the harder it was to see him, surrounded by students, surrounded by laughter, surrounded by carefree aura that he discovered most high school students to have. None of it quite reached him, though.

Heavily he sat down in his assigned seat and idly stared at the backs of students that blocked his view from Kyo. Even if there wasn’t a wall of bodies around the orange haired teen, he knew their gazes wouldn’t meet.

He knew the heavy weight of Kyo’s eyes wouldn’t fall on him. He knew Kyo would keep his face trained far and away.

There was a sick feeling in his stomach that was so distinct from the nausea that had been plaguing him these past few months. A feeling that had hung heavy on him all weekend.

He and Kyo hadn’t spoken once. Or, rather, Kyo had made sure not to speak to Yuki.

For a majority of the previous week the rule of “not speaking in public” was upheld almost annoyingly too easily. Nothing had changed in their relationship, not really. Nothing had altered between them. Kyo didn’t seem to be particularly ignoring him, nor did he ever seem to particularly seek him out.

He was too calm in blowing Yuki off like that, and maybe that’s why he had gotten so irritated. Maybe that’s why he had… said those things.

Since then he had become all too aware that it was entirely possible to talk to Kyo less. Kyo was mad at him, or sad at him, or upset or disappointed or something. Whatever it was, the weekend had been hell and spent in their own respective rooms away from each other. Even when Tohru had left to buy groceries and Shigure had left to run a few errands. The weight of an empty room had never been so crushing before.

What was worse Yuki wanted to apologize.

He hated that.

He wished he could be more like Kyo and confront him so guiltlessly about him being so upset over a comment that he obviously didn’t mean.
Twice already since this relationship started did Kyo say things that Yuki just became *sensitive* to. Things that made Yuki catty and petty and petulant and insecure. And twice had Kyo noticed and decided that it would be a great idea to press a harsh finger on that tender spot until the bruise expanded and expanded.

*Back off.*

*Don’t talk to me in public.*

*Pathetic cat.*

A roaring laugh from a few classmates surrounding Kyo broke him out of his thoughts, and he was reminded of eyes that were determined to keep themselves away from him.

Apologizing was a bad idea.

It’s not like Kyo ever would if he was the one to lash out.

Kyo wouldn’t lash out over something like… like *this* anyway.

The proud cat remembered that stifling hatred wasn’t supposed to be translated in caresses and heavy breaths and hot touches.

And the sickly rat remembered that, too.

So, maybe, this was it.

Ended as it started.

Suddenly and impulsively.

Monday’s seemed like the longest day in the world now, and Yuki tried to push away the rising feeling in his gut by pulling out his phone from his school bag.

   »»*Hot pot tonight sounds great, actually.*
   <<*We regret to inform you that we are no longer taking reservations* *(♂▽♂)/
   <<*jk don’t cry I feel like ur crying*
   <<*are you crying?*
   »»*I’m not crying.*
   <<*(≡_≡=)*
   <<*liar!*
   <<*meet me at the gate after school*
   »»*OK*

Maybe this was for the best.
When Kakeru and Yuki made it back to Kakeru’s apartment the sun was already beginning to set and Maki was already readying different things in the kitchen. A smile fit so easily on her face as she chopped vegetables and hummed to herself, only looking up when the boys had passed the entryway.

“Yuki! It’s good to see you again!” Quickly she wiped her hands on a well-used apron and bounded over to greet the boy properly.

“You too, it’s been awhile,” Yuki smiled.

“Makiii, what about me?!?” Kakeru whined, flailing his arms around. “I’m the boyfriend over here! I knew it! You’ve fallen for the prince!”

“It wouldn’t be hard to fall for him, he has such a nice face!” Maki complimented and Yuki felt himself flush slightly, not quite knowing how to handle being complimented so freely.

“Maki, you wound me!”

She giggled, walking to greet her boyfriend with a two handed high five and a bright smile. Yuki couldn’t help but let out his own laugh.

“Where’s Machi?” Maki asked, looking behind the dark-haired boy. “You didn’t leave her behind somewhere, did you? She’s so cute and small she could be taken!”

“Machi’s coming?” Yuki asked.

Kakeru gave him a bright smile and a thumbs up before turning back to his girlfriend, “She said she had some things to do. She’ll be here soon.”

“Oh good,” Maki gave a sigh of relief. “Until then, help me in the kitchen, Kake!”

“Is there anything I can help with?” Yuki asked.

“Sure!” Maki responded enthusiastically as Kakeru slipped on his own apron. Yuki rolled up his sleeves and stared down at a cutting board of carrots and onions that Maki had set aside. “If you could cut these that would really help.”

Yuki stared down at the vegetables.

How were you supposed to chop these things again? He looked around the room but decided to suppress the question.

Whatever, he’d figure it out.

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“Wow,” Machi said, softly. Her eyes fell on the plate of vegetables, specifically a stack of very jaggedly cut carrots and onions. The four sat around the table, with Maki trying more gracefully than Kakeru to cover her laughter. “I’ve never seen carrots make such a strange shape before.”

Yuki hung his head, “I probably should have mentioned that I’m not the best in the kitchen.”

Maki began loading the meat, tofu, and vegetables into the pot that the four surrounded, a light humor clear in her voice, “Don’t worry about it, Yuki. It gives the pot some character!”

“And I suppose we should have expected the prince to be bad at such a commonly chore.”

Yuki chopped his hand on the top of Kakeru’s head.

“Hey! Don’t be so violent around girls!”

“Don’t be so stupid around girls,” Yuki said flatly.

“He has a point, Kake,” Maki said almost solemnly.

Yuki laughed and even Machi let a small smile float onto her face as Kakeru gave an all-too-offended gasp at his girlfriend.

It wasn’t long until the food was ready, but time felt as though it was fling by even faster because of the easy conversation that flowed between the four. Kakeru and Maki were both masters of conversation in their own way, and Yuki had never felt so relaxed around people who weren’t his family in his life (although, he supposed, he wasn’t altogether that comfortable around his family, either).

He figured it wasn’t a coincidence when he noted that Machi was speaking more than he had ever heard. Maki clearly adored the girl and shot her question after question (“How’s school?” “Good.” “How are your parents?” “They’re alright.” “I love your bow today.” “Thank you very much.”).

It was nearly halfway through the meal when Machi spoke unprompted, however, a bowl of rice and an abundant amount of poorly chopped carrots still left to be eaten, “My parents told me you two got engaged recently.”

Kakeru and Maki exchanged glances, smiling softly at one another. Machi continued, “Congratulations.”

“Wait… you already proposed?” Yuki asked.

“Well, sort of,” Kakeru said sheepishly rubbing the back of his head. Maki had a cute blush occupying her cheeks as she smiled up at the boy. “We decided we would get married about a week ago, but I don’t say we’re engaged yet because I wanted to do something really cool like in the movies! Get a hot air balloon, or sky writing, or something like that!”

Maki giggled, taking his hand in hers, “And we decided that everything would have to wait until after graduation anyway.”

Yuki looked at them almost stunned, before a small sincere smile broke out on his face, “Congratulations.”

“What would you like as engagement presents?” Machi asked.

“No, no! We don’t want to make too big a fuss out of this. And we want the wedding to be small,
too,” Kakeru said waving his unheld hand in front of him dismissively. Maki nodded in agreement. “Just a few family members as witnesses. And Commander over here, of course.”

It took Yuki a moment to process who Kakeru was talking about, “Wait… you—you want me to come to your wedding?”

Kakeru had to laugh at the genuinely shocked expression Yuki gave him. Yuki looked to Machi who smiled at him, nodding as if to give him confirmation.

“I’ll try and make this very clear,” Kakeru took his hand back from Maki, grabbing onto Yuki’s hands suddenly and adjusting himself so that he was on one knee. Yuki’s expression quickly faded to one of nausea and slight disgust. “Yuki Sohma. Will you please attend my wedding?”

“Absolutely not.”

Kakeru let out another tearful gasp.

“I think I should be more worried about Kakeru falling for you, Yuki!” Maki laughed and Yuki couldn’t help but let out a laugh too. The two boys let out a respective “guh” at the statement and Yuki took the opportunity to steal his hands back and push Kakeru away.

“Why are you so mean to me,” he lamented.

Yuki rolled his eyes, “Of course, I’ll be at your wedding.”

Kakeru jumped up immediately, feigning happy tears in his eyes as he placed a hand over his mouth dramatically. “He said yes! Did you hear that? He said yes!” Maki laughed as the two girls applauded the scene. Yuki couldn’t help but bow his reddening face again.

“Maki… Machi…. Please….”

“He said yes!” Kakeru, said loudly again, this time going over to the balcony to fling the door open and shout out into the neighborhood, “HE SAID YES.”

“IDIOT, SHUT UP!”

Laughter didn’t quite fade from the house for the rest of the night.

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“Get home safe, you two,” Kakeru said with a wave, his other arm wrapped around Maki’s waist as she waved, as well. Yuki smiled at them, before heading down the path, side by side with Machi.

He felt giddy, almost drunk on the pure atmosphere the household had fed him. He felt warm, welcomed, friendly. Is this what love was supposed to feel like?

“They’re so close,” Machi said finally as they walked down the quiet street. Yuki turned his attention to her.

“I know,” he said with a laugh. “You sort of can’t help but feel envious of them.”

“Right!” Machi said fervently, as if it were a grand realization. Yuki was taken aback at the
expressive response, but laughed when Machi flushed slightly. “It must be nice to have someone you care about that much.”

Yuki hummed to himself at the words, “Yeah…”

“President?”

Yuki looked down at her, “I thought you were going to call me Yuki, Ms. Kuragi.”

“…Yuki?”

“Yes, Machi?” He smiled at her cute and bashful expression.

“You seem sort of spaced out,” she said softly. “Is everything alright?”

For some reason that question was coming up a lot around him. Haru asked him almost every day now, in different, subtle ways. Tohru begged the question with her eyes, and before this week Kyo seemed as though he was almost avoiding the concern with his whole body.

Hatori would call and ask in a way that felt so clinical. Ayame called more frequently now, too (though he only answered every once in a while).

Machi was outside of that world, though. That felt nice. That felt… safe.

So perhaps, just a little would be okay…

“I suppose I’m just thinking about what it means to love someone,” he said thoughtfully. “Kakeru and Maki make it look so easy.”

“Is it not?” Machi asked, and Yuki gave her a furrow of his brow, as if unsure how to respond. “I… I’ve never been in love before, but I thought one of the nice things about it was that it isn’t hard.”

“Maybe,” Yuki seemed unconvinced.

“Pres—Yuki… Are, um, are you in love with someone?”

Yuki felt the question halt him, stop his heart in his chest as he turned his wide eyes to Machi, who couldn’t quite bring her eyes up to meet his.

“I…” Yuki said.

“Never mind!” Machi said suddenly, pushing Yuki reflexively to rid the tension in the air. It caused him to tense, and a sudden ripple of anxiety crashed through him at her being so dangerously close. “Th-that was too personal! I’m sorry!” She bowed 90 degrees from the waist before snapping back up and walking quickly towards the station.

“Ah, Machi, wait!” Yuki said, once he had calmed himself from the thought of transforming in front of her. Machi kept her pace up. “It’s okay, you don’t have to be so embarrassed.”

“I’m not embarrassed!” She snapped back. “A-And I don’t want to know!”

Yuki smiled. She seemed so earnest and sincere, even if the only way she could express it was to be messy and blunt. Yuki liked that about her. Liked her in general.

The rest of the walk to the station was in a comfortable silence, with Yuki giving her small smiles when her flushed face dared to meet his for even a moment. It wasn’t until they had parted ways
their trains were on different lines) and Yuki had started his walk on the path home that the heavy feeling started to return.

Now the light and sunny feelings that were given to him under Kakeru’s roof seemed like an interrogation. They were so happy, and why did it seem so easy? So simple? So uncomplicated? What was he missing? What was he missing?

It was late when he walked through the door, and the house was soundless and dark as he closed the door behind him and toed off his shoes.

It was Monday.

And when he entered his room to change into his pajamas and unload his schoolbag on the floor, he felt himself unable to stay behind the doors of his room. It didn’t feel right.

As if he went to bed… things really, truly, honestly would be over.

Yuki opened the door to his room, deciding that he wouldn’t be able to accept that.

Yuki stared out into the hallway from behind his open door. The night was already mostly gone, eaten up by conversation and an unfamiliar type of laughter. But the pleasantness of the evening would never be enough to overshadow the worry and frustration cradled into his stomach.

At this hour, everything felt too loud and too sudden. His bare feet that worked against cold floor sounded like boots dragging across gravel. Yet, even as he quickly made his way across the hall, sliding Kyo’s door shut behind him, and even as he snuck inside the midnight-coated room, no one stirred. Even as Yuki’s ears rang from the clattering parade that came with a sleeping household, he knew there would only be one person in the world who would hear such clamor.

Even the rustle of Kyo’s futon sheets against Yuki’s threadbare pajamas was enough to make Yuki cringe, was enough to make him wonder if he had disturbed the girl three rooms over, or the man one floor down. Still the boy before him was far too still, and far too peaceful as his orange eyebrows pinched in slumber.

Kyo shifted slightly, his eyes still shut, but his head adjusting on the pillow. Yuki sighed.

“I know you’re awake,” he said.

Kyo’s eye peered open, sleep drooping his eyelids slightly before he closed them again and released a yawn. “What’re you doin’?” He mumbled, though there was little aggression in his voice.

“I can’t sleep,” Yuki said simply. It wasn’t a lie. He could never sleep, lately.

His hand snuck forward to rest on Kyo’s as it lay by his head, Yuki’s thumb moving in slow peaceful circles in a way that seemed far too intimate, and every second that passed Yuki regretted it more. He didn’t stop.

Kyo opened his eyes again but did little to shift away from Yuki’s gentle touch on his hand. “How is that my problem?”

Yuki let a blanket of silence fall over them, as thick and sweltering as wool in July, before finally saying, “I’m sorry I yelled.”

Kyo opened his eyes again, but this time more definitely.
“I’m sorry I said that,” Yuki said again, this time quieter.

“Like I give a shit,” Kyo accepted.

“I know you don’t.”

“Then there. That’s that, isn’t it?” And as if it were really that simple he shut his eyes and settled back into his pillow.

Briefly, the feeling he managed to capture at Kakeru’s house earlier came back in such a small, teasing dose. But now the taste of it seemed so much more poignant and real. It tasted sweet and pure, like ripe fruit, and it made his stomach flutter in a way that wasn’t followed by phantom pains or nausea.

Yuki smiled and felt a knot of tension release through his veins, and felt how he relaxed against the fabric of the futon, leaning closer to Kyo so as not to spill onto the hardwood. Kyo let out a frustrated sigh and opened his eyes again. “What time is it?”

Yuki twisted his neck to try and view the clock behind him on the floor before turning back to face Kyo. “12 o’clock.”

“Dammit,” Kyo mumbled. “We’ve got school,” he said absently but his eyes remained open. Yuki wanted to laugh at how delicate Kyo’s sleep schedule seemed to be. Even on a good day, it would still be another hour until Yuki would be able to fall asleep.

He wanted to push this feeling a little longer, maybe pretend for a bit more.

Maybe Kyo would let him.

“Why don’t we take tomorrow?” Yuki offered with a smirk. Kyo gave him a skeptical look through his sleepy eyes before his lips turned up in a partial smile.

“I bet you haven’t skipped a day of school in your life,” he teased. “Besides, what the hell would we tell Tohru?”

Yuki mulled over the idea for a minute with a sigh before letting out a small quiet laugh, one that echoed off their subdued voices. “I’ve skipped class before. Once. In elementary school.”

“What a rebel,” Kyo said with a snort. He was awake now, staring back into Yuki’s stormy gray eyes just as Yuki looked into his own. During the day Kyo’s eyes would be filled with fire, with something so alive and pure it excited Yuki to give them even the slightest glance. But now, in bed, with chilled darkness caressing them both his eyes had calmed. They were cooling pieces of coal when a fire had turned low and dark. Yuki was happy to be so close to feel the bit of heat they still gave off.

“Sorry I couldn’t be as much of a troublemaker as you—a title you seem determined to defend, by the way.”

“What the fuck is that supposed to mean?” Kyo muttered in a watered down annoyance to accompany Yuki’s eyes that were so free of malice.

“Skipping school, beating up kids, I think there was incident with a broken chalkboard too….” Yuki laughed as Kyo was the one to give the kick this time.

“Yeah but it’s not like I do that shit now,” Kyo hissed.
“You did jump out of a second story window, and you did punch a hole through a window,” Yuki said idly.

“Yeah, but I haven’t beaten up a damn person, so shut up,” Kyo retorted, but there was a hint of amusement in his tone as he latched onto Yuki’s teasing one.

“And so far our chalkboards seem to be safe,” Yuki commented.

“Hell, how do you even know about that?” Yuki felt himself tense again, the comforting circles on Kyo’s hand stopping as a cold sweat broke through his skin as he swallowed back a world he had hidden on the tip of his tongue. “Haru,” he said finally, avoiding Kyo’s glowing red eyes as they peered open slightly to watch him.

“That damn cow,” Kyo mumbled and Yuki felt his thumb loosen again as he continued stroking Kyo’s hand. “Well, whatever betty fuckin’ do-gooder. Don’t let my bad influence spoil your permanent record,” Yuki laughed at the clear annoyance Kyo had seeped into his words even as they were hushed under the quiet hours of morning.

“Did I ever tell you that story?” Yuki asked after a moment. Kyo opened an eye and raised an eyebrow, his expression neutral but attentive in the late hour. “About how I skipped class,” Yuki clarified. Kyo shrugged under the covers but kept his eyes open. “I was seven,” Yuki started in a hushed voice. “And I decided to run away from home.”

Kyo’s eyes dawned with realization. “I do remember that.”

“You do?” Yuki asked genuinely surprised. Kyo clicked his tongue softly as his eyes flashed in remembrance.

“No one really shut the fuck up about it for, I don’t know, two weeks after it happened. I remember being at the dojo with Shishou and all the moms would come in to pick up their kids. ‘Did you hear about Yuki?’ He imitated in a pretentious nasal voice that had Yuki chuckling. ‘You didn’t last very long, did you? You managed to escape for, what, two hours?’”

Yuki rolled his eyes with a smile. “I could have made it longer if I wanted to,” he replied simply.

“Yeah, whatever,” Kyo teased which caused Yuki to give him a light kick under the covers, which Kyo immediately retaliated. Yuki laughed slightly and even Kyo gave a tired smile, closing his eyes again.

“It’s true. I left just to find my way back,” Yuki said almost bitterly.

“What made you come back?”

Yuki thought about it for a moment, his thumb continuing to stroke Kyo’s hand as he contemplated the question.


“Hope?” Kyo repeated dryly. Yuki let out a sigh.

“That maybe one day I’d have a place in all of… this.” Maybe one day I’d be of use. Maybe one day I would have a life that welcomed me warmly. Maybe one day I would wake up and not regret even opening my eyes. Maybe one day when I left, I wouldn’t be afraid of being on my own.
Yuki found, for the second time that night, that these words were lingering on his tongue, found that they were trying to be relayed, that they were trying to be heard. He wanted to be heard, and, strangely enough, he wondered what it would be like if Kyo was the one who heard it. It was a feeling he swallowed immediately.

“Never thought that’d be a problem for the rat,” Kyo said absently.

“It wasn’t a problem for the rat. It was a problem for me,” Yuki said.

Kyo’s eyes opened and as he stared at him, pierced him, waited for the snide remark or the witty retort, or the smirk that always seemed to play onto his lips when Kyo was around. Nothing came, and Yuki watched Kyo’s expression fade into wandering and curious eyes that searched over him. It was terrifying.

“I suppose you’re right,” Yuki sighed. “Coming up with an excuse for Tohru would prove to be quite a task.”

“Huh?”

“If we were to skip.”

“Oh. Yeah, I guess,” Kyo huffed.

“And then there’s Shigure,” Yuki said with a bite in his tone.

“Don’t even joke about that,” Yuki tried to laugh, but was met with Kyo’s serious tone. “No one can know about this, Yuki. I mean it.”

Yuki looked away from him with a sigh, “I know.”

And just like that, everything felt complicated again.

Regardless, Kyo fell into a light slumber after that, satisfied with Yuki’s complacency. His muscles relaxing and his eyes losing their tension as he drifted to an easy sleep.

Yuki, however, watched the sunrise through Kyo’s curtains and nearly suffocated on the words he never said.

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The late night had dragged Tohru from sleep once more. Mondays were always the hardest days to sleep, after Rin’s words would swim in her ears and make her feel increasingly unsettled in a home she had come to know as her own.

So she did the only thing she could do when thoughts cluttered her mind, tried to keep herself busy. Quietly, ever so quietly, she snuck downstairs into the laundry room and took inventory of the detergent she needed, snuck into the kitchen to see what vegetables they were missing, and if the milk was low. Stood on her tip toes to grab herself a glass to fill with water.

A pen, she thought. I need a pen.
There was one upstairs in her school bag, along with a notebook where she kept lists of everything she needed for the house.

At the base of the stairs she stopped herself, however. Pen, lists, and groceries forgotten when she saw Yuki carry himself out from his room.

He didn’t turn to come downstairs. He didn’t pad down the hallway to the linen closet. He didn’t sleepily walk his way to the bathroom, either.

No.

With clear, crisp, and awake eyes, Yuki disappeared into Kyo’s room and shut the door behind him.

Chapter End Notes

Who else is at an age where literally everyone around them is getting engaged or married? Goodness gracious.
Chapter Notes

My beta and I were talking about this chapter, and now that Tohru knows the situation in Shigure's house can basically be summarized with "but they don't know we know they know." Hah.

Lately I have been getting a lot of lovely comments here on AO3, which has been such a pleasant surprise. I'm so glad that people are still a part of this fandom and enjoying this fic. Makes me all warm and fluttery inside. If I'm slow on the updates it's just because apparently I can't write chapters under 20 pages anymore. But trust me, this fic is planned all the way out to endgame, so it's not going anywhere. Thank you again to everyone reading and I hope you enjoy these last few Autumn chapters (there are only a couple more to go)!

Yuki wasn’t the first one to wake up this time.

He’s all too aware of that when a rough, calloused hand is pressed between his shoulder blades and rousing him from sleep.

It wasn’t particularly gentle, but just the mere fact that Kyo wasn’t flipping the futon out from under him or shouting in his ear or even kicking at his side was enough to make Yuki feel warm. A warmth that made him sleepy. He settled himself further into the pillow and he could hear Kyo grunt.

“Get up,” Kyo sounded annoyed now. “There’s school, remember?”

“Ugh,” Yuki supplied gracefully as he sat himself up in the futon. He blinked his eyes open to see Kyo satisfied enough to turn his attention away from the groggy rat as he finished buttoning up his shirt. In the back of his consciousness, maybe he could hear a phone ring, or some rustling downstairs. But otherwise, it just felt quiet and still and not at all like Kyo.

Right, he was in Kyo’s room.

Somehow that was just processing now, even if Kyo’s presence beside him, waking him, lingering near him, felt completely natural. He looked down at himself, pajamas only ruffled by nothing more than sleep, palms a bit clammy from the early hour, Kyo’s scent surrounding him…

…And all of the sudden he felt embarrassed. By the way Kyo wouldn’t turn to look at him and grumbled nonsensical things under his breath with a pink tint on his ears, Yuki could tell Kyo was feeling that strange pressure too.

Which was odd to say the least, because he could think of a lot more embarrassing things the two of them had done in this very room.

Last night they hadn’t even touched each other, except for the unsure hands that collided against each other throughout the night. Yuki flushed, flushed, at the thought of holding hands.

Well that woke him up. And now that he was awake, he didn’t really know what to say or do.
“So,” Yuki started, Kyo peered at him over his shoulder. “Good morning.”

Kyo quirked his eyebrow but gave him a soft grunt as a reply.

“Are you tired?” Yuki asked a bit guiltily, even if his own few hours of sleep were already beginning to weigh on him.

“A little,” Kyo admitted. “You?”

“I’m always tired,” Yuki said with a yawn, and the soft snort that Kyo let out was so comforting to Yuki. He wondered if Kyo turned around if he would be smiling.

He’d like to see that.

It was on that thought alone that allowed him to lift himself up onto his feet. His head felt a sudden rush of dizziness but Yuki walked through the swirling room around him so that he could steady himself against Kyo (who made an all too satisfying guh noise when Yuki’s head fell against his shoulder).

“What are you doing?” Kyo craned his neck to look down at Yuki. Yuki could feel the warmth of his back so close to his own skin, fueling that cozy feeling in his stomach.

“I’m getting up,” Yuki responded. Kyo rolled his eyes didn’t move to push Yuki off.

Yuki smiled lazily against Kyo’s shoulder and placed his hands on the cat’s hips, turning his head so he could breathe against tan skin. Kyo stiffened.

“Now what are you doing?!”

“We didn’t get to do anything last night.”

“Whose damn fault was that?!” Kyo snapped, pinching the bridge of his nose when he realized how loud his voice had become. “You’re the one who didn’t come home last night.”

Yuki lifted his head, giving Kyo curious eyes at his response.

They felt so close now. Yuki pressed against Kyo’s back, hands tangled in his sides, faces horrifically close. The rat rested his tired head against the other’s forehead and let a small smile curl across his lips.

“I didn’t think you’d want me around last night,” Yuki said softly.

Kyo contemplated the question, averting his eyes after a moment to say, “Don’t go deciding stupid shit on your own.”

That took Yuki aback, processing the sudden, simple words. Days of agonizing and regretting and moping and overthinking was brushed away in a sentence.

It made Yuki think that this thing between them wouldn’t be so easily disrupted, no matter how unspoken the terms.

Yuki smiled, “Okay.”

He couldn’t help it. He wanted to kiss him. He wanted to touch him. He wanted to be a part of Kyo’s routine. Here in the early hours of the morning in Kyo’s room felt dangerous and safe and challenging and complacent and soft and warm. He wanted all of those feelings, wanted to connect
their lips with these new threads of realization. He wanted to kiss him, he thought, leaning in closer and--

“Yuki!” A voice from downstairs caused Kyo’s head to swing closer on reflex resulting in a painful head-butt for the both of them. They both stepped away from each other holding their heads in their hands as annoyed groans escaped them. “Yuki! Come down!” Shigure’s voice called again, and the two boys looked at each other with a sheen of panic.

“He’s probably still sleeping, Shigure!” Tohru’s voice came just as loud at the base of the stairs.

Kyo shot him a look as if to say, *what the fuck do we do?* How would I know?! Came Yuki’s shrug of a response.

They could hear Shigure climbing the stairs and Tohru’s pitter patter of feet following behind him.

“J-Just let him sleep, Shigure! You know how he is in the mornings, and there’s still awhile before school and—”

“Sorry, dear Tohru, doctor’s orders,” Shigure’s knock on the door across the hall hit the two like bullets. “Yuki!”

Yuki could feel a tight grip on his wrist, and turned to look at Kyo’s desperate and panicked eyes.

“How do you propose I do that, idiot?” He whispered back with a glare. Kyo looked around the room before his eyes settled on the balcony doors. He turned to Yuki, tilting his head towards the unconventional exit.

“You have got to be kidding me,” Yuki hissed.

“You were the one who snuck in here last night,” Kyo retaliated. Yuki pressed the heel of his hand against his eye.

“Fine,” he snatched his wrist back from Kyo’s grip and made his way over to the balcony, opening up the doors and feeling the nip of a bitter autumn morning.

Quietly he assessed his situation, looking down at the unforgiving ground—that was a no go (he wasn’t a cat, for God’s sake)—and then up at the overhang of the roof. He sighed, balancing himself easily on the railing of the balcony before jumping and hauling himself up onto the roof with an upper strength he would rather not have asserted this early in the morning with this little sleep.

Once he caught his footing he sat down for a moment, letting the surge of panic wash out of his bloodstream through his frantically beating heart. His head bowed, his fingers rubbed at his still sleepy eyes.

How humiliating.

Yuki sneezed at the sudden chill that his body was so rudely presented with.

“Yuki?” Shigure’s voice called questioningly.

“Yeah,” he replied, voice still raspy with sleep.
“We’ve been looking for you,” Shigure said with a slight glimmer of amusement bleeding through his voice. “What on earth are you doing on the roof?”

Yuki lifted himself up and walked to the edge where the ladder rested and climbed down slowly, finally meeting Shigure’s dark eyes and easy smirk.

“I couldn’t sleep, I thought I’d watch the sunrise. I must have dozed off,” Yuki brushed past the dog into the house. He could hear Shigure shuffle behind him as they left the cold air from the outside behind them.

“You’ll catch a cold like that. Come downstairs, you have a phone call.”

“Okay, just give me a minute,” Yuki said. Shigure patted him on the shoulder as they walked down the hall.

“Tohru, I found him!” Shigure called out triumphantly and Yuki could hear Tohru give a relieved and pleased reply from the bottom of the stairs. The exchange, however, washed against his ears as Kyo exited his room. Uniform on. Composure in place. Yuki glared at him which Kyo returned reflexively before Yuki rushed into his room and snapped the door shut.

Kyo was fairly good at appearing unfrazzled for a guy who was frazzled nearly 24 hours a day.

He slid against the door until he was sitting, knees bent, head hanging, and honestly he could have gone back to sleep just like that. But, Yuki knew this from an early age, the world was determined to move on around him—no matter how uncooperative his body seemed.

He was tired, sure. And still feeling sort of sick in his belly, and his throat and mouth felt dry and dehydrated.

Still, he couldn’t bring himself to be all that upset. Even after being so unceremoniously tossed out of Kyo’s room.

In fact, Yuki thought as visions of Kyo’s sleeping form next to him filled his memory, he was feeling better than he had in a long while.

He picked himself up and changed into his school uniform which was still on the floor from undressing so hastily the previous night. Tie straight, hair somewhat controlled, Yuki exited down the stairs to where Shigure was chatting animatedly on the phone.

“Oh, here he is, here he is,” Shigure said into the receiver. “Yes, I’ll pass him over now.”

Shigure handed the phone over to Yuki who took it hesitantly. People who called the house for him were a small number. Akito on a few occasions. His mother on even fewer. Ayame had taken to calling his cellphone now that he had one. Yuki felt his gut twist into his throat as he placed the phone against his ear.

“Hello?”

“Good morning, Yuki,” Yuki breathed a long sigh of relief when he heard Hatori’s monotonous voice on the other end. His muscles relaxing, he looked at Shigure, signaling for him to leave him in peace for once.

“Hatori, how are you?” Yuki asked politely.

“I’m well. I’m calling about your check-up,” always straight to the point with him. Yuki rolled his
“What about it?”

“I’m going to need you to come to the main house this week for it.”

“Why? I had a check-up last month.”

“Yes, well—”

“And the month before that, and the month before that.”

“You, Yuki,” Hatori’s voice was stern and it made Yuki flinch. “I don’t want you to argue about this. You need to have your regular check-ups since your condition’s gotten worse.”

Yuki gripped the phone tighter, staring down at the floor with intent, petrified eyes. Hatori could be scary, but he was nothing compared to the main house.

“I’m feeling a lot better,” Yuki said. “I don’t need the check-ups anymore.”

He heard Hatori sigh at such a point blank lie.

“You don’t know how to fix my condition, do you?” Yuki asked, defiance always being drawn out of him with the prospect of returning to a world he had long since turned his back to. “You can’t give me medicine for something you can’t diagnose.”

“I would still like to relegate how you’re doing.”

“Then you can call,” Yuki said.

“Yuki—”

“I’m not going to the main house,” Yuki said flatly. “I’m sorry.”

Yuki felt his blood go cold at the sudden silence on the other end of the line, but when Hatori sighed Yuki could feel oxygen returning just a touch easier.

“Put Shigure back on the line,” Hatori said. Yuki nodded, even if he knew Hatori couldn’t see it. He called for Shigure who came from the dining room where breakfast was just about prepared and took the phone gleefully from Yuki.

“Hello?” Shigure spoke to Hatori so naturally. In the back of his mind, he wondered if anything made the dog anxious. “Yes, alright… I understand… What’s with the serious tone of voice, Hari?”

Yuki shifted uncomfortably as he listened to the one-sided conversation, but didn’t budge even as Shigure chirped a farewell and hung the phone up.

“Did he tell you to tell me to go to the main house?” Yuki asked, crossing his arms.

“Basically, yes,” Shigure said with a smile, turning to Yuki. “But would you listen to me even if I told you?”

“No,” Yuki answered honestly. Shigure smiled again.

“Then I suppose that’s that.”
“-ru. Tohru! Hey Tohru! Earth to Tohru!”

“Huh?”

Oh, that’s right. She was at school. That is, if her uniform and the school bag clutched to her chest was any kind of giveaway. She looked up at the intruding voice and saw Momiji’s golden locks bouncing on his head as excitedly as he was. Haru behind him, giving Tohru a passive, but not unfriendly, look.

Tohru shook her head.

“Sorry,” she muttered, slipping on her school shoes and putting her street shoes into her locker.

“Oh, right, I’m probably in the way standing here in the middle of the ha—” she looked down at her school shoes, the ones she had just put away to put back onto her feet.

Immediately Tohru felt her face flush as she scrambled to put her street shoes back on, spilling frantic apologies to the two boys who seemed to be waiting for her at this point.

“Geez, Tohru, are you okay? What has you so spaced out lately?” Momiji asked, pressing one cool hand against her forehead and another on his own. “You feel kind of warm. Are you getting a fever?”

“No! No! I don’t think so!” She flushed harder, finally getting herself back in order. Momiji jutted his hip and gave her a skeptical look. Haru didn’t really seem perturbed in the least by the exchange. “I’m sorry, I think I’m just out of it today.”

“I’ll say!” Momiji linked his arm around hers and pulled her forward. In the back of her mind, she realized this was probably the fastest she had moved all day. Gosh, she really needed to get better at this secrecy stuff. It was weighing down on her to such an obvious extent at this point. Tohru was sure of it.

“Are you going home?” Momiji asked.

“No, I still have to go to work,” Tohru said. It was Friday, right? She was fairly certain.

“We’ll walk you then!”

“Y-You don’t have to! It’s so out of the way!” Tohru said, still being pulled along by Momiji.

“We can’t leave you alone like this! What if you wander into traffic or slip or fall down a manhole or something!” Momiji said firmly.

“We don’t have anything else to do, either,” Haru said, more to reassure the girl than anything. She sighed. Maybe having company would help her clear her thoughts.

“Um, okay. If you don’t mind then.”
“Yay! Tohru’s work! Tohru’s work!” Momiji bounced happily, forcing Tohru to hop along with him.

“Careful, Momiji. Don’t bump into her accidentally.”

“I won’t,” he sang out. Tohru laughed, releasing his arm just in case. It was better safe than sorry. “I promise I’ll be attentive!”

Momiji nodded, satisfied with the response as they began down the path to Tohru’s work. Momiji certainly had a loud presence. And it was more than welcome when her thoughts had been pounding against her head for days now. Had she been this bad since the beginning of this week? Hana and Uo did seem a bit concerned by the fact that she was walking into more walls than usual. She stubbed her toe almost three times in the past few days. And there was the incident of tripping over a gardening club member when she was seeking out a vending machine.

But other than that she hoped she was still acting relatively normal. Yuki and Kyo hadn’t said anything, thank goodness.

Her mind cluttered up again.

Yuki and Kyo…

“Woah, hey!” She felt a hand grab the back of her uniform and pull her away from almost stepping out into a red-lighted crosswalk. Tohru snapped her attention back to reality when a car passed a little too close to her feet. She let out a harsh squeal.

“What was that about being more attentive?!?” Momiji scolded as Tohru held a hand over her hammering chest.

“S-Sorry,” she shook.

“It’s a good thing I know where you work, Tohru!” He said with a sigh, taking her hand and leading her across the road when the light turned green, Haru following shortly behind them.

“Do you not take the train to work?” Haru asked, looking behind him in the other direction. Momiji shot him a strange look at the sudden change of subject, but Tohru didn’t seem to notice, taking it all in stride.

“It’s only one stop away from the nearest station. It’s easier to walk.”

“I see,” Haru hummed. Tohru tilted her head in a question (something she found she did a lot whenever Haru was nearby).

“But you walk from work to Gure’s place, too, right?” Momiji gave an almost exhausted grunt at the thought. “It’s such a long walk, Tohru. Maybe I should walk you home after work, too…”

“I promise I’ll be better by the walk home!” Tohru exclaimed. Suddenly she yelped as two slight but strong hands pushed her to sit down on a nearby bench that she hadn’t even noticed were there.

“Careful, Momiji,” Haru said softly, but the rabbit only gave a pouting look.

“Tohru, what’s wrong?” He asked. “Having too much on your mind is bad for your health!”

“I-Is that true?” Tohru paled.

“In your case, it seems so,” Haru said simply. Momiji nodded. Tohru looked between them and then
immediately back down to her feet (had her socks been different lengths all day?!).

“So?” Momiji prodded. “What’s wrong?”

Tohru played with the straps of her bag.

*What’s wrong* she thought to herself in an echo.

Well, nothing, if she was honest… It was just…

It was just that when her eyes clenched shut she could see Yuki opening the door to Kyo’s room so gently. Walking in with this *expression* that was so particular and unique to the rat. A nervousness that manifested in determination and caution. She recognized it when he decided to run for student council president. When he decided to open up to his brother. When he brought Tohru to his garden.

What was an expression like that doing on Yuki’s face when Kyo was at the end of the path?

She wasn’t one to exactly jump to conclusions… Or even really… think about things like… Like… the kinds of intimacy people could have with one another… But things were definitely beginning to make sense if the entirety of the picture was pieced together.

Their sporadic fights, the spikes in intensity of their irritability sandwiched between moments of peace that came so quickly they could cause whiplash. Yuki’s distractedness, his loss of appetite. Kyo’s relapsed bad temper, and the strange undefinable tension between them. One that everyone was so quick and ready to dismiss.

Or maybe she was just… seeing things! Or being silly! Or being too hopeful that their fights weren’t just meaningless bursts of unfounded hatred! She did always hope the two would become friends….

“Tohru?” Momiji called for her and suddenly Tohru remembered where she was and who she was talking to and what they were asking her to say. A bright blush covered her face.

*How in the world am I supposed to talk about this?! I could never! And with the conclusions I’m jumping to, too…*

Momiji was leaning in closer to her, doing that thing where he blatantly violated the personal space of his prey to scrutinize them further. Tohru never knew rabbits could be so intimidating.

“I-It’s Yuki!” Tohru blurted out before she could stop herself. “And Kyo!”

Momiji stepped back and raised an eyebrow. Haru watched with a kind of composed intensity that flickered behind his eyes. Tohru deflated. There was too much in her right now, she felt like she was going to burst.

“Did they do something?” Momiji asked, his eyes turning serious. Tohru shook her head.

“I-It’s just, um,” she sighed. She didn’t have to say anything. She *couldn’t*. But maybe just enough to relieve the thoughts that were so heavy they blinded her movements and general motor functions. “Th-the way they fight still seems so different than it used to be when I first met them. I think something might be wrong, but I don’t… I don’t know how to ask.”

Momiji breathed a sigh of relief, “what, is that all?”

She nodded and Momiji just laughed.

“Those two fight, that’s all there is to it, right Haru?” To Tohru’s dismay, Haru gave an affirming
“But they were doing so well for so long! They barely fought at all last year!”

Granted, they didn’t talk much in the previous year, either. When they were second years they hardly acknowledged each other at all. There was a perfect harmony around how they ignored each other so perfectly. A kind of absence of response to each other that would sometimes make Tohru worry even more.

“Tohru…” The concerned tone that coated Momiji’s words caught Tohru’s attention indefinitely as she looked up to meet his sad eyes. “The closer graduation comes, I think the more likely Yuki and Kyo are going to be… acting kind of weird.”

Her eyes widened, remembering the words Kazuma had told her with such a pained expression the year before.

“Kyo…” is getting locked up.

Momiji nodded and Haru looked away.

A new realization clicking into her mind.

If Kyo is getting locked up…

If they’re really…

Tohru let her eyes widen.

“Not just Kyo,” Haru said. “After graduation Yuki is moving back to the main house to train for head of the family. That’s what my parents told me.”

“He is?” Tohru couldn’t help the shock in her voice. “But Akito… Isn’t Akito the head of the house?”

“Well,” Momiji grunted around the word. “People in Akito’s position of the curse tend to… not have the longest lifespan. It’s kind of understood that the rat, or the zodiac closest to the head, will end up being the head of the family when that happens.”

Tohru didn’t realize how tightly she was clutching her bag until Momiji placed a reassuring hand atop her too-tense one.

“Akito is… going to die?” Tohru asked.

“I-I mean, it’s not like this is going to happen tomorrow!” Momiji said with a nervous laugh. “It’s just something the zodiacs have to plan for.”

Haru nodded again when Tohru turned her head to him and she sighed.

“So Yuki will go back to the main house,” Tohru said. Somehow the words felt sour and ominous.

Yuki didn’t talk much about his past, but it leaked out of him, as if desperately trying to escape him. Yuki had an air about him that made it seem as though he was always running, always petrified of what might be around the corner, always cautious of every step he took.

It was a fear that had become a part of his body like its own limb.
A hopelessness settled in Tohru’s stomach.

“Maybe just let them be for now,” Momiji said, trying to bring a kind of cheeriness back into his voice. It washed off Tohru uselessly.

She had to do something. She had to do something. She had to do something.

Tohru snapped up to her feet, determined expression clear on her downtrodden face, and Momiji jumped back at the sudden movement.

“I have to work!” Tohru said glaring up at the sky, and Momiji let his features soften at Tohru’s apparent resolve. He chuckled, taking her hand and leading her down the sidewalk again to her work, Haru walking just behind them.

“Yeah, you have to work,” Momiji confirmed. “But you have to take care of yourself, too.”

“You’ll make everyone worry if you don’t,” Haru said, plainly.

Tohru nodded, “Okay.”

Admittedly, Tohru barely heard the words.

She had to do something.

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Hatsuharu Sohma was not a conversationalist.

Kyo was all too painfully aware of that fact.

There was a brief time in Kyo’s life where Haru would have possibly be considered Kyo’s closest friend. Though both “close” and “friend” were taken to have more liberal meanings by these standards. Kyo and Haru were in elementary school together, and Kyo was a torrential force of rage and hurt wrapped inside a tiny body. Haru met him with a remarkable indifference and subtle admiration.

Kyo would yell and kick and scream and scare the other kids off and Haru would watch from a few paces behind him, humming softly to himself as if impressed by Kyo’s complete and utter lack of sociability.

They would go to the dojo together. Haru would ask him for advice on his form. Haru would ask him for sparring matches. Haru would develop his reflexes by dodging Kyo’s reckless and irritated fists. They would walk home together (Kyo held his hand this whole time lest he wander off and get lost on the way back. Most days he would walk him all the way back to Haru’s house, even if it was an extra ten minutes past Kazuma’s home. Kyo was convinced Haru wouldn’t make it otherwise).

They rarely ever talked.

If Kyo thought about it now his nose would scrunch and his eyebrows would furrow. No matter how you looked at it, it was weird to spend that much time with a person and still have most of the memories be filled with such a one-sided silence.
That was, except for when they talked about Yuki.

It was a common motivator in the dojo ("Hit me as if I were that dumb rat!" "Imagine beating Yuki’s face in with that punch!" "If you get your kick as good as mine you could probably kill that rodent in one blow!").

Haru improved his skills on this kind of regimen, even if Kazuma gave them both unsettled and scolding looks every time this method was used. Kyo and Haru shrugged it off. It was effective, and what was the point of learning all this stuff anyway if you weren’t going to use it against your sworn enemy?

The common factor of their relationship made it so when Kyo yelled at Haru, there was little venom in his threats. He would rarely push Haru away all that whole-heartedly. He kept him around.

But outside the dojo, things became silent again.

They had better things to do than talk shit about some kid they barely even saw, anyway. Some rat who holed away behind Akito like some scared baby. They didn’t spend their time speculating on his life, getting themselves angry over his blatantly pampered lifestyle, and didn’t mock him so openly like the other boys did to the girls on the playground.

The promise that one day he would be defeated (preferably killed) by their hands was enough of a bond between them. So was the unbridled anger that Haru could never seem to hold back during practice. Even if Kyo would smack the back of Haru’s head and accuse him of having a form way too sloppy to deal any critical damage on the sickly form of their hated cousin.

But it was a bond that Kyo didn’t have with anyone else but Haru.

That changed a couple years later.

Haru’s anger seemed to dissolve, evaporate, right into the thick summer air. His kicks and punches were strong, but not any stronger if Kyo shouted motivations to imagine Yuki’s face instead.

They hung out at school still, still walked to practice together, still went home together, but something felt distant at the time.

One day Haru brought Yuki to the dojo.

Kazuma had to pull Kyo off of Haru.

Yuki joined a separate class.

After a week, Haru joined Yuki’s class.

Kyo walked to the dojo by himself, and home by himself.

Whatever, he was used to being alone. And it wasn’t as if he and Haru were all that close anyway.

The year that Kyo was in middle school without Haru sealed their separation. By the time Haru donned his own gakuran in the following year at the same school, not a word was exchanged between them.

Kyo didn’t really think twice about it now. People had entered and left his life in far more violent ways. The lukewarm parting wasn’t enough to earn a grudge from Kyo. It just was what it was. By the time Kyo was a second year in high school he learned bewildering skills of tolerance around his
family members. And so their relationship devolved to something… reserved but not sour. Acknowledged but not close.

It didn’t change the fact that Kyo had known Haru his entire life, however. It didn’t change the fact that Kyo just knew certain things about his cousin. How could you not learn a few traits and habits after being stuck with someone for long?

And Kyo knew for a fact that Hatsuharu Sohma was not a conversationalist.

Hatsuharu Sohma was not a gossip.

Kyo let these thoughts swirl in his head all week during his sessions at the dojo. The unsettled feeling in his stomach giving his kick just a little more power, and his punch just a little less accuracy.

“Sorry I’m late,” Haru said, bowing before he walked onto the mat in his karate gear.

“Haru, I wasn’t sure you were joining us today,” Kazuma said amiably as Haru joined Kyo and Kunimitsu.

“Where were you?” Kyo folded his arms across his chest.

“Walking Tohru to work,” he said simply. “Look after her, she might be getting a fever.”

Kyo gave an understanding nod before the three turned their attention back to Kazuma.

Haru landed a hit on Kyo during their sparring match that evening. It was the first one Haru managed since Kyo’s last year of middle school.

Maybe he really was distracted.

The thought passed idly through his mind as practice came to a close. Kyo wiped himself down with a towel, sucking water into his belly as his eyes rested lazily on Haru’s back who was conversing with Kazuma. He hadn’t noticed he was staring until Kazuma gave him a pointed look (almost disappointed) and Kyo reeled back from the sudden and immense curiosity at what their conversation held.

He would have to deal with that later.

Kyo let his eyes rest much more consciously on Haru’s back this time, waiting as Haru bowed to Kazuma and stepped off the mat and right past Kyo. Kyo followed him to the door, slinging his bag over his shoulder and fastening his shoes by Haru’s side.

When Haru began to walk Kyo followed and after a moment of humoring him, Haru stopped to face Kyo.

“What is it? Do you want to fight?”

“No.”

He tilted his head, “A date?”

“Neither, you dumb cow!”

“Then what do you want?” Haru’s voice was as deadpan as ever, and Kyo found it to be completely unsettling. “You’ve been staring at me all practice.”
“I have not,” Kyo denied weakly, leaning his back against a tree as he tried to collect his thoughts. How did he even approach this subject?

Maybe it would be best to just ignore it. Ignore everything. Just keep powering through as if nothing was wrong and nothing was different. If anything was going on it only had a few more months to matter, anyway.

Kyo closed his eyes for a moment, but as soon as he did feather light touches consumed his memory. Yuki’s soft, apologetic eyes, so expressive and genuine, were in front of him. A wistful and quiet voice that sunk into his eardrums made him dizzy.

“Did you… Did you tell Yuki shit about me?” Kyo asked.

Haru’s eyebrows furrowed slightly, an expression he would wear whenever someone mentioned Yuki now. Something guarded and protective, “What kind of shit?”

“I don’t know, middle school stuff?”

“Middle school?” Haru asked as if the concept was foreign to him. Kyo balled his hands into fists.

“Just stupid shit. Like about me breaking that chalkboard or about that kid I beat up.”

Haru turned his body completely to face Kyo, his head tilted up as if he were trying to piece together Kyo’s inquiry in his mind. After a moment his expression broke, as if realizing something, and his gaze was suddenly piercing against Kyo’s.

“What?!”

Haru hummed in response, observing Kyo.

“Stop it, don’t give me that look! I was only asking, but if you’re gonna be a huge pain in the ass about it then forget it,” Kyo began to stomp away, hoping the flush in his cheeks wasn’t evident.

“I did tell him.”

Kyo turned back around immediately, “You what? When?”

Haru gave Kyo a puzzled glance, one that peered through that protective almost-glare that had regained its place on Haru’s features, “Is he using this information against you?”


“He’s not blackmailing you or anything?” Kyo couldn’t tell if that was a joke or not.

“Of course not! It’s not like I give a shit about anything that happened back then, anyway!”

Haru crossed his arms behind his head, his stance unnaturally relaxed beside Kyo’s taut and tense one. Still there was a kind of caution in his tone, one that seemed almost dangerous to Kyo.

“I wonder how such a strange topic came up,” Kyo looked away from Haru, opting for silence this time around as he did his best to keep the reddening color off his cheeks. After a moment, he heard Haru give a sigh.

“He used to ask about you.”

Kyo looked up at him as if the words didn’t register. He rolled them around in his brain trying to
echo back Haru’s words to himself in a way that made sense, “He used to--?”

“I know you have an image of what Yuki’s past was like, Kyo. But at some point you’re going to have to accept the fact that it wasn’t as perfect as you keep wanting it to be.”

Kyo could feel his body respond defensively to that, but it died on the realization that he wasn’t sure what he wanted to dispute. This idea that he didn’t understand Yuki, or disregarded him so harshly, it sat uneasily in his stomach. But, well, he didn’t understand Yuki. He did disregard him to a certain extent.

He didn’t know anything about Yuki.

The words faded on Kyo’s tongue, but his fists remained balled and uncertain.

“You can’t stand to be around Akito for more than a few minutes, none of us can,” Haru continued. Kyo wished he would stop already. “For a while, that was Yuki’s entire life.”

“Why are you telling me this?” Kyo snapped, more desperate than angry.

“Because I don’t want you thinking anything stupid.”

“I’m not! I just asked, Christ!”

A beat of silence passed between them. Neither really moving, nothing really resolved. If anything, Kyo felt more confused than he had in all these months combined.

“So what do you mean he used to ask about me?”

Haru gave another sigh, dropping his arms to rub the back of his neck.

“Sometimes I’d be able to sneak into his room when he stayed at the main estate,” Haru admitted.

“When I did, he’d ask about you.”

“Why?”

Haru shrugged, “I never asked.”

“You wouldn’t, would you,” Kyo said, shaking his head. “Can’t you even guess?”

Haru tilted his head, “Aren’t you taking too much interest in this?”

“Why wouldn’t I?” Kyo snapped back. “It’s about me, after all!”

Haru shrugged again, shoving his hands in his pockets. His expression was still guarded, and his limbs weren’t as relaxed and fluid as they normally were. For the briefest of moments, Kyo almost felt bad about cornering Haru to play middleman between Kyo and a version of Yuki that likely didn’t even exist anymore.

Almost.

“Well?” He prodded, and he swore he could hear the faintest tch of Haru’s tongue.

“Sometimes you need something to keep you going,” Haru said. “Or something to hold onto.”

Kyo scratched the back of his head. The way Haru talked about Yuki was so different now compared to five years ago. Kyo always considered the years before high school to be a time where
Yuki didn’t even exist outside of his hatred. His home? His family? His friends? His school? His life?

Not Kyo’s problem.

“Hold onto? What do you mean? Hold onto what?” Kyo was getting irritated now.

“I don’t know, hope?” Haru offered with a lazy shift on his feet.

What made you come back?

Hope, I guess

“Hope?” Kyo echoed with a rasp in his voice. He could feel his head beginning to ache.

“Kyo?” Haru asked, his eyebrow quirked, and Kyo realized he hadn’t said anything in the past few minutes.

“I have to go,” Kyo flung his bag over his shoulder and began walking down the path, pushing past Haru. He couldn’t look at the stupid cow’s stupid face for a second longer.

The whole way home Haru’s monotone words pounded against his brain, aggravating another migraine out of him. The pressure behind his eyes felt swollen and achy, his tongue felt dry and limp, his throat tight and constricted. He wanted to get to the house and up on the roof as soon as possible. He just wanted to get away, away, away.

It wasn’t long until he received his wish, storming into the house and up onto the roof without even bothering to change out of his uniform first. The chill he felt once he settled himself was welcome and relieving. Kyo felt like he could breathe easier the higher he was. Felt like he could see more.

The conversation left a bad taste in his mouth. As if the eyes he desperately kept trained onto the ground and never onto the path ahead was suddenly forced to look up. Forced to look at a pair of silver eyes wet and open with emotion that Kyo didn’t want to fucking see.

It was on that thought that Yuki broke through the clearing, Kyo watching his figure approaching the house with his school bag secure on his shoulders.

He watched from a safe distance Yuki’s measured and careful steps towards the house, watched the top of that mop of hair shine against a moon that was fighting away the last of daylight.

Yuki stopped.

He tilted his head upwards to stare directly at Kyo. Even from here, the potency of Yuki’s gaze seemed as powerful as it was centimeters in front of him.

And then Yuki smiled.

Kyo wasn’t sure what to do with that, and settled for giving the rat a blank stare from where he sat two stories above. Yuki didn’t seem all the perturbed when he broke the gaze and disappeared inside the house.

With a sigh, he tossed himself back so that he was laying down and burying his field of vision into the cool expanse of sky above him.

Kyo promised himself when Yuki had first kissed him months ago, that he wouldn’t question Yuki’s reasons. It was the least he could do after Yuki never asked him why Kyo had followed along for
this long.

But for the first time, Kyo found himself wondering why.

He also wondered what it would mean to find out.

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The following Monday Yuki came to school feeling lighter. The weekend was filled with stolen
glances and awkward stares and bashful exchanges when neither Shigure nor Tohru were around. It
felt oddly pure, and more than a little exhilarating. As if stories of high school puppy love were
actually becoming something of a reality.

When Yuki looked at Kyo he felt his heart flutter, his mouth go dry, and his body become restless
and reckless. His thoughts turned to Kyo like a magnet, distracting him almost completely and filled
his head with thoughts of *Monday, Monday, Monday.*

Sure, his stomach was still tied in queasy knots and his joints still ached horribly from lack of sleep.
Breathing didn’t come as easily anymore, either. The autumn chill was quick to steal his breath out of
his throat, and running long distances or even climbing the stairs to the third years’ floor winded him
a little.

But it was okay, because he wasn’t alone in this whole tornado mess of emotions.

All this weekend, Kyo had stared back. Kyo had turned embarrassed and shy. Kyo had sparked
random conversation.

Kyo had let Yuki kiss him sweetly one night before bed with a total lack of expectation that
something might follow.

(Nothing did).

That… that all had to mean something.

Right?

“Yuki,” the source of the voice caused Yuki to turn on his heel in the school hallway, face
brightening into a small smile when Haru approached him.

“Haru,” he greeted back. “What brings you to the third years’ floor?”

Yuki asked as if he didn’t already know, his unsurprised eyes following on the newly purchased
curry bread that Haru held out for him, “Lunch?”

The courtyard was becoming a less and less popular spot as the autumn months wore on. The nip in
the air was proving too much for the students, and even Yuki found the weather to be turning into an
unpleasant kind of cold. However, he liked the privacy and quiet that the near-empty courtyard
provided. Being mothered by Haru felt less embarrassing in a less public space, too.

“Here,” Yuki held up a handful of change and dumped it into Haru’s palm.

“What’s this for?”
“The bread,” Yuki said. “I don’t want you to keep buying it for me.”

“It’s not a big deal,” he reassured.

“I know. But… I would just rather pay you.”

Haru nodded, closing his fingers around the coins and shoving them into his pocket, “Thanks.”

Yuki crumpled the plastic wrap of the bread into a tightly condensed ball, fiddling it with his fingers as he stared up into the darkening sky. Was it meant to rain today? The clouds seemed feeble and weak, but there was a kind of gray that settled into the earth. Yuki hoped the skies would stay clear.

“You’re in a good mood,” Haru said. Yuki turned to face his cousin, easy smile slipping onto his face.

“Am I?”

Haru nodded, with a simple, deadpan expression, “I’m glad.”

“I guess I have been,” Yuki said with a laugh.

“Did something happen?”

Yuki hummed to himself, resting the back of his head against the wall as he stared back up to watch the clouds move languidly across the sky. They seemed relaxed and still, quiet and undisturbed.

“I decided something,” Yuki started. “I don’t want to be cursed anymore.”

The words rolled lazily off Yuki’s tongue, as if the statement were as natural and easy as the clouds passing above him. He smiled to himself at the admission, soaking in the quiet words that he had been thinking for so long.

Words that tried so earnestly to claw their way out of his throat.

Moments passed and Yuki turned to face Haru, expecting his defaulted expression of quiet and kind indifference to meet his eyes.

Instead, Yuki was met with a look that was so rare for Haru’s usually singularly molded features. His eyebrows knitted, his lips turned down into a frown. His stance was stiff and his eyes distant and much colder than a careless October breeze.

“What?” Haru asked. Yuki almost reeled back from the question.

“What? Don’t you want to break it too?”

“Of course I do,” Haru said, a frustrated edge to his voice.

“Me too,” Yuki said firmly, feeling his words flare up almost defensively for some reason. “I want to do everything I can to break away from it. From this family. From Akito!”

Why weren’t his words being properly conveyed? Why were they falling so flat against Haru?

“What’s everything you can? What does that mean?” Haru questioned. Yuki took a step away from him.
“It means—” Yuki cut himself off, swallowing the words on his tongue.

“Does it mean doing this,” Haru motioned towards Yuki’s thinning body, “to yourself?”

“It means what it means,” Yuki said softly, turning away from him. “Why are you getting angry?”

“I’m not getting angry,” Haru said, though his eyes were still narrowed. His hand was clutching his water bottle almost too tightly. Yuki eyed him carefully, retaliating Haru’s accidental glare with his own.

What was this?

Of all people, Yuki thought for sure Haru would understand.

Yuki felt himself calm, however, when Haru’s expression composed itself back into its usual distant gaze after a particularly wary sigh from the ox. He settled against the wall again, keeping Haru in the corner of his eyesight.

“Sorry,” Haru muttered.

“It’s… okay,” he said. “Are you alright?”

Haru nodded, pushing himself off the wall to stretch himself, “I’m fine, you don’t have to worry about me.”

“I still do,” Yuki said.

Haru turned to smile at him, “Thanks.”

The warning bell struck between them, and they both reflexively looked up to the school building behind them. Yuki couldn’t even think of another few hours of classes. His brain seemed too fogged, still.

“Time’s up,” Haru said, taking Yuki’s trash from his hand and walking over to the nearby waste bin to dispose of it. Yuki watched him carefully.

“Haru, if there’s anything wrong you can talk to me about it. I promise I’ll listen,” Yuki said. “It’s the very least I can do.”

Haru walked back over to him to pat him on the shoulder, a reassuring gesture that Yuki thought would be better served on Haru’s shoulder. He accepted it anyway.

“You do enough,” he said. Yuki highly doubted that. “Gotta go to class.”

Yuki nodded, because that was all he could do. All he could ever do around Haru sometimes.

They parted ways there in the courtyard without another word, but Yuki looked over his shoulder to watch Haru walk into the monochrome air.

It wasn’t the first time wishing he could do something more.
“I want to do something different today.”

Yuki watched Kyo look up at him with a quirked eyebrow, his mouth pinched into a skeptical and wary frown. Tohru was still at work, would be for another few hours, and Shigure had barely cleared the path when Yuki knocked on the door of Kyo’s room.

“Try something different?” Kyo almost regarded the words with disgust.

“What’s that look for?” Yuki laughed.

“The last time you said something like that I got a finger up the ass.”

“I don’t see you complaining about that,” Yuki smirked. He watched a wave of heat fill Kyo’s cheeks as he looked away. “I promise this won’t be as invasive.”

Kyo rolled his eyes, “Alright, fine. But nothing creepy, like… like tying me up or making me wear something weird.”

Yuki turned away from Kyo so he could snort into his hand, tumbling laughs out into the hallway, “I promise, I promise.” He turned back to Kyo when he calmed down. “Put on your coat.”

“My coat?” Kyo asked, definitively confused at the prospect of putting on clothes. Yuki nodded, affirming.

“I’ll wait for you downstairs.”

It was only a few minutes until Kyo was in the entryway, meeting Yuki was a confused look, “Where are we going?”

“You’ll see. Put on your shoes,” Yuki said, grabbing an umbrella.

“You won’t need that,” Kyo said simply, mindlessly obeying the order and tying up his laces.

Yuki nodded and left the umbrella behind.

There were a few silent minutes down the path, Kyo following behind Yuki silently, with Yuki keeping his eyes trained straight ahead. Yuki didn’t dare disturb the silence, wiping his clamming hands on the inside of his coat pockets as they made their way forward.

Dirt path never turned to concrete, and Yuki could feel the confusion radiating off of Kyo. He turned around to give him a smile.

“We’re almost there,” he said. “I hope the walk isn’t too much for you.”

Kyo bristled, “I should be saying that to you, you damn scrawny bastard.” It was enough to speed up Kyo’s steps so that they were walking side by side. Yuki smiled.

“It’s just up here,” he said quietly.

Through a smaller, narrower path that was beaten with weeds and sparse moments of grass came a clearing in the woods. A small patch of land, well-tended and looked after.

A garden.

Kyo looked down at the springing plants that came from the tilled soil, watching how Yuki crouched at the edge of it to feel the leaves with tender fingers.
“What is this?” Kyo asked.

“It’s my secr—” Yuki paused. “It’s a personal project. Right now only the spinach is ready, but in a week or so the strawberries might be ready to pick, too.”

“You grew all this?”

“I did,” Yuki turned to face him. Kyo wasn’t budging from his spot, “It helps.”

“Helps?” Kyo asked.

“Like Shigure’s books help you,” he said, turning back to face the plants. “Are you going to help me pick the spinach or not?”

When Yuki was met with no response, he turned his head back around. Kyo was stood still, not moving since they first arrived, hands deep in his pockets as he stared hard at the ground by his feet.

“Kyo—?”

“This is weird.”

The words hung in the air for a moment, before Yuki gave a small laugh that was more breath than sound, “As weird as a finger up there?”

The humor was choked out of Yuki’s expression when Kyo didn’t even have the decency to look up. Yuki stood, coming to Kyo instead.

“What are you talking about?” Yuki tried again.

“Why did you bring me here?” Kyo asked suddenly. “What’s… what’s the fucking point?”

Yuki wanted to flinch away from the words. They weren’t cruel, they weren’t instigating, they weren’t trying to be invasive or malicious. But they were scared. They were unsure and desperate and confused, and Yuki felt himself swallowing a thick, sticky lump in his throat.

“I brought you here because I wanted to,” he said defensively. “What’s the big deal?”

“It’s a big deal!” Kyo snapped his eyes up to look at him for the first time since the house and this time Yuki did flinch back. “Did you bring me here to have sex?”

“No!” Yuki spat the response back. That only seemed to make Kyo even more riled up as he paced away from Yuki running a rough hand through his hair.

“I wasn’t… I wasn’t going to fucking ask this unless shit got weird,” Kyo’s words were manic and loud, and Yuki stared straight into his back, wishing that Kyo would just turn around already. “But you made it weird!”

“How did I make this weird?!” Yuki claimed, a breathy edge in his voice. “Ask me what?”

“Why are you doing this?”

“Because the spinach needs to be picked and you weren’t doing anything better with your time!” Yuki called back, fingernails digging into his palm, knees feeling weak.

Kyo turned around.
“THIS,” Kyo motioned a hand between them. “WHY ARE YOU DOING THIS WITH ME? THIS WHOLE THING? FROM THE START? WHAT ARE YOU—WHAT THE FUCK ARE YOU DOING? WHAT ARE YOU—”

It registered a few moments too late to Yuki that he must have been making a humiliating expression. One that spoke too loudly with eyes that were too soft in the face of Kyo’s angry tantrum. But it also registered to Yuki that whatever face he was making must have been what made Kyo stop, bite the inside of his cheek and compose himself before turning back with eyes so fired with determination and need.

“What are you getting out of this?” Kyo asked, voice still loud with ragged edges, but controlled as much as it could be.

The words felt like an injection, one that flowed through Yuki’s bloodstream like a disease. He felt Kyo’s demanding eyes more than he could see them. He felt like he really couldn’t see much of anything right now, actually.

Because the question was pumping in and out of his heart and up into every pulse point until his blood felt rushed and unsteady in every part of his body. As if every nerve-ending under Yuki’s skin was trying its best to reject the point blank shot.

So it did the only thing it could do.

Yuki only had a moment to clutch his stomach before he vomited onto the dirt below.
In terms of canon basis and all that, I can't not use the ending of the anime. I just love it too much, with all my tiny little heart. From beyond that it's all manga-based, of course.

To me, these next two chapters really fit better as one, but even I will not post something that ridiculously long. I just hope this doesn't feel too abruptly ended or anything.

Next chapter will be the end of Autumn no matter what, and I should have it posted fairly soonish. I hope you all enjoy and thanks again to anyone sticking with this!

"Are there any stories about the cat and the rat?!!" The words burst out of Tohru before she could even manage a greeting.

Rin blinked, looking up from her book to observe an all too anxious Tohru flooding into her hospital room. She raised a hand up and gave Tohru a naturally composed glare.

"Calm down."

"Yes!" Tohru said, not calming down at all.

Rin sighed, "What are you all worked up about today?"

The horse spirit was becoming accustomed to the strange form of determination that the younger girl bled out of every pore in her body. It was so visceral and instinctual in Tohru that Rin wondered if she even noticed it at this point. She asked questions with her entire body, worried about people with every breath in her lungs. It was hard not to get sucked into her vibrations.

Rin managed, however.

"Most of the stories you've told me have been about other zodiac members! Or about the heads of the curse!" Tohru forced herself to sit down in her usual chair by the bed, but her back was stiff and straight as she talked. "What about the cat and the rat? Aren't there stories about them?"

"I guess, sure," Rin said tying her hair back in a loose, low ponytail. "There are stories about every zodiac animal."

Tohru stared with expectant eyes, and Rin rolled her own closing the book she had previously been concentrating on.

"The story we heard the most growing up was called the priest and the cat. Have you heard of it?"

Tohru shook her head, but something familiar struck her about the title. She tried to wrack her brain as quickly as she could for any memory of the tale, but it fell short as if just on the tip of her tongue.

"It's been a long time since I've heard it," Rin started, her eyes fluttering up trying to summon the
"Did Shigure not write about it?"

"No, not this one," Rin said. "At least, not from what I've read."

"Oh," Tohru said, a bit disappointed. She spent a majority of her time around the current rat and cat spirits, she supposed it would seem obvious to her to write about such a thing if she were an author. Instead, she recalled the conversation she had had months ago with Momiji, Kisa, Haru, and Hiro.

About Yuki and Kyo being so distant in the years before high school.

"The way it goes," Rin started, pulling Tohru from her thoughts. "Is that generations ago there was a very kind-hearted rat spirit man. Most of the zodiac loved and respected him, especially the head of the family at the time.

"The rat was supposed to become the head of the family when he turned eighteen to relieve the aging head, but instead he decided to become a priest. He spent a lot of time traveling and caring for people in different villages.

"Everyone knew about him in the family already, but his acts of kindness made him especially famous within the Sohma family. And so, when the cat heard about him he decided to take advantage of the priest for his own gain.

"He tricked the rat into giving him a large house, his own maids, private banquets, power in the family. And because of the rat's position in the family no one could say anything. But all this stuff was just extra on top of what the cat really wanted."

"What… what did the cat really want?" Tohru asked.

"His bones," Rin said. "The rat's bones."

"A-As in… the bones in his body?!"

"Do you know of another kind of bone?" Rin asked flatly. Tohru turned an incredibly pale color, gripping the edge of Rin's sheets. "You've seen it, right? The cat's actual form?"

Tohru caught the shiver before it could shake its way through her body. The memory wasn't a pleasant one, and honestly not one that she enjoyed recalling. She did what she had to do, she never once regretted going after Kyo and bringing him back to Shigure's house. She never once doubted her feet that moved of their own accord when the foul smell of rotting flesh dashed off into the woods.

But it didn't change the fact that now she was a bit uneasy when it rained, as well.

Tohru nodded.

"Apparently back then it was hard to control," Rin said with a shrug. "At random times the cat would just transform and be taken over by instinct. A lot of zodiacs and Sohmas died because of rampant attacks from former cats. The person possessed by the spirit wouldn't even be conscious, a lot didn't even remember transforming. Hato—someone once told me it was because the pain caused by the transformation was too traumatic."

"Is it really that painful?"
"I guess."

"Is… Is it painful when you transform, too?"

Rin looked away to contemplate the question, her fingers going to play with the edges of her bangs, "I wouldn't call it painful, per se. It feels strange, mostly. Like I've lost total and absolute control of my body. Like handing over controls to a co-pilot."

"I see," Tohru said with a thoughtful nod.

Tohru could tell Rin was anxious to get off the subject when she returned to the story, "Anyway, because the rat spirit was a holy man, his bones acted like a kind of ward to keep the transformation from happening. In the end, the cat lead the rat spirit away into the woods, and the trusting fool went with him. There the cat murdered the rat in cold blood and skinned the flesh off his body.

"It ended up being the reason why each cat is locked up. Before then, cats had only attacked when they were in their actual form. This was the first time someone possessed by the cat killed someone with a conscious mind. It was like proof that the cat spirit can taint a human soul."

"Oh my gosh… That really happened?" Tohru looked down at her lap, "B-But Kyo isn't… He's not tainted."

"Be that as it may, it's the one story that has proof that it actually happened."

Tohru tilted her head until her eyes widened with realization, "Kyo's bracelet!"

"Right," she said. "So there's your rat and cat story."

"A-Aren't there any nicer ones?" Tohru asked, her voice pitching close to a whine.

"Don't you think you should stop expecting fairy tales by now?" Rin's eyes pinched into a glare. "It's a curse, dummy. Of course the stories are unpleasant!"

Tohru gave an anguished sigh, fiddling with the edge of the sheet now, her grip on it finally having loosened. Rin watched her carefully.

"Besides," Tohru looked back up at the girl. "When it comes to the cat and the rat, the rat will always beat the cat. That's how it is no matter what. The only way to beat a rat is to kill it."

Tohru's eyes went so wide Rin flinched back from the reaction.

"It's not like I'm saying that would happen now!" Rin snapped back. "Those two idiots have lived together for years already, if Kyo was going to kill Yuki it would have happened!"

"K-K-K-Kill…"

"Stop making that face! I'm just saying that's how things used to be! Breathe, idiot, breathe!"

Tohru did as she was told, taking frantic breaths at Rin's command. After a moment Tohru was able to push past the initial shock of the suggestion.

For the second time that day, her thoughts went back to that rainy day.

And to the unbelievable sight one week ago.

"Kyo wouldn't kill Yuki…"
"Glad to see you at least some common sense," Rin huffed. "And if you knew that why did you freak out so much?"

"It's just such a scary thought!" Tohru exclaimed. Rin clicked her tongue. "B-But that night… when I saw Kyo… change into that, um, Yuki was there. He was there."

Though her eyes widened, Rin's expression softened. This was a story she definitely hadn't heard.

"Yuki chased after Kyo with me. He even… He even grabbed onto him and wouldn't let him run away. When that happened Kyo didn't try and hurt Yuki, o-or he did but it was like he was trying to get away! Not because he wanted to! Kyo listened to him… He listened to me…"

He changed back and came home.

The scrapes on Tohru's arms and legs didn't seem so bad after that.

And Yuki never once complained about his shoulder.

"Yuki went after him?" Rin asked.

Tohru's grip tightened on the sheets, "He did!"

She said it again, softly and to herself, as if trying to convince herself, as well.

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Kyo placed an unsure hand on Yuki's shoulder because he wasn't sure what else he could do.

All he knew was that Yuki was on his knees, leaning heavily against a tree, as he vomited up what little he had in his stomach. Bile slipped from Yuki's throat again and again, coming out in wheezy gags that interrupted desperate gasps for air.

And Yuki was shaking.

No matter how hard Kyo gripped his hand against Yuki's shoulder the boy wouldn't stopped trembling which almost seemed unfair, because Kyo was the one who felt unsteady in his skin. The only thing that kept his hopelessly overwhelming thoughts at bay was the sound of another retch being forced from Yuki's throat with an accompanying groan.

Yuki coughed, a rough and undignified noise that sounded as if it were shredding his throat. Kyo flinched at the sound as it came again, but Yuki rose weakly, his body sucking in breath after breath as if there wasn't nearly enough oxygen in the air.

Yuki turned his head to look behind him, giving Kyo a look that completely countered his calm, and peaceful expression from only moments ago. No, even with Yuki's insides forcing their way out, even with his burning coughs, and weakened breathing, Yuki still glowed a color that could only be described as livid.
He slapped Kyo's hand away, as if only just then realizing it was there, and turned to face him dead-on.

"You're an idiot," Yuki spat.

Kyo instinctively took a step back, but he could feel a familiar kind of glare overtaking his face, "What?! What the fuck did I do?"

"You're asking all these stupid questions," Yuki wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, spitting a little bit on the ground to try and rid himself of the taste. "Can't you just… can't you just let things be? If it really bothered you, you would've stopped all this a while ago, right?"

"I—" Kyo sputtered. The last thing he wanted was to be directly questioned about this. "I don't know! I guess!"

"You guess, I know," Yuki said. "Whatever's bothering you just get over it, nothing has to change."

"You're the one who's changing things!" Kyo spat back. "What the hell are you doing bringing me here? Or asking me out to dinner? Or… or sneaking into my room and just…! Just!"

"Being nice to you?" Yuki asked, and Kyo felt himself pause. Yuki looked like he wanted to throw up again. His hands were still shaking even if the rest of him was firmly rooted into the dirt below. He looked angry, desperately so, as if to hide how lost his eyes were.

Kyo could recognize that look a mile away.

He looked down at his feet, knowing he would never be strong enough to look such at such an expression straight on, "You know that isn't how this started. I know you know it's different. I just want to know fucking why."

Yuki gave a bitter laugh, "Does it matter?"

"It matters," Kyo said. "It just does."

Yuki sighed, and Kyo dared to look up at him. He wasn't staring back. His eyes were closed, restraining what little composure he had behind them. His still shivering hands ran through his hair, rough and anxious, and his already porcelain skin looked so pale.

"I just don't get why you're asking me all this now," Yuki evaded.

"I wasn't gonna," Kyo said. "I'm not that dumb, I get that we're not supposed to ask about why we're doin' this."

"What?"

"What do you mean what? You never asked why I was doing this so I never asked you!" It was a pact, Kyo thought to himself, one that that he was positive Yuki understood. But Yuki's blank and arrogant expression made him feel foolish and silly at such an explanation.

Yuki shook his head, "Kyo I never asked because I already knew."

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"It means I know why you're doing this," Yuki said, simply. Kyo figured he must have been wearing a skeptical expression because Yuki rolled his eyes. "Let me guess. You didn't want to get locked up a virgin. You didn't want to spend the rest of your life behind bars wondering what it would be like
to actually touch someone. It's not like you could do it with a girl, and the only one you could do it with would mean leading her on. For as much of an idiot you are, you're not a bad person. Even when it comes to Kagura."

"Hey—"

"When I came on to you, it gave you an easy out to release some of your hormones. And you figured doing stuff like that with me would mean there wouldn't be any collateral damage. Because obviously I hate you and, even more obviously, you hate me."

Kyo swallowed hard, his fingernails digging hard enough in his palms to hurt.

"What's it matter if I hate the guy? Whatever it is he's doing makes me feel good, and I don't have to care about how he feels," Yuki said in a light mocking tone before letting out another series of coughs.

Kyo waited for the coughs to settle down, wrenching out words from his throat, "So? Isn't it the same for you?"

"You're an idiot if you think I would ever do something for the same reasons you do," Yuki said. "But I knew you would assume something so dumb."

"Then why?! CAN'T YOU JUST ANSWER THE QUESTION?!"

Kyo watched Yuki swallow down something in his throat, his eyes zeroing in on Kyo's. Trapping him.

"Because I'm in love with you."

Yuki didn't look away. But the rat added a soft "idiot" as if for good measure.

"I'm in love with you," he said again.

Kyo paled and Yuki didn't look away. But the rat added a soft "idiot" as if for good measure.

For a second he thought it was a joke, and he waited for Yuki to smirk. Waited for Yuki to give in to some twisted and disgusting punchline that would be equal parts condescending as it would be relieving. He waited for Yuki to say anything, anything, that proved that what he just said wasn't real.

"I'm in love with you," he said again.

Kyo looked around him, searching for an exit or escape. He thought that if he wanted, he could just run in any random direction and easily be anywhere that wasn't here right now. But Yuki's earnest and remorseful eyes still shrouded in a low burning rage kept him frozen in place.

Even if every terrible feeling, and twist in his gut, and burn in his stomach began to make sense.

Kyo realized, this was exactly what he dreaded Yuki would say.

"How," Kyo tripped on the word. "How long?"

"What?" Yuki looked terrified of the question.

"How fucking long?"

Those were the words that finally broke Yuki's gaze. He looked down, away, not meeting Kyo's eyes, "I don't know. A while?"

"What the hell does "a while" mean?! Huh? After we started this? Before? When I moved in with
Shigure? What?!

Yuki turned away from him, leaning on a nearby tree to give him support, as he pressed the heel of his hand into his eye. Kyo could feel his blood hum, something that felt so close to rage, to anger, to emotions he was familiar with but it just wasn't. It encompassed him completely, overtook his whole body, made every cell inside him hum, filled him with energy, and also made him want to lay down and rest for years.

He moved so that he could stand in front of Yuki, not accepting how he so easily turned away from him.

"Answer the question."

"Why do you care so much about this? What does it matter when it happened, can't you just... can't you just leave me alone now that you know? It's not like I think you're going to return my feelings! I never thought that!"

"Because you've been tricking me," Kyo realized that made him sound like a child, so he tried again. "You've been lying to me. I want to know for how long."

Yuki fiddled with the bark of the tree, "A while."

"What does that mean—"

"I don't know, Kyo! It means a while! Years! Since before Shigure's house! Since before you just ran away to the mountains and disappeared for months! Before middle school! Since I first met you! Is that what you want hear?! I fell in love with you the moment I met you!"

Yuki grabbed Kyo's collar, and with those silver eyes that burned like molten lava, burned like melting silver, he raised his voice, "I've loved you since I first saw you! I remember every word you first said to me! You told me that I should have never existed, that I should just die and I clung onto those words because it was the most honest thing anyone had ever said to me!"

Kyo grabbed at Yuki's wrists, trying to struggle away, an acute sense of danger surrounding him with Yuki throwing his words back at him, "Let go!"

"I hate you! I hate you for doing this to me! I hate that I love you! I hate that you're getting locked up! I hate that I need you so much!"

"Yuki, let go!"

"I HATE YOU."

There was a minute.

A moment of silence that felt like it might crush Kyo.

Where his hands didn't move from Yuki's wrists, and Yuki made no move to breakaway.

For a moment, the two just stood there.

Inches apart, but forced together, like the same sides of a magnet being made to stay still.

Kyo wasn't sure where he could go, what he could say.

If he said anything at all, what would happen?
"I understand you have to hate me," Yuki's voice seemed so quiet now. So subdued. It hurt, every word Yuki spoke was a crushing weight on his lungs. "I would have to be as stupid as you to think you'd love me back."

Kyo looked down at Yuki's bowed head, his soft words falling from his mouth onto the floor like the bile that stained the dirt.

"But I wanted you to at least hate me for me. Not just the rat. I wanted—" Yuki swallowed. "I just wanted to get to know you."

Kyo released Yuki's wrists, and Yuki's arms fell limp at his sides. Kyo stepped back on shaky legs, not able to process a single word, a single second of this conversation clearly. His head felt muddled and crowded and loud and he couldn't hear. He couldn't hear Yuki coughing anymore, he couldn't hear the rough wind disturbing the trees, he couldn't hear the pebbles under his feet that scraped against his shoes.

A thought bloomed in the back of his brain, clear and sharp and foreign.

He could say no. He could laugh. He could twist the feelings in his chest into pride and wear them like a crown, wear Yuki's broken expression and shattered words like a victory. He was weak, and sad, and off his guard. He could kick him, maybe. Or strike him in the stomach and spit on a body that would surely crumple before him. He could tell Yuki how disgusting his feelings were, and walk away like a king. Like a god.

Maybe he might never be able to tell Akito how he beat his precious rat, but Kyo would know. And as he rotted in his cage for years in the future the memory would keep him warm and thrilled.

He could.

"I need to think," Kyo said.

Yuki looked up at him curiously and Kyo couldn't help but fight the flush that overwhelmed his face.

"You confessed, right? So let me," Kyo scratched his head indelicately. "Let me think about it."

"Are you serious?" Yuki asked, exasperation taking a hold of his voice.

Kyo nodded, despite the fact that Yuki was staring at him as if he sprouted a third arm.

"Fine," Yuki said. "Then think about it."

It was another moment of stiffened silence before Kyo willed his legs to move again. Quietly, he turned away and made his way towards the path.

He felt like an idiot, saying something that seemed so irresponsible and careless. Saying he would think about Yuki. Think about his feelings, his confession, his words that seemed to have been pried from Yuki's bones. Saying he would think when he could have so obviously done anything else.

But for some reason, Kyo couldn't bring himself to do anything else but think.

Anything else just wouldn't seem right.
Tohru sighed as she exited the hospital building. She felt exhausted from all the pent up tension that anxiety harbored in his joints. For the first time in a while, Tohru lamented the fact that it was Monday. She felt like she needed a long, deep, undisturbed sleep where none of the built up thoughts from the past few weeks could penetrate her consciousness.

As expected, talking to Rin helped a little bit, but not as much as she would have liked. Stories of the cat and the rat ended as almost any zodiac story ended. Tragedy, death, betrayal, bloodshed. Tohru cringed to herself. Well, perhaps that did help put things into perspective.

The most bloodshed that ever came from Shigure's house was when Kyo tripped on his own attack and landed straight on his face. The bloody nose was certainly a sight, but not anything that Sohma legends were made of. That was a relief in its own way, she supposed.

And whatever she had or had not seen that night didn't seem violent in nature, at all. If anything, it seemed gentle and soft.

Whatever it was.

Maybe it was time to take solace in the strange anomaly, and chalk up the rest of her imagination to just that: her imagination. It would certainly ease her nerves if the rest of her could be as rational.

Tohru stared up at the dusky sky, dark purple and blue hues already invading the evening like a bruise as the last of daylight slipped away. The breeze tonight was stronger than it had been so far this season, but the sharp winds felt relieving against Tohru's flushed cheeks.

For a moment she stood there, taking in the setting sun that was already blocked by the residential horizon and the bare branches of trees.

"You're spacing out again."

It took a moment for Tohru to realize that the voice was addressing her. The very familiar voice. The too familiar voice.

"Did you know that Mondays are the only day you take the station to work?"

"H-H-H-Hatsuharu, what are you doing—here! Doing here! You're here! Why are you-?! You can't be-What are you doing?!"

"Was that all a question?" Haru tilted his head, a blank expression still clear on his face as hands were buried in his pockets.

Tohru thought she might faint, clutching her school bag a bit too tightly she looked over her shoulders frantically, sweat breaking out onto her forehead before she brought her hands out to push Haru away from the hospital gates apologetically, small hands digging into his back.

"I-I'm really sorry, Haru! B-B-But you can't be here! We need to leave please!"

Haru didn't budge under Tohru's powerless prodding. Instead, he turned around quickly, holding a hand so that his palm met her forehead and kept her at an arm's length unable to accidentally move
forward and transform him.

"Is it because Rin's here?"

Tohru withdrew, standing up straight, but deliberately looking away from Haru to stare at the sidewalk. He walked so that he was in front of her. She looked diagonally up at the sky. He stood by her on his tip toes. She stared down. He crouched before her. She took her school bag and shoved it into her face, skin heating like a kettle on a stove ready to burst.

"Interesting," Haru said.

"You can't see her!" Tohru said, perhaps a bit too loudly, muffled by the fabric of her book bag. Haru didn't answer, so she continued. "I-I know you want to, but you can't! I promised her I wouldn't tell anyone where she is, especially you!"

Guilt flooded her like a tidal wave as soon as the words left her mouth. The last thing she ever wanted to do was hurt Haru. Like most of the Sohmas she had met, Haru's heart was as good as his intentions, and having to ward him off when Tohru wanted him by Rin's side as much as Haru probably did… She felt awful.

She lowered her book bag after a moment, peering over it. As expected, Haru was staring straight back at her with an unwavering stare.

"I-I'm sorry," she said quietly.

He sighed, "She said she doesn't want me there?"

Tohru nodded sadly.

"I guess I can't be too surprised," Haru said. "Kagura told me the same thing."

"I-I tried to change her mind! H-Honestly!" Tohru took a step toward him, feeling her eyes welling up with tears. "But she doesn't hate you! I promise! I really really promise!"

"She told you that?" He asked, one simple eyebrow arching at the question.

"It's a gut feeling!" Tohru said. She spoke like it was fact, she knew it was fact. A small wave of relief came when Haru gave her a small smile, patting her on the head affectionately.

"Okay."

"Okay?" Tohru hoped the reassurance wasn't just for her sake.

Haru turned, walking down the street, motioning for her to follow, "I'll buy you dinner."

"Oh, you really don't have to," she said, trotting along behind him.

"It's the least I can do after following you," he said simply.

Tohru pouted slightly at that. She had been so careful, too! "I can't believe you found out. You're like a detective."

"You wouldn't make a very good criminal," he said, blankly. Tohru couldn't help but let out a giggle, causing Haru to peer in her direction.

"Sorry… that just sounded like something Rin would say," she hoped the statement would rouse
another rare smile from the boy, but he kept his stone-like expression as they continued their walk. Tohru fidgeted with the straps of her bag.

"How is she?"

"Huh?"

"Rin. How is she? Are you allowed to answer that?"

Probably not, Tohru thought.

"She's, um," Tohru pondered. "She's keeping herself busy. She has a lot of energy for someone in the hospital, I think. And she eats when she likes the food."

"Is she getting better?"

"I don't really know," she confessed. "I only see her for a short amount of time, and she never wants to talk to me about those sorts of things."

Haru gave her a brief glance, "What do you talk about, then?"

Tohru was definitely sure that this topic wasn't allowed.

"The curse," she blurted before she could stop herself. "Um, uh… Stories about the zodiac, too. She tells me about them."

Tohru didn't get a response to that. She didn't get much of a response to really anything else for the rest of the night, even as they sat across from each other in the tiny noodle shop a few blocks from the station. She thought, perhaps, that his quiet nature and oddball method of socialization drove the silence for that night.

Even still, Tohru couldn't help but notice the way his eyes narrow slightly at the word 'curse.'

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The hardwood felt nice.

It soaked up every icy bite that the cold night air offered, and pressed it back into Yuki's skin like a gift. It was chilly, and there were goosebumps lining his skin, but the chill settled his stomach somehow. It calmed his headache somewhat. If he inhaled deeply, the night breeze rushed down his throat and soothed that slightly, as well.

He shivered, curling into himself, laying haphazardly against the balcony, as he stared out past the clearing of the house into the wood's horizon. Every rustle and cracking branch making his stomach jump, even though the pathway home was clearly out of sight from this angle.

He doubted Kyo would be coming home today at all. If he did, it wouldn't be until midnight drenched the house and he knew for sure that Yuki was tucked away into his own space of the
Yuki couldn't blame him, and to be honest it was a relief.

He'd be surprised if he could face him ever again.

Though, he supposed he would have to. Kyo was planning on giving him a response, after all.

Hours had passed since their encounter, but to Yuki it already felt like years had gone by. Yuki's stomach twisted into a knot of anxiety, the thought of having to wait for an answer he already knew causing him to cough violently into his hand—the noise surely the reason the lights behind the shoji doors flicked on so suddenly.

Yuki didn't even flinch when the balcony door to Shigure's office slid open.

"My, my, what do we have here?"

Yuki curled his face further into the wood, trying to shield as much of his expression away from the dog.

"You're looking a little worse for wear, Yuki. Bad day?"

"That's a bit of an understatement," he said, his voice even but depleted of any energy.

"Have you come looking for romantic advice? Because, you know, I do get quite a few letters from adoring fans asking about their love conundrums."

Yuki scoffed, "I don't think your pornographic works are going to help me."

"Suit yourself," Shigure said with a smile, sitting on the balcony beside Yuki's head, where he lay on the strip of wood. "So then what brings you to my door, Yuki?"

"To smoke," he said. And then added, "Is that okay?"

"Here I thought you quit on me," Shigure grabbed a pack of cigarettes from his sleeve, handing one over to Yuki. "Still have your matches?"

Yuki nodded, sitting up so he could place the cigarette between his lips, already feeling the comfort in his lungs before reaching for the book of matches in his pants pocket.

To his own surprise, he didn't cough when he took a deep inhale of the tobacco. If anything, he felt more settled than he had all day. The heavy, bitter taste weighed down on his mouth, overwhelming the flavor of vomit that still lingered on his tongue. He took another drag, watching how the smoke intermingled with his breath—the air just cold enough to catch faint outlines of an exhale.

Shigure joined him, though seemed to savor the cigarette much less than Yuki who took his time with each puff and breath. Yuki realized how different Shigure must have looked with a cigarette. The weight of it was still foreign in Yuki's hand, still dangerous. The thrill was dull, but still present. The effects stirred, but weren't imprinted on him.

When Shigure smoked it looked like an extension of himself, a natural part of his breath. As if the cigarette was a sixth finger. As if his exhales were always so visible and as if the smell of tobacco was just the scent off his skin.

"Where's Kyo?" Shigure asked suddenly. Yuki involuntarily flinched. "Wrong question, huh?"
"I don't know where he is," Yuki said. "I don't know when he's coming back."

Shigure hummed in response, "And here I was going to apologize for coming back early today."

"Hatori must be tired of seeing you on a weekly basis," Yuki said passively. "Lucky for him, I doubt he'll have to see you around as much, anymore."

"Are you telling me I'm allowed back in my own house, now?" Shigure laughed.

"You act like I was the one who kicked you out," Yuki spoke dryly, bitterly thinking back to how silently grateful he had been when Tohru announced her new Monday work shift, and Shigure had offered to vacate the house, as well (he could have done without the wink and the smirk). Now Yuki couldn't stand the thought of being alone in this house for a moment, with or without Kyo.

Yuki sighed, feeling his breath catch in his throat, "I made a mistake."

Shigure didn't turn to look at him, "Oh?"

"I shouldn't have—I," Yuki took another drag to mask the scratchiness of his words. "I made a mistake."

"I won't argue with that," Shigure said, his voice steady and serious. Yuki curled his knees up and stared down at his feet, wanting to bite back but just feeling too tired. "I tried to tell you before, there was no way this could have ended well."

Yuki shot him a weak glare that he knew Shigure could feel when he gave a small smile.

"It's only the truth. What would you have done if he loved you back, Yuki?" Shigure looked him straight on, eyes burning dark with a dangerous sort of amusement. "Would you have told Akito? Asked him not to lock up your boyfriend?"

Yuki looked away, swallowing the lump in his throat as Shigure gave a chuckle.

"I've been in love before," Shigure reaffirmed. "I'm not a monster, you know."

"And they didn't love you back," Yuki said, softly, no malice streaking his voice.

"No, they didn't," Shigure said. He smirked, "So you are looking for my advice."

Yuki still had his pride, choosing to suck on the end of the cigarette instead of answering. Shigure shook his head in amusement.
"Why don’t we start with what happened," he offered. Yuki fiddled with the knees of his pants.

"I told him the truth," he said.

"And what did he say?"

"He said he needed to think about it," Yuki said with a flood of tobacco running from his tongue.

"You're acting as if he said something a lot worse," Shigure said with a laugh. "How strangely reasonable for Kyo."

"It was an idiotic thing to say," Yuki said. "He's not in love with me."

"Lucky for you."

The two sat in silence for a moment longer, absorbing the nicotine into their lungs, with only small coughs and stuttered breaths from Yuki. His stomach still felt queasy, and in the back of his mind he knew the cigarette wasn’t helping that nausea. But it was okay. He thought if he stayed here, smoke in his mouth, cold between his toes, staring at a nothing that became more and more defined by the billowing nightfall, he would be okay.

Nothing less, and certainly nothing more.

The thought felt foolish as soon as his second cigarette was smoked to the nub once more.

"How did you handle it?" Yuki asked suddenly.

Shigure looked at him as if the question hadn’t been for him, "Handle what?"

"Whoever they were," Yuki motioned with his hand to the empty space. "Not being in love with you back."

Shigure leaned back, his arm蛇形 its way through his robe so that it come up to stroke his chin, "I was young. I used a very specific strategy of denial and an unhealthy amount of meaningless sex."

"That helped?" Yuki asked skeptically.

"No, of course not," he laughed. He took another moment before stubbing out his own cigarette on the ground—neither willing to move to retrieve the ashtray from the office.

"Is everything a joke to you?" Yuki mumbled.

“It might be,” he said with another chuckle. Yuki sighed, rubbing at his eye harshly in hopes of relieving the pressure in his head. He lifted his head when Shigure shifted behind him, standing up to disappear into his office for a brief moment before coming back.

He settled beside Yuki with a grunt, placing the ashtray between them, before placing a small bound book on Yuki’s lap.

It was thick, and the cover was hard-bound and stained a deep forest green. The spine had a small engraved pattern, but other than that the cover remained plain. He picked it up to flip through the pages. All blank, fresh, and clean. But not at all like the thin, flimsy Campus notebooks where he jotted down all his notes.

“What’s this?” Yuki asked.
“Writing helped,” Shigure said, more seriously this time, though the glimmer hadn’t faded from his eye. Yuki looked up from the pages skeptically, and Shigure shrugged. “You wanted to know.”

“And it worked?”

“Well sure, don’t you trust me?”

“Not particularly,” Yuki offered, dryly. Shigure laughed.

“And yet here you are still talking to me about fairly sensitive information. How curious.”

“It’s not like I had many options,” Yuki mumbled, eyeing the notebook in his lap. “I thought you only wrote about the curse, anyway.”

“Oh, Yuki,” Shigure clicked his tongue. “You might not know this yet, but there are so many ways to write about love.”
Chapter Notes

This chapter would have been done a lot sooner but I kind of went through of phase where I hated everything about my writing and wondered if maybe I should just scrap everything and rewrite this entire fic from scratch. I soon realized that this would be nigh impossible, pouted about it, and then finished this chapter up hah.

But here it is, folks. Autumn has finally reached its end! I can now comfortably say that this fic has reached its official halfway point. This fandom is small and few but thank you to everyone who has left comments or kudos, you honestly make my day! And it gets me so pumped to see people can still enjoy stuff from this fandom.

This chapter is the longest one yet in the whole fic, including the intermissions. You guys keep saying you like your long chapters, and I guess I’m just out on a mission to prove you all wrong. I cackle as I past the thirty page point and think, will this be the final straw? Next chapter will be another intermission and the continuation of the rat and priest story, as well. I hopefully won’t be too long in getting that posted like last time, either (sweats).

Anyway, thank you again and I hope you all enjoy!

10/21/03

I can’t believe I’m considering this.

10/24/03

What will writing do? What has it ever done? Other than get Shigure in trouble with Akito. We never talked about it, but I’m fairly sure that’s why he doesn’t live in the main house anymore.

Maybe writing isn’t so bad.

10/26/03

Haru is probably too nice to me.

10/27/03

Today it feels like
When I woke up this morning I

To do:

- Pick up erasers on the way home
- Give sensei college form
- Spinach
- Get Kyoto/Nara photos from Kakeru
- What kind of meat does Maki like? Any kind is fine, apparently.

10/29/03

Where do I even start with something like this? I feel like I have so much to say, but every time I try and form it into sentences it doesn’t sound right. It’s never sounded right. Maybe that’s why it took me so long to say anything.

10/30/03

I can’t believe the first person I told I love K... was Shigure.

11/1/03

I keep wondering why he hasn’t told Akito yet. Every day I wake up I think “it will probably be today, huh?”

I wonder what would happen if Akito found out. He would probably lock Kyo up early. Maybe force me to live with him again. Or at least somewhere in the main mansion.

Or maybe he would be so angry he would banish me from the Sohma house. Forever.

Mom calling at 2PM TOMORROW. Ayame said she’ll call the house phone. CHARGE PHONE just in case.

11/2/03

I’m such a coward.

11/6/03

Kyo still won’t even look at me.
11/7/03

I wish I could express how angry I am. For someone like Kyo it’s easy. When he feels an emotion, he shows it. Even when he doesn’t want to. Everything about him is clear and vibrant. When he’s angry, he yells. When he’s happy, he smiles. When he’s upset, he sulks. It’s all so simple.

I wonder what I look like to other people. Akito used to tell me that my face was boring. He used to say he could never tell what I was thinking because my expressions were like that of a doll’s. Blank and still. I wonder if that’s still true. Sometimes I wonder if anything has changed since then, but I don’t think it has.

11/8/03

Ms. Honda definitely knows something is wrong. This is all such a mess.

11/13/03

I know this is my fault. I shouldn’t have sprung this on him. I should have stayed calm and just denied everything. It wouldn’t be that hard to lie. I’ve been doing it for years. I doubt he would have figured it out, he’s not that observant with these sorts of things. Maybe I could have just convinced him that I wanted to be friends, or that I was curious about him.

I can’t even imagine what he thinks of me right now. Every time I do I feel sick. A different kind of sick that usual. He doesn’t need to hear these things from me right now. He never needed to. He has so much more important things to be worrying about right now.

He should have just rejected me.

11/15/03

I’m so grateful to have Ms. Honda in my life. I sometimes wonder how the world was so lucky to have such a wonderful person in it.

11/17/03

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“Oh my. What absolutely dreadful waves everyone has today.”

Yuki lifted his gaze from the page where his pen had been tapping against it absently, thinking of the words to write. When his eyes fell upon Hanajima he quickly closed the book and slipped it back into his school bag.
“What was that?” He asked.

“Did something happen? Lately your household has seemed particularly disturbed,” Hanajima said. “What a stressful environment for our poor Tohru.”

“Nothing’s happened,” Yuki said easily. “Perhaps you’re reading the waves wrong.”

“What a silly thing to say. I actually find it quite funny,” her face didn’t even twitch with expression. “Whatever’s happened, you seem to be the source of it all.”

Yuki swallowed, his instincts split between wanting to flinch away and wanting to let his eyes narrow. He did his best to do neither, giving her a small, lifeless smile. “I wish you wouldn’t say things like that, Ms. Hanajima.”

“It’s only what I’ve observed, I didn’t mean any offense,” she said. And, honestly, how was he ever going to tell if she was lying?

“Everything’s fine,” he said. “And even if it wasn’t, I would be able to handle it. So please don’t spread your observations to anyone else. Especially Ms. Honda.”

She stared at him for a long minute, and Yuki nearly broke out in a sweat over the gaze, before giving a simple “alright” and walking away.

He watched her walk away from him to rejoin Uotani who gave her a passively curious glance from her desk by the window. He sighed and turned his head back to his own space, staring at nothing in particular, but glad to focus his gaze anywhere else but Kyo’s empty seat. Every break and lunch for the past few weeks had Kyo jumping from his desk and pacing quickly down the hall. To the roof, most likely. During these times Yuki found the most solace sitting against the dirt of the courtyard.

Haru joined him regularly now. He was good company to keep when he didn’t feel like saying anything.

The ox had gotten into the habit of providing him food now, too. What started as packaged breads and convenience store rice balls escalated to bento boxes filled with his aunt’s home cooking that Haru would watch him eat intently.

Yuki would eat most of it (half of it), Haru would eat the rest, wash it down with his own packaged food, and would leave Yuki in peace.

Haru really was too nice to him.

Yuki thought about this as he waited for him, idly flipping through assigned readings and corrected homework sheets as he waited for a crop of black and white hair to appear at his classroom door. He hadn’t even really noticed that almost fifteen minutes had eaten the lunch hour when a different familiar face opened the door instead.

“Yuki!” Momiji’s voice sang as he waited at the edge of the classroom, waving frantically at the boy.

“Momiji?” Yuki asked, rising from his desk to meet him. “What are you doing here? Ms. Honda is meeting with a teacher today, you know.”

The blonde boy shook his head vigorously, “I’m not here to see Tohru, I’m here to see you!”

Yuki was almost taken aback by the other man’s blatant cheerfulness. The past couple of years had filled him out, given him a proper growth spurt, and carved his features into something mature and...
handsome, but still he carried around his relentless optimism. It was a strange contrast, one Yuki wasn’t sure he could be around all that often. Still, he smiled. There wasn’t much else you could do around Momiji.

“Did you need something?”

“No, but you do,” Momiji smiled, taking a hand that had previously been tucked behind his back and presented Yuki with a familiar bento box. Yuki grabbed it warily, eyeing Momiji before leading him out into the hallway and away from the bustling classroom.

“What’s this?”

“From Haru. He said to give it to you no matter what,” Momiji’s voice was a bit softer now, but his smile stayed in place. “Sorry, I would have brought it sooner but I got distracted by some girls in my class.”

“It’s alright,” Yuki said, holding onto the box awkwardly. “Where’s Haru?”

“Well…” Momiji’s smile dropped as he rubbed the back of his head. “Auntie told me she’s not letting him come to school for the next couple of days. I’m supposed to bring his homework to him.”


“Not exactly,” Momiji crossed his arms with a sigh. “He went black at the main house yesterday. Really bad, too.”

“He did?”

“Yeah, and apparently it took him a long time to calm down. He even ended up hurting the lady that comes to clean Auntie’s house.”

“You’re kidding!”

“It was an accident!” Momiji said hurriedly, holding his hands up in defense of Haru. “She heard noises coming from his room and when she went to check on him she sort of got in the way of something he was throwing.”

“Oh my God,” Yuki ran a hand through his hair. “Is she okay?”

“She’ll be fine, she was just really scared apparently.”

“I can’t really blame her. Black Haru is… definitely something,” Yuki decided on. “How’s Haru doing? Is he alright?”

“Yeah, Auntie’s super mad at him though. She said he’s not allowed to leave his room until he’s thirty,” he laughed. “It’s just been awhile since it happened.”

“Almost a year,” Yuki confirmed. “What made him turn black?”

Momiji shrugged, “he wouldn’t tell me. He just told me to give you the bento when he texted me to come over this morning before school. He seemed okay, though.”

“Haru always seems okay,” Yuki said.

“And so do you,” Yuki turned to give Momiji a surprised glance. Momiji tapped the bento box with a questioning hum, “Are you eating okay?”
“I’m fine,” Yuki said quickly. “This is just one of Haru’s quirks lately.”

Momiji hummed again, crossing his arms with a dissatisfied look, “well, whatever. Sounds like you two have stuff to work out.”

Yuki tried not to roll his eyes.

“I’ll come by after school to get the box from you. Until then, I have my own stuff to do,” Momiji said, sticking his tongue out over his shoulder before heading down the hallway back towards his own classroom.

Yuki gave a small wave uselessly to Momiji’s retreating back, before eyeing the weighted bento in his hands.

He was sure to eat all of it.

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“Am I the only reason you come to the main house anymore? I’m touched,” Haru spoke flatly as he leaned over his open windowsill, observing Yuki sitting uncomfortably on a close-by tree branch.

“Would you just help me inside?”

Haru did as he was told, grabbing Yuki by the forearms as he guided him in through the window, “You could have come through the front door, you know.”

“I tried that,” Yuki said. “Your mom said that you’re not allowed to have visitors for a while.”

“Huh, I didn’t think she was serious,” he said, flopping back down on his bed.

“You’re taking being quarantined like this awfully well,” Yuki sighed, setting his bag on Haru’s desk before sitting down on the desk chair. Haru shrugged, lifting a comic that was sitting on his bed and holding it open straight above his face so that he could read it on his back.

“It’s not so bad. I kind of deserve it,” he said, his voice normal and even. Haru’s eyes flicked to Yuki for a moment before settling back on the pages of his comic. “You must have heard what happened.”

“Momiji told me,” Yuki confessed. “I just wanted to make sure you were okay.”

Yuki watched a small smile spread onto Haru’s lips, soft and sincere—just like Haru, “You’re too nice to me, Yuki.”

“That’s my line,” Yuki pulled out an empty bento box and a stack of papers to put on Haru’s desk. Haru eyed the homework with no particular emotion, and reached out to lift the box up as to weigh it in his hands.

“Feels empty.”
“It is.”

“You didn’t cheat did you?”

“How do you cheat at eating? I ate it all,” Yuki huffed. Haru hummed before he lifted himself off the bed and ruffled Yuki’s hair.

“Good for you.”

“I don’t think I appreciate that from a guy one year my junior,” Yuki said irritably, straightening out his hair. Another moment of silence passed as Haru stood by Yuki, looking through his homework passively, and reading the little notes Momiji left in the tops of corners.

“So,” Yuki started, observing Haru from the desk chair. “Are you alright?”

He nodded. “Yeah. The maid’s fine, too. Just a bruise and some scratches. I was able to apologize properly today.”

“That’s good,” he said carefully. “But it’s not what I asked.”

Haru’s hands stopped tracing the papers before him, opting to fiddle with the edges of his bangs, instead. Yuki watched, silently, as Haru pressed the ends of his hair between his fingers and his vacant eyes stared out the window.

“I got angry,” Haru said, finally, after a moment of silence. “I think I still am.”

“I think that much is obvious,” Yuki said. Then after a moment, “What happened?”

Haru flipped his gaze to Yuki so suddenly that Yuki felt it like a sudden gust of wind, “I think I’m mad at you.”

“You think?” Yuki let worry crease his brow. “Haru if I did anything to you, I’m really sorry. If you ever have a problem with me I’d rather you talk to me about it instead of letting it build up like this.”

Haru let out a soft sigh before sitting down heavily on his bed, “As I expected, being mad at you is hard.”

Yuki must have given him quite a face because Haru cracked a tiny laugh, hardly there had Yuki not been hyper aware to every expression on the other boy.

“I know you haven’t been doing well, Yuki,” Haru started. “I know there’s something going on, but I didn’t ask. Whatever it is, though, it has you not eating, and tired, and sad. Am I wrong?”

Haru spoke so matter-of-factly, with a voice unwavering and still. It was comforting just as much as it was direct, and Yuki didn’t see any purpose in lying about his recent situation. He shook his head sheepishly at Haru’s expecting eyes. Haru gave a small nod back and turned his gaze back to the wall.

“It’s got something to do with the curse, right? Part of it does, at least,” he didn’t wait for Yuki to confirm his statement as he continued. “Thing is, whenever the curse is involved people in this family tend to try and handle it themselves. You. Rin.”

Yuki felt something sink in his chest. Haru was always so calm, but something seemed deflated and defeated inside him. Yuki turned to look away from it.

“I won’t pretend to know how you feel. I’ve never had a problem with my parents, and being cursed
wasn’t ever something that really bothered me. Maybe a little when I was a kid, but you helped me get through that to the point where I didn’t care. But I’ve seen what it’s done to everyone else.”

“Haru…”

“I get why you want to break it. Why Rin wants to, too. But when Rin told me something similar she disappeared. She got sick and wouldn’t let me help her. She tried handling it on her own or,” Haru paused, words lodged in his chest. “At least without me.”

Yuki looked up, wondering if the small catch of breath was imagined because Haru still looked so expressionless, so composed.

“Don’t handle things on your own, Yuki,” he said softly. “Don’t disappear. Or I really will get mad.”

Yuki looked down at his knees.

A strange sort of sensation filled him. When did people in his life start… caring about him? When did that shift begin? Tohru’s face became clear in his mind in that moment, talking with her in the pouring rain in his garden during their first year together.

Or maybe it was earlier. Vague memories of Haru beside him in that room. Sitting quietly, calmly, a fair distance away. Just to keep him company. Neither talked much at that age. Neither had much to say.

Beyond that everything seemed blurred and unfocused until it spit him out at this point, with Haru worrying so much about him that he couldn’t control it. Tohru caring so much she would cook his favorite dish one, two, three weeks in a row. Hatori smoking at the kitchen table the first of every month. Kakeru inviting him to dinner more and more.

Yuki didn’t know how to explain it. He felt guilty. Embarrassed, maybe.

He had grown used to passive eyes settling over him, indifference sweeping him up. That was not a feeling he ever wished to relive, but it was one he was comfortable with. The knowledge that there was no one to catch him when he fell was a relief of sorts. He could soak himself in depression and anxiety and carelessness and no one would bat an eye. No one would even have to pretend to be troubled.

Perhaps that’s why he was so drawn to Shigure, to spilling so much about himself to a man who so clearly didn’t care, who had so expertly mastered the art of total indifference. Shigure knowing about Kyo, about Akito, about his life, was of no consequence. It was the most comfort he felt he deserved to receive, and Shigure knew that—teased him about it in his own way.

That’s not how it was anymore, was it? It at least wasn’t how it had to be. He eyed Haru and swallowed the immediate instinct of shame that warmed his body just under the skin.

Step by step, he was learning that everything he had lived through needed to be retaught—relearned. What did he really know about anything? He felt useless and clumsy and as wise as a crying newborn. All he could really do was taking a few wobbling first steps.

“If you tell me not to disappear, I won’t,” Yuki said. “I promise.”

Haru looked at him with a tilt of his head, as if the idea of Yuki humoring him with his words left a sour taste in his mouth. So Yuki took it one step further.

It was the very least he could do.
“I told Kyo I was in love with him,” Yuki started, his eyes venturing far and away from his cousin, his friend. “I told him I’ve been in love with him all my life. I told him because we’ve been, sort of… fooling around.”

Yuki chanced a look at Haru and felt his neck burn when Haru pinned him with a look that showed more emotion than he had ever seen on his non-black self. Haru looked shocked, like he was processing every word. Had Yuki not been so terrified, he might have laughed at breaking Haru’s emotionless default.

“Um,” Haru tried after a while.

“Can you please just say something?” Yuki could feel his blush creeping up into his ears.

“You,” Haru began, contemplating his words. “You have weird taste in guys.”

“Can you please say something else?”

Haru scratched his neck with a soft grunt, “When did it start?”

“Spring,” Yuki said, tracing meaningless patterns on the desk with his finger. “I came onto him.”

“Why?”

“Because I wanted to,” Yuki said. “I’m in love with him.”

“You’re in love with him?” He repeated, as if the words were the most foreign taste on his tongue.

Yuki nodded.

Haru looked confused, but didn’t make any move to question it. If anything, with each passing second he looked as if he was adjusting himself to the new information. His face calming effortlessly back to an expression Yuki recognized.

“And what did he say when you told him that?”

Yuki sighed, “He said he had to think about it.”


“Shigure said the same thing,” Yuki said, irritably.

“Sensei knows?”

“Only because he figured it out a while ago,” it wasn’t exactly a lie, but the excuse fell off Yuki’s tongue guiltily. “But now you know too.”

“Does anybody else know?”

“No.”

Haru scratched the back of his head, his leather and chained bracelets falling down his arm and clattering together as he did. Yuki was waiting for the moment to drop, for Haru to process the situation as too troublesome to bother himself with. For Haru’s indifference to be as pure and rejecting as he remembered indifference could be.

Instead, Haru stood to put a comforting hand on Yuki’s shoulder and said, “Thank you for telling
Yuki nodded with a small laugh but Haru didn’t move from where he stood, questions and curiosity restrained in his eyes to make room for comfort. Yuki’s smile fell as he put a hand over Haru’s and squeezed it gratefully. He hung his head, tired and sad.

“Thank you for listening,” Yuki said softly, trying to suck whatever strength he could from the rare and simple touch of Haru’s hand.

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Leg extended, bent from the knee, followed with a slice. The bag made a satisfying noise at the impact. Kyo retracted, lifted his leg and did it again. Retracted, fists up, leg up and extended to kick at it again. Again. Once more. Twice more. Three times more.

Leg up, extended from the knee and the bottom of his foot pushed into the bag. Again. Again. Again. Again. A rough cry spilled from Kyo’s throat, far longer than it should have been, sweat breaking out on his forehead as the bag trembled pathetically with each stomp, stomp, stomp—

“Kyo?”

On instinct Kyo’s leg swept around to target the source of the voice, and with a vocal grunt that was almost a shout his leg hit the palm of Kazuma’s hand, eyes wide from the sudden attack, arms up and legs braced in defense.

Kyo retracted, chest heaving, as he looked away and wiped the sweat from his brow.

“Sorry,” he mumbled.

“It’s alright,” Kazuma said, softly. “I think you killed it, though.”

Kyo raised an eyebrow and followed Kazuma’s motion to the punching bag that was now swaying helplessly back and forth. Kyo nodded stiffly.

“Just a few more minutes.”

“Oh no, I think it’s time you showered so we can have a talk.”

“Huh?”

“That’s non-negotiable. So pack up your things, you’re done for the day,” Kazuma patted Kyo on the shoulder with a gentle smile. One that Kyo was never really able to argue with. And today, the energy just wasn’t quite there to put up a fight with anything other than a punching bag. He wrenched his shoulder from the grip in a small sign of protest before nodding.
Kyo stared blankly at the shower drain as water and dirt and grime and sweat washed away beneath his feet. He closed his eyes and breathed in deeply through his nose, trying to center himself in the sound of water splashing, in the feel of heat prickling his skin. Of nothing else, nothing else.

I’m in love with you.

I hate you.

Kyo gave a guttural shout and splashed water into his face before rubbing at his eyes vigorously. Couldn’t he be left alone for one fucking minute? He slammed a fist against the shower wall, feeling the water turn from hot to lukewarm.

Did that stupid rat have to follow him everywhere? His words hadn’t left his head for weeks now, circling him until he was dizzy. It was all he heard some nights, playing over and over on repeat, with Yuki just a few rooms over. And Yuki would wake each day and look composed and neat, no evidence of their conversation apparent at all except for the bags that hung heavy from Yuki’s eyes.

Sometimes, Kyo would wake up and convince himself it was all a dream. A twisted nightmare that clutched at his heart and made him feel as though he had been sleeping for years. It was easy to believe some days, as if he didn’t know what Yuki tasted like, as if he didn’t hear those words that clung to him like drying cement, as if summer had never happened at all. He would sneak glances at Yuki. Former student council, pretty-boy, cool and collected Yuki, and he would know that it was a dream.

But then there were days where everything felt too real.

As if every part of his skin that was touched by Yuki ached with an absence of heat. He would walk and hear the same crack of branches under his feet that led him to that clearing, to that garden. He could smell vomit and spit, and Yuki’s haggard and desperate eyes seemed so close. Too close. His gravely words shouting out every weakness Kyo never wanted to know.

Yuki had never looked so weak in his life.

Kyo felt lightheaded at the thought, and when he looked down he found himself already half hard. He glared down at his member.

Not again, he berated himself harshly. Not to this.

It was a useless thought as something shifted inside him, movements and thoughts and feelings that he knew weren’t quite his. Ones that filled his head with Yuki’s crumbling form, weakened, broken. Kyo groaned behind his teeth, fighting with the noise.

Weakness was never something Kyo associated with Yuki. He was pristine, and mighty, and holier-than-thou. He was composed, with reflexes like lightning and Kyo bumbling along behind like thunder. Yuki wasn’t weak, in fact he was elegant in his strength, never needed to prove it to anybody, and it was one of the reasons it was so easy to hate him.

He was so unprepared to see Yuki fall. Even more unprepared to see him fall for him. A losing prospect no matter how you looked at it. All this time Kyo would charge at him, search for every weakness, irritate and exaggerate the few scraps of insecurity he could gleam from Yuki. All this time, and now he realized he never really had to do anything at all. Just exist. Just be.

A simple chemical reaction that ruined Yuki from the inside out.
A frustrated hand covered his dick, clutching almost painfully tight. He was fully erect now, and he slid to his knees in the shower, defeated and angry.

The memory played again, as it had for weeks now. Yuki pinning him with a glare that burned like ice, his shaking hands as he spoke, his broken heart spilling through his eyes.

Sometimes Kyo would play the scene on repeat, eyes glazed from a burdened concentration. Sometimes he would feel exasperated and even a bit sickly himself. Sometimes he would feel his body become overwhelmed with the simple decision he had made to think about it. Sometimes he would feel his body overflow with an emotion that weighed down so heavily on him he could hardly move. But sometimes, sometimes…

Kyo stroked roughly, breathing hard. He didn’t want to think about this, he didn’t want to jerk off to this. He didn’t want to think about how satisfying it was. It felt filthy and disgusting and like everything he knew he was. He bit his lip hard as pleasure spiked up his spine at the thought of Yuki hunched and vomiting.

His thumb swiped over the head of his cock as Yuki screamed through his composure. Rough, grating, desperate.

So desperate.

Kyo let out a choked moan, feeling heat coil tightly in his stomach, and he wanted to finish. He wanted to finish so badly. He clawed at the wall and let out a ragged breath.

He thought about that same desperation underneath him, clinging to him, clawing down his back. He thought of Yuki above him, convincing Kyo to stay with every sloppy kiss and rough caress. He thought of Yuki falling apart at the seams.

Yuki loves you.

Kyo stroked harder, harder, twisted his hand, and felt his motions grow faster. Pre-cum was dripping from his flushed head, his chest heaving with a pleasure it couldn’t contain, with a disgust that burned like sex. He bit his tongue.

How pathetic.

Kyo came with a growl, his seed staining the shower wall.

It took a moment to rouse himself from an orgasm that seemed to rip itself from his body. He felt dirty, wretched, and his insides burned low with remorse. He felt as though he obeyed something, submitted to something. Something that wasn’t him.

A rebellious spirit that had cracked into his bones since puberty flared. Kyo felt angry.

But his body welcomed the release, drained the tension from his body and replaced it with an exhaustion that would be easy to break down and replace with rage and confusion. But for now, there was a fickle calm that cooled his nerves.

His knees hurt, and the cold water didn’t do much to comfort his flushed skin.

With a wince he rose, collecting himself as best he could and splashing the cold water from the shower onto his face and onto the wall to wash away any evidence of himself.

It would be better to burn the stall from the ground up, but this would have to do.
Kyo stepped out of the shower and took the towel to his skin, leave red marks and peeling skin behind his rough hands. When he was dressed, dried, with his towel around his neck he slammed the bathroom door shut behind him to head downstairs.

For a brief moment he considered sneaking past Kazuma and making a run for home.

It was the thought of going home at all that stopped him. Had him wandering into the small living room of the dojo and sitting across from his mentor with a cup of still steaming tea waiting in front of him.

Kazuma smiled at him.

Kyo thought he might be sick.

“Have some tea,” Kazuma urged. Kyo nodded, taking a small sip. “How is it? I’ve been practicing, you know."

“Most people don’t gotta practice making tea,” Kyo tried to make up for the deflated energy in his voice with a small smirk, but it came off as more of a grimace. He took another sip. “It’s fine.”

“Ah, one day I’ll try and make it as good as Tohru’s,” he said with a smile. “How are things going at Shigure’s house?”


“Are you getting along with Shigure?”

“I guess,” he mumbled.

“And everything is alright with Tohru?”

Kyo shrugged. Kazuma sighed and the two sipped their tea in silence for a moment.

“Kyo, I think we need to talk,” Kazuma started. His cup hit the wood of a table with a soft thunk and Kyo let his eyes be drawn to the sound instead of his guardian. “Haru told me about you and Yuki."

“What?” Kyo felt the color drain from his face.

He must have said the word too harshly, because Kazuma’s eyes widened just slightly in surprise. “He told me you two have started fighting again… Is something wrong? You look like you’re about to be sick.”

“Oh.” Oh. “I’m. Fine,” Kyo swallowed back something rising in his throat, and downed the rest of his tea. “So me and Yuki are fighting again, so what?”

Kazuma’s eyes bent in an expression Kyo recognized immediately as disappointment. He looked away, defensive guard taking root in his throat, tension running up his spine. He didn’t want to talk about this.

“It’s none of Haru’s damn business anyway.”

“I asked him,” Kazuma said. “He didn’t tell on you.”

Kyo didn’t turn to look at him.

“You’ve been on edge lately, Kyo. For a while now. Not just these past few weeks. I was curious,
so I asked,” Kazuma said. And then added, “I’m worried about you.”

Kyo scratched at his head, feeling the damp locks in his clammy fingers. There was too much jumbled in his brain, and almost all of it felt sticky and messy. It was adhered to his tongue like a paperweight. He clenched his jaw tight and didn’t respond at all. Kazuma seemed to realize this (he always did).

“I didn’t say anything for a long time because whether you realize it or not, Kyo, you’ve done well for yourself in Shigure’s house. You’ve matured a lot, and you’ve done it with your own strength, and by letting people in. I’m glad. I want you to learn to trust people, and to care for them,” Kazuma reached across the table to place a comforting hand over Kyo’s that rested lazily by his tea.

Kyo jolted at the touch and his fingers curled into a fist but he didn’t take his hand away.

“I’m proud of how much you’ve grown,” Kazuma said with a smile that Kyo finally turned to face him. Something unpleasant swelled in his chest. Guilt, a feeling of deceit. He hung his head. Kazuma shouldn’t be praising him like this.

“I know this year is… difficult. But I want you to be able to think about your future without regressing into bad habits. Fighting Yuki has never gotten you anywhere,” Kazuma said. Kyo snatch his hand back.

“What future?” Kyo spat the word out. “You know what happens to me after this year is over!”

“They’ll have to go through me first,” Kazuma snapped back. Serious. Firm. Kyo rolled his eyes. “I’m not going to let them take you.”

The words offered no comfort to Kyo at all.

“You can’t stop it,” Kyo said dismissively, eager to get off the subject. “And so what if I’m fighting with Yuki again? Who cares? It’s not like we suddenly became best friends or something!” Kyo could feel his voice getting manic. “I fight with him because I hate that guy! That’s all there is to it! Nothing else!”

“You hate him?”

“I hate him!” Kyo slammed his fist on the table, yell ripping from his lungs.

Kyo heard the words as an echo of Yuki’s from weeks ago. He shook away the memory, the hollow air the words took, the sting he felt when he remembered those fingers wrapped around his collar and those words burning off Yuki’s tongue.

He hated what Yuki was doing to him.

He hated… He hated him, he thought to himself just as desperately as Yuki sounded.

Kazuma crossed his arms.

“Why?”

“…What?”

“Why do you hate Yuki?” Kazuma asked, unwavering eyes winding Kyo.

Kyo’s hand was curled up too tight, knuckles turning white from the coiled fist. With a frustrated yell Kyo’s fist landed on the table again, as his other hand dug deep into his hair, almost pulling at it.
“I don’t want to talk about this! I’m not talking about Yuki!”

“Then don’t talk,” Kazuma’s voice was still gentle, but Kyo felt scolded under the firm tone. “But you at least have to think about it. You’ve matured a lot, Kyo. You’re not that same scared child I took to the mountains three years ago. But you need to learn to admit things to yourself—to come to terms with difficult situations. You don’t need to hate someone in order to prove yourself. That’s not who you are.”

Kyo opened his mouth but nothing came out.

He wanted to scream, that is who I am.

What growth? Anything that could be taken as such was probably just misinterpreted exhaustion—a built-up tolerance. That wasn’t growth that was coasting. That was laying low. That was waiting for the end.

“What if I’m not who you think I am, Shishou?” Kyo rasped out. “What if I do really hate him?”

Kyo peeked up, taken aback to see Kazuma’s soft, pained smile.

“Why do you still think so little of yourself?”

Kyo’s eyes crinkled in confusion, but Kazuma just sighed in response.

“Keep a clear head, and take it from there,” he stood, ruffling Kyo’s hair as he left the room. He called over his shoulder, “Go home, Kyo.”

Home.

Kyo couldn’t think of anything he wanted to do less.

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11/10/03

Kyo...

I feel like

Kyo is som

I still remember the first time we me

Yuki tapped his pencil uselessly against the page, frustration etching onto his features. He chanced a peek over at Haru, making sure he was still napping lightly on his bed. Half-done homework littered Haru like a sloppy halo, while Yuki’s own completed work sat in a neat pile on Haru’s desk.
It didn’t feel quite right leaving just yet. Yuki didn’t want to, anyway. Home wasn’t someplace he was eager to go. Not lately. This house had always been a haven when that feeling struck.

It was nice, Haru’s room didn’t feel like the main house. It didn’t feel as though it was inside any walls. It felt secure and warm, laced with memories of childhood he would even dare to call normal.

He stared blankly out the window at the aging tree, remembered sneaking into this room after long days of middle school where that same itchy feeling of not wanting to go home settled more permanently.

Haru would help him through the window and together, silently, they would work on homework, on projects, listen to music, read comics. It didn’t matter. Yuki just enjoyed the escape, and Haru never really seemed to mind. He felt stronger here, protected. Safe.

A wave of nostalgia crashed over him as his confession to Haru settled like dust. That same silent support, that same careful look, that same peaceful moment between them. So, Yuki had pulled his notebook from his bag once Haru dozed off and pressed the pages open cautiously. He admitted so much to Haru, maybe he’d be able to admit a little more to himself.

That was the kind of strength Haru gave.

*Kyo…*

“What are you doing?”

Yuki snapped the journal shut on reflex, “nothing.”

Haru quirked an eyebrow.

“I was getting ready to leave.”

Yuki stuffed his work back into his school bag with Haru watching him intently from the bed.

“Need help getting out?” Haru rose, eyes looking bleary and distant with sleep. Yuki let out a curt laugh.

“No, I think I remember how to get down,” Yuki hoisted himself onto the windowsill, one leg reaching out for the sturdy branch that acted like a stepladder to Haru’s room. His hands reached for a higher branch, and with that he pushed himself out of the window and settled himself into the nook of the tree. Yuki turned to see Haru resting his elbows on the windowsill.

“Don’t fall.”

“I won’t,” Yuki said.

“You have,” Haru retaliated. Yuki rolled his eyes, staring down at the ground before sheepish eyes went back to Haru.

“Haru… You won’t… You won’t tell anyone, will you?”

The ox gave a soft sigh at the question, reaching his hand out the window towards Yuki in a signal to take it. Yuki eyed the hand warily, before surrounding it with a loose grip.
“Yuki,” Haru said. “No one would believe me if I did.”

Yuki dropped his hand and rolled his eyes, “Haha.”

“I’m serious. But either way I won’t say anything.”

“Thanks, Haru,” Yuki said, relief staining his voice. He sighed awkwardly and gave a soft sort of shrug. “I guess I’ll see you soon.”

“My mom won’t keep me here forever,” Haru assured. “Don’t get into too much trouble while I’m gone.”

“Now you really are starting to sound like a mother,” Yuki laughed. With a final wave he maneuvered his way down the tree and followed the small pathway that webbed through the main house.

Haru didn’t live too close to the main mansion. His house joined others that lined a few blocks within the walls. Together they feigned a harmless suburbia. From here it would take a winding twelve minute walk to Akito’s residence, and a nine minute walk to where his parents lived. He could shorten that time if he cut through the yard with the cat and snuck under the gap in the hedges that acted as a flimsy secondary wall around the center estate. That, however, endangered the cleanliness of his clothes. A mistake he was sure not to make all that often when he was younger.

Especially not in front of his mother.

Yuki knew he had to follow that path at least part of the way to reach the stretch of grass, bushes, and trees that hid the cracked hole in the wall. It was the only means of escape within the Sohma house. Every kid knew about it, cursed or not, and they grew up keeping the secret. As if knowing that plastering it closed would be signing their own deaths. A death by slow, drawn-out suffocation.

Now that Haru’s house was mostly out of view and familiar pathways and steps flooded his eye line, Yuki found it was getting harder to breathe. With an unstable hand he loosened his tie and tugged at the first button of his uniform. When his breathing didn’t come an easier, he felt a moment of panic closing up his throat even more.

Yuki leaned against the small gateway that surrounded the house with the flowers and the chipped front porch. When he was younger these neighbors had a dog, but he stopped seeing it when he was about twelve. He never said a word to his neighbors, though they often greeted him. The idea of one of them coming out from their front doors and offering Yuki the same hollow hellos they gave him as a child in the midst of an oncoming panic attack was not calming him down in the least.

He forced himself off the gate and ran the opposite direction. Down a pathway he didn’t recognize, past houses he had never seen, towards grass, bushes, and trees that surely only covered undamaged wall.

It didn’t matter. He would walk along the outline of the structure later. For now, repeating any part of that routine from when he was younger was not an option.

It was a few minutes later when Yuki finally calmed down. The shade of a tree blocking the small gust of warmth the autumn sun could barely muster. His back against the bark, his chest rising and falling in heaves. Then pants. Then measured breaths.

He was chilly in the shade, and the grass was cold enough to feel wet underneath him. He buttoned his coat up again when he was certain he was calm and rose to his feet, blinking vacantly at his surroundings.
“Where am I?”

Yuki readjusted his school bag as he assessed just how lost he was. Wherever he was, it was a place he had never seen before. Not even when he was a small and boyish and eager to explore with the other children. His legs had taken him somewhere else completely, of which he was mostly grateful for. He heaved a sigh and stepped onto a small path that consisted of sparse stepping stones, as opposed to the cleanly paved sidewalks and roads that surrounded most of the homes.

The more he walked, the more surprised he was that he honestly never explored this area of the estate as a kid. The small stone path cut a small, indistinguishable line through a lush, green area of the estate. The trees were taller and were imposing even though autumn made them bare. The grass was growing over the stones and tangling with bushes of weeds that looked like flowers. It seemed like a possible haven for mischievous boys.

Curiosity allowed him to climb up the hill where the pathway led, and it was then when he saw a small house shrouded by trees and bushes, as if hiding from the rest of the world. Yuki’s foot collided with a garden of pebbles that replaced the overgrown grass, and was for a moment entranced by the sound of a small sohzu.

The calming water rushed through the bamboo and beat against the rock like a heartbeat, and Yuki sucked in a nervous breath as he stepped closer to the house.

“Hello?” He tried, almost certain no one was around or inside. “Does anyone live here?”

His arm was shaking and so were his legs, and something foreign spread through his chest as if trying to split him open. Oddly, the feeling wasn’t bad, even if it did stir up a familiar nausea in his stomach. His belly growled angrily, but Yuki was too distracted to throw up or calm it down. He let his weak legs walk him around the house and to the front door elevated by the small wooden porch. He hopped up, removing his shoes.

Yuki knocked firmly, “Hello? Is anyone home?”

Without bothering to hear an answer, he nudged the door open. A small voice berated him in the back of his head. If people did live here, this was not going to be something he would want to explain. And it would not be something he would want other people finding out about, people like Akito. That flicker of anxiety was wildly overrun by a deep-seated curiosity that was running cold in Yuki’s veins. No one lived here, he was sure.

Not yet.

“Hello?” He tried again, but the insides were bare and plain. No signs of life to liven the walls that were oddly bright thanks to the sun shining through the many windows. The tatami creaked under his footsteps and Yuki was growing more uneven by the second.

All things considered, it was a nice house. One story, clean, with a narrow hallway that broke off into a few naked rooms. A bathroom, a kitchen (small but usable), what he assumed was a bedroom, and a bigger space that would expand wider if he opened up the walls and let the outside air spill in.

Yuki walked up and tried to do as much, wanting to feel the bitter and uncirculated air of the house meet with the fresh, cool breeze, but the sliding doors wouldn’t budge. All he could do was open the blinds of a window wide open, but even then bamboo bars were firmly in place and skewered the round shape. He squeezed them tight and tested their hold.

Yuki sighed and stepped back, feeling tired and heavy.
He knew where he was.

“So this is the cat’s cage,” Yuki said. It was to no one in particular.

He sat in the middle of the room, taking a rest from the feeling of being winded, and let the sun cover him in parted slants through the window. The last scrap of daylight was good for keeping a second panic attack from rising. It was close to sunset, but the window was soaking in every opportunity to sift the sunlight inside the house.

No, not house. Cage.

This was a cage. And it was terrifying in its construction. In its normalcy.

He looked back at the bamboo covering the window. They were sturdy, but if he still attended the dojo, and if some of his techniques weren’t so rusty, he doubted he would have too hard a time breaking through the bamboo unharmed.

He looked at the shoji doors that refused to break open. He thought of all the times Shigure complained about his house being destroyed, of the doors collapsing under the mere weight of Kyo’s body falling backward. Surely they would have to bring a table in here at some point to make it at all livable. Tables were easy to lift and to throw. The doors wouldn’t be able to stand the duress.

He looked over his shoulder to the front door. Yuki had opened it without a second thought. He had let himself in as if opening the door to the home of a close relative or a dear friend. The door was made from the same material as the walls in this room. Wood and paper.

He didn’t want to seem childish, but Yuki had expected something… different.

From a young age he learned that the cat only had a limited amount of time in the outside world. When he was six his mother shamelessly told him he would be put in a cage as she adjusted the lines of her lipstick in a compact mirror. When he asked Akito if it was true, he had laughed and told him of course it was true. The cage was small, like at a circus. And if Yuki was really nice Akito would let him feed Kyo from his hand like a pet.

Yuki cried that night thinking about that shock of orange hair stuffed inside a carnival box.

As he got older, he realized that probably wasn’t the case. But the image only adjusted in small ways. For instance, the bars became taller. The floor was replaced with a kind of hay. Then, after a while, the steel bars were replaced with plaster walls, or hardwood. And when he was fourteen, the image of a shed-like cage was taken over by the idea of an attic or basement. Like in movies or books.

At seventeen, Yuki didn’t really like to think about it at all. But he could assume it was damp, dark, cold, and locked up tight.

But this… this.

Yuki leaned forward, his hand bracing him as he hung above the floor, and his other hand clutching his stomach. A fear seized him, one that his body knew on reflex, one that was just as overwhelming as the unwelcome voice and body that hid within his own.

Yuki, above all, knew how damaging a room could be.

And he knew just as well that Kyo would never lift the table high above his head, or use the heel of his hand to knock through bamboo.
He knew, because for ten years he stared out of a window, stared through cracks in shoji doors, let his legs hang and dangle from the front porch, and never once tried to run.

(Maybe he did once, but did it count if he only came back?)

Something was bursting out of him, he thought it might be vomit again, but he hung his head above the ground and waited for bile that never came. His throat felt itchy, and his body restless. Did he want to scream? What… what did he want to say?

Yuki spilled the contents of his school bag out onto the clean tatami floor and searched through his scattered belongings until his hand ran over his notebook. He grabbed a pen and flipped the pages wide open.

11/10/03

Kyo…

Yuki’s hand shook, trying to form the words that were swarming in his head. Trying to give them a voice. Trying not to sink into a familiar silence that acted as a prison. Why was it that after all these years he still couldn’t say anything? He still couldn’t even write it down? He could barely even think it?

Why were the only words that escaped from that time in his life “I love you” when there was so much more than that?!

Yuki ripped the page from the notebook and balled it up in his hand with a frustrated grunt, ready to toss it across the room. Ready to let it sit in the corner of the lifeless room until it was picked up by tan hands in April.

He stopped himself.

With a swallow, he unwrinkled the paper, trying to smooth it out on his knee.

Kyo…

The letters agonized him, surrounded by crossed out words that just didn’t seem to fit. Didn’t seem to describe something so life-changing and earth-shattering as that one name.

He brought the paper to his forehead and took a deep breath, suddenly feeling disgusted at having been here for so long. As if he were invading Kyo’s privacy, or as if he really were intruding on some innocent family’s home. Yuki knew that if Kyo ever walked inside that room from Yuki’s time in the main mansion it would feel…

Exposing.

Humiliating.

Naked.
Is this what Kyo’s fate was? Something a little too familiar? Something not from fairy tales or fables, but something a little too real? If so, he didn’t think he could stay here a moment longer.

With another steadying breath he folded the paper, stuck it deep in his pocket, piled his belongings back into his school bag, and picked himself up.

With one last look over his shoulder, he stared into the sterile household that seemed to have never even witnessed what life truly meant. Breathing, troubled, messy life. Not like Shigure’s home, where there were scars and scratches and noises and things that littered the space until it was full to the very brim.

People lived here before. Would Kyo be scrubbed clean, too?

Yuki rested a hand on the wall for a brief support at the thought, but it jerked away. Surprised, he stared at his fingers as if they had been burned. It was enough to push him from the house and close the door quickly behind him.

He really needed to get out of here. The sun was setting and it was getting dark. It was getting colder, and Yuki really, really needed to leave.

Before something terrible happened.

“Yuki?”

Something really terrible.

“My, Yuki is that you?”

A voice like oil stopped Yuki in his tracks, so close to completing his journey down the hill. It was dark, and there are some lights on the path, but what Yuki noticed first was a shock of dull brown hair. Kureno’s eyes were distant, mouthing—almost whispering—an apology. It’s the only look Yuki had ever seen him wear. An expression as silent as he was. It was how he knew the voice didn’t come from him.

Yuki trained his head a little lower to see inky black hair framing shocking white skin. Akito’s clothes were all black, and fit his thin form. The night distorted his image, making him skinnier, taller, with limbs that bent in an inhuman way. Yuki took a step back, a strange sense of aggressive comfort at his back, even though he knew the only thing behind him was that terrible place.

Yuki clutched the strap of his school bag tightly, his hands beginning to sweat even under the cold November evening.

“Hello, Akito,” he said softly.

“So I’m not hallucinating. It is you,” a sickly kind of grin covered Akito’s mouth. “You don’t come for months, and yet I have to find you in such an unseemly place?”

“I,” Yuki had to swallow to force his throat to open a little more. “I came to check on Haru.”

Akito clicked his tongue, crossing his arms in front of his chest with a roll of his eyes, “You check on that idiotic ox and don’t even bother to say hello?”

“I heard you weren’t well,” Yuki eyed Kureno, his expression as grounded into the earth as he was. “I didn’t want to disturb you.”
Akito’s expression fell into something soft, alluring, as he took a few steps forward so that a gentle hand could rest against Yuki’s cheek. Yuki breathed in a shaky breath through his nose, feeling his hands beginning to shake.

“Oh, Yuki,” Akito said. “You could never disturb me.”

Yuki gave a stuttered nod and Akito chuckled at the reaction, pulling his hand away. Yuki felt himself relax slightly.

“I’m sorry,” Yuki said.

“Just don’t make that mistake again,” Akito hummed. “I’d love to spend time with you like we used to. When we were children. Ah, I’m feeling nostalgic.”

So was Yuki, and it was making him sick.

“And?” Akito’s voice suddenly shifted into something lower, darker. “If you were checking on that cow why are you here?”

“I got lost,” Yuki answered honestly. “And when I found the pathway I got curious.”

Akito tilted his head with a hum.

“That monster’s cage?” Akito finished, sounding completely bored with the topic. “Yes. Most zodiacs can’t stand to be around it, so imagine my surprise when one of the maids said they spotted you heading right this way.”

“It wasn’t on purpose,” Yuki justified quickly, but something made him pause.

He didn’t… think it was on purpose. The way his legs moved, it was almost as if he was following the only possible path they could take. But perhaps he wasn’t giving coincidence enough credit.

“Of course I know that,” Akito cackled, waving a dismissive hand. “Who would come here on purpose? Not even a simple boy like you would be so stupid.”

Yuki nodded stiffly.

“Now, Yuki, let’s go. I don’t think someone as frail as you should be in a place like this anymore,” Akito turned, motioning for Yuki to follow.

He knew where Akito would lead him, with Kureno in tow. Down that path he had done everything in his power to avoid. Down those hallways, passing by maids with distant eyes, and surrounded by walls as thin as paper, but as strong as steel. Akito’s voice weaving its way into the rooms there as tightly as the woven tatami.

Strangely, however, the thought that overtook his mind as he watched Akito turn away wasn’t any of these. They burned low in the back of his head like a small headache. What boomed louder, clearer, was a voice that sounded so much like Shigure’s.

“What would you have done if he had loved you back?”

“Asked Akito not to lock up your boyfriend?”

What a coward he was.
“It doesn’t seem right,” Yuki said quietly. So quietly that the last word was swallowed up completely by a whisper. Akito turned back around, eyeing Yuki up and down who hadn’t moved even on Akito’s command.

“Excuse me?” Akito asked a little too sweetly. Kureno turned his head away as Akito snarled, “You’ll have to speak up.”

“It doesn’t… Seem right,” Yuki tried again, this time forcing the words out. “It seems… seems cruel to,” Yuki swallowed, “lock someone up like that.”

Akito stared at him for a long moment, and Kureno didn’t look in his direction at all. Yuki thought he’d definitely done it now, and that Akito looked too calm. He wondered for a moment if Akito heard him at all, and how great it would be if he didn’t. If Yuki, in reality, was having an intense delusion—perhaps Akito was just waiting for him to trail behind him uselessly.

Yuki knew that wasn’t the case when Akito started to laugh.

It was a wicked sound that Yuki thought felt like something was scratching his teeth, or pricking his spine with needles. But Akito was hunched over, using Kureno’s broad chest as support as he exaggerated the sounds coming too cruelly from his tongue.

“Oh, oh, Yuki,” Akito said, regaining his breath in humored gasps. “Are you feeling sorry for that monster? How merciful of you.”

Yuki looked away, feeling something snap in his chest. It must have shown on his face because suddenly Akito wasn’t laughing anymore.

“Do you think something so disgusting would ever have a place in society?” Akito asked, seriously. Yuki felt his throat close up. “If fact, do you think any of you would have a place in the world if I didn’t allow it?”

Yuki eyed Kureno that stood dutifully behind him. He didn’t say a word, he didn’t even move. Akito took a step towards Yuki, not even commenting on how Yuki immediately took one backwards.

“You work because I allow it. You live because I allow it. You, Yuki, go to and from your true home, here, because I so graciously allow it. But sooner or later this game you’re playing with Shigure and that… thing,” Akito shivered, as if repulsed by the word, “Will have to come to an end. This façade will fade away, and what you’ll be left with is… family.”

Akito wrapped boney arms around Yuki’s neck, embracing him loosely, smirking against Yuki’s ear when he felt him tense underneath him.

“There’s only one place in the world where you can live freely. I’m doing you a favor,” Akito whispered against the shell of Yuki’s ear. “I’m doing you all a favor, even that monster. Because where else could you go? Where else would you want to go? This bond… this family is special. Irreplaceable.”

Akito hugged him tighter.

“Not everyone can be a Tohru Honda,” he hissed.

Yuki felt his breath go erratic and shaky, a cold sweat breaking onto his forehead and the back of his neck. Shaking arms lifted, working against gravity, and Yuki wasn’t sure if he was going to return the embrace or pull him away.
“Akito,” the stable voice broke the air, and Akito pulled away to throw Kureno a sneer. “You should be resting.”

With a soft sigh Akito turned back to Yuki, placing a gentle hand on his cheek before withdrawing it, but not before letting long nails just graze the soft skin there.

“Next time you’re here, be sure to visit,” Akito said, softly, before turning to match his steps with Kureno’s.

The sky was a deep, dark blue, and was close to fading into a complete black. Beyond the wall, surely there might have been some color that stretched thin on the horizon. Purples, soft oranges, deep blues. All that covered the estate was colorless and still and when Akito faded into it completely Yuki’s legs gave out.

He felt as if he didn’t have another word left inside him.

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Kyo laid flat on his back as he looked up at the stars that began to reveal themselves bit by bit. It was nice, just staring at this scenery for a while, even if it wasn’t from his preferred spot on the roof. Instead, he laid out on the shorter brick wall that lined the border between the quiet residential area, and the thick of trees that surrounded the pathway home.

It wasn’t quite as comfortable as the roof. Sure, the tiles would dig into his back and ass and legs in irritating ways, and the wall here was a bit too thin so Kyo found his legs dangling off on the sides. There was no slope, either, and his neck complained at being laid so flat.

It would have to do.

The dojo was still in his system, the conversation still lingering on his ears. Kyo wondered to himself what Kazuma would have told him if he knew the real situation. If he knew all the sordid things he was doing with Yuki. What would Kazuma have said if he told him what Yuki had said to him all those weeks ago?

A shudder of fear was inevitable. Just thinking of such a hypothetical situation was enough to make him antsy.

He lightly slammed the back of his head against the cement top of the wall.

He didn’t want to see those disgusted and disappointed eyes even in his imagination.

He didn’t want to think about the fact that the conversation probably wouldn’t have changed all that much.

Kyo let the thoughts flutter away, his mind dancing around much more dangerous topics as they had for the past couple of hours. Because, like an idiot, that’s what he promised he would do. First to Yuki and now to Shishou.
So, alright, let’s think, Kyo commanded his brain. And briefly he could hear Yuki’s voice in the back of his head taunting him. Probably saying something like don’t hurt yourself. Kyo groaned uselessly.

He was so busy having hypothetical mind conversations with Yuki that he barely noticed footsteps trudging against the pavement and stopping sharply close-by. It wasn’t until he heard the clearing of someone’s through that Kyo lifted himself up at the sound, turning to see Yuki. Uniform still on. Bag clutched tightly through white knuckles.

Kyo flinched back, feeling cornered by Yuki’s distant and pained look. It felt so potent, and Kyo wondered idly when the last time they had even looked at each other was.

“Kyo,” Yuki said with a rasp in his voice. “Were you waiting for me?”

“No, I—” He wasn’t. Truth be told the thought of having to walk past the living room, the kitchen, even Yuki’s room to get to the roof made him too anxious to even take a step onto the path. If anything, this was an extreme evasion tactic, and Kyo was pondering how long he could stay on that small ledge, if he could sleep on it. Somehow he couldn’t quite say that, though, and instead ran a hand through the hairs on the back of his head. “What are you doing home so late?”

“I had things to do,” Yuki said, not moving where he was from either. “I’m going to head home.”

“Okay,” Kyo said, watching Yuki’s unusually pale form turn away, eyes a bit frazzled as if they couldn’t focus on any one spot in particular. Kyo cursed under his breath before calling out, “Wait!”

He jumped off the ledge and gathered his belongings that were resting beside the brick. Yuki watched him patiently without saying a word, and with Kyo’s karate bag and backpack securely on, they fell into a slow pace down the path.

They were halfway home when Kyo broke the silence.

“You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

Yuki gave a soft, hollow smile to the path ahead, “I saw Akito today.”

Kyo’s stomach dropped.

“Why the hell were you at the main house?” He asked, almost scolding.

“Haru turned black a couple days ago,” Yuki said. “I was checking on him.”

Kyo nodded, accepting it as the reason he hadn’t seen Haru at the dojo. “Damn cow,” he mumbled.

“I wouldn’t be too hard on him. It was mostly my fault, anyway,” Yuki gave a dry laugh, as empty as his smile and Kyo couldn’t help but turn to look at him.

“Haru’s got his problems,” Kyo huffed. “That ain’t your fault.”

“I suppose,” Yuki said, passively. “You know, you don’t have to walk with me. You can run ahead and keep on avoiding me. I wouldn’t hold it against you.”

Kyo swallowed, not saying anything. God, did it sound tempting.

“It’s fine,” Kyo said stubbornly. Yuki eyed him for a moment before giving him a tired smirk.

“Ach, you have something to say to me,” Yuki said, reading Kyo a little too easily (like always). “I
guess this had to happen eventually.”

Kyo turned to look at him again.

It was… all too late to be realizing this, but Yuki was, for lack of a better word, attractive. Kyo felt like the word didn’t quite fit, though. Not for the sensation it was to simply look at him. A creeping and almost undeniable feeling that Yuki could spark. Something like dread, terror, that pulled like gravity and stung like water in your lungs. Yuki was so beautiful it was devastating. That’s what it was like. His sad eyes, his pale, frightened skin, his thin form, but strong stance… Kyo would just have to come to terms with that.

Would have to come to terms with a lot of things, he thought.

Now, with Yuki beside him, and anger, rage, and hatred refusing to occupy his instincts.

With Yuki looking so broken, and Kyo feeling so uneasy about it.

*Just say it,* Kyo yelled at himself, and the force of his own thoughts caused him to stop walking altogether, causing a tired and confused Yuki to turn and look at him.

“Yuki,” he said gruffly. Yuki squared his shoulders, waiting for whatever words he had to say.

“What is it?”

“I,” Kyo swallowed. “I don’t hate you.”

Kyo felt as winded as Yuki looked by the confession. He felt something in him churn, something dangerous become unsettled beneath his skin, but he refused to take the words back.

Because, Kyo realized horrifically, it was true.

He didn’t hate Yuki.

He hadn’t for a while now.

He hated that Yuki made things complicated. He hated that Yuki could so easily dismantle him. He hated that Yuki always seemed to have the upper-hand. He hated that everything in his head had been such a mess these past few months. And he *hated* how little self-control he realized he had when Yuki was involved.

Those were all things that were fairly easy to disguise and manipulate.

But if Kyo had to be honest with himself, anything as white-hot as hated washed away with the rain on that day.

The day Tohru brought him home.

And Yuki was right there beside her.

Yuki had tackled him into the mud, form shaking, eyes watering, voice harsh from shouting, and that was a debt Kyo was never quite sure how he was supposed to repay.

So he didn’t say anything at all. Let things fade back into a normal routine. Let their happy home continue as usual, as if nothing had happened at all. With Tohru it was easy. With Shigure it was easy.
But with Yuki it was different.

Yuki didn’t talk too much after that, not for a while. At least not to him. He didn’t goad Kyo on as much. He didn’t challenge him, didn’t sneer at him. Yuki didn’t do much of anything, and Kyo was more than happy to follow that lead.

And when Yuki started looking at him again, they were with eyes he couldn’t recognize at the time, but now, a year later, were ones he recognized intimately.


And maybe… maybe Kyo felt something too.

Maybe he wasn’t a total monster. Maybe doing those kinds of things with someone you don’t even hate are bound to have an effect on any normal teenager (not that he was all that normal).

Maybe Yuki wasn’t too hard to be around, maybe he saw more sides of him, those ”nice” sides that Yuki would give him so tenderly that would only fill Kyo’s gut with a strange sort of guilt.

Maybe it was time to give in to Kazuma, to admit what he had known all along.

“You don’t hate me?” Yuki asked breathlessly, and Kyo refused to heed to his legs’ desperate request to run away.

He shook his head as a confirmation.

Kyo didn’t really know what to do from here.

And the smile that Yuki gave him had him not wanting to say anything else at all.

Because, all of the sudden, Yuki was coming towards him.

Yuki couldn’t quite help it. All he could really do was smile, because Kyo was so flustered and so earnest and so cautious. He wanted to laugh, but he was worried it would scare Kyo away. Yuki rolled his eyes, but his smile still stayed. Wasn’t not hating someone the same as liking them?

He felt thirsty all of the sudden, like he had been parched this past month, and all he could think about was feeling Kyo’s lips on his again. Letting himself sink back into this world, into Kyo’s routine. But this time more honestly. This time around it would be different, he would have to hold back wanting to kiss Kyo, wanting to be with him just a bit longer. This time he could cherish every
part of his body without remorse, and he would make Kyo understand what he had been holding back for so long.

It was thrilling, and his breath caught in his throat, and he felt as if the only way he could keep breathing is if he stole the air from Kyo’s mouth.

Yuki walked forward, gentle hands coming up to rest on Kyo’s cheeks, and he leaned in.

At this point, Yuki was used to many different kinds of responses from Kyo when he kissed him.

Their first kiss had been reluctant, shocking. Kyo’s mouth was stock still, and his lips refused to move. Other times Yuki would kiss him and Kyo would sweep him up with a desperate passion that would have Yuki pressing against him harder. Other times Kyo would be slow to respond, holding himself back as he let himself adjust to the idea that it really was Yuki kissing him.

What Yuki had never experienced before, though, was Kyo’s lips not being there at all.

Carefully, confused, Yuki opened his eyes, his hands still on Kyo’s face, but Kyo’s eyes were looking away and Kyo was definitely leaning back.

“I don’t think we should do this anymore,” Kyo said.

Yuki dropped his hands.

“What?” Yuki asked, disbelief melting into a confused kind of anger. “You just said that you don’t hate me.”

“That doesn’t mean—!” Kyo called back, still too close from a dead kiss. Yuki flinched. “I don’t…”

“I… I know, Kyo,” Yuki said, sparing himself from hearing Kyo finish his sentence. Of course Yuki knew, had known for years. But actually hearing it hurt a lot more than he expected it to. “I never expected you to love me back, I told you that! So let’s just… go back to how we were!”

Kyo gave him a look that burned to look at, one Yuki could coin as familiar, but he wasn’t quite sure why.

“Why would you do that to yourself?” Kyo asked, eyes squinting from disbelief.

Yuki felt as though he had been shot, and he reached out to grab the open fly of Kyo’s coat, zipper digging into his hand as he clutched on desperately.

“It’s fine,” Yuki grounded out. “It’s enough. Just to… do this… it’s enough.”

Kyo put a gentle hand over Yuki’s, “I don’t hate you.”

He said it again, but this time it hardly granted Yuki any relief.

“I don’t hate you, which means I’m not okay with just… fucking do this to you.”

Yuki snarled, “That’s my decision!”

“It’s mine, too!” Kyo said firmly, voice raising.

It was weird. To hear Kyo’s voice so loud, but free of anger, free of any kind of rage. It sounded so passionless to Yuki’s ears, and when he looked up to face Kyo, his eyes were turned down, watching him carefully, as if he were fragile and helpless.
It clicked.

Yuki knew what those eyes meant.

“Kyo,” Yuki breathed. “Do you feel sorry for me?”

He received his answer but Kyo looking away.

Yuki wrenched his hand away and took a step back, feeling dizzy. Feeling like he might throw up again, holding his insides together out of pure, unfiltered spite.

“You feel sorry for me,” Yuki said, manically. His fingers digging deep into his hair as he shook his head. “For falling in love with you, you feel bad for me.”

“Yuki—”

“Why couldn’t you have just hated me!?” Yuki shouted, voice more powerful than he expected it to be, and leaving a stunned Kyo still.

Yuki turned to walk quickly towards the house, hearing footsteps coming up behind him.

“Yuki, wait!”

On a reflex Yuki turned around to send his fist flying towards Kyo’s mouth, and he caught it with a frantic eyes and calm stance. He wanted to hit him, he wanted to punch him, and kick him, and maybe send him flying through the dark woods until he couldn’t even open his eyes.

Yuki dropped his fist.

“Don’t you dare follow me,” Yuki said, barely loud enough for Kyo to hear as he kept walking.

It was an unreasonable and childish request. They were on the pathway home. The home where they lived together. The home where Yuki would have to see Kyo every single day. Where he would have to live in this hell where Kyo only knew how to avoid him, how to look away from him.

Nonetheless, Yuki was relieved to hear footsteps stop and nothing following him as he finished the journey home on legs that were walking too fast for his head to keep up with.

He needed to lay down, he needed to think, or maybe to stop thinking, or maybe to leave Japan forever.

He needed to rip the name *Sohma* from every pore in his body, needed to breathe fresh, pure air out of this box, up from underneath this tightly shut lid. He needed eyes that weren’t shaped like Kyo’s, shaped into pity.

When Yuki reached his room, he slammed the door shut, sitting against the door, and letting deep unsatisfying breaths pass through him one after another after another. He frantically tried to shush himself, because Tohru could hear or Shigure could hear or Kyo could come home and hear.

He only had these thin walls around him to contain himself, and Yuki wasn’t sure if that was enough.

Yuki stayed there for a while, his body unwilling to move as he looked at his room, illuminated only by the soft half-moon that slid high into the sky.

He could hear life happening from behind the shoji doors. He could hear Tohru talking with Shigure,
hear newspapers being flipped, plates rattling together.

He could hear a door open and close followed by the small greeting of “hello, Kyo.”

He could hear footsteps coming up the stairs and stopping in front of his room.

He could hear a soft sigh, and then the opening and closing of a door again.

Yuki buried his face in his hands. Something inside him was upset, was angry, was thrashing around, and his body was feeling claustrophobic. As if his skin was suffocating him, and his tongue was swelling up and in the way. He felt sick.

And he needed to get out of here.

Yuki didn’t really think twice.

With an energy that he pulled deep from within the reserves of his bones, Yuki stood and grabbed the small duffel bag from his closet. He stuffed underwear, spare clothes, and his phone charger inside. He listened, pressed his ear against the door, and when Tohru and Shigure were both retired to their rooms, Yuki fled down the stairs and out of the house.

The cold air was a relief, calmed down his flaming skin, as he took his first steps on shaky legs into the late night. Yuki looked over his shoulder, expecting something to pull him back inside. Expecting something to waver, and to suddenly be okay with a result that Yuki had been expecting anyway. It didn’t happen.

For the second time in his life, Yuki ran away from home.

He mused, bitterly, how long it would be until he came crawling back.

It wasn’t as if he knew of anyplace better to go.
I am so sorry this took so freaking long???

Man oh man, things have been crazy busy in my life lately--something that only happens in cycles, apparently. And now that things are calming down I can finally FINALLY post this chapter. I've been very excited to share this, and it does bring the story of the cat and the priest to an end. But don't you worry, our regularly scheduled emotionally constipated boys will be back very soon! I promise that the next chapter is coming your way in a much more reasonable time frame. I'm making this the motherfucking summer of Furuba, my friends. I'm talking more of this angsty mess and much much more. You'll think you've gone back in time to 2009. Get pumped.

WARNINGS FOR THIS CHAPTER: This chapter features a pretty fair amount of gore and violence. Themes such as death, trauma, and suicide also make an appearance. There are also a fair amount of sexual situations with a minor. Also, it's fucking long as shit. But I think you guys don't need me to tell you this anymore. This is... as dark as the story will get. I promise. And if it doesn't sound like your cup of tea then I would urge you to maybe wait about a week for the boys to come back in town (where the angst is a little more controlled, hah).

I believe I mentioned in the last intermission installment that this is a story that's been brewing in my head for awhile. One that I found I had the idea for as far back as when I read Kyo explaining what his beads are to Tohru. I'm nervous to hand over this last part, but I hope it's a contribution to this universe that people will like. And I hope it's written well enough to convey the story of these characters. The canon universe of Fruits Basket is dark as shit, and I'm having a good time really sinking my teeth into all those ominous breadcrumbs that canon left behind.

Last, but not least, I'll leave you with a small guide the characters in this chapter so that you don't have to go back and try and figure out who everyone is:

Miho - The Dragon
Hideki - The Dog
Daiki - The Cat
Kazu - The Rat
Youta - The Snake
Takeo - The God
Noboru - The Former God (Takeo's Father)

For those who venture to read this ridiculousness, thank you and enjoy!

It seemed oddly quiet as Miho walked through the estate.

The sun was out, but the sudden drop in temperature was shocking enough to nobles with such fragile and pale skin to keep doors closed, creating a labyrinth of hallways that ran for what felt like miles and miles. Miho didn’t mind. If she were honest, the temperature wasn’t cold enough for her
liking yet, anyway, as shreds of summer still rained down with bright sunbeams that cut through the cooling air.

Full dishes, still warm enough to spread humidity across her knuckles, gathered on the tray she gripped, keeping her head high and eyes forward as she walked. Warm weather also meant having to dodge the pairs of eyes that would fall on her silently, boiling her skin with their questions and judgment. Even from maids who hid their thin, displeased mouths with their uniform sleeves. Their thoughts would cower behind open doors, and Miho was glad to walk silently through the maze of the estate and elevated wooden floors undisturbed for once. She welcomed autumn and winter with open arms.

Turning the corner, Miho kept a soft groan to herself when she passed by one door in particular, her eyes flitting up in disapproval as she held her head a little higher, listening as soft murmurs spilled through the paper doors.

Murmurs of voices that sounded very familiar, if she thought about it.

Miho tensed, her eyes fitting into a confused glare as the door opened and Hideki stepped out, followed by Sohma Yoichi.

Yoichi wasn’t a zodiac, wasn’t a man of any particular merit, in Miho’s eyes. But he had a cunning smile, and a speech that was good at complimenting the foolish. He agreed with everyone, nodded to every opinion and question, and paraded his humility around to inflate the egos of men who hardly needed the praise.

Men like that couldn’t be trusted, Miho decided.

And yet this boy (her junior by three years), silly with youth and compliments as empty as the ones he gave, decided he might be a doctor. The musing of the idea sat well enough with him to lazily pursue the career path, padding himself a luxurious existence in the nest of the Sohma household, seeing no need to expand his horizons beyond the wall.

Miho gripped the tray tighter as Hideki stopped his friendly chats with Yoichi to turn and give her an unapologetic smirk, Yoichi’s hand still on his back.

“Miho,” Hideki started, glancing down at the tray in her hands. “What brings you to this side of the estate?”

The dragon had to stop her face from contorting too obviously. Never expose your distaste, her mother used to say. Never let them see you angry.

“It’s 4 in the afternoon,” she said, carefully.

“Can’t let the beast go hungry,” Hideki nodded, with a smile too pleasant to be sincere.

“Miho, always a lovely sight to see,” Yoichi said, cutting the tension between them with his clear indifference to the tray of food and Miho’s tense shoulders.

“Yoichi,” she greeted back. “Hideki, may I ask why you’re here?”

“He wasn’t feeling well,” Yoichi answered in his place. “Something has been upsetting his stomach.”

Hideki made a mournful noise of agreement, “But I think I can rest easier now, doctor.”
“Hideki…” Miho tried to choose her words carefully, gritting her teeth behind her closed lips. “You realize that if you have any problems you can make an appointment with me anytime.”

“I don’t see any point in doing so if I want to keep my memories intact,” Hideki shrugged.

“That’s not all I do,” Miho said, a bit too sharply. “The physical body of a zodiac needs a specific sort of care and shouldn’t be left to,” her eyes trailed to Yoichi, “just anyone.”

“What’s with those angry eyes, Miho? You’re going to wrinkle your beautiful face,” Yoichi said with a smile that was too sickeningly alike Hideki’s.

“I mean it, Hideki,” she said, ignoring the younger man. “Especially now that Master Noboru has passed, there is bound to be—”

“Enough, Miho,” Hideki said firmly. “If Master Noboru were still here, he would tell you to keep your pride in check. Besides, you seem all too busy these days.”

Miho looked down at the try of food, before snapping her eyes back up. The two were smiling at her.

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Daiki didn’t even flinch when the door slammed open and closed. He hummed in wary amusement as footsteps grew louder and louder, not moving from his sunspot by the window as Miho entered the room in a huff.

“This doesn’t sound good,” Daiki commented as he heard her approach him, setting the food down with a harsh enough force that the dishes clanked together.

“I don’t think you realize how lucky you are to be isolated from this family,” Miho said sharply.

“Who dares to cross Sohma Miho this time?”

“Hideki finds new ways to infuriate and patronize me every day. I think he finds sport in it,” Miho huffed, letting herself relax at her side of the table.

“Ah,” he said, a spark of fear causing him to sit upright. He turned to face her.

“He’s started making appointments with that child doctor. Yoichi couldn’t chase a cold out of summer,” she huffed. “What I wouldn’t do to…”

“Be careful, Miho. I know enough about Hideki to know he’s dangerous. You should stay away from him. All the better that he won’t make appointments with you now.”

“That’s just a cat’s instinct against a dog,” she teased. Daiki gave a disapproving look.

“I’m serious. It’s best just to leave him alone.”

Miho rolled her eyes, “You’re so weak-willed.”

“And you’re headstrong and stubborn,” he laughed. “You’d make a better boar than a dragon.”
“Now you sound like my mother. She spent the last years of her life trying to raise me to be as demure as you turned out to be.”

Finally that comfortable smile broke out on Daiki’s face, a laugh chasing his lips. “Am I demure?”

“You’re certainly not brash.”

He considered the words for a moment, mulling over the words in his head before his smile turned soft and careful.

“If there’s anything I’ve learned, Miho, it’s that emotions are dangerous. Hatred, rage, vengeance, spite, if I were to feel any of these I would put this entire estate in danger. I would put you in danger.”

“Is that why you haven’t left this house in three years?” Her voice was sharp, but her hand went to cover his.

“Miho,” he started carefully, “your emotions may not turn you into a beast, but that doesn’t make them any less dangerous. Please, be careful. You’re a dear friend of mine, I would hate to see you suffer because of someone like that. He’s all the more dangerous now that Master Noboru has passed.”

“Hideki. A true example of what it’s like to live life without emotion.”

“There’s a difference. Mine are kept at bay. He never had any to begin with.”

Miho laughed at that, relaxing in the presence of her friend.

“Ah, I almost forgot. Inside the tray, there’s another letter for you.”

Daiki quickly lit up, carefully removing every dish so that he could pop the thin layer of wood from the top of the tray. He grabbed the letter as if it were precious, his eyes going soft as he flattened the paper out to read. Miho smiled, watching him devour the words.

Yet the familiar sight of Daiki’s playful eyes and small smiles was replaced by something far more serious as the moments passed. His hands gripped the pages tightly, and he hunched into the letter as if it had captured him by the neck.

“Daiki? What’s wrong?”

Daiki could only respond with another shudder of his shoulders and tears fell onto the tray below.

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Takeo shivered.

Bitter winds were digging into his skin. There was a heat humming under his skin, flushing his face and neck, which caused the cold air to burn that much harsher. He hardly noticed. He hardly noticed anything these days. Weather was the least of his concerns, and right now his senses were trained in completely on the sight before him.

Crouched onto his knees, eyes peering through a well-used hole in the shoji door, Takeo stroked
himself as he watched a man bury himself deep inside Youta. The snake was squirming on his splayed out futon, long strands of wispy, pale hair scattering around him as his face contorted into painful pinches of pleasure.

The other man grunted, and Takeo turned his attention to him.

He was handsome. One of the more handsome men Youta had bedded in some time. His shoulders were broad and imposing, his jaw was sharp, and his eyes were demanding, yet kind. That was something Takeo hadn’t seen in a while—kindness. He could tell from how his grip on Youta’s hips would sometimes break away to caress stomach and leg, from how he let out breathless smiles when Youta made a particularly wanting gasp.

Other men wouldn’t even react to Youta’s expressions. Most times flipping him over onto his stomach and digging their broad fingers into hips enough to bruise as they took what they wanted before scurrying away from the intimidating estate.

But what really stood out, what drew Takeo’s attention more than anything, was the scar above the man’s right eye. Clear and jagged. Gorgeous and rigid. Takeo bit his other hand to keep from crying out, as his fist moved furiously under his robes.

Youta was panting, grasping at hair that wasn’t long enough, and arching up into the man who met him enthusiastically.

The man smiled, and Takeo was finished.

The boy eyed the mess on his hand, panting as quietly as he could as he still listened in on the noises that would last for a while longer. He was young with a body too eager, as most boys were experiencing his age. And he tried to keep himself from getting aroused again when he finally listened to their mutual climax through the door.

It wasn’t long after that that Takeo was pulling himself up and walking away from the room. Whatever followed wasn’t his business, and frankly he wasn’t interested. He washed his hand off in the pond of the main garden, enjoying the splashing sounds that his hand made in the water before wandering around the grounds. It was nice here. Tranquil. Even more so with the colder weather that bit viciously at his now wet hand.

He didn’t mind. The years had forced a growth in him, and the pains were eased by beautiful things. He loved the gardens. He read poetry in his spare moments. He listened to the peaceful patters of rain. He drew art, and enjoyed noble meetings if only because he could gaze at the elaborate kimonos of wealthy women.

Nature was his favorite beauty, though. And this was his favorite spot.

He sat on a stone amongst the bamboo and the grass, under a tree that was beginning to color a deep red, and listened to water stir from the manmade stream that cut through the foliage like a thin, precise blade. It was peaceful, and he must have lost track of time because in what seemed like mere moments, Youta was sitting next to him. Relaxed posture absorbing the peace from the garden.

“How are you feeling?” Youta asked, his mellow voice blending effortlessly with the soft rustle of leaves against a breeze.

“Good,” Takeo said, honestly.

The snake smiled, “I had a feeling you might like this one.”
Takeo shrugged, an expression as still as the undisturbed water from the pond. It had been years since any ripple had disrupted such downtrodden eyes.

“He seemed gentle.”

“Too gentle,” Youta sighed.

“You looked like you were enjoying it.”

“You wouldn’t believe all the different expressions I can make,” Youta’s grin was that of a deviant. Free and careless. His hand reached out, tilting Takeo’s unfocused eyes to him, sliding his thumb over his young, plump lips.

Takeo didn’t flinch.

“Why don’t you let me find someone for you? You’re at an age where you should be gathering experience more practically. And it’s a shame to let such a pretty face go to waste.”

Takeo wrapped his fingers around Youta’s wrist, pulling his hand away from his face easily.

“I told you, I don’t want to.”

Takeo felt Youta’s finger circle around his ear, lips coming forward so his voice could fall into a whisper.

“And me? You’ve already seen all the faces I could make for you.”

Takeo turned his head to face the snake spirit. Youta’s face was thinned and matured, his eyes overflowing with both a knowledge and lust that seemed unattainable. He looked like an adult. Takeo supposed, now with his father deceased, he was one too. But Takeo still felt small against the expression.

“Could you find someone with longer hair next time?” He asked in lieu of providing an answer. Youta gave an amused sigh as he pulled away.

“Long hair is just a novelty. The trick is find similar features in the face. Did you notice? His chin was near identical,” the snake said, triumphantly. Takeo gave a small smile and nodded, eyes still focused on blades of grass.

“The scar,” he said, meekly. Youta hummed in agreement.

“Maybe I’ll invite him again. Would you like that?”

Takeo gave another weak shrug, hoping Youta would take it for a nod. Youta was good at reading him, good at doing things that pleased Takeo. He couldn’t say he trusted Youta, he couldn’t say he particularly liked him, either, but somehow that didn’t stop him from being comfortable around him. From being drawn to him in a room full of people, even if they didn’t exchange more than a few words. He felt protected, oddly, by Youta’s deviancy. It felt nice to know that someone else knew who Takeo truly was, and to not care that they did.

“How long do you plan on sitting out here?” Youta asked, pulling at his sleeves to cover his hands. The fabric was probably hiding gooseflesh, and Takeo smiled softly to the ground.

“You don’t have to sit with me,” Takeo said.

“I know.”
It was odd to have a zodiac, an underling, pity him like this. Takeo didn’t really mind either way. Maybe because pity felt different between them. Maybe because he knew how desperate another could be to please a god. While his father was alive he understood, he shattered every nerve and emotion in his body in hopes that he could reshape them into something that Noboru—that the god—was pleased with. Now that he was the only one, now that he knew how the zodiacs looked at him, he allowed himself to indulge in these moments.

Sometimes Takeo even liked to test that. He wondered if he sat here until sundown if Youta would stay by his side, shivering himself into his zodiac form. Not even slinking away when he did.

He didn’t get the chance to find out.

“Master Takeo!”

He turned his tired eyes to a maid, middle-aged but still beginning to gray, who was running towards him in as big of strides as he robes would allow.

“Master Takeo! Master Takeo!”

“What is it?”

She bowed by the waist when she was close enough, panting for breath, “Please come back to the house!”

“What’s the meaning of this?” Youta asked in his place.

“Master Takeo, Master Youta,” her head finally peered up to offer Takeo a breathless smile. “Master Kazuo has just arrived at the main gate.”

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The mountains were peaceful, enthralling, and burned with a clarity of air. The open spaces and tall marshes of grass that weaved around hilltops and trees, and fought against skies that poured down snow were like an open playground. Here, in the Sohma’s Edo estate, that was not at all the case.

Well-manicured walls adorned with expensive vases and scrolls, and perfectly pristine and white shoji doors surrounded the three men in the room. The air was still, but as if it had been tamed from where miles away it rolled free. The room was lavish and grand, with high ceilings, and Kazuo could hear the shuffles of discomfort coming from behind him—most likely at having to sit in seiza position for so long. They had been waiting for nearly an hour now in this room, and not a word had been spoken.

A low, impressed whistle was the only thing that broke the silence after a long moment.

Kazuo turned around to give an authoritative glare, but couldn’t quiet find it in him to keep back his exasperated smile.

Behind him sat two boys, young but built strong from life and work in the countryside. Straws from their beaten and threadbare sandals still stuck to their socks, their tan and rough skin hidden behind dust covered robes, and hair cut short and mused by the elements of a journey.
The taller of the two shoved his elbow into the other boy’s side in response to his whistle, and the two boys exchange barely concealed snickers, only to straighten up immediately when Kazuo cleared his throat.

“Remember, do not speak even if they address you,” Kazuo said, his senses picking up on rushed footsteps walking his way. The two responded with obedient silence and sat as stock still as their master when the door slid open at the hands of a frantic looking maid.

Kazuo held back tears at the sight of Takeo stepping into the room.

He looked baffled, awestricken with just the thought of Kazuo walking the pathways of this home once more. They shone bright and he stepped forward carefully, bringing his hands out so they could gently slide onto Kazuo’s cheeks.

Takeo’s hands were hesitant, shaking, fingers exploring the flesh as if to make certain that this was happening. Kazuo smiled up at the boy with eyes still so young when he felt Takeo’s thumb brush over one of the three still prominent scars on his face, before the air suddenly felt cold at Takeo’s hands being withdrawn. His face was flushed red and his breaths struggling to remain even.

When Takeo stepped far enough back, Kazuo knelt forward in a deep bow, the two men behind him echoing the movements.

“Master Takeo,” Kazuo started, the deep rumble of his voice familiar to the estate. “I am so sorry to hear about the passing of your father. Master Noboru was a great and honest man. I know you will take his place with dignity and compassion.”

Kazuo couldn’t look up, but the silence felt strange. After a moment he decided to continue.

“If you will allow it, I have come to pay my respects. I know I’ve already disobeyed the former master by returning to this house, but if you will allow me to return I—”

“Are you back for good?”

Kazuo peered up, carefully allowing himself to sit back up into a formal position. The two men behind him, however, didn’t budge from the floor.

“Master Takeo, I assumed—”

“Will you be coming back for good? Forever? Are you back to stay?”

Kazuo let a small smile fall onto his lips as he looked up at Takeo. His attention was diverted for a moment from the sound of shuffling, and only then did he recognize the string of company that had crowded in the room behind Takeo.

Several maids and servants watched with impassive faces but curious eyes, Youta standing at the edge with arms crossed and bored expression. Beside him the young ox boy, who could barely stand when Kazuo had left, and now was old enough to sway on his legs. Behind them the monkey and the ram, who were blossoming into young adults.

Kazuo’s attention had been so immediately devoured by Takeo he was surprised at himself for his inability to observe, but now that the gathering was clear he discreetly strained his eyes to try and find Miho’s night black hair.

“Who are they?” Takeo asked, pointing a finger towards the two still bowing figures. Kazuo bowed his head.
“These are my two trusted disciples. Akio and Eiji. They have vowed to follow me wherever I go. I wanted to present them to you.”

Akio, the taller boy, and Eiji sat up with still reverent and stoic eyes.

Kazuo watched as Takeo turned his gaze away from the two boys, and directed his attention to the crowd before them.

“Leave us be, go back to your duties,” the crowd dispersed, disappointed but silent. The maid was about to close the door when Takeo held up a hand, “please show the disciples out.”

The maid gave a deep nod as the two boys behind Kazuo exchanged glances.

“Go,” Kazuo said. “I will meet with you soon.”

Without another word, the two boys left, and the maid snapped the door shut.

The air stilled between them, and Kazuo was left to face what he had been fearing his entire journey back. Noboru had passed, leaving Takeo the head of the family, with the spirit of the god residing fully inside him. Noboru had shunned him years ago, and he wondered if he had taught that same resentment into Takeo. He wondered if the casual ways he was able to speak with the younger boy could now only be distant, fleeting memories. He wondered, with an aching heart, if Takeo hated him.

These worries were interrupted by Takeo stepping forward, bringing himself closer inch by inch as if he were approaching a frightened animal. With a quiet air that seemed to consume Takeo, he knelted before Kazuo, and with slow moving arms he reached forward, wrapping Kazuo in a desperate hug that squeezed tighter and tighter with each passing moment. It was gradual and overwhelming, and Kazuo clung back with a great sigh of relief.

“You’re back,” Takeo said into Kazuo’s shoulder, and the rat spirit could hear the tears on his tongue. “I thought I would never see you again.”

Kazuo moved his hand in comforting circles on Takeo’s back, “I’ve missed you, Master Takeo.”

“Takeo,” the boy corrected. “When it’s just us, please.”

Kazuo smiled, “I’ve missed you, Takeo.”

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“—ta? Master Youta?”

“Hm?”

The maid shrunk back, nervously bowing before the snake. She looked young, and he knew he would have recognized a face so vulnerable. She must have been new, perhaps the daughter of one of the servants on staff.

A dull pang of attraction swam lazily through him, not forceful enough to excite. He thought to himself he might have liked to bed her if it were three years earlier. Maids were a convenience to his sexual hunger. They would never attempt to embrace, would never wrap their arms around him even
in the heat of the moment—something even expensive prostitutes would sometimes fall into by accident.

Beautiful, vapid women were his favorite. Women attracted to his money and name who would transform themselves into whatever it was Youta desired. They were fun, and never had any desire to embrace him at all.

Lately, however, the risk that women presented combined easily with his steadily growing disinterest. He had a different type now, and he could barely stop his pitiful smirk at the anxious girl. How narrowly she had been saved from his clutches.

The girl lifted her gaze, still hesitant to meet his eyes, “I was instructed to tell you that your dinner has been prepared in your quarters.”

He regarded her with careful eyes, shifting his glance to the closed door that hid muffled sounds of conversation.

“If… If you’d like, I can inform you when Master Takeo finishes speaking with Master Kazuo,” she offered.

“I think I’ll stay here. Tell them I’ll have my dinner later.”

“Of course,” she said, about to scurry away when demanding steps came thundering down the hall. She turned, bowing again when Hideki came into view, his hands crossed and buried inside his sleeves, his face pinched into distaste, and his sharp eyes raw and unforgiving. He didn’t give Youta nor the maid a second glance as he reached towards the door.

“Master Hideki! You can’t—”

“You can’t go in there,” Youta supplied, giving Hideki a sly smile. He whipped his head around to Youta accusingly, to which he responded with a shrug. “Master Takeo’s orders. He’s speaking with Kazuo.”

“I’m aware,” Hideki hissed. “When did he return? Why was I not informed immediately?” He accused the maid who stammered for an answer.

“Can you blame anyone? If you treat every servant like you’re about to eat them, no wonder they’d be hesitant to approach you,” he laughed, waving the girl away. “Go on, resume your duties.”

The maid didn’t waste a moment before rushing away. Hideki snarled.

“I should have been told of Kazuo’s return.”

“You know now,” Youta said, sharply. “As if there was anything you would be able to do.”

Hideki opened his mouth to reply when the door slid open, revealing Kazuo, with Takeo trailing just behind. Whatever softness was left from his conversation with Takeo faded away at the sight of the two men. He stood taller, his jaw tightening, his eyes hardening. Youta gave him a nod with a smile not one of his fellow zodiacs had ever been able to read. Hideki didn’t bother to hide his sneer.

“Kazuo,” he said.

“Hideki,” Kazuo replied, before turning away from him. “You’re looking well. How have you been, Youta?”
“Thriving,” Youta gave Kazuo a humored smile, which Kazuo replied to with a nod.

“Kazuo says he’ll be staying for a while,” Takeo said, a smile that had long been lost finding its way to the young boy’s expression.

“Perfect,” Youta said, eyeing the rat. “What a lovely turn of events.”

“I heard you brought two strays with you,” Hideki said.

“You of all people using the term ‘strays’,” Youta laughed, earning a glare from Hideki.

“My disciples, you mean?” The air around Kazuo turned dark, and Youta and Takeo exchanged a glance. “They’re loyal students of mine, and I would like them to be treated with respect.”

“They’re outsiders, and they cannot stay here,” Hideki said. “Only Sohmas are allowed within these gates.”

“With all due respect, Hideki, that is not your decision to make. I have already discussed it with Master Takeo. They will be staying in the servants’ quarters close to my own.”

“It’s alright, Hideki,” Takeo interrupted, an exhaustion clear on his face. “If they’re disciples of Kazuo I’m sure they can’t be bad people.”

Hideki’s lips pressed in a thin line, but his eyes closed in restraint, “Yes, Master Takeo.”

“If you will please excuse me,” Kazuo said. “I’ve had a long journey and I would like to retire to my quarters. Tomorrow I will pay my respects to Master Noboru.”

“I’ll see you tomorrow, Kazuo,” Takeo said giving Kazuo’s hand a quick squeeze. Kazuo smiled back, before making his way down the hallway and leaving the three men behind.

Hideki didn’t waste much time in breaking the silence.

“You father would be furious if he knew you allowed him back in here,” he said.

“My father is dead,” Takeo said. “It doesn’t matter what he would think.”

Youta eyed Takeo. As he grew, he had been able to catch the brief flashes of the man he was turning into. A detached man, estranged from his own emotions, estranged from the purity of joy and laughter. A man who buried himself in lavish beauties and beautiful artwork as if to try and garnish the empty walls of his own heart. There was still glimpses of a child in him, scared and earnest and curious, but every day that boy was being left behind. And this man, at times, was demanding and direct. He was cold, with eyes that narrowed passionlessly. It made Youta shiver, made him eager to see even more.

But just as it came, it was gone. The brief defiance under Takeo’s skin was replaced with an impassivity—the greatest weapon he had against his fear of Hideki—and he was disappearing down the hallway to his own quarters. Youta watched with keen amusement, careful not let his desire slip through his eyes.

He would grow to be a fine master.

The thought was brutishly interrupted by a rough grip on his arm.

“And what do you think you’re doing?” Youta’s words were curled like the familiar smirk on his lips as he let Hideki drag him down the hall.
The older man whipped his head back with a glare, not bothering with a response. Youta gave a laugh, and let his feet carry him in the shadow of Hideki’s frustration.

“Did you release the last of your frustration?” Youta asked.

He stretched himself out, long and languid on the futon. His hips were sweetly sore, his chest still flushed red, sweat drying on his temple. He looked down at his own legs, lazily. The naked milky skin was damaged by bite marks, reddening in this cooling air. He lifted a leg up to trace his finger around one. Hideki really was a dog.

“He doesn’t like you, you know,” Youta taunted when Hideki remained stubbornly silent. He released his leg so that he could lay flat on the futon again.

His head rolled to stare at Hideki’s back, a pipe between his fingers as he blew puffs of smoke out into the graying day. His face was still pinched and distraught, a snarl only barely being restrained by his clenched jaw. Youta wondered if Hideki had run out of energy, if maybe his stamina was fading as he neared an older age. He wanted to laugh at the thought, took comfort in the other’s growing weakness.

The dog looked back to give Youta an unimpressed stare before taking in another deep inhale of his pipe.

“He doesn’t need to like me, he just needs to trust me.”

“Who would trust a face like that?”

If Hideki was bothered by the comment, he didn’t show it. Instead, he extended his arm to flip his pipe upside down so that the used tobacco would fall onto the ground outside. Silently, he refilled it from the small glass capsule beside him. It wasn’t until he took another deep inhale that he spoke again.

“You haven’t called on me lately,” he said, voice neutral and face still turned away.

Youta hummed, “I’ve gotten bored of you.”

Hideki let out a disbelieving snort. Youta felt a flicker of irritation run through him. It was true, he had gotten bored of Hideki’s company. And whenever they were together like this Takeo refused to take up his familiar post outside the wall, where a small hole in the paper could be seen from here. But being with another zodiac was an intense experience. Everything felt deeper, stronger, desperate, complete.

Hideki was a disgusting man who struck a sliming fear into his fellow brothers, but it didn’t stop the fact that Youta would cry out all the louder when his hands trailed down his chest, down his stomach, down his thighs.

Youta turned his face away, staring at the other end of the room. Not wanting to occupy his vision with the back of that man.

“You’ve grown fond of Master Takeo, I’ve noticed.”
“What of it?” He replied with a boredom that tasted bitter on his tongue.

“You do realize that with Kazuo back, Takeo’s favor for you will be soon to fade away, don’t you? Your half-baked duty as that rat’s replacement won’t last you very long.”

Youta scowled to himself, something burning in his stomach. He could hear Hideki pulling the strings in his own voice, choosing the words that would strike him the hardest, that would target perhaps the only weak spot he had developed over the years. Well, that was a given. Master Takeo was every zodiac’s weak spot. Even Hideki’s. Even Kazuo’s.

That’s just how it was.

Youta was about to respond when he heard Hideki give a soft growl.

“I knew it,” he said, sliding back to slide the doors shut almost completely, only allowing a small sliver of space so that he could peak through.

“What is it?”

“Kazuo, that rat,” Hideki snapped. “He’s emerged from his quarters, I see. And I know exactly where he’s headed.”

Youta rolled himself onto his stomach as Hideki continued to spy from his post. In this stifling room, the gates around this family felt so small.

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Kazuo had lived in the estate all his life. In fact, until he had decided to journey to the mountains to become a priest, he didn’t have any recollection of going beyond the gates of the Sohma house for more than an evening. He remembered when he was younger Master Noboru taking him by the hand to local festivals and, once, even to a fireworks show.

At the time the tight grasp around his palm felt safe and complete, but now that he was older the hand might as well have been a shackle. A chain that kept him linked to the inside of this house. Perhaps it was then that such a restlessness grew inside of him, perhaps that anxiety was something that always brewed in him.

Or maybe it had been there from even earlier.

Kazuo remembered that dark, rainy night from when he was so young. Of a beast with no restraints rampaging within the crowded walls of the estate. Kazuo remembered Daiki—no. Kazuo remembered the true form of the cat spirit. Clawing at him, leaving markings that would never heal on his face, his chest, his legs. He remembered the hungry look of rage in those dark, brutal eyes.

He remembered being under him, a scared child heaving in what could have easily been his last breaths. And he remembered the beast above him shaking, screeching out as if being whipped or burned. In what could have been the last moments of his life, Kazuo remembered a child equally as scared, equally as damaged, falling onto his chest, naked and shivering. Crying even though he wasn’t even conscious.

Kazuo’s blood had run cold. A chill that rivaled winter rain, and his whole body seized desperately.
He wrapped his arms around the small body on top of him, hoping that combined something warm could flicker.

Kazuo let a finger glide over his scars as he walked down the path.

Perhaps it was then.

Or maybe it was even a month or so after. When Daiki had found him, scared that anyone might catch him outside of the cellar where Noboru’s aging father had arranged for him to stay until he deemed necessary.

Daiki had dropped to his knees, falling forward in the most despairing and earnest bow Kazuo had ever seen.

Tears streamed down his face as he did.

And Kazuo realized that this gentle spirit being mixed with that of a bloodthirsty monster was the only reason he was still breathing.

Perhaps, it was when Daiki ran away. Back to the cellar, willingly. A child, barely conscious of what evil could be holding back the very manifestation of it to the point where his seams were about to break. Kazuo realized that perhaps this blessing inside of him was something far more ominous.

Something far more dangerous.

That must have been the case, because though his life had been spent within these walls, nothing felt more comforting and like home than the walk to Daiki’s house. The house they had built together. Built to keep the young boy safe, and warm. Built to remind Daiki that even he could know what rain looked like, sounded like, felt like, without the fear of something else overtaking his form.

It was the only gift he could think to give him, at the time.

Now, he had something grander in mind.

But now was not the time to think of things. Now, all Kazuo wanted was to see his dear friend again.

Kazuo walked up the winding dirt path, his eager feet going faster than usual, until he was standing in front familiar shoji doors, with the calming sound of a steady sohzu. Carefully, he slid the door open, slipped off his shoes, and waked inside.

Kazuo walked quietly, he always had. He had an exceptional talent for sidestepping creaks in floorboards. The house wouldn’t groan around him, though its skeleton was old and rusted. Out of habit, he moved to the largest room where he remembered Daiki loved to sit and take in the sun.

His heart filled with a warmth so foreign and welcome when he saw the back of an orange head. Daiki was exactly where he thought he would be, Shoji doors opened wide to take in the last of the Autumn day. Even as a chill stretched through the home, the sun was brilliant, and shining down on the boy.

“Daiki,” he breathed. Relieved, ecstatic, burdened with such heavy feelings of wanting to see his smile.

Daiki turned immediately from where he was sitting on the floor, eyes wide and glossy, chest beginning to rise and fall more harshly at the very sight of Kazuo before him.
“Kazuo,” he echoed.

In the quickest of moments, Kazuo found himself embraced, engulfed, by the warmth that was Daiki. The cat spirit latched onto him, his head burying into his chest just as any cat would when seeking attention. Kazuo wrapped his sturdy arms around him in response, hugging closer, tighter, harder, until all he could breathe was Daiki.

“I’m home,” Kazuo managed to say.

“Welcome home,” was all Daiki could offer in response.

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“Not much has changed since you left,” Miho said.

It was morning, and the sun was high in the sky but its heat had yet to grace the soil. The two walked quietly through the graveyard, passing by clean, pristine stones. Some were decorated with flowers and gifts. Some left completely bare. Kazuo kept his gaze straight ahead.

“Since Master Noboru passed in the summer, Take—Master Takeo has become more resigned. He doesn’t come out of his room much, unless one of us can tempt him with music or a performance. Last month we went into the city for the theater. I think he enjoyed that.”

“You think?” Kazuo asked.

“It’s hard to tell with him, lately,” she paused. “He’s also taken a liking to Youta.”

Kazuo hummed to himself, “Youta?”

“I’ve been keeping an eye on him,” Miho reassured. Kazuo nodded.

“And Daiki?”

Miho smiled to herself, “I don’t know why you’re asking me. I think you’ve talked with him more than I have.”

“Letters can’t replace flesh and blood,” Kazuo laughed. “And from what he tells me I don’t think that’s true. Daiki’s written about you a lot. He says you visit him, even outside of his meals.”

“Perhaps that’s true,” Miho said, smile still on her lips.

“And to think you were afraid of him when you first met him.”

“I can’t believe I was ever afraid of that boy.”

“He’s your age, Miho,” Kazuo said, gently.

Miho shrugged, finishing the rest of their walk in silence until they stood before the gravesite. It was clean, polished, but it looked as if no one had offered gifts in some time. Kazuo placed his own offering at the base of the stone before stepping back and giving a bow with his hands together in front of his face.
Miho mirrored his actions, placing her own offering down, soon after.

Neither moved for a moment. Taking in the engraved characters that made up their former god’s name. Kazuo drew in a shaky breath, and Miho took an extended interest in how the sun reflected against the immaculate stone.

She hadn’t come here since the funeral, and hadn’t planned on coming back until the anniversary of his death. Being here made her uneasy. She could tell it had a similar effect on Kazuo.

“I feel ashamed,” Kazuo said, suddenly. Miho turned her head to face him. “When Master Noboru died, I… I could feel it. I cried like a child. I was in the mountains, and I knew.”

“…There’s no shame in that. We all cried.”

Kazuo shook his head, “I pretended I didn’t know. When I received your letter informing me that he had passed, I feigned my surprise. Only then did I begin my journey home. If I hadn’t received your letter… I probably never would have come back at all.”

“Kazuo.” Miho placed what she hoped was a comforting hand on his shoulder. Kazuo’s face began to pinch, tears forming in the corners of his eyes.

“There was nothing more connecting us when he died. The gracious spirit moved on to Takeo, and I—I realized how little I cared for him. How little he cared for me. He manipulated me, he used that power against me. He kept me inside this estate for my entire life, and even when I came back six years ago it wasn’t enough. He wanted more from me. From this… thing inside me. And because I couldn’t give him that, because I couldn’t obey every command given to me I grew ill. I was bedridden for months. I wasn’t able to eat, I could barely stand. My disciples had to serve me water with my head resting on their lap, as if I were a newborn.”

Miho stood silently, his words making her uncomfortable though she didn’t move her hand away from him.

“How much has this zodiac warped us? How much has this zodiac mutated our souls? We instinctively hate a boy so gentle and kind, yet follow tirelessly behind a selfish man. Because if don’t, we’ll be punished. That’s not living.”

“With Master Takeo things will be different,” Miho encouraged. “You know what a good boy he is.”

Kazuo shook his head, “I love Takeo. He has a caring spirit. But what if that’s simply not enough?”

“When would be enough?” Miho asked, her voice giving more of a demanding edge than she expected. Kazuo didn’t flinch at the tone, instead stared endlessly at the grave before him.

It took a long moment before Kazuo spoke again.

“If I asked you to assist me with something, would you?”

Miho turned to face him, “What do you mean?”

“Would you?” He repeated, insistently.

She gave him a hard stare. “Of course I would.”

Another stretch of silence until Kazuo broke the air once more.
“I’m going to end my life.”

Takeo awoke with a start, perspiration soaking his forehead. His head turned to the door that led to the outside and he leapt from his futon to throw the doors open wide. The sun was high in the sky and morning was already burned away.

When an elderly maid entered the room, Takeo whipped his head around.

“Good afternoon, Master Takeo. You slept well,” she said with a smile.

Anxiously he wrung his hands together, feeling ripples of anxiety through his body. “I’m sorry. I slept in. I didn’t mean to.”

The maid stopped for a moment to give him a quizzical look, before letting out an unsure laugh. “You certainly don’t have to apologize to me. As the head of this family you can do whatever you like. That includes sleeping in as late as you wish.”

“But,” Takeo still couldn’t bring himself to relax. “My father used to get so angry…”

The maid straightened herself, approaching the boy to give him a soft ruffle of his hair. “Your father is at peace in another world now. You can live your life as you want.”

Takeo didn’t quite know how to respond to that. So instead he asked, “Where’s Kazuo?”

“Master Kazuo went with Lady Miho to the graveyard to pay respects to your father. They left only recently.” Hesitantly, she added, “Would you like to join them?”

“No.”

He dressed and prepared for the day.

Daiki jumped when he heard the door open with an unfamiliar crash and four sets of footsteps stomping in after. By the time he had jumped to his feet the clambering legs had already found their way into the main room of the house, where Daiki had previously been sipping tea and soaking in the sun from the open doors.

Kazuo, Miho, and two boys he didn’t recognize stood before him. The strangers made his body go stiff, but their relaxed stances and the gentle expression of Kazuo allowed his shoulders to sink back down to normal.

“Daiki, I’d like to introduce you to my disciples,” Kazuo said. The two boys bowed deeply before snapping back up. “This is Akio, and this is Eiji.”
“Pleased to meet you!” They said in enthusiastic unison.

“Teacher, may we inspect the house?” Akio asked, fervently. Kazuo nodded and the two fled from the room excitedly, talking in hurried hushed tones that made Kazuo shake his head with an amused smile.

“I apologize, they’re usually more polite. They’ve been excited to see this house since I told them about it.”

“You… told them about this house? About me?” Daiki asked, eyes wide.

“I’ve told them everything,” Kazuo said, only to interrupt himself with a chuckle. “I grew ill while I was in the mountains, and there was no other way to explain my transformations besides the truth.”

Daiki looked towards Miho, but her solemn face was turned away from him.

“They tended to me very well, I’m grateful for them.”

Daiki nodded, watching as one boy came in, tracing the walls with his fingers and excited breaths.

“This house is powerful,” Akio said. Eiji came in behind him with his hands on his hips.

“That really must be something huge inside you,” Eiji said looking at Daiki. Akio walked over to slap him on the back of the head. “Ow!”

“Eiji, watch your tongue,” Kazuo scolded.

“No, it’s alright,” Daiki laughed. “The demon inside me has been suppressed thanks to your teacher. You’re allowed to admire his work.”

“See!” Eiji said, mostly to Akio, as he pointed a finger towards the red-haired man. The taller of the two slapped his hand away.

“I’m so sorry, Master Daiki. Country folk just don’t ever seem to have any manners,” Akio said with a bow.

“You’re from the country!”

“I’m from a village, you’re from under a rock or maybe the bottom of a swamp,” Akio responded.

“Boys, please,” Kazuo said with a smile as he eyed Daiki. His flustered expression was amusing, never having gotten used to being addressed so formally.

“They really are rowdy,” Daiki said with an overwhelmed laugh. Kazuo echoed the sound. “You weren’t lying in your letters.”

“It’s certainly never quiet with them around,” Kazuo said.

“So you are the guy teacher writes all those letters to,” Eiji said. “He talks about you a lot.”

Daiki turned his head to face Kazuo, a confused look on his face but Kazuo was staring straight ahead, refusing to meet his gaze as his eyes pinched into a scolding glare.

“Eiji, I wish you wouldn’t speak so freely in front of my family,” Kazuo said. Akio whispered something into Eiji’s ear which earned a snort from the shorter man.
“Akio says you’re embarrassed,” he said. Akio stepped on his foot. “Hey!”

“Snitch.”

“Can you boys inspect the house in another room, if you don’t mind?” Kazuo said, perhaps a bit too loudly. Daiki stared down at his feet with a smile, feeling a soft warmth in his chest. Kazuo had thought about him when he was in the mountains. He was someone who existed outside of this cage, and a few exchanged letters.

He watched as the two disciples slumped out of the room, moving on to inspect the more modest areas of the house.

“I’m sorry about them,” Kazuo finally said.

“It’s alright, it’s nice to have company,” Daiki laughed, sitting on the floor around the table and offering Kazuo and Miho some tea. “Miho visits quite often, which is always nice. But I don’t think anyone else has come to this house since six years ago.”

“I knew you and Miho would get along,” Kazuo said, giving Miho a smile. She returned it, half-heartedly. Sipping from her tea as she stared at the table.

Daiki’s expression crumpled into concern, “Miho? Are you alright? It’s unusual for you to be this quiet.”

Miho nodded, finally looking up to give Daiki a smile.

“Kazuo, where did you come across your disciples?” Miho asked, steering the conversation away from herself. Kazuo was now the one staring down at his tea, a fond smile slipping onto his face.

“Akio worked in the neighboring temple from where I was originally studying under my own teacher. He came to our temple when he was offered work. When I first became ill, he cared for me. Even after I transformed before him, he stayed by my side. Later, when I explained to him our family’s situation, he became fascinated. He stayed by me to learn more about the zodiac. Overtime, he became an extremely loyal disciple and friend.

Eiji we came across in our travels. He was an orphan boy, homeless, and who had barely eaten when we found him. We brought him back to health in a small mountain town, and when he was fully recovered he insisted he become a disciple as well. He’s certainly the more rowdy of the two, but I think he helps to calm Akio. He’s the most serious child I’ve ever met.

They balance each other, just as they balance me. Especially now that I’m pushing an older age.”

Daiki chuckled and Miho gave a weak smile.

“I’m glad you weren’t lonely in the mountains,” Daiki said.

“I wasn’t alone,” Kazuo said. “But lonely has a different meaning.”

Daiki stared into those gray eyes, felt himself latching onto the comfort they gave. They seemed so potent up close, and he couldn’t help but smile.

Miho stood, breaking the trance that both men had fallen into, “I think I’ll let you two catch up.”

“Miho, wait—”

Daiki was cut off by the two boys bounding back into the room, sitting across from Daiki at the side
not occupied.

“We were wondering if we could ask you a question, Master Daiki,” Akio said.

“Um, well, I suppose,” Daiki said, looking between Miho and Kazuo.

“If the wards are all in the wall, what do you use when you leave the house?” Akio asked.

“Oh. I don’t,” Daiki said.

Kazuo looked up at Miho with confused eyes. She turned her gaze away.

“You don’t?” Eiji asked.

Daiki shook his head, “if I did, the demon might return.”

“Teacher told us that he built you this house six years ago, what did you do beforehand?”

Daiki looked down at his tea, “It’s hard to explain. I learned how to keep this demon at bay. I kept it locked inside of me, always aware that it could break free. Rain made me weaker, which made certain seasons more difficult.”

“You held back a demon without any wards?” Akio asked, clearly perplexed.

“I have them now, that’s what’s important.”

“Daiki,” Kazuo started. “You haven’t left this house once? But… The outdoors, the sun… How have you not gone mad?”

“I get plenty from the open doors, and I keep myself busy,” he said. “This is for the best.”

Kazuo looked up at Miho once more, who gave him a resigned look in return, “You knew about this?”

“Nothing I said could ever get him to leave.” Miho crossed her arms. “He’s oddly stubborn.”

“You are certainly the last person I want to hear that from,” Daiki said, with a misplaced humor in his voice.

“Daiki, my intention was never to keep you trapped in here. This house was so that you could live freely.”

The cat spirit smiled, placing a hand over Kazuo’s, “This is how it has to be. Now I live without fear. I’m grateful to you every day because of that.”

Kazuo gripped Daiki’s hand tightly as the disciples sat in silence. No one felt the need to speak in the moments that followed, feeling the sun pour through the open doors.

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A certain chill was falling into the bones of the estate. Takeo felt himself shiver under his robes, pulling the fabrics tighter onto himself as he stared down at his studies. His penmanship was
suffering from the tremors in his hand, and the numbness in his fingertips. He always was particularly sensitive to the cold, especially in his fingers and toes.

Takeo felt a sudden warmth embrace him in the form of a wool blanket. He looked up from his papers to see Hideki smiling down at him.

“Thank you,” he said quietly. He turned his attention back to his writing.

“You would do well to take care of yourself, Master Takeo. The vessel of the gracious spirit is always quick to fall ill,” Hideki said.

“I’m aware.” Takeo felt the brush between his fingers, cold to the touch from the air in the room. Everything felt as if it was freezing. He nestled himself further inside the blanket. “Did you need something?”

“I just wanted to pay you a visit, Master Takeo. Is that so bad?”

Takeo shook his head, but didn’t offer him any other response.

“You seem to be in better spirits now that Kazuo has returned,” Hideki continued. Takeo shrugged. The dog laughed, “There’s no need to hide it.”

“He’s escorting me to dinner in the city tonight,” Takeo said. He indulged himself in the sentence, trying to pretend that he hadn’t been waiting anxiously for the sun to set.

It had been nearly a month since Kazuo had returned, and Takeo could hardly stand how happy he was. He wasn’t sure when it became so hard to let those emotions show on his face, to break through such a tough mold. When he was younger he felt as though people could see into him as if he were a piece of glass. His father could always tell. He could tell when Takeo was sad, distressed, angry, happy. And with every passing emotion, his father had made sure to smother it deep inside of him.

Perhaps he was broken now. Perhaps this was the only way he would ever be able to show his smile again. Trapped within his mouth, behind his teeth. Trying desperately to shine through his eyes.

Takeo was glad that Kazuo didn’t seem to mind. That beautiful face marred with scars keeping that same smile that Takeo remembered from when he was younger. Kazuo always grabbed his hand so carefully, talked to him as if he were the only person in the room, stared into his eyes to show he was listening to every word that fell from his lips.

Nothing about him had changed.

“He seems to be spending quite a lot of time with you,” Hideki said. Takeo felt his lips curve even if his eyes remained stoic. “But what I find strange is how much more time he’s spending with that demon.”

“What?” Takeo asked, finally looking up at Hideki.

Hideki’s posture was always tight and rigid whenever he was in front of Takeo, his back as stiff as a board. But his expression always seemed lazy, calculating, meandering. He gave Takeo an easy smirk, head cocked to the side and the boy flinched.

“He spends most of his days there,” Hideki continued. “Visiting the demon early in the morning until late in the evening. It’s quite interesting.”

“How do you know this?”
“Friends of mine have told me so,” Hideki said. Takeo paled, his mind flashing towards the stray dogs that would laze around the estate. They would curl up under the balconies, or sit by open doors, and pretend to sleep on the side of the pathways.

Takeo put his brush down.

“Did you know that Kazuo exchanged letters with that beast? They were in correspondence nonstop these past six years.”

Takeo felt his chest swell painfully, an uneasy feeling rising inside of him. He curled into himself, away from Hideki. He didn’t want to hear anymore.

“Did Kazuo ever send you a letter?”

Takeo opened his mouth to respond, only to have a maid enter after knocking on the door.

“Master Youta is here to see you, Master Takeo.”

“Oh…”

“I’ll leave you be, Master Takeo. Please, let’s speak again soon,” Hideki bowed before exiting the room, brushing past Youta with devious eyes that Youta countered with a careless expression.

The door closed, and Youta sat before Takeo, who was clutching the ends of his blanket tightly.

“Master Takeo? Are you alright?”

Takeo nodded weakly.

Youta eyed the door a bit warily. The heavy presence of Hideki always lingered behind wherever he went like a bitter smell that he could taste in his mouth. The weight of it seemed to be piled entirely on Takeo’s back who slouched further with a pout. The snake spirit smirked, always enjoying the expressions that made Takeo seem more like a boy.

“It seems as though something’s troubling you,” Youta said, not bothering to hide his amusement. He sat before him, sharp yellow eyes prodding words from the younger man.

Takeo shrugged, resisting the attempt, but when those eyes wouldn’t focus off of him Takeo sighed.

“I have a lot to finish before tonight,” he offered.

“That’s right,” Youta started, eyeing Takeo’s studies, “Kazuo is taking you out tonight. How nice. Are his mice coming?”

Takeo shook his head, “I didn’t want them to. I just wanted… I wanted it to be just us.”

“My, my, how sly you are, Master Takeo. I dare to say you might have learned a few tricks observing me so closely.” Youta smiled when Takeo flushed, but his expression stayed solemn.

“Kazuo says I should get to know his disciples,” Takeo said.

“Oh?”

“Apparently they’re around my age,” Takeo mumbled. “They seem okay, I suppose.”

“What were their names again?”
Takeo shrugged.

After another moment he spoke again, “They’ve been following Kazuo for years now. That’s what he said. They probably know a lot about him.”

“Not nearly as much as you, Master Takeo.”

“Maybe.”

A silence passed between them, and the two allowed a chill to seep into their bones. Youta could feel an agitation under his skin. This morose look that overtook his master had gone from amusing to sour. The air was heavy, even under Youta’s lighthearted words.

Youta couldn’t help but think to himself how much worse the taste in his mouth became when Kazuo was involved, even in comparison to Hideki’s slimy flavor.

“He never wrote me,” Takeo said, finally. “He wrote the cat. But he never wrote me.”

The snake slithered up beside Takeo, sliding his hands over Takeo’s blanket-clad shoulders and down to his hands to hold the cold fingers between his own.

Enough was enough.

“Did you know there’s only one bond that can rival that of the zodiac?” Youta whispered into his ear. “The bond between two lovers.”

He could feel Takeo stiffen underneath him. He watched as the skin of his face turned pale. Youta buried his face into the top of Takeo’s head and smiled.

“That’s not possible,” Takeo said, retreating further into himself.

“But it is,” Youta followed him, keeping his ear close to his mouth. “You would know if you simply… acted upon your desires. You would see what it feels like to have fully realized passion thrumming beneath your skin.”

“Stop,” Takeo said, voice quivering, when Youta’s hands began to slide up and down his arms. “Stop saying these things. Kazuo would never… The cat is a demon!”

“Demons are known for many things,” Youta continued, his voice dropping to a whisper. “Deceit. Lust. Pleasure.”

“STOP IT.”

Youta flinched back as if the words had burnt him, his body pushing him back until he hit the wall behind him. A cold-laced fear drenched his blood at the sheer reflexive impulse of his body. He thought he might collapse just from replaying those words in his head again. But he couldn’t help it. There was something deeper in that commanding voice, centuries, and worlds old, that thrilled Youta.

He smiled as he stood.

“Very good, Master Takeo. Learn to master that voice and no bond will ever rival ours.”

Takeo turned to glare at him, defiant and petulant, and Youta bemoaned to himself that it wasn’t anything stronger. Still just the mask of a child that covered up the real treasure inside.
“Get out,” Takeo said.

“Always and forever, as you wish, my master,” Youta said. He slid the door open and peered over his shoulder before sliding it back shut behind him. “Always and forever.”

A soft knocking sounded on the door. Kazuo turned his head.

“Come in.”

A maid sat before the door, bowing her head as it slid open to reveal Miho. Her face as somber as Kazuo would have imagined.

“Please, excuse us,” Kazuo said to the maid, who ducked away behind a closed door without a moment of hesitation.

Miho, however, seemed to be content to linger by the doorway. Her shoulders were drawn down, and her hair seemed to fall aimlessly around her face. She looked pale, with eyes tired, and bones exhausted beneath a pale skin that was kissed with stretched anxiety.

Kazuo had to look away, tying his simple, clean robes as he faced the wall of his room.

For as long as Kazuo had known her, Miho had roots that sprouted from the bottom of her feet. She was sturdy, still, unwavering, and stood as tall and proud as a trunk of a tree that bragged a height of miles. Her hair fell like leaves, bending around weather and nature, but never succumbing to it. Miho was a root, sunken into the earth, because if she did not grab onto the drying soil of this family she would be toppled and crushed.

Women always seemed acutely aware of this, doubly so for Miho, and Kazuo had a brief moment of envy for her sex. He wondered if he could ever possess a confidence that wrapped around the nerves within his body that could dictate his expressions, instead of the wistful masks that tried to hide a fear as prevalent as tooth decay. Men seemed alike in that way. Rotting behind misplaced trust and power, while women hid a ruthlessness behind underestimation.

Now, however, Miho looked wilted and it was Kazuo’s fault.

His body wouldn’t turn to face her, and he felt weak.


“I’m taking Takeo to dinner beyond the walls tonight,” he said, and added with a smile, “He’s changed so much, I can hardly believe it. I want to learn all I can about this new him.”

“Before you leave?” Miho asked, voice sharpened. Kazuo’s smile dropped.

“Right, before I leave,” Kazuo said.

He finished tying his robes, worn and clean, and he patted himself down. It was strange having the maids clean his clothes again. These past few years he lived frugally, with dirt and wrinkles embedded in his clothes. Now everything felt clean and polished.
“Did you need something?” Kazuo finally asked when the tension in the room grew too thick. Miho took in a deep breath.

“Do I have any chance of stopping you?”

He turned, not because he found the strength to, but because she deserved it. She deserved to see his answer in his eyes. “No.”

Miho stepped forward, tentatively at first, but her feet collapsed beneath her, bending into a shaky run as she collided with Kazuo. Her hands fist in his robes as she buried her face in his chest. Her shaking shoulder were the only indication that she was crying.

She looked like a child when she cried, and Kazuo figured that must be why she rarely allowed herself to do so.

“Please don’t do this,” Miho said. Kazuo stepped away, leaving her reddened face exposed. His chest ached.

“I have to,” he said.

“You do not!” She cried. “You do not have to take your own life! You do not have to end things this way! Do you know how many of us rely on you? What will Takeo do without you? What about Daiki! Do you even understand how much he cares for you?”

“This is for the best! What would be best for Daiki—for any potential cat in this family—is to have this curse break! To have this all ended! To not be slaves to the whims of one man! Takeo is a kind boy, but what about the god that comes after him? Or after them?! Master Noboru was strict and blindsided and had a closed off heart, but he could have easily been a man that was cruel for sport! Where would we all have been then?”

“That won’t happen! The bond is too strong for that to happen!”

“Don’t be naïve, Miho! You’re better than that,” Kazuo snapped. Immediately, he took a calming breath, bringing his voice back down to a composed level. He wrung the angry tension from his eyes and let exhaustion seep in, instead. “We’re not free like this. Beyond these walls. We can’t even embrace our own mothers and fathers without turning into what we really are. We’re not allowed full access to ourselves. We’re not allowed our own bodies. No one should have to live confined behind these walls, knowing that the spirit that brews inside them isn’t even their own.”

“What if it doesn’t work? What if you can’t kill this thing that’s inside you? What if another rat is reincarnated the moment you shove that blade in your stomach?! Are you willing to die for nothing?”

“It won’t be for nothing,” Kazuo said. He looked at Miho straight on, stance unwavering and unapologetic even as his expression was laced with remorse. “I’m leaving you my bones.”

“What?” Rage and confusion snapped together on Miho’s face.

“Actually, I’m leaving Daiki my bones. And every cat if that’s how it has to be.”

“You cannot be serious.”

“I am.” Kazuo lifted his arm and traced his fingers along his exposed forearm. “The spirit of the rat, combined with my teachings will act in the same way the wards of Daiki’s house. If combined in a perfect loop, and worn around his neck or wrist, he will never have to worry about transforming again.”
“Kazuo…”

“No one will be confined to that house. He won’t have to live like a prisoner.”

Miho shook her head, tears still spilling from her narrowed eyes, “you would do all this for him, and yet you don’t even realize that you being alive is worth so much more.”

“That’s not the point,” Kazuo said. “This is for something greater. If I am able to break this cycle, that’s life I’m granting to those who might have come after us.”

“Can’t you think about this more? Do you have to decide something like this so suddenly?” Miho pleaded.

“This is not sudden. I returned to see my family once more. This has long been decided.”

Miho drew in a shaking breath, her face contorting as if trying to fight the tears that fell. Her body quaked and her hands balled tightly into fists. Kazuo wrapped his arms around her, pulling her close, but even so her body remained rigid and stiff.

“Maybe I’m being selfish,” Kazuo said, softly. He clutched her tighter. “I do not want to live in this world any longer. I want to die as my own man, with my own spirit, and with a promise that better years will come for this family.”

Miho wrapped her arms around Kazuo violently, pulling him closer. The words stung, resonated in a way that was too familiar. Spoken words that she could see reflected behind the eyes of nearly every zodiac.

The trapped spirit that could only ever grind out the softest of words under a shadow that swallowed it whole.

_I don’t want to live._

“Don’t do this alone,” Miho said, doing her best to keep her sobs behind her words. “I will be with you. Don’t do this alone. Please. Don’t do this alone.”

It was silent as she wept in his arms. The air was still, and the autumn breeze combined with nightfall to bring forth a chill.

“Three days,” Kazuo said. “At midnight.”

Miho felt as though her breath had been robbed of her. She held him tighter.

“What will you tell Daiki? And Takeo?”

Kazuo drew in a heavy sigh, “that this is a journey from which I will not be returning.”

They held their embrace until the sun had completely fallen beyond the horizon.

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The moon was high in the sky when Youta heard the knock on his door. The small disturbance was enough to rouse a chill in his skin, shutting the window where he was previously standing and
observing the clear sky.

“Who is it?” He called. His voice felt so loud in the mansion where so many were tucked under a blanket of sleep.

A maid opened the door, bowing before rising to enter the room.

“I apologize to bother you at this hour, Master Youta. Master Takeo is calling for you.”

He quirked an eyebrow, “It’s very late. What could he possibly need at this hour?”

“I’m not sure, Master Youta. When he returned from the theater he asked me to call for you.”

“Is that so?” Youta smirked as he tightened the sashes of his robe.

The maid didn’t respond, but dutifully led the man from his room down a familiar route.

It wasn’t long before Youta was standing before the doors of a secluded, and well-used room. The maid opened the door for him, and Youta felt disappointment curl in his lungs when Takeo was not the one sitting there waiting.

However, the man who sat on his knees in the middle of the room was giving him a bemused smile. It took Youta a moment to remember who he was, when his eyes fell upon his right eye.

It was the man with the scar. Who weeks ago had fucked him in this very room.

Youta stopped himself from looking straight at the small hole in the wall when the maid closed the door behind them.

“I wasn’t expecting you to search for me again,” the man said. His smile was kind, even if it did border on mischievous. His hair had grown out slightly since their last meeting, but certainly not long enough to please the voyeur on the other side of the wall.

Youta felt eyes on him, felt his skin prickle with heat at the thought of being observed so intensely.

It was different this time.

Takeo was always a willing observer, but never once had he arranged anything. Never had Youta felt so needed.

The snake dropped to his knees so that he was even with the man and crawled forward, hands sliding up broad chest and pale neck and against the nape of the man’s neck. He seemed perfectly pleased to watch Youta make the first move.

“I suppose,” Youta untied the sash of his robe and let it hang open, “that I needed another taste.”

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Youta’s back arched like it might snap in two. He could feel lips on his chest, his collarbone, tongue sliding across his neck as hands rocked his hips down onto the other man’s length. Youta writhed in his lap, his skin flushed with desire as the hands on his hips gripped desperately. The other man was panting into his skin, biting and kissing through his labored breaths and Youta let another moan slip
through his lips.

Takeo could hear everything.

Takeo was watching.

With small, childlike eyes that burned with an unhampered maturity. But he was watching, observing every arch in Youta’s back, every cry that slithered past his tongue, every time his plump lips opened around restrained screams.

The snake shivered in a stranger’s hands. Overwhelming pleasure was assaulting him from just beyond the shoji doors, disjointed fingers and lips and body only playing a minor role in the grandest theater Youta could ever imagine.

His body was bending and his voice was cracking and his chest was heaving all for another. All for the whims of something that rumbled within his blood. As if he were experiencing pleasure for two, as if his body was being racked with the need to be this wanton mannequin that just wanted to please. To pleasure. To be watched.

Watch me. Look at me.

I’ll moan so much louder for you.

Suddenly Youta’s back was against the futon, instead of being perched on the man’s lap. He groaned at the change of position, lamented how he could no longer grind his weeping shaft against the other man’s stomach, but the sentiment changed when the rough grip on his hips turned tighter, more frantic.

Youta splayed himself out on the floor. Taking up as much space as he possibly could. Devouring as much of the room as could be possible. He writhed as the man with the scar entered him again and again, ruthlessly slapping their hips together. Youta’s hips were meeting each thrust, demanding something harsher, demanding anything more that could accompany the feeling of eyes burning trails over his skin.

Oh, he hoped Takeo was touching himself. Touching himself and watching him. Looking at him and holding back his gasps from behind the paper walls. Letting that anxiety and guilt and confusion burn into something brutally salacious.

Desire.

The man with the scar placed a gentle hand on his cheek, and Youta’s eyes snapped up in surprise. As if he had forgotten he had been there at all. The man was looking at him with such concentration and wonder, gentle fingers translating into something familiar. For a brief moment, Youta felt sorry for him. Something was budding in the man above him that he could never reciprocate. He couldn’t even remember his name.

If anything, he felt like an intruder on his moment. The true voyeur amongst them. Seeing things he shouldn’t be, witnessing something he would never even be able to comprehend.

Youta wrapped his arms around the man’s shoulders and brought him close in a tight embrace, if only so he wouldn’t have to see those unfamiliar eyes. He let his hips slow into something sensual and intimate, setting a pace that he knew Takeo enjoyed.

The gentility. The gracefulness. The intimacy.
That’s what Takeo wanted. Youta would give him that, put his pleasure aside to allow him to watch what he wanted. Would turn the man’s face towards the wall so Takeo could clearly see that scar. Would lace his hands together with the man just by his head so that Takeo could breathe in the sincerity.

He came harder than he had in his entire life.

Youta laid there in a disjointed bliss and barely registered how much time had passed before the man was picking up his clothes and dressing himself to leave. Had he exchanged words with him as he left? His tongue felt used and careless, and the man’s eyes were kind and hopeful as he turned away. What had he said? Not even he knew.

His head was still reeling. The only thing that poured enough strength in his boneless body was the thought of seeing Takeo. He needed to see him right then. Needed to look at his beautiful face. Maybe it would be flushed and embarrassed. Maybe he would still be erect. Maybe he would ask Youta for even more.

Maybe he would thank him. Every possibility brought a shiver through him as he quickly tied his robes in place and all too eagerly burst from the door, rounding the corner to see his master.

Takeo was crying.

His knees were drawn up to his chest, hugged tightly as if he were to uncoil he would fall apart. His face was buried into his legs, and somehow through the tense rigidity of his body his shoulders were shaking. Youta wasn’t quite sure what to do.

Youta had followed him out of curiosity, a motivator that fueled most of his actions. The boy had been sniffing around the room, had been lingering during such intimate and heated moments. And then ran away like a frightened rabbit. He had never really spoken with the young master before. Master Noboru rarely mentioned him, or allowed the boy to accompany him anywhere. It was as if he was being hidden away, out of sight and out of mind.

Still, his heart broke at the image Takeo painted. Youta wasn’t one to distress himself over other people’s woes—especially not that of a stranger’s, which is what Takeo was. But it was like seeing an old friend cry. A friend of thousands of years.

“Are you alright?” Youta sat beside him in the garden, and Takeo flinched at the sound.

The boy shook his head, “something’s wrong with my body.”

Takeo whimpered, sniffling violently before a panicked sob tore out of him. Takeo curled into himself even more.

“Do you want me to take you to Miho?” Youta asked, and Takeo shook his head vigorously. The tips of his ears turning pink.

“No, no, no,” Takeo rocked back and forth as if trying to comfort himself. Youeta felt pin pircks behind his eyes, as if he might cry as well. He placed a gentle hand on his back. Stuttering words finally broke from Takeo’s frantic tongue. “I-I’m all hot, a-and,” another gasping sob. “M-My… It’s standing a-and it feels weird. I think I m-might vomit.”
Youta’s eyes widened, and he felt bad for letting a chuckle slip past his lips. Where had they been keeping this boy? What must it be like to be so afraid of your own body.

“Don’t laugh!”

Youta stopped, but his smile stayed, “I’m sorry. But you should know it’s natural, young master. It’s called an erection. It happens when your body gets excited.”

“Excited?” Takeo asked, peering up from behind his knees. Youta smiled, covering his shoulders with a comforting arm.

“Did watching me excite you?” Youta laughed when Takeo’s face lit up. “It’s alright, no need to be embarrassed. You’re young, so your body is very easily roused. It won’t always be like this.”

“It won’t?” Takeo’s tears were dissipating, and Youta smiled as he tucked a piece of hair behind the young boy’s ear.

“It won’t,” he reassured. “One day, you’ll find out exactly what pleases you down there.” Youta gestured to his nether regions that were still tightly trapped between Takeo’s legs and stomach. “Women with large breasts, men with strong hands…”

Takeo blushed and buried his head again.

Youta gave an amused hum, “Takeo, do men excite you?”

Takeo shrugged and Youta laughed again, “you have quite the cute face. One day it might even be pretty. Men like that, you know.”

There was a beat of silence, before Takeo turned his serious and tear-puffed eyes to Youta, “all men?”

“Did you have someone in mind?” Youta asked. Takeo flinched away from him again. He smiled at how easy it was to read the boy. It was endearing.

“Young master,” Youta leaned in close to Takeo’s ear. “Have you ever tried touching yourself while you think of them?”

Takeo’s face turned bright red, but he stared at Youta in amazement.

“It’s a pleasure like you’ll never experience.”

“Master Takeo?”
The younger man’s back was pressed against the wall, knees drawn up tightly to his chest, where his arms folded over them, his head buried as his shoulder shook. His robes were messy and rumpled, and Youta could see the shine of Takeo’s seed on his clenched hand.

Takeo was crying.

They were the same tears from when he was a boy.

No, Youta thought, perhaps they were different. When little boys cry it’s because they’re scared. When little boys cry it’s because they’re confused. It’s because the world is moving too fast, and they just don’t understand why the ground is shaking beneath their feet.

When men cry, it’s because they’ve been broken.

Takeo sobbed into his knees, body shivering like a leaf in a snowstorm. Face puffed and red, and Youta felt his own tears slide from behind his eyes.

Silently, he sat beside Takeo, letting his head fall back against the wall. Listening to the sobs of the boy beside him. Listening as piece by piece, he chipped away.

“H-He’s leaving,” Takeo gasped through stuttered breaths. “Kazuo’s leaving.”

Youta nodded in acknowledgment, but there was no way Takeo could have seen it.

The snake draped his arm over the boy and allowed him to cry into his shoulder for the remainder of the night.

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It was the third day too soon.

It was frightening to Kazuo how well he slept. He woke up from his slumber to a rising sun, still hesitantly painting the sky. His body felt stiff and weak, but something inside him was well rested. Well prepared for today.

Kazuo rose before a maid could rouse him. He had been avoiding the ruthlessly loyal staff and the pained and disappointed looks they would give him as they shuffled around him. They were a staff so completely in-tune to Takeo’s every whim and emotion. He was glad that Takeo would be left such loyalty when Kazuo was gone. It comforted him, even though Takeo wouldn’t talk to him at all these past couple of days.

It hurt Kazuo to know Takeo was so angry with him. He could feel his body retching from the mere idea that his deity, his Takeo, could turn against him. Kazuo vomited into a basin to start his day, but dressed as if it were any other.

There was one more that he needed to see, and his chest lit afire and burned cold with anxiety at the mere thought.

Daiki.

His friend. His dearest companion.
The thought of regarding him so fondly almost caused another wash of acidic bile to come up his throat, but he kept it down. He kept every overwhelming emotion locked tight behind his eyes, using his shaking legs to climb up the hill and to the secluded house on the edge of the property.

For a moment he could pretend he was living another life.

Being in this place, being with Daiki, felt as if he were miles and oceans away from the walls of the Sohma estate. It felt as if he were coming home to a different life. He took a moment and wondered what it would be like to climb a lonely hill, deep in the mountains, to find Daiki tucked away inside the house. Or, even better, to find him lazing under the sun. To see him running through grass that would be taller and thicker and far more unkempt. It was a thought that made Kazuo glow, that made the sky look all the bigger. As if it were endless, not as if it were unreachable.

His thoughts were brought to a halt when the sound of the sohzu hit cleanly against the boulder, leaving an echoing sound that seemed hollow and threatening. A steady pace that reminded him he was being watched closely.

He pulled back the door and stepped inside to take off his shoes.

Kazuo could feel his steps masking any noise. As if his body was trying to silence him. Maybe that’s what it meant to be the rat, Kazuo thought. Steps that went unheard, words even less so, and a body that would always be silent, no matter how blood rushed and raged inside it.

He entered the room, taking a moment to watch as Daiki sat in the patch of sun, absorbing the light. His red hair almost looked golden when the bright sun touched it, only to fade back into its autumn locks. He blended with the dying leaves, the dramatic colors that announced the bareness that would be winter.

It was almost too heartbreaking to watch.

Kazuo cleared his throat, lamenting how Daiki jumped at his quiet entrance, but savoring in how the tension in his shoulders smoothed when he saw Kazuo looking back at him.

That was a smile Kazuo would take with him to his grave, and he felt selfish for wanting to burn the expression on his skin so that he could never part with it.

“Kazuo!” Daiki said, standing to greet him. The brightness in his eyes overriding the exhaustion that was deep-set behind his skin that had paled over the years apart. He looked happy, and Kazuo felt a pain in his stomach. As if death might take him naturally after all.

“I won’t tell him,” Miho said. “I won’t be the person who breaks his spirit even more.”

He swallowed back whatever was clogging his throat, realizing he hadn’t spoken in ages when Daiki’s expression changed to something concerned.

“Kazuo? Are you alright?”

“Yes, I—” Kazuo brushed past him so that he could sit at the table. Sitting down heavily, fearing he would have collapsed had he stayed on his feet for a moment longer.

“Kazuo? What’s wrong? Are you sick?” Kazuo could hear Daiki’s feet shuffling behind him, pouring water from a small vase and into a cup. He smiled to himself. When Daiki didn’t speak, he could hear how large his feet truly were. Kazuo was taller than Daiki, but it didn’t diminish the other boy’s height at all. He was a large man, tall with slim limbs that could stretch and run wildly if he allowed them to.
But as Daiki came back into view, bringing the glass of water to Kazuo’s lips, Daiki seemed small. A lifetime of trying to retreat into his own body made him seem as easily shaken as the leaves on the trees that clung to those last few moments of life. He looked scared of the smallest snowflake.

Kazuo accepted the water, tilting his head back to let it slide down his throat, reveling in how Daiki sat so close to make sure every last drop was lapped away. When it was gone he slid back, placed the glass on the table, and looked at Kazuo expectantly.

It took a long moment until Kazuo was able to speak.

“Daiki,” it was the only word he felt he could genuinely say. “Daiki… how do you feel about me?”

Kazuo drew in a breath when Daiki went quiet.


Kazuo closed his eyes, he felt weak and sick, as if his body were repulsed by the words, even if his heart readily took in the weight of each one.

“Please don’t.” Kazuo took his hand back. “Please don’t think so highly of me, Daiki. I’ve trapped you here. I’ve forced you into this secluded life. And now I’m—”

He couldn’t say it. So Daiki said it for him, “You’re leaving again?”

Kazuo looked at him with remorseful eyes, narrowed and darkened by shame and resolve. Daiki only smiled at him.

“It’s alright, I understand.”

“You do?”

“I do.” Daiki reached forward to take his hand again, but Kazuo watched as a moment of indecision brought the hand back to his lap. Kazuo’s fingers suddenly felt cold. “Go as far as you can from here.”

“I wish I didn’t have to leave you here. In this place.”

Daiki looked straight at him, but his gaze didn’t quite meet Kazuo’s eyes. Instead, he could feel Daiki breathing in the scars on Kazuo’s face, burning them into his memory. Kazuo wished he could rip them off his face. Wished these scars didn’t serve as the iron bars that kept Daiki so firmly in place that it rooted him into this house.

He could at least tell him that.

Kazuo wrapped gentle, pale fingers around Daiki’s wrist and pulled his hand up to his face, bringing the pads of Daiki’s fingertips to where the scars left bumps and grooves on his skin.

“I don’t regret these scars,” Kazuo said. Daiki’s eyes were wide as Kazuo guided his touch from his forehead, across his nose, and down to the edge of his lips. “I don’t regret that day. I’ll never forget that look in your eyes.”

“What look?” Daiki asked, but his voice had mixed with his breath.

“Of someone more powerful than this curse,” Kazuo said. “You are an impossibility that I’m so glad
to have met. Please don’t let these scars shame you. Because I’ve always worn them proudly.”

A tear spilled from Daiki’s eyes. His fingers still lingering on Kazuo. Deep claw marks now being traced over by tentative skin.

“When are you leaving?” Daiki asked.

“Tonight.”

“How long can you stay?”

Kazuo looked at him and wished he could say forever.

“Until the sun goes down.”

Daiki, ever so hesitantly, shifted himself forward, until his arms wrapped firmly around Kazuo, an embrace he returned with every part of his body.

And he stayed.

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“You shouldn’t be so upset when you’ve been the one avoiding him,” Youta said.

Takeo gave a defined pout that almost looked like a glare as he stared out the open door and into the garden. A small part of him would freely admit that he had kept the door open to spite Youta, keeping that sharp breeze pouring in as Youta refused to move from his side. But even as he shivered, the snake refused to slither away.

Takeo wasn’t sure if he was grateful for the company or not.

The sun was beginning to set and something gripped at the young god’s heart at the thought that Kazuo might have truly leave without bidding him goodbye. That he wouldn’t even try to see him one last time. He would cry if there were tears left in his body, but the last two days had washed them all away.

“He hasn’t left yet,” Youta said, surely trying to be comforting.

“I know that,” Takeo snapped. “He’s with that cat still.”

“It’s natural to want to be with your lover on your final night.”

“SHUT UP.”

Takeo could feel the snake behind him tense. He could smell the fear off of him at his suddenly booming voice. But Takeo couldn’t be bothered to look behind him. He buried his eyes into his knees, drawing himself into a ball and heaved up dry, panicked breaths that he scolded himself into calming.

“Stop saying those things,” Takeo wrenched out. “Kazuo wouldn’t! Not with him!”

Youta didn’t say anything, and Takeo could feel the frustration building in his throat.
When Takeo lifted his head again the sun had almost completely come down, and a knock on his door whipped his head around to see past Youta who was still keep his mouth obediently shut.

“Come in,” Youta finally said in his place. The door slid open to reveal Hideki.

“He’s back in his room,” he said, inviting himself inside. “I don’t know for how much longer.”

“He just got back?” Takeo asked.

“He’s been in that house since the sun’s been up,” Hideki offered, making no effort to hide the smirk from his face.

Youta chuckled to himself and Takeo glared at them both.

Without another word he walked right past the two and ran as fast as he could all the way to Kazuo’s room. Night was overtaking the estate and the halls were being bathed in soft lights that only allowed Takeo to see right in front of him as his feet carried him quickly.

He waved the maid away when he finally approached Kazuo’s room. He quickly opened and the door, allowing himself inside. He rested against the door trying to catch his breath as Kazuo stared at him in shock. Takeo hated how surprised he was to see him, hated how it seemed to overrule any other emotion that could lay there so beautifully.

“Master Takeo—”

“Were you going to leave without saying goodbye?” He demanded.

“No, of course—”

“Were you?!”

Kazuo gave a small sigh, his eyes turning soft, “I wasn’t sure you wanted to see me at all. But of course I wouldn’t leave without seeing you one last time.”

“I don’t want to see you!” Takeo said with a pout, crossing his arms as he turned his head indignantly away. Kazuo gave a laugh. “What?! What’s so funny?”


“I’m not a child,” he mumbled, but didn’t resist when Kazuo pulled him into a hug. Kazuo was still so tall, and Takeo was still growing into his body. He breathed in Kazuo’s scent deeply, as if he hadn’t been allowed oxygen in his whole life.

He loved the smell of Kazuo. Warm and comforting, filling the only memories of his childhood worth remembering. Then it was comforting, now it was exciting. Now Takeo pulled himself flush against Kazuo and felt his chest ache, his body ache.

He wanted him so much.

“I would never leave without seeing you. I never want you to think that I would forget you.”

Takeo grasped at Kazuo’s sleeve, “Maybe you will. Maybe you’ll see so many new people and new things that you won’t remember me at all.”

Kazuo hugged him tighter, “That would never happen. You will always have a place in my heart. Parting from you wounds me deeply.”
“Then don’t go. Please. Please stay,” Takeo begged. Burying himself into the embrace, Takeo used all the strength he had to hold onto the only man that ever mattered.

Yet that strength was swept away as Kazuo broke from the embrace to stare him down in the face. He put a comforting hand over his cheek, gentle and kind and everything Takeo had ever yearned for. “I’m sorry, Takeo.”

Takeo looked up at him, need clawing at his throat, the futile feeling of wanting something burning a hole in his chest. He pushed himself back into the embrace, not wanting to meet eyes that didn’t want to stay. Kazuo let him.

And with all the honesty and earnest desire that he had kept locked away, he said, “Have sex with me.”

“What?”

Kazuo pulled away to look down at the boy, but Takeo was already spreading Kazuo’s robes open across his chest, kissing the flesh there hesitantly. Hungrily. Kazuo took hold of the younger boy’s shoulders and jerked him away.

“Takeo, what are you doing?” Kazuo looked frightened, a panic in his voice as Takeo stared up at him. And how hard it was to keep his eyes on his. He had exposed that one piece of skin and now he wanted more. He wanted to unwrap Kazuo until he was bare before him. Wanted to pull him flush against his equally naked skin. He wanted to make the same noises Youta did, as Kazuo pushed inside of him.

He wanted Kazuo’s mouth on his. On his skin. On his neck. Nipping and biting and gentle, just as everything Kazuo did. That same desire overflowing until they both couldn’t stand it, as he had seen so many times before. He wondered if he could pull those same desperate sounds from Kazuo.

And he wondered if afterward he would stay. Wrap his arms around Takeo and allow him to sleep. Stay by his side, want for him and not the outside, love him in every way without distractions.

Would Kazuo form a bond with him that seemed so much brighter than the jagged strings that connected them now.

“I told you, I’m not a child,” Takeo said firmly. “I know all about how men do it.”

“Takeo, what you’re asking of me is not possible. I can’t… I can’t do this with you.”

“Why? Why not?!” Takeo asked on a dry sob. “Do you not love me?”

“Oh Takeo.” Kazuo kneeled down hastily and put a hand on Takeo’s cheek again. The action hurt. “Of course I love you. I love you as if you were my brother.”

“Then why won’t you just shut up and do it!” Takeo lurched back, pointing accusing eyes at Kazuo. “You’re just a zodiac! Don’t you have to do everything I say?! Shouldn’t all my requests be considered law?!”

“Takeo…” Kazuo reached out a hand that was slapped away.

“What’s the point of being in this wretched family, as this wretched god if no one even does what I say?! If I can control nothing?!” Takeo charged forward, a fresh surge of tears spilled form his eyes as he pounded his fists against Kazuo fiercely. “I’m supposed to be your God!”
“You are, of course you are.”

“Then why did you leave? Why did you leave me with him?! I didn’t care that he wanted you to be head of the family! I don’t want to be! I never wanted to be! I just wanted you to stay!”

Takeo fell to his knees, his hands buried into his eyes as he sobbed, each falling tear accompanied with a scream as defined as that of a newborn’s.

“You left me alone! You left me all alone! And now you’re leaving again! And you won’t even fall in love with me! You won’t even pity me! Even though you’ve done both for that… that… cat!”

“What are you talking about?!”

“Please,” Takeo choked out. “Please don’t leave me here again. I can’t stand it.”

Takeo’s breath were coming out as stuttered sniffs, tears still flowing freely from his eyes as Kazuo picked him up as if he were an infant and brought him to his bed. He laid them both down and pulled the cover over both of them.

Kazuo held him close as he wept. Said nothing about the erection pressing against his leg, and stroked his hair calmly. With a grace and gentility that Takeo had come to painfully disdain. He let himself be wrapped in the embrace, holding him as tightly as he could. As if he could anchor him to this one spot for the rest of his life.

“Please,” Takeo choked. “Just once. Take me just once. I love you.”

A hand stroked his hair, but moved no further.

“Try and sleep,” Kazuo said.

“You’ll be gone when I wake up,” Takeo whispered.

Kazuo said nothing, continued to stroke his hair, continued to hold him close. And against every whim in his body, his eyes started to droop. His body began to relax. Deceptively protected, deceptively comfortable.

“I love you,” Takeo said again.

“I love you, too,” came the reply.

The last word Takeo could manage before sleep took him over was, “Liar.”

Takeo wasn’t sure how much time had passed, but when he awoke with a violent start, the moon was still high in the sky.

Kazuo wasn’t there.
Miho was trying to find some comfort in the sky, in the endless stars she would rely on night after night. A sky she would stare into deeply, as if speaking to it from afar. A distant lover she would never really know. But tonight, the dotted inky black sky was obstructed by billowing waves of clouds. They grayed the sky, leisurely strolling before the moon to steal its light for themselves.

The moon blotted out once again, accompanying a gust of wind and Miho shivered under her robes. With all her might she kept her hands still and resisted the urge to wrap her robes tighter around her. A fruitless action that only showed weakness before men.

Even younger men.

Miho peered over her shoulder, breaking her wistful eye contact with the night air, so she could gaze at the two disciples behind her.

The two were dressed in white robes—clean, but still stained from previous use and travel. Whatever regality they had was lost in their dirt-gray cuffs and splitting threads was made up for in their posture and in their silence. They carried their packs and their lanterns in silence, the only light in this world illuminating their somber faces.

Miho could hardly believe that these were the same two boys who wrestled through the cat’s chambers, sliding their palms across the wood of each wall. Giggling to themselves when their master turned his back.

Where had those children gone?

Miho could only ask, “You don’t want to stop this?”

“We’ll follow Teacher anywhere,” Akio said. The darkness hid whatever expression Eiji made that accompanied his stuttered breath. From then, no one spoke until Kazuo finally approached the three in their planned rendezvous.

“You’re late,” Miho said. “I was hoping you wouldn’t come.”

“I apologize,” Kazuo said. He brushed past the crowd and began to walk with resolve in each step. “Let’s get going.”

They walked in silence. The only sounds that passed between them were the rustling of the branches under the thick wind, and the desperately muffled sobs that slipped from Eiji. The estate was large. Kilometers wide and long. Forest and gardens lined the outside walls, turning thicker and deeper in the farthest corners. Daiki lived in one, where trees broke, and grass parted for that one little house on a hill. On the opposite end no homes, no paths, no Sohmas disrupted the area.

Quietly, Miho wondered why Kazuo would choose to end his life here. Within the walls it seemed tasteless and disrespectful. Kazuo deserved better. Perhaps they all did.

They climbed the tallest hilltop together until they reached a small clearing. Now that they had emerged from the high grown foliage, the clouded autumn night was clear to see—its edges furled with silhouettes of branches.
A violent gust of wind passed through her, angered the limbs of the trees, darkened the night further, and Miho could do nothing but stand still.

The two disciple boys laid out a flimsy straw mat, bowed before they stepped atop it, and kneeled deeply as they spoke some sort of prayer. Miho turned, letting them prepare without her watchful eye, and focused instead on the push and pull of the forest that the wind forced relentlessly.

After a long moment, shivering from the cold, and face flushed from keeping tears from falling down her cheeks, Kazuo called out to her. She turned.

Kazuo was kneeling on the mat, his white robes matching those of his disciples who sat obediently behind him. Yet, somehow, the robes looked as if they were crafted of the finest silk on his frame. He held out his hand, and Miho took it. There would never be a chance to again.

“Help them take my bones,” Kazuo said. Miho nodded, but Kazuo kept his grip tight on her hand. He looked her straight in the eye. “And erase this from your memory.”

“What?” Miho would have dropped his hand if she could.

“What I’m asking of you is… cruel. Once you take my bones, forget everything that happened here. Please.”

After a moment, Miho nodded.

He dropped her hand. Off the mat, she sat opposite of him.

Kazuo clutched the blade before him, removed it from its simply decorated sheath.

His eyes fled to hers one last time, and Miho was overwhelmed by the emotion there.

Relief.

No one said anything. The disciples leaving unsaid words behind their eyes.

Miho watching him closely, letting him know that she would be here until the end.

Kazuo smiled.

The blade disappeared into his stomach.

Everything in the world changed to the color red.

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Takeo began to cry.

He wept as his bare feet collided against the prickly plants in the uncared for grass. A sudden branch caused him to collapse in the darkness, wind biting against his ears as he fell into the mud.

He lifted himself up and kept walking.

Where was his body taking him?
He hoped far away from here.

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Miho was crying.

Akio and Eiji sniffled and sobbed silently as they handed her the blade.

It took her a moment. She stared at Kazuo’s peaceful and lifeless face. A vessel without a spirit. A friend yet also, somehow, a stranger.

“We have to undress him,” she began. The two disciples nodded, opening his robes with shaking hands, and pulling away the bloodied fabric. Eiji cradled his teacher’s head to his chest, lifting him up so Akio could remove the robes completely from his chest. Carefully, the younger laid him down once more, before they both slid what remained off his legs.

When it was done she took the blade and carefully, almost afraid she might harm him, sliced the skin of his arm wide open. Blood that was still warm blubbered and spilled from the flesh, staining her white robes. With the back of her hand she wiped away the persistent tears, but she continued on.

Miho had never been one to pale in front of blood, nor the human body. But she could feel bile forming in her stomach, could feel unease warring behind her ribs. A familiar feeling, a feeling of transforming, threatened her. As if the dragon inside her wished to roar and howl and destroy.

Perhaps it was how easy it was to cut skin. She’d seen it before, in scraped knees, and harsh tumbles. In needles that slipped into skin, and knives that strayed onto fingers. Blood spilled as if that’s what it was meant to do. But now, pulling back skin, her hands washing in blood, revealing bone, not even the body seemed strong. It all seemed malleable, it all seemed weak, all just waiting for its last moments that could come so easily.

Miho sliced down Kazuo’s chest until her carving met with his own self afflicted wound.

She took a moment to breathe, before tossing another blade to Akio. He was pale and silent and scared. She could see it. But he looked in a far better state than his counterpart, who has tried viciously to calm himself since they had departed on this journey.

“Slice down the arm and pull back the skin,” she commanded. He hesitated, stared at her wide like he couldn’t process the words she was asking. She snapped, “Are you deaf?”

He shook his head, and with the trembling hands of a boy did as he was told. Eiji stood suddenly to retch on the outside of the clearing. It was making her own desire to vomit all the more pronounced.

She tossed down the blade in frustration and took the edges of Kazuo’s sliced open skin between her fingers. With all her might, and that of the dragon’s, she pulled the skin apart. The bone was there, exposed, stained with blood, tauntingly white and well-built.

Miho looked up at his face once more and the disconnected images made her force in a deep breath that couldn’t quite reach her lungs. She stood, anxious and nauseated, searching around the supplies the four of them had brought.

“A cloth. Bring me a cloth!”

Eiji scrambled over, face flushed, nose running, eyes wet and mouth dribbling remnant saliva.

“Put the cloth over his face,” she commanded, but still couldn’t sit herself back down. There was
something on her back. Something stopping her legs from bending.

Something.

Eyes.

“Who’s there?” She grabbed a lantern from the ground and lifted it up to search the edges of the clearing, her fingers going lax and dropping the lantern as soon as she could see a figure standing there.

“Master Takeo,” she breathed.

Akio and Eiji looked to where her eyes were fixated. There, on the edge of the clearing, was Takeo. His eyes were wide, his face ghostly white, and Miho could see a trail of liquid running down his leg. He shook like a leaf at the mercy of the vicious autumn wind.

“K-Kazuo,” he stumbled forward. As if he wasn’t aware he was moving at all. As if he had been frozen within a body that never needed him anyway.

“Master Takeo.” Miho took a step forward, but Takeo leapt back, staring at her in horror. A look she had never seen directed at her before.

Yet, she took a moment to inspect herself. White robes stained with blood and dirt, streaks of red on her face where she had wiped away tears, long locks of hair whipping restlessly against each breeze. Pale, frantic, and scared.

She frightened herself.

Takeo began to run.

“Master Takeo!” She screeched as she ran after him.

His legs were shaking but he was fast, fear and adrenaline sparking short, energetic legs into action.

A desperation carried Miho as they ran through the wooded area of the estate. Her sandals were slipping off, and she could feel her feet being cut and sliced open by stones and weeds as she chased after the boy.

Takeo aimed for the clearing, Miho could see it too. The connection of this far, outside nightmare world to that of the Sohmas. To that of an ugly disguised. Never exposed in its true intentions, in its true violence.

Those worlds could not meet.

Not yet.

Not ever.

She grabbed his arm and he screamed. Screamed as if he were the one being sliced open. As if he could feel every inch of the blade stripping his skin apart. Holding him bare and exposed on a night that would eat him whole.

Takeo screamed.

She enveloped her arm around his waist, her hand wanting desperately to go her his mouth.
Miho wrapped her hand around his eyes and in a flash of white Takeo went limp in her arms.

She shook, collapsing to her knees with the sudden added wait as tears slid down her face. She took in a rough breath, trying desperately to bring much needed air to her body, but as her mouth hung open and she breathed and breathed and breathed she felt as though she was suffocating.

She looked up, the edge of the forest just mere meters away, and she could see the beginning of houses through the break in the trees.

Carefully, she turned Takeo’s head towards herself, embracing him from behind, holding him tightly.

His eyes were stained with blood. He smelled like urine and dirt. His breathing was weak, and Miho felt a fresh wave of panic wash through her body.

No one had ever erased the memories of a god.

Miho lifted her hand to stare at it, deep iron red sinking into the grooves of her fingers. Into her nails. Staining her skin for as long as she lived.

She hugged Takeo tightly and began to sob.

“I’m sorry,” Miho cried. “I’m so sorry.”

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Where was he?

He felt something soft underneath his hands, something plush and smooth.

His body relaxed.

He was in bed.

In bed with Kazuo.

He stayed.

Takeo could feel himself smiling. The body beside him was warm, firm. There by his side. He knew if he woke up he would be gone, but Kazuo chose him. He chose him.

Takeo wanted to open his eyes to greet the sight but found he couldn’t.

It was dark. And his eyes wouldn’t open. Maybe he needed more sleep? Maybe his body wasn’t ready to be roused awake. Perhaps all he needed was to revel in this moment a bit longer.

He nestled himself further into the body, but Kazuo’s smell was beginning to fade. Something was seeping into his back.

He reached back to wrap Kazuo’s arm more firmly around his stomach but when he touched the skin there, it was met by a pool of deep liquid. What was this?

What was this?
It was red.

The sheets below him were soaked, and it was burning into his robes. He was being painted in melted iron. It felt so hot. It felt warm and it smelled so bad.

He forced himself up, but it was gluing him down, dragging his robes off his skin as he pulled away. Naked, exposed, hands and feet and cheeks warm with that thick substance. Red staining him, he ran. He ran as fast as he could.

He needed to find Kazuo.

He was there, by his side, surely he would be there if he ran to him. He ran as fast as he could, but his feet were sinking with each step, falling deeper into something too thick to be the ocean, too vile to be as pure as water. Frantically, he pushed himself through, his bare skin soaking up the foul substance. The smell foul and Takeo wanted to vomit.

But he could see him.

Kazuo was there.

He was smiling at him.

No, he was smiling at that.

Takeo was stuck, he couldn’t move, even as the liquid was starting to fill higher and higher. What was once at his stomach was now at his chest, but he couldn’t move.

Kazuo was atop that demon.

He was making a face he would never see. Creamy legs, perfect chin, that scar above his eye, a surprisingly freckled back, that long, silver hair. They were moving together to give pleasure to that thing. That demon.

Kazuo was burying himself into the cat, moaning as his eyes shut tight. Lewd sounds escaping his mouth again and again and again, he was losing control. The pleasure rippling behind that skin was burning hotter than he had ever seen. And, god, how he had watched Kazuo. Watched every fruitless encounter. Watched that rich skin stretch over those bones, watched him make love to faceless men.

He wanted that member inside of him, it was all he wanted, that same cry of pleasure that was building in Kazuo now. It wasn’t fair.

The demon was toying with him. He didn’t deserve him. He didn’t want him enough.

Takeo tried to move forward but the liquid was at his neck now, and he looked down in a panic, only to have fear frozen into him when he glanced back up.

Kazuo was burying himself into a demon. Its foul smell, its rotting flesh, its mangled skin moving grotesquely under each thrust.

He tried to shout out to Kazuo, he wanted to tell him to open his eyes. To look at the sight before him! But every shout came muffled and unheard. Silent. No words could leave him ever again.

Takeo struggled and thrashed against the restraints of the rotted ocean, but it was too late.
The demon’s sharp claws in a cry of pleasure were digging deep into Kazuo’s skin. They slid down the scape of beautiful back and arms and sliced him open. Kazuo’s flesh was being shredded, being torn apart, and the liquid was growing higher and higher, until Takeo was breathing in iron. Drinking what was undeniably Kazuo’s blood.

He was submerged completely.

And he screamed.

He screamed louder than he ever had in his life.

Screamed for every time he wished he could.

Screamed when his father kicked his side.

Screamed when his mother, the mistress, let him watch from the closet as she seduced his father.

Screamed when the spirit inside him sapped his strength, left him collapsed and gasping on the edge of the wall with no one to hear.

Screamed when Kazuo left without saying goodbye.

Screamed when the only kindness in his life lost the flesh from his body.

Screamed because it was the only thing he could do.

“MASTER TAKEO!”

Hands were restraining his arms, bringing back the sensation of sinking back into blood, blood, blood.

He cried, sobs wrenching away from this ribs. He thrashed, felt his arm connect with flesh, felt his foot being grabbed and pushed back into the plush of the futon. No, no, no, it would stain him, it was dirty, he needed to burn it!

“Master Takeo, please!”

Hands were on his cheek, and eyes were looking at him desperately.

Miho.

Instinct made him want to leap away, but he couldn’t.

Something in her eyes was calming him down.

Something he had never seen in anyone but himself.

Fear.

He opened his mouth again, but all that came out was a soft scream, wilted this time, but still there. Tears were falling form his eyes, but he couldn’t quite register them.

Miho was looking at him, maids were holding him down, the room looked red.

Everything looked red.

Like that was the color it was supposed to be.
“It’s been four days and he’s barely calmed down,” Miho said. Her eyes were tired and haggard, her posture wilted. The two disciples exchanged looks before they offered their own sympathetic silence.

The three met in a small restaurant beyond the walls. Had it been any other time, Miho might have mused over the fact that the two country boys looked so out of place in the bustling city. Akio flinched every time the patrons and workers yelled over each other, and Eiji seemed distracted with every new sensation that walked by. It was late in the afternoon, the sun wanting to set earlier and earlier each day, and a sheen of oranges spilled just outside the fabric curtains of the restaurant.

“He’ll be bedridden for a while longer. Most days he throws violent fits that no one can placate. I’ve never seen him like this,” she said. A woman in a simple kimono brought their table a modest pot of tea.

“That will fade, surely,” Akio said. “It will just take some time.”

“Perhaps,” Miho buried her face in her hands. How easy it would be to release the power behind them. To flash herself away. To forget everything that happened. To leave behind the aching guilt whenever she walked into that room to see Takeo’s frantic eyes searching for something that wasn’t there.

“It’s not your fault,” Eiji added, somewhat awkwardly. He seemed nervous to address the woman, but steadfast in his words. “We were doing what teacher asked of us.”

“What if he never heals?” Miho shot back. “What if the damage done to his mind is too great?”

The two exchanged another look, not knowing what to say, and it made Miho give pause. These two were outsiders. They knew almost nothing of this world and of this life. To be unloading these woes onto them seemed fruitless. But where else was there to turn? The two reminded her of Kazuo so much, in their own ways. The only man she could tell everything to. Her dearest friend would never sit across from her again, and these two sets of eyes were lulling her into a false sense of comfort.

They were only children.

When the silence had stretched long enough, Akio reached into his bag to pull out a small, silk sack. He offered it to her, the real reason for their meeting lying inside.

She took it tentatively, and when her fingers brushed against the object inside, even through the cloth, her breathing felt short and her stomach felt uneasy.

She opened it carefully, staring back at a series of red and white beads.

At what remained of Kazuo.

She hadn’t even realized how long she had been staring into the bag until Akio cleared his throat. She quickly tied the bag tight and gave them a weak nod.

“I think it would be best if you both moved on from this place as soon as possible,” Miho said.

“We’ll return to the mountains when the sun comes up tomorrow,” Akio said. Eiji nodded.
“Where are you staying? I’ll pay the wages at your inn,” Miho offered.

“We couldn’t—”

“In the inn above the tea shop across the street,” Eiji said, cutting off his companion. He looked at her with serious eyes and Akio sighed.

“Understood,” she said. The three gave one last look and Miho opened her mouth to speak one last time, “Thank you for being loyal to Kazuo. He was my dear friend, and I’m glad you two were there in his final years.”

The two stood and bowed deeply, before leaving a few coins on the table for the tea that they didn’t drink. Miho smiled, somewhat amused as she watched them go.

There was a somber air about them, an air of mourning. But as they spoke to one another, gestured, and emoted, Miho smiled. They could walk away from this other world. Choose what came next. Live how Kazuo would want them to.

She reveled in that fantasy for a moment, enjoying the brief time she had outside the estate. The clattering of dishes, the mixing voices, the steps on the dirt roads outside, dogs barking, and carts being dragged through the streets. It was the sound of normality. A sound that would always be foreign.

She looked down at the silk bag in her hand, her fingers beginning to tingle from holding it for so long.

Perhaps this was as close as any of them would get.

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Daiki’s ears perked at the sound of his door being opened. The familiar sound of Miho coming through the door, perhaps with a plate of food for dinner.

These last few days had been lonely ones.

His house felt empty without Kazuo, the air felt colder. He spent his days looking out his window towards where he thought the direction of the mountains might be. He daydreamed adventures and journeys and people. Wondered idly how the two disciples were talking circles around Kazuo’s gentler and quieter nature.

It was how he spent most of his days before Kazuo had returned to. It was as if he was returning to his regular routine, even if the memory of Kazuo’s back walking down the hill and out of sight still caused tears to brim on the edge of his eyes.

Miho was close to Kazuo. Closer than anyone, perhaps. He couldn’t blame her for not visiting him in these past few days, and leaving the task of bringing his food to frightened maids who would leave it on his doorstep before running away.

He wondered how she was fairing, hoped that the ache of loneliness wasn’t being handled completely on her own, and hoped every day since Kazuo had left that she would visit. If only to be silent and miserable together.
So when the door slid open, Daiki immediately picked himself up to start preparing the tea. A warm drink to chase away the chill.

“Cat.”

The unfamiliar voice had Daiki turning around immediately to face the presence before him.

“Master Takeo.” Daiki dropped to his knees in a deep bow.

A moment of silence passed, and Daiki wondered if perhaps he had imagined the young god standing in his home. He peered up, the child shaking but his face serious. Serious and angry. Carefully, he straightened himself up.

“Master Takeo?”

“Y-You fucked him,” the boy said. He voice cracked on the words. Words he never thought he’d hear a deity say.

“What?”

“You fucked him, and then you killed him.” Takeo was crying, and Daiki wanted to, too. His creased brows expressing nothing but confusion.

“Master Takeo, I-I’m not sure what you mean.”

Takeo took a step forward. Another. Then another. Daiki reflexively fell backwards on his hands, and crawled away.

“You killed him.” Takeo raised his arm, the palm holding a jagged rock picked up from the gardens outside.

Daiki barely had time to cover his face before that arm came down hard against his skull.

“YOU KILLED HIM. I SAW YOU.”

“Master Takeo, please! Please!”

His arm was beating down faster now, bruising and breaking every part of his skin that Takeo could reach, and Daiki could do nothing but fruitlessly shield himself against each blow. Again and again they came, one after another, with Takeo screaming ruthlessly against his ear. It was a horrible sound. Filled with a pain and an anger that seemed so familiar.

“You tricked him! You tricked him! You made him love you and then you killed him!”

“I didn’t! I’ve never!”

“KAZUO NEVER SHOULD HAVE TRUSTED A DEMON LIKE YOU!”

Daiki stilled, his eyes going wide as his stomach plummeted through his body. His hand caught the wrist of the boy before he could swing down once again, and he thrashed against the cat’s grip.

“Kazuo’s dead?” Daiki asked, his words too quiet and flooding his dizzying mind.

“Let. Go.”
The vicious voice held a command in it that Daiki couldn’t disobey. Of their own accord, his fingers unwrapped around his wrist, unable to move any further to defend himself. He stared with wide, terrified eyes as the bloodied rock in Takeo’s hand as it was raised above his head once more.

Daiki let out a scream when he was hit again.

Blood was beginning to spill from his head, matting down his orange hair, as Daiki tried to move away. Takeo wouldn’t stop, and another blow had Daiki descending into a puff of smoke.

He felt dizzy and weak, the transformation disorienting him. And before he could leap away on four legs in the lither form of the cat, his tail was being stepped on, and another swift blow was brought down onto a creature much weaker, much softer, and much more vulnerable than any human.

Takeo let out a screech.

It was the last thing he heard.

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It was an hour later when Miho walked through the doors of Daiki’s home.

She brought the helpless cat onto her lap, feeling each broken bone in his body as she did.

She stroked the orange fur mindlessly until she heard his final breath escape him.

Miho cried.

The burden of being the only one to mourn a kind man.

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“The cat is a dangerous demon. He took Kazuo’s trust and warped it for his own gain. No wonder Kazuo felt as though he had to leave. We think when he told the demon that he was departing on his journey he became deranged and skinned him alive in his true form.”

Hideki took a lazy sip of his tea as Miho stared down at her own. Blank and heavy expression doing its best not to meet with Hideki’s carefree one. He smiled at her, a smile all too oily and foul.

“Well, at least that’s what Master Takeo said he saw. And who are we to question god? Even if he’s been unwell lately. It doesn’t seem that unlikely. Kazuo never was one to have much common sense, anyway.”

She drew in a deep breath, trying her best not to let the shaky exhale catch Hideki’s well trained ear.

“You wouldn’t happen to have another side of the story, would you?”

Miho finally lifted her gaze, the twisted curl of the dog’s lip causing her stomach to furl. “I think you know anything I might say.”
“I’m glad we’re on the same page,” he said. “Now then, as for Master Takeo’s health, we’ll be entrusting that to Yoichi. We wouldn’t want someone outside the family to be meddling in on this. He’ll be keeping a close eye on him. I will be, too. That’s a given, an advisor should stay by his side as often as possible. And as for the future cat, when they’re born Master Takeo has ordered that they spend the rest of their days inside that house Kazuo built for the demon. Of course, we’ll be scaling back on some of the luxuries of the place.”

“Of course,” Miho said, voice dry and angry.

“I was hoping to get in touch with those strays Kazuo brought along. Surely they saw something,” he said. “But when we searched for them, they were nowhere to be found.”

Miho closed her eyes, resisting the shiver that wanted to curl up her spine and the tears threatening to spill from her eyes.

“Perhaps the cat got them, too.”

Hideki smiled.

“We will all need time to recover from this tragedy, Miho. I know you tend to let your emotions overrule your ability to think clearly sometimes. I also know you had something of a friendship with that thing. However, try not to spread any misleading information among the family. Not when the air is still so sensitive.”

Miho let a tear spill from her eye, but remained silent and still.

“Are you understanding me?”

She nodded.

“Good.” He waved a dismissive hand. “You’re free to go.”

She stood, walking toward the door when Hideki spoke again.

“Oh, and Miho. Try not to approach Master Takeo anytime soon. For some reason he seems terribly frightened of you.”

She left the room without a word. Just as Hideki wanted her to.

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Autumn was in its last days when the estate finally began to calm. Youta sneezed as he walked on the wooden planks of the outside platforms. He hadn’t seen Takeo in some time and lamented the fact, only able to catch a glimpse of his flailing and writhing limbs when he sneaked a look inside his room. His eyes frantic, his body dangerous, his mouth disconnected with his thoughts.

After that, he didn’t particularly try to approach him.

Yoichi told the other zodiacs that he was getting better under his care, and that he would be a picture of health in no time. The relief was offset by gaping presence of a missing zodiac, still thrashed deep in each brother (and sister, he supposed).
It would be anxious wait for the next rat to be born.

Youta didn’t find himself too worried. He was more perturbed by the cold weather that threatened to harshen each day. He shivered as he finally tucked himself away inside his room.

It wasn’t a moment later that he heard a soft, timid knock on his door. He called for them to enter.

“Master Youta,” the timid maid he had come to recognize entered the room.

“Yes?”

“Master Takeo is calling on you.”

“Is he?” He asked, an unsure mix of confusion and relief settled through him. “Is he well enough for me to see him?”

“He insisted he was,” she responded.

“Then I’ll go to his quarters in a moment.”

“Oh,” she started. “He’s not in his room. Master Takeo said to meet him on the western edge of the estate. In the storage rooms there.”

Youta gave her a long, hardened look. She squirmed under the scrutiny until he waved her away with a small “thank you.”

Without wasting a moment he thrust himself back out into the cold, walking quickly to those familiar rooms, so much warmed than his own. He could barely hide a reckless smile as he approached.

Would it be the man with the scar again? Or perhaps some new suitor that Takeo enjoyed all the more.

Youta opened the door, completely unprepared to see Takeo sitting in the middle of the room atop a laid out futon.

His stance was calm, but as he looked up his eyes seemed wild and dangerous.

A chaos that should be feared.

“Come here,” Takeo said. Youta immediately did as he was told.

He watched, unbelieving, as Takeo undid the sash tying his robe. Watched as he pulled back the fabric so it slid off his pale shoulders. Watched, as Takeo placed cool lips on his stomach, his chest, his collarbone.

Felt a breath catch in his throat when Takeo pushed him back, and stared up at him when Takeo pressed their hips together. Inexperienced movements were lighting a fire between the two as their members rubbed through Takeo’s robes.

And Youta watched, and watched, and watched.

And waited for Takeo to watch back.

The boy kept his eyes trained on patches of skin, on the backs of his own eyelids, on the floor just beside Youta’s head.

The sensation of being touched by his deity nearly too much to handle, but the pleasure felt
disconnected somehow. As if he weren’t the one feeling it at all. As if he were in the way somehow.

Takeo rutted against him, and Youta turned his head to stare at the hole in the paper walls.

And found himself wishing for the eyes of a boy who had passed away.

Takeo undressed himself and climbed back on top of him.

All Youta could do was gasp.
IT’S HEREEE!!!

Gosh, how many apologies do I owe for being so ridiculous late with this? A hundred? A thousand? Probably more.

Thank you to people still reading this, I mean this from the bottom of my tiny little heart. And an especially big thank you to people who read the intermissions to this story, as well. I am beyond pumped to have been able to share those stories as a part of this one, and now to officially kick off the second half of this story! Especially since things will soon being to HAPPEN. Which I mean as ominously as possible.

I don’t have much else to say other than I’m pleased as punch that I get to write something so long and ridiculous and people will read it. I’ve had so much fun actually writing out the first half of this fic, and I’m determined to see it all the way through to the end. Even if there are some time delays here and there (sweats).

The sudden sound in the house was enough to make Tohru jump.

It was cold and the air felt stale. As if nothing in the house had moved these past few months, not even the oxygen that circulated through it. When she shivered it felt familiar, and she wrapped her scarf tighter around her neck, letting the pom-poms at the end fall softly against her uniform-clad stomach.

The sound echoed through the house again, and it seemed so foreign that Tohru didn’t recognize it right away. Her ears hadn’t adjusted to noise yet for the day—wouldn’t until the dull clatter of students surrounded the school gates. But she snapped to attention when it happened again.

Ring. Ring. Ring.

It was early, so the call must have been an important one, and she chastised herself for falling into such a daze in front of the fridge—watching the pre-wrapped meal she had left the day before. As if it might suddenly vanish if she stared at it hard enough.

It didn’t. So she closed the fridge door and rushed to pick up the phone. Relieved when she caught the ringing before it could drift away into another motionless memory that could easily freeze inside the house.

“Hello?” She asked. A chill ran through her at the feeling of the cold earpiece against her skin.

“Tohru! Oh, what a relief! Finally, someone answers a telephone around here!”

“A-Ayame?” Her voice stuttered, a sudden wave of guilt washing over her. “How are you? How, um,” she hesitated. “How are you?”

“Marvelous, as always! Though this dreaded winter weather has me locked up inside! I’m so sensitive against this wretched cold, I’m ready to hibernate until spring! But what would my
customers do without me? I can’t even stand the thought.”

Tohru could hear him sigh, and the pleasant and oblivious tone of his voice was comforting. Despite everything, she felt herself smile.

“I heard on the news that this cold snap should end by the end of the week,” she offered consolingly. Ayame gave a disbelieving hum on the other end of the line.

“Now, down to business. Please don’t think I don’t love the sound of your cute little voice, but I must speak to Yuki. I’m afraid it’s urgent, and he hasn’t been answering my calls all week! He’s the stubborn kind, you know. What is the point in having that silly cell phone if he never answers it? Honestly!”

“O-Oh,” she swallowed. “Yuki?”

“Yes! Put him on the phone immediately!”

“Well he, um, h-he you see—”

Tohru yelped when the phone was suddenly plucked from her grasp and pulled up to Shigure’s ear. He had a pleasant grin, but his hair was mused and his robes slightly loose and messy. He must have just woken up, she thought. It was rare to see him at all in the mornings. Rare to see anyone, really.

“Ayame!” Shigure’s voice called out, devoid of any grog or slumber, even if his eyes still seemed hazed and distant. “I know, it really has been too long… No, no, don’t bother yourself with the trip. It’s been ages since I’ve been to the shop. We’ll have to have tea there.”

Tohru listened to Shigure give a light-hearted chuckle in response to Ayame’s muffled voice on the other end of the line. “Oh, only for you, mon amou. Just be sure to conserve your strength.”

Another laugh. Tohru fiddled with the ends of her scarf.

“Yuki? …I’m afraid you just missed him. He’s already left for school. You know how busy these kids are preparing for entrance exams lately… Ah, I see… And he’s not answering his phone at all? How very peculiar…”

Tohru ducked her head, that dull pang that had become familiar to her returning. If Shigure looked at her, she was sure not to notice.

“Well, I’ll be sure to pass along the message. …Alright. Talk to you soon. Bye!”

The phone hung up with a small clack and the silence in the house rushed back all at once like a vacuum. She stared up at Shigure with concerned eyes, only to meet his carefree ones.

With as comforting of a smile as he could give, he raised his index finger to his lips in a shushing motion and gave her a wink.

“Just give it some time, Tohru.”

Tohru nodded, but it was hardly a comfort.

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“Hey,” the dismembered voice called out. He felt himself shift, the pins and pricks in his neck from an uneasy night’s sleep making themselves known with a groan.

“Hey,” the voice insisted again. This time with a shake of his shoulder. At least that’s what it felt like. He curled away from the sensation.

“Yuki. Wake up.”

Yuki forced his eyes to pry open, looking up at Haru’s carefully calculated glance. The warmth from his hand was slipping into Yuki’s shoulder, and the idea of curling into the side of the couch sounded far too appealing. He would have, too, had he not been afraid that Haru would somehow become annoyed.

Finally, Yuki sat up.

“What time is it?” Yuki rubbed at his eyes, pawing around uselessly for his cell phone. No luck. He sighed, and looked up at Haru. His uniform was on, but he had yet to put on his chains and necklaces that he had become accustomed to.

“It’s early. We have to get to school.”

Yuki made a noise of protest in the back of his throat.

“Come on, get up,” Haru insisted, leaving the room to head to the bathroom most likely. Yuki stretched on the too small couch, forcing himself up in the vacant room so he could walk around.

Disoriented, he picked at his clothes. Haru’s t-shirt, and his own underwear served as his pajamas. That’s right, he had forgotten to pick some up from home earlier in the week. He forced the shirt off and looked in the dingy mirror that hung on the back of Haru’s door.

His expression was clogged with sleep, his eyes barely open to see his pale, slim figure. His hair was course and rough and sticking up in every different direction, and the bags under his eyes were dark and heavy.

He looked away easily, throwing Haru’s shirt on his bed before treading over to the couch and the clothes that lay haphazardly by its side. He pulled his pants on, and buttoned up his uniform shirt, annoyed at how thin his wrists seemed to be in the cuffs. Where was his coat? He could already feel the cold sliding into the window, and wondered for a moment how he managed to stay at least somewhat comfortable during the night.

That mystery was solved when he spied the space heater turned away from the bed and towards the couch. And when he saw his coat hanging up neatly on the closet door. Yuki gave a slight smile, sighing as his fingers went to his collar.

When Haru reentered the room, he looked surprised to see Yuki dressed and nearly ready, greeting him with a soft wave.

“Yo.”

“Have you seen my tie?” Yuki asked. Haru cocked his head.

“My uniform tie,” he clarified.

“Oh,” he said. As if this was his first time hearing of the garment. He gave a look around the room with a shrug, “You can use mine.”
Haru rummaged through his closet for a moment, Yuki waiting patiently on the couch and taking in the morning. It was winter, and the days hesitated on sharing their light so early. The sky was a cool blue, graying where clouds invaded the sky. The tree by Haru’s window was now completely bare of any leaves. It looked dead. Yuki got caught up in staring in the ugly, mismatched patterns that the branches took.

“Here.” The piece of dangling cloth in front of his eyes.

“Oh, thanks,” Yuki said. He went to stand in front of the mirror again, methodically tying his necktie step by step until it looked neat. Flawless. Perfect. He had gotten good at it.

Yuki became aware of the oppressive silence when he turned to see Haru staring at him resolutely, observing him with those narrowed and perceptive eyes that he always had.

“Where’d you leave it?” Haru asked, motioning to the borrowed cloth.

Yuki brushed passed him to collect his books that were resting on Haru’s desk in a pile. He sat on the couch to organize his backpack, bulging with test materials and used clothes.

Where had he left his tie? Thursday he had barely made the last bus for the station closest to home. He had packed his casual clothes in his backpack and left after a few hours of restless sleep for school, before the sun even had a chance to fully rise. Friday he had spent most of his afternoon in the library, and from there went to an internet café closer to the center of Tokyo. He buried himself in studies he didn’t care for, for schools he thought nothing of, until it was well past the time to catch the final train.

He holed himself up in a 24 hour karaoke bar, changed and slept in the empty space for the five hours of time he had bought, listening to off key songs and screeching cheers and microphone-dull voices through the walls as he closed his eyes and pretended to sleep. During hour four he looked both ways in the hallway and brushed his teeth in the bathroom sink.

Saturday had him wandering around in the morning, yawning into his hand every other moment. He walked until he wasn’t sure where he was, walked until all his brain heard were the sounds of people’s feet hitting the pavement. He walked until he reached Kakeru’s place at sunset, where they had agreed to meet for dinner that night.

For a brief evening he smiled and laughed and ate what he could stomach in the company of friends. He stayed until it was late, and Kakeru naturally offered for him to stay the night. He slept on the futon beside Kakeru’s bed, staring up the ceiling as he listened to his friend snore, remembering being woken up by Kakeru’s amused face smacking his stomach with a pillow in the morning.

He left on Sunday, walked to the main house, vomited behind a bush when he snuck in through the hole in the wall, and climbed the tree to Haru’s room.

Haru had let him in without a word, and the two studied in silence, barely trading any conversation as Yuki’s eyes sunk into the words and equations on the notebooks before him.

Where did he leave his tie after all?

“At Kakeru’s, hopefully,” Yuki said, brushing off the subject. “I’m sure he has it. If not, I’ll try and buy another one this week. Thanks.”

Haru gave a small hum that accompanied his wary eyes. The only eyes Yuki saw Haru wear these days.
“I’ll meet you outside. We should get going,” Yuki said, opening the window to Haru’s room. He had propped himself on the windowsill when he felt a hand grab his arm. He turned with a false curiosity to see those furrowed brows again.

“Hey,” Haru started. “Be careful.”

As if it were another normal day, Yuki smiled. “I’m always careful.”

Well, Yuki thought, as he firmly planted his feet on the ground and let go of the final branch, I guess this is a normal day now.

Three minutes later, Haru joined him, and they walked in silence to school.

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“The National Center Test is now just a little over a month away. So I expect that you’re all starting to sweat. That’s good. You should be afraid of this test, but don’t let that fear drive you. Be sure you’re all getting a proper amount of sleep, and be sure not to eat too much or too little due to stress,” Ms. Shiraki began, a gentleness almost gracing her serious and firm tone.

“For those of you taking secondary tests for private universities, be sure to manage your time well. It’s important to score high in the proper test sections, but don’t divide your time too drastically so that you’re not focusing on certain subjects at all. As it gets closer to testing dates, we’re trusting you to do your work diligently and independently. But you still need to attend your classes, or your teachers will get mad.”

A wave of groans washed over the students.

“Don’t pull that on me! I’ll be the most upset!” Her comedic anger broke the tension of the room, allowing the over-worked students a moment of laughter.

“And, of course, for those of you who don’t plan on taking these tests at all, be sure to properly support your peers. They’re undergoing a lot of pressure right now, so tread lightly.”

“Yeah, Kyota!” A student shouted as others joined in the jeering, throwing balled up paper and pens at the student, his hands up in defense as he laughed.

Yuki fiddled with his pen and decided to focus his attention outside.

The sun was high in the sky, but the gray clouds had yet to disperse, leaving the outside ashen and colorless. Yuki watched from his seat at the shaking, naked branches that somehow bloomed bright cherry blossoms each spring. Somehow, it was a hard concept to grasp. It was easier to believe that these trees would chip away bit by bit, drop by frozen drop of rain, snowflake by snowflake, until every landscape was barren. Browning grass and dirty layers of dew that barely turned to snow. Broken sticks and cracking leaves gathering up on the bottom of his shoe.

He would just have to get used to that.

Desperately, Yuki tried to turn his attention back to the front of the class.

Ms. Shiraki was there, a thick sweater the only apparent change in the woman as her ponytail
swished back and forth with each important point of her announcements. Behind her, the letters of
the chalk board scratched out SELF STUDY. The students would have nearly half the day to bury
themselves in entrance exam prep work, and Yuki both reveled and dreaded the time to himself.

Fruitlessly, he looked around. A mop of bright orange hair was missing from the room. Not
surprising. Kyo was showing up less and less as talks of entrance exams grew more and more. He
never showed his face during self-study periods, and skipped even more classes beyond that. Yuki
wondered where he would go.

Yuki found in himself that he was more of a wanderer, enjoying following his aimless legs wherever
they would carry him. New atmospheres, new sounds, new smells distracted him from pointless
thoughts that didn’t need dwelling on anymore. So he would walk from one block to the next,
sometimes getting on trains if they were sparse enough. Letting himself pull away as far as he could
go, until he inevitably snapped back to a world so small it could fit on the head of a pin.

Kyo… wasn’t like that. He stayed inside himself. He liked familiar places; he liked people and
sensations he already knew. The cat couldn’t wander too far, couldn’t explore further than the
towering walls that surrounded him. But he could sit on the edge of them, sit atop them as if he were
a bird. Watch for miles and miles from a height no one would ever experience, because they didn’t
have to. Because they were part of the scenery that seemed so far away.

His eyes drifted to the ceiling, wondering if Kyo was maybe lounging on the roof of the school
building. Even though there was no sun. It was gray. And cold. And the wind snapped against flesh.

Yuki looked ahead once more.

That was really none of his concern, though, was it?

It had taken him a week to realize that. His overnight bag carelessly stuffed after his confrontation
with Kyo. His tired—exhausted—eyes trained onto Haru’s carpet. His body falling into a fitful sleep
on his ox cousin’s couch. Barely moving. Barely thinking. Staring at the ceiling at night, and trying
to fight the sunlight that tried to penetrate his eyelids during the day.

Haru sat beside him. Listened to his uneven breathing. Listening to his coughing fits, and bringing
him water and simple foods when Yuki couldn’t keep his food down. Haru was so kind it hurt
sometimes, it made Yuki’s gut twist with guilt and shame. Pity was marring him like a sunburn, as if
Yuki had laid out in the hot summer sun completely exposed, unable to move though his flesh
bubbled and burned a blistering red with each passing second.

“What happened?” Haru finally asked on the third day. Yuki was sitting on the floor, his back
against the couch as he slumped over his schoolwork.

“I was rejected.”

The word hung in the air for a moment until a familiar sensation had Yuki scrambling for a trash can.
His stomach emptied every last bit of food that was left behind the first two days, and Yuki moaned
as his arms shook.

Whatever was inside him was angry at him.

Infuriated.

The rat was trying to claw its way out of such a disobedient vessel.

Gnawing and gnashing at Yuki’s insides.
A punishment for forcing something so unnatural onto its instincts. A punishment for ever knowing what Kyo had felt like, tasted like. A punishment for loving something so grotesque.

And a punishment for being rejected by something so *lowly* at all.

His conversation with Hatori, so many months ago, kept flashing into his mind. His warning not to stray from instincts that weren’t his own, to stay obedient, to keep the peace with such a violent spirit was flashing in his head again and again.

*Give up.*

By the seventh day, he did.

On shaking legs, and an empty stomach, Yuki crawled out of Haru’s bedroom window, now too tainted with his weaknesses to be any sort of haven, and walked back home. He walked through the Tokyo lights, and down the forest path. He felt his skin itch with each passing step, the need to run away becoming stronger and stronger as he neared the house.

But he didn’t.

He slid the door open and closed, winced to himself when conversation in the dining room immediately died at his renewed presence, and walked up to his room without another sound.

He sat at his desk, pulled out the brochures his mother had sent him, and stared down at each one until his eyes went red.

The same brochures that laid in front of him now, in the chilly classroom, on an early December day, in a world that didn’t seem so bright anymore.

It didn’t matter how much he avoided the house now, how far he wandered away. It didn’t matter how late he would come home, how long he would keep himself awake in the neon lights of this merciless city. It didn’t matter how early he would leave, how cold the air would be before the sun could catch up with it. It didn’t even matter if he could still find himself smiling in the company of his friends, hiding away at Kakeru’s or Haru’s or in 24 hour internet cafes.

The brochures would still be there like a leech on his back.

A college small, exclusive, pretentious, and close to home.

Yuki turned his gaze to the back of Tohru’s flowing brown hair. It was mused and frizzy, something that often happened when she was worried and couldn’t stop running her hands through her silky locks. Her face was pale, her eyes tired too, and her shoulders carrying a weight she couldn’t even recognize.

He couldn’t look at her for more than a moment. He was too disgusted with himself.

But things would get better for her soon enough.

A few more months, and Tohru would find a fulltime job. She would move out of Shigure’s house. She would start her own life. She would have the freedom to do just that, and the thought made him smile. As if she had already faded into the pleasant memory he knew she would become.

Tohru would move away.

Yuki would move back to the main house.
And Kyo would get locked up.

Yuki picked up his pen and opened his textbook to a page sick with highlighter ink.

Right now, all he needed was to pass this exam.

Anything outside of that goal wasn’t his concern anymore.

Yuki understood that now.

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“You want me to do what?”

Akito whipped his head around to give the older man a wicked glare.

Kazuma sat quietly in the elegant room, decorated simply and traditionally as the rest of the home was. Akito, however, had hardly made eye contact with him since Kazuma entered the room for a meeting he had called for earlier in the week.

It was obvious in everything Akito did how little he thought of the man, how apathetic he was towards his presence. How Sohma meant nothing unless it was paired with zodiac. So Akito kept his eyes on the caged bird, chirping and squawking from behind the decorative metal as Akito rubbed its belly through the bars.

Finally, however, Kazuma had his full attention.

“I said I want you to allow Kyo another four years so that he can attend university.”

Akito sat before him at last. Though his posture was lazy and relaxed, not threatened or intimidated. After a moment he even brought the back of his hand up his mouth, vibrating with exaggerated giggles that couldn’t be contained.

“You must be joking,” Akito laughed. “You’re as idiotic as I first perceived.”

“I don’t see how allowing him this would do you, or this family, any harm. Kyo’s accomplished good marks in school despite his circumstances and has learned to control his temper. Another four years is nothing if we’re talking about the rest of his life.”

“Do you really think I’m stupid enough to fall for such an obvious ploy?” Akito inspected the dirt under his long, manicured nails. Growing from amused to bored in a matter of seconds. “Besides,” he added on a spiteful grin. “That thing’s father would never allow it.”

Kazuma kept himself composed against the words, even if he felt a heavy glare threatening to narrow his eyes.

“I’ve been Kyo’s legal guardian for years now. It doesn’t matter what he would allow.”

“You’ve really begun to step out of line, Kazuma,” Akito said, finally bringing his eyes to meet his. Patience was running thin in his gaze, but Kazuma expected nothing less. He was sure that his own eyes mirrored that same expression. “I should throw Kyo into that cage early just for your disobedience.”
Calmly, Kazuma replied, “You would have to get through me first.”

Akito snarled, baring his teeth as his fists packed down with tension. “Don’t go disrespecting me so casually. I’m still head of this family. And I’ll do with that monster whatever I see fit.”

“And I’m his father, and I will do what’s best for him no matter the cost,” Kazuma shot back immediately. He took in a breath, calming his nerves, trying to avoid Akito’s expression that stretched over his face so tightly the skin might crack. “I’m only asking if you’ll allow Kyo to finish his education. I believe he’s earned that much.”

Akito scoffed, “He hasn’t earned anything. He’s allowed as much freedom as he has now because I am incredibly gracious. You should be thanking me for giving the cat the same treatment my father and his father before him gave your own monster grandfather.”

Kazuma felt his fists tighten, doing his best to keep his expression neutral as Akito continued on.

“Now then,” he said, that oily grin back on his face. “Luckily for you, I’m willing to forget you came here at all today. It must be hard for you to grasp what we zodiacs have together, and it must be even harder for you to realize that you will never understand what that creature feels because you are simply not one of us.”

Akito crawled towards him, cradling Kazuma’s head in his sinewy fingers.

“In a few months everything will go back to how it should be. And you will not be a part of it.”

Kazuma took a moment to stare into that face and wondered what it might be like to be a zodiac. Perhaps the angles in Akito’s face would be sharper, perhaps his teeth would be slightly whiter, perhaps the natural red patches on his skin would be gone. Perhaps he would be even more beautiful than he already was. Perhaps he would shiver when he smiled so close, with his hands wrapped around his cheeks.

But he wasn’t a zodiac.

All that was in front of him was a sick child.

Kazuma took Akito’s hands in his own, much bigger ones, and peeled them off gently.

“You’re right. I’m not a zodiac. Which means you can’t scare me away.”

He released Akito’s hands and stood, bowing deeply as he made his way to the door.

“I apologize to say that I will do what’s best for Kyo even if it’s against your wishes.” He rose to look down on Akito. “I’ll see myself out.”

Kazuma didn’t look behind him as he walked through the halls of the main estate, but did hear quite clearly Akito’s angered cry for Kureno as he left.

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Kyo glared at the tree before him.

If it was summer or spring or at least *warmer* Kyo would have liked to climb to the top and nestle
himself in the branches, resting his back against the bark as he took in the sun that spilled through the leaves.

That wasn’t going to happen now, with no leaves to guard against the already gray sky. The lack of colors made the limbs of the tree look weak, as if Kyo might break off the branch just by wrapping his firm fingers around its base. And even if he could make it to the top, he was sure it was even colder higher up.

He glared harder, as if the tree had betrayed him somehow. This whole fucking season felt like a betrayal, really. Who needed nipping winds, and icy rains, and all this cold bullshit? It was driving an already soured mood even further, and made even the simplest of pleasures in Kyo’s life a burden. He couldn’t run, train, wake up without feeling this undeniable burn in his stomach that he was absolutely determined to blame on this weather.

So, in a vehement ‘fuck you’ to nature, he kicked the base of the tree, shoved his hands in his coat pockets, and kept walking home. Maybe he’d take a nap. Or just go to bed early. It was only four and already starting to get dark.

The only thing that kept him awake anymore was going to the dojo, but avoiding his mentor’s saddened and heavy eyes was becoming just as exhausting. Almost as exhausting as having to answer “how was school” when the accumulative hours of the day that he spent behind a desk were dwindling drastically. It’s not like there was any point anymore, but convincing Kazuma of that was an insurmountable task that Kyo didn’t have the energy for in the least.

So when Kazuma told him that today the dojo would be closed Kyo didn’t even question it and decided to dawdle on his way home, limbs sore with a desire to move more rigorously, but blood pumping slow and languid in ways that had Kyo yawning gracelessly into his hand.

That’s how Tohru found him: Mouth open, small tears at the edge of his eyelids, bags under his eyes, and breath splaying out into the winter air. He heard Tohru giggle before he saw her, and turned around to greet her smiling face with a nod.

“Kyo,” she said seriously, though the smile breaking out on her face was easy to spot. “Do you need a cat nap?”

Kyo rolled his eyes, bonking her on the head lightly with his fist, “That was a terrible joke.”

Tohru giggle again, only to let out a yawn herself as they both walked down the path side by side.

“Don’t you work mondays?” Kyo asked. Tohru tugged at a strand of her hair, shaking her head in the corner of Kyo’s eye.

“No, I,” Tohru sighed. “Th-they gave me the day off.”

Kyo quirked an eyebrow, “No need to look so beat up about it. It’s not like they fired you, right?”

Tohru’s eyes went wide, “Oh gosh! I Hope not!”

“Calm down, like anyone would ever fire you,” Kyo said with a roll of her eyes. Tohru didn’t seem convinced, but Kyo was content to drop it. Like anyone would fire Tohru. And if they did, it would have to be for something shady. If it came to that he’d storm down there and swing his fists around and get to the bottom of it. But, really, that was Plan Z as Plans A through Y involved Tohru being Tohru, and generally making the whole scenario an impossibility.

Whatever. He yawned again.
“Something about winter makes everyone sleepy, I think,” she said. Kyo glanced down at her, only to look away. She was doing it again. Pretending like nothing was happening in that obvious way of hers. He could tell by the sad smile on her lips, by the dulling brown in her eyes. But what was he going to do about it?

He was pretending everything was normal, too.

“I hate winter,” he mumbled back, and Tohru smiled.

“But Christmas is always nice! And New Year’s! And it might snow this year!” She clasped her hands together happily at her own thoughts, and Kyo snorted.

“Snow ain’t that great.”

“Have you seen snow?! Tohru’s attention was immediately back on him with her wide and curious eyes and he gave a smug little shrug.

“Everyone’s seen snow, dummy. It snows here.”

“I mean real snow! The kind that piles up and that you can jump into and make snowmans with!” Kyo let out a snort at the childish glee she looked up at him with.

“When I went up to the mountains with Shishou, there were some places that had snow on the ground,” Kyo said, slightly smug. “It wasn’t much. We were there in the summer.”

“It was summer and there was still snow,” Tohru’s voice was awestruck. “I wish I could have seen.”

“If the snow ever piled up past your ankles you’d fall over every other damn step.” Kyo pulled a strand of Tohru’s hair and she giggled. There was a moment of true peace as they walked home in the bitter air. The sun was already setting, and the shadows were long and oppressive like they were every winter evening. But Tohru had a way of calming the air around her, of taking frazzled tension and soothing it with gentle words and movements.

She was so different than Yuki, he mused quietly, before he could halt the train of thought.

Tohru was gentle edges and soft and feminine and girl. Her long brown hair and her flowy skirts that swished against her arms that rocked back and forth when she walked.

Tohru was like a cloud in spring.

Yuki was like a torrential downpour.

What a damn lie it was that Yuki was some kind of pretty boy. The softened features of his face were so quick to turn as jagged as scraped metal. His words and his movements were sharp, like a knife—no, like needles. Stinging silently. He was agitating and absurdly complex and as out of control as the rainy season. As if he was aiming to soak Kyo in his weather, engulfing him in it entirely, and Kyo had no choice but to let those beads of musky rain water pelt down on him again and again and goddamn again.

“Is someone at the house?”

The storm cleared at the sound of Tohru’s curious voice, and he pulled himself away from his thoughts—humiliated at their existence—as he lazily turned his head to face the upcoming house.

“It looks like—”
“Kagura!” He yelped.

“Kyo!”

“Oh Christ, no!”

In sudden surge of energy, Kyo felt his legs charge up as he turned on his heel and started bolting down the path they came, interrupting Tohru’s happy little wave.

“Kyo! Get back here! Don’t you run away from me!”

“Get the hell out of here, this ain’t your home!”

“I. Came. To. Visit!”

With a victorious screech, Kagura tackled Kyo to the ground, immediately pinning his arm behind his back and digging her thumb uncomfortably into his palm. Kyo could feel scratches forming on his knee and chin as he flailed under her.

“Get off! Get off!”

“Kyo! Aren’t you happy to see me?!”

“No!”

“That’s not very nice!” She punctuated the thought with a brutal twist of his arm and he yelped before letting his forehead fall onto the cold dirt of the path.

“Why me?”

“Um,” he could hear Tohru say. “Why don’t we all go inside? It’s warmer there.”

He felt Kagura lift herself off him, and when Kyo didn’t immediately stand, she pulled him up by the scruff of his shirt and dragging him inside.

Damn, he hated being tossed around like this.

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“After all these years, Kyo, you still haven’t realized that running away is never going to work,” Shigure laughed, placing a bandage on Kyo’s scraped up chin. “Boars specialize in running straight towards their target.”

“What the hell else am I supposed to do?!” Kyo slammed his fist on the table, pulling away roughly when he felt the bandage was firmly on his skin. “And why are you here? Go home!”

Kagura flinched indignantly at Kyo’s accusatory finger, burrowing herself further into an embrace with Tohru who had a contented grin on her face.

“It’s not my fault, I see you running and I just want to chase after you! If you want to blame anything, blame love!”
“I BLAME YOU!”

“Now, now, let’s calm down,” Shigure said. “Kagura, we’d be happy to have you stay for dinner.”

Kagura gave a delighted squeal, and Kyo let out a resigned grunt.

“Great! I brought some ingredients along! But I think Kyo crushed most of them with his body,” Kagura said sadly. Shigure clicked his tongue disappointedly.

“She tackled me!” Kyo defended.

“So I may have to get more!” Kagura continued, ignoring Kyo, completely. “Tohru, you’ll come with me, right?”

“Of course!”

“Oh brother,” Kyo groaned.

“A meal cooked by two lovely ladies! What more could any man ask for,” Shigure said, approvingly. “Just, please, no more setting my kitchen on fire, okay?”

“Gure, that was years ago!” Kagura whined, finally untangling herself from a happy looking Tohru. “I promise I’ll be good! And Tohru will be with me the whole time!”

Shigure nodded in approval, and Kagura smiled broadly.

“Great! It’s five of us, with three huge, boorish boys, so we’ll probably have to get a lot. I know all of Kyo’s like and dislikes, but what about yours and Yuki’s, Gure?”

A prickly silence filled the room, and Kyo could feel a headache coming on.

“Yuki isn’t… eating with us tonight,” Tohru said. And hell, if that girl wasn’t the most obvious person on the face of the planet. The way her eyes darkened, the way her shoulders dropped in worry. That dark aura that coated the house was coming back, and Kyo considered breaking his vow of never talking to Yuki again just so he could have another shot of kicking his ass.

He hardly even noticed how much he had slumped over, too, until Shigure spoke up.

“Yuki’s off studying that mop of hair off his head! Entrance exams have him out of the house a lot,” Shigure said, coolly. As if it could actually be the truth.

Kagura gave a sympathetic nod, “Poor Yuki. Exam season is the worst.”

Shigure gave an agreeing hum.

“That’s alright, that way we can make one of Kyo’s favorites!”

“Something tells me you would have done so anyway, Kagura,” Shigure smiled back, and Kagura gave a guilty giggle.

“Tohru, let’s go, okay?” Kagura snapped up, dragging Tohru up by the arm.

“S-Sure!” Tohru said. He could hear the two girls chatting away, hammering against his skull relentlessly and with the attention pulled off him, he could feel the tension in his body go slack. That’s right, he wanted to take a nap. Unceremoniously he stood, trudging out of the room and towards the stairs.
“Do whatever you want, just leave me alone for a bit,” Kyo said over his shoulder. Distantly, he could hear Kagura calling after him and Shigure’s eyes watching his back. But by some miracle (that was surely named Tohru) no one chased after him, and he made it to his room and onto his already messy futon without incident.

He closed his eyes, and fell asleep like he would against the beat of a hurricane—even with barely a few clouds in the sky.

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Yuki blinked down at his study materials, watching in a daze how the fluorescent light was reflecting off the glossy textbook pages. He looked up, staring out of the windows, confused at how it suddenly became so dark. He could see himself in the reflection of the glass, out of it and out of focus eyes that didn’t know where to go now that they weren’t staring at his text materials.

He looked around, knowing in the back of his mind that he wasn’t the only one here, but surprised nonetheless when he heard pages flipping and pencil lead scribbling, and tired sighs escaping overworked students.

That’s why he nearly fell out of his chair when Kakeru appeared across from him, his presence too loud and bright for such a gloomy room.

“How do you know what you look like?”

Yuki raised an eyebrow at him, determined to ignore him as much as possible as he turned back to his books.

“What?”

“You look like Anpanman if someone squeezed all the filling out of him, you know?” Kakeru made a wringing motion with his hands as if trying to get all the water out of a rag. “And then they left him out in the cold and he got all mushy and moldy. And then, like, that kid from The Grudge found him and possessed poor an-less Anpanman.”

Yuki finally looked up at Kakeru who was rolling his head around and gargling in the most half-assed possession Yuki had ever seen. Finally, he stopped and gave Yuki a solemn nod, “that’s what you look like.”

Someone shushed Kakeru from another part of the room, and at least he had the decency to look somewhat guilty.

“I never saw that movie,” Yuki said, lowering his voice.


“Do I really need to take this from you?” Yuki said on a heavy sigh.

“Don’t get mad. I’m just saying that you’re looking a little worse for wear these days. Are you doing okay?”

Yuki rubbed at his dry eyes.

“Everyone’s stressed right now.” He motioned to the room of people sinking into their desks.

“What? About entrance exams?” Kakeru pshawed in an exaggerated manner while still trying to stay
quiet, and he slapped Yuki on the back now in quick successions from across the table. “Like you need to worry about that! You know you’re gonna pass, you perfect motherfucker!”

Maybe that’s the problem.

Yuki grabbed Kakeru’s hand and pushed his thumb into his palm painfully, causing Kakeru to wince through his smile. “You might even score top in the nation and then I’ll really come up there and kick your ass! I’ve been training!”

“I think you could stand to be a little more stressed,” Yuki said with a roll of his eyes, letting him go.

“No thanks, I don’t want to get wrinkles on my beautiful face.”

Yuki snorted, trying his best to give his studies more attention but it just wasn’t happening. With a sigh, he closed his books and began to pack up.

“We should get out of here before you disrupt the peace any further.”

Kakeru stood and followed Yuki out of the room. The rest of the school was dark and empty, with only a few wandering seniors who were meeting with teachers or holing themselves up to study. It wasn’t that late, but the early nightfall made it seem like Yuki had been studying for years.

“Listen, come over to my place tonight. My mom’s out of town and Maki’s coming over. Leave the worries of your troubled life behind!”

“I don’t know, I’ve been over a lot lately,” Yuki said, crossing his arms as he leaned against the wall outside the library. “I’m starting to feel like I’m imposing.”

“You totally are!” Kakeru said, swinging an arm around his neck and pulling Yuki close. “Not to mention how you eat me out of house and home. What am I supposed to do with these freeloading best friend of mine?”

Kakeru dug his fingers roughly into Yuki’s scalp, musing the hair there until Yuki was laughing and pushing him away.

“Allright, alright, I get it. I’ll come over,” Yuki said with a small smile.

“The prince is coming over!” Kakeru said with a cheerful pump of his fist. Without a second of hesitation he whipped out his phone. “I need to text Maki and tell her to bring out the good China for our royal guest.”

“Oh, shut up,” Yuki nudged Kakeru’s shoulder with his own as they walked down the hallway. Another day was almost done, and night was coming earlier and earlier.

Yuki liked to wander in the city streets when the sky turned pitch black, and the ground began to glow, as if the sun had set right into the concrete of the city. But, he would admit, he preferred the quiet, and never neat apartment of Kakeru’s any day.

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There was the soft noise of chopping against the cutting boards. Tohru slicing up vegetables while Kagura filled the rice cooker and turned on the stove. It was… nice, Tohru thought. Working with
someone in tandem in the kitchen was always a nice feeling. It felt comfortable and welcoming. Like a home should feel.

But Kagura was being oddly silent. As if she had forgotten Tohru was even here. As if her mind had wandered away as she placed the diced up chicken in the pan and began to mix it with the spices.

Perhaps that was just the effect this house had now. Silencing. As if no one dare speak more than was necessary. As if speaking at all was some sort of violation against nature. The air was stale and tired, driving a rift between each room in the house, dividing it into cold-war like territories.

And no one was allowed to acknowledge why.

Tohru looked around her, as if afraid to even think these thoughts under her roof—as if Kagura might hear her frantically running brain. She repressed a sigh as she focused back onto her vegetables, letting the simmering of the stove become a pleasant white noise.

Yuki’s absence was a frightening one.

One that was having an immediate effect on this beautiful world Tohru had been a part of since her first year of high school. One that had Kyo antsy and Shigure quieter than usual. And Tohru worried to her stomach.

Something must have happened, and Tohru wish she knew what so that she could simply… do something. A sympathetic nod, a comforting word, a careful nudge to open up, something. Sometimes she wondered if she could drag Yuki back by the collar in an apologetic confrontation. Force him to eat his favorite foods and speak his mind.

But in the few collective moments Tohru would see Yuki in the house, he looked like a scared mouse. As if something in the air was making him sick, as if the walls were closing in on him and sucking the air out of his body. Tohru would watch him and want to flee from the house, herself.

And the fact of the matter was Tohru didn’t know what happened. Tohru didn’t even know where to start in piecing this life back together. Didn’t know why Yuki’s eyes were so sunken and resigned. Didn’t know why Kyo was so anxious and tired all the time. Didn’t know why Shigure preferred to pour himself into his work rather than peak up for even a moment at the world beyond his sliding door.

And from the few stunted conversations with Yuki, she could tell he wasn’t anywhere close to telling her.

Though, she could guess.

Tohru shook her head frantically, causing Kagura to jump at her sudden movements.

There was no way. It was a ridiculous thought back then, and it was a ridiculous thought now!

There was certainly no way those two were… involved with each other. Something else must have happened. Something family related.

Kyo was getting locked up soon.

And Yuki… well, she wasn’t sure what Yuki would do after graduation. Or what Shigure would do when the three of them moved out of his house.

There was a lot she didn’t know.
“Tohru?”

“Yes!”

She snapped to attention, giving a particularly harsh and instinctual chop with her knife that caused Kagura to jump and, in response, cause Tohru to jump, too.

“Careful!” Kagura chided, taking the knife away from her with a huff.

“Sorry,” Tohru said. “I guess I got lost in thought.”

“I know,” Kagura said with a smile. “You make such a cute, concentrated face when you start dozing off.”

Kagura furrowed her brows and brought her lips into a slight pout to mimic the other girl, and Tohru smiled.

“It’s alright. I was worried it might be like this when I came over,” Kagura sighed, taking Tohru’s chopped up vegetables and mixing them into the pan with a loud sizzle.

“You did?”

Kagura’s face focused on the pan in front of her, a sort of sadness leaking into her eyes before she opened her mouth to speak again.

“Kyo’s getting put in the cat’s cage in a few months. I don’t think anyone wants to think about it.”

“Yeah…” Tohru sighed. “I guess so.”

“But I think that’s why it’s a good thing that you’re here! You have a good effect on people, Tohru! If anyone can help Kyo right now it’s you.”

Kagura looked sadly down at the food, even through her smile, and Tohru looked away. She wasn’t sure how true that was anymore. But the expression on Kagura’s face, mixed with the hidden meaning of her words made Tohru’s previous theory about the cat and the rat all the more ridiculous.

“I think Kyo’s happy to see you. In his own way,” Tohru said.

“See! That’s what I mean! You know how to make people feel better!” Kagura flashed a smile that was a bit forced, and Tohru did her best to do the same. “I know this family puts a lot of pressure on you, though. For that I’m sorry. First this house, now Rin—”

“Rin isn’t a pressure at all! I’m happy to help!”

Kagura gave a nervous laugh as she covered Tohru’s mouth from her too loud outburst. Not unkindly, she put her finger to her lips in a shushing motion and Tohru nodded apologetically.

“I’m glad you feel that way,” Kagura said in a quieter voice, now. “I know she didn’t let you see her today, though.”

Tohru sighed, “She’s probably tired.”

“Or just being a brat,” Kagura huffed. “I wish I was as patient with her as you are.”

Tohru gave a sympathetic giggle.
“Oh, and I hope you know I visit her, too! A few times a week if I can. Though she makes sure the visits don’t last that long.” She gave an embittered laugh. “But at least she’s stopped throwing things at me since you started seeing her.”

Tohru briefly thought of Kagura and Rin’s relationship becoming even more explosive than it already was. Ah, that was a scary thought. Who would even win that fight?

“You know how to talk to people in this family,” Kagura said. Tohru’s attention snapped back to her. “I’m a little jealous.”

“No, no! Not at all! I could never understand this family like you! A cousin—a fellow zodiac is irreplaceable! And I think you all have a stronger bond than you think.”

Kagura stared at Tohru for a long moment, before launching herself out to Tohru in a tight, light-hearted hug—as if the conversation hadn’t even happened and she was greeting Tohru for the first time that day. Tohru hugged back.

“Ahhh! I’m so jealous! What am I going to do when Kyo picks you?!?” Kagura said, tightening the embrace. Tohru gave a nervous laugh.

There wasn’t much else she could do besides that.

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Kyo pulled himself out of bed at the smell of food. It was easy to think that he could crash into his futon and stay there in a deep slumber until morning, but the wafting scent from the kitchen caused his stomach to growl viciously. He rolled over onto his back and stared up at the ceiling, rubbing at his groggy face with his hands as he pulled himself up.

It felt like it had been ages since he smelled Tohru’s cooking downstairs. Perhaps he was just exaggerating, but the house always seemed emptier lately. Tohru picked up more shifts at work now that her workload at school had dwindled, and most of her cooking came wrapped and refrigerated from earlier in the morning.

The nights she was home to cook he was either at the dojo or holed up in his room, nursing a headache or deep in sleep—only to wake up hours later and stuff his face with whatever leftovers there were in a darkened house.

But today nothing sounded better to him than a hot, freshly prepared meal, even if Kagura was going to drive him crazy cozied up next to him around the table. At least, Kyo begrudgingly thought, it was better than sitting in silence next to Shigure or across from Tohru.

Another growl ripped through his stomach, and that was enough to convince him to head down the stairs towards the girls. With a yawn, he stretched as he reached the hallway, passing by the open door to Shigure’s office until a familiar and irritating voice stopped him in his tracks.

“Kyo, come in here for a moment,” Shigure called. Kyo huffed out indignantly, before turning on his heel and away from the food to lean against the frame of Shigure’s office door.

“Yeah?”
Shigure looked up from his work, over the frame of his glasses to give him an amused smile, gesturing towards the empty spot on the ground on the other side of Shigure’s desk. Kyo didn’t move and Shigure gave a shrug.

“I was wondering if you could do me a favor,” he began, turning his eyes back onto whatever he was writing below him. Kyo didn’t even shrug. Shigure would ask regardless of whether he said anything or not.

“Could you tell Yuki to call his brother back? He’s been relentlessly trying to get in contact with him.”

Kyo tensed at the name, feeling rage boil under skin at Shigure’s continued feigned innocence.

“Why are you asking me?” Kyo said through his teeth, trying his best to stay calm. “Tell Tohru to do it.”

“I guess I could.” Shigure lifted his pen to tap it against his chin in faux contemplation.

Kyo turned, ready to walk out the door, “Then do. I don’t want to be near that damn rat ever again.”

“I just thought you would want an excuse to talk to him.”

Kyo stopped, halfway into the hallway. Blood running cold, and eyes turning wild and angry as he whipped his head around. This time Shigure was staring straight back at him with a grin as Kyo stormed back inside with his teeth barred and fear squeezing his chest like a vice grip.

The leaned down to bury his fists in the front of Shigure’s robe, “Why would I need an excuse to talk to that fucking rat?”

Shigure smiled back, unfazed in the least, “Are you sure that’s a conversation you want to have with the door open?”

Kyo took another moment to glare at him, finally shoving Shigure back as he released his grip to turn around and slam the door shut. He gripped the edges of the door, pressing his forehead lightly against the wooden frame, defeated.

Shigure laughed, “I would advise you never to play poker. I’ve never met a person easier to read.”

“What do you know?” Kyo asked. His voice was smaller now.

“Why don’t you have a seat?”

After a moment Kyo pulled himself away from the door, reluctantly sitting across from Shigure at his desk. Whatever work Shigure was pretending to do was now completely forgotten as dark, frightening eyes honed in on Kyo.

“I take it things are still rocky between you two. Well, I guess that will be a given until Yuki comes home,” Shigure smirked. “Or until he gets over you.”

Kyo ran a hand through his hair, feeling something tighten in his throat, “What are you—why the fuck are you saying this shit?”

Shigure shrugged, “Just an observation. Don’t get too bothered by it. You’re the one who rejected him, after all.”

If Shigure was looking at him, Kyo didn’t know. He refused to look up from where his vision was
trained on the patch of floor in front of his crossed legs. Absently, he could hear Shigure light a cigarette and take a deep inhale.

“So,” Kyo began, when he gathered enough courage. “Are you gonna tell Akito?”

“No, I’m not,” Shigure said. The words couldn’t comfort Kyo; the aftershocks of fear still trickled through him.

The thought alone was enough to paralyze him.

“Why not?” Kyo asked, nerves still on edge. “Don’t you live to snitch people out?”

“What a cruel assumption,” Shigure laughed.

Kyo slammed his fist down, panic clear in his wide eyes. He knew this would have to happen. He had been preparing for this outcome ever since this shitty year started. He had been counting the fucking days until he would be locked up in some shitty cell that Akito had made just for him. Just to watch him suffer.

He knew this was happening. He was fucking ready for it.

But… he had more time, right?

That didn’t mean he was ready to go tomorrow.

What would he do if that was the case?

His mind was drawing a frantic blank of who he would say goodbye to, of what he wanted to do, of Tohru’s food he still wanted to eat.

In that moment panic surged through him in the form of sharpened rage, the only translation he knew fluently, and when he opened his mouth he could hear the volumes of a scream rising behind them.

“Would you just cut your shit and tell me for real? I wanna know if I’m alright or if any day Akito’s gonna call and cut my freedom a few fucking months short because you can’t keep your big mouth shut!”

“I won’t,” Shigure said. His voice reverberated finality. Kyo could feel the tension in him snap like a thread. “What fun would that be?”

“So what? Are you gonna blackmail me now? Yuki’s gone, so you need someone else to pick on?!”

“I would never pick on Yuki,” Shigure said, acting offended. “We had a deal, after all.”

“A deal?”

“My, what a wonderful smell. I bet dinner is ready,” Shigure said, suddenly. He stood, stretching, and ready to head towards the kitchen, cigarette still dangling from his mouth. “Those girls have made us something delicious, I’m sure.”

“Sit the fuck back down!” Kyo snapped, and Shigure did with a petulant whine. “What the fuck are you talking about? What deal?”

Shigure took another deep inhale of his cigarette, and Kyo could tell Shigure was absolutely reveling in whatever it was he was about to say. For a guy who bragged about knowing nothing, he sure like to act like an ass when he knew something.
“I thought you didn’t want to hear anything about him ever again?”

“That was before I found out you two were scheming behind my back!”

“We weren’t scheming,” Shigure laughed, as if amused by Kyo’s complete stupidity. Kyo just glared at him until Shigure gave a relenting sigh. Smirk still proudly displayed on his face. “Yuki and I made a bet that if he could get you to return his feelings by graduation, I would personally pay for his schooling and his board after high school. Wherever he chose to go.”

Kyo blinked.

“What?”

Shigure nodded.

Kyo ground his teeth together, pounding his fists on the desk one more time as he launched himself up to angrily pace around the room.

That fucking, that fucking rat!

It figures he would be just another piece in this dumb little game this family was playing, just another toy to mess around with until someone got tired or bored or decided it needed to be locked up.

Kyo let out an angry snarl as he ran both hands through his hair far too roughly, So that bastard rat was just... was just using me!

“Ah, ah, ah,” Shigure said, wagging his finger. “I never said that.”

Suddenly the brimming anger was replaced with a blind-sided confusion.

“But the bet—”

“What about it?” Shigure smashed the butt of his cigarette against an ashtray. “You made a similar deal with Akito regarding Yuki.”

Kyo paled.

“Beat Yuki in a fight, and you get to walk free from the cage.”

“That’s not the same! I didn’t bet that he would fall in love with me!” Kyo exclaimed, his arms swinging wide in protest.

“No, but you certainly capitalized on the feelings you do have for him.” Shigure smiled, removing his glasses to give Kyo a few of those piercing eyes, unfiltered. “Or I suppose I should say did have for him.”

Kyo felt his fists tighten.

“Why shouldn’t Yuki be able to capitalize on his, then?”

“It’ different!” Kyo shouted. “He--! ...He--!”

“If you’re trying to ask if Yuki’s feelings for you were real or not, rest assured that was completely sincere,” Shigure said, giving his tone a sing-song smile.

“Since when do you know so much about him? Or me?! Fuck, why would that stupid—why would
he even need your damn money? Everyone knows the rat family is loaded!”

“A question only asked by someone who has never met Yuki’s mother.”

There was that familiar pang again.

The same one he felt when he asked Haru about Yuki’s earlier years.

The same one he felt when he stared at Yuki’s tired eyes and his brain just couldn’t understand.

The same one he felt when Yuki snuck into his bed and held his hand through the night, whispering a conversation Kyo felt he would never get.

Kyo pushed it aside, “What the fuck does that mean?”

“You might know if you had learned anything about him other than, you know, what he’s like in bed.”

That was it.

“Thought, admittedly, that does sound more fun,” Shigure laughed.

Kyo felt his fist come down hard on Shigure’s desk, cracking it down the middle, splintering the wood as papers and cups and writing tools flew from the table and to the floor to the beat of Kyo’s ragged and enraged breathing.

“SHUT UP. I AM SICK OF THIS FAMILY FUCKING DOING WHAT THEY WANT AND SAYING WHAT THEY WANT. YEAH, I MADE THAT FUCKING BET WITH AKITO. AND I’D MAKE IT AGAIN. BECAUSE THAT WAS THE ONLY CHANCE I WAS EVER GOING TO GET.”

Kyo grabbed Shigure once more by the collar, but this time he pulled him up so that he was eye level with Kyo’s flaring, red eyes. At least, this time, Shigure’s smile had nervous lines around it.

“DO YOU KNOW THAT HAPPENS TO ME AFTER THIS YEAR? HUH? DO YOU? I’M GETTING LOCKED UP. MY FREEDOM GETS TAKEN AWAY FROM ME. JUST CAUSE I’M THE DAMN CAT. I DON’T GET ANY TREATS JUST FOR BEING A FUCKING LAP DOG LIKE SOME PEOPLE. AND I WAS FINE TO BEAT THAT BASTARD RAT INTO THE GROUND UNTIL HE… HE… HE—” Kyo’s knuckles were going white from the grip, his eyes clenching shut. “UNTIL HE STARTED FUCKING WITH MY HEAD! NOW WHAT DO I HAVE LEFT? NOW WHAT DO I GOT? SO DON’T COMPARE US. DON’T FUCKING COMPARE WHAT WE’VE BEEN THROUGH.”

“So you beat Yuki, and you get your freedom?” Shigure asked.

“Yes,” Kyo hissed.

“You get to join the zodiacs around the banquet table, hm?”

“That’s the goddamn deal!”

“And that’s what you want?”

“SO WHAT IF I DO?!”

Kyo’s face twisted into aggravation when Shigure started letting off light-hearted chuckles, gently
patting Kyo’s hands that were still buried deep into his robe.

“You bet for a seat at the table, and Yuki bets to leave it altogether,” Shigure smirked. “It just makes me wonder which one of you was the one really fighting for your freedom.”

Kyo drew in a shaky breath, his grip loosening as he stared through a desperate rage into Shigure’s all-knowing smirk.

“But that’s none of my business.”

Kyo took in a deep breath, releasing Shigure suddenly so he fell against the floor. Shigure gave a relieved laugh as he straightened his clothes up, and Kyo turned on his heel to leave the room, still fuming and steaming from the lingering words in the air.

“You better keep your damn mouth shut,” was all Kyo said before opening and closing the door behind him with a sharp snap. He wasn’t even surprised when he found Tohru and Kagura huddling in the hall, startled by the yelling, no doubt.

“K-Kyo?” Tohru tried. Kyo didn’t even turn around as he headed for the stairs.

“I’m not eating tonight,” he mumbled.

“Kyo!” Kagura echoed.

“I'M NOT EATING TONIGHT!”

Silence fell, and Kyo dropped his head at his own faltered temper. Instead of apologizing, however, he let the sound of his bare feet tapping against the steps fill the quiet air.

He opened the room to his door, slamming it shut behind him, and dove right back into his futon.

He could sleep for years.

------------------------

What do you see when you look in the mirror every day?

You drag yourself over the mirror and what’s there? It’s blank. Empty. Void of anything useful.

You look so ragged and tired. And for what? For who? Aren’t you just kidding yourself? Aren’t you just trying to rebel like a child against a family that’s given you everything?

You look horrific. And those good looks?

Wasted.

You spend all your time as a shell inside yourself, lamenting over meaningless details of the past. And now who are you? What direction have you taken? What path?

You’ve squandered those brains, too.

And manipulated your heart to believe your harmful whims.
I would have rejected you, too.

Aren’t you lucky you get to coast your way to a job? Cry about it all you like, but the truth is you like things that come easy. You’re not built for challenges. You’re not built for much, really.

You could have been. Maybe. Perhaps. If you hadn’t dulled every bit of yourself down with childish decisions.

But what else could you expect from a chi—

Yuki blinked.

It took him a moment to process where he was, until the faint light from his cellphone (with 7 missed calls marking the screen) illuminated the organized clutter of Kakeru’s living room. The lead from his mechanical pencil cracked on the notebook paper, the edges of the notebook fighting for space with mugs and books and remotes for the TV and heating system.

With a shake of his head, bringing his thoughts back to earth, he swiped away the broken lead off the page and stared down at the words he had just written.

It happened again.

With a sigh, he ripped the page from the notebook without a second glance and tore the piece to shreds again and again until his fingers turned white with the effort and the paper resisted any movement.

They weren’t his words. They didn’t belong here.

Deciding that was enough writing for tonight, he closed the weathered journal. A luxury he had surprisingly kept by his side since Shigure had given it to him nearly two months ago. Except now instead of stunted thoughts and half-finished lists, the pages overflowed with words he couldn’t bear to hear himself say.

Words that were locked so tight under his skin, vacuum sealed into his heart, and bursting through his brain like tidal waves. He was writing because that was all there was left to do, and because if he didn’t, surely the words would write themselves on his face. He couldn’t have that.

And so now here he was, halfway through a journal he had scoffed at when it was first given to him, ripped out stems invading every few bundles of pages, and words that were entirely his.

He never read his own entries, and planned to burn the book to a crisp once he had filled out the very last page. He could scribble through another easily—though he had grown attached to the clean, leather, forest-green color. He liked how it felt between his hands. The pages stained with pencil lead and pen ink had slight waves in them, marking themselves apart from the words yet to be written on the blank pages. And when Yuki cracked open the journal, there was a sense of comfort in how it would creak in a welcome under him.

Tonight, however (and like many), was not a night he felt welcome in his own headspace, and he flopped down onto the floor of Kakeru’s living room, not ready to sneak back into his friend’s room and crawl into the guest futon. He stared up at the ceiling and breathed a long sigh, knowing that sleep was hours and fitful hours away.

Decidedly, Yuki stood as quietly as he could, grabbing his cigarettes and a book of matches from his school bag and crept outside to the balcony.
It was cold, and Yuki shivered as he rubbed his arms over Kakeru’s long-sleeved shirt that served as makeshift pajamas. He considered, briefly, grabbing his school sweater or jacket, but the risk of having them smell like smoke for the rest of the school week hung too heavily on his head. So instead, he garnered as much heat as he could from the lit match, huddling around the cigarette in his mouth as if that would warm him at all.

Yuki took a deep breath of the tobacco, holding it in his lungs for a moment, and letting it drift from his mouth and mingle with his frozen breath. Smoking in the winter always made a more dramatic effect, and he loved seeing his breath dance so vividly against the cold sky.

He took another puff, trying to breathe out through his nose as he had seen Shigure do, but coughed at the sudden sensation, trying to keep quiet as he calmed his breaths. He sighed, staring at the shortening nub of the cigarette, the ends flaring with an irritated orange. Yuki ignored the dull ache in his lungs and took another—

“What in the high holy hell is going on here?”

Yuki sputtered at the door opening that accompanied Kakeru’s oddly earnest and concerned gaze. He coughed out the smoke and into his hand, dropping the contraband onto the pavement below even though he already knew he was caught.

Kakeru closed the door behind him and approached Yuki as he calmed down from his small coughing fit, giving him an infinitely confused stare even if the amusement could never truly be wiped from Kakeru’s default expression.

“S-Sorry,” Yuki said through the last of his coughs. “Did I wake you?”

Kakeru raised a brow, “No. Couldn’t sleep. Thought I’d see what the former class president was up to on my balcony.”

Yuki sighed, running his smoke stained fingers through his hair.

“You smoke?” Kakeru asked. “Don’t you have asthma or something? Or, you know, a permanent record to upkeep?”

“It’s just… now and then,” Yuki lied. “And my asthma’s practically gone. Just something left over from childhood.”

“Uh-huh.” Kakeru didn’t sound convinced. “So you’ve been smoking “now and then” since when?”

Yuki rolled his eyes, “What is this, an interrogation?”

“No, no, just wondering. I never thought I’d see the former prez doing something so scandalous. It’s like seeing a shooting star. Or catching Santa Claus with his beard off.”

Yuki leaned against the balcony, body heavy with shame and exhaustion as he let the question hang for a moment. Jeez, it was still freezing outside.

“I think I started when I was fifteen.” Another lie. Yuki remembered that day as clearly as the expressions on his mother’s face.

“Woah, woah, woah, fifteen?! What are you some kind of delinquent? Are you sure you’re the Yuki Sohma? Or were you replaced with some kind of cyborg in the middle of the night?”

Yuki chuckled, “it just started. I never really saw a reason to stop.”
Kakeru was surprisingly silent for the next moment, and Yuki was content to shiver in that silence on the chilly balcony until Kakeru let out a long, lamenting, and overly exaggerated sigh. Yuki felt his arm being tugged, Kakeru leading him back into the apartment and sitting him back down at the table.

In a swift movement, Kakeru closed the balcony door, turned on the lights, and started shuffling in the kitchen which Yuki could see from his spot on the floor. It was odd. The soft lighting was enough to make the night feel warmer than it was, accentuating the peacefulness of the late hour, but Kakeru’s silence made him feel as though he was about to get scolded.

It was a few minutes later that Kakeru was returning with two mugs of hot tea and sitting across from him at the table. Unsure, Yuki took the warm cup between his hands and savored the heat that steeped into his near-numb fingers. Yuki smiled, but the expression dropped almost immediately when Kakeru began to speak again.

“What’s going on?” Kakeru asked.

Yuki took a sip of his tea, “What do you mean?”

“Come on, Yun. You don’t eat. You don’t sleep. You’re stressed 24/7. You’re always in a pissy mood, and now smoking with your screwed up lungs? I think it’s my right—NAY—my obligation as your best friend to ask you what the hell is going on with you. Because I feel like I’m missing a couple of pieces of the puzzle here. And you can go ahead and crash here all you want, but first I gotta make sure you’re not in some trouble with loan sharks or the yakuza or something.”

“It’s nothing like that,” Yuki sighed.

“Well, you’re not giving me much else to go on, man!” Kakeru threw his hands up in what Yuki was sure was supposed to be comedic. But there was something else etched onto his face. Something Yuki rarely ever saw. “I’m just worried, alright? So can you just tell me what’s going on? In a good man-to-man bonding sort of way?”

Yuki stared down hard into the mug of tea, brought it to his lips and sipped at it cautiously as he avoided Kakeru’s eyes. But it was no good. Kakeru wasn’t filling that silence. It was Yuki’s turn to speak. And he knew Kakeru would listen. He knew Kakeru would care.

But Yuki thought to the last time he told someone what was going on, he thought about Haru. About this busted dam of chaos that was flooding into Haru’s room week after week now and he felt ashamed and small. What if he did the same to Kakeru? What if he gave him too much of this stupid mess?

“Yuki?” Kakeru prompted, and Yuki noticed his tea was nearly halfway gone.

He couldn’t stay silent, and he didn’t have the energy for a lie.

He supposed he would just have to be more careful this time.

Yuki looked up at Kakeru and warily opened his mouth to speak, “I confessed to someone.”

Kakeru’s eyebrows shot up in surprise, an impressed sort of smile leaking onto Kakeru’s features though he still didn’t say a word. Yuki took another sip before continuing.

“I confessed to… to someone I live with.”

“Hond—?!?”
“Not Ms. Honda.”

Yuki looked away, a flush brightening his cheeks as he took another sip of tea. He didn’t want to watch Kakeru’s face make the realization, though when he peeked up he could see everything beginning to click into place for his best friend.

“Wait…” Kakeru scratched his head. “You mean carrot-top?”

Yuki gave a small nod.

“He’s a guy,” Kakeru said, as if Yuki might not know. Yuki nodded again. “…He’s your cousin.”

“Distantly,” Yuki said, quickly.

“Jeez,” Kakeru said after a moment too long. He exhaled harshly. “Heavy.”

Another beat of silence, “He rejected me.”

“And you haven’t been taking it well,” Kakeru finished. Delicately. Yuki could tell he was treading on completely unknown territory, and almost smiled at his friend’s frantic discomfort.

“Not exactly,” Yuki said.

The two continued to drink their tea, and Yuki could feel a heavy weight crushing on his chest, heavier and heavier until he placed his mug down a bit too firmly, catching Kakeru’s jittery attention.

“I can go,” Yuki said, making to get up.

“No! Hey! Wait a sec! Sit down! Uh,” Kakeru moved his hands around with such an earnest panic that Yuki couldn’t do much else but return to his seat on the floor. “Sorry, you’ve just got me stumped here. I’m supposed to be the awesome best friend that gives you great advice and fixes your life and then you look up at me with shining watery eyes and we hug and I totally spoon you.”

“That sounds terrible,” Yuki offered, deadpan.

“Let me think! I’ve been through my share of shit, but falling into an all-encompassing, life-ruining love for a family member isn’t really something I’ve seen outside of soap operas!”

“It’s not life-ruining,” Yuki pouted, but Kakeru gave him this look that had Yuki giving a defeated sigh.

It’s not like he could tell him anything else, so he relented.

“I just want you to be okay,” Kakeru said on a whine that almost made it sound like a joke. But the frustration was clear in his brows and Yuki gave a tentative smile.

“So…” Yuki started, awkwardly clearing his throat. “It doesn’t bother you?”

“What? You being gay?”

Yuki wrinkled his nose at the word, “Gay?”


this strong for anyone besides him. Regardless of gender.”

Yuki had never thought of it like that before, oddly enough; Gay or straight. Perhaps when he was younger, still in middle school. He remembered briefly trying to drive his attraction in another direction—to anyone else other than this cat. Men, women, it didn’t matter. Just as long as he felt something.

But it never happened.

Or, at least, that’s what he would assume. Those years in middle school were blurred and shaky in his memory. And Yuki wasn’t jumping at the chance to dive back into those memories of a life he left behind.

Once he entered high school there was Ms. Honda. He remembers the day he was supposed to see her in a certain light, look at her like a man. Her body was that of a woman’s, just as alluring as it was a comfort.

Only ending in another fruitless attempt to steer these useless thoughts onto someone else.

Kakeru gave a contemplative hum, “So you’ve never had the hots for me? Not even a little stirring in the pants for your super-hot best friend?”

“I think your stupidity outweighs your attractiveness,” Yuki said, smirking at Kakeru’s obvious offense.

“You’re in love with, like, the school’s biggest idiot! Didn’t that guy jump out of a window in his first year?!”

Yuki gave a genuine laugh, nodding his head because, well, he couldn’t even deny that.

“Believe me, it’s not the worst he’s done.”

“Apparently not! Breaking the heart of Mr. President, himself! Maybe I should kick this guy’s ass!”

Kakeru rolled up his sleeve and gave his fist a twirl in the air.

Broke my heart.

Yuki wanted to flinch at the statement, brushing it away to that deep pit of words that still weren’t allowed past his tongue.

“You don’t have to do that,” he laughed instead, picturing Kyo handily beating Kakeru in a few seconds flat. “Kyo and I have had a… complicated relationship for as long as I can remember. I can’t say I expected anything different.”

Yuki could feel his brow furrow at the thought, a frown pronounced on his face as the tired expression returned.

Kakeru slammed his hands on the table startling Yuki from retreating back down into his thoughts, “Then we’ll just have to find you somebody new!”

“Somebody new?” Yuki raised an eyebrow.

“Duh! They say the best way to get over someone is to fall in love with somebody else!”

Fall in love with somebody else?
Yuki blanched.

Was that even possible?

“C’mon, there are like 15 million people in Tokyo alone, there’s gotta be a perfect match out there for you somewhere!” Kakeru rested his head on his hands and with a cheeky smile, gave Yuki wink. “Though they also say not to be blind to what’s right in front of you. But I’m sorry to say I’m taken.”

Yuki kicked Kakeru under the table and he let out a yelp.

“It’s times like these when I feel bad for Maki.”

“That was not nice! And after I listened to your deepest, darkest secrets!”

Yuki rolled his eyes.

“I guess that just means you’ll have to tell me yours one day,” Yuki finished off the last of his tea, and put the mug down to see Kakeru giving him a bright smile.

“I’d entrust you with my secrets and my life,” Kakeru said around a snicker.

Yuki smiled in a way that he hoped said: ‘me too.’

He fell asleep that night with warm tea in his stomach, and in the presence of a friend. It was warm in this apartment and Yuki felt the similar easy sensation of being in a home. Even if it wasn’t his. Even if this would never be a permanent feeling. He thought, in the last moments of his consciousness, that he missed it.

That warm feeling of being surrounded by people you loved. Even if they never knew anything past your smile.
YOU CAN’T KEEP ME DOWN. I WILL ALWAYS RETURN.

(Thank you to all the lovely people who comment. You are my bright and shining stars.)

Yuki stayed at Kakeru’s for the rest of the week.

Looming feelings of overstaying his welcome aside, the week had given him a brief moment to relax from his thoughts. Having Kakeru around constantly was sort of like having an annoying, chirping bird by your window that never seemed to shut up. If Yuki tried to think at all, Kakeru made sure (purposefully or not) to interrupt it with his own obnoxiously loud voice. For which, don’t get him wrong, Yuki was grateful.

On Wednesday Yuki met Kakeru’s mom and immediately learned where he got it from.

Saturday to Wednesday mornings, Kakeru’s mother worked shifts as an assistant manager of a small family restaurant during the day, and bartended in Shinjuku’s golden mile at night. It was where she learned to harden her speech, as well as laugh and yell as loud as the tourists she served.

The nights were hard on her, and she had taken to staying at a friend’s place close by during the weekends to ease the burden of commuting. When she finally burst through the door on Wednesday night, she grabbed a beer and nearly sucked down more than half of it before she introduced herself.

She was a kind woman, if not a bit abrasive and crude. She shamelessly flirted with Yuki, to both the boys’ chagrin. And when Maki joked that Yuki could mend his broken heart by dating the older woman, Kakeru let out a pained belly moan.

It was a different feeling from staying at Haru’s house. A different type of healing.

The ox boy was quiet, his family subdued and private. In Haru’s room the walls of Sohma house were visible from the window, and the cursed aura that intensified whenever he was around any of his zodiac relatives all created an environment that made Yuki feel filthy. It was as if the walls and floor and desk and couch and blankets were stained by Yuki’s flesh. An unseen, yet foul ink that spilled from every pore in his body.

Yet Haru would always be there, undeterred by the mess of emotions Yuki would present to him from behind his tired and honest eyes. It was an unconditional friendship that could only be described, oddly, by the strength of this bond they shared. Cursed. Together. He didn’t know what he would do without him.

Kakeru’s house was completely different.

Noise and life and action sprouted from every corner of the room. Personality was streaked across the space, between Kakeru’s video games, text books, used plates, gifted trinkets from Maki, and Kakeru’s mother’s magazines, video tapes, overflowing picture frames, and vases and ornaments so ugly they must have been gifted from family.
Yuki enjoyed the space. He enjoyed being able to witness such an idealistic home with his own two eyes. He enjoyed not being able to hear his own cluttered and over-crowded mind over the sound of boisterous laughter and passionate family feuds.

But it didn’t take long for Yuki’s skin to start itching again.

For him to remember that he didn’t belong here.

That this wasn’t his.

He couldn’t stay here forever.

He couldn’t hide under the blanket of another person’s life for the rest of his own.

This coveted normalcy only served to remind him of his elementary school years. Watching children from afar, through car door windows, through schoolhouse doors, from beyond the fence of the dojo.

It was about time he returned to his solitude, where he belonged. But it was nice to know that he had a place to rest if the deepest corners of his mind grew too dark. He hoped, selfishly, that that escape would remain for as long as they were friends—which he knew would be until his last dying breath.

So at the end of the week on Friday morning, Yuki told Kakeru that he would finally leave Kakeru’s place. To which Kakeru offered him a long, dramatic sigh.

“Tired of me already, huh?” Kakeru responded as Yuki put his outdoor shoes in his locker.

“It’s not that. I can’t hide at your place for the rest of my life. I have to go home eventually,” Yuki lied. Maybe he would go back tonight, briefly. Perhaps just to sleep in his own bed for a change. In the morning he could take the early train out to the outskirts of the city. Maybe close to the ocean. It was especially quiet during the winter, and generally void of tourists.

“Yeah, yeah, I know when I’m being broken up with,” Kakeru teased, a bright smile still on his face. Yuki released a relieved breath. “You have to come out to dinner with me tonight, though!”

“What? We’ve had dinner together for the past week,” Yuki raised an eyebrow.

“Yeah, but there’s this new café I wanted to try out! And I know I couldn’t get the school’s star pupil and resident hot mess to try it with me on a weekday! Come oonnnn, it’ll be fun! Then you can go back to sulking in your basement, or wherever.”

“I can’t tell what I like about you more—your overwhelming understanding, or your unmatched sensitivity.”

“I’m just the whole package,” Kakeru snickered. “Hey, I’ll even let you pay. I think you owe me that much after all the times I risked my life to wake you up in the mornings.”

Yuki rolled his eyes, “Alright, sure. Why not.”

Kakeru whooped as he jumped up in the air, “Sweet! Date with the president!”

“You know, sometimes I think you want me to be attracted to you.”

“I just don’t get it, man. I’ve got the face of an angel, hair woven from silk, and I’m objectively hilarious! I mean, maybe I’m getting a head start on gaining my holiday weight,” Kakeru patted his stomach with both hands. “But, c’mon, Prez, I think I’m checking all the boxes here.”
“I don’t think I’d have the patience to be attracted to you,” Yuki said. “But I suppose I can spare one more evening with you.”

“I am honored to be graced with your presence,” Kakeru said, sliding onto one knee and giving a deep bow. Yuki clicked his tongue, trying to take a step away from the general radius of idiocy.

“Has anyone ever told you that you have too much energy in the mornings?”

“Almost exclusively!”

Yuki couldn’t help the small snort that escaped him.

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That’s what Kakeru had said in the morning, but now Yuki was feeling distinctively tricked.

For all of Kakeru’s self-proclaimed good traits, punctuality didn’t seem to be one of them.

And it would be fine if it were any other day at any other time in any other place. But it wasn’t. There was a looming crowd surrounding Kakeru’s desired destination, and it was making Yuki’s palms sweaty. He was trying his best to look casual, to look natural, and not so much that he was terrified by every brush of shoulders he felt, but he had a feeling that an expression of clear tension was etching itself onto his features.

Yuki took a deep breath.

The last thing he needed was Kakeru to try and bully his worried energy out of him on a crowded sidewalk.

With cautious steps, Yuki walked to the entrance of the café and pressed his back against the building wall. He watched warily as passersby flooded his vision and went about their days. After another few minutes Yuki flipped his phone open—ready to send Kakeru a perfectly passive aggressive text, when a soft voice interrupted the action.

“Pres—Yuki?”

Yuki closed his phone, his eyes leading him to the source of that voice. To one Machi Kuragi.

Her eyes were slightly widened with confusion, and a small tint of red was brushing her cheeks from the cold air. A flimsy jacket covered a burgundy turtleneck, but she still seemed to be wearing her uniform skirt and socks.

“Machi? I didn’t realize you were coming tonight,” Yuki said with a smile, an anxious realization already sinking into his gut.

“Machi? I didn’t realize you were coming tonight,” Yuki said with a smile, an anxious realization already sinking into his gut.

“Kakeru wouldn’t stop bothering me about it all week,” she said. “But I didn’t know you were coming, either.”

Yuki offered her half a smile as an uncomfortable moment dropped between them.

“Do you know where he is?” Yuki asked. Machi shook her head. “I see. Will you excuse me for one moment?”
Machi averted her eyes to her shoes and nodded. Yuki followed the flow of the sidewalk, stepping out of earshot of the café as he pulled out his phone and dialed an all-too-familiar number.

“Hello, sweet Prince!” Kakeru answered the phone almost immediately, with an already infuriating tone.

“What are you doing?”

“I haven’t the slightest idea what you mean.”

“Then where are you?”

“I was just about to call! I was on my way to meet you when influenza struck me down on this hallowed winter’s night. Cough cough.”

“That would be a lot more convincing if you didn’t actually say the word ‘cough’,” Yuki snarled.

“Awww, don’t get mad! I’m really sick! Really!”

“The only place you’re sick is in the head!” Yuki scolded, looking over his shoulder. Machi had taken his place on the wall, observing the shuffling crowd in a daze. “Why are you doing this?”

“Since I can’t meet you tonight, I thought it would be fun to pass the time with a perfectly lovely girl. A perfectly lovely single girl.”

“I knew it,” Yuki ran a hand through his hair. “Don’t you think trying to set me up with your sister is a little creepy?”

“Not as creepy as wanting to boink your cousin,” Kakeru shot back, not unkindly.

“Distant cousin,” Yuki retorted.

“Whatever. Besides, Machi and I are only half siblings, so it’s only half creepy.”

Yuki groaned into the phone, “I appreciate what you’re trying to do, Kakeru. I do, but I can’t do this.”

“Why not? You were the one who insisted you weren’t gay!”

“It’s not that!” Yuki could feel frustration crawling into his throat. “I’m just… I’m not ready for this.”

“Not ready for what? Not ready to have pleasant conversation with a cute girl on a Friday night? Don’t be so virginal, princess. Gasp! Unless you think you’re too good for this fair maiden!”

“No! Of course not!”

“Well, good! Because, believe it or not, Yun, you’re not the only one who’s been doing the mopey-pining thing,” Kakeru almost sounded as if he were scolding him. Yuki flinched at the tone, looking back over his shoulder at Machi who caught his eye this time and gave him a small smile. “Maybe if you’d been paying attention at all the past couple of years you would’ve noticed it.”

“I don’t… think that’s something you should be telling me,” Yuki sighed. He could feel himself beginning to pity Machi for having such an idiotic older brother.

“Yuki. Listen to me. There’s no future in mourning over carrot-top. You’ve been doing it for months and all it’s gotten you is sleeping on my apartment floor. And whether you want to admit it or not,
you and Machi are a good match. I wouldn’t want to entrust my sister to any other kingdom in the land."

“I don’t know…”

“Are you gonna deny that you like her?”

“It’s not that. Of course I like her… I’ve always liked Machi. But it’s not… Kakeru I don’t… It’s still so complicated with Kyo.”

Yuki could hear Kakeru sigh on the other line, and suddenly he felt very small. “It’s not like I’m telling you to get married. Just some coffee. Or tea. Flirty tea.”

“Kakeru…”

“Don’t you think seventeen years old is a little early to be heartbroken beyond repair for the rest of your life?” Yuki gripped the phone, a discomfort strumming within him. It was that sick feeling anyone got when they heard a truth that the rest of their body so vehemently wanted to reject. “Besides, if you leave now you’ll be the jerk who stood up a perfectly nice girl at a romantic restaurant on a Friday night!”

“I’m not going to stand her up!”

“Good! Then I’ll expect to hear all the details on Monday!”

“Wai—”

“Good luck!”

Yuki stared at his phone as the line went dead. Snapping his phone shut a little too harshly, he sighed.

For a moment, Yuki fidgeted with the phone in his hand before shoving it into his pocket. He tried to calm himself down. Just because Yuki knew about Kakeru’s ulterior motives didn’t mean that Machi did. Knowing what he did about her, she tended to think Kakeru was exclusively an idiot when it came to matters like this. Hesitantly he looked over his shoulder to catch Machi’s eye, and when she stared back he knew that standing on the edge of the street all night wasn’t going to work.

Breaking her gaze, he carefully worked his way towards her—doing his best to avoid touching or bumping into any of the people on the street, and flinching slightly when someone came a bit too close. When he was finally in front of her, he looked up to see warm brown eyes staring at him intently. As if studying him. And if Yuki could transform from a look, he was sure it wouldn’t matter because she looked at him as if she already knew everything.

Yuki was going to have to ask Kakeru what she knew on Monday.

“Kakeru says he’s,” Yuki exhaled. “Sick.”

“Idiots don’t catch colds,” Machi said so matter-of-factly Yuki couldn’t help but smile.

“Either way, I think it’s just the two of us,” Yuki said. Machi gave what was barely a nod in reply, which caused Yuki to shift uncomfortably. “Would you still like to have a drink with me?”

“Yes,” Machi answered immediately, but her expression was still serious, maybe even a little strange. But it was softened by the reddening of her cheeks. “…If you want to.”
Yuki smiled, suddenly feeling a lot more relaxed. “I think that would be nice.”

Stiffly he looked around him before approaching the door of the café, allowing a group of schoolgirls and a few couples to step before him into the building. Yuki gave a small, relieved sigh when he finally wrapped his fingers around the handle of the door and pushed inside the noisy restaurant.

“Kakeru said he made reservations,” Machi said in a tone that was almost too hushed to hear under the sea of voices.

The front counter was flooded with people, though, and more kept coming in. Asking about reservations, or even for a table, meant wading through a thicket of people all lingering around, waiting for their names to be called from a small speaker connected to a microphone on the corner of the desk. Yuki took another look around and spotted a few girls in his school’s uniform, one of the many clusters of girls that were chatting in sharp tones that would cut in with high pitched laughter.

Yuki steeled himself to approach the counter, but when he took a step forward a hand on the back of his jacket caused him to involuntarily jolt. He turned around to see Machi retract her hand from him as if she had touched an open flame.

“Let’s go somewhere else,” she said. Yuki gave her a confused look, hoping that he didn’t look as relieved as he felt. “I don’t like it here.”

“Are you sure?”

She nodded, “It’s too crowded.”

Yuki stared at her for a long moment.

“Don’t you think so, too?”

He did.

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Yuki followed Machi’s lead away from the restaurant. For a few blocks Yuki trailed behind, trying to stay out of the way of the people passing on the sidewalks, and feeling safer as he stared at Machi’s back. She looked over her shoulder a few times, but said nothing.

Finally, when the area turned less urban and populated, and more residential and calm, Yuki walked beside her, letting the tension ease out of his shoulders as they continued their peaceful stroll through the neighborhood.

It only took a few more blocks for Yuki to realize that they had been walking in silence this entire time. And it only took a few seconds after that to realize how uncomfortable the silence was. Yuki stumbled with words to say, but it was harder to force things out of his throat.

Especially with Kakeru’s voice circling around his head. He shooed it away.

“You seem to know your way around pretty well,” Yuki said.

“I guess.”
Machi turned into a park and Yuki dutifully followed. It was cold outside, especially now that the sun had gone down and that they were away from the bustle of the inner city. Without much ceremony they sat down on a bench, and Yuki felt a chill go up his spine from the cold metal.

“It’s cold out,” Yuki tried.

“It’s winter,” Machi responded. Yuki repressed a sigh.

He was going to kill Kakeru. Being alone with Machi was not a new or strange occurrence at this point. There had been plenty of times over the past few months where they walked together to the station, or to Kakeru’s house. But now this... date that he had been bullied into (whether Machi knew it or not) was making his shoulders stiff. And he couldn’t even put his finger on as to why.

“Do you come here often? To this park?” Yuki asked.

“Not really,” Machi said. A drop of silence before Machi kept talking, though her voice was still subdued. “Sometimes. I pass by it a lot. On the way to school. I like to walk through the park in the winter. After it... After it snows.”

Machi held her hand out as if in example, and Yuki looked up to see it was, in fact, starting to rain down soft, shimmering pieces of snow. The snowflakes were small, and too wet to clump together. It almost felt like a light mist.

“I didn’t even notice,” Yuki said.

“You’re not very observant,” Machi said, a small smile on her lips.

“I wouldn’t go that far,” he laughed. His voice was soft to match hers.

Yuki tapped an ungloved finger on his knee, hoping that watching the snow could be a placeholder for actual conversation. Machi was certainly treating it as such.

“Do you,” Yuki trailed off like he wasn’t even sure what the end of the sentence was. Just some words to fill the empty space between them. “Do you like snow?”

“No.”

Another simple answer. Yuki almost slumped in his seat but stopped himself when he stole a glance her direction.

Her hands were in tightly balled fists, her eyes trained down and her expression so earnestly frustrated. Yuki completely related with the tight line of her lips.

Really, he was going to punch Kakeru.

A soft smile finally loosened Yuki up, if only slightly.

“Why not?” He prompted.

Machi fiddled with her skirt, “It’s too clean. And. It’s too white.” Yuki tilted his head up to the sky, looking at the snow as if he would see something previously not there. “I don’t trust it,” Machi finished.

A snort escaped Yuki before he could catch it, and he snickered behind his hand.

“Are you making fun of me?”
“No, no,” Yuki shook his head. “ Somehow, I understand what you mean.”

Yuki was glad that earned him a small smile. Another chuckle left his throat, only to be interrupted by a shiver.

“You look cold,” Machi said.

“It’s winter,” Yuki responded.

That even got him a laugh.

He stared at the ground, and her scuffed up shoes caught his attention. Her socks were clean, but frayed at the top. Her uniform skirt was wrinkled. She wore evidence of herself all over, Yuki wondered if he did the same.

They sat like that for a moment longer, watching the snow with simple and curious faces, until Machi pointed over to a café at the edge of the park. Small, simple, with a sun-faded menu in its fogged up windows.

“We can go to that café over there.”

Yuki raised an eyebrow, “Is it any good?”

“I wouldn’t know,” Machi said. “It’ll be warm inside.”

Yuki stood with a smile, wiping the back of his pants off as if he could shoo the cold away. “Sounds good to me.”

Yuki was far more relieved to see that this café wasn’t accompanied by the mob of people that surrounded their original meeting place. It was quite and cozy, and the warmth of the inside swallowed him up completely, making his fingers and toes tingle as they tried to shed the cold. It wasn’t large by any means, and other than a small pathway created between the counter and the tables that lined the wall, there wasn’t much room to move around.

Yuki gestured for Machi to take the lead, and she made a beeline for the table furthest away from the door, passing by a soft-speaking couple that paid them no mind.

“What kind of crepe do you like?” Yuki asked, shedding his coat, and eyeing the handwritten menu in chalk above the counter.

“I can pay for it,” Machi said.

“I insist.”

She hesitated before saying, “Kiwi and chocolate.”

When Yuki returned with their crepes (kiwi for Machi, Banana for himself), Machi was already beginning to look far more relaxed. The frustration was gone from her brows, instead replaced by a simple kind of nervousness. He handed her dessert over with a smile, to which she gave a soft “thank you.”

The silence was back, but it was ebbing away slightly as the evening wore on. Transforming back into the understood and comfortable silences they often shared. Returning to the solidarity they both found in each other’s quiet.

Aside from tonight, where words stumbled awkwardly between them, Yuki enjoyed their exchanges
where words seemed secondary when they communicated with each other. He wondered if perhaps that could be attained again. Perhaps if he cleared this up earlier, rather than later. She was a nice girl, a great girl. And Yuki wasn’t lying when he said he liked her. Even if he considered Machi in that way before tonight, a simple high school romance seemed almost completely unattainable. So much seemed unattainable right now. And while he certainly thought less when Machi was near, it seemed as though nothing could truly stop him from thinking at all.

Thinking about things that certainly weren’t supposed to be going through the head of a teenage boy on a date with a teenage girl.

He took a bite of his crepe, trying to form the sentences in his head as carefully as possible when Machi finally spoke—the first time she had truly initiated conversation between them since the night began.

“You look more relaxed away from crowds,” she said. “You really hate them.”

It was a statement more than a question, but Yuki couldn’t deny it.

“I suppose you could say that.”

“How come?”

Yuki gave a shrug with a small smile, letting the question roll off his shoulders as his mind continued to distract him. As if Machi could sense his gears beginning to turn away from the small café at the edge of the park with the nice, quiet girl, she spoke again.

“When I was little,” Machi began, but stopped herself—as if registering that her voice was too quiet. She took a nibble of a kiwi, a smudge of chocolate smearing on her lip. Yuki smiled, before she began again.

“When I was little, my mom used to take me out to fancy parties. Some were small dinner parties, some were big events. At first it was once every few months, then it became once a week. Then twice a week.”

Yuki blinked, now listening to her intently.

“She would make me wear expensive dresses. And she wouldn’t let me leave the house until my hair was perfect. Sometimes, she’d pull on scalp so hard, it would hurt all night. Then I would go to these parties and everyone was so tall. All the women had these pretty dresses, and all the men wore suits and patted me on the head when they saw me. It made me feel silly.”

Machi took a pause to take another bite of her crepe.

“I don’t like fancy clothes now,” she said. “Or crowds.”

It was strange, he thought, looking down at his half-eaten crepe. He felt as though he didn’t know much about Machi. There was something about her that he connected with, understood, but now it was dawning on him that he didn’t quite know why. She never talked much about herself, and the most he really knew about her life was through Kakeru. He knew she lived alone. He knew there was tension between her and her mother. He knew the expression of a person trapped and muzzled by a family’s expectations. But beyond that it was radio silence.

And Yuki found he didn’t mind learning more about her.

“Your turn.”
Yuki snapped his eyes up and was finally met with Machi’s. They were so direct, and Yuki immediately thought of ruby eyes that were so quick to turn away.

“Huh?”

“Your turn. To say why you don’t like crowds,” Machi said, as if it were obvious. “You looked really upset.”

“Did I?” Yuki tried to laugh. Machi’s expression didn’t twitch.

“I didn’t think you would tell me unless I told you mine,” Machi said. She finally looked away, taking another bite. That smudge of chocolate was still there. “Your turn.”

What was he supposed to say? That he was cursed like in some storybook? That the wrong brush with a person of the opposite sex would turn him into a talking rat? That this was just a thing that happened to his family?

Yeah, not a chance. He cleared his throat, piecing together words in his brain one by one.

“I… was never around crowds much as a child. My mother didn’t take me anywhere. She… left me behind a lot. Usually she would leave me with relatives that,” Yuki hesitated. “…Liked their solitude.

“I learned to be afraid of people at a young age. Then, when I entered middle school, the kids thought I was strange because I spent so much time alone. So I kept to myself. Perhaps I never learned to be around people, at all.”

Yuki blinked.

As he spoke, he realized the words he was saying were true.

He looked to Machi with a somewhat surprised expression, but even though she had realized Yuki’s tension in the café had a deeper reason—just as hers had—she hadn’t realized that it was something Yuki was discovering for the first time. She raised an eyebrow, and Yuki realized she was expecting him to speak after he had looked at her with bright, newly understanding eyes.

He smiled, “You have a way of bringing things out of me.”

“Do I?” She asked, genuinely curious and suddenly shy. “I just thought you might like to talk about it.”

“I don’t think I’ve ever liked talking about it,” Yuki said. “Have you?”

“Not really.”

Yuki’s eyes came up to look at her, only to find her staring right back. After a moment Yuki began to laugh, light-hearted and gentle sounds that coaxed a smile out of Machi.

Finally, that comfortable silence fell between them once again.

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“I’ve been getting some complaints,” Kunimitsu said, suddenly.

It was evening, and Kyo was busy mopping the floors of the dojo alongside the other man. Kunimitsu leaned against the handle of the mop, hands folded on top and giving Kyo the same wary smile he gave him when Kyo was six. Kyo spared him an impatient glance, but otherwise didn’t respond.

“The new recruits say you’re too hard on them,” he continued, unprompted.

“Not my fault they can’t keep up,” Kyo said, briskly.

It’s not that Kazuma minded having Kyo around the dojo so often lately, but Kyo knew the longer he loitered around, the more likely it was that he would be put to work. Which was exactly what happened. Now two, sometimes three times a week, Kyo helped lead the afternoon beginners’ classes.

Which was really only a good idea in theory.

Kyo wasn’t about to complain if it meant Kazuma continued to keep a blind eye at how Kyo would show up earlier and earlier throughout the weekday, however.

“How about going a little easier on them, huh? They’re just starting, you know.”

“They gotta learn one way or another.”

“You talk as if you had no problems keeping up when you first got here,” Kunimitsu snorted, mimicking an ungraceful and poorly formed kick that Kyo was especially known for when he was younger.

Kyo clicked his tongue, “How about you stay out of it, Kunimitsu. Deal with your own damn class if you’re that worried.”

“Right, right, sorry I brought it up.” Kunimitsu continued mopping. “I can take it from here. Shishou said he wanted to talk to you.”

Kyo let out an anguished sigh. What now? He just wanted to be left alone for two seconds.

“You look even more like a teenager when you do that,” Kunimitsu said.

“Shut up!”

Kyo treaded up the stairs of the dojo, taking a quick shower in the bathrooms they had and changing out of his gi that had collected sweat grime from the week. He’d wash it when he got home, he thought to himself.

When his hair was damp, and his clothes packed up, he strapped everything to himself and hoped that was a good enough indication that he was in some kind of rush. Nowhere to be in particular, just anywhere but where he was. Even his shower was a violent scrub of hands against hair and skin.

When Kyo walked into the makeshift kitchen, however, Shishou wasn’t there. Somewhere, distantly, he could hear his muffled voice talking either on the phone or to Kunimitsu, so Kyo plopped himself down at the table, not bothering to shed his school or workout bags as he slumped over and tapped his toes against the ground.

It didn’t take long for his antsy hands to rummage over the papers on the table. It was an old habit to
want to organize the mess that always seemed to follow Kazuma. A childhood filled with crumpled papers, dirty dishes, and dust in the corners of the room, even after cleaning thoroughly. It wasn’t something he looked back on with anything other than indifference, or on good days, endearment, but it did give Kyo the muscle memory to collect a mess and leave it angled and neat.

Muscle memory was squashed out in favor of realization, however, when Kyo looked down at what was in his hand. His fingers dug into the flimsy sheets and magazine sheened paper.

Kyo didn’t even hesitate in ripping the papers down the middle.

“What are you doing?” Kazuma’s voice suddenly boomed down into the kitchen, immediately wrenching the destroyed pamphlets out of Kyo’s hand.

“What the hell is this stuff?!” Kyo demanded, holding up a fistful of ripped up college brochures and information print-outs. Just looking at it made him feel queasy.

“It’s for you! It’s for your future!”

“I don’t have a future!”

“How much longer are you going to keep feeding yourself that line?! How much longer are you going to try and convince yourself that’s true?!”

“It is true! What are you gonna do about it?! What is anyone gonna fucking do about it!”

“Anything! Something!” Kazuma looked genuinely frustrated, an enraged sadness seeping into his posture as he looked down at the papers in his hand. “You can change your fate, Kyo. You don’t have to do what he says.”

The silence in the room burned Kyo like an open flame, and he immediately stood, ready to bolt out of the dojo. Ready to run away. Ready to add one more thing to this list of things he refused to fucking deal with.

Kazuma put a forceful hand on his shoulder.

“Sit. Down. You’re not going anywhere until we talk about this.”

Kyo tried to slap his hand away, but it refused to move, firm and merciless in its tenderness. He didn’t want to do this. He didn’t want to talk about this. He couldn’t. He couldn’t.

Kazuma’s hand wasn’t moving, so he sat. He sat as if he were a petulant child. Arms crossed, expression cross, head turned away. Kazuma sat next to him, trying to salvage the documents as best he could as he flattened them on the table.

“Kyo,” Kazuma began, careful and desperate. “What do you want for yourself? Don’t you want something more for your life?”

He didn’t respond. Kazuma sighed.

“Answer me, Kyo. What do you want for your life?”

Kyo felt his fists clench, knuckles turning white, teeth grinding together. Kazuma slid one of the wrinkled papers towards him, a chunk of the right corner already missing.

“I found a list of Buddhist colleges that don’t require you take the national center test. They have their own individual exams that aren’t as rigorous, and some require an interview. Some even offer
Kyo scoffed, “You really think someone’s gonna want me in their school after a fucking interview?”

“If you gave people a chance to get to know you, yes!” Kazuma said. “Why are you so determined to shut yourself off from any possible future? Why is the idea of fighting back so terrifying to you? You know I would never give you up to that place.”

“It’s not up to you!”

“You’re right, it’s not. It’s up to you,” Kazuma put a gentle hand over Kyo’s, his eyes pleading, breaking, and Kyo couldn’t look their way. Their potency was a spore that caked the insides of his lungs and blood like a poison. He wanted to throw Kazuma’s hand back at him and run away. He wanted to run away.

“You don’t… you don’t get it. I don’t need to hear this from you!”

“Who else are you going to hear it from?” Kazuma’s grip tightened on his hand. “I just want you to listen to me.”

“No! I’m tired of listening to this! I’m tired of listening to everyone! What happens, happens! I’ve made my fucking peace with it, so why don’t you?! I don’t… I don’t need this from you! This shit show is hard enough as it is!”

Somewhere, in Kyo’s rantings, he had flung Kazuma’s hand off of him. He had backed away, he had retreated to that corner in his mind that granted him a familiar, prickly comfort.

His throat constricted as tightly as his chest, and Kyo couldn’t even admit to himself that shame was what keeping his eyes so heavily weighted away from his guardian’s.

“Okay,” Kazuma finally said. Once the air had gone still and quiet. “Okay.”

Kyo peered up, fear coiling under his skin.

“I’m not giving up on you,” Kazuma said, as if reading Kyo’s most frightened thoughts. “But we can stop talking about this for now. But you should know I already signed you up for a couple of these schools’ tests. You can make your decision when the time comes.”

Carefully, mournfully, Kazuma came forward and wrapped his arms around Kyo’s rigid and unresponsive form. Kyo gritted his teeth.

“One day, Kyo, you’re going to have to learn to be kind to yourself.”

A sound escaped Kyo, something too rough and dry to be a sob. But something squeezed from the base of his core, something that caused Kazuma to clutch him tighter.

Kyo opened his mouth. So much wanted to escape: I’m Sorry. I Can’t. Something even deeper, something that was cracking and fraying his edges that he couldn’t let go, couldn’t lay bare in front of even Shishou.

“I know you’re better than you think, Kyo. Go back to your classes. Study. Go through the motions of having a future, and when you look up one day you’ll realize it’s ready and waiting there for you. I promise.”

Kazuma pulled away, put gentle hands on Kyo’s face so that he would be forced to look into those
hopeful, wise eyes.

“Do this much for me, alright?”

Kyo felt like his tongue was locked tightly inside his teeth.

But the look on Kazuma’s face was something that only allowed him to nod.

“Fine,” he rasped out. “But no promises.”

Kazuma smiled.

And Kyo figured he could spend the last few months he had at least trying to make him happy.

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It was early when Tohru woke up that next Monday morning. When she opened her eyes, she didn’t even need to turn her head to check the clock, she knew she had hours still until the day started. Sun was spilling through the window, but still tinted in the soft blues that only came with early morning. Tohru took the time to stare at her ceiling before climbing out of bed quietly, awake, and chilly from the cold winter air.

When she tied the apron around her waist, she started the kettle to boil and put some rice in the cooker to have for the next couple of days in the week.

She opened the fridge and frowned when it was left exactly as it was two days ago. Filled with precooked meals and premade rice. It would go bad if it wasn’t eaten today. With a sigh, she pulled it from the fridge and packed it in two bentos. Hana and Uo would eat it for sure.

By the time the tea was ready Shigure was sitting down gracelessly around the table, giving Tohru a tired smile, hair still pushed around with sleep, and a grogginess in his eyes that Tohru never really witnessed until this year.

She smiled at him, handing him a cup of tea already prepared for him, and some soup and fish for breakfast, made the night before.

“You spoil me, Tohru,” he said, as he did every morning.

Tohru sat across from him with her own breakfast, happy to enjoy the morning with company.

“You look sleepier than usual,” she said. “Are you close to a deadline?”

Shigure nodded, yawning, and taking another big sip of his soup. “I should be close to finishing. Sometimes when I start writing I seem to lose track of time.”

Tohru smiled again, and he returned it. “I hope I can read it when it’s finished!”

Shigure smirked, the fog seemingly lifted from his eyes, “I’m sure you will.”

Tohru hid her nerves with a bite of her fish.

Once breakfast was done, Tohru promptly did the dishes with the help of Shigure, who stumbled
back to his room to fall asleep just as he always did these past few mornings. Tohru wrapped up the now cooked rice in proper portions. The kitchen was spotless, left just as it was, and the table was cleared as if no one had sat around it at all.

Upstairs was silent and still. Downstairs wasn’t much better. And with a deep breath Tohru slid the door open to Shigure’s office, scanning over the bookshelves one by one. Title to title. His finger gliding over the stiff, militant spines of book after book.

It only took a few moments for Tohru to step back, hand clutched at her chest in a fear that was just as expected as it was stale.

It wasn’t long after that Tohru was slipping on her shoes and walking down the path of the house, schoolbag lighter than it had been in weeks.

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“I wouldn’t be too long today, Ms. Tohru,” the nurse said. Tohru came to know her from checking in each Monday at the front desk, and had formed a cheery acquaintanceship with the woman. “Ms. Isuzu has been particularly low in spirits lately.”

“Did something happen?” Tohru asked.

“Who can ever tell with Ms. Isuzu,” she said, light-heartedly. Tohru gave a careful smile before walking down the familiar walkway to Rin’s room.

Somehow, Tohru wasn’t shocked when she opened the door to find the curtains drawn. One little light was turned on in the corner of the room, and Rin’s hair was falling in cascaded clumps over her shoulders as she slumped into a book.

The air had a sickly warmth and felt stale to the breath. Months ago the side of the bed was arranged neatly with conservative stacks of mail, and well organized books. Now, everything in the room felt as though it had toppled over. The books, the papers, the used snack wrappers, the tissues, even Rin—sitting on worn sheets that seemed just as exhausted by the wrinkles and creases in their fabric.

Rin didn’t look up when Tohru walked into the room, and with assured steps Tohru headed straight for the curtains, pushing them back completely to let the sun spill inside. Rin winced.

“I didn’t say you could do that.” Her voice sounded harsh. As if she hadn’t used it all day.

“You’ll hurt your eyes,” Tohru responded, bringing a familiar chair up to sit next to Rin’s bedside—as she always did.

Rin was pale and wispy, her skin almost translucent where it was exposed. Her hair had a lack of shine to it as it tumbled slightly tangled and disorderly across Rin’s back and shoulders. Rin still wore her harsh and merciless stare, but it had dulled over the months.

Neither of them said anything for a moment once Tohru sat down, Rin ignoring her in favor of reading the book in front of her. Others were open around her on the bed (the other two that Tohru brought last week), and Tohru tilted her head to try and read some of the text of one of the exposed books.
“Did you find anything?” Tohru asked after a moment. Rin snapped her eyes up.

“No, of course not,” she snapped. “The stupid books don’t tell me anything.”

“What about these ones?” Tohru gestured to the others, and Rin scoffed.

“Just as useless. Just take them and give me the next few.”

Tohru’s fingers fiddled with the edge of her sweater, “I think it might be time to… take a break from this. Maybe the reason we—you haven’t found anything is because you’re pushing yourself too hard! It might be better to get a clean mind on the whole thing!”

Rin clicked her tongue, “that may be the stupidest thing I’ve heard you say. Just give me the books.”

“Really, Rin! I… I think I should put my foot down! You’ve gotten… really sick, and I think you should focus on your health over anything!”

“My health? My health? How much of my health is my own when I feel like I don’t even get a say over my own body?! How am I supposed to get better until this curse is broken?!”

“There has to be another way to help yourself get better! A-Another kind of medicine, or maybe some sort of——”

“TOHRU.”

Tohru felt her back go stiff and a cold sweat break out on her scalp and forehead. She was startled, but by now being scared of Rin felt unproductive. Being scared for Rin, however, that felt almost necessary.

“Just. Give. Me. The. Books.” Rin said through her teeth. “And if you’re going to be this difficult, just leave afterwards!”

“N-No!”

There was a flash in Rin’s eyes as they transformed into an anger Tohru was quick to recognize.

Rin lunged forward and grabbed at Tohru’s book bag, to which the other girl reflexively yelped. Rin pulled the bag that was still wrapped around Tohru’s shoulder forward, forcing the brunette to stand, and almost tripping until Tohru caught herself by bracing her arms against the bed.

“Rin!” Tohru cried out in panic, trying to grab the bag back.

“You’re such a nuisance! Coming in here all the time!” Rin tugged at the book bag hard, bringing Tohru closer. Tohru reflexively wrapped her arms around her school bag, trying to bring it back. “If you’re not going to help just leave!”

“No!” Tohru yelled back, clutching onto her bag desperately, even as Rin’s hands tried uselessly to shove their way inside. “You need to rest! Please!”

“Let go!”

“No!”

“Why not?!”

“Because there aren’t any left!”
Tohru stumbled backwards when Rin let go, barely finding her footing in time and taking deep breaths in to calm her nerves. She could hear Rin breathing too. Harsh and deep, as if she was just now remembering to intake oxygen for the day. Tohru chanced a look up at her, biting her lip when she saw the wrinkles in Rin’s forehead deepen, her eyes sink in, her mouth contort into an angry frown.

“You’re lying,” Rin said. Quietly. As if it were the only reality plausible.

“I’m not,” Tohru said.

“This can’t be it,” Rin said. “You must have missed something! He might be hiding them from you!”

“H-He’s not, I promise! He never caught me!”

“Shut up!” Rin buried her face in her hands, a frustrated cry falling from her lips. “He knows something! I know he does! He has to! Someone has to! There has to be a way!”

“There is! I’m sure!” Tohru lied. “B-But you should rest! You’re not well, you need to take care of yourself!”

“Would you shut your mouth?! I don’t need advice from a goody goody who doesn’t even know what it means to be cursed! To be in this family!”

Tohru bit her lip, looking away.

“I’m sorry.”

“You’re sorry,” Rin mocked. “Go back to Shigure’s house. Find whatever! Steal his trash! Find his notebooks, whatever! And bring them back here!”

“I… I don’t think he knows anything, Rin. If they’re not in his books…”

“They ARE! STOP SAYING THAT! YOU JUST HAVE TO LOOK HARDER!”

“But there aren’t anymore!”

“SHUT UP!”

Tohru barely had enough time to shield her face from the book that came flying her way. With a startled shout, the spine of the book hit Tohru right in her forearm, blocking it from hitting her nose. The room went still as an ache panged Tohru’s forearm. Slowly, coming out of her wince, Tohru lowered her arm.

Rin’s eyes were wide, scared like a child’s, and her arm seemed frozen in place from where she had extended it to throw the book.

Tohru snapped out of her defensive posture immediately, panicking as she saw the storm clouds forming behind Rin’s eyes, “it’s oka—"

“Leave. Please.” Rin’s voice was softer, fragile. Her head resting atop her bent knees as her arms wrapped around her head. She looked like she was hiding from the sun.

“It’s okay! I—I promise!”

“Please. Just leave. Don’t come back, okay?” Rin retreated further into herself. “You’re not useful anymore.”
“Rin…”

“Tohru, please.”

She stood there for a moment, staring at the mass of limbs and hair as if she were broken glass. Carefully she picked the book off the floor, and collected the other two off the bed, slipping them into her bag.

Her footsteps felt too loud as she turned away, and the hallway felt too wide when the door opened. Just as it felt too cold when she stepped outside. The same chill she felt that morning coated her spine as she looked up at the graying clouds.

How many more people were going to fall apart around her?

And she thought, would she ever be able to help?

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<<i enjoyed spending time with you

Six words.

Yuki never thought he could read six words so many times.

They fluttered through his head again and again as he stared down at his phone, a newly added number donning the top of the screen.

“I enjoyed spending time with you, huh,” Yuki said to himself.

He was sitting at his desk with his phone open and his eyes trained onto the message, feeling like his eyes might dry out from the bright screen. It was a free period, and Yuki wasn’t the only student in the room with their phone out, or their handheld console being held over study papers. Some of the students had pushed their desks together to chat quietly.

Some were diligently looking down at their material, pencils flying across the page, marking the sides of their hands with smudged graphite.

One in particular.

Yuki’s eyes flickered from the screen of his phone to the back of tangerine hair.

For the first time in what seemed like weeks Kyo was sitting through a free period. His head bowing down to focus on whatever the material was in front of him. Solitary and still. Yuki couldn’t remember the last time he saw Kyo so passive.

He brought his eyes back down to his phone, pressing a button so that it would light up once more.

<<i enjoyed spending time with you
The bell chimed throughout the school and Yuki snapped his phone shut as he quickly looked up at the clock on the wall.

His eyes automatically went to the back of Kyo’s head, once more. *He’ll turn around,* Yuki thought. *He’ll have to look over here.*

Kyo didn’t, instead packing his books up into his bag and making a beeline for the door. Yuki felt the grip on his heart slowly begin to loosen, leaving him with a sickly and unsatisfied feeling. He stared down at his own notes that had barely been glanced over in the past hour.

*I screwed up.*

The nausea was back.

Yuki put his books back into his bag one by one, taking his time as he did until all that was left was his phone on the desk. He grabbed the bento box from inside his desk and then with his other hand clutched his phone—reluctant to put it in his bag or pocket. Absently he flicked it open and closed as he made his way over to the 2nd year floor and resting against his usual spot.

It wasn’t long before Haru joined him, too.

“*You look deep in thought,*” Haru commented. Yuki handed him the bento box which Haru took, making a slight face when he realized it wasn’t completely empty.

“I am,” Yuki said.

“Oh?”

Yuki flicked his phone open and closed a few more times before finally facing Haru straight on.

“Machi Kuragi. She’s in your class, right? Straight brown hair. Bangs. Quiet.”

Haru nodded, “I know her.”

“You do?”

“Not well.”

Yuki hummed, crossing his arms, “What do you think of her?”

Haru leaned against the wall next to Yuki, mimicking his position, “I don’t talk to her much, you know.”

“Still,” Yuki said, a faint plea to his tone.

The back of Haru’s head rested against the wall, and he looked up to the ceiling in contemplation.

“I like her,” he said. “She reminds me of you.”

Yuki tapped his foot, as if a substitute for fidgeting with his phone.

“Why?” Haru finally asked after a long moment.

“I went on a date with her,” Yuki said. Simply. Bluntly. The way Haru would speak. “It was… nice.”
“You should do it again,” Haru said, almost too suddenly.

“What?” Yuki lifted an eyebrow at him, almost smirking at whatever form of enthusiasm this was. Haru’s eyes were serious and dead set on Yuki, making him feel pinned. “Haru, you know I—”

“You should do it again,” Haru said again, firmly. “It would be good for you.”

Yuki felt a bit of annoyance at Haru’s words, his face falling into something akin to a pout. He rubbed the back of his neck, hesitant and quiet. Haru gave him a half smile.

“Sorry, I know that’s not the answer you want to hear.”

“It’s not,” Yuki sighed. “But then again, that probably means it’s the right answer.”

Haru’s smile didn’t fade. Yuki sighed.

“Alright, alright,” Yuki said, making a shooing motion with his hand. “Is she still in the classroom?”

“I’m glad to see you’re taking this more seriously,” Mayu said. Kyo was standing in front of her, head bowed, eyes turned away as he was lectured. “But now that you’re back I want it to stay that way, understand? No more skipping class.”

Kyo gave something between a nod and a stutter with his head.

“Your guardian called and gave us your list of colleges, too. Something that would have been nice to have four months ago, you know,” she looked down at a sheet of paper and Kyo bit his lip to keep from cursing under his breath.

“These are good schools you’re aiming for. Have you figured out what you’re going to study?”

Kyo shook his head.

“Answer properly,” she snapped.

“No, ma’am,” he bit back.

She sighed, “Baby steps, I suppose. Alright, you’re dismissed. But don’t think you’ve gotten out of answering my question. I want you to be thinking about it these next few weeks. And I better see you in class every day, you hear?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“And don’t call me ma’am. Get out of here, ruffian.”

Kyo gave a stilted bow that he didn’t repeat at the door, doing his best not to slam it behind him.

Shishou could be such a pain in the ass when he wanted to be, Kyo thought with a scoff. But for now he was glad to be free of all the lectures and harassment. At least if he kept his head down in the books no one would bother him for a while. And why not? It’s not like he had anything better to do.
He walked through the halls of the second floor where the teacher’s lounge was located, eager to stretch out the stiffness in his back from sitting down all day at the dojo. He wouldn’t chance running at this time of day through the halls, where people were passing in and out of classrooms and girls were loitering around the hallway without a care, so instead he shoved his hands in his pockets and walked briskly.

He passed by a clump of girls lingering around a classroom entrance, chattering and whispering to themselves in that grating sort of way girls did. He side stepped away from them, happy to swerve around them and make his way down the hall when

“Is Yuki asking her out?”

Kyo stopped.

A morbid and dangerous curiosity had him turning back around, peering over the heads of the four girls and into an empty classroom.

Yuki was smiling.

Yuki was smiling at a girl.

The girl was smiling back.

For a second, Kyo thought he might be hallucinating. Maybe there was something in his eyes. Or maybe his hearing his off. Maybe he’d studied so much today that his brain just didn’t comprehend what was going on around him.

He rubbed his eyes, but when he opened them again Yuki was still there.

And now, all of the sudden, it was as if he couldn’t look away.

Yuki’s hand was lightly placed on the corner of the girl’s desk, his smile charming, calculated, honest. His head bobbed slightly with laughter. Conversation looked like it was falling easily from his lips. He wasn’t being polite, Kyo could spot that smile—that posture—from a mile away. Yuki didn’t lean in like that when he was being polite. Yuki didn’t gain that small glint in his eye when he was being polite. He didn’t even laugh when he was being polite.

There was an earnestness so familiar to Kyo when Yuki continued his silent conversation with the plain looking girl. A girl he almost got bored just looking at.

“Ah, ah, they’re coming this way!” One of the girls said, and in a panic, Kyo backtracked down the hall and around the corner, pressing his back against the wall as he clutched onto his book bag strap.

What… What the fuck?

Kyo peered his head around the corner and watched as Yuki walked side by side with this girl. Watched as Yuki’s mouth kept moving, kept speaking, kept smiling.

What the fuck?!

“Yuki!”

It took Kyo a full second to realize that he was the one who spoke. That Kyo was the one walking towards him. That after nearly a month and a half, he was the first to break the silence between them. It took him far too long to realize that Yuki had turned around and was staring at him with eyes as
wide and surprised that he would allow them around a stranger.

A stranger, that’s what this girl was.

She was looking at him, too.

Oh shit, they were looking at him.

Kyo scrambled for words to say as he stared right into stormy gray eyes. The first time their eyes had met in weeks.

“Call…” Kyo’s gaze flicked to the girl before they were back on Yuki. “Call your damn brother. He keeps calling the house.”

There was a moment where it felt like there was no one left in the hallway. Like once again, they were the only two left in the world. That, once again, they were face to face before the world exploded again and again underneath them.

“Alright.”

And just like that the world snapped back to normal. Voices in the hallway. Laughter in classrooms. Feet against tile.

Yuki turned around, turned away from him, and continued to walk down the hall.

The girl followed.
NEW YEAR, NEW CHAPTER

Oh man oh man oh man, it has been a very busy few months. I've barely had time to sleep let alone write, but I'm glad that most of the dust has finally cleared and I can take this up again! I love writing this fic, and I love everyone who has given feedback so far! It really lights up my day to know that people are reading and enjoying this - despite the very sporadic update schedule!

I won't ramble on too much in this A/N, but I certainly hope you all enjoy Things Happening this chapter! And hope you're all having a lovely kick-off to 2017!

Step.

“Well, I heard that he’s walked her home every day for three weeks!”

“And he’s walking her in the morning, too!”


“They’re totally dating. Ishikawa said he saw them holding hands.”

“Awww!”

“Sorry, ladies! You can always cry onto my shoulder if you like.”

“Haha, no way!”


“She was the one who confessed, right?”

“No, no! I heard Yuki confessed! What big talk, acting like she doesn’t even care about the prince, and then turning into his girlfriend!”

“Well, who could say no to him?”


“Look, there they are!”

“Where?”

“Right through the window. See! I told yo—”

Kyo slammed the bathroom door behind him. With a few gruff kicks, he opened up the stall doors to make sure no one was inside so he could freely pace up and down the tiled room with his hands deep in his pockets. Did no one have anything better to do? Is this what he had to deal with? Relentless,
useless, frivolous fucking gossip that clogged his ears like wax. Like sludge down a goddamn drain?

What was there to talk about anyway? Yeah, sure, he never seemed to see Yuki unless… unless she was around. And, yeah, maybe he was smiling a bit more. In that way. That way he used to smile this past summer. Maybe that ridiculous cloud of self-pity was replaced by an infuriatingly miraculous recovery. And Maybe. Maybe just fucking maybe.

Maybe Yuki was happy.

Kyo forced the faucet to run at full force, almost unscrewing one of the handles completely before dunking his head underneath the running water. It shifted from hot to cold as it poured onto the back of his head, as it trailed down his cheeks, and to the tip of his nose. His hands clutched the edge of the sink so hard his knuckles were turning white. And after a moment he finally pulled his head up to look in the mirror.

His hair was flattened by water, and he could feel heavy drips of it streaming down his neck and seeping into his shirt. With a grunt and repressed shiver he pulled his handkerchief from his pocket and slapped it onto the back of his neck to absorb the water there.

As his fingers dug into his neck through the cloth, the room suddenly felt very empty. The echoes of students chatting and walking and laughing felt miles away, as if over some sort of barrier separated by steel.

His eyes flicked from his soaked bangs to the farthest stall in the bathroom and a wave of sickness overcame him. A shame so poignant and sharp it felt as though he was taking a punch. His foot tapped restlessly, and the handkerchief was now far too roughly trying to dry the back of his head.

December was slowly reaching its end, and the cold air was seeping into Kyo’s head through every damp strand as the most chilling and sickening thought aggressively danced around the back of Kyo’s eyes.

Wasn’t the bastard supposed to be in love with me?

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“The recipe says to reduce it to a medium heat and then to add the vegetables… oh, whoops.”

“It’s fine,” Machi reassured as she looked down into the pot. “We were going to cook them anyway.”

“You’re right. Maybe we don’t reduce the heat, then, so that the rest of it cooks faster to make up for the vegetables,” Yuki said, scratching his head.

Machi nodded, “Makes sense.”

It’s less than an hour later that Yuki’s out on the balcony, doors wide open trying to air out the apartment from the smell of a dinner gone terribly wrong. But it’s nice. Laughter is fresh on his stomach, and a cigarette between his lips as he lets the winter night sweep him up.

Unlike Kakeru, Machi enjoys the smell of cigarette smoke—though she never asks to take a drag. Yuki wouldn’t really know what to do if she did. It results in moments, small and simple, where
Yuki can look in another direction, let his expression crumple for just a moment, and Machi will be right there staring at his back. It’s as if she’s holding him up.

“The food should be here soon.” Machi stepped out onto the balcony to join him, taking up her familiar spot against the door while Yuki leaned against the railing.

“Sorry about that.” Yuki said, feeling quite sheepish. “I really thought we could get it this time.”

“It’s fine.”

“I’ll pay for the food when it comes.”

“You don’t have to do that.”

Yuki turned to give her a smile, “I want to.”

Her cheeks brushed the slightest pink as she stared down at her feet, “Okay.”

Yuki turned back around, taking another deep breath of cigarette. He could hear the definitive noise of Machi sliding against the door to sit down. He smiled to himself. She had a similar gentility that he felt in Tohru. That same soothing voice, and eyes that listened so carefully. But there was a deliberate spirit in Machi that was dirty and rough.

She walked through mud, letting splatters of dirt stain her socks. She sat on snow, letting the water seep into her skirt. She laid down on her floor, letting her hair mingle with dirtied plates that had been left there. It was a whispered abrasiveness that was mirrored in her blunt speech. It was refreshing.

“What are…” Machi stumbled over her speech, and Yuki peered over his shoulder. “Are you… do you… plans for New Year’s?”

“Do I plans for New Year’s?” Yuki teased, stubbing out the cigarette on the railing.

Machi flushed hard, bringing her knees into her chest. “Well do you?”

Yuki’s body braced at the thought, he was beginning to feel queasy again.

“I spend New Year’s with my family every—almost every year,” Yuki said. “It’s not really optional.”

“Oh.”

“What about you? Do you plans?” Yuki laughed softly, hoping to get a smile from her. She didn’t.

“My mom wants me to come home for New Year’s. Just for the day.”

“Just for the day?”

Machi nodded.

“Are you free…” Yuki was tempted to ask what her plans were for Christmas. If maybe she would consider spending the holiday with him. But even now, in these stolen moments of peace, did he have the right mind to know what that would mean. He wouldn’t lead Machi on like that. …No more than he already selfishly was.

He shook his head and tried again, “Are you free a few days before? Maybe we can have our own
New Year’s.”

“Okay,” Machi said, still staring at her shoes. Silence passed, and then, “I think I would like that.”

“We could make soba.”

“We could order soba,” Machi said, finally with a smile.

“We’ll never get better if we don’t practice,” Yuki said.

“Some things just aren’t meant to be,” Machi said.

Yuki’s response was cut off by the sound of knocking against the door. But Machi’s eyes were piercing right into him, and he felt as though not saying something would be like committing some sort of crime. He looked away from her, gently patting her on the head as he passed through the balcony door to answer the knocking.

He paid for the food, thanked the delivery boy and set the bag on the table, sliding some old dishes, napkins, and schoolwork as out of the way as he could.

He could hear Machi coming in and shutting the balcony door as he unwrapped the food, placing a Styrofoam box on the space next to him. He didn’t look up at her.

“Yuki,” she said.

“Hm?” Yuki opened his food and snapped his chopsticks apart.

“Yuki,” she said again, and this time he looked up. “You can stay here if you want. Tonight.”

Yuki blinked, appetite suddenly gone. A thousand different jumbled excuses cluttering his mind.

“Kakeru told me that you sleep over at his place a lot. He said you don’t like to go home. I don’t either. So, you can stay here tonight. If you want. I thought maybe you weren’t asking because you thought it would be weird.”

Confusion and then realization flattened out the voices in his head, causing a wash of relief through him. Of course Machi didn’t mean it like that.

Of course, but…

A nagging guilt was pulling at Yuki’s chest as he looked around the cluttered living room, and finally back at Machi’s serious and unwavering expression.

“Only if you let me sleep on the floor.”

“I have an extra futon.”
Yuki woke the next morning, eyes blinking into focus the grayed sunlight through the window.

Machi was sitting next to him, uniform already on, hair cascading down the sides of her face as she stared down at Yuki. He smiled up at her, but her expression didn’t change.

“Yuki,” she said. “I like you.”

It was already dark when Tohru came home from school. The last bits of bright blue clung to the sky as she closed the door behind her and took off her shoes and scarf. The sun was still trying to linger, even if it had already sucked the golden wash of the city back into its sleeping tendrils.

But by the time Tohru stood in front of Shigure’s office door, there was no sign of shaded blues in the sky at all. The pitch black surrounded the house—as it did every night earlier and earlier in the winter, and made the house feel abandoned in this small forest clearing.

The thought of that made Tohru retract her hand on an instinct that didn’t entirely feel hers.

She brought her knuckles back up and rapped on the door, before any strange thoughts could invade her mind or break down her courage any further.

“Come in,” Shigure said.

Tohru opened the door to see Shigure’s wide, expectant smile. It was a familiar routine to knock on his door and tell him dinner was ready, or to tell him that his laundry was finished, or even that she had made some tea if he would like to join her (he always did).

This time, however, Tohru walked inside and firmly planted herself on the other side of Shigure’s desk, sitting in seiza with a back straight as a board—as she always was when she was ready to say anything that seized her stomach. Shigure watched with patient eyes, putting down his newspaper and removing his glasses to grant her the serious tone she wished.

“Can I ask you something?” Tohru asked, and then added when she felt her tone was too harsh, “Please?”

“Of course, little Tohru. What do you need?”

“Why does Rin think you know how to break the curse?” Tohru asked. Shigure took a second to be surprised but quickly fell back into his narrowed and careful expression.

“Rin? Now there’s a name on everyone’s lips lately. Do you know where she is?”

“Yes,” Tohru said. Bluntly. Honestly. It took Shigure aback, but Tohru had been lying for so long it was causing her to go crazy. Just that one little word felt like pressurized air leaking out of a balloon. For good measure she added, “I can’t tell you where.”

“I didn’t ask,” Shigure said, with a laugh, “Can you not trust me?”
Tohru finally looked away, down at her lap, fingers trembling, “I… I asked first.”

When she looked back up, never before had she been so aware of how isolated this house was. Shigure looked at her with eyes she had only seen from afar—among whispered Sohma conversations—among the walls of the main house where Akito would hide behind his sleeve. Tohru was only ever granted glimpses of this world.

It wasn’t fair.

“Do you know how to break the curse?”

“Those are two different questions,” Shigure said, taking the paper back in his hands to fold it properly and set it off his desk completely. “Which one do you want me to answer?”

“Um,” Tohru felt her voice begin to shake. “Both. Please.”

Shigure looked back at Tohru, and she realized for the first time he was addressing her without a smile on his face.

“No, I don’t know how to break the curse. I’m not sure how Rin got that idea in her head,” he gave a humorless laugh. “I know much less than what people give me credit for.”

“You write about the curse so much. We just—She just thought—”

“I write what I know, nothing more, nothing less. There’s no formula that your secret book reports would decipher.” Tohru’s eyes went wide, but before she could say anything Shigure sliced through her response with a sharp smirk. “It’s very cute watching you try to sneak around.”

“I-I’m sorry, I—”

“It’s alright. I’m not mad. But I hope you’re convinced now that I don’t know as much as you—Rin might think. Is that good enough for you?”

Tohru stared up into Shigure’s harsh gaze, watching him closely. Her intent eyes were met with an equal force, as the two sat across from the other. Souls bared, night dark, house quiet. She felt trapped somehow, as if she was the one forcing her body to stay—as if she would have to fight through her own will to turn around and leave the question hanging in the air.

Perhaps, just this once, it wasn’t about the curse at all.

Perhaps, there was a stirring inside of her that was disturbed that very first meeting with Rin.

“What if you did know how to break the curse?” Tohru asked, finally. “What if Rin was right? What if there was something you knew? Would you… would you tell them? Would you tell Kyo and Yuki? A-And Rin and Momiji and Haru and Kisa? And Hatori and Hiro and Ritsu? Would you tell them? Would you… would you help them? Would you break the curse?”

Tohru breathed in Shigure’s silence on a panicked breath and added, with a stammering heartbeat, “Or would you write about it?”

The silence persisted for a moment more, before Shigure finally answered.

“I would write about it.”

“I don’t believe you,” Tohru said, almost immediately. “That’s not true.”
“It is true,” Shigure calmly insisted. His eyes dark and careful. “I’m not the person you think I am, Tohru. But I’m happy to keep pretending if it makes you happy. This family’s skeletons are far above your paygrade, Ms. Honda.”

Tohru’s hands clenched, and she could feel her body tremble from Shigure’s words. Her legs and hands would shake when she finally stood, she knew.

“I don’t believe you,” Tohru said again. “I’ve seen how you are with Kyo and Yuki. And. And me. I don’t think you want to be cursed. I think you’re like the rest of them.”

Shigure laughed.

“Those assumptions of yours got you far in this family, but eventually you’re going to have to realize that they can be quite childish. Be careful what you diagnose in this house, Tohru. It’s not always welcome.”

“I’m not going to change my mind,” Tohru said, adamant even though his words were carefully burning through her gut.

“I see,” Shigure said, smiling as he rested his head on the back of his hand. “Then you’ll just have to decide which one of me you trust. Neither will disappoint you.”

Tohru took in a shaky breath, not wanting to be the first to look away—as if she would lose him if she did, as if she would lose another member of this house. Another member of her… family.

The door opened and shut in a distant sound, but instead of Kyo’s rough grunts as he kicked off his shoes, what caused Tohru to be the first to look away was Yuki’s soft “I’m home.”

Tohru, scrambled and on weakened legs, rushed out of Shigure’s office with his gaze burning into her as she left.

“Yuki!” She called, a bit too excited, a bit too manic.

“Ms. Honda, are you alright? You look terrified.”

“No, no, I’m fine. I’m,” Tohru grabbed his hand with both of hers and squeezed like her life depended on it. “I’m happy you’re home.”

Yuki gave a faint smile and a nod—more of a response than she expected. Bags were still heavy under his eyes, and his uniform still hung too loose, but he followed when she led him into the kitchen to start dinner.

She suddenly didn’t want to be alone in such an empty house.

-----------------------------------------------

It really had been awhile since Yuki had been home, so much so that he was beginning to forget what days Tohru had her shifts now. He drummed his fingers on the table, a guilt coiling in his gut at the thought of how many nights he could have—and should have—walked her back to the house. Even if they separated at the path. Even if he turned back.

Last night had been nice. They had chatted over dinner some, Yuki had departed to his room after
helping Tohru with the dishes, and was relieved to hear that Kyo hadn’t entered in after him until
Yuki was already under the covers of his bed.

It was nice, but.

But alone time with Tohru meant time where he didn’t know how long he could hold out against
those worried eyes, that warm embrace of a woman who had a tendency to make him talk about
everything and anything. He wasn’t ready for that.

And time in the house meant time lying awake in bed, knowing that Kyo was just one room over.
Knowing that’s where he slept—breathed. Yuki could almost feel it on the back of neck and it made
his stomach curl.

But, he was getting tired of hearing himself speak. Tired of having problems no one could fix and
never got better. He was tired of sleeping on Kakeru’s floor, and Haru’s couch. Because each time
he returned it was as if he was retelling the ugliest parts of his life all over again. Which, for a while,
was better than coming back home where it was as though he was living the ugliest parts of his life
all over again.

But today he was home, and Tohru was out on a day he didn’t realize she had a shift. So, instead, he
sat at the kitchen table, hearing Shigure rummage in his office in the background, and knowing Kyo
wouldn’t be back for hours—if what Haru told him was to be believed.

Yuki wasn’t the only one avoiding this house.

He sighed, finally fishing his phone out of his bag and opening it up. Without much thought, but
with mounting regret, Yuki pressed the contact for his brother and brought the phone up to his ear.

It rang one and a half times.

“Yuki!”

“How wonderful that you called! In fact, I was just about to call you! You know what, this silly
phone business is so inconvenient. I insist that you come down to the shop soon! Mine’s made some
lovely changes around the place, I’ve been dying to show them off to you, baby brother. Don’t
worry, I’ve looked ahead on your schedule and I’ve marked your next free day—”

“How did you get my schedule?” Yuki asked, rubbing at his temple.

“That teacher of your is quite the lovely woman. Would you believe all I had to do was call her and
ask for it! Tell her I say hello when you see her next. And all your wonderful friends! You can bring
them along if you like, though I’ll be honest and admit that I would never shy away from one-on-one
time with you, Yuki. There’s so much bonding to be done.”

“I’d rather not know what your definition of bonding is. And I’ve already told you that I’ve been
busy—”

“With entrance exams. I know, I know. You’re working yourself too hard, you know. You need to
allow yourself some time to relax! Some time to visit family!”

Yuki wanted to snort at the statement, and realized he did a moment too late when Ayame went
silent. He internally slapped himself. He could hear Tohru in the back of his head, hear his brother’s
voice back in the parent-teacher conference last year that Mayu was so insistent on reminding him of.
Making his brother feel bad wasn’t what he was meant to be doing.

“Okay…” Yuki said. “Maybe I can make some time.”

“That’s lovely to hear,” Ayame said. Yuki heard him take a breath on the other side of the line. “You haven’t been answering my calls. I was beginning to wonder if I had the right number.”

Yuki clutched his cell phone tighter at the words.

“I’ve been… busy,” the excuse fell lamely from his lips as though he were a parrot. His brother made a thoughtful noise, as if he was extending the courtesy of believing him.

“I see. I would like it if you checked in with me sometimes, Yuki. I’m your brother. You should let me protect you.”

“Protect me from what?”

“Our mother, of course. We were speaking the other day and she was telling me all about the entrance exams you would be taking in the new year and—”

“Ayame,” Yuki said, firmly. “I didn’t call to talk about that.”

“But, Yuki—”

“I don’t want to talk about that.”

Another silence passed, “Then may I ask why you’re calling?” Ayame asked, curious, but not at all resentful or threatening.

Yuki looked down at the bare wood of the table and gave himself a wry smile. He wondered what Ayame would do if he said he was calling because Kyo told him to.

“I’m calling because…” Yuki scratched his head, sighing. “Because I have love troubles?” At least it was honest.

Yuki regretted the words as soon as they came out of his mouth as Ayame gave a bold, and overly-confident laugh into the phone’s receiver.

“Love troubles you say! Well why haven’t you told me sooner! You know, I consider myself to be quite the expert in this field! Lay all your woes and troubles down at my feet, Yuki, and tell me about this bewitching enchantress that has caused my brother such a dilemma!”

Yuki pinched the bridge of his nose. *Crap.*

“It’s really not that big of a deal. Forget I said anything—”

“NONSENSE, baby brother! Tell me everything. I simply will not hang up until you are put at ease!”

“At ease, huh?” Yuki laughed quietly to himself at the statement, but felt Ayame go quiet on the other line. Yuki took the time to glide his finger across the tabletop, back and forth in distracting motions. “Someone likes me.”

“Not surprising. You are a young, intelligent, and good-looking boy. I’m sure many like you.”

“This is different.”
“Oh? And what makes this one different?”

“I like her, too,” Yuki sighed. “But… I don’t think it’s in the same way.”

Yuki’s ears perked up at the sound of the door opening. His smile placed carefully on his face in a brief greeting to Tohru when she walked through the dining room to the kitchen. Ayame’s voice was so distinct, even over the phone, Tohru would surely be happy to say hello.

Yuki’s smiled dropped when the person standing in the entryway for the dining room was not Tohru at all. It was Kyo.

“Now there’s a dilemma! I have to say I’ve witnessed quite a flurry of romantic attention over the years, and very few have caught my attention. But, oh, my dear baby brother, the ones that do!”

Wherever Kyo had been—the dojo most likely—had his hair damp, and a sheen of sweat still breaking out onto his forehead. His neck looked shiny from exertion, too. Did he run here? It was cold outside, Yuki thought, following the gooseflesh of Kyo’s neck up to his bright, bonfire eyes.

“In my experience, you should never force that particular feeling out of yourself. When you see a woman and you look deep into your eyes, you can tell almost immediately if she will be the one for you. It’s a completely instantaneous thing.”

Kyo was staring back at him. Eyes wide and strained between something of surprise and frustration. He could tell by the way his eyebrows pinched, by the way his lips pressed together as if he wanted to say something—he never would. Yuki knew that much.

Yuki’s eyes wandered all over his face—rampaging through his eyelashes, across his cheekbones, to his set jaw and to that hair. Bright and furious, just like his eyes.

His eyes.

“Now, I’m sure she’s a perfectly nice girl, Yuki. But don’t lead along anyone who doesn’t stand a chance of winning your heart to the fullest. Now! If you’re interested, I can share with you some of my famous exploits from over the years! Where to start?”

Kyo turned away from him as Ayame rambled on in his ear. And just like that, he was gone. A face that Yuki hadn’t realized he was starving for. A face that he hadn’t been able to look at in so long, aside from stolen glances here and there.

And, of course, in the hallway that one time.

Yuki felt winded, as if he had drunk up too much water and forgotten to breathe. His idle hands were restless, his lips chapped and useless. The phantom touch of Kyo’s cheek in his hand, his fingers through his orange locks lingered until Yuki brought the hand not holding his phone in front of his eyeline—clenching and unclenching his fingers into a fist.

“—ki? Yuki! Yuki, are you there?”

Yuki could hear the stomping of feet upstairs, his eyes drawing up towards the ceiling at the noise like a magnet.

“Yes,” he said. “I’m here.”
Kyo’s body felt hot all over.

He could feel himself sweating, feel himself twitching and writhing on his futon. He could feel hands that weren’t his own traveling across his skin, rucking up his shirt and pulling his boxers down without so much as a warning.

Kyo didn’t need a warning. He didn’t need for these hands to hesitate. He needed their rough and calloused skin to press against him harder, to slide up his neck so fingers could slip into his mouth, while the other clutched his member and stroked rough and fast.

The owner of these hands didn’t have a face. Kyo tried to look behind him, his chest heaving and flushed as he laid on his side, but each time he tried to meet the eyes of his beholder the features seemed to be obstructed. Out of reach. Or blurred and fuzzed away like the static on a radio station.

Kyo gave up. He didn’t need to know who, he just needed them to keep touching him. Muscular arms wrapping around him, thick thighs intertwining with his own. His legs couldn’t stay still, and rubbed against leg hair and firm tendons hidden behind coarse flesh. And, god, did it feel good.

He could feel himself grinding on the force behind him, being met with nothing as he was jerked off in unfamiliar but wonderfully versed hands. Shit, he wanted more. He wanted so much more. His hips were getting demanding, his tongue moaning around fingers that he sucked on eagerly.

He was completely lost.

His stomach turned and dropped as if he were falling from the roof of a building. Plummeting to his death in a sweet adrenaline that crawled through every centimeter of his pumping blood.

The man was entering him.

Fuck, he was pushing inside of him and it felt so good. His mouth was open, silent in its scream, and his body was convulsing and twitching just from being entered. It was thick and pulsing and hot inside of him, and Kyo couldn’t help grinding and twisting his hips on that cock. Begging for it to reach that spot. Begging to be obliterated by thrust after thrust after thrust.

Kyo could feel himself make a noise, even if it didn’t reach his ears. It was distant and needy and came from a place so buried and locked away that it could barely materialize in his subconscious.

And the man kept rutting into him, kept slapping his pelvis against Kyo’s ass as if he wanted to break him. As if he wouldn’t be satisfied with Kyo peeking and writhing and clenching and cumming on his dick—but as the ultimate goal was for Kyo to be wiped away. Completely obliterated off the face of the earth.

And it was working. Thank god, it was working. Kyo was falling farther and farther away with each deadly snap of hips. Kyo’s own hips working against the other’s, rocking and grinding and pushing until the brutal pace was matched unequivocally by Kyo’s own desire to melt away.

Kyo grabbed the arms of the man and wrapped them around him, toned, muscled, and far from fragile. He wrapped himself up until all he could feel were arms against his chest, his torso.

Kyo came on a broken moan, strangled from his lungs, and with the thought that even with arms wrapped around him, it still felt cold where skin was supposed to meet.
He turned his head around again, expecting the same stream of static. Instead, his eyes met with familiar storm grey ones. So intently piercing into his own gaze, even post-climatic bliss couldn’t stop the immediate tension he felt.

But the eyes weren’t challenging. They weren’t calculating and cold. They were focused. They were on him. They were looking at Kyo as if nothing else in the world existed. For a moment, that’s what it felt like, too.

Phantom fingers reached out to brush Kyo’s hair out of his face, but Kyo could barely feel their touch at all.

Arms were wrapped around him again, but the sensation didn’t feel as empty as the first time. These arms were familiar. Perhaps not as large or toned, but still masculine and possessive. They brought Kyo closer, and kept him warm and trapped.

He could hear Yuki’s voice somewhere. Distantly, as if it were memory, even though when he turned his head Yuki’s lips were clearly moving. Softly, he would assume. As if he were whispering a secret to Kyo.

That’s where the dream lingered. With Kyo’s back against Yuki’s chest. With Yuki’s arms wrapped around Kyo’s waist. With fingers and legs intertwined together.

Kyo woke slowly.

Carefully.

Aware of the quiet and calm night, and of the man that was somehow just across the hall.

His boxers were soiled and his sheets wrinkled and tangled around his legs from all the inevitable movement.

He brought himself up to a sitting position, feeling uncomfortable in his soiled underwear, but tired and sated from an orgasm that was as intense as it was forbidden.

With all the tension his body could manage, his fingers dug into his hair as his head hung low between his bent knees. His jaw clenched, his eyes pinched together.

But, tonight, the energy to be mad simply wasn’t there.

Instead, all Kyo felt was tired.

--------------------------------------------------

If this day weren’t bad enough, it was beginning to snow.

Machi watched as the flakes came down absently, softly, quietly, at first – but then with more purpose. Either the snow was falling faster than she first thought, or she had lost herself in a daze again staring up at the sky.

She pulled out her phone as a form of distraction and to double check the time, but couldn’t resist opening it up to the text message from Yuki she had received a few hours earlier.
I want to walk you home today.

That’s all the text had said. In response, she had given a curt “OK.” Followed by a brief “I’ll wait outside.”

She absently flicked her thumb scrolling through the text messages that were already there. The messages between them were brief, and rarely anything more than instances of letting the other know that they had arrived at a specific location, or confirming any plans they had already made.

It was nice. It felt something like familiarity and it made Machi’s cheeks warm. It was only when she scrolled back down to the words that seemed so oddly weighted that Machi felt unpleasant flutters in her stomach. An anticipation that seized her heart and only mounted more and more at the thought of having to see Yuki again.

She thought waiting outside instead of in the classroom would help her gain more peace of mind. The chilly winter breeze was always a pleasant feeling, especially combined with a gray-clouded sky. That was, of course, before it began to snow. It was already beginning to collect on the ground and Machi could feel a rip of anxiety through her.

So, she kept staring at the sky.

Thinking over that morning, only days ago, piece by piece in her head. Of Yuki’s blank expression, his empty response, his tense shoulders. Of his promise of a proper response later. Sometime “later.” Whatever that might mean.

It was okay.

Machi took a great comfort in not regretting her words. All she said had been the truth. It was hard to regret the truth.

Machi’s antsy legs were getting too restless as another three minutes passed. The school was beginning to empty by now. Students were running off to after school activities or back home or to spend the night with friends terrorizing the city with their loud voices and careless loitering. Machi was even beginning to see a few teachers going home.

So with an empty courtyard, with very few people to make marks and prints in the snow, Machi took it upon herself.

She stared down at her feet, watching as her boots dug into the snow. Kicked it a bit when she confirmed no one was watching as they passed by. She wandered idly, sliding a bit on a particularly slippery patch and outstretching her arms to balance herself.

She could watch her footprints make patterns all day if she could. It would be better if she had walked around before the snow had fallen, though. Perhaps she could have collected some mud or dirt on the soles of her shoes that could leave trails in packed up snow.

“Hey.”

Machi could hear voices fluttering around her, probably students running and yelling after each other. She let herself slide purposely this time – more gracefully, as the snow collected on the toe of her flimsy shoes.

“Hey!”

The voice finally caused Machi to look up – even if it was one she didn’t recognize.
Her eyes stared down to the owner of the voice before looking behind her carefully. No, he was definitely talking to her. He was looking directly at her. And he was walking cautiously towards her, as well.

She wanted to match his gaze, she hated feeling like she was being sized up for any reason, and tended to let the intensity of her eye contact speak the words she wouldn’t, herself. But his hair was so bright and orange, she couldn’t help but bring her eyes up to that mop instead. Snow was falling on his locks. Some would collect, some would seep into the color. She liked it.

“Hey, don’t you answer when someone’s talking to you?” He said to her, finally close enough to hold a conversation.

Machi cocked her head, “I didn’t know you were speaking to me.”

“I’m lookin’ right at you,” he snapped. Impatiently. As if he were in a hurry, not as if he were trying to be mean. Machi turned so she could face him completely.  

“I guess so,” she said. “I don’t know who you are.”

Well, that wasn’t entirely true. He was familiar, that was for sure. She had seen him amongst the third years often enough. He was in the same circle as Yuki. What was it her classmates said about him again?

Oh, that’s right.

“You’re Yuki’s cousin,” she said, speaking the words along with the discovery.

“So you do know who I am.” That same impatient tone. He was getting annoyed.

“Not really,” she said. “I don’t know your name.”

A pregnant silence swelled between them as the boy cursed under his breath. His hands were twiddling in his pockets, Machi could tell by the way the fabric of his pants wouldn’t stop fidgeting.

“Kyo,” he grumbled, finally. “And you?”

“Why are you talking to me if you don’t even know my name?” She asked, a genuine question.

Kyo turned away and gave a frustrated run of fingers through his hair as he paced a few steps away, only to turn around and come back. “Jesus, he would be dating someone this difficult.”

“We’re no—” Machi felt the denial on her lips, but that unpleasant clench of her gut was back. One that swirled inside her along with an unhealthy and sickening dose of hopefulness. “Machi.” She said instead. “I’m Machi.”

“Machi,” Kyo parroted.

“Kyo,” Machi returned.

She could tell it wasn’t nice to meet her, but that was fine. There was a crassness to his nature that she was being drawn into. One that was easing her anxiety that always followed a fresh snowfall. In that way, it was nice to meet him, but she figured she probably shouldn’t say that.

“Do you want something?” Machi asked, after another moment of silence.

“Yeah,” Kyo gave another rough grunt. “No, fuck—I don’t know.” It was said more to himself than
Machi didn’t really know where to take the conversation. It’s not really one she knew how to drive, especially since he was the one with something to say to her apparently. She felt her fingers getting numb in the cold. She felt the sudden impulse to press them into the snow.

She looked back up at Kyo, who was still deliberating on whether to say anything at all. Well, she had time.

She crouched down, delicately tucking the back of her skirt under her knees so that it wouldn’t dip too much into the snow, and dug her fingers into the fresh snowfall, digging around until she reached dead grass and dirt.

“What the hell are you doing?”

“Waiting for you to say something,” Machi said. She looked up at him. “If you’re going to at all.”

Machi’s fingers dug around until they encountered a stick, pulling the damp wood from the snow. Kyo crouched down across from her with a heavy sigh.

“You’re weird, you know that?” He said. Machi shrugged, handing him the stick. Her fingers continued to draw patterns in the cold dirt.

Kyo took a second to look at the stick with a confused pout before he started following suit, running the end of it through the dirt and grass to dig it up in clumps. They sat like that for a minute.

“I just wanna know if he’s takin’ care of himself,” Kyo finally said. Quietly. If Machi hadn’t spent her whole life listening to what quiet sounded like, she might not have heard it.

“In what way?” She asked back.

“I dunno,” Kyo grunted, pulling out a small pebble from beneath the dirt and hurling it as hard as he could over her head. “Eating…” Kyo paused, staring up at her for a moment before looking back down at their little island of dirt. “Sleeping.”

She hummed quietly, contemplatively. She sighed at the thought of the man who had now become such a close friend of hers – who held the objection of her affection more than she thought anyone could. Of that kindness and compassion that drew her in behind his frightened carapace.

She wanted to stay out of his world, but at the same time she wanted to know all about it. She wanted to help, but she only felt as though she could passively support. She wanted Yuki to tell her everything, every last dark secret, but also felt special being the woman that he was quiet with.

Now she didn’t even know what she was to Yuki. Let alone the little facets of a well-disguised breakdown. She sighed.

“He could be better,” she said. “He could be worse.”

Kyo’s strokes across the dirt became more aggressive, dirt falling gracelessly onto the snow to mix into a murky brown color. Machi paused her own idle scribbles to watch Kyo. He was digging a firm moat into the dirt, his expression pinched and hindered as his gaze narrowed and narrowed on his own hand. Machi warmed her own dirt-stained hands under her armpits to keep warm as she continued to watch.

Snap.
Just like that the stick broke in half and, with a frustrated noise, Kyo threw it to his side. He ran both hands through his hair in a messy and aggressive tousle.

“Is he…” Kyo began again. Dropping his arms by his side in a defeated gesture. “Is he happy?”

Machi met his gaze. Something there that reflected so clearly in her own eyes, it as if she was looking into a mirror. It hurt. Something about the words felt sharp and messy and devastating.

She didn’t get a chance to answer.

“Kyo!”

Both Machi and Kyo snapped up at the voice, Kyo whipping around to face Yuki. His shoulders broadened and his face twisted into an expression she had never seen before this very moment.

“Don’t say anything.” Kyo whispered to her quickly, before running away. Machi watched him go, his footprints being replaced by Yuki’s as he stomped forward, watching Kyo retreat with an infuriated terror paling his skin.

Machi watched him watch Kyo and something burned in her stomach. As if what she watching was private – a world so separate from her own. So, instead, she looked back down at her feet.

“Machi, I’m so sorry,” Yuki finally said, content with Kyo’s increasing distance between them. “I didn’t think he would try and talk to you. Are you alright? He didn’t… He didn’t say anything strange to you, did he?”

Machi chanced a glance down at the comforting hand he had placed on her elbow, before looking back up at him. She shook her head.

“Are you sure?” Yuki asked. “Are you positive?”

“He asked me my name,” Machi said. She bit the inside of her cheek. “That’s all.”

“Somehow I find that hard to believe,” he mumbled. “Please don’t listen to anything he says.”

Machi tilted her head, “Why not?”

Yuki looked like he didn’t know what to do with the question, as if the answer should be obvious to her.

“Isn’t he part of your family?” She pressed.

“Distantly,” Yuki said, looking away from her. “I think we both know what it’s like not to trust our own family.”

Machi took a step back at that. A gust of wind rushed through and nicked at her already cold fingers. She shivered, looking back down at her feet.

“I’m sorry,” Yuki said. “That was rude of me. I shouldn’t—I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay,” she said.

“Kyo and I just have a complicated relationship. We always have.”

“He doesn’t seem like a bad person,” Machi said. Because if Machi knew one thing it was how to read people. She would unabashedly admit to this, not in any immodest sort of way. But it was the
truth. Terrible people had a sort of stink to them, an aura that vibrated around them and made Machi’s ears ring. But good people, honest people, were like dirt. Genuine in what they were, sometimes trying to let things grow, sometimes hardened, sometimes forming a foot path, or sometimes like a giant muddy pool that splashed happily with each new raindrop. That’s what the Sohmas, of those she had met, felt like so far.

“He’s… not. He’s not,” Yuki admitted. He sighed, taking Machi’s hand in both of his and covering it in an attempt to warm her fingers up. A few moments in, as if he had realized something terrible, he released her fingers with shame flashing in his features. “Just stay away from him. Please.”

Machi shoved her hands into her coat pockets, “Okay.”

With that she turned, ready to leave this conversation behind and walk down the path back home. She was cold and anxious and tense, and she wasn’t sure if this strange encounter was making this walk with Yuki worse or better.

It definitely gave her something else to think about as they walked down the path together in silence.

Usually Machi didn’t mind, because usually neither of them had much to say. But today was different. Yuki had so much to say it was practically rolling off of him in waves. She could tell by how he wouldn’t look at her, how he wouldn’t relax.

And, to be honest, she was getting irritated.

Whatever their relationship might be, at least Kyo said what he wanted to say. Yuki usually did the same, but today he was like a frightened mouse—too afraid of his own words.

And it just made Machi’s stomach sink. Because, even if it was an unspoken promise, they would always say whatever words they felt needed to be said. Even if it was nonsensical. Even if it wasn’t verbal—such as the times Yuki would walk out onto her balcony and take long, inhaling breaths of a cigarette. Even if it was hard or strange. It’s what drew her into Yuki in the first place.

But having him hide from her hurt in a million different ways right now and just served to remind her that perhaps she was making this out to be much different than what it actually was.

“I don’t want you to walk me home the rest of the way,” she said. “I can go on my own.”

“What?” Yuki said, as if he were honestly surprised.

“You feel uncomfortable around me now and I don’t like it. So I’ll walk by myself,” she began to walk, but Yuki suddenly grabbed at her shoulder, only to jerk back his hand when he realized what he’d done. She looked down at where he had touched her and then back up at him with a frown.

“See?”

“That’s not…” Yuki sighed. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to make you feel like I don’t want to be around you. That’s not it.”

“Then what is it? Because you haven’t said anything to me for three days.” It wasn’t angry, and it wasn’t accusing. But it was curious and maybe a little sad.

“I just didn’t want to say anything until I was certain about my feelings for you… Whether it was one way or another.”

“So, you’re certain now?” Machi asked, feeling her chest tighten as she looked up at him.
“No, I—” Machi’s stomach dropped with her eyes. “I’m sorry. I wish I could give you an answer but things are… complicated with me right now. Maybe always.”

“Then why did you ask to walk me home?”

“Is it bad that I missed you?” Yuki smiled at her, and Machi smiled back.

“No. And it’s okay that you don’t have an answer, either. But I don’t want you avoiding me until you figure it out.” Yuki gave her a confused look, to which Machi responded with, “What?”

“You really want me around still? Even if I haven’t figured everything out yet? Won’t that be hard on you?”

Machi shrugged, “It’s better than you pretending you don’t have anything to say.”

Yuki looked as if he was still trying to figure this out in his mind, but he smiled through his confusion.

“So then… Did you still want to have our early New Year’s?”

Machi smiled, “Yes, Yuki. I would like that very much.”

-----------------------------------------

Kyo ran all the way to the dojo that day.

The dojo was far from the school, and half an hour into the run Kyo could feel his legs beginning to burn, but he pushed through it until the sight of the dojo filled his vision, chest heaving and sweat dripping and yet there was still so much energy thrumming under Kyo.

His stomach was unsettled, and his blood felt like it had been startled and never calmed down. There was something under his feet that called for him to run longer or faster or whatever would burn him out.

At first, he didn’t even want to change into his gi. He wanted to grab the first punching bag he could find and beat his fists against it ruthlessly. Punch after punch, kick after kick. He wanted to detach it from the chain and kneel above it while he drove both his fists into it one after the other.

He couldn’t, though. He at least had enough sense in his mind to know this. Instead he barely greeted anybody, ran with tunnel vision to the changing rooms and tied his belt too tight around his waist, and slammed the door a little too hard when he left.

He was six minutes into mercilessly beating the punching bag in whatever refined manor that he could salvage, when Haru came up to him.

It took about 4 more minutes of Haru staring down the side of his head until Kyo finally addressed him.

“What do you want, Haru?”

“You seem fired up today. It makes me want to fight you,” Haru said.
“Fuck off,” Kyo landed another disappointing hit on the punching bag.

“I’m serious. Don’t you want a fight with something other than a defenseless bag?” Haru asked.

“You’re not that much better of an opponent,” Kyo grunted, punching the bag so hard that his arm felt like it was shaking from the impact.

“Don’t say that. You’ll hurt my feelings.”

Kyo rolled his eyes, hoping that was enough for Haru to go away. And it felt as though it was, for a moment, until he felt fingers flick the back of his neck. Kyo bristled before snapping around to face Haru.

“What the hell?!?”

“Just checking your reflexes,” Haru said, fingers still up in an incriminating flicking position.

“Fine, you want to fight? Then let’s go!”

Kyo began lunging at Haru who took a step back and put his hands up.

“Hang on, let me compose myself,” he said, with a completely blank face.

Kyo rolled his eyes.

Haru, slow as could fuckin’-be, let himself come down into a ready stance, cracking his neck from side to side before giving Kyo a small nod.

Kyo lunged.

His leg swung and kicked immediately before his fists came forward to meet with Haru’s barely composed elbow blocks. Kyo grunted, and with a small opening gave Haru a particularly gnarly punch in the stomach, causing a soft little noise to escape Haru, though it didn’t reflect on his face.

He jumped back, a tiny glint in his eye, Kyo recognized, from when he was feeling especially determined.

Haru was the one who came towards him this time, fighting in a way that was calm, analytical, and composed—but was no match for Kyo’s instincts, experience, and violence.

For every punch Haru tried to land, Kyo would block so harshly it felt like its own blow, and every strike that Kyo gave was set to kill. He grunted through, kicking and punching, until finally his leg swung Haru’s out from under him, and Kyo was ready to give that final punch right to Haru’s nose.

Kyo managed to stop himself a hair before doing just that.

Kyo took in a deep breath, watching as Haru did the same, sucking in oxygen from over-exertion and fatigue.

“Well,” Haru said between breaths when Kyo still hadn’t moved. “Are you going to help me up?”

Kyo clicked his tongue, moving away from Haru to grab his towel from his bag at the side of the room. He wiped at his face rigorously as he listened to Haru stand up on his own and approach him.

“What’s eating you, Kyo? You nearly killed me.”

“I’m getting closer to beating you, I can feel it.”

“Keep tellin’ yourself that,” Kyo snapped. “And nothing’s wrong.”

Kyo walked back towards his punching bag, not even bothering to catch his breath as he continued his regimen of hitting it with one punch right after the other.

He could feel Haru right behind him.

“I think you might be lying,” Haru said, voice flat. “You seem annoyed.”

“I’m not fucking annoyed. Except by you!”

“Interesting behavior for someone who’s not annoyed.”

Kyo swung back around, his fist up and poised to take another punch at Haru, “FOR THE LAST TIME—”

“You’re not annoyed. We get it.”

Kyo looked up at the voice that wasn’t Haru’s. A voice that came from elsewhere. A nightmarish tone that sunk into Kyo’s blood and made his hot sweat turn cold on his body. Haru, curious, also turned to see where the voice had come from, and a lot less bothered than Kyo by the surprise presence.

Yuki.

Yuki was taking off his jacket and unbuttoning the cuffs of his sleeves to roll them up, his face hardened and dark.

Haru backed away, and Kyo barely noticed with how his gaze was stuck on Yuki completely.

“What the fuck are you doing here?” Kyo asked.

“You may not be annoyed, Kyo. But I certainly am.”

“So? What the fuck am I supposed to do about it?” Kyo hoped that came off as threatening as he wanted, but there was a deep and unabashed fear that was coming through in his voice. Making him antsy and skittish. He felt his fight or flight instincts kicking into overdrive, and his want to punch something was almost as forceful as his absolute need to run the fuck away.

“Well, I’ve never expected you to just sit there and take a beating, but it certainly would be nice if you did this time around,” Yuki snarled, poising himself into a starting position. An invitation to fight as clear as a blocked off exit.

“You want to fight, rat boy?” Kyo growled back.

“No,” Yuki said, racing towards him before he could finish his sentence. “I want to kick your ass.”

It was only the first punch, and Kyo was already feeling overwhelmed. He bent back, watching as Yuki’s arm struck past where his face would have been like lightening. He jumped away when Yuki kicked at him, and jumped again when Yuki tried to sweep his legs out from under him. He blocked as Yuki aimed a punch for his side, and blocked again when another fist was aimed for his cheek.
Kyo was being pushed back, towards the paper doors of the dojo that led out back to the garden, and Kyo could feel his feet struggling to keep up on the defensive. He wasn’t used to fighting defensive. Especially since he and Yuki had cut off communication altogether months ago.

No. Kyo was used to swinging and kicking and hitting and punching and backing his opponents into a corner one by one, pushing them to be better, pushing them to swing at him, pushing them to find any sort of opening or to take control because if not, Kyo wasn’t sure what he would do. Lately, he didn’t want to stop, no matter whose back was against the wall.

And this time, it was his.

Kyo shouted out, lunging forward in a blind attempt to catch Yuki off guard. Instead, Kyo felt a hand on the back of his gi, and a punch to his side, before he was being pulled into a headlock. Yuki’s arm was tight around his neck and the more he struggled, the more he could feel his cheeks begin to glow. His face was burning with a lack of oxygen and rage, but Yuki held on steadfast.

“You had no right to talk to her! Do you hear me? What are you trying to do?” Yuki tugged harder.

“Huh? Why can’t you just leave me be?!”

Kyo used all his weight to fall back down, taking Yuki with him. The two fell on the ground hard, and Kyo rolled around and struggled as much as he could until Yuki was finally forced to uncoil around his neck.

Kyo jumped back up on unsteady legs, heaving in oxygen as inconspicuously as his body would allow it. Yuki followed shortly after.

“Why? Did I upset your little fucking girlfriend? Did I scare her or something? Or did I just fucking scare you?!?”

Yuki shoved Kyo hard and he stumbled back through the closed shoji door with a yelp and a grunt. He could feel the paper tear beneath him and the wood crack and scratch against his skin as he landed hard on his ass on the slim balcony of the outside, a two foot drop down to the garden.

“What does it matter if she’s my girlfriend, huh!? Why do you even care?!”

Out of the corner of his eye he could see Haru running off someplace before Yuki was kicking at his side, sudden and swift and merciless and Kyo shielded himself as best he could before rolling off the ledge and onto the cold, and now snow-covered, ground of the garden. With another shout, Kyo immediately grabbed at Yuki’s leg on the higher ground and pulled towards him, causing Yuki to trip and fall on his back with a thud on the balcony.

Yuki kicked his foot around, almost hitting Kyo’s face a couple times, until Kyo freed him in favor of standing and backing up so that they were now dueling on the unofficial, and unmatted, outside. Snow was digging into Kyo’s barefeet, and Yuki jumped into the fray in nothing but his socks. The cold seeping in for Kyo, and for Yuki if his small little shiver was anything to go by.

They paused for a moment, only a moment, before they were back at each other. But this time, they clung to each other, rough and careless and with malicious intent behind each skin cell. Kyo grabbed onto Yuki’s hair and pulled, while Yuki latched onto Kyo’s ear and tugged even harder. Yuki punched at Kyo’s back again and again, while Kyo aimed his punches at Yuki’s stomach, free and unblocked.

Yuki let out a hiss of pain before headbutting him and socking him in the eye, to which Kyo retaliated by hooking his leg around Yuki’s and punching sideways on his thigh in hopes of breaking
something. Yuki untangled himself and they both stumbled away off-balance from each other. But *fuck* balance, Kyo thought. And *fuck* Yuki, he screamed internally as they both were ready to pounce right back into the fight.

But suddenly his arms were restrained, and he was trapped against a warm body as he struggled to kick and punch and fucking *fight* this beast, this fucking savage monster, that hid behind this contorted sense of beauty and was just aimed at ruining Kyo’s fucking life.

And Yuki stared at him in the exact same way when Haru wrapped his arms around Yuki from behind and pulled him away.

Kyo struggled, blood rushing to his ears, filtering out anything but Yuki screaming back at him because—apparently—Kyo was screaming too.

“Kyo! Kyo! Kyo, calm down!” He could hear Shishou say, while he tightened his grip around Kyo’s arms but he wasn’t calming down. He couldn’t.

Yuki looked like he couldn’t, either. Bucking his hips forward as Haru held him back as well as he could.

“Yuki,” Haru was saying. “Yuki, come on. That’s enough.”

That apparently calmed him down.

But his eyes were still *burning*.

“Stay away from Machi! And stay the fuck away from me!” Yuki screamed.

Kyo spit at him and it landed in a big glob in the snow.

He watched as Haru let him go but kept a firm hand on his arm as he was dragged away, limping. But Shishou’s arms were still firm around him. He wouldn’t let go. He wouldn’t let him fucking go!

“LEAVE ME ALONE!” Kyo screamed, and just like that, he was struggling again.

He was kicking and screaming and revving and revving with the brakes relentlessly applied. Kazuma wasn’t letting go, wasn’t showing him an inch of wiggle room. Wasn’t letting him fucking breathe! Not here, not at school, not in his own damn home! He couldn’t fucking breathe!

“LET GO OF ME, DAMMIT! LET ME GO!” Kyo jerked his head back to try and hit Kazuma’s nose but his master was too quick, too familiar with Kyo, and his head collided with nothing but air.

“Kyo! Calm down! What’s wrong with you?!”

“Let me go!”

“What’s wrong?!”

Kyo struggled and struggled and struggled and, “EVERYTHING.”

He went limp.

And it was enough for the dam to break lose behind his eyelids.

Rough, raw, and jagged sobs pulled themselves out of Kyo that sounded more like screams than cries. He went limp in Kazuma’s arms, and could feel his knees seeping in the snow as Kazuma
clung to him as if he were fine china.

They fell together, as Kyo collapsed from the inside out, the cemented wall he kept in front of his eyes and in front of his teeth crumbling into dust and powder and Kyo had never, never been so angry with himself as he was right now in this moment.

“Kyo,” Kazuma said, worried and careful and desperate all in one, “What’s wrong? Please. Please, I’m here. I’m right here.”

And Kyo wanted to say it was because he was getting locked up. He wanted to say it was because his “bright” and “full” future was getting cut off. He wanted to say what Kazuma wanted to hear. He wanted to give Kazuma the problem he wanted to solve. But he couldn’t.

With a mouth full of rubble and a stomach full of sand, Kyo couldn’t say anything else but the truth around a sick sob.

“I’m gay.”
It happened when he was thirteen.

It came with the realization that the world was just as cruel to him as a teenager, as it was when he was a boy.

And this was the cruelest, sickest joke dealt to him by far.

In his second year of middle school, Kyo was already accustomed to being isolated. Moving around constantly after the death of his mother meant moving from elementary school to elementary school. When he finally settled with Kazuma, his final year was spent with what any young child would call friends, and what a more naïve person might call family.

By thirteen, Kagura had already seen his true form.

By thirteen, Haru had already left his side to glue himself to that rat.

By thirteen, every friend he made had backed slowly away after incident piled onto incident of delinquent behavior with Kyo’s move into middle school.

By thirteen, he was finally settled into one place—settled enough to let himself hate.

He was blinded and engulfed in a red fog for most of his younger, teenage years. The rage he felt was almost sentient, and it strung him up like a puppet. His body felt as though it moved on its own, his words detached from his mouth, his actions separate from his own. It wasn’t a sensation that was new to Kyo, but that didn’t matter. Kyo would let the devil himself possess every cell in his body if it meant he could shed the beads around his wrist.

It was getting easier to resent Kazuma, despite the childlike wonder in his eyes when he followed him around like a duckling just a year before. It was getting easier to be alone—in his room, at a desk where all eyes would avert away, in the dojo long after all the other children left.

It’s just how life was now. Kyo knew he would have to get used to it anyway.

Or maybe he would just kill himself. Let this fucking disease pass on to some poor bastard that wasn’t his problem. It was a thought that entered his mind every now and then, but the idea of being able to bring down that fucking rat with him was too gorgeous an image to not be realized.

After, he thought to himself. After I kill him, I’ll kill myself.

It was at this time that Kyo realized girls never interested him.

And why would they?

Girls were a threat—a terrifying nuisance. Girls were a special category of person in Kyo’s brain—either they were useless, Kagura, or his mother. All were to be feared. All could—and had—a hand at ruining his life. Kyo didn’t really give it a second thought that in his second year, girls were a species he could grow numb to.

If it were up to Kyo, he would go his whole life without thinking of dating or sex or love.
These were all foreign and childish topics that classmates would gossip about. They would roll their tongues over it as if coating the ideas with their nasty saliva. They were filling their pathetic and carefree lives with problems because they never knew what it was like to have some of their own.

Kyo would have been content if that was the only way such ideas ever crossed his mind. But why would the world start cutting him a break now?

The winter semester was starting.

Kyo could recall every damn detail of that day, which only made it worse when he knew he would never remember his name. Something he knew he did on purpose, but something that made him feel sick all the same.

He stood with the rest of the class by his desk, watching as the teacher rearranged their seating assignments on the board. Everyone stood diligently, with heads held high and backs straight and stiff. Kyo slouched in the forest of do-gooders, tapping his foot against the floor beat by beat by beat.

No one even looked at him, and by this point it would have taken a lot more for his teacher to report him—or even attempt to scold him. If he micromanaged every disturbance Kyo caused from big to small, there wouldn’t be any time left to teach a class at all.

His new seat was placed towards the middle of the room at the very end of the row. Far from the windows, and close to the wall that hung flyers for clubs, announcements for tutoring, class party sign-ups and, now, the list of secret Santa participants.

He would admit he liked it better than his seat closer to the front row and immersed in a sea of desks and ducked heads. At least being next to the wall meant one less face crowding around him.

“Hello! I’m ------!”

It was the first thing he had ever said to him, and Kyo couldn’t even remember.

He was a boring looking guy. Hair cut like his mom told the barber what to do. Uniform neat, buttoned up, and Kyo was sure that his shirt would be tucked in if the jacket of his gakuran came undone.

Kyo did remember that he didn’t respond to him.

Instead, he watched as he sat in front of Kyo’s desk, cheery and unscathed by their silent and chilly encounter.

After a moment, the boy looked over his shoulder and smiled.

--

Kyo was beginning to spend less time at home.

He didn’t like being around Kazuma at the time, and even going to the dojo was becoming a chore. He went, only to release the pent-up energy that was stored beneath his skin. He would kick his legs in time to the class, punch with a form that he tried to perfect, but sometimes it wasn’t enough.

After having to be pulled off again of another sparring partner, and with no one willing to challenge
him (not even Haru—not that he came to his section anymore), the dojo was beginning to frustrate more than it relieved.

And then Kazuma would try to scold him as if he knew him. As if he knew what Kyo had been through. As if he understood what he was thinking and what he was feeling. He wasn’t even his dad. And after a few more years of dealing with this, he’d toss Kyo aside just like everyone else.

Kazuma just had more patience. That didn’t change the fact that he was probably still a bastard.

But without the dojo as a proper outlet, Kyo found himself in the principal’s office more often than not. Starting fights, talking back to authority, and breaking rules was becoming second nature. He was becoming the wrong end of a magnet, and walking down the halls, everyone would wax and wane around him at a considerable distance.

All, that was, except for this kid.

He sat in front of him, and Kyo gained a staggering indifference to the back of his head. Besides their one-sided introduction a few weeks ago, they barely exchanged a word.

But today, when Kyo sat down at his desk, foot tapping, fingers drumming, mouth in a scowl the boy turned back around with that same smile. One that seemed misplaced when directed at him.

“You’re Kyo, right?”

“So what if I am?”

“Do you remember my name?” He asked, hopefully. He was beaming.

At the time, Kyo did. He didn’t say it back.

“Well, that’s okay. Hey, you’re having a hard time with English, right?” Undeterred, the kid kept smiling. At first Kyo thought he was making fun of him.

The kid wasn’t wrong. Kyo’s least favorite subject was English, if only because they had a hard-ass teacher who would pick on Kyo every chance she got. In front of the whole class, she would force Kyo to stand and recite passages from the homework—words that Kyo just couldn’t quite comprehend or wrap his tongue around.

It was humiliating, and the first few times caused Kyo to run out the class screaming.

Now, it was barely worth the effort, and all he got in exchange were the chuckles of his classmates. He hated it.

“What’s it to you?” Kyo asked, giving a violent poke to the nosy companion.

“I wasn’t trying to call you dumb or anything,” he said, picking up on the defensive tone. “You’re actually pretty smart, aren’t you? You get high marks on math and science and stuff, huh? Do you study a lot for them?”

Kyo didn’t remember the last time he talked to anyone so much. It had him feeling a little confused. “Not really,” he said. He scowled, because he wasn’t sure what else to do.

“I just thought I could help you with English. I’m pretty good at it! Sensei always calls my name first for tests, if you don’t remember. Well, first or second.”

Oh, yeah. That was true. Their teachers would pass out their tests in order from best to worst score.
That also meant:

“Wow, you suck at math.”

“So you do remember my name!”

“I didn’t say that,” Kyo blubbered out, defensively. This guy wouldn’t stop smiling and it was weird.

“This is great! Then let’s plan to meet after school! I’ll bring my English books and you can bring ma —”

“Hey.” Kyo said, the chattering voice allowing him time to regain his composure. “Just leave me the fuck alone.”

Kyo gave him a glare, watched the smile on his face melt into disappointment until he turned around to face the board.

And, without much ceremony, that was that.

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That was not that.

Much to Kyo’s surprise the kid continued to talk to him. Almost eagerly. As if he looked forward to getting told off by Kyo every day.

What a fucking weirdo.

Kyo cursed at him at first. Told him to fuck off. Even went so far as to threaten to punch him, but still he would come in day after day and greet him as he always would.

It was becoming remarkably irritating. The amount of effort that it took to even acknowledge someone so deficient of social and mental intelligence wore on Kyo’s nerves like everything else in the world.

What was worse was that their classmates were starting to notice their strange dynamic, as well. It was like a show whenever the kid would sit in front of him, twist himself around to try and engage Kyo in conversation.

After a couple of weeks he could hear snickers and giggles around him. It figured. They must have baited this guy into pranking him. It wasn’t the first time it had happened. One time in the autumn semester Kyo came back to his desk to find that all his textbooks had been replaced with English ones.

Another time some girls had staged an elaborate confession where the three fought over him in the middle of the classroom. Kyo had turned red until one had tried to touch him. He pushed her away a little too violently and sent her flying back into some desks.

“What did you do that for? It was just a joke.”

It was the last thing any of his classmates had attempted to say to him in months, and that suited him just fine.
But now here was the new bait. His classmates must have gotten bored of their eventless lives.

One day he came into class and there he was again. Looking up at him. Smiling. Teeth bared and eyes bright as the sun and it was disgusting. It only took one chuckle from a passerby for Kyo to wrench the kid up by the collar.

“What part of leave me the fuck alone do you not understand, huh? You think this is funny? Trying to start shit with me?”

A few whistles came from the other side of the classroom, along with another bought of laughter from some unknown faces. God. This is what they wanted. They wanted to see Kyo explode. They wanted to see him lose control. It was a sport to them. It was a goddamn movie.

Akito’s sickened grin came to the forefront of his mind. That cheerfully disgusted look when he slipped the beads off his wrist.

Fine.

I’ll let them watch.

“IF YOU COME NEAR ME AGAIN I’LL KILL YOU,” Kyo looked back out towards the class. “DO YOU HEAR ME? I’LL KILL YOU.”

He brought his fist up, ready to make an example of this month’s attempted punchline, but the kid had a look in his eyes—a complete and raw confused sorrow that had Kyo pushing him away instead.

He stared at him for a moment, as if he were alone in that now silent classroom, and the kid stared back.

Kyo kicked the desk next to his and left the room.

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If Kyo had bothered to look up from his desk for more than his math lesson, he would have learned quite a lot about the world around him. It was the uncomfortable and looming thought that followed him around every time his anger flared—every time he pushed his guilt away.

But this time, it was at a volume he couldn’t ignore.

It had been two days since he had yelled at the kid and, as Kyo had wanted, he kept to himself. He didn’t attempt to speak to him again. He didn’t even look at him.

Good, Kyo thought.

Now he can go back to his shitty friends—whoever they were.

Turns out they were nobody.

It wasn’t that Kyo was trying to see, spitefully, who might have set him up this time around. But he was a cat, after all. He was curious. So, he kept an eye on the head in front of him. Waited for him to get up for lunch. Waiting for him to interact with those assholes between classes. Waited for him to
charm the girls in the seats in front and next to him.

Waited for him to do anything, at least.

No one seemed to approach him, though. No one seemed to really pay him any mind.

On that second day he had lifted himself out of his chair, a weight hanging on his shoulders and his expression sunken and solemn. Kyo tapped his finger on his desk three times before getting up and following him down the hall.

He was pleased when his search brought him to the school’s roof. A favorite spot of his anyway, even in the cold.

He was less pleased when he found the kid sitting on his own. Picking at a bento and sneezing once from the cold.

Alright, fine. So the kid was a loner. Maybe he wasn’t trying to set him up. Maybe he was just a freak.

Just a freak.

Kyo didn’t sit out on the roof that day. He didn’t really think he had earned it.

Instead, irritably, he tapped his fingers on his desk all through lunch, 3rd and 4th period. He tapped his foot when that wasn’t enough to release his energy. And when the kid in front of him refused to turn around by the last class of the day (usually favoring to turn to Kyo and say “glad the day’s almost done, huh!”) Kyo took liberty, himself.

Without thinking, in the bustle before class began, Kyo tapped the kid’s shoulder.

He was hoping he would be angry. He knew how to deal with angry. It was like a second language for Kyo. But when he turned around all the guy looked was sad. Sad and maybe hopeful. And maybe surprised.

Fuck.

His tongue was twisted in knots.

The words I’m sorry not even in his vocabulary—not even in his head. Especially for some guy he didn’t even give a shit about, obviously.

“Yes?” He asked, when Kyo hadn’t said anything a few seconds later.

“Hey,” Kyo started. “I need a pen.”

The kid blinked at him before his eyes trailed down to the pencil sitting at the edge of Kyo’s desk. Kyo felt himself flush from embarrassment. He was such an idiot.

The kid smiled, anyway.

“Sure!”

After that, he wasn’t so annoying. After that, Kyo let him become routine.
“I just beat this level in this video game, but it took me forever. The guy guarding the castle kept killing me over and over again,” he lamented one day, keeping his eyes glued to his handheld console. Kyo kept his eyes on the back of the game, listening intently to the sounds that poured out. “Have you played it yet? Everyone’s talking about it.”

Kyo shook his head.

“What? What games do you play, then?” He asked, putting the game down with the telltale music of his character death.

“I don’t,” Kyo said.

“What, like never?”

Kyo shook his head again. Before he could respond the console was being pushed into his hands, still warm from when the kid had previously held it. It was a strange looking thing, especially up close. Kyo had never played with one before. His mother tended not to spend too much money on him, except for maybe a present or two on Christmas or his birthday (usually books he didn’t read or hats he didn’t wear).

Kazuma didn’t believe in having too many electronics in his house, a purist and a traditionalist who tried to teach Kyo a gentle form of discipline that was being shaken to its foundation in these years. And it wasn’t as if Kyo had any friends that would share their games with him.

It took about thirty seconds of Kyo examining the device, clueless, before the kid began to laugh. Light-hearted, and kind. Unlike the rest of his peers and classmates. Unlike his family or Akito.

“Look, I’ll show you,” he said.

He pulled his chair from his desk to sit right by Kyo, and slated his finger over his to instruct which buttons to press when.

Kyo seized up immediately, but his hardwire reflex to constantly flee wasn’t blaring its alarm. Instead, all Kyo could think about was the last time someone had touched him outside of a fight. So, quietly, he let the boy instruct him through an entire level like that.

It didn’t even occur to Kyo how much easier it would have been for the kid to simply tell him how to play.

Kyo felt the back of his neck grow hot when he pulled away from him. He could feel him watching him over his shoulder, crowding his space as he clumsily jumped from stage to stage on the device.

A little moment later he passed the device back, after falling down a dark pit.

“You don’t want to play anymore? I can let you borrow it if you want!”

Kyo shook his head.

He couldn’t imagine it would be as much fun on his own.
There was a gash on Kyo’s face.

Well, not so much of a *gash* as a *scratch*. It really depended on who you asked between the two of them. But if you asked Kyo it was not that big of a deal.

It didn’t matter, the kid gaped like a fish as soon as he had laid eyes on Kyo’s disheveled appearance. His eyes were heavy, a bruise on his right cheek, his lip cut and swollen, and a *scratch* on his forehead that maybe wasn’t cleaned up as well as it should have been.

It happened before practice the day before. He spotted that fucking rat walking out of the dojo, half-invested in his conversation with Haru. Those eyes dull, as if they had never seen the sun. As if he were somehow innocent. Kyo hated those swirling rings of silver that always looked at Kyo as if they didn’t understand.

Kyo shoved his shoulder into Yuki as he was walking away—hated how he would just take his words and take his actions as if he were somehow *better* than Kyo. Yuki had kept walking without a word.

So Kyo had picked up a rock and thrown it at his back.

For the first time since they met, the rat looked at him square on. As if he had never been timid in his life. As if he had never been unsure in his entire life.

Hah.

Kyo knew it had been an act.

So he pushed him. He got in his face. He yelled at him. Tried to make him break. He knew he would. This mopey, crybaby act was just that. An act. And Kyo knew it.

Kyo shoved him again. And again. And again.

*Again.*

Yuki punched him.

For the first time in that rodent’s sorry life, he manned up and punched Kyo right across the face. Kyo might have celebrated if it stopped there. Might have rejoiced over the hard proof in the taste of iron that Yuki wasn’t the darling angel child that everyone made him out to be. That *Akito* made him out to be.

But it didn’t stop there.

Kyo punched back – of course he punched back – and Yuki had somewhere along the way decided he would have the last word. The punches kept coming. Then kicks. Then throws. Clumsy moves molded around half-baked karate techniques melded with rage and frustration.

Shishou pulled them apart and that bastard started to *cry*.

Cradled in Shishou’s arms he sobbed like the pathetic sewer rat he was. And, even worse, there was barely even a scratch on Yuki.
By any witness, Yuki won the fight.

Kyo ran away, fled the scene of the dojo. The infuriating image of Yuki’s tears drowning him.

It would mark the only time he had seen Yuki cry.

Kyo showed up that next morning like that. Having walked around the city streets alone, too angry to go back home. Too afraid to call Shishou. Too scared to know if Shishou even cared if he was gone, anyway.

Kyo flinched away and out of his thoughts when he felt pressure being placed on the cut on his forehead. The kid responded by flinching away in surprise, as well. As if worried he might burn himself on Kyo’s skin.

“Just leave me alone. I’m fine.”

“No, you’re not,” he said, simply. Kyo was too tired to lie in return. “I’m taking you to the nurse’s office!”

“I don’t need to go to the damn nurse!”

“If you don’t you’ll get in trouble with the teacher!”

“Like they give a shit!”

The kid crossed his arms with a pout, a petulant and frustrated look that Kyo almost wanted to laugh at. He looked like the kid who wanted the piece of candy at the grocery store – not as if he were some weirdo who wanted to see Kyo’s lip back in one piece.

“You know,” he said, that same defiantly petulant voice on his tongue. “The teacher would probably care if I said you were scaring everyone.”

“Huh?”

“Sensei, did you see Kyo?” He said, a mocking lilt in his voice. “His face looks so awful—”

“Hey!”

“He looks like he was some kind of fight! Do you think he’s in some kind of trouble outside the school? Maybe it’s gangs or something! I was talking with the rest of the class and we’re all really worried. Maybe you could talk to him?”

Kyo narrowed his eyes. “You wouldn’t.”

The kid smiled. “Try me.”

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“Hello?” The kid called out, but no response came in the nurse’s office. Kyo trailed behind, hands deep in his pockets, kicking at non-existent dirt on the floor. “Anybody here?”

“Nobody’s here. Can I just go?”
“Sit down,” he commanded. Somehow, Kyo was too tired to try and defy the demand.

Kyo hopped onto the end of one of the examination tables in the room, clicking his heels together idly as he watched the kid rummage through the doors and cabinets.

“I don’t think you’re allowed to do that,” Kyo said.

“It’s fine.” He made a triumphant noise as a drawer revealed what he was looking for, and with a soft smile he approached Kyo with bandages, cotton balls, and disinfectant.

It was quiet in the room, the heat from his hands grazing Kyo’s thigh as he poured the disinfectant in a little dish set on the bed. Kyo felt exhausted and wired all at once, his eyes training on the boy’s fingers like a trance as they dipped the cotton balls into the liquid, but so aware and heightened to every soft breath he took.

Kyo peered up, and he must have been looking for too long, because suddenly the kid’s attention was on him. His eyes flicked up to meet his, and he smiled. It seemed so much closer than when they were separated by a desk and by the noise of a crowded classroom.

“This might sting a little,” he said. His fingers brushed away the greasy, matted locks of Kyo’s hair. Kyo flinched, but did his best to train his body to stay still.

He was both aggravated and grateful when he seemed unaffected by this, his fingers moving freely, anyway. The boy’s thumb pressed against Kyo’s forehead, gently stretching the skin so that the soaking cotton ball could reach every nook of the little cut. His fingers rested in Kyo’s hair, and immediately Kyo felt shame at how dirty it must have felt.

The kid moved the cotton against his skin in slow, brushing motions. Determining what was superficial blood, and what was injured skin. Kyo’s shoulders tensed, staring at the slope of the kid’s neck because looking at his face seemed impossible in that moment. He was aware he was biting the inside of his lip only when he felt the sting of it.

“Sorry,” he said, removing his hands and leaving Kyo’s forehead cold. It felt like a breeze was slicing between them, even though he had only moved an inch away. That stupid tie was fastened up to that idiot’s neck, too. “I know it must hurt a bit. It looks like you have a bruise there.”

With a clean, new cotton ball, he resumed his task. His thumb back on his forehead, though now it rubbed slow almost indiscernible circles at his hairline. Comforting and soft and barely there. The cotton ran over his nose, and outlined his lips and Kyo thought he might be dying. If he was, he didn’t think he minded too much. It was the kind of death he could fall asleep to, even if his heart didn’t seem to be able to rest for a moment.

Kyo closed his eyes, and let himself be cleaned up.

“Hey, Kyo?”

“Hm?”

“Can I ask you something?”

“Depends on how dumb it is.” Kyo’s throat felt way too dry.

He was silent for a moment. His hands left his face once more, and Kyo could hear the opening of a band-aid box. “Do you like anybody right now?”
Kyo let his eyes peer open.

His hands had left Kyo’s face, but it didn’t feel as cold as it did before. It was because the other hadn’t moved away.

“You know,” he prompted when Kyo didn’t say anything. “Like… Like girls?”

Kyo shook his head. “Girls are too much trouble,” he said. And it was true. But somehow his face began to burn at the answer.

And you? The question that anchored his tongue. It refused to take form.

But maybe that was okay. Maybe the smile that slid onto the kid’s face was enough.

Kyo would begin to hate himself as he grew older. Because, no matter what, he refused to remember the boy’s name – but that smile was one he would never forget.

The door opened, startling Kyo with an ungraceful shout. When he looked back, the boy was feet away.

“Sohma! There you are!” An older woman cried. The school nurse. She was probably tired of seeing him by now. “Your guardian has been calling all morning asking where you are!”

“He has?”

“Did you not go home last night? Don’t worry your father like that! Go to the office right now and give him a call!”

“Yes ma’am,” the kid answered for him in his place. His hand was wrapping around his arm and pulling him off the bed and out of the room.

“Go on,” he said, once they were outside of the office. “I’ll tell Sensei why you’re late.”

Kyo watched him walk down the hall, then left to call Shishou from the office.

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When the kid stood up to at the end of the day to go, Kyo had said this:

“Weren’t you gonna teach me English?”

Kyo made sure he wasn’t looking him in the eye when it was said. Instead, his attention fell on the backs of students who huddled and laughed together in the middle of the room. Even still, he could almost feel the kid’s smile like a burst of sunlight released from the confines of a cloudy day. It made his cheeks feel warm like summer. Even if outside it promised to snow any day now.

“Only if you teach me math!” He was already pulling a chair towards Kyo’s desk. He sat down before he could even finish the sentence.

Kyo shrugged, but it felt like a smile.

“Hey sit up! I’m going to be a strict teacher, you know. No slacking off in my class.”
“I can already tell you’re gonna be more of a pain than usual.” Kyo felt his smile follow through in the curve of his lips and the wrinkle of his cheeks. “Don’t forget, stupid, you need my help, too.”

“Yes, but I’m a great student.”

“If you were that great you wouldn’t need my help in math.”

“At least I show up to class,” he pouted.

“Get as smart as me and you won’t need to do that, either.”

“This isn’t studying, this is just making me mad at you!” The kid said, lightly beating the butt of his fists against Kyo’s arm. Kyo gave a rough chuckle, as if the sound was rubbing against the rust in his throat.

Out of the corner of his eye, Kyo could see a pack of lingering students watching over them. They looked away and laughed when they noticed Kyo looking their way.

“Shut up and open your book,” Kyo said.

The two sat across from each other as students began to thin within the school. What started as the piercing, and deafening roar of babbling, mindless students, turned into the dull, distant chatter of those who remained on the cleaning crew.

At some point, mid-trying to gain their concentration to study, the kid looked up at him with pensive and worried eyes. His gaze landed on Kyo’s now bandaged cuts and bruises. The swelling had lessened, and the purple of his bruise had faded in intensity forming a murky yellow-brown.

Kyo could feel him staring.

“Does it still hurt?” He asked, surprisingly before Kyo could call him out.

“Nope,” Kyo said.

“Who’d you get in a fight with?”

“None of your business.”

“Were your parents mad?”

Kyo gave him an unimpressed stink eye.

“What? I’m curious! One time I went home after crashing my bike into our neighbor’s gate. I banged up my knee and broke off part of their fence. My dad was so mad I thought he was going to kick me out of the house!”

Kyo snorted, “You wouldn’t last.”

“Come on! I want to know.”

Kyo huffed, spinning his pencil between his fingers as he leaned away from the desk.

“It was my cousin,” Kyo said. “We got in a fight.”

“Why?”
“Because he ruined my life.”

The kid didn’t know what to say to that.

“And my guardian was mad. Real mad. Happy?”

Kazuma, in fact, was mad. It was the first time Kyo had ever seen him angry. When he came to pick him up from school the day before he remained silent the entire walk back. Once they entered the dojo he instructed Kyo to sit at the table, and once he did, he yelled.

Shishou never yelled.

They hadn’t spoken since Kyo stormed away from the table and up into his room the night before.

It was just as well. Kyo already started packing his bags for whatever new house he would be sent to.

“Hey,” the kid said. “If you get in a fight with your cousin again… can I… can I help clean you up?”

Kyo looked at him straight on. He was red up to his roots, and his hand was clenched so hard around the pencil he thought it might break.

Kyo felt his heart rush over beats in response – as if it was pumping blood two steps at a time.

“What.”

A sudden cackle of laughter tore Kyo from the moment, and he turned his head over his shoulder to see the two boys on the day’s cleaning crew, occupying their own corner of the room. A cold rush of dread scraped through Kyo at the thought of other people hearing their conversation. The idea that anyone might catch the second meaning in their words that not even Kyo was willingly aware of made his stomach drop to his toes.

“What the hell are you laughing at?” Kyo threatened.

“Nothing, nothing,” one said, but as soon as his eyes locked with his friend they burst out into cruel chuckles, once more.

Kyo felt a hand on his sleeve, “Kyo, just leave it.”

He yanked his arm away, “It sure doesn’t sound like nothing, assholes. What’s so damn funny?”

“We just never thought we’d see the most boring guy in class with the biggest delinquent. Are you about to tell us that you’re aiming for the honor roll?” His friend behind him started laughing again.

“It wouldn’t be that hard if all I gotta be is smarter than you!” Kyo cried out.

“Yeah, you’re a real genius,” the laughing one said.

“Come on, Kyo. We all know the real reason you got the color of your hair was you were thinking too hard. Your head just kept steaming and steaming until it matched your face. Look! You’re even turning red now!”

Kyo didn’t remember much what happened next, but he did remember being pulled off the guy only after he made him cry. He remembered how the fracture in his finger felt, too.

His form was still a little off.
“We don’t know what we’re going to do with you anymore.”

“Your temper has been a problem for awhile, Sohma.”

“Why did you have to get so angry, all he did was make a comment about your hair.”

“We’ve called his father, he should be here soon.”

“I don’t know how he deals with you.”

“You have to wonder how he’s raising you.”

“HE’S NOT MY DAD.”

The only thing that stopped him from breaking the window was that was exactly what they expected of him.

Kyo pressed his forehead against the hallway window, staring down the sun as it set, shrouding the world in orange and shadows.

It would have been so easy to force his arm through the glass.

Even if it didn’t break on the first try, he could grab a desk chair from a classroom and throw it through. Maybe he could throw himself out the window. Maybe that’s what they were expecting him to do, too.

What good would it do really?

A broken window and another lecture from adults who didn’t care anymore.

They were giving up on him.

Shishou was giving up on him.

Kyo could see it, in those dark, forlorn eyes when he walked into the teacher’s lounge. That distant expression when Kyo said what they had both been thinking.

Kyo pressed his forehead harder against the window, staring down onto the courtyard below.

No one would care, but it might make his dad happy. For that reason alone, he peeled himself off the window and walked back to his classroom to collect his things.
Kyo would go home, and Shishou would send him away. He was tired of this. He was tired of Kyo. How was anyone supposed to handle this monster inside him, anyway?

He opened the door to the classroom and the sudden noise caused an involuntary squeal to come from one of the desks. Kyo almost jumped at the sudden sound that cut through the white noise in his head. Immediately, his body was poised for a fight and his eyes were back taught into a glare. But when he stared into the classroom the only one who stared back was the kid.

Sitting alone, in the sunset-drenched classroom was the kid.

The soured dread that filled Kyo over the prospect of going home was instantly transformed into a new dread – alluring and pounding and arresting of his entire body. One that made him so hyper aware to every movement and every word he spoke, as opposed to numbing him away until he wasn’t even the one allowed to speak and emote for himself.

“What are you doing here?” Kyo asked. He lingered by the door, clenching the frame so hard he wondered if it would break.

“I was waiting for you,” he said. “Are you okay?”

Kyo gave a stunted nod before forcibly pushing himself into the classroom with his head bowed. He just needed to get his things so he could leave. Leave and never come back. Maybe he could run away into the mountains. Or find some fishing village and live in a hut there. Those all sounded like good options after today.

The kid put a hand over his arm, stopping the frantic packing of his things into his school back. Kyo stilled. When had he gotten so close?

“Kyo, I’m really sorry. I didn’t mean for things… I knew those guys were jerks and we should have left, or maybe I could have said something. Next time, I’ll punch them! The teachers won’t get so mad if I do it.”

It was said so seriously that Kyo couldn’t help but let out a snort, a genuine cackle escaping him.

“What? I could do it!”

Kyo laughed harder, but calmed when he saw the amusement was not shared by his friend. “It’s fine. It’s not your fault.”

The kid smiled. Kyo, somehow, found the energy to smile back.

The grip the kid had on his arm suddenly tightened and Kyo was drawn back again to that point of contact.

“Hey, what gives—”

“Kyo, do you like me?”

Kyo wrenched his arm back from the kid and stepped away. The kid looked nervous, but not undeterred.

“What?”

“Do you like me? It’s hard to tell with you sometimes. I want to know.”

The kid took a step towards him and Kyo refused to back away. He couldn’t tell what part of himself
was keeping him rooted but, God, he hoped it wasn’t the part that he controlled.

“You’re, um, alright.”

The kid reached his hand out again, but instead of gripping his arm he intertwined their fingers together. Kyo felt a shock go up his arm and into his chest. His heart pounded against every wall in his body, swaying him this way and that, as if trying to knock him down.

“Is this alright, too?”

Kyo couldn’t answer that. He didn’t even know how to speak. So, instead, the boy leaned forward and pressed his lips against his.

It was a brief moment, lips against lips for only a moment. Kyo felt like he was burning alive.

“Wh-what was that?” Kyo asked, when he pulled away. He was sure he looked as frightened as he felt, only being comforted by the red-hot blush and the stuttering nerves of the other boy.

“It was a kiss. I don’t, um, really know if I did it right. My sister has some magazines that teach you how to do it. W-With tongue. Um. And stuff.”

“Tongue?”

The kid nodded, and for the first time lifted his eyes to meet Kyo’s. “Want to try it?”

Kyo felt as though he might be frozen, as if nothing would move him again. But then the kid leaned in to kiss him again and immediately he felt himself melt. It was awkward and tentative, but when he felt the other’s tongue against his lips Kyo couldn’t do much but open his mouth in return.

Neither knew how to kiss, and Kyo felt their teeth bash together along with a groan of discomfort form the other, but Kyo had never felt any sensation like it. That part inside of him that kept him from running away was now beginning to respond.

And as soon as he did, he could feel the eagerness in the other boy.

It was overwhelming. This feeling had been unlike anything else he had ever experienced in his life. Since he was eight the only physical contact Kyo had known was fighting in the dojo, was kicking his leg up and thrusting his fist out and hoping that it made contact with flesh. Before that, sometimes his mother would kiss him briefly on the cheek before retreating to the other side of the house.

Shishou used to embrace him when he was a child, but that hadn’t happened in years.

And now… now the world felt so much warmer—hotter—intense and engulfing. It felt like the floor beneath Kyo would collapse and he would fall right after it. When the boy put a hand on his hip, it felt like people could break bones with their fingertips, and when he put his hand in his hair it felt like skin could peel like an orange.

When he licked his tongue against Kyo’s it felt like he could drown in another person. A saying that was usually said in novels and dramas in a way that was cliché and careless, but Kyo understood now that it meant you couldn’t breathe—you could die.

And suddenly the only thought in Kyo’s head was: *I’m going to transform.*

Kyo pushed the boy back so hard that he collided into the desks behind them, scraping them out of place.
They collected their breaths for a moment, but as soon as their gazes collided Kyo ran as if he were a snapped rubber band. His schoolbag left behind.

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Kyo screamed the entire way home.
The last thing he needed was another reason he was different.

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“I’m not going to tell anyone, if that’s what you’re worried about.”
It was the first thing said between them in three days, and Kyo wanted to flinch at every word.

It was the end of a lunch period and he had cornered him on the roof – blocking the door to go back into the main building. Kyo didn’t even want to look up at him. He didn’t even want to look at his shoes.

He didn’t say anything.

“You know, for someone who yells so much, you don’t have much to say, do you?” He sounded angry. He probably looked angry.

“S-Sor… I’m. I’m…” His voice was small, broken into tiny pieces, collecting sounds off the ground from sentences and sentiments people left behind. It wasn’t enough.

“On second thought, don’t say anything. It would just make it worse.”
Kyo chanced a look up. The kid was mad, but the heartbroken expression culminating in his welled up, angry eyes was what made it worse.

They didn’t speak again for the rest of middle school.

Kyo didn’t speak to many people for the rest of middle school.

He could barely even look at them.
“You're shivering, Kyo.”

That’s what Kazuma said when Kyo leaked all his anger out onto the snow. Whatever was left inside of him, he wasn’t sure what it was. But it left Kyo groggy and weary. He nodded dumbly when Kazuma urged him to go upstairs and change, and wanted to run when Kazuma told him to come back downstairs immediately afterwards.

So now, here he was. Sitting across Kazuma at the kitchen table with an ice pack pressed against his eye, and a throbbing in his head and side making it hard for him to make exaggerated movements. Not that he felt as though he could at the moment, anyway.

For the first time in a very long time, Kyo wondered if today would be the day Shishou kicked him out of the house.

“I’m not mad, Kyo,” he said. “Please don’t think that I would be angry at you for such a thing.”

Kyo couldn’t quite process the words, all he could do was clutch the ice pack harder against his eye. The dull pulse of pain that followed felt grounding.

“Will you look at me, please?”

With stuttered movements and anchored eyes, Kyo somehow found a way to drag his gaze up to Kazuma. Those sad, pitying eyes were back on him like hot coals on skin. Kyo’s first instinct, buried somewhere beneath a lifetime of fear that was just now being allowed to bloom, was the need to lash out and yell.

And then, the only thing he could think about was Yuki. Staring back at him with angry eyes on the pathway home.

“Kyo, do you feel sorry for me?”
“I don’t need you to do this,” Kyo said. “It’s fine. Just leave me alone.”

Kazuma sighed. “Not this time, Kyo. I fear I’ve been leaving you alone too often. But now it’s time to talk about this.”

Kyo steeled his jaw. “I don’t know what else there is to say.”

“Why don’t we start with Yuki.” Kyo’s blood went cold with the name, and he hoped it wasn’t showing on his face.

“What about Yuki?”

“He seems to have something to do with this. Why are you two so angry at each other?”

Kyo grumbled, “We’re always angry at each other.”

Kazuma let out a little laugh at that, a light sound against the somber mood. Kazuma didn’t speak further, however, waiting for Kyo to respond. It was enough to make Kyo look away again.

“He… Yuki… He knew. Kind of. He knew about me. I’m not sayin’ why, but he did.”

“Did you tell him, or did he find out on his own?” Kazuma asked.

Kyo clenched his fist. “He… found out.”

“I see,” Kazuma said. “How did that make you feel?”

Kyo gave an exhausted roll of his eyes, transferring the ice pack from his eye to where Yuki had headbutted him. He could feel a migraine starting to form. “What are you, my therapist now?”

“I’m asking because I’m trying to get to the bottom of what’s going on. I want you to be honest with me, and I want you to know that being open with another person is nothing of consequence.”

Kyo huffed at that.

“How did you feel about Yuki finding out?” Kazuma asked again, his gentle tone still attempting to soak up Kyo’s nerves.

“At first… I didn’t mind. I thought maybe,” Kyo swallowed. “I thought he got it. I thought… ‘yeah, this guy is a bastard, but maybe he’s not an asshole.’”

“What changed?”

Kyo’s mind flashed to Yuki walking down the hall with that girl. With rumors and gossip being passed around like candies. He thought of the way Yuki leaned into her and smiled.

I’m such an idiot.

“He lied to me,” Kyo said through clenched teeth. “He got me to feel all sorry for him… got me to say shit and he lied to me.”

Yuki loved him? Yeah right. Who knew what he was playing. Who knew what he was trying to do. Maybe Yuki was an asshole.

Kyo clutched his ice pack harder.
Whatever it was, Yuki was saying world-ending love confessions one day, and dating the world’s most ordinary girl the next. Whoever Kyo thought Yuki was in those months, in those moments, must have been something Yuki was working out of his system. This was Yuki’s real destiny staring Kyo back in the face. A girl. A family. A life. A future.

Kyo was stuck like this. Yuki could just shake Kyo off at his convenience.

And maybe it took months to realize, maybe too many moments alone in the dojo, or alone in his room, or alone in that now empty-feeling house, but Kyo didn’t want that.

Kyo didn’t want Yuki to shake him off.

Kyo didn’t want Yuki to move on.

His nails ripped into the plastic of the ice pack.

“I hate him,” Kyo said. He hated himself for feeling unfamiliar pinpricks behind his eyes. “This time, I really mean it.”

“I think it might be a good idea to talk to him,” Kazuma said. Kyo shook his head, but Kazuma gave a soft smile. “One day. It doesn’t have to be today.”

Kyo looked up at him and sniffed back whatever moisture was trying to collect against his eyelids.

“I wish you had told me sooner,” Kazuma tried. “Had I known this is what you were struggling with…”

“You didn’t need to know,” Kyo said. His voice felt small and cracked. “It doesn’t matter, anyway.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Kazuma’s voice turned sharp.

“It means that if I had any fucking luck at all in the world, no one would have needed to know any of this. I could have just been locked up in peace without anyone getting in my fucking business.”

“You keep saying things like this, as if you don’t even want to fight for your freedom. You deserve your own life, Kyo. You deserve love – no matter what form it’s in. Your being gay will never make me angry. But this, what you’re doing, this is what frustrates me.”

Kazuma reached forward to place a comforting hand over his, but just like so many years ago, it’s as if Kyo’s skin was peeled back revealing only an exposed nerve. Kyo flinched in Kazuma’s grip, but he held firm. “Please tell me you’ll fight for yourself.”

“Why?!”

“What do you mean why? Do you need a reason to want to be treated as a human being?!”

“Well what if I’m not one?!” Kyo slammed his fist on the table. “What future do I have? What future do you see me having if I’m not locked up? With this fucking… thing inside me. With this shit around my wrist!” Kyo held up the beads on his arm to accentuate the point. “And on top of all that… on top of all this bullshit I’m supposed to find a nice guy to live my life with? Don’t fucking kid yourself. I’m not gonna be that damn naïve.”

“Why is you living a happy and fulfilled life such a ridiculous fantasy?! Why do you present it as if it were impossible? You’re not even willing to try!”

“Because I know what will happen if I do!”
A heavy silence fell onto them. Kazuma’s hand not moving from Kyo.

“Kyo…”

“Shishou, look,” Kyo sighed. “I appreciate everything you’ve done for me. But people like you… they’re just good luck. That’s not how the fucking world is.”

Kyo’s hand felt cold, and it took a moment to realize that Kazuma had pulled away. Kyo wanted to hang his head in defeat, only to suddenly be swept up in Kazuma’s firm and tight embrace.

“I’m sorry,” Kazuma said, holding Kyo close. “I’m sorry for what this family has done to you.”

“Shishou—”

“Please don’t give up on this world. Please don’t give up on yourself. There’s a future out there waiting for you. I know this. It’s the only thing a parent can be sure of for their child.”

Kyo hugged back, burying his face into Kazuma’s shoulder.

For the first time, the tempting words of his Shishou were starting to break through and it was terrifying. The devil Kyo knew was a beast, a monster, an entity that called itself Sohma and had a single room waiting for him that Kyo could only describe as safe.

But the devil he didn’t know…

It seemed so far away, seducing him with impossible notions. With concepts Kyo couldn’t even wrap his head around.

*Is it even possible? To live that kind of life?*

“Promise me you’ll try, Kyo. Please.”

Kyo could only hold on tighter.

A frantic and harsh knock at the door pulled the two apart. Dazed, and with red eyes, the two looked towards the door as if not fully processing the sound.

“I wonder who that could be.”

Finally, Kazuma pulled himself off the floor, tousling Kyo’s hair as he did, and walked towards the entrance.

Kyo wiped at his eyes with his wrist, flinching when the sensitive bruised skin protested at the action. Kyo hissed and placed the ice pack back to his black eye.

“Well, if this isn’t a pleasant surprise,” Kyo heard Kazuma say at the sound of the door opening.

“Is Kyo here?”

“Right in the kitchen.”

The sound of soft little footsteps carried over into the room and when Kyo looked up, Tohru was looking back down. Her breaths were coming out in huffs, and her face was red from the cold and whipping winds.

“Tоhru, what are you doing here? Did you run here?”
“Haru said I needed to come here immediately! He said you were hurt!”

“Haru did?”

Tohru frantically nodded, sitting in front of him and dumping the contents of her bag out onto the floor. The hardwood flooded with first-aid.

“You know, Tohru, we have plenty of first-aid here,” Kazuma said, a bright smile beaming through.

“I just wasn’t sure! I brought everything I could find at home!”

“Why don’t I make you two some tea,” Kazuma offered, laughing amiably as he excused himself into the kitchen.

Kyo watched as Tohru fumbled with a bottle of antiseptic, murmuring to herself frantic little sayings as she attempted to collect herself. Kyo couldn’t help but let out a small huff of laughter, himself.

“You didn’t have to come all the way out here, Tohru.”

“Of course I did!” She said, immediately. “Plus, Haru said you needed somebody!”

Kyo let out a rough sigh and rubbed at his mouth, “Jeez, what’s gotten into that dumb cow.”

The shuffling stopped, Kyo peered at Tohru.

“Was he right? Do you need somebody?”

Kyo could feel the threat of tears once more and shook his head violently at the situation. It was as if his system was completely thrown off balance. Every emotion spiked through him like vertigo.

“Well, you’re here now anyway.”

Tohru smiled, “Where does it hurt?”

Kyo rolled his eyes, “Everywhere. He beat the shit out of me.”

“…Haru did?”

“No!” Kyo said, offended at even the idea that Haru could land a punch on him. “Yuki did.”

“Oh,” Tohru said, her voice suddenly small. “I thought you two weren’t talking.”

“Fighting ain’t talking.”

“Right.” Tohru put a gentle hand on Kyo’s arm. “You’re all scratched up.”

Kyo twisted his arm to look at it, he hadn’t even realized. “Must’ve been when I landed through the door.”

Without another word, Tohru put a dab of antiseptic onto her fingers and began rubbing it into the small cuts on Kyo’s arm. It stung, but Kyo hardly reacted at all. He stayed silent as Tohru patched him up. Halfway through putting a band-aid on his arm, she spoke.

“One of my first memories of you two is when Yuki sent you flying through the door in Shigure’s house.”

“Don’t remind me,” Kyo groaned.
Tohru let out a soft chuckle, “I was so scared. I thought you might have died!”

“That rat couldn’t kill me if he tried.”

“I know.”

Kyo peered down at Tohru, who gave him an earnest look in return. A moment passed just like that, and Kyo felt that sharp spike of fear course through him, the one that had been lying dormant under his skin until today.

Kyo was the first to look away.

Tohru took a moment before she spoke again, “Sometimes I miss when you two would fight. I know that probably seems selfish, but I liked knowing that you two were acknowledging the other in your world. I know that’s… sometimes not easy. For either of you.

“I know there’s not much that I can do for you to help. I… I know it’s not my business, and I know that it’s something that I’m sure is… very complicated. But I made a decision this year.”

Kyo could feel Tohru’s gaze burning through him, drawing his eyes to hers like a magnet. That dedicated look of sincerity was so familiar now. In that moment, no one in the world was stronger than Tohru. Especially in comparison to him.

“Alright, alright,” Kyo said instead. “What’s the decision?”

“We’re not going to spend New Year’s together. I’m going to go to Hana’s house for the holiday. The three of us are going to spend the new year separately.”

Kyo stared at her, a curl of disappointment refusing to show on his face.

“Things are different from when we were fifteen. In that first year, on the roof with you two, I thought I wanted to spend every beginning of the year with you two for the rest of my life. But this year, I’m going to wish for something different. When the sun comes up, I’m going to wish that we can all end the year together instead.”

Kyo curled his fist on the ground, the thought of that room coming into his mind again. Tohru interrupted the thought.


Kyo stared back at her in disbelief, but Tohru simply smiled and continued to patch up his arm. After a moment, he nodded. It was a slight movement that was barely there, but it caught Tohru’s attention enough to stop her movements.

“You,” Kyo paused. “Me and Yuki.”

Yuki sneezed.

“That means someone’s talking about you, you know,” Machi said, popping her head into the living room. Yuki let out a little groan at the clogged up feeling in his nostrils.
“Or that I have a terrible immune system,” Yuki said. Then quieter, “I’m such an idiot.”

“I have tea coming,” Machi said from the kitchen of her apartment.

Yuki stared at his ankle propped up on the table. It was what Hatori told him to do two days ago over the phone (Haru had forced the phone against his ear). He hadn’t noticed Kyo had bent it funny in the moment, but the fall from the balcony onto the snow has twisted it unpleasantly.

Even with his foot elevated, and tea and cold medicine filling up his pores, it still didn’t help with the side effects that came with such direct contact with Kyo.

Yuki wiggled his toes and a sore swell of pain followed. Kyo was all he could think about. Maybe that would never change, so long as he lived. Yuki gave a wry smile at the thought.

“Maybe this is a good thing,” Machi said as she entered the kitchen. “If you can’t stand, you can’t help me in the kitchen.”

“And you can’t cook all that food by yourself,” Yuki said, smiling.

“So take-out it is.”

The two nodded to each other in agreement. Yuki took the cup up to his lips and took a sip.

“When do you have to leave to go to your family’s?” Machi asked.

“Tomorrow afternoon at the latest. The head of our family made it very clear to me that he wanted me there for the entirety of the festivities this year.”

“Do you usually not go?”

“No,” Yuki said. “No, I usually do. It’s just… these past couple years have been very different for me. I was hoping it would stay that way.”

Machi took a sip of her own tea, “It’s silly to want change to stay the same.”

Yuki laughed, “Sometimes I think you don’t realize how wise you really are.”

“Am I?” Machi asked, dryly. “Maybe you’re just simple-minded.”

Yuki laughed again and Machi gave a smile. A knock suddenly burst through the room.

“That must be the take-out, I’ll get it,” Yuki said, wincing as he stood up.

“I don’t think you should be moving around,” Machi said.

“If I don’t move around, I’ll go crazy.” Yuki walked with a slight limp to the door, greeting the deliveryman and paying for the food they ordered. Machi watched, as if waiting for Yuki to fall, and then followed him back into the living room.

“I still can’t imagine you being in a fist fight,” Machi said. “You don’t seem the type.”

“I trained in karate since I was 10.”

“That’s different. There’s a difference between sparring and getting in a fight. Kakeru took karate for three years, I don’t think he would last against anyone in a fight.”
“He does have terrible reflexes,” Yuki said. “I wouldn’t worry about it. It’s a lot more common than you would think.”

“Is that supposed to make me worry less?”

Yuki took a moment to think, “For some reason, I thought it was.”

Machi sighed, but didn’t say another word as she opened the bag of food.

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Yuki couldn’t quite explain it either.

He breathed in the tobacco deep on the patio. His stomach was still a bit sore when it expanded to let the smoke into his body, but it felt cathartic to let it stretch under the nicotine. It was late, but the one patio light lit his breath as it was released and Yuki watched it leave.

Machi was asleep in her room—had been for a while—but Yuki hadn’t been able to sleep for the past two days.

That shouldn’t have been strange, Yuki had become a light sleeper in these last few months. Even curled up on Machi’s futon, or Haru’s couch, or Kakeru’s floor, sleep evaded him a full rest for too long a time now.

But this was different. Yuki felt alert. As if the sun never even set.

The past two nights were spent in his journal under his cell phone light, attempting to piece together his thoughts. Attempting to piece together why his rage had settled into something so uncomfortable. Something was lodged in his chest, and all Yuki could say was that it felt as though it was the shape of Kyo’s fist.

So, Yuki smoked.

His weight leaning on his good leg, the cold grazing his skin like a razor.

Yuki knew he was angry, he was absolutely enraged when Kyo approached Machi – tried to bulldoze his way into this safe nest Yuki created for himself. He knew he should still be angry, and he wanted to be. Whatever irrational fire that dragged him to the dojo was one he wanted to last, to keep fanning. He wanted it to grow to such boundless lengths that it burned up any other feeling Yuki had inside him – just like what Kyo did to him.

Sadly, that just wasn’t the case. Because all Yuki could think about when their fists collided with each other, when they met each other like a strike of thunder, was how much he missed Kyo.

Yuki convinced himself that staying away from the house was the only way he would heal, the only way he could move on. Being near Kyo was too taxing, too emotional. It hurt. And Yuki responded in the only way he knew how – to run away. To divorce himself from a lifestyle he had cherished between that broken little family in that house.

He thought it was the only way.

But Kyo wrapped his arms around Yuki and punched blindly. Yuki had done the same.
The contact high of being so close to Kyo again, it nearly broke down whatever shaky foundation Yuki presumably built as he was hiding away in unknown home to unknown home.

Quickly, Yuki intruded the thought on himself that that was exactly why he was staying away. Kyo was a weapon so intricately designed to attack Yuki. He had done the right thing. He did what he could to keep his head above water.

Yuki flicked the cigarette out onto the street below and quickly grabbed another from his dwindling pack. The accompanying matchbook that he kept inside the carton revealed itself to be empty and Yuki sighed. He searched his pockets for another, his lips formed around the unlit cigarette. Nothing.

Yuki groaned and entered the apartment again as quietly as possible. He crouched next to the extra laid-out futon and searched his haphazardly laid out uniform pants, pleased when he felt his fingers collide with something there.

Yuki pulled the offending item out, but frowned when it revealed itself to be a crumpled-up piece of paper. He stepped back outside to catch the light from the patio and unfolded it, curiosity now piqued.

A wave of regret flooded him.

There, wrinkled and tattered on one of Yuki’s journal pages was just one word.

*Kyo.*

Yuki swayed where he stood, remembering the encounter he had with the cage at the main house. Remembering how sick he felt inside. Remembering that he had seen the place where Kyo spend the rest of his days.

In just a few months Kyo was getting locked up, Yuki would never see him again. And here he was, cutting Kyo out of his life, expediting a process. Keeping Kyo away. Kyo said he hadn’t hated him. Kyo stopped their physical intimacy because he *cared* about Yuki.

And Yuki ran away.

Yuki felt like pressure was building up in him, and punched the patio railing before pacing around the small, confined space.

What was he doing here?

What was this emotional warpath Yuki was on? A tornado that was bringing in people he loved and cared about. First Kyo, then Haru, then Kakeru, now Machi.

Machi.

God, he was an idiot.

He’d admit that a life with Machi was tempting for a multitude of dishonest reasons – the escape, the distance, the denial of who he was and what he wanted. This poor girl who liked him romantically – said as much – and still let Yuki’s indecision into her life.

Suddenly, Yuki felt very sheepish and very immature.

This wasn’t the love he wanted to give. This wasn’t who he wanted to be.

It hurt, of course it hurt, but with how much he said he loved Kyo why hadn’t he been there for him?
Yuki gripped the railing, and tossed the full cigarette in his mouth off the patio. He hung his head. He made his decision.

*I’m not going to stop loving him.*

*But I’m going to do it right this time.*

No response.

Yuki clamped his eyes shut, and let his body scream it.

*I love him.*

*I love Kyo.*

*I don’t care what you have to say about it.*

Yuki opened his eyes again. The world unchanged, and the night just as still. Yuki let out a shaky breath that caught in his throat.

Yuki coughed.

It was small, like drinking water and having it go down a throat the wrong way. Yuki tried to dismiss it.

He coughed again. Then again.

Yuki brought his elbow up to his mouth to conceal the sound, but what started as small, now felt like inflamed tears inside his lungs. His stomach began to act up, and he felt light-headed. He was going to vomit.

Quickly, he rushed back into the apartment, tripping over the coffee table and hearing something fall to the floor. He slammed the bathroom door shut and was sure to lock the door.

Immediately he coughed his vomit into the toilet, hunching over as his stomach released all the food he had eaten for the night in sour chunks that made his throat burn more than it was. He coughed and choked as it was all released, his lungs burning, his head falling into a vertigo that made him dizzy with each hack.

*I know what you’re doing.*

*You can’t get rid of me that easily!*

Yuki thought angrily to himself, he clutched the edge of the toilet as his body regurgitated spit and stomach acid, gagging and coughing. His face felt hot, and he could feel himself begin to hyperventilate.

He fell to the ground, hoping the tile would cool his cheek as his body continued to try and purge him.

Yuki heard a knock at the door and a new wave of panic followed him.

“Yuki, are you okay?”

*No, no no, please don’t. Please. Please.*
“Machi! Don’t come in!” His sentence was flared with another coughing fit, pains in his stomach began to feel like stab wounds. His head was pounding, and his skin was breaking out in sweat.

“Yuki! What’s going on? Are you sick?”

He could hear the worry in her voice, he could hear her continue to knock.

Yuki closed his eyes, tried to dig his nails into his skin as if that would stop the inevitable from happening. He and the rat both knew one thing: there was only room for one kind-hearted girl in this family to know their secret.

“Machi!” Her name was broken up by a gag, his stomach trying to turn itself inside out with nothing else inside. “G-Get my cell—” another stream of spit and acid forced itself from his mouth. “Call Hatori!”

He could hear Machi’s footsteps running quickly away, could distantly hear her voice through the door. Could hear her knocking and yelling things, but Yuki couldn’t bring himself to focus on any of it.

His hair was matted with sweat, his whole body was beginning to hurt, stabs of pain through his ankle, up into his legs, his back, his stomach, his throat, mouth, and head. His arms were rigid and tight, holding himself together as he shivered. His body was trying to shut down, trying to let unconsciousness tempt him so that the other could take over.

*Is this what we do when we don’t get what we want?* Yuki thought. *Throw a fit?*

He could feel the spirit inside him bristle, its claws sinking into the blood and flesh of Yuki’s insides and scraping, clawing into broken strips of nothing. He coughed up, his throat roaring angrily each time he did, and every part of his body felt as though it was on fire.

His body demanded he sleep, demand that he let himself heal from the damage it was doing to itself, demanded Yuki to be weak. Yuki banged his head against the wall and, with gritted teeth and horrendous effort, lifted his bad leg up into the air and slammed it back down against the ground hard.

Yuki cried out in pain, jolts forming from his leg up into his scalp, forming as an alarm system.

“Yuki!” Machi’s voice was clear again, but this time he could hear something else. A knocker that was firmer, harsher. A deep voice was calling out to him. Maybe two. But Yuki couldn’t make anything out.

“Yu--! Un—ck …! C—you… YUKI!”

He could feel himself drifting again, his eyes starting to droop, wanting to escape the spikes of pain and fire, but Yuki lifted his leg again and slammed it down once more. He cried out again.

And this time he was awake enough to hear a pounding against the door. Panic washed through him, he was hyperventilating again, his breaths coming out faster than his words.

“No, no no no! No! Stay out! Don’t come in! Stay out!” Yuki demanded between breaths but it was fruitless. The pounding on the door kept coming and coming up he could hear a violent *crack* of the door being broken open.

“Yuki!”
Big yellow eyes and tendrils of silver hair filled his vision.

Ayame.

“Yuki, we came to get you,” another voice said. Hatori.

Yuki coughed in response, shaking his head as he clutched onto the sleeve of his brother who was attempting to help him up.

“D-Don’t—Don’t let her see me. Please. Please. Please. Don’t—She can’t know. Please. Please, please. No, no, no.”

His body was being lifted, Hatori on one side and Ayame on the other. His body limp and unable to move on its own.

“Hatori, please,” he said between labored breaths. “Not her, too.”

“He’s shaking.”

“What do we do?!?”

“Calm down, just get him to the car.”

“Yuki, hold on, dear brother! We’re going to get you help!”

“Is he going to be okay?!?”

Yuki felt his body lay down, the shakes and shivers convulsing him sending new shocks of pain from his ankle, head, and chest. He was still clutching onto his brother’s pants, distantly realizing his head was laying in his lap.

Yuki heard the sound of cars doors close, and the roar of an engine underneath his body.

“Please, she can’t know.”

Something grabbed his hand, the cool skin felt nice against his feverish skin.

“We’ve left, Yuki. It’s okay. She’s not here.”

“She’s not?” Yuki asked, delirious and half asleep.

“You’re safe.”

His body collapsed.

It was the last thing he remembered before the car was filled with a puff of smoke, empty clothes, and a sleeping rat on Ayame’s lap.

Chapter End Notes

I honestly can’t believe that people are still following and reading this. It really brightens my day more than you could know. With this chapter, this season has finished. I hope to get the next one out as soon as possible!
Thank you, you beautiful readers!
It started with the scream of a maid.

Or screams if Atsukane had to describe it. One screech wouldn’t have been heard so far away from
the main estate, especially in some place as isolated as the cat’s quarters. Instead, what greeted Atsukane—and the rest of the household before the sun had been given the chance to rise—were long continuous throaty, scratchy shrieks.

The music of the New Year’s celebration was brought to an abrupt stop. It felt as though every person in the estate stopped to raise their ears to the sudden sound.

Atsukane, head of the family and god of the zodiac at the young age of 19, did his best not to interpret the sound as the bad omen it was.

Atsukane followed the hysterical maid up the hill, through the pathway of overgrown bushes on a walkway hidden by the heavy fall of snow from the nights previous. Followed by maids, guards, and Isao, the dragon. The sight laid before them.

Hiromoro, Atsukane’s beloved friend, laid out on the floor of the cat’s cage. Blood pooling and seeping through the wooden and unkempt floor.

Hiromoro, the rat, half dead in a sick of his own blood.

The cat, nowhere to be seen.

_____________________

The first entry isn’t of words, but of letters.

Sloppy curves of the alphabet litter the page — doing their best to form a neat, straight line. The bulky, clumsy script tilts awkwardly as it’s written. On the opposite page, a neater script mirrors the practice. It sets an example that is being followed by a blundering hand.

Eventually, with the letters all placed in order, words begin to sprout like seedlings in spring. Scattered in no real order. Pages and pages filled with nonsensical words.

Window
Day
Night
Sun
Rain
Bamboo
Rice
Cold
Cage
Mother
Cat

Then, finally, written again and again with deliberate repetition:

Yahiko.

(1807)

_____________________

Hiromoro looked so helpless on the bed. It was a sight that Atsukane could barely stand to watch. Yet, it didn’t seem right to turn his head away as Isao went through the motions of inspecting each injury on the man’s body. A deep, jagged cut sliced across Hiromoro’s torso was being covered by
bandages. Along with another cut, not so deep, but still just as ghastly, marring his shoulder.

The cuts would surely scar once the rat healed, and it broke Atsukane’s heart — the thought of Hiromoro’s milk-smooth skin being disturbed so violently when it was nothing but flawless and untouchable growing up.

It made him sick, to think of the ways that the cat’s claws would slice through skin like a knife through raw dough. The thought itself sent shivers through his whole body.

“I’ll kill him,” Atsukane muttered. “I’ll kill that cat for what he’s done.”

Isao hummed passively, a clear sign of the doubts he’d always harbored against Atsukane. But the god didn’t say anything, merely glaring at the older man. Isao was nearly seventeen years older, the oldest of the current generation of zodiac, and was not shy in flaunting his wisdom over the younger zodiacs as a disappointed parent might.

“One of these injuries didn’t come from the cat,” Isao said, still focusing on his work.

“What? How can that be?”

Isao motioned to the cut on Hiromoro’s shoulder, the less lethal of the two. Atsukane followed the path of it to where it stopped short of the larger slice of skin, finally covered properly by Isao’s bandages.

“When we brought him here from the cat’s quarters his shoulder had already been wrapped. Someone tended to the injury. Not well, but it was still clearly bandaged.”

“That could still be the fault of that cat,” Atsukane said the word like a curse.

“The beast rampaged, injured Hiromoro’s shoulder, allowed him to find help to tend to it, then sliced open his stomach? The cat really is as unintelligent as they say.”

Atsukane huffed at the sarcastic tone.

“Did he seem to be in pain at the banquet?” Isao asked. “He could have been hiding the injury during the New Year’s celebration.”

“Hiro tells me everything—I would have—” Atsukane stopped, tone sinking from a natural confidence, to heavy and pained. “I want to believe he would have told me if something happened.”

Atsukane looking over his friend with fraught, desperate eyes. It must have cracked through Isao’s rare empathy, because when he spoke again with a sigh, the undercurrent of his words was reassuring.

“He broke his high fever this morning, which should be good news. He should regain consciousness soon. You can ask him what happened, then.”

“How can you be so sure he’ll wake up?”

“Usually, when a zodiac undergoes something traumatic, they retreat into themselves until they can heal from the physical strain. Despite the injuries, Hiromoro has not transformed. It’s a sign he must not be as ill as we believe.”

Atsukane looked passed Isao to give his friend a worried glance, spotting how pale and ghastly he appeared. No matter the broken fever, no matter the cleaned and healing wounds of the man,
Hiromoro still looked as though he was knocking on the door of death.

“Hiromoro has a weak psyche. He’s always been more easily susceptible to trauma and the like, but his mind must not be convinced of his body’s current fragility. It’s a promising sign. He should awaken after a few days.”

“A few days?”

“If I had to guess.”

Atsukane paused, tracing his fingers over his friend’s hand with furrowed brows, “Is there nothing we can do to wake him sooner?”

Isao looked up to give Atsukane a wearied expression, pinning him with his icy green eyes — all sympathy evaporated from his features.

“What?”

“If only you could hear yourself, Atsukane. Maybe then you would know what you sounded like.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means that I cannot wake Hiromoro according to your schedule. The fact that you still plan to go abroad after everything is beyond irresponsible.”

“I never asked you to do such a thing!”

“I’ve known you since you were a child, and I know you keep your selfishness as a close companion in your heart.”

“I’d rather not be accused of anything with my friend lying near-dead right before my feet, Isao!”

“Just as I would rather have a god that cared at all for the affairs of this family. Not whatever foolishness you think you’ll find overseas.”

“We made a compromise. I’ll only be gone for a year, if you remember,” Atsukane’s words were sour on his tongue. “Or would you rather I follow Goichi’s example? Perhaps I should kill a man to grant myself the freedom to leave?”

Isao gave him a harsh look at the statement.

“That compromise was made before Hiromoro was almost murdered and the cat escaped from its cage. Is your nose so upturned that you can’t even see how needed you are?”

Atsukane flinched away from the familiar scolding, bringing his eyes back to Hiromoro. It hurt to see him like this, his heart weighed down heavily by the sight of his pale flesh, and his usually silky and beautiful silver locks clumped and dull in a tie.

They weren’t brothers by mother or father, but by bond, by love, it was the closest to a sibling Atsukane would ever wish for. And now, here he was, and Atsukane didn’t need to be told how terrible a person he was for having these feelings of still wanting to leave—of his heart being pulled by strings away from Hiromoro’s side and out of these locked, gated walls.

Atsukane took Hiromoro’s hand into his own and squeezed.

“I asked him to come with me,” Atsukane whispered. “To Holland. I wanted him to accompany
“This is the first I’ve heard of this,” Isao grunted.

“Because he refused,” Atsukane’s eyes narrowed.

“Not surprising. Hiromoro doesn’t strike me as having the disposition for travel. He’s hardly ever left the estate, and you asked him to leave the country?”

“He was changing. He was becoming curious — I thought he was ready to embrace the larger world.”

Isao snorted. Atsukane whipped his harsh gaze to the dragon.

“Hiro deserves to know more than this stifling family with its hidden monsters.”

“It’s only been under your authority that a cat has escaped - something unheard of by any other god. Perhaps what Hiromoro deserves is your protection, as half-hearted as it is.”

“Why are you so cruel to me lately?” Atsukane asked.

“Why are you so childish lately?”

“Why am I so childish to want to live a life outside of twenty foot walls? Can’t I ask to experience a world beyond what the Sohmas expect? Can I be nothing else but a deity? Can’t I simply be a man? If only for a little?”

Isao pondered a moment before responding, “No.”

Isao stood, walking to his chest of herbs and medicines and pulled out a pipe. Isao lit it with a long match as Atsukane kept his eyes narrowed on the dragon.

“No, you cannot be just a man. You were born into this curse like the rest of the spirits. The fact that you do not transform into an animal when hugged by the opposite sex does not abstain you from the responsibilities that come with this position. The zodiac look for guidance and leadership. They look for someone who will care for them when dark times surely come. Your grandfather understood that.”

“My grandfather was a cruel, unstable man. He used his fist before his words. Who would want that sort of leadership?”

“Perhaps you were too far removed from certain tragedies of this family, Atsukane. Your youth makes you sloppy and deviant. I don’t believe you understand what you turn away from.”

Atsukane rolled his eyes, simmering in the silence that always shrouded the dragon doctor’s presence. Atsukane took another long moment to stare at Hiromoro’s shut eyelids. There was a tension there that wouldn’t dissipate. As if he didn’t know that his attack had ceased—as if he didn’t know he was safe.

A slide of the door turned their attention to a maid, bowing from her kneeling position. “Master Atsukane, Master Isao — Young Master Mitsuhide wishes to pay his respects.”

“You say that as if Hiro’s already dead,” Atsukane hissed.

“It’s alright, send him in,” Isao responded. The maid said nothing more but shut the door to follow orders. “That boy has an attachment to Hiromoro, I’m sure he just wants to make sure he’s alright.”
Atsukane hummed absently as the door opened again, this time revealing a young boy — no more than ten years of age — but with oddly sharp, intellectual features for someone whose face was still trying to catch up.

Mitsuhide, the young dog child, bowed deeply before shuffling next to Atsukane by the bedding to observe the distressed and sleeping rat spirit.

“Will he die?” Mitsuhide asked in an even tone. His somber eyes scanned the length of Hiromoro’s bandages, of the single slice of blood that still stained through.

“He should regain consciousness soon.”

“It must be difficult to see Hiromoro in such a way,” Atsukane said, taking sympathy on the child.

“I hope he recovers soon,” Mitsuhide affirmed. His eyes turned to Atsukane, “Are you still going on your voyage?”

Isao eyed Atsukane over the young boy’s head, disapproving glance striking Atsukane like a bell.

“I don’t intend on leaving until I find that cat monster,” Atsukane said, more to Isao than to Mitsuhide’s young, questioning gaze. “I’m fully aware of what a risk it is to have that thing be loose in the city—even with the beads.”

Isao looked at him, unconvinced.

“But that won’t be for awhile, will it?” Mitsuhide asked, and Atsukane felt irritation billow at the young boy’s unfittingly apathetic tone. “He’s gone into hiding. I bet he’s gone forever.”

“It’s an unhinged monster parading in human flesh—and that’s if it’s still in possession of the beads. It has no literacy, no intelligence, no manageable skills, and it’s never once been exposed to the outside world. The cat won’t be difficult to find. I’d be surprised if it made it past the walls of Sohma House.”

“And you won’t leave until the matter is settled?” Isao asked, eyebrow raised.

“Of course not,” Atsukane said, lifting himself up to leave. “But as soon as this is all put to rest, there is nothing you can do to keep me from boarding that ship to Holland.”

Isao narrowed his eyes into a glare, and Atsukane didn’t look away. Even as he felt the young dog observing the scene between the two men carefully.

“If the family cannot handle my absence for a year, then we’re in far bigger trouble than even my undivided attention could solve.”

“If you would pay attention, Master Atsukane, the family can barely manage to handle itself with you present.”

Atsukane didn’t regard that with a response, walking out the door with one last final glare thrown over his shoulder. The door shut softly behind him, courtesy of the maid, and Isao sighed as he looked back at Mitsuhide staring intently at Hiromoro’s injuries.

“This is probably not a sight for a child.” Isao approached Hiromoro to close his robes, finally dragging Mitsuhide’s attention to the dragon, instead.

“I’m not frightened,” Mitsuhide said.
“Why don’t you run along? It’s best to leave Hiromoro to rest.”

Mitsuhide’s mouth scrunched in consideration, as if he were chewing on the words. “Will you tell me when he’s awake?”

“Of course,” Isao said, granting the boy a soft smile that was not returned.

I’m starting to feel better. Mother says my body will feel normal soon. My skin still hurts a little. And sometimes I start crying and I don’t know why. I thought it was because it hurt so much. Now I think it’s because he’s sad inside of me. I don’t think he likes it when people are afraid of him. Master Asukane looked really really afraid.

Mother has been rubbing green goop on my arms to make it hurt less. I think it’s working. She said it’s from plants in the mountains and that’s why it’s green. The only thing I see from here are plants. I asked why she couldn’t use those and she said they weren’t the right ones.

Does that mean all plants are green? That would be really boring. When I go outside, all the plants will be different colors. And people will wear them like hair to be fancy. Mother will wear one that’s red. Because that color is the most be-comming on her. We’ll eat fish that we grab right from the ocean with our own hands. That way we know it is fresh!

-Yahiko

(1812)

Mitsuhide skipped from stone to stone on the decorative path in the garden — through only the rock faces were visible through the thick layer of snow covering the ground. His wooden sandals clacked against each rock as he jumped, making soft little noises when he landed in subtle, childish activity.

On the final stone, he slipped slightly, catching himself on one foot before he let out a small cry. Regardless, as if sensing his brief distress, a young pup came running through the snow — wagging its tail happily as he stared up at Mitsuhide.

His expression didn’t break often, not since his mother had gotten sick, but the young dog child found himself smiling slightly as he kneeled down to greet the dog, its tongue coming out in friendly licks over Mitsuhide’s chin.

“I’m okay,” he reassured, softly. Then, with his smile gone, “Where is he?”

The pup gave a quick, energetic bark before trotting away, looking over its shoulder to make sure Mitsuhide was following.

He did, trailing through the gardens so that the hem of his robes at his feet started seeping melted snow in a dark patch. He kept pace until a clearing of sparse trees broke to reveal a frozen pond.

A man stood on the what-would-be-shore, kicking snow with his sandal like a child might, though he was closer to thirty in age.

Goichi, the boar, had a hardened face, and a stature just short of being stout — years of physical training formed him into an intimidating hill, a far cry from the terrifying mountain of his father. His large, burly figure was complimented by simple, passionate expressions. As if his face was the
rushing tide of the ocean, crashing, overwhelming, and singular in its complexity.

He gave a rough grunt when he saw Mitsuhide stroll to join him, sitting on the disturbed pile of snow at his side as the pup panted happily, seeking affection in Mitsuhide’s lap.

“You’re bothering me,” Goichi gruffed. “I told you not to do that.”

“I’m not doing anything,” Mitsuhide hummed impassively. “Can’t I greet my uncle?”

“You’ve always been tricky,” Goichi eyed him suspiciously. “I don’t want greetings from troublesome kids.”

“Then I won’t greet you,” Mitsuhide relented. Instead, he looked up at Goichi, blank expression searching and curious, and said this:

“Did you do it?”

Goichi rose his foot, digging the slats of his wooden sandals into Mitsuhide’s side and roughly shoving him to the ground. Mitsuhide gave a yelp of surprise, crying out further when his head harshly hit the ground padded by snow. The pup barked frantically and loudly at Goichi in response. Goichi rose a fist to the animal only for Mitsuhide’s words to cut his swing short.

“If you hit him I’ll call for his mother,” Mitsuhide glared, only now properly pouting like a child. “She has very sharp teeth. And a quick temper. Like you, uncle.”

Goichi glared, but his fist slowly fell back to his side, “That’s what you get. You’ve disrespected me by accusing me of a cat’s crime!”

“If you didn’t do it you shouldn’t get so angry,” Mitsuhide stood, wiping the snow off his robe. He was careful not to stand too close, and the pup by his feet half hid, and half snarled from the boar.

“I get angry around petulant children,” Goichi snarled.

“You get angry around everything,” Mitsuhide said back, crossing his arms. “Hiromoro’s going to wake up, you know. If you’re lying they’ll find out.”

“Hiromoro has always been a wisp of a man. He won’t survive another night.”

“That seems like a threat.”

“It doesn’t matter what it seems like. Keep to your own affairs and maybe you won’t end up in any trouble.”

“Hiromoro’s affairs are mine too, now,” Mitsuhide smiled, feigning innocence to his uncle who didn’t fall for the act even for a moment. “Since we’re such close friends.”

Goichi let out a bark of a laugh, sardonic and surly. “You’re the one more suited to be a rat.”

“If I’m such a rat I wouldn’t be warning you.”

Goichi took another heavy stride towards Mitsuhide who immediately skirted back, shoulders tensing in response to a strike, dog growling at his feet — but still he kept his expression even.

“If you say such a thing again—”

“If not me, someone else,” Mitsuhide took another step backwards. “Do you know how many
fingers a cat has?”

Goichi’s gave an angry and stumped expression, “I hate riddles.”

“Riddles sharpen the mind, you shouldn’t turn down the opportunity. Especially since you’re trying so hard to court Hisame.” Mitsuhide lifted a fist at Goichi’s growl. “Cats have,” he raised a finger as he said in time, “One, two, three, four, five fingers.”

“What does that—”

Mitsuhide curled his fingers like a claw and struck the air lazily as if scratching it.

“Next question: How many fingers does your dagger have?”

Goichi’s eyes widened, absentmindedly patting where his sheath normally rested at his hip—but today was nothing but absent space.

“Final riddle: Guess how many claw marks are on Hiromoro.”

The Sohma family had many members in high places. Their name, their wealth, their position—it all lead to good fortune for its members, despite the never-fading rumors of how strange and peculiar the family was.

Isao could have been a doctor overseas, or somewhere deep in the capital, perhaps even working among the emperor and his family. But he, just like all the other dragons before him, always chose to stay among the Sohmas and fulfill his unspoken contract to the family.

Deep in his heart, Atsukane knew he couldn’t respect the decision. Those who were able to go further, past the walls, to develop their own lives and careers as if the curse didn’t even exist—that was always something Atsukane cherished in other zodiacs. It was something through which he could live vicariously.

It was one aspect of Hiromoro he could never accept. Atsukane could never comprehend why Hiromoro trapped himself in this house and among these people when he had the intelligence to go so far beyond. Atsukane wished he could understand the fear that always seemed to arrest Hiromoro at even the mention of the outside world. But Hiromoro kept his heart locked away, even from his god—from his best friend. As if to open up what was inside of himself would cause the pieces of his body to collapse in a heap. In that sense, Isao was correct—Hiromoro always had a weak mentality, and had always been somewhat sensitive.

It was also why Atsukane and Naruse enjoyed each other’s company as much as they did.

Naruse was the monkey spirit. He was a man five years older than Atsukane with a devious glint behind his eyes. Naruse had a charm about him that was alluring, but could be almost cruel in his blunt honesty. Atsukane found him amusing, found him to be an unofficial mouthpiece for what he was thinking most days. Even if he was a man who could only be handled in small doses.

Naruse’s sharp wit didn’t make up for his lazy, careless attitude, however. Yet, regardless, he managed to secure himself a comfortable position working as a police chief within the city. Naruse used the title as an actor might use a stage name, allowing himself to indulge freely in liquor and gambling undisturbed.

He was deviant, but he was free. And considering that Atsukane couldn’t ask the assistance of true
investigators, Naruse would have to do.

The cat’s cage was not somewhere Atsukane liked to frequent. In fact, when he walked the snow covered stone path with Naruse by his side, he realized it had been years since he last came to see the cat at all. If not for everything that happened in the past few days, he wondered if he would have ever come to visit this place again.

“When I heard about it, I couldn’t believe it. And now that I’m standing here, I still can’t believe it,” Naruse whistled. Atsukane felt itchy just being here.

“Do you think you can find it?” Atsukane asked.

“What? The cat?” Naruse laughed, “Of course I can.”

“But can you do it quickly?”

The monkey eyed Atsukane, giving him an amused look.

“That eager to learn a little Dutch, are you?”

“Among other things,” Atsukane mumbled as Naruse stepped forward to examine the area, his sword hanging casually at his waist.

The two took the opportunity to wander around the space. The walls were worn with disrepair, wood curdling from years of humidity and neglect. Other than Hiromoro’s blood and vomit that stained the main living area—now a dull, sickly scabbing color, the floors were clean but dingy and worn. The furniture was scarce, just a table and a potted plant in the corner that looked well taken care of, despite the cold air. And, other than the table being shifted from its center in the room, not much seemed disturbed.

“It’s not very smart, I imagine. I’m sure we’ll be able to find it soon enough.” Naruse quickly cut through Atsukane’s thoughts.

“Doesn’t something seem strange about this place?” Atsukane asked, feeling a tug at his stomach.

“It’s the cage. Of course it feels strange,” Naruse said easily.

“No, no, something else.” Atsukane shook his head. Naruse tilted his head in amusement. “We keep assuming that the cat transformed.”

“Obviously.” Naruse waved a flippant hand.

“What else could account for Hiromoro’s injuries?” Naruse shrugged.

“Not all of them,” Atsukane sighed.

“Oh?”

“Isao said one of Hiro’s injuries had already been tended to before he was found.” Atsukane patted his shoulder, mimicking the spot on Hiromoro’s body that had been cut through. “There was a bandage tied around it.”

“That’s odd,” Naruse hummed. “He seemed healthy enough at the banquet—well, healthy for Hiromoro, that is—” Atsukane clicked his tongue at that. “Unless you noticed something else.”
Atsukane shook his head, “I didn’t… But… we didn’t part on the best terms that night, either.”

“Had a spat with your pet?”

“Don’t vex me today of all days,” Atsukane glared, but Naruse brought his hands up in defense.

“Well then, he must have obtained the injury between the time he left the banquet and arriving here. And that certainly wouldn’t make sense if it was the work of a cat.”

“Isao said the same,” Atsukane sighed.

“The other injury, however,” Naruse trailed off, making a slicing motion down his chest. “I don’t find there to be any other explanation.”

“Perhaps,” Atsukane trailed off. “But that’s what’s so odd… Have you ever seen the true form of the cat?”

“Fortunately no,” Naruse said. “You have?”

“When I was young my father made me witness its transformation. Just as his father did to him. It was horrifying.”

“I’d consider that crueler than any beating,” Naruse smirked. “Well? Did it have claws? A mouth full of blood? Rotting skin? Just as all the stories say?”

“That wouldn’t even begin to describe it.” Atsukane placed his fingertips on the walls of the house, letting them glide as he walked the perimeter of the room, looking around. Pinpricks floated up his arm unpleasantly. “But what I remember most from that experience was this horrible smell that was left behind. A smell like death… Or—burning flesh. It lingered in the courtyard for days.”

Naruse considered the information before taking a curious sniff at the air, “smells like water and wood. Quite nice, actually.”

“Exactly,” Atsukane said. “Where’s that horrible smell? Where are the torn pieces of flesh from its transformation?” Atsukane furrowed his brows, walking quickly to the open doors of the cage as he motioned to them. “Are we to believe that in the form of the beast he calmly opened the doors, rather than raged through them?”

Naruse chuckled.

“What?” Came Atsukane’s irritable reply.

“Just wondering if you’re having fun playing detective.”

Atsukane’s mouth scrunched up, glaring at Naruse, “I just want this resolved.”

“Of course, of course,” Naruse said. “But, I hate to tell you, I believe this is far simpler than you’re making it to be.”

Naruse walked through the barren home to the open doors Atsukane had just motioned to. The opened doors exposed the outside, to the slivering excuse of a garden that could hardly compare to the grand landscapes and maintained grounds of the main estate.

Naruse stepped onto the engawa with a pouting Atsukane trailing behind. It had snowed in the previous days, leaving a fresh blanket of white on the foliage that surrounded the cage. The bushes and trees grew high, combined with the isolated location atop a hill, it was near impossible to see
anything beyond branches and leaves soaked in snow.

Naruse dropped his wooden sandals that he had been carrying into the snow, slipping them on, and walked around to the side of the house. Atsukane did the same with his own sandals and followed behind.

Immediately, a strong, pungent smell hit the two. The smell was distasteful enough that the two wrinkled their noses. The source came from a small room, intended for the cat to take a bath. There was a well, a wooden tub, and a small place to create a fire underneath. There were icicles forming on the side and at the mouth of the pipe that served to feed the water through. Idly, Atsukane thought how the cat could even find a way to draw a bath in these conditions. He shivered at the thought.

“Well, there’s your smell.” Naruse motioned to the tub, before smirking. “Of course, this is the cat’s bathing area. It could just be his natural stench.”

Atsukane let his sleeve drop from his nose to sniff the air, face deliberate and confused, “That’s not right. I don’t remember it smelling like this…”

“We often exaggerate the memories of our childhood,” Naruse said.

“I suppose…” He sniffed again, as if making certain that the smell wouldn’t trigger bile to rush to the back of his throat, as it did years ago. When it didn’t, Atsukane took a deeper breath, “It smells like vinegar.”

Naruse sniffed, “It does…”

Now donning his own ponderous expression, Naruse took a step forward as Atsukane watched. Snow and ice had built up on the edge of the tub. But Naruse knelt down, his hands disturbing the snow that had piled particularly high in one area, despite the rest of the ground being even and uniform.

“Atsukane,” Naruse called, and the deity immediately stepped beside him to look at what the monkey found.

Black splotches in the snow. At first it simply looked dirty, but the pigment had a thickness so distinct, it looked as if a bottle of ink had been spilled.

“What is that?” Atsukane asked. As Naruse continued to dig his fingers through, the revealed splotches seemed to grow in size.

“You’re the detective, you tell me,” Naruse teased. Atsukane gave an irritated grunt.

“Nothing like that came from the monster, if that’s what you’re asking me. I would have remembered.”

Naruse hummed thoughtfully before taking a piece of stained snow into his fingers and bringing his hand up for him to smell. He dropped it immediately after, wiping his hands against each other to rid his fingers of the wetness, stains, and stench.

“I know that smell,” Naruse said, standing up. “It’s what the ladies at court use to blacken their teeth. Hisame did just the same for the banquet.”

Atsukane could picture the beautiful horse spirit, Hisame. He could picture her reserved smile—how she seemed to part her lips with the same frequency as a man being struck by lightening, her blackened teeth showing only then.
“I don’t recall them smelling like that,” Atsukane said.

“The wonders of perfume. Though it does seem like an excessive amount,” Naruse motioned to the circumference of stained snow about the size of a melon. “You don’t suppose…”

“Suppose what?”

The amusement in Naruse’s eyes faded, a harder edge taking on his features as he stared down at the stained ground.

“Perhaps you were right, Atsukane. Perhaps the cat hasn’t transformed.”

A chill shot through Atsukane, “Why do you say that?”

“What is the one distinguishable feature on the cat in its human form?”

The god thought for a moment, “Its hair.”

“Exactly. Perhaps the dye wasn’t used for teeth.”

The sharp stab of panic was now pierced through Atsukane’s stomach, “That can’t be true. If that’s the case… If that’s the case how are we supposed to find it?”

Naruse patted Atsukane on the shoulder, heading back towards the engawa and walking through the house.

“Don’t worry, this might be good news.”

“How on earth is this good news?” Atsukane nearly snarled, following behind him.

“It means the cat has even the barest amount of intelligence. Perhaps it will know how to keep itself hidden in the city. Certainly better than a monster rampaging around Edo.”

“Hardly,” Atsukane grumbled. “If the cat knows what it’s doing maybe it’s already gone far enough away for us to find.”

The two closed the back doors of the cat’s cage behind them.

“What a defeatist you can be,” Naruse teased.

“Isao has already remarked on how I’m the first god to allow a cat to escape! Forgive me if my failures are all too apparent,” Atsukane snapped.

“Your failures are so clear, they’re foreshadowing quite obvious questions you haven’t seemed to asked yet.”

“What questions?”

“For one, how the cat came into possession of the dye in the first place.”

Atsukane blinked. He hadn’t considered that. Then again, the idea of anyone interacting with the cat in any way that was voluntary seemed absurd.

“And, of course, what was Hiromoro doing here in the first place?”

Naruse smirked, and that caused Atsukane to stop, glare firm on his face.
“Hiro would never. I won’t hear you speaking ill of him,” Atsukane shot back. “Not with him being so close to death.”

“Yes, yes,” Naruse sighed. “You’re so overprotective of Hiromoro. It’s not good for him, you know. It’s perhaps why he’s become such a timid character.”

“Naruse,” he warned. But the monkey kept walking, laughing as he walked towards the entrance of the cage. Atsukane gave an angry grumble before walking to join him.

It was only when he took another step forward the tatami beneath him squeaked abruptly.

Atsukane looked down, an idle curiosity passing through him as he removed his foot to press back on the same spot. The tatami groaned again, much more pronounced than the pieces around it.

He knelt down, fingers grazing the edge of the square before his nail dug into the edge of it. It was loose, and with some effort, Atsukane found that he was able to pry it open.

“Atsukane? Where are you?” Naruse asked, poking his head back inside.

Atsukane looked up from the pit in the ground to the monkey.

“What is it?” Naruse questioned, coming back inside as Atsukane felt curiosity pull him into a makeshift basement.

It was dark, and Atsukane became submerged in the stale cold of the space. The daylight from above only somewhat illuminated a small desk, an oil lamp, and stacks of books on damp, wood-rotted shelves.

The god reached to the desk, and brought the worn journal that laid there into his view. He could feel Naruse staring down at him from above, his silence just as confused as Atsukane’s.

“What is this place?” Naruse finally asked, as Atsukane climbed up the squeaking, unstable wooden steps back into the cage.

“A journal,” he trailed off.

Naruse hummed, “The cat’s?”

“That’s absurd,” Atsukane said, simply. “The cat doesn’t know how to read, much less write.”

“Is that so?” Naruse asked. “You never know what that beast could be getting up to with all that time on its hands.”

Atsukane’s eyes didn’t leave the journal as he flipped through it, “Impossible.”

“It’s easy enough to tell, you know. Are the entries signed? What was the name the cat used?”

Atsukane’s eyes dropped to the end of an entry.

“Yahiko,” Atsukane read.

Yahiko, the name of the cat.

I thought I might never know what happiness could be again. Since the day my mother was banned
from here, I’ve felt the light of the sun trickle its way out of each corner of this place that only holds
reminders of her. Bit by bit, the darkness consumed what was in its path, eating tatami after tatami
until all it had left to eat was me.

I fault myself. I hang my head, knowing how dearly the world around me tries to lighten my sullen
temperament. I know that when the cuckoo calls out to me in the morning, it begs for my smile.
When the clear night sky rids itself of clouds, just so I can see its endless stars, I know it means me
well. I know that when the cricket and the beetle hop merrily into my home, it is offering me
company when I am horribly lonely.

Tonight, however, nature sent me something different. A beauty I am surely unworthy of, but I
cannot send away because I will not waste the efforts of the moon and sun that watch over me
gently, just as mother said. Perhaps this woman is a child to them? Her skin is pale and clear, like
moonlight. Her eyes carry tides, and could move mountains. Yet she glows as if an escaped spot on
the sun. Her voice feels like fire, and I could not describe the sensation of watching her as anything
other than searing.

I know I will mourn on my deathbed if I never see the face of this woman again. Yet, my chest is full
with the gift of such a chance encounter. I will rest easy with the parting token she has left me. Her
name, whispered to me like a secret.

Tsuna.

With this, I can be content. And content I shall be, in this space of mine. Friends, companions, and
peace on every breath of the wind and rustle of leaves.

-Yahiko

(1825)

———————————

“It was said in ancient Egypt, often times they used animal fat to cure wounds. Sometimes wild
animals, other times they would sacrifice their domesticated pets in order to heal their injuries.”

Isao spoke while he made quick work of replacing the bandages on Hiromoro, the blood staining the
used-cloth had become lesser and lesser since the past couple days, which had Isao free of his grave
tone, even though Hiromoro still lay unconscious.

Mitsuhide watched with rapt attention, while Atsukane stood by the open door that led to the outside.
His brain could barely listen to the conversation, his eyes mindlessly following the gentle snowfall.

“My father once said the reason the zodiacs heal so quickly is because our fat is that of an animals,
not of a human’s. As if we’ve evolved into the perfect healing vessels of ancient Egypt.”

“Egypt…” Mitsuhide wondered aloud. “The place with the pyramids.”

“That’s right,” Isao said. His work finished on Atsukane, he stood to place his supplies back into his
ordered study.

Mitsuhide kept his eyes on Hiromoro, and Atsukane took a quick glance over his shoulder to view
his sleeping friend. The sight of it still flushed him with panic, and he turned back to his outside
view, where the winter air served to cool his skin.

“I read that Egypt is so hot it can burn the skin off your bone,” Mitsuhide said idly. Atsukane
“Don’t believe everything you read.” Isao responded, simply.

“I read that in ancient Egypt, they would worship cats,” Atsukane added, looking over his shoulder at Isao.

“Really?” Mitsuhide asked, not without a hint of disgust.

“There’s a reason time evolves rational thinking,” was Isao’s passive response. Atsukane simply hummed to himself and looked back out the doorway.

“Rational thinking, huh?”

If Isao heard the softly spoken words of Atsukane, he didn’t have a chance to respond as the door opened by the hand of a kneeling maid to reveal Naruse, who sauntered into the room. He still donned his police gear, though his helmet was wedged under his arm. His brown hair tied up into a neat knot, and he smirked as he entered the room.

“What a gathering,” Naruse mused. “Finally, a party where Hiromoro can contribute interesting conversation.”

Atsukane whipped a glare over to the monkey who laughed and waved a hand before Atsukane could construct a biting reply, “I’m joking, of course.”

“You could benefit from a more serious demeanor. You might learn some respect that way,” Isao sighed.

“What do you want?” Atsukane crossed his arms, now turning to face him fully.

To Naruse’s credit, his face did burn the amused edges away as he stood straighter to address the question. An officer’s habit and no more, Atsukane was sure.

“We’ve searched the city. Still no sign of it,” Naruse reported. “My men are still working on it. However, I will say it’s a lot more difficult looking for a black-haired man in Edo than you would believe.”

Isao gave an irritated sigh, “Your men don’t rest until he’s found.”

“I’ve told them the same.”

Atsukane looked down at Hiromoro, waiting for his face to twitch in reaction. Hiromoro was such a light sleeper, Atsukane would take advantage of this and frighten him awake many mornings when they were young. But even with all this chatter, nothing stirred in the rat’s face.

“Do you think he’s still in the city?” Came the smaller, younger voice of Mitsuhide.

“No one seems to have reported any missing money or jewels around the house. For now, we have to assume he’s stranded somewhere in the city.”

“Maybe he’s trying to find a job,” Mitsuhide hummed.

“I don’t know who would hire such a grotesque thing,” Naruse sighed. “Regardless, we’ll continue the search.”

Atsukane didn’t realize the silence was because of him until he felt the presence of three pairs of eyes
on him. Finally, he looked up at Naruse who was waiting for some for of confirmation.

“Oh,” Atsukane said, pulling himself out of his daze. “Right, fine.”

“I thought you said you would be taking this seriously,” Isao said with a pointed look stabbing Atsukane through the chest.

“I am,” Atsukane gave back immediately, but the spark of his voice was clearly gone. His eyes grew heavy at even the thoughts he was musing over in his brain. Still, they grew too heavy not to speak. “Remind me again his given name?”

“Yahiko,” Isao said. “Spelled with no kanji. Yura gave him his name in hiragana.”

Atsukane nodded, eyes narrowing at nothing in particular. “Are we… Are we certain that Y—that it was responsible for what happened to Hiro?”

“Now I definitely know you aren’t taking this seriously,” Isao said, voice low with anger.

Naruse snorted, “You’ve lost your mind, Atsukane.”

Mitsuhide said nothing but to tuck his knees to his chest.

“I have not lost my mind! I want to know what happened more than anyone! How do you think I feel seeing my brother like this?!?”

“Your brother will be awake soon enough to give his account of what happened. It doesn’t change the fact that we have a loose cat within the city!” Isao harshly declared.

“I’m not saying stop your search!”

“What reason do you have for even entertaining these thoughts?” Naruse questioned, voice curious and light. As it always was.

Still, Atsukane still couldn’t quite admit that he’d become quite enraptured with the writings of the cat. Writings he still couldn’t quite believe were the cat at all. He read through the journal entries, waiting so patiently for the tone of the words to turn aggressive and evil. He read waiting for the cat to write down his murderous, contemptuous, wretched thoughts onto paper.

Yet, it never came.

Atsukane couldn’t quite wrap his head around the whole ordeal. He shook his head, trying to clear himself of how these journals plagued him.

No, of course they were right. Of course he was being ridiculous. His thoughts were simply scrambled by the stress of Hiromoro’s near death, was all.

“I simply wish we knew more about that night,” Atsukane brushed off. “Perhaps we could get a better sense of where the cat would go if we knew what happened.”

“We were all at the banquet that night,” Isao sighed.

“Ah,” Naruse exclaimed, smugly. “Perhaps not all of us.”

“Who wasn’t there that night?” Atsukane asked, all too eagerly.

“Well, the zodiac was all present. But I believe we’re forgetting the more hidden residents of the
house.”

Atsukane looked to Isao and Mitsuhide, until his incredulous eyes landed back on Naruse.

The monkey only sighed out a smile. “I mean, of course, the maids.”

The maids were questioned the next day. Naruse, Atsukane’s reluctant investigator, sat next to him growing restless and bored after only a handful of interviews. It irritated Atsukane. This was his job after all.

Though Atsukane would admit, the task was exhausting.

Lady Shino, the head maid, knew how to choose her girls.

The maids were women with pretty faces, and loyalty as sharp as a knife. They would all grow to be the backbone of this estate. And so, they spoke eloquently, but hastily, and in short, unembellished sentences. They spoke indirectly, as if they all shared the same mind and tongue. And so, interview after interview was growing fruitless.

It was becoming a tiresome feat.

“Never trust a Sohma maid unless it’s with your life,” Naruse said after another unhelpful interview. “That’s one of the first things I remember my mother telling me as a child.”

“They have a duty to this family,” Atsukane said, exasperated.

“To the family. Not you. They decide what’s in your best interest and they have for years.”

“Next is the woman who found Hiro, she should provide something helpful,” Atsukane said. “Why wasn’t she sent in first?”

“I imagine they’re telling her what to say.”

“I don’t like being toyed with in a situation this dire,” Atsukane asserted, but even to him it sounded like a pout. Naruse merely laughed.

“Allright, send her in,” Naruse said to a maid waiting patiently by the doorway. She nodded, sitting to open the door and reveal the young maid on the other side. The other maid exited, but a lack of footsteps in the hallway suggested she remained close in proximity.

The young woman bent into a deep bow on her knees immediately, eyes averted away from both of them.

Atsukane eyed her as she straightened herself, sitting before them in seiza, hands neatly on her knees.

She was pretty, as all the Sohma maids were, with her rich, black hair tied up and out of her face. Her skin was smooth, porcelain, and her expression battling between troubled and impassive. Atsukane thought she looked far too noble to be a maid.

“What’s your name, child?” Naruse asked.

“Sohma Tatsu,” she responded. Her voice was light and airy. A stark contrast to when she’d screeched for help only a few nights before, where her voice was scraped and weighted with terror.
“I don’t recognize you,” Atsukane said, idly. “Are you new?”

The girl nodded, hesitantly. “I was recruited during the year of the rooster.”

“You haven’t even been here a year,” Naruse hummed. “And your own animal?”

“I was born under the tiger,” she said.

“A powerful year,” Naruse said. “It’s been some time since we’ve had our own reborn to us.”

Atsukane felt a physical pain in his stomach at the mention. No tiger had been born for nearly three generations, and just musing on the thought was enough to sicken and sadden something deep in the deity’s soul.

“The tiger sleeps,” Atsukane idly said.

“Only to awaken all the more powerful,” the maid finished. Before quickly adding, “Master Atsukane.”

Her posture exposed her nerves, with stiff shoulders and a tight jaw. A maid of only a year — Atsukane immediately grew suspicious. Outsiders were far and few between inside the Sohma walls, even amongst their own staff.

“Our family must seem very strange to you,” Atsukane said, eyes narrowed. “How did you find yourself work here?”

The girl’s hands clenched in her robe, but her expression maintained its neutral facade. “Lady Shino was dear friends with my mother as a child. My father passed at a young age, and sometime ago my mother grew very ill. She pleaded with Lady Shino to give me work. I am eternally grateful to the Sohma Family for accepting a burden such as myself.”

“And your mother now?” Naruse asked.

“She has since passed.”

“I’m sorry for your loss,” Atsukane said.

“Thank you, Master Atsukane.”

“Lady Shino informed me that you have been tasked with feeding the monster,” Naruse said, with a laugh. “What a cruel joke to play on the new recruit.”

Tatsu took a moment before saying, “I am grateful to the Sohma Family for offering me work.”

Atsukane crossed his arms, “And do you always work so late into the evening?”

Tatsu kept silent long enough for Naruse to bang an authoritative fist on the table.

“When your god speaks, you answer,” said the monkey. The maid startled, obviously tense.

“I work as long as I am needed throughout the day,” she responded, finally.

“May we ask why you were needed so late at night in the cat’s quarters?”

She rose her eyes to them, finally.
“I was about to retire when I realized I had never collected the dishes from the monster’s meal earlier that day. Lady Shino scolds us if all the china isn’t accounted for in the morning.”

“To go back so late. Does it not frighten you to be alone with that creature in the dark?” Naruse asked, smile playing on his lips.

“I do not speak to him all too often. But he has never transformed before me, so I have only ever seen him as a human.”

“Is that so?” Naruse asked.

“Yes,” she said. “While I went to collect the bowls I encountered Master Hiromoro. I apologize for my lack of composure at the time.”

“You saved his life,” Atsukane said. “My brother would be dead had you not found him.”

“Master Hiromoro has always been kind to me. I’m glad to know he will recover,” she said.

A silence passed into the room, until Atsukane finally spoke.

“Did you see anyone else that night? While you made your way to the cat’s quarters?”

Tatsu took a moment to earnestly think on the question before her expression turned somewhat troubled, “There was a man…”

“The cat?” Naruse supplied. Tatsu shook her head.

“I do not believe so. The cat is quite lithe. The man I saw looked well-fed.”

Atsukane settled the maid with a wary look at the description, “What was he doing?”

“I’m not sure,” she said after a moment. “It was from further away. Though I spotted him close to the zodiac homes. His robes were not that of a servant’s.”

Naruse and Atsukane exchanged a look, before Naruse wrote something down in a small journal — notes from each interrogation.

“I suppose those are all the questions we ha—”

“Do you know of a woman named Tsuna?” Atsukane said quickly, cutting Naruse off.

Her eyes bent again under the question, but she was quick to compose herself.

“I’m sorry, Master Atsukane. I’ve never heard the name.”

Naruse eyed Atsukane, who kept a scrutinizing look on the young woman.

“You’re free to resume your duties. Don’t be surprised if I or Master Atsukane wish to speak with you again.”

“Thank you Master Naruse, Master Atsukane.”

She bowed to them both, raising herself to walk backwards, still bent at the waist until she reached the door. There, she exited, closing it behind her before the two heard her scuttle down the hallway.

“Tsuna?” Naruse asked.
“She was mentioned in those journals.”

Naruse hummed, “She must be a lover.”

“I thought the same, but there’s no Sohma or maid with the name,” Atsukane’s eyes narrowed at the closed door, at the afterimage of Tatsu.

“I see,” Naruse said in understanding. “She wouldn’t be the first maid to sleep with a cat. How pitying of her.”

“She’s a liar,” Atsukane gruffed.

“She is,” Naruse said. “The trouble with maids free of the curse. They can lie right to your face.”

“But why? If she were in love with the cat, why not run away together? Why is she still here?”

“Women are a mystery,” Naruse waved a hand. “One neither of us will ever be able to solve.”

There was a knock at the door at that moment, and Naruse called for the person to enter. Another maid, older and familiar with a kind face, kneeled slowly on aged legs before them at the open door. Through her composed nature, her breathing was still heavy, as though she’d run all the way here.

“What’s happened, Yura?” Atsukane asked, brows furrowing.

“Master Atsukane, Master Naruse,” she spoke. “I’ve come to announce that Master Hiromoro has finally awoken.”

“Hiro?” Atsukane stood immediately.

“And the rest of the maids?” Naruse asked, amused.

“I need to see him,” Atsukane said. “Surely a chief of police doesn’t need my help to determine whether little girls are lying or not.”

Naruse gave a mirthful snort. “Go on, then.”

Atsukane did so, practically flying out of the room to head down the veranda that surrounded the inner-most estate of the Sohmas. Hiromoro was being kept in Isao’s quarters, and Atsukane navigated himself there easily. On a heavy breath, he rounded the corner to Isao’s portion of the estate, when to his surprise he found Hisame, the horse spirit, there already.

“Let me through, Isao!” Hisame boomed in a voice loud and rich. “I need to speak with Hiromoro!”

Hisame was a beautiful woman, striking beyond words. Her long, black hair was shiny and thick like the mane of her animal. She was tall, with harsh prominent features, from the strong curve in her nose, to the broadness of her shoulders. Though she did not stand taller than Isao, she did meet him in his eye—her expression pointed into a glare as sharp as a sword.

“He’s still resting, Hisame,” Isao said. “No disruptive visitors are allowed at this time.”

“Disruptive?” She snarled.

“What’s going on?” Atsukane asked, head held high as he interrupted the scene.

Hisame looked away, scowl heavy on her features.
“She’s insisting on seeing him,” Isao sighed.

“I simply wish to speak with him for a moment,” Hisame insisted. “Master Atsukane—”

“Hisame,” Goichi’s rough voice struck out through the crowd of people. “I see we had the same idea. To come pay a visit to Hiromoro.”

“Is that so?” Atsukane asked, eyes narrowed. Goichi gave a quick bow at the god’s address.

“It’s important that all the zodiacs are in good health,” Goichi said, though his eyes landed on Hisame as he straightened himself.

“I’m turning you all away.”

“Isao!” Hisame demanded.

“The last thing Hiromoro needs at this time is the chaos of this family. All of you. Leave.” Isao said, firmly.

“Do as he says,” Atsukane reaffirmed.

Hisame’s eyes turned dark, but Goichi spoke before she was given a chance to say anything more.

“Come now,” Goichi interjected, but the polite words sounded at odds with him. “Don’t disturb the doctor’s good work.”

A storm was swirling on the brash features of the woman, her eyes bursting like pregnant clouds growling with thunder ready to clap. But she bowed to Atsukane, prompting the same from her ladies and maids.

“I trust you’ll let me know when I can see him,” she said to Isao, voice like the threat of heavy rain. The doctor nodded.

“I’ll accompany you, Hisame,” Goichi said, falling in step with her. He gave a shallow bow in farewell. “Master Atsukane.”

Atsukane and Isao watched them leave, Atsukane sighing when the hall was finally cleared.

“It would be best for you to wait to see him, as well,” Isao said once the air settled.

“Open the doors,” he ignored. Isao stepped aside, as Atsukane knew he would. The maids opened the doors for him, and without another glance towards the dragon doctor, the god entered the room.

Goichi was not a man who dwelled much on his own thoughts. He never really felt as though it was necessary. Men knew what was best for themselves instinctually. His father was a living example of that. He demanded attention, command, obedience in a powerful voice that knew no hesitance.

The boar built himself to follow this same example, to become a man of instinct, and thought little of the mind. But Goichi couldn’t deny how he faltered around Hisame.

Women were dangerous in that sense, both in the zodiac and in the affairs of the heart.

And Hisame was as dangerous as they came.
Sharp, steel-strong eyes, words collected and precise, figure tall and ethereal wrapped in expensive silk and deep colors. Hair like ink pulled up and back to reveal the features of her face — leaving the world without a shield.

Even Goichi, a man who never had any need for subtlety or inaction, found himself stumbling for words in her presence.

So their walk through the snowy gardens, prompted by Goichi, was met with silence in the beginning. He grew all the more anxious as time ticked by with things left unsaid between them. His eyes trailed to hers more than once, but to his dismay she never seemed to meet his.

“So lonely… lovely…”

Goichi stopped at the sound of her rich voice, looking at her as she gazed over the frozen pond beneath them.

“The exquisite pure-white fan / Of the girl I lost”

Goichi blinked, his stupor having him look around the ground.

“The lady lost her fan—go fetch her one!” Goichi barked to one of Hisame’s ladies in waiting that trailed behind a good distance away. Hisame lifted an elegant hand to halt the order.

“It’s a poem,” Hisame finally looked his way. Goichi felt embarrassment prickle angrily when he could hear the faint giggle of a couple of Hisame’s ladies. “It’s a favorite… Of Hiromoro’s.”

“Hiromoro?” Goichi restrained himself from growling at the thought of the man.

Hisame nodded, looking away from him once more. Goichi felt an urgent need to have her look his way again.

“What good does poetry do to a man in a state like that? His body needs to heal, not such pretty words.”

“Poetry heals in a different way,” Hisame said.

“Only women believe that,” Goichi gruffed.

“The poem I recited was written by a man. A man trained and devoted to the art of his craft. Not unlike your father.”

“You cannot compare some poet to my father. He’s a soldier. He doesn’t waste his time on frivolous things,” Goichi stated. “Nor should you.”

“Is that so?”

Hisame looked his way again, but she remained unreadable. Cold in a way that left Goichi flushed. She was a woman of power, he couldn’t help but be attracted and drawn to it, though it left him feeling like a fool most times.

The flawless curves of her figure did more that enough for him to forgive that, though.

“Have you given any more thought to my proposal?”

“Goichi, please. I think it’s inappropriate to talk about this at such a time.”
“Hiromoro is alive and awake. His dramatics won’t kill him.” Unfortunately. “I want you to be my wife.”

“I told you I needed to think about it,” Hisame sighed. “I… I do not make such decisions so lightly.”

“What is there left to think about?”

“I,” Hisame looked away. “Please do not push the matter. I will give you a response in my own time.”

Goichi reached forward to grab her wrist, turning her towards him. He squeezed, almost enough to bruise, and his features were set—brusque and determined. She did nothing but narrow her eyes at him, trying to pull her hand away but failing under his firm grip.

“Unhand me.”

“You’re a smart woman,” Goichi snarled. “But you’re still a woman. One in need of protection. That cat is loose now, and who knows where it lurks. Its spirit has a vendetta against each of our animals. Don’t you think it’s about time you found a suitor who can protect you against that evil?”

“Thinking like that had you forced out of this estate for a year,” Hisame said, evenly—and despite the cold chill, Goichi could see the faint sheen of perspiration on her forehead.

She feared him?

That was all too trilling.

A slow smile pushed its way forward, “Don’t worry, the only zodiac I would ever kill is that cat. What happened in the past…” Goichi’s grip tightened, drawing an aborted, panicked gasp from the woman—though she kept herself composed. “It was with a life that couldn’t compare to yours.”

She looked as if she was holding a breath, skin paling, “The way you court a woman is quite unorthodox.”

“You should be grateful to have a man that can take action. Isn’t that better than some poet?”

“If you want my gratefulness, then unhand me.”

Goichi chuckled, but finally let her free. “You’re stubborn. It only makes me desire you more.”

Hisame took a step back.

“I won’t give up on you, you know,” Goichi stated. “Prepare yourself for that.”

Hisame’s eyes narrowed, and without another word she turned away from him to rejoin her ladies. Goichi watched her walk away with a gleam in his eye until she was no longer in sight.

———————————

Atsukane was rebellious from a young age.

He had escaped more times from the estate than anyone would care to admit. From climbing to the top of the wall by the vines, to identifying weak bricks in the barrier that was shrouded behind bushes and flora. To sneaking himself into carts that would deliver food and luxuries to the estate.

His heart thrummed with the idea of adventure, with the idea of travel, and the idea of interacting
with people who were not in his own family. Even as the curse of the zodiac pulled him back to his animals after each evening of gallivanting around the city, there was a gaping wound in his chest that longed to be filled with experience.

Atsukane was fourteen when he decided he wanted to prove once and for all that he could be separated from the zodiac without consequence. On a warm, summer evening, he shimmied himself out of the growing hole in the wall in the far north-east corner, and traveled on foot for two nights and one day, until the sun rose above a nearby mountain shrine overlooking the ocean.

His lungs heaved with the effort, and his legs shook harder and harder with each hour that passed with him plotting to go even further. By the time he stood at the top, he could hardly stand, and the monks that resided there were tasked with looking after him for another three days. Guards from the Sohma estate came to collect him by the end of the third day.

The monks gave him a good luck charm, one of good health and safe travel, and despite his weakened state at the time, Atsukane held it like a trophy.

Hiromoro kneeled by his side when Isao forced him to bedrest for the next few days after he returned. Atsukane pouted, lethargy waning away as he was brought back to the presence of his family, but irritation and restlessness blooming.

“There are worlds beyond that ocean,” Atsukane said to Hiromoro. “I want to see each one.”

“You’ll get sick,” Hiromoro replied. “You’re silly to want to leave this place.”

“Your mind is so feeble and small,” Atsukane pouted. “Don’t you long for more adventure?”

“I long for a more competent god,” Hiromoro said, snatching the pillow from under Atsukane’s head and hitting him in the stomach.

Atsukane laughed, rolling over onto his stomach to reach for the charm that had yet to leave his side. He rolled back and presented it to Hiromoro.

“I don’t need luck to leave this place. I’ll do it with my own will.”

Hiromoro laughed, but was interrupted by Atsukane pressing the charm into his palm.

“You’re the one who needs luck,” Atsukane said.

Hiromoro looked closer at the charm, looking nauseous at each word. It was true, the household was oddly cruel towards Hiromoro—teasing that he wasn’t fit to be a rat. He moved slowly, had clumsy hands, and though he was intelligent, his mouth muddled his words when faced with many people.

If Hiromoro didn’t appear tongue-tied, often times he would appear rude and uncaring. His long, lingering silences and absences from family banquets in honor of retreating to his room was off-putting to people. But his beauty was unmatched by any other Sohma in the estate, and was favored by the god as in keeping with tradition. But not even this could grant him grace from those who mocked him.

“What am I supposed to do with this?” Hiromoro asked.

“Keep it safe. When you decide to leave this place, take it with you. And maybe we can meet again outside these walls.”

Hiromoro shook his head, but smiled. He tucked the charm into his sleeve and kept watch over him
for the rest of the night.

Now, years later, Atsukane was the one watching over Hiromoro’s bedside.

Hiromoro was beautiful.

Even chewed up by sickness, even so clearly submissive to the brush of death. His skin was a sickly pale, his eyes were soft and captivating, his brow furrowed. To Atsukane, he always appeared to be so breakable. Perhaps it was the long locks of silver hair that reminded him of glass. Every part of him seemed so translucent. As if even the barest touch of fingers would crush his bones.

Hiromoro sat up in his bed, fingers fisted in his futon, back slumped as he stared down at his covered legs. He wore a robe to fight off the chill that winter brought, but it was left open to let his bandaged injuries breathe.

The white of the bandages might as well have blended in with the white of Hiromoro’s skin.

Atsukane watched as a maid knelt by Hiromoro’s side, lifting a cup of tea to his lips before he sputtered, petulantly moving his head to the side and grabbing it from the woman.

“I can manage on my own,” he snapped. The maid released the cup to him and backed away. He sipped at it, hand shaking, before placing it on the floor.

“Hiro,” Atsukane said, softly. “You frightened me.”

Hiromoro looked away from him, “I apologize.”

A tense air settled between them, one that was unfamiliar. Hiromoro was his closest friend, his dearest brother, the sacred rat to his deity.

Atsukane lifted his gaze from his friend to the maids crowding the room, “Leave us.”

The did as they were told, obediently shuffling out of the room without a sound, and leaving the pair to be drenched in silence. Once another moment passed, Atsukane brought a gentle hand to Hiromoro’s cheek, forcing him to meet his gaze. Hiromoro only smacked the god’s hand away.

“Why are you so cold with me all of the sudden?” Atsukane asked in a huff. “Are you still angry with me for what I said at the banquet?”

Hiromoro simply glared at him.

“You’re a child,” Atsukane sighed.

“If you think so little of me then there’s no reason for you to be here.”

“I am not letting some mindless argument overtake my affection for you!” Atsukane accused sharply. “Are you so petty to not let me care for you after something so dire?!”

“I’m fine now, as you can see,” Hiromoro said.

“Hiro…” Atsukane’s voice turned soft. “Please… Don’t treat me like this.”

Finally, the rat turned to face Atsukane. But his guarded gaze was an unkind stranger to Atsukane.

“I must ask what happened,” Atsukane said, a pleading lilt to his voice. Hiromoro simply tensed.
“Please, leave me be. I don’t wish to speak of it,” Hiromoro said.

“How will we find that cat if you do not tell us what happened?”

“He escaped?” Hiromoro looked towards Atsukane, a fear building in his eyes.

“I’m sorry. We didn’t realize what happened until he’d gone,” Atsukane said. “We’ll find him. He won’t get away with what he’s done to you.”

Hiromoro’s eyes drooped again, and Atsukane could feel rejection from his friend—the tense, frightened nature that overcame Hiromoro in the face of most other people. Something he never thought Hiromoro would direct towards him.

“I know it may be painful, but I need to know what happened,” Atsukane said. “Why were you in the cat’s quarters at all?”

Hiromoro’s mouth fell open, as if his tongue was quicker to give the words than Hiro, himself. But he snapped his mouth shut. The sight stirred an anger in Atsukane, who brought his hand once more to Hiromoro, forcing his face to turn to his with more aggression.

“Answer my question.”

“I thought I was more to you than an object that must simply obey,” Hiromoro snarled. Atsukane’s eyes narrowed.

“Of course you are,” Atsukane shot. “But there are matters in this house that demand resolution.”

“You just want to leave with a clean conscience!”

“Hiro, you were nearly killed!” Atsukane shouted back. “I have never once in my life felt a sensation more painful than seeing you lifeless on the floor of that cage!”

“I won’t answer your questions,” Hiromoro said, sharply.

“You will,” Atsukane snarled immediately, summoning the voice of the spirit within him. Letting it reach the rat spirit in a total command. “Tell me what happened.”

The vibration in his vocal cords that echoed through his spirit reverberated throughout the room and straight into Hiromoro’s stomach. Like bile, words forced themselves up out of Hiromoro.

Or so Atsukane thought.

“No,” came the firm reply. The two stared at each other intently, glaring their wills at each other, until Hiromoro wavered, his body growing weak and falling against Atsukane’s chest.

Resentfully, he wrapped his arms around him, stroking his hair.

“Please, Kane,” his friend near wept. “Please, spare me. For now, please. Be my friend, not my god.”

Atsukane sighed, anger, curiosity, misplaced rage, and aborted power all swirling in his chest. He continued to stroke his friend’s hair.

“If you’ve done something wrong, I won’t be angry,” he said. “I would forgive you even as you stabbed a dagger through my heart.”
Hiromoro curled into the man’s chest.

“I know,” Hiromoro whispered. But he said no more.

When will you return?
My body is fevered with
Desperate longing;
Time has become a sickness
From which I hope you heal me

-Yahiko
(1825)

The next few days were spent at Hiromoro’s side.

Isao would come by and give Atsukane disapproving looks that the deity would pointedly ignore. His heart had nearly been ripped from his chest when he saw the blood surrounding Hiromoro—he would not be banished from his bedside. Not when he still planned to leave on his journey to Holland in less than a month.

Hiromoro, however, seemed to awaken with a hardened, difficult personality—more so than what was normal for Hiromoro’s usually standoffish nature. The likes of which was vexing both Atsukane and Isao. For one, the rat refused to take any medicine—not even when Atsukane commanded him to do so.

Isao called Atsukane soft one day under his breath, believing that Atsukane was not using real conviction in his words to command the rat. But that wasn’t the case at all.

Being the deity came with powers of its own. Supposedly, and for generations, no zodiac had been able to resist the command that came from a god. It was as if the curse were clear, unbreakable strings, all trailing from each animal and tied tightly to the neck of the zodiac god. From there, the god could take their nimble fingers, and pull and tug on each string as they saw fit.

Atsukane knew this power had been abused in the past. If horror stories from past zodiac lives were to be believed. And from the way his grandfather boasted the power when Atsukane was a boy, he knew they were true.

But Atsukane grew into a fine, morally upright man. His father had suffered terrible abuse from his grandfather, but all it did was make him kind and careful—even if kind and careful men were always the first to die.

How Atsukane missed him terribly.

Even still, he was not above using the power for the good of his cursed brothers. So when his commands continued to fall flat against Hiromoro, Atsukane felt a panic surge through him. And to cover how distraught it made him, he allowed Isao to believe he was simply doting on his friend.

Finally, after the third day, when Isao left the room, Atsukane had had enough.

“You betray your own body by not answering my questions,” Atsukane snapped. “Why do you
refuse to speak?”

Hiromoro laid in his bedding, turning his body away from Atsukane.

“If you’ve come to yell, then please leave me to rest,” Hiromoro dismissed. A violent cough escaped him. Atsukane grunted in frustration.

“This is making you ill,” Atsukane accused.

“Then stop,” Hiromoro said sharply.

Atsukane opened his mouth to say something more, but was interrupted by a soft knock.

Tatsu scurried inside, bowing low and deep.

“Master Hiromoro, Lady Hisame wishes to see you.”

“Tell Hisame—”

“Let her in,” Hiromoro said, cutting Atsukane off. “Now.”

Atsukane looked to Hiromoro whose eyes were narrowed on Tatsu—and she looked back at him as if she feared him.

Atsukane’s eyes narrowed.

Hadin’t she said Hiromoro was kind to her? Now, Hiromoro looked at her sharply, a brief, tense air suffocating between them until Tatsu retreated back to her duties.

Atsukane pushed down his curiosity, but eyed Hiromoro carefully.

“You can’t avoid me, Hiro. You need to tell me what has happened. Your resentment for me is turning dangerous—even while you’re still healing.”

“Answer me—Can I only love you if I obey you?” Hiromoro coughed violently into hand, and Atsukane stared at him, a loss for words. “Which would you prefer?”

Hiromoro’s coughing fit continued as the doors opened to allow Hisame inside. She rushed to his side immediately, crouching down beside him in sharp, blunt movements, barely sparing a glance to Atsukane. Tatsu watched from the doorway, seemingly unable to close the door and cut herself off from the sight of Hiromoro’s illness.

“If your cough worsens, sit up,” Hisame commanded. Hiromoro nodded through the fit, sitting up with the aide of her hand on his shoulder.

Atsukane tried to piece the scene together in his head.

It was only in the past year that Hisame and Hiromoro had become closer, spending most of their childhood as idle, passing friends. But even so, seeing her clear distress for the rat still felt strange to Atsukane.

“Hisame,” Hiromoro whispered, resting his head on her shoulder. Atsukane bristled at the sight, even more so when Hisame threaded her fingers through the silver locks of the rat. Comforting, almost motherly.

Perhaps those rumors were true.
“I’ll leave you two, then,” Atsukane near spat. Hisame looked as if she could see right through his immaturity, which only grew to irritate Atsukane more.

“Kane…” Hiromoro began, but Atsukane had turned away, ordering Tatsu to open the door for him as he left.

“Leave them be. He’s sick,” he commanded in a low voice when Tatsu closed the door behind Atsukane.

They locked eyes for a moment, her face unreadable and distant.

“Yes, Master Atsukane.”

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Too much was swirling in Atsukane’s head. What was supposed to be a simple matter was turning more confusing by the day. And Hiromoro sat in the center of it, silent and stubborn. Naruse met with him again in Isao’s quarters as he reported, once again, no luck in finding the cat.

“And here we thought it might be easier with Hiromoro awake,” Naruse sighed. “I wouldn’t be surprised if the cat has found a way to leave the city by now.”

“He hasn’t,” Atsukane said, sharply. Naruse and Isao merely eyed him.

“Instinct,” Atsukane lied. He thought of the journal entries — of the deep well of love the cat would write about endlessly. There was certainly no way the cat would leave without their beloved—yet no one had gone missing from the estate since the incident.

Atsukane couldn’t bring himself to present this aloud to his fellow zodiacs, however. The idea of a cat in love seemed nothing but foolish, and he didn’t have the courage to speak it.

“Who am I to argue with a god,” Naruse dismissed.

“It’s time you start doubling your efforts, Naruse,” Isao said.

Naruse sighed, “I’m celebrating with endless bottles of sake when this cat is killed.”

Atsukane didn’t respond to that except to look away. The clever monkey was quick to catch the reaction, however.

“*If* the cat is responsible, of course,” Naruse teased. Isao clicked his tongue at the joke.

“I won’t be mocked for trying to understand what’s happened. Hiro hasn’t been any help,” Atsukane mumbled.

“I can’t imagine why that boy is being so uncooperative,” Isao sighed. “We could be finished with this by now.”

“Perhaps Hisame knows something,” Atsukane did his best to keep the bitter tone from his voice, but it leaked through all the same. “She has been by to see Hiromoro every day since he woke up.”

“They’ve gotten close,” Naruse affirmed.

“So it seems.”

A knock on the door paused the conversation, and soon it opened to reveal Mitshide, walking inside
with his pup trailing behind him. Isao looked up at him, crossly. “I told you, he stays outside.”

Mitsuhide pouted, looking to the dog, “Go on.”

The dog whined, but did as it was told, rushing out of the estate without another word.

“Don’t worry, Mitsuhide. Isao is just jealous that there aren’t any dragons to befriend around the estate,” Naruse laughed.

Mitsuhide bowed in acknowledgement, but only let the smallest smile grace his lips. Isao rolled his eyes.

“What, Mitsuhide?” Isao asked.

“I’ve just come to collect the medicines for my mother.”

“Alright,” Isao said. “Have a seat.”

Mitsuhide did as he was told, as Isao stood to rummage through his things.

“Do you think there’s any truth to it?” Naruse asked, as Isao rummaged around. “Their affair? The maids say they’ve seen Hiromoro sneaking into her room at night. Quite frequently, too.”

“Hiro and Hisame?” Atsukane questioned. “They have gotten quite close, but…”

“But?” Isao raised an eyebrow.

“Why wouldn’t he have told me? That hardly seems like something to keep secret.”

“Maybe she was embarrassed of him,” Naruse said idly.

“I wish you wouldn’t continue to antagonize Hiro in my presence,” Atsukane snarled. Naruse shrugged.

“Naruse might have a point. She’s a strong-willed woman. It’s hard to imagine her matched with someone such as Hiromoro.” Isao pulled viles of herbs out of lacquer drawers and sectioned them off into smaller doses folded into paper.

“They weren’t together,” the dog suddenly said.

Atsukane and Isao’s attention was pulled to Mitsuhide, who was still sitting obediently as he waited for the doctor’s medicine.

“How would you know that?” Atsukane asked.

Mitsuhide looked at his lap, toying with the edges of his robe. Atsukane couldn’t tell if the boy was nervous or bored.

“I’ve spent a lot of time with Hiromoro in the past year… He’s been,” Mitsuhide faltered. “He was kind to me when my mother became ill.”

“Mitsuhide, we appreciate you trying to help. However, there are certain things that adults keep secret from children—I’m sure if their affair was hidden, they would take caution to make sure you weren’t informed, as well.”

“It’s true. There’s plenty of reasons to keep these sorts of secrets,” Naruse near-sang.
“That’s not it,” Mitsuhide protested, suddenly. His eyes came up to Atsukane.

“They didn’t?” Isao asked, impatiently.

“Hisame asked Hiromoro advice on whether or not she should marry Goichi.”

Isao gave a huff of a laugh.

Atsukane’s brows furrowed, “She was considering his offer? It’s no secret Goichi has had feelings for Hisame, but she’s hardly ever seemed interested.”

“Goichi has always been thick-headed in that way,” Isao waved off. “A year away did nothing to change him.”

“Perhaps that’s the problem,” Naruse said, gravely. The three men exchanged glances.

“They really weren’t together!” Mitsuhide insisted. Isao merely handed him the medicines in the now folded paper.

“Thank you, Mitsuhide. Wish your mother well for me,” Isao said, the dismissal clear. Mitsuhide hesitantly took the medicine and scurried out of the room. The heavy air of the room maintained.

“Goichi was sent away for killing a man,” Atsukane said slowly. “We should remember that.”

“A zodiac wouldn’t kill a zodiac,” Isao said, but the conviction in his tone seemed lost. “The only one capable of that is the cat.”

“But it would make sense as to why their relationship would be kept secret,” Atsukane muttered.

“Because if Goichi found out, who knows how he might react,” Naruse nodded. “I think I have to mention, he does fit that maid’s description of a ‘well-fed’-looking man.”

“And if Goichi is involved? That has nothing to do with a missing cat,” Isao said with a shake of his head.

“No, perhaps not,” Atsukane wondered aloud. “But I’m beginning to wager that he knows more than we believed.”

The smell of the sea was something Atsukane loved since he was a boy. Growing up as head of the family—as a god—Atsukane found that many things changed their shape as he grew up.

Adults that seemed so tall and overpowering became easily pliable, smaller, less powerful. Vast rooms of the estate along with beautiful silk robes seemed to drown him as a child, but now seemed like a second skin.

The estate itself seemed like its own planet—it moved on its own, as if with the whims of the moon. Breathed its own life, bustled with activity and people. But even the grandness of the estate was something Atsukane was quick to grow out of.

The ocean never changed. Looking at it as a child was no different than looking at it as a man. Large, unending, promising, unforgiving.

Atsukane breathed in the scent deeply as he stood on the deck of the boat. Sailors and workers bustled behind him, busying themselves with preparations for a journey that would depart in less than
a month now. And Atsukane could not wait to be back on this ship as it sailed away—the island of Japan becoming smaller and smaller until it became the size it had always been in Atsukane’s mind.

“Master Atsukane, Master Goichi has arrived,” one of the sailors said suddenly. Atsukane pushed himself away from where he was leaning off the side of the boat and commanded for the boar to be brought to him. An order that the sailor quickly followed.

It was still winter, and the ocean breeze made the chill all the more biting. Atsukane could feel his cheeks flare red under the harsh nip of it. But he hid his shivers when Goichi came into sight.

The boar bowed deeply at the waist, “Master Atsukane.”

“Goichi,” Atsukane nodded. The man righted himself.

“An honor to be called on by you,” he said, confident smile firmly in place.

“Right.”

Atsukane turned to walk further up the deck of the ship towards the hull. Goichi followed behind, the two breezing past the sailors who would pause to briefly greet them before continuing on their duties.

“It’s a fine ship,” Goichi finally said. “It’ll withstand the journey well.”

“I’m glad you think so,” Atsukane said. “I wanted your opinion, since you have some experience with traveling.”

Atsukane’s voice was not welcoming, and Goichi seemed a bit unnerved by the sudden mention of his former journey. A journey that was not taken willingly.

“Ah, is that so,” Goichi pushed a smile past the uneasy nature of his words. “In my opinion there’s no greater land than Edo. I’m sure you’ll find the same.”

“Is that true?” Atsukane asked.

Goichi nodded, “It is.”

The god hummed at the response. He took a step closer to Goichi, eyes narrowing as he assessed him.

“Goichi,” Atsukane began. “Would you die for me?”

The shift in Atsukane’s voice forced the truth out of the boar, who was not doing well at hiding his tentative expressions.

“I would, Master Atsukane.”

“Would you do anything I asked?”

“I would, Master Atsukane.”

“Obey any command?”

“I wou—”

“Approach the railing.”
Goichi, as if moving on an instinct not his own, followed the order without a moment of hesitation. Large, boisterous steps swiftly had Goichi’s toes touching the rail of the ship, and his hands rested there as if to offer him balance.

Atsukane felt something flare in him that had been suffocating around Hiromoro. A power that came so easily—an obedience from an inferior that something deep in him craved.

Why was it suddenly so much easier?

“You’re a man with a heavy stride. I wonder if your legs would swing over the railing in one go,” Atsukane muttered out loud. Goichi turned to him, fear apparent on his face. “Lift your leg. Place it on the rail.”

Goichi did as he was commanded, looking awkward and strange in a one-legged frog-type pose. The ship was docked, there was no fear of getting lost at sea. But the drop from the hull to the sea was still enough to be unforgiving. The ocean water lapped and kissed the edge of the boat, foam forming like snow. And the cold pacific would certainly feel like the embrace of a bloodless demon in the January day.

“Master Atsukane—What—I have pledged my loyalty—I am loyal to only you! What—”

Atsukane placed a firm hand on Goichi’s back and jostled him as if he were pushing him forward towards the sea. Goichi took in a sharp gasp, but Atsukane grabbed the neck of his robe to balance him back onto the ship just in time.

“Grab the rope for support. But place your other leg on the railing.”

Goichi hesitated for a moment—enough to make Atsukane’s blood boil.

“Now.”

Goichi obeyed quickly, teetering his balance on the railing, and gripping onto an overhanging rope that attached to a sail until his knuckles turned white.

“If you lie to me, you let go of the rope. And then you’ll swim to the dock, bring yourself back here and stand on this rail again. Are my orders clear?”

“Yes, Master Atsukane!” Goichi boomed, chest trying not to heave.

Atsukane’s eyes narrowed, “Did you try and kill Hiromoro?”

Goichi’s teeth gritted, his stance still struggling to find balance. “Yes!”

Atsukane felt anger flare deep in his core.

“I ought to let you fall on that alone!” Atsukane growled through his teeth.

“Wait! Wait!” Goichi pleaded. “I did nothing! I didn’t touch him!”

“I told you not to lie to me!”

“I’m not!”

“Let go of the rope.”

Goichi did as he was told, the zodiac in him obeying before Goichi could protest, and with another
stumble he fell backward into the water. Atsukane approached the edge of the rail, watching as Goichi yelped and yowled below at the cold temperature, swimming frantically back to the dock. Atsukane followed him from above on the deck. Something flaring in him dangerously. Something as enticing as lust, but something as deeply satisfying as unfiltered power.

“Bring him back here!” Atsukane shouted to the sailors who fished Goichi out of the ocean water. They did as they were told, dragging the sobbing boar back on deck. Goichi limped between the two sailor men who held him up.

“My leg, my leg!” He cried out when they finally approached Atsukane once more.

“The rail!” Atsukane growled. And the sailors followed Atsukane as he led them back to their previous spot, Goichi crying out and shivering violently.

“Stand back on the rail,” Atsukane commanded.

“Master Atsukane, my leg—I cannot—”

“I gave an order, and you will obey!”

Goichi lifted himself weakly on the railing, crying out when pressure was placed on a purpling leg. He was left in just his socks, his shoes having been lost in the sea. But he pulled himself up by the rope. His clothes were dripping, drenched, and the water from them pattered onto the deck. It made the rail slippery, and Goichi felt himself trip, holding himself up by a strong grip on the rope with both hands.

“Master Atsukane, I beg of you—” A cry cut him off as a sharp, winter breeze cut through his soaked flesh.

“Tell me what happened,” Atsukane snarled. “Did you also release that cat from its cage?! As a way to cover up your own crimes?!”

“No! I would never release that monster! I didn’t touch it!”

“A true monster tries to kill his own brother in cold blood!”

“I swear to you, I did nothing! I did nothing! I was drunk! I couldn’t think straight!”

“Your drunk instincts are to kill one of your own?! A zodiac?! What happened before was overlooked—but have you gone insane?!”

Goichi shook his head, still struggling to maintain his grip on the rope. His words came in gasps, his body shivering to try and purge the cold from his skin, and his teeth chattered as he spoke.

“Mitsuhide! That dog! He told me! Told me Hiromoro had convinced you to send me away for that year!”

Atsukane blinked. He hadn’t thought of the incident much—but now that he remembered it, Hiromoro was the one to convince Atsukane to punish Goichi more seriously for his crime.

“You killed a man! A year away is hardly that damning of a punishment!”

“He was a servant! A thief! I did the estate a favor!” Goichi gasped, pulling himself up so that his foot could touch the railing again, but he still dangled like a loose tooth in a child’s mouth. “And I was sent away and poisoned in your heart by that rat!”
“So you attacked him?!”

“No! No, no, no,” Goichi gasped out desperately. “I was drunk, I wasn’t thinking! I searched for him but couldn’t find him after the banquet! I brandished my knife at some point and—and some—some woman took my knife from me!”

“A woman?” Atsukane asked, disbelief clear.

“I speak the truth! I cannot lie to you! Master Atsukane, please! She took my knife from me! I haven’t found it since!”

“You lie.”

“I do not!” Goichi cried out. Atsukane approached Goichi, looking up from the deck, dry, unbothered, powerful. Goichi stared down at him, dangling, desperate, weak. Their eyes locked much like a predator trapping its prey by the neck with their teeth.

“Tell me again that you’re speaking the truth.”

Goichi nodded frantically. “I do, I do! I speak the truth.”

Atsukane knew it was true.

“Let go of the rope.”

Goichi was left with a broken leg, a pinky and ring finger turned black and needing to be amputated from the cold, and a mild case of frostbite. Isao said nothing when he tended to him. And Goichi was wise to mirror the silence in full.

Atsukane came back to the estate in a rage. His power brimming and surging through his body, his anger at a zodiac for considering something so vile, his lack of answers or knowledge.

What was he missing? What was he missing?!

He stormed through the estate, ignoring how maids avoided his stride, fear apparent in them, as he made his way through.

Goichi sang like a songbird under his power, and yet Hiromoro remained as silent as stone. And Atsukane still could not comprehend where his power faltered in talking to his friend. But perhaps his trust in Hiromoro is what was leading him so astray.

In a frenzy, Atsukane forced the doors to Hiromoro’s room open. He was still being cared for in one of Isao’s rooms. And so the room was left bare and empty.

Atsukane looked around.

What was Hiromoro hiding from him?

The room was one that was familiar to him. Hiromoro had never been one to spend much time outside, and as children they often spent their time here, rambunctious giggles hidden behind shoji doors.

As children, the room held fond memories.
But then they grew older, and somehow, for reasons unknown to Atsukane, Hiromoro let this room grow around him like a second skin. His view on the outside world shifted from wary to fearful.

All of the sudden, Hiromoro had let himself become weighted in paranoia. Leaving Atsukane no choice but to move forward without him, though it pained him to see the weary, troubled look of his dearest friend.

Something that Atsukane thought to be lifted in this past year, when Hiromoro seemed to carry himself freely—as if discarding a burden on his shoulders.

But then Hiromoro awoke from his injuries and it was as if he was closed off and away all over again.

Atsukane meandered around the spacious room, looking for anything that might be out of place. What he was looking for he wasn’t sure, and the maids were diligent in their work — anything out of place would have been shuffled and put away by now. Still, Atsukane lingered.

The room was lavish, as all the rooms of the zodiac were, with various memorabilia from previous spirits of past generations. An ornate room divider, painted with a beautifully intricate scene of a rat in a foggy wood, stood at the corner of the room — matching ones that all the other zodiacs had in their own, painted with their own animals.

To the side were ornate dressers, rich lacquer painted with gold accents of sunflowers on the side. Atsukane opened drawer after drawer on the dresser. The last one teeming with a thick blanket that Atsukane removed — only to find it revealed something strange.

A flat, wooden box sat innocently, wide enough to cover the floor of the dresser in its entirety. Curiosity had him pulling the lid of it open, looking over his shoulder as if he were a child trying to sneak sweets from the kitchen.

It was a box for a kimono, Atsukane knew that much. But it was empty save for a single piece of paper that read:

*For Tsuna*

There was that name again, haunting Atsukane. Did Hiromoro know this woman, too? He must have, if he had gifted her something as expensive and lavish as a kimono. Where was it now, Atsukane wondered.

Who was this Tsuna to attract the attention of both his close-hearted friend and the estranged cat?

Atsukane felt something sick in his stomach.

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*My dear Tsuna — I know of the heart you have that is pulled in two. I have seen it scrape at your eyes, leaving behind scars in the form of sighs from your stunning, troubled lips. I feel it in your touch. Ten fingers on each hand, but only five caress my cheek. I am the same, at times. A head with two minds, a body with two souls. Yet, the fear torn through your limbs is all the more human. This, too, I have found I love.*

*Perhaps it is because I have lived in a world that has never shown me a whole, that the half of your heart can only be valued by someone such as myself. I will cradle it gently. I will nourish the beats of it with my own blood, if I must. I will wait, substituting the hollow cavern in my chest, for what you have left behind with me.*
And my pulse will become nothing but memories of you.
-Yahiko
(1825)
________________________________________

“You lost to him, didn’t you?” Atsukane said calmly the next day. It felt as though Hiromoro was truly looking at him for the first time since he woke up. “It was not a fight with a monster you survived, but with a man.”

Hiromoro’s eyes burned as he listened, narrowed with confusion and anger, “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“You both fell in love with the same woman, this Tsuna—whoever she is. And for some unknowable reason, she chose that cat over you.”

Naruse snorted. Both men turned sharp eyes to him. Naruse bowed his head in a faux apology.

“Atsukane, I’ve said I would not talk about thi—”

“I found the cat’s journals, I’ve found his account of the story. I’ve read how this woman was torn between two men, you cannot lie to me any longer!”

“I have not lied to you once in my life!”

“No, because you have chosen to stay silent again! Silence is weak, Hiro! You have shown yourself as nothing but weak before your god!”

Hiromoro flinched at the words, but looked away. “I will not speak to you when you act in this manner.”

“You will speak to me whenever I so command,” Atsukane growled. “Why do you refuse me so vehemently? What have I done to earn such a callous side of your temperament? I want to help—I told you I would not be mad if—”

“Will you not leave me alone!!” Hiromoro shouted. “I’m tired of your questions. I’m tired of your theories. I’m tired of how you look at me as if I’m some puzzle to solve!”

“You’ve turned yourself into a puzzle!” Atsukane cried back. Hiromoro only looked away, anger resting between his furrowed brows.

Atsukane’s voice softened, but his expression was still firm and unwavering. He continued, “The rat has a position high above the cat. Matters of love cannot be controlled—your body has had a reaction to this, I understand—”

“Stop.”

“—People of the outside don’t understand—they don’t see the monster. This woman chose poorly, chose to pity a man over loving you—surely, you must see that you will be able to heal from this—”

“Stop it.”

Atsukane fell silent. Naruse huffed an amused sigh, and Hiromoro locked his angry eyes onto him.
“Leave my quarters. Both of you. I’ve tired of how this family sees me. I won’t have it any longer.”

“Hiro—”

“LEAVE.”

“Atsukane, perhaps we should come back another day. He’s still nursing a broken heart, after all,” Naruse said, seeming to be all too amused by the exchange.

Atsukane gave one final parting glare to Hiromoro before standing to leave, storming out of the room. Naruse followed his angry steps, diligently.

“Congratulations, detective,” Naruse said once they were outside.

“Why will he not just speak to me?!”

“It’s certainly humiliating enough to have earned his silence,” Naruse laughed. “Perhaps he still believes he can deny your claims.”

“I have the journals of the cat, I know what’s happened.”

“Taking the word of an escaped monster?”

Atsukane went to respond, but his eyes caught the fleeting form of a woman in the gardens. The familiar kimono of the maids stood against the snow-covered land, and the familiarity of the woman’s porcelain face had the angry fire burning at full force in his stomach, once more.

“I’m settling this,” Atsukane spat, stepping off the engawa and into the snow without finding proper sandals first.

“Where are you going?” Naruse protested.

“I’m doing your job! If all you’re going to do is entertain yourself with this disaster then leave me be!”

Atsukane brushed off the scoff from the other man and continued his trek towards the woman, now obscured by the thick, tall bamboo of the garden. Without a second thought, his hand reached out to grab at her arm.

Tatsu let out a surprised yelp, turning to face him with movements like the crack of a whip. Though her eyes were wide and scared, the submissive nature of them seemed to have gone now that they were far and away from the composure needed to manufacture their last interview.

Atsukane didn’t let her go, gripping tightly. Her gaze fell to his hand around her arm and then back to him.

“Master Atsuka—”

“I know it was you. I know you were the one having an affair with that cat. I know you’re the reason such a fate has befallen this family—has befallen Hiromoro!”

“Your voice, please,” Tatsu whispered furiously, her eyes flitting this way and that around her.

“Why did you release him?! Why did you free him from that cage?! An outsider such as you has no knowledge of this world—of this life! To think that you can judge our clan so harshly as to do something so thoughtless and dangerous! I ought to have you killed!”
“Please!” She cried out again, attempting to wrench her arm out of Atsukane’s grip to no avail.

“If this family collapses it will be your fault! It will be because of your foolishness! If that monster finds sport in attacking and killing people in his time outside his cage, those lives will be on you!”

“Master Atsukane!” She called again, voice still low, but tone far too biting and defiant for a servant. He gripped her harder.

“You’re a vile woman!” he snarled.

“The vile ones are you!” She snapped back, voice now matching Atsukane’s tone. The shock of hearing such defiant words thrown at him gave Atsukane pause. His face twisted as he watched the realization of what she had said mold her face apologetically. Her eyes began to rim with tears, but Atsukane didn’t want to see it.

Without a second thought, he used his grip on her to toss her into the snow. She fell on her front with another yelp, and Atsukane could see her shivering from how the snow seeped into her body.

“Apoloize,” Atsukane commanded, watching her back heave, before she slowly lifted herself up on her hands. Still half-lying in the snow, she bowed her head.

“I’m sorry, Master Atsukane,” her voice broke. The words sounded sincere, but something still tugged in his gut. He kneeled in front of her, taking a handful of her hair to force her head up to face his.

Tears spilled down her cheeks, but the resolve on her face remained.

“Confess,” he commanded, as if she were a zodiac. As if she would have no other choice.

“Unhand me, and I will,” she said, evenly. “The maids treat me like a dog, they attack and assault me. They have since I first came here. I will no longer respond to violence. Not when I know you’re a man who knows how to treat an animal properly.”

Hiromoro eyed her warily, but his hand unclenched, letting strands of hair fall through his fingers. Her front was wet, her hair disturbed from its tight, rigid style. He watched her stand, watched her back straighten—she stood too tall to be a Sohma.

His eyes narrowed at the thought, “Sena Tatsu.”

“I’ve long since abandoned that name,” Tatsu said. “I gave everything to the Sohmas. Including the ties to my former clan.”

“I don’t believe you,” Atsukane said, simply. “Tsuna can be made from the characters of your name.”

Tatsu took a moment to consider this, looking surprised by the information before shaking her head. “I hope you have not shared this information with anyone. Rumors are lethal within these walls. I do not wish to be labeled as Yahiko’s mistress.”

“And yet you call him by name,” he accused.

“It’s not what you think,” she said immediately. “I was fond of him, yes. We grew close when I went to bring his meals to him. At times we talked for hours, speaking of life outside these walls. But I never laid with him. He was nothing more than a dear friend.”
Atsukane felt a pang of sympathy at the words.

“And Hiromoro?”

Tatsu looked away, jaw clenching at the mention of the rat spirit. Atsukane narrowed his eyes.

“What happened that night,” he started, voice darkened like a threat. “If you were the cause of what happened to my brother—”

“I was not,” she said, quickly—harshly.

“You’re forgetting your place! You do not snap at the head of this family!”

“I was not, Master Atsukane,” Tatsu said, eyes square on him. “But I know for certain that Yahiko did not harm Hiromoro that night!”

“What?”

“Yahiko is the one who saved him!” Tatsu pressed. “That man is nothing but kind, and yet he is labeled as some sort of monster by this family! Locked away—isolated from the world that you so wish to become a part of! How can you not recognize your own cruelty… Master Atsukane.”

Atsukane felt something grave burn in his heart, something as thick and heavy as a boulder weighing down the organs behind his flesh.

“What do you mean he saved him?”

Tatsu was quiet for a long moment, and the two stood there staring at one another. She shivered when a harsh winter breeze licked at the damp front of her kimono, but she did nothing to warm herself further.

She looked as if she were the one assessing him, and not the other way around.

“I did not leave any china in the cat’s quarters that night. I was wandering in the gardens on my own. The other maids had hidden something of mine here—I still have not found it, so I’ve spent my nights and free time in the day searching, still. It was the last momentum left of my mother, I…”

“I don’t see how this is relevant.”

“Yahiko approached me while I was searching in the snow,” she said. “He had already been released from the cage. He was distraught, near inconsolable. He told me that Hiromoro was injured and that I needed to rush to get him help.”

Atsukane stared at her, mouth agape, eyes narrowed, “You’re lying.”

“I am not, Master Atsukane,” she said.

“If that’s true, then you admit to allowing the cat to escape!”

“I do,” she said. “And if that bans me from the family, then so be it. I was not about to let an innocent man rot in that cage when he had just found the courage to leave it. Instead, I went to Hiromoro’s side and found him in dire need of help. It was then that I called out to the family.”

“The words you’re saying don’t make sense,” Atsukane said, voice weathered in a weak denial.

For the first time since he’d grabbed her arm, Tatsu’s face softened. She looked at Atsukane as if she
were pitying him, as if he were a small child holding back tears in the wake of the first scolding from his parents. She was older than him by only two years, but when he interviewed her she seemed terribly young, terrible fragile, terribly naive. As all the Sohma maids could transform themselves to be.

Despite her confession, despite the disrespect she tossed back to him, Atsukane couldn’t help but think of her as nothing but the epitome of a true Sohma maid.

“The whole estate knows of your journey in less than a month’s time. It takes a brave man to want to see the world differently from what he’s known it.”

Atsukane gave her a wary glance.

“However,” she started again, still sounding like a scolding parent. “True understanding of the outside world starts with the immediate life around you. See what is in front of you, but that you refuse.”

“I still do not understand the words from such a defiant, lowly mouth,” he gave back, weakly. But he could feel her words settling sickly inside of him.

Feel the words of the cat that had been plaguing him since he found the journals.

He felt himself shake and bend under the gentility of each stroke of ink, the kindness with which the cat wrote about the violence in his life.

The violence of this family.

His legs continued to shake, and did so viciously. And though the sickly feeling inside him bloomed under the movement, Atsukane settled himself against a bamboo stalk to steady himself.

Only to realize Tatsu was doing the same.

It took a moment to realize that it wasn’t Atsukane’s leg that were shaking, but the ground beneath them—and two fearful eyes locked with each other as the rumble intensified.

In a violent rage, the earth roared, knocking Tatsu against Atsukane, her head painfully colliding with his shoulder—and he instinctively wrapped a protective arm around her.

Shouts and screams from the estate could be heard, from the city, as the earth released violent shivers—as if trying to shake all the snow off its back.

A deep crack from the foundation of the estate shot through the air, and Atsukane felt Tatsu cling to him desperately, trying to keep her footing even so as not to knock them both to the ground.

As quickly as it came, the earthquake settled.

All that was left were echoes of pained, frightened cries throughout the estate.

Along with the involuntary tears that rolled down Atsukane’s face.

Atsukane hadn’t left the estate since Hiromoro’s accident. On any other occasion, he would be more than pleased to be doing so. On clear, sunny days, Atsukane relished the outside world. The walls of the Sohma estate served as some sort of barrier that made the inside seem as though it was closed off to the brunt end of the sun. And so, usually, Atsukane loved the feeling
Today was an exception.

Atsukane, with Isao by his side, along with two servants behind them, walked in mourning clothes towards the center of the city.

A breeze passed through them harshly as they reached town. Over the black silk kimono, Atsukane wore a matching gray hakama—simply detailed, but lush and extravagant in comparison to a poorer man’s kimono. It was because of this that the men stood out so blatantly amongst the town.

Edo was uniformed in black, and its people worked with wails and exhaustion on their lips through the streets.

The aftermath of the earthquake was felt deep in the bones of the city.

Atsukane walked past homes and shops with sunken in roofs, debris stacking in neat piles where residences used to be. Piled high before the homes were broken, shattered remnants of what used to be furniture and keepsakes. The dirt pathways seemed to be lined with nothing but cracked wood, and broken porcelain.

The men around Atsukane did not seem to move their heads to take in the devastation, instead keeping their eyes straight forward as they moved swiftly through the city. Atsukane could feel a heavy weight release itself in a frozen exhale, that traveled visibly from his dry lips and into the cloudless sky.

It was cold, too cold for the sun to touch, and it seemed mocking of the weather to look so bright and clear. As if the sky purposely did not don mourning clothes of its own—as if to say it had nothing to mourn here at all.

The estate had been harmed by the earthquake. The act of nature did not show bias between what was “inside” and “outside.” In all, fourteen Sohma members had fallen dead within the estate—8 family members and 6 servants—with many of the homes in great need of repair.

Lady Shino had reported to him shortly after to say that thankfully all the zodiac members had been spared of any harm.

Atsukane had been the one to correct her.

When they approached the center of town, the overwhelming stench of death had Atsukane wanting to vomit—his eyes watering on instinct. He pushed the feeling down, covering his nose with his sleeve until he noticed Isao seemed unaffected. To match the strong spine of the dragon, Atsukane let his hand fall to his side, doing his best to will the sick feeling to pass.

Laid down in a courtyard, and spilling onto the streets of the town, were the unidentified dead. In neat rows, head to feet, head to feet, head to feet, they overwhelmed the earth like a woven blanket of rotting flesh.

A sight, a smell, a sensation far worse than ever seeing a man turn into a monster.

Narrow pathways were left between rows of head and feet, and many others wandered the desert of corpses, some wailing in recognition of a loved one, some frantic and desperate.

Quiet shuffles, and far off sobs were all that kept silence at bay in the area, as no one seemed to want to speak in the presence of the dead.

Atsukane didn’t dawdle. With a wave of his hand, the four of them separated, searching down
separate rows for a body both familiar and unknown to the Sohma family.

As he walked his own row, Atsukane took in the expressions of the men and women. Most had skin dirtied with grime, debris, and blood. The clothes were stained, limbs looking both cold and unattached—blue and purple creeping on the edges of what used to be the lively color of flesh.

He saw him, then.

It was the clothes.

The kimono of a servant of the estate wrapped around the body, and Atsukane wondered briefly how he hadn’t been caught in such clothes. The Sohma Estate encompassed the entirety of his life, seeing the uniform looked so obvious, so blatant. The idea that a passer-by wouldn’t have noticed and contacted the family of one of their servants was wandering about the city was odd to him.

Atsukane looked up and around. There were so many people. So many dead that it seemed like a never-ending valley. So many wandering about and bustling in tune with their own affairs. Perhaps Atsukane really didn’t understand the vastness of the outside world as much as his ravenous book reading had made him believe.

He brought his attention back to the dead, kneeling down.

For the first time since he was a boy, Atsukane took a long look at the cat’s face.

His red eyes were open, but the dimness of them made them seem like a murky brown. The stains of the dye had left marks on his scalp and on his hairline, coated with dirt and dust from wherever he had been when he’d passed in the earthquake.

The servant’s kimono had a violent tear through the chest, and old blood seeped into the rips.

Atsukane brought a hand to the man’s cheek, wiping away some of the dust.

He looked like a man.

With the cat no longer in his body, with no spirit at all left inside of him, he looked nothing more than a man with handsome, kind features.

Perhaps it was because he had read so many of his words, his thoughts, his troubles in these past few days—perhaps it was because the words of that maid had shaken his foundation in time with the earthquake—but Atsukane wondered what it meant that the traces of his warm, tender expression still echoed on his departed features, whereas the cat was nowhere to be seen.

He didn’t know how long he stared, but it was enough time for Isao to crowd behind him—only humoring him for a moment longer.

“You found him,” he said. “We should leave this place.”

Atsukane swallowed, nodding silently.

He reached forward, intent on completing their mission in this above-ground gravesite, and moved the sleeve of the man up to reveal his wrist.

More reverently than he would care to admit, Atsukane peeled the juzu beads off the cold, lifeless arm. Atsukane flipped the cat’s hand over, working them past the swell and bump of his hand—realizing for the first time how tightly the beads adhered to the wrist.
It was something else that caught Atsukane’s attention, however. In the palm of the dead man’s hand sat something else, something untouched by the devastation of the earthquake. Most likely because of the shield that cat’s hand provided.

Atsukane untangled it from the cat’s fingers and held it up to his face.

He stared until Isao called his name.

Atsukane entered quietly, not wishing to disturb the air of the room. Hiromoro’s knees were drawn to his chest, his long hair obscuring his bowed head and pale skin. He looked small, fragile, hurt.

Atsukane felt a deep, bubbling regret at the words exchanged a few days before, at the harshness of his tone. Now, all he wished was to hold the man in his arms and grant him comfort and peace.

The maid quietly shut the door behind Atsukane, and it was just the two of them in the room.

Hiromoro didn’t look as Atsukane brought himself to stand before him, not even an arm’s length away. And then, to even himself with his dear friend, he kneeled before him.

“I’m sorry,” Atsukane whispered, for his words the other day.

Hiromoro finally brought heavy eyes up to look at the god.

Atsukane reached out, his hand resting on the man’s shoulder. He slid his hand down the length of Hiromoro’s arm until he rested on his hand, coaxing it towards him with the palm open.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered again, this time for what he placed in Hiromoro’s fingers.

The rat looked down to his hand.

It was a charm. *Their* charm. The one that Atsukane had given to Hiromoro when they were boys. The same charm that was found in the dead fingers of the cat.

When Hiromoro’s face crumpled, tears falling endlessly, silently, down his cheeks, Atsukane knew why.

“Please tell me what happened,” Atsukane pleaded. “Tsun.”
“Master Hiromoro, Master Mitsuhide says he looks quite forward to being in your care.” The elder maid bowed at the waist, along with the little dog child. Hiromoro eyed the two uncertainly in his own quarters, repressing a sigh.

“Mitsuhide, welcome,” Hiromoro said. “Ah, you can leave us.”

The maid did as she was told, Mitsuhide lingering behind with his blank, unwavering eyes. Hiromoro could feel regret seep into him the longer their eyes met.

“How is your mother?” Hiromoro tried.

“Not well,” Mitsuhide responded, voice even. “My father sends his gratitude for looking over me as my mother recovers. He says I will learn a lot from spending time with you.”

“Your father speaks too highly of me,” Hiromoro tried to dismiss. “I feel as though I lead a lifestyle that would be quite dull to a child.”

“I don’t mind,” Mitsuhide said with a shrug.

Silence fell between them again, awkward and stiff. And Hiromoro felt the expectant eyes of a child on him. He did all he could think of after a moment, and cleared his throat.

“The old dog lies intent / Listening… does he overhear / The burrowing moles?”

Mitsuhide tilted his head, “I’ve never heard moles.”

“No, well—It’s a poem. It’s best not to take things too literally from them.”

“Oh.”

Thankfully, the need to fill the silence was filled by a rustling of feet and commotion just outside the room. Hiromoro and Mitsuhide both turned their heads to the shuffling crowd that was flowing downstream in the hallway.

When Hiromoro opened the door, he caught sight of a maid.

“You, there. What’s the excitement?”

“Master Hiromoro,” the woman greeted, immediately bowing at the waist but hurriedly righting herself again. “Master Goichi has returned.”
“Uncle?” Mitsuhide spoke softly. But Hiromoro felt his blood turn to ice. Without thinking, the two fell into the stream of people, gravitating towards the news.

Their feet followed them to the engawa that surrounded the outside of the estate, Goichi marching through the gates of Sohma house with a confident stride.

Hiromoro watched him. The oily look of his smile, the molded eyes, the looming figure of a man dull with muscle. He swallowed from his place in the crowd.

“Tell Master Atsukane I have returned!” He called out, triumphant. A few maids scattered away, obediently.

Hiromoro watched, and for a moment, Goichi’s eyes landed on his. They stood there, staring each other down. And Hiromoro did his best not to look frightened. Goichi merely regarded him with a condescending sneer.

“I’ve paid my penance, and I’ve returned to the family!” Goichi called again.

Hiromoro turned on his heel and walked away from the scene.

It was January — the new year had just passed, the year of the rooster had just been welcomed in. But just the presence of a boar seemed like a bad omen.

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“This is a horrible idea,” Hiromoro remarked. “You’ll get caught.”

Hisame lifted her arms, allowing her maid to tie the obi tightly around her elegant, filled-out waist. The horse did nothing more but let out a sharp laugh.

“I never have before,” she said, finally lowering her arms as the kimono was fastened completely.

She looked beautiful, as she always did. But the kimono was shorter—falling just above her feet—and was less extravagant than that of what the ladies were expected to wear to court. Her hair flowed down, free of the tugs and pulls of intricate styles.

Despite the simpler clothes, she still looked noble—perhaps that was never a look that could be shaken away.

“You’ll see,” Hiromoro said, smugly. “There are too many prying eyes for you to get away with anything.”

“My servants are loyal to me,” Hisame said, making eye contact with Hiromoro as she reached tender fingers to caress the cheek of her maid. “And only me. Isn’t that right?”

“Yes, Lady Hisame,” the servant said with a smile. Hiromoro looked away from the scene, far too intimate for his tastes.

“There’s no such thing as loyalty in this estate,” Hiromoro remarked, passively. Hisame let out another laugh.

“Our pathetic god of ours would weep if he heard you say that.”
"You shouldn’t speak so ill of him." He glared at her, and she rolled her eyes.

"Now who’s being the loyal dog," Hisame sighed. "Speaking of dogs, I’ve noticed you’ve gained a shadow."

"Mitsuhide," Hiromoro confirmed with a grumble. "His father wants me to tutor him or mother him, I’m not sure. But the child doesn’t seem interested in a word I say."

"Mitsuhide is just like that—and I’m sure his mother’s illness doesn’t help his demeanor."

"And my heart pities him. But why must I be saddled with such a burden?"

"Would you rather Goichi care for him?" Hisame smirked.

"I would rather Goichi not returned at all," Hiromoro huffed.

"Don’t be so stiff—you love a good story, he must have some good ones from being away so long."

"Not interested."

Hisame chuckled, turning away to spray perfume onto herself. Hiromoro was simply grateful for the subject to be dropped.

Hisame turned to present herself before Hiromoro.

"Well?"

"Your beauty is so apparent that you stand out like a horse among dogs. You’ll get caught."

"Don’t be so chaste, haven’t you wanted to live life out in the world some nights?"

"For all your mocking of him, you sound just like Atsukane."

"He wants to throw his life away on pirate ships—I simply want a good drink." Her eyes brightened as she fastened her gaze onto Hiromoro. "You should come with me."

"What? No, of course not," Hiromoro snorted.

"Yes, you should! You need to leave this cruel little place! You need some fun!" She chirped, gaze dangerous on such a beautifully intense and determined face. "Chizu! Fetch a proper kimono for Hiromoro from his quarters."

"Yes, Lady Hisame."

"No! I’m not going with you! I have no interest in what goes on out there. People are cruel. Condense them together and you have a crowd of foul-mouthed filth, nothing more."

"Oh, these walls have poisoned you," Hisame scolded. "The outside is not as bad as you think."

"You only say that because you’re a woman," Hiromoro commented. "People have no trouble showing kindness to a beautiful lady."

A smile stretched wide across Hisame’s face, one that spelled more danger than Hiromoro could imagine at the time. She knelt down before him, where he sat sipping tea in her quarters and put Hiromoro’s face in her slender hands.
“Then why not be a woman with me tonight?”

Hiromoro flushed red at the idea. “Excuse me?!”

“You have a face so beautiful, and a figure so feminine. You would look breathtaking in the proper kimono.”

“You cannot be serious,” Hiromoro gaped. “I would never—I don’t—I don’t even wish to go out with you in the first place!”

“Hiro,” she whispered deviantly. “As a woman, you might find yourself a handsome man—one that won’t transform you when you embrace.”

Hiromoro flushed red at the statement, taking her wrists in his hands and pushing her away, “I wish you wouldn’t be so loose-lipped with my privacy.”

“Aren’t you curious? I know you admire my robes when we’re in court—I know you enjoy coming to harangue me before I leave because you enjoy watching me dress.”

Hiromoro looked away at that.

“I refuse to be the deviant man in a dress.”

“How about this?” Hisame began. “If I can fool even your eye, you come out with me tonight.”

He looked to her.

He had no idea what possessed him to agree.

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By all accounts, Hiromoro had lost the bet.

When he looked into the mirror it was another person entirely. He could hardly recognize his own reflection—and how grateful he was for that, too.

This reflection he could stare at for hours, could happily observe and indulge. His own was nothing more than a shadow of a man, attempting so fruitlessly to be seen as such by the family around him.

The kimono was beautiful—silk and black, with red and white cranes condensing themselves towards his feet. The obi tied tightly, creating a silhouette that was not his own, but did well to accentuate the feminine features of his body while hiding his lack of breasts.

But his face—his face was unrecognizable.

Hisame’s maids had applied a white powder to his already pale, light skin. It evened out any blemishes, and made his skin look all the more delicate. The red on his lips and cheeks made him look sensual, made his lips seem bigger. And the pencil of thin eyebrows brought forth a coquettish expression that Hiromoro couldn’t stop himself from making.

He looked like a woman—he couldn’t ponder on why that felt as much of a relief as it did.

“I win,” Hisame said. Hiromoro did not argue.

The two clasped their hands as they snuck away, Hisame giggling like a young girl as they made their way to the entrance. Though Hiromoro could only feel anxiety building further and further up
his throat as they approached the outside.

A small pocket of gold was handed off to the guard by Hisame, giving him a small wink. He laughed, a familiarity clear between the two as he made a show of turning his head away. Hiromoro kept his head bowed, hoping the blanket of night would hide himself even more than the make-up coating his skin.

Hiromoro though it might be the same, entering into the world, thinking as though everyone could see through him. Just a larger, crueler version of Sohma Estate—if something existed.

That’s what he had been told, after all.

But there were just so many people.

How strange and wonderful it was to walk through the city streets and not recognize a single person, to not have them recognize him. The added weight of the disguise straightened his spine—brought him alive.

The bars Hisame took him too were big, inviting, fanciful. They drank expensive liquor that tasted so much sweeter outside the gates of the house. They looked as if they were nothing more than two beautiful sirens enjoying a night in the city.

It was inevitable that men would approach them.

When the first man did, Hiromoro nearly jumped out of his skin, earning a hand on his shoulder from Hisame.

“Relax,” she whispered in his ear. “You won’t transform against a man.”

He supposed that was true. But he still couldn’t find himself to believe that any man couldn’t see right through him.

“Say, isn’t my sister pretty?” Hisame asked a couple men that lingered when she still felt tension rolling off Hiromoro. The two men readily agreed. “She has a hard time believing it, you see. She’s shy.”

“Miss, your beauty is the kind that keep men alive during war,” said a man. Hiromoro couldn’t help but flush.

“Thank you,” he said meekly.

“The kind that have men writing poetry!” Another man slurried, and he leaned on his friend with a laugh.

“Oh, poetry!” Hisame said brightly, turning to Hiromoro. “Now there is something with which my sister is quite well versed.”

Conversation become somewhat easier after that.

“Another one, give us another one!” One of the men in the crowd cried out. Hiromoro took another deep sip of his sake, feeling his cheeks redden and laughter come easily to his lips as he placed a finger on his chin in mock thought.

“By way of pretext / I said ‘I will go / and look at / the condition of the bamboo fence’; / But it was really to see you!”
Hiromoro punctuated the poem with a teasing lilt to his voice as he looked towards one of the more boisterous men in the crowd. The men laughed and jeered, patting the other man on the back as he tilted his head back and laughed.

Hisame laughed gently beside Hiromoro, watching him attract the crowd with the memorized poems of ancient people. It was late by now, and Hiromoro had long since relaxed between the liquor and conversation.

But Hisame leaned in to take his hand, prompting him off his seat so they could both stand, “I’m afraid we must return home!”

“Oh, really?” Hiromoro asked, still tipsy, as the men cried out at the announcement.

“My Lady, one more! One of sorrow and parting, since my heart is already in shambles!”

The men laughed again, and Hiromoro cleared his throat as he stood tall, the men around him falling silent.

“It is other people who have separated / You and me. / Come, my Lord! / Do not dream of listening / To the between-words of people!”

Hiromoro spoke the poem from deep in his heart, feeling something ache. But the men fell into their laughter again.

He hadn’t meant to recite the poem — one that played over and over in his head at the thought of a former love. But it came to his lips like honey, the words sick and smooth with repetition.

“Really, we must be going.”

“May we meet at a bamboo fence one day, ladies!”

Hisame laughed and Hiromoro forced a smile onto his painted lips as he followed Hisame out of the bar, still grasping onto her hand.

They walked, side by side, their legs moving in short, quick strides as they were restrained by the tight ties of their kimonos. Hiromoro stayed silent as he walked beside Hisame in the still bustling city, despite the late hour.

“What troubles you?” Hisame asked as they approached the hole in the Eastern wall. The two ducked to allow themselves in, walking as quietly as they could through the estate. “You seemed to be enjoying yourself up until now.”

“Does killing a man make you feel so powerful?” Hiromoro wondered, suddenly.

“Why does your mind keep wandering to Goichi? Give him a wide berth and he won’t bother you. You torture yourself over nothing.”

“He’ll find ways to torment me, just as he did in our youth,” Hiromoro spat. “I can only imagine what he would do if he saw me in these clothes.”

“He won’t,” Hisame laughed. “I’ve not been caught once!”

The night that they had departed had been a strange one. One of decision and change, though neither had realized such a thing in the moment. The 10th of January, however, was marked as ‘butsumetsu’ - a day struck with misfortune according to the calendar of the Shinto priests.
Goichi’s return seemed to coincide with such a day, seemed to poison the week with misfortune. Hiromoro was not someone religious nor superstitious, but had he known that this day was one not to venture out and play with the hand of fate, he might had repressed such an urge that overtook him suddenly as they walked down the path.

Then again, it would take a year for Hiromoro to think of luck and misfortune as nothing more than man-made shackles.

A sudden gust of wind had the two shivering suddenly, pausing where they walked on their roundabout route home. And when Hiromoro went to wrap his arms around himself for warmth, his eyes landed on a pathway that seemed oddly out of place and mistreated.

“Where does that lead?” Hiromoro asked in a low voice. Hisame looked, both now stopped before it.

“That’s the way to the cat,” Hisame said, discomfort clear in her tone. “Can we keep going?”

The cat?

Something lowly and monstrous, yet inferior and weak.

Is this how Goichi saw people? If Hiromoro faced himself with the cat, would he understand the urge and desire to kill?

“I’ve never seen the cat,” Hiromoro admitted, walking towards the pathway.

“Hiromoro, where are you going?” She asked in a harsh whisper.

“I’m curious…” Hiromoro said, courage built with alcohol.

“Hiromoro!” Hisame half-whispered after him. “Have you gone mad? What are you doing?!”

Hiromoro ignored the woman, keeping his head high on the path, wobbling slightly from the alcohol but confidence inflated nonetheless.

“Shush, Hisame,” he called over his shoulder, slurring his words. “No one would dare touch the rat.”

“You’re not a rat right now—you’re a woman!” She hissed.

“Tonight, I’m both,” he said, but by now she was left behind at the mouth of the path. He knew she wouldn’t follow him the rest of the way.

The winter night was chilling, but Hiromoro’s cheeks were still pleasantly warm—and the wooden sandals made soft, delicate noises against the stone path. Curiosity burned with alcohol in the rat’s stomach as the pathway led to a house guarded by high-rising shrubbery.

It wasn’t quite what Hiromoro expected.

And then, there he was.

Through the bamboo bars, Hiromoro could see him. And what was worse, he was staring back.

But no, this couldn’t be him. There wasn’t a chance on earth. The cat was a monster, to be feared, to be hated, to be pitied. He was grotesque and malformed—disgusting, he smelled of rotting flesh and burning driftwood. He was a monster, a creature that encompassed everything that was vile.
So who was this man? Because Hiromoro did not feel anything nearing fear—even if his heartbeat quickened like that of a scared rabbit.

This man... He was so handsome. The sharp features of his face, of his jaw and cheekbones, made harsh angles that somehow bent under the gentility of the man’s gaze. His eyes—a burnt orange, and donning an expression so horribly soft, so wide and honest.

His hair was so beautiful.

“What are you doing?” Hiromoro pointed, his wobbling legs giving away his less-than-sober state.

The man bowed, forehead touching the floor from behind the bamboo window, and Hiromoro approached even closer when the prostrated position robbed him of the view.

Pale hands carefully clutched the bars as he looked inside the cage—looked inside what appeared to be nothing more than a house. Though a strange sensation jolted under Hiromoro’s skin at the contact.

“Answer my question,” he slurred, looking down at the man.

“I am...” the man started. “I am not quite sure how, My Lady.”

“Why are you in the monster’s cage?” he slurred, back straightening at being taken for a woman.

The man lifted his head slightly, to look up at Hiromoro, those overwhelming eyes wrapping around Hiromoro once more.

“Because, my lady,” he said, carefully. “I am the monster.”

“Nonsense!” Came the drunken exclamation. “You’re beautiful.”

The man’s face cracked into an amused smile. He lifted himself, slightly, but still remained in his seiza.

“To be complimented by someone who incarnates the word so easily, I’m honored.”

Hiromoro blinked owlishly at the man, warmth not brought on by the alcohol filling his body. “Did you mean to imply that you think I’m beautiful?”

“I apologize if I spoke out of turn,” he said, immediately bringing his forehead back to the floor. Hiromoro could feel his cheeks break into a smile, a feminine giggle releasing from his chest. He had been called beautiful, pretty, gorgeous, stunning all night. But to be looked at, studied so earnestly—so intensely—to hear that from someone who looked as if he had seen nothing else in the world but Hiromoro, it was thrilling.

“Stop bowing,” he commanded. “You look silly. Men shouldn’t look so weak.”

“I apologize for the display.” He followed the command, but the smile was back on his lips, “I have found that I cannot deny when I lack strength, my lady. And I’m afraid you’ve taken the last of it.”

“Why do you apologize at all if you seem to enjoy speaking out of turn?” Hiromoro asked, rather breathlessly. “Come forward.”

He did, standing on the other side of the bamboo bars, the two only inches away. They observed each other curiously, as animals might. Keeping their guards high and above, unsure of whether the other would suddenly become a predator.
“You’re no monster,” Hiromoro finally whispered. The man smiled, quiet, secretive.

“Let’s keep that little secret between us,” he said, voice pitched lower. “My lady.”

Hiromoro could hear Hisame begin to call after him, hear her wooden sandals clack against the stone pathway hesitantly. His breath caught more so than it already had. When had it become so hard to breathe?

“I must go.”

“Wait,” the man reached out for a silk sleeve, the beads around his wrist grazing against Hiromoro’s own arm. Hiromoro gave him a shocked expression, and the man immediately retracted.

“My deepest apologies,” he said, voice fearful and apologetic. “I simply… I wish to know your name.”

“I…” Hiromoro looked behind him quickly, before looking back. “I am not sure yet.”

The man gave Hiromoro an amused laugh, and oh what a sound to hear. Never had he heard a noise so sweet and affectionate in nature. How can someone within these walls, amongst the Sohmas, be so lacking in the sharp, horrible edges that plagued this family?

“Will you return when you know? Now I’m quite curious.”

“Perhaps,” Hiromoro smiled.

From there, Hiromoro untangled himself from the bamboo bars, from the soft sounds and expressions of the other man, of the heavy, warming feeling that was starting to choke him.

She felt the man’s eyes on her as she stumbled away, only realizing when Hisame was in sight that he never asked for the other man’s name in return.

Hiromoro lost himself in his own thoughts in the following days. Smile, hair, expression like sunset sunk deep into his chest, making his movements sluggish. What a silly thing to be so plagued by—to be so taken by a drunken encounter with the Sohma’s caged outcast.

Though Hiromoro still couldn’t make sense of this—still couldn’t believe that the cat was hiding inside that man. Perhaps the moment had been nothing but a drunken dream.

Three days passed when Hiromoro decided he needed to know the truth, but a look in his mirror made him realize that he could not. Not like this, not like Hiromoro. Not like a man he could not even connect with—not with the vessel of the rat.

“I need your help again,” Hiromoro said to Hisame that night. She looked at him curiously. “I need your kimono once more.”

Without the aid of alcohol, Hiromoro found it was difficult to walk up the path towards the cat’s cage without fear arresting each step.

Regardless, he let his legs take him back to the secluded prison, back to those bamboo bars, back to… such an unsuspecting sight.
When Hiromoro arrived, the man was still there. And it took his breath away all over again.

“My lady,” he said, looking just as winded as Hiromoro, though he seemed to be so proudly. That clear, undisturbed smile came back to his lips. “Have you discovered your name?”

Hiromoro cleared his throat, approaching the bars even closer. “You speak out of turn again.”

The man laughed softly, “My apologies. I shall not speak again until you grant me permission.”

“Is that so?” Hiromoro mused. The other man shook his head, lips tightly shut. Hiromoro couldn’t help but laugh. “Speak. However… Only tell me your name.”

His eyes turned even more impossibly warm, “Yahiko.”

“Yahiko,” Hiromoro echoed, fondly. A winter chill passed through and Hiromoro shivered. “Aren’t you cold? Can you not close your windows?”

Yahiko tapped at his closed lips playfully. Hiromoro laughed.

“Speak, you fool,” Hiromoro smiled. “I feel as though you’re teasing me even more so with your silence.”

“I would never dream of it,” Yahiko replied. “And if I closed my windows, I might have missed your arrival. I would never have forgiven myself if that happened.”

Hiromoro felt himself flush under the praise, make-up hiding his tinted cheeks, fortunately.

“Now I know you tease me.”

“No!” Yahiko said, so seriously. “All I’ve dreamed of these past three days is to know the name of such a beautiful mirage.”

“Am I mirage?”

“Beauty like yours does not often grace this place.”

Hiromoro looked around, at the isolated house on the hill. A quiet longing in his stomach, to be so secluded from a family that only knew how to speak in biting cruelties. He pushed the feeling away.

“What name did you assign me, then? In your fantasies.”

Yahiko took a moment to ponder the question, peering far off and away out the window.

“I would be lying if I said I hadn’t pondered this,” Yahiko said. “From behind these bars, the only lady who seems to match your grace is the moon. Today, she’s as clear and bright as ever—so much so it almost feels like summer.”

Another harsh winter breeze blew against Hiromoro’s back, and he couldn’t help but let out a biting laugh.

“It’s the dead of winter.”

Yahiko simply smiled, reaching out a hand from beyond the bars towards the other, palm open in an inviting gesture. “May I?”

Hiromoro shouldn’t. He knew that. It was the hand of a monster. It was a cursed, disgusting limb
that was reached out to him.

These thoughts were scattered as Hiromoro placed a reluctant hand over Yahiko’s. His hand was soft, slightly tanner than his own, with long, rough fingers. Hiromoro grew insecure immediately. His hand was so large, too. So unlike that of a woman’s. What a strange desire, he realized, to disparage his own body in such a way. Though he had never been one to be comfortable in his own skin—he would avoid mirrors and shrink himself down when he walked. But now, here, with his hand pressed against another’s, he realized the true language that rested beneath that constant discontentment.

And how he hoped so badly for this kind man not to discover him so quickly. Not with his curiosity far from sated.

Yahiko was quick to dispel these fears—gentle fingers wrapped around Hiromoro’s hand, grip tender and welcoming.

“Ah,” he said. “Just as I thought. Warm as a summer evening.”

Hiromoro’s chest filled all too quickly with something he couldn’t recognize, but it was so full that not even air seemed allowed to enter.

Hiromoro breathed, “Tsuna.”

“Tsuna,” he spoke back, contentedly.

“That is my name,” she said.

“Summer’s moon,” Yahiko said, brightly. Tsuna blinked at him.

“You… You know the proper characters?”

“Should I not?”

“I was under the impression that cat couldn’t read,” she said, sheepishly. He simply laughed.

“I’ve had to find some way to fill the time until I met you,” he teased.

Yahiko smiled, wide and honest.

If this man was a monster, Tsuna thought, then what must the rest of the world be?

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Tsuna met him again. And again and again.

Spring brought in a gentle breeze that flitted through locks of soft, orange hair. Bamboo bars did nothing to keep out the pleasant weather, and it pleased Tsuna to see Yahiko’s nail beds no longer outlined with blue and purple from the biting cold.

She sat outside the window, as she always did, shoulder so close to pressing against the wall, with Yahiko sitting opposite, looking at this woman—this creation of Hiromoro with a kindness that was intoxicating.

“Stood before the beach / The tide kisses my ankles / And grass tickles feet.”

“You wrote that?”
“As I said, I’ve had to find ways to pass the time,” he admitted, humbly. “Do you like it?”

Painted lips curled upwards, “You should know, grass does not grow so abundantly on a beach.”

He cocked his head, “It doesn’t?”

She shook her head, “on a beach there is water, sand, perhaps rocks. Seashells that cut your feet.”

“Seashells? Are those like knives? Why would you walk without sandals in such a place?”


Perhaps, he smiled. “But I’ve never seen one.”

“A seashell?”

“A beach.”

Tsuna blinked at the man, reality crushing into her skin and making her blood go cold. Of course he had never seen a beach. Of course he had never seen anything at all, being trapped in a place that only overlooked onto hedges and walls. She felt a flush of shame, and the heat of it with her cold blood almost caused gooseflesh to break onto her skin.

“How can you tell me about it?” He asked.

She opened her mouth to do as much, but she faltered. “There… There is… sand. And water.”

“As you’ve said,” he mused. That lilt Yahiko would take when he knew he was being mocked, but accepted the words, regardless. It stung to know what he expected from the words of other people.

But Tsuna meant no mocking intent, realizing that she, herself, had only been to the beach twice in her life.

Tsuna—no, Hiromoro barricaded himself inside this world. Inside this estate. Where everything was safe, but everything felt heavy on his shoulders. Where normality was maintained, but normality meant cruelty and political games.

Of course he understood why Atsukane grew so restless here. But only just now, as Tsuna, did she realize how badly she hoped that the outside could provide something more. While Hiromoro was never left to hope at all.

The conversation pattered out when Tsuna’s mind grew heavy with these thoughts, and she made her way back down the trail to her quarters, using the blanket of night in hopes of not being seen.

She stared at her reflection in the mirror, resistant to wipe away the disguise—resistant to fall back into place as the closed-off, frightened rat.

How much more he would prefer to simply be Tsuna.

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When Hiromoro entered Atsukane’s quarters a few days later, the man was already vibrating with a childish energy. He was up on his feet when the door closed behind Hiromoro, a servant just finishing tying the knot of Atsukane’s monsuke—an outfit usually reserved for when Atsukane planned to go beyond the walls.
“Going somewhere?” Hiromoro simply asked when he caught Atsukane’s attention.

“Isao has finally agreed to my terms! I’m to go on a journey!”


“If only!” Atsukane barked a laugh. “The Sohmas have business in trade—in the following year, when one of our ships departs full of porcelain and spices and silk to Holland—I will also find myself on that ship!”

“Holland?” Hiromoro echoed, incredulously. “The journey is so long.”

“And what an adventure it will be!” Atsukane laughed, approaching his friend to clutch at his upper arms excitedly. Hiromoro had never seen a larger smile on the man’s face, but still he could only shake his head with an exasperated smile.

“I suppose there’s nothing I can do to stop you, Master Atsukane,” Hiromoro teased. “But I’ll miss you terribly. How long will you be gone?”

Atsukane’s smile lost some of its fervor, but the blaze in his eyes was far from deterred, “Only a year. Isao wouldn’t allow any longer.”

“You wouldn’t survive longer than a year in the first place,” Hiromoro laughed. “I worry for your health.”

“And I, for yours,” Atsukane sighed. “If in the Capital / In this deserted house / I am to sleep alone / Better for to suffer / The hardships of travel!”

“You’re using the poetry of a man who died amidst a journey,” Hiromoro laughed.

“Better than your stuffy poets who hid themselves away in mountains,” Atsukane shot back, easily. “I would love to trade stanzas with you, my friend, but I am off to inspect the ship that will house me for the most wondrous year of my life!”

Atsukane brushed past him, and Hiromoro couldn’t help but follow on his heels. “You’re going to the docks?”

“I am. Why? Care to join?” Atsukane laughed as if it was a joke.

“Yes. Could I?”

Atsukane stopped his stride to look at him before a bright grin broke out on his face, “Of course! The sea air will do you well!”

Hiromoro laughed weakly, and before he could change his mind, he was dragged away towards the awaiting carriage by his eager god.

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The sea air was fresh, and Hiromoro couldn’t help but take deep breaths as salted air peppered his skin. The docks creaked under him, Atsukane, and Atsukane’s men. The ground seemed unstable in that way. But Hiromoro couldn’t help but stare out at the sea.

The docks teemed with people, but the abundance of men helped relax Hiromoro’s thundering heart just a little. Though he couldn’t help but flinch when some passed too close. He could hear Atsukane’s servants chuckle at him when he did, but he did his best to ignore it.
Atsukane was still aboard his ship, flitting around and calling down to Hiromoro from the deck as he was led by sailors and other, older Sohmas that Hiromoro recognized from court. The heads of trade, he assumed. And he amused himself with watching them having to respond to civilly to Atsukane’s hyper energy.

But on the docks Hiromoro remained, falling into a trance in how the ocean waves fell over themselves in rolling movements.

“Hiro?” Atsukane asked, suddenly beside him, when a fair amount of time had passed. “What are you staring at?”

“How do you have anything else to attend to today?” Hiromoro asked.

“Nothing that can’t be handled at a later time,” Atsukane said easily.

“Will you take me to the beach?” Hiromoro asked before he could stop himself. “I—Well, I want to find a seashell.”

Atsukane was more than happy to lead the way.

That night, Tsuna rushed to the side of the cast-away cat, once more. Her eyes beamed, her heart full, a smile breaking apart the near-permanent melancholy of her features.

“Lady Tsu—”

“It feels soft. Sand. It feels softer than any other ground I’ve felt. Like snow—fresh snow. But it collects the heat of the sun.”

Tsuna reached for Yahiko’s hand and he gave it without thought, a confused smile on his own lips. She reached down and grabbed at the loose dirt, crumpling it finer and finer and letting it fall on his palm that she laid open atop her own.

“Something like this. But buried between are seashells, former homes of little creatures that pinch and crawl near the water.”

With her free hand, still stained with loose dirt, she reached into her sleeve and grabbed the shell she had picked up from that day, pressing it into his large hand. His eyes widened, he observed it with such reverence as he pulled it through the bamboo bars, rubbing his thumb over the smooth underside in fascination.

“What else?” His eyes lit up like a child’s. “What else did you see?”

“The air smells of salt. I could feel it on my tongue and in my nose. And it’s cold—colder than here! Just like the water. It goes—it goes on for miles!”

“As blue as they say?”

“And more,” Tsuna matched his excited tone. “And the waves... The sound of it all...”

“What was it like?” He prompted, still clutching the seashell in his hands.

What did the waves sound like? How was she supposed to describe a sound that crashed in her ears only as a feeling—only as an emotion. The feeling of urgency, of being overwhelmed and fraught and tossed around and crashing against land, but only being able to laugh in exhausted wheezes on
There were no words in the world for a sound like that.

Instead, Tsuna reached into the cage, past the bamboo bars, hands cupping over Yahiko’s ear. Fingers collided with orange locks, and Tsuna felt as though she was touching the finest silk ever woven. The heat of his skin sunk into her pinkies, as her fingers formed an enclosed dome.

His eyes met hers and he didn’t pull away. Red and silver danced in their gazes and Tsuna could feel her heartbeat drum frantically in her chest at such a simple contact.

“Listen,” Tsuna said, voice suddenly low and weak.

He did, closing his eyes.

“Waves,” she said.

He hummed happily, a smile curling upwards as he took in a world that would vanish when he opened his eyes.

The thought soaked through the cheerful mood of Tsuna, who wanted nothing more than to show him the real thing.

But when he opened his eyes, slowly, hands still pressed against his ear, he looked far and away from a man who was facing the harsh reality.

Yahiko looked right at Tsuna, as if that was all he ever wanted to see.

“You’re hands sound beautiful,” he said, softly.

“It’s supposed to be the ocean,” came her breathless reply.

“Then, perhaps, I’ve found a place even more breath-taking.”

Summer brought rain. And with the rain, came a fouling in Hiromoro’s mood.

The rainy season dragged through the humid, muggy months. The weather caused an overheating of the estate, and sweat to collect in collarbones and joints. The estate felt all the more isolated in these moments.

Hiromoro also did not visit Yahiko on these days.

Hisame found herself busy in the summer—spending most of her days out in the city, though under proper supervision that was forced upon her when she didn’t sneak her way out. Atsukane threw himself into his plans to go abroad, finally being given permission from Isao and the family to depart for the year.

With the weather as sour as it was, Mitsuhide was the only company regularly brought to his quarters, filling the damp air with stifling, halted conversation.

Hiromoro longed for Yahiko’s presence. He longed to hear his rich voice, his muted laughs, his gentle speech. He longed to hear his poems, longed so badly for his conversation and his humbly flirtatious compliments that would expand Hiromoro’s chest painfully wide.
But Hiromoro was not so lovestruck to not heed the warnings of how dangerous cats became in the rain. Rain brought out the most violent, the most malicious, the most drastic movements out of the creatures. How many stories were there from past zodiacs of how the cat would become nothing but a monster when the weather turned?

Yahiko was not as they said, Hiromoro knew this very well by now. But the rat inside Hiromoro was cruel and vicious. It had a control over his body that Hiromoro could not control. A need to obey the deity, a need to maintain order, a need to be a strong, intelligent, loyal rat.

He wasn’t so foolish as to think any zodiac would be different. And behind that cowardly excuse, he hid. Fear too arresting to visit the man that filled his thoughts so completely in these past months.

But what had truly become strange was that Hiromoro, too, longed for Tsuna.

With no excuse to dress in silk and paint his face, Hiromoro felt melancholy seep into skin and bones.

His body felt like another zodiac prison, overseen by the Sohmas. Hiromoro did not want to look in the mirror, did not want to dress as a man, did not want to fall into masculine speech that felt like rolling spikes on his tongue.

His hair was a comfort, long and feminine, and he let it flow out of low ponytails as many of the men in the estate would wear.

He longed for Tsuna. For her power. For the control she gave his body. For her bright speech, and clear thoughts. For her beauty. For her heart.

It felt silly, because surely Tsuna was still him somehow. Yet, a war collided in this body—a push and pull that had him grappling for control. And for a long time now, Hiromoro knew that he had been claimed by the rat.

But Tsuna?

It felt as though Tsuna could be claimed by nothing at all.

The rain finally broke, giving the rainy season a brief pause.

Tsuna wasted no time in her reappearance—climbing the pathway to the cat’s house so eagerly, she had to pause when she was only a few feet away to catch her breath—so as not to expose such apparent excitement.

Yahiko smiled when he saw her—as he always did, as if he never expected to see her again. Composed, she sat as she usually did at her perch in the window.

“I’ve missed you,” he said. “I’ve had no one to mock my poetry.”

“I do not mock,” she responded, laughter still in her voice. “The world you write about simply doesn’t exist.”

“And thank goodness,” he smiled. “Grass on beaches. Oceans made of fingers. What a chaos this world might be.”

“I couldn’t let it grow any bigger, for fear of what you might do to the animals,” Tsuna joked.
“Educate me on something else today, if you will,” Yahiko said, leaning closer to the window. He looked pale, almost sick. And his eyes were sunken in and tired. Tsuna tried to distract herself away from this by focusing on his easy smile.

“If I must.”

“Do you hear those sounds?”

Tsuna stayed quiet, lifting her head slightly as she listened carefully.

Distantly, she could hear something. Drums and chimes. A clattering of people. A laugh above the crowd. Rhythms that clashed against one another like symbols. It was distant, but distinct.

“Every summer I’m graced with this noise, but I’ve never known what it is.”

“It’s a festival,” she said, but that brought no clarity to Yahiko’s expression. “It’s a gathering for people in the city. With food and games and music and such.”

“A festival? What is being celebrated?”

“I’m not sure. Perhaps the solstice.”

“Are you not curious?” Yahiko laughed. “A celebration should be enjoyed by any who can partake.”

“Oh, I…” Tsuna looked away. “I cannot.”

“No?” He asked, so genuinely surprised. “What stops you?”

“It’s outside,” Tsuna motioned towards no direction in particular—as no matter where she gestured, it would be met with wall.

“Are you trapped in here?” Yahiko asked, voice so solemn it broke Tsuna’s heart. “Like me?”

“In a way.”

The words once spoken to her again and again played around in her mind.

Of how the outside world was terrifying. Of how it was something to be feared. Of how it was no place for a zodiac. Hiromoro’s thoughts mixed with that of Tsuna’s, and she felt her expression crumble.

“It’s atrocious of me to say such things to you,” Tsuna said, softly.

Yahiko reached beyond the bars, palm up, an inviting expression that allowed Tsuna to ignore it if she pleased. She didn’t. She couldn’t if she tried, and she placed her hand carefully over his own.

“Why do you fear the world, Lady Tsuna?”

She swallowed, feeling how her eyes turned red.

“I was… It was what… I was taught… Of how cruel a place the world is.”

“Who would teach you such a thing?”

“Why do you question me?!” Tsuna hissed back, taking back her hand. “Are you not aware that people put you in this cage? That people built this? That people have abandoned you?! Why do you
stay so kind here? The world does not deserve your forgiveness! Nor mine!”

Silence floated between them, hot tears forming in the corner of Tsuna’s eyes. The sounds of the festival floating over them as if a distant, unreachable memory.

“Perhaps it is because I’m in a place like this, that kindness is all the more forceful when it’s presented.”

Tsuna looked to him.

“Your kindness is so hard to ignore, it consumes my every thought,” he said, carefully.

“I’m not kind,” Tsuna sniffed. “I’m a selfish person.”

Infuriatingly, Yahiko only smiled.

“Is your selfishness bringing you here? To me?” Tsuna felt heat rise to her cheeks, and Yahiko could only chuckle in response. “Somehow, that makes me even happier.”

“Don’t smile like that,” she snapped, voice overtaken by how flustered she’d become. “You should be longing to go to that festival, instead. Why are you so strange?!”

“Go for me,” Yahiko said, instead.

“What?”

“Like the beach. Go in my place. Tell me about it. Please. Any world you tell me about rids me of longing.”

——

This was different than the beach. Of course it was different. Tsuna had never been outside of the walls before without Hisame.

Tsuna never existed outside of the cat’s cage, outside of Hisame’s grip, outside of Hiromoro’s tightly controlled fantasies.

It was a horrible idea, to face the outside world in what felt like such a horrible maintained disguise.

But Tsuna also knew that the world would not bend to Hiromoro as it would to Tsuna. Perhaps she was more curious than she wanted to be about what Tsuna could grant away from the Sohma house.

The first steps out of the hidden entrance in Sohma estate, and into the nearby festival felt as though they were being walked on the legs of a doe. Shaky, newborn, easily wobbled by any breeze. Tsuna’s heart beat frantically, manically, body taut and tense with nerves.

The sound of the festival was overwhelming. People chattered loudly over each other. They squished together on the pathway, making Tsuna all the more anxious as she kept pace with the crowd so as not to be bumped into.

The smells of the festival were overwhelming, however, and made her stomach grumble. And the music from afar seemed to bring melody to the directionless cacophony of voices.

“Young miss! Young miss!” Called out a man behind a booth—older, tan, and imposing how he stood with his hands crossed over his chest. “Care to try your luck?”
He motioned to a game behind the booth, a wooden ring toss that seemed to be weary with age.

“Only a few coins to play,” he smiled. Her eyes widened, searching her kimono fruitlessly. Of course. She had gone straight from Yahiko to the secret entrance, hoping wildly that no one would spot her—she’d not stopped for a coin purse back in her quarters.

“I… Sorry, I don’t have money on me.”

“I supposed we can let it slide for the most beautiful woman at the festival.”

Tsuna felt heat behind her cheeks, “Oh, I couldn’t.”

“Please! I insist! You’ll bring good luck to my stand!”

She hesitantly stepped forward, allowing the man to place the wooden rings in her hand. With nervous movements, not liking the feeling of being watched, she flicked her wrist and tossed each ring one by one—with only the second one landing on its target.

“That earns you a small prize, you know,” the man boomed a laugh, handing Tsuna a small, wooden doll—features carved into the woman’s expression.

“I’m a local carpenter here,” the man said. “My daughters always loved these dolls.”

“Did you make this?” Tsuna asked, eyes wide with disbelief.

“I did, young miss. I think she might be as pretty as you, don’t you think?”

“No, she’s much prettier.”

The man simply laughed at that.

——

Tsuna had only planned on being at the festival for a few moments, but the atmosphere of it all kept her enraptured more and more by each moment. She clutched the wooden doll as she walked, watching as people laughed and talked. The joy on their faces bringing a lightness to Tsuna.

At one point, the crowded separated in two, allowing men in customary, uniformed robes to march down the center playing their drums.

She watched as they howled and yelled in time, the beat of the drum vibrating beneath her feet. The concentration of the men as they hit each note. A young boy, much smaller than the rest, fell to the back of the formation, and he looked so focused on his drum that Tsuna couldn’t help but laugh, fondly.

It was beautiful.

Life being celebrated, life being bright and joyous. People wanting nothing more than to cherish a moment.

Yahiko would fit among the crowd perfectly.

On that thought, a sudden drop and a shiver reigned down Tsuna’s spine. She looked up, only to see the moon blotted out with clouds. Another drop falling on her cheek.

She’d wasted too much time here. She had only wished to gather some smells and sights and sounds
to bring back to Yahiko, she hadn’t meant to get so lost in the moment—to get so lost in what Tsuna so loved.

When the rain started again, Tsuna wouldn’t be able to see him. The world would fall back into its wretched balance of a gray world. And Tsuna needed to see Yahiko before the rain fell relentlessly again.

She rushed back to the estate, sneaking through the hole in the side of the wall, and running back to the familiar path of the cat. Staying hidden in gardens and shrubbery and avoiding the main pathways.

The rain was falling more steadily by the moment, but had yet to break into a downpour, and Tsuna prayed that the fear in her chest wouldn’t outweigh the sudden urgency to see Yahiko.

Finally, the cage came into view. Tsuna called out his name.

“Yahiko!” She called again. She was sure she looked a mess. Hair disturbed by branches and movement. Robes in slight disarray. Face touched with sweat as she panted.

The sounds of the festival were far and away now, drowned by the gentle, growing pitter of rain.

“Yahiko?” Tsuna approached the bamboo bars, peering inside. Only to find Yahiko where he normally sat, propped against the wall, dozing lightly.

Without thinking, she reached a hand out to him—adrenaline spiking at the fear of what she might awaken, but when she jostled him lightly through the bars of the window, he opened eyes that were completely unchanged—simply tired.

“Lady Tsuna?” He asked, drowsily, finally beginning to awaken. “I didn’t think you’d be back tonight.”

“Then why did you fall asleep by the window?” She smiled. He returned the expression easily.

“The rain…” He started. “It makes me tired. Paralyzingly so,” he sighed. “I feared you’d come by during a storm, and I wouldn’t even know—being so dead to the world.”

“It makes you tired?” Tsuna asked, eyes turning confused. “That’s all?”

“I can fall ill, as well,” he said.

Tsuna felt something angry tug inside her. Tired and ill? Tsuna had been fed story after story of the cat and its monstrous, angry temperament. Of how it could destroy and collapse buildings and flesh. How it smelled like rotting death and raged with a mind of its own, only seeking blood, only seeking violence.

Only to see the rain weaken a kind man.

“I know so little about you,” she said, softly. The rain started to pour harder, and it looked like a perilous struggle for Yahiko to stay awake.

“You know more than anyone else has cared to, my lady,” he said, with a lopsided smile. His eyes drooped, and Tsuna felt a surge of something warm and urgent bolt through her.

“Do not sleep in the presence of your lady,” she snapped, and he lifted his head up in obedience, chuckling at her sudden, petulant nature.
“Anything you say, Lady Tsuna.”

“Then stand,” she ordered.

He did so, almost wobbling on his feet, holding onto the bamboo bars for stability. He forced his half-lidded eyes on her.

The rain was soaking through Tsuna now. It deflated her hair, into long, deep, silver streams. Her robes clung to her body. And the black eye makeup clumped at her eyelashes.

“A lady like you doesn’t need to be caught in rain like this,” Yahiko forced out. “You must be cold.

“Then warm me,” she said, her voice just as commanding, but so soft, so unsure.

She reached her arms through the bars, circling them so she could cup Yahiko’s face gently, and brought him forward.

The space between the bars was too thin for either one to allow their heads through, but they could meet in the middle, meet where bamboo pressed into both their cheeks. Meet where wall parted for window, where outside met inside.

They kissed through bamboo.

Tsuna’s mouth coated with rain and lip stain, and Yahiko’s lips dry and bare. But despite his lethargy, he kissed her back with all his might. His hands clenching the bamboo bars desperately, his mouth following her command.

Tsuna let her wet fingers trail through Yahiko’s hair as she kissed him. Hard and sweet. Desperate and gentle.

No sensation would ever match the feeling.

Her heart was fluttering as she pulled away, rain pouring on her, yet Yahiko’s skin still dry as bone. His surprise had jolted an expression far more awake than earlier, and red was rising to his cheeks as he stared at Tsuna as if she were the only thing in the world.

Something inside her body protested, screamed, kicked, and shouted. But, regardless, she needed to kiss him once more. And he met her without a moment of hesitation.

——

When Tsuna finally broke herself free from Yahiko’s embrace through bamboo bars, she hurried down the path that led back to the streets of the main estate.

What she hadn’t expected was a familiar face to be staring back at her.

Hisame stood, umbrella poised over her head, eyes blazing with disbelief, disgust, pity. Tsuna felt something pulse in her stomach, her heart beating so fast, it felt as if it had simply stopped beating altogether.

“Hisa—”

“Is this what you’ve been doing? Where you’ve been going when you ask me to dress you up like this?! I thought it was some sort of strange joke, or—or some odd method of solace! But this?!”

“You don’t understand!” Tsuna yelled over the rain. “He’s a good man! He’s good to me!”
Hisame took an instinctive step back, as if the words burned her. Tsuna stepped closer.

“Please! Please do not speak of this to anyone!”

“Don’t touch me! You’ve gone insane!”

“Hisame, please! You’re better than the slow and common thoughts of this family! You know I would never lie to you! Please!”

“Hiromoro—”

“Do not call me that. I—I don’t go by that name. Not when I’m like this,” Tsuna brought her arms up to wrap around her, as if to steady herself with her own embrace. “Her name is Tsuna—I… She’s everything I wish to be.”

Tsuna could feel her eyes filling with tears as she stared at Hisame. The rain was beating down on them both, but only Tsuna was soaked by it. Hisame still looked frightened, unsure. Her eyes kept flitting to the pathway to the cat’s house, and Tsuna could only give her pleading, desperate eyes.

“This isn’t right,” Hisame said, almost too softly to hear over the rain. “Hi—You’re having an affair with a monster!”

“He’s not a monster! Nothing about that man is a monster! Men who kill as their instinct are monsters! Men who are nothing but malicious and cruel are monsters! Men who beat their wives and children—those are monsters! Men who you have rightfully avoided when they call on you! Those men are monsters! But Yahiko—! Yahiko—!”

Tsuna’s voice broke, tears streaming down her face as she wept. Her legs giving out, knees hitting the muddied ground. She knelt forward on her hands, half sobbing, half prostrated, bowing in a raw, open beg.

“Hisame, please,” she choked. Her tears coming easily as rain fell down on her.

But suddenly, she felt relief from the pounding thundering drops against her neck and back.

Tsuna peered up to Hisame, who kneeled above her—expression still apprehensive. Yet, she still gave Tsuna shelter from the rain under her umbrella. Still reached out to cup her soaked cheek as she lifted her face up to look at her.

“You’ve gotten my kimono all wet,” Hisame swallowed. Tsuna did her best to offer a smile through her tears.

“I’ll buy you another. One as beautiful as you look right in this moment.”

Hisame sighed, lifting Tsuna up with her, allowing her to lean against her shoulder, though Tsuna was soaking rain water onto Hisame.

“Come home,” Hisame said, already leading them there. “Tell me what’s happened.”

That night, Hisame listened. She carefully took in each word. She allowed Tsuna to detail each of her and Yahiko’s meetings. She listened, and didn’t recoil. Simply nodded, heart heavy, as she helped wash the make-up off of Tsuna’s face.

“Let’s sleep for now,” Hisame finally said when Tsuna ran out of words. “Morning will bring
answers, I’m sure.”

Tsuna nodded, and shortly after retired to her own quarters—but only after Hisame assured she wouldn’t tell a soul.

Laying in her futon, staring at the ceiling, listening to the rain patter against the estate, Tsuna’s heart wouldn’t stop pounding. It shifted from the fluttering warmth from Yahiko’s touch, from remembering such a tender kiss, to the pounding, unstoppable nerves of a body with a fever. At first Tsuna believed it to just be the anxiety of being discovered by her friend.

Only then, she vomited all the contents of her stomach onto the tatami. Her shivers uncontrollable.

Something inside her screeched.

The rat was furious with her.

She thought of the wooden doll she’d left behind with Yahiko. How the rain must be making him fevered, as well. She let her thoughts slide back to the feelings of his lips against hers, not caring how it spiked nausea in her—because something else, something untouched by her spirit, glowed and brightened at the memory each time.

Even as the fever lasted three more days, servants pressing cold cloth to her skin, Atsukane fussing over her condition, Tsuna couldn’t help but smile all the while.

——–

Mercifully, the rain came to a stop a few days later.

Yahiko was so absorbed in thought, he didn’t hear the doors slide open. In his grasp was the small, wooden doll left behind by Lady Tsuna. An object that only served to pull smile after smile out of him.

“What’s this?” Said a sudden voice. “Contraband?!?”

Yahiko yelped when the doll was pulled out of his grasp and into the hands of the maid, instead.

“Tatsu!” Yahiko whined, though his smile was still apparent.

“Where did you get this?” She questioned.

“I shouldn’t say,” Yahiko sighed exaggeratedly, smile teasing his lips.

“No secrets! They’re not allowed!” Tatsu giggled, plopping herself by the adjacent corner of the table, leaning in. “Does this have anything to do with those terribly mopey eyes of yours that you’ve had lately? Or with all those love poems?”

“How dare you say something so cruel to a friend,” Tatsu sighed. “Go on, Yahiko. You know how horrid my days can be. Tell me a story that will lift my spirits!”
Yahiko smiled at her, eyes creasing at the thought of the elegant lady that had started grace his window. How his heart would race just at the sight of her, just at the thought of her.

Even now he longed to see her. He could hardly wait for evening to fall.

“T’ve met someone. A lady. More beautiful than anything I’ve ever seen.”

“You haven’t seen much,” Tatsu teased, but her smile stayed warm. “A lady, you say? What’s she like? How on earth did you even meet?”

“She found me. She found this place, somehow. And when I saw her for the first time... only then had I realized just how much beauty I had been denied in this world.”

“Is she a Sohma?”

Yahiko’s smile dampened, “She is.”

“She must be one of the ladies from court,” Tatsu said, appraisingly. “She gave you this?”

“She did. She went to the summer festival and came back just to tell me what it was like. She won that for me.”

“I would be cautious,” Tatsu said. “The women of the court here are bored easily. Many times they’ll find sick ways to amuse themselves.”

“She’s not like that. Her feelings for me are genuine.”

“I certainly hope so.” Tatsu stared back at the doll, lips curving up, “And what does she look like? This gorgeous, mystery woman.”

Yahiko fell silent until Tatsu lifted her gaze to him.

“Yahiko?”

“She has eyes and hair of pure silver.”

Tatsu’s eyes widened, mouth falling open.

“Yahiko—That’s—”

“She cares for me. I know it. Please. Be happy for me, my friend. I’ve found what I could only read about in my mother’s poems for so long. Trust me, please.”

“Yahiko,” Tatsu said, only this time her voice came as a warning. “You need to be very, very careful.”

———

Autumn greeted two new dangerous additions; Yahiko and Tsuna.

Almost every night would have Tsuna visiting the cat’s cage, once the estate has settled to sleep, and once Tsuna would paint her face with a now well-practiced hand.

But days... days now belonged to Tsuna, whether she donned the robes or not. A rich, hungry curiosity for the outside world began to overtake every part of her. She would make excuses now to take the carriage out. She would coax Hisame to come with her on long, day journeys.
Conversation between them still remained tense throughout the season, but Hisame never said no when Tsuna asked to be painted on.

When Atsukane asked to venture out, beyond the gates, Tsuna would agree without a second thought.

She preferred the days, however, that allowed her to sneak away on her own—walking through the city, walking to the nearby shrines, taking in the world around her, all so she could report back to Yahiko what she saw that day.

But even at the side of Atsukane, even when Mitsuhide was made to come along with her, Tsuna could feel Hiromoro fading from her body. Replacing it with a person she knew all the better, loved all the more. To the point that she delayed when people called out to her as ‘Hiromoro.’

She didn’t mourn for him long. She couldn’t mourn for a man so entangled with a rat.

A month into autumn brought her back to Yahiko, their hands intertwining through the bars of the bamboo as they spoke in soft, hushed tones.

“I have built a house / With no windows and no walls / On a mountaintop; / Bamboo melts beneath the sun / And I see you for miles.”

“I think I like that one,” Tsuna hummed. “It reminds me of the poems written by courtesans from centuries ago.”

“Sounds like high praise,” Yahiko smiled. “Finally, I’ve improved past your harsh critiques. Perhaps all I needed was the right muse.”

Tsuna felt her cheeks warm, but grasped at Yahiko’s hands all the tighter. “Don’t mind critics. They only know how to tear apart—they don’t know how to create.”

“You don’t write your own poems?” Yahiko asked.

“I’ve studied poetry all my life,” Tsuna sighed. “I feel like everything has already been said.”

“Not by you,” Yahiko offered. Tsuna brushed aside the comment, rubbing her thumb back and forth on the back of the cat’s hand.

“Who taught you how to write the way you do? You’ve been isolated here your whole life.”

“That was my mother’s doing,” Yahiko smiled easily, though his eyes were sad and downturned.

“Your mother?” Tsuna thought for a moment, something clicking in her mind, “The woman who birthed you—is her name Yura?”

“That’s her,” Yahiko nodded. “One of the maids in the estate.”

“Of course,” Tsuna said. “She’s one of the elder maids. I’ve known her since I was a child. She’s always been very kind.”

“Tell me—is she doing well?”

“As far as I know,” Tsuna bashfully admitted, realizing she knew very little of the affairs of the estate’s employees. “Are you not able to see her?”

Yahiko stared past Tsuna, his features becoming solemn. Yahiko was such a positive, beautiful force.
Tsuna had so rarely seen him look so downtrodden. It made her grasp his hands even tighter.

“I haven’t seen my mother in six years,” Yahiko sighed.

“What? Why not?”

He swallowed back a heavy weight on his tongue, forcing up a smile. “She wasn’t always a maid. From what she told me, she was once a well-respected member of the court here.”

Tsuna blinked, “That must have been before my time.”

Yahiko nodded, “She became a maid when… when she gave birth to me. She was my father’s mistress—he was content to wash his hands of me when I was born. He wanted her sent away. But she pleaded to become a maid instead, if only just to watch over me.”

“That’s… beautiful. She… she taught you how to read? How to write? No wonder you do it so elegantly.”

He smiled at that, a bit more earnestly, “My mother had the most elegant hand. She spent her time with me here when I was a child every chance she would get. Once, she even slept here. She allowed me to curl up on her chest as a kitten.”

“You’re lucky… most mothers of the zodiac can’t stand to be around their children, if they survive the birth at all… I never even met my mother…”

Yahiko untangled one of his hands form hers to reach through the bar and cup Tsuna’s cheek. She leaned into the touch before a wave of embarrassment flooded through her. “Perhaps lucky is the wrong choice of word. I apologize.”

“Don’t apologize. I agree. I have wonderful memories of a mother who loves me.”

“Then why…?”

Yahiko sighed, “Apparently the Head Maid took a disliking to her. The moment my mother made a mistake, she used it as an excuse to stop her visits. My mother visited in secret for another year, but she’s been ill. She hasn’t been able to sneak herself to me in years. Especially not with the watchful eye they keep on her.”

“I had no idea,” Tsuna breathed. “I—I can fix this. I’ll tell them to put Yura back on the proper duty! I’ll force them to loosen the reigns on her! You deserve to see your mother!”

Yahiko simply laughed at her enthusiasm. “What a warrior I have on my side.”

“Don’t mock me, I’m serious.”

“I know. And you have no idea how happy that makes me,” Yahiko guided Tsuna’s face closer to the bamboo bars. Eyes warm, appreciative, loving. “I’ve learned a lot from the maids. With only few exceptions, they’re the only ones I’ve interacted with. And I know enough about them to know they’re dangerous. It’s best not to interfere with their affairs. For mother’s sake. Possibly even yours.”

Tsuna shook her head, though not enough to jostle Yahiko’s hand away. “It’s not right.”

“Somedays, I’m inclined to agree. How I wish so badly to tell my mother about you. Of the happiness that’s been planted since you stumbled into my life, drunk to the high heavens.”
Tsuna chuckled, “Don’t embarrass me.”

“Lady Tsuna,” he whispered. He brought her face closer, and once again they found themselves kissing through the bamboo bars of the cage. Tsuna’s lips overlapping Yahiko’s. Their touches gentle and tender.

They broke apart, and Tsuna could only smile at how the bamboo dented the skin of Yahiko’s cheek. She reached forward to caress the welt.

“These bars are becoming a nuisance,” Tsuna said, idly.

“I agree,” Yahiko breathed against her lips. “Do you think of embracing me, Lady Tsuna?”

She pulled herself away, a sudden fear spiking through her. “Don’t get too carried away. You’re still locked inside this cage. Thinking more on it will only cause us both pain.”

“I do not mean it that way,” he said, though nerves were clearly brushing against his words. “The door to the cage is not locked. It never has been.”

Tsuna’s eyes widened.

“You could... You could leave?”

“No,” Yahiko gave a mirthless chuckle. “No. For many reasons, that isn’t possible. However... if you wish... To join me in here.”

Tsuna went pale. Hiromoro went pale.

“Yahiko—!”

He quickly reached for her hand again, comfortingly rubbing his thumb on the back of her hand in rushed movements.

“I know this is not the proper place for a lady, I know it is beneath you. But I think of you... So tirelessly in the moments you are not here. My lips feel cold and useless when yours are not there, my hands feels as though it’s missing fingers when not locked with yours.”

Tsuna’s heart pumped all the faster, becoming so aware of how large her hands were, of how broad her shoulders were under her robes, of how she was no woman when her clothes were peeled back.

“Do you not think of me the same way?”

Tsuna snatched her hand back once more.

“Do not tell me what I feel!” She snapped in a voice all too low. Panic surged through her as she stood.

“Lady Tsuna?” Yahiko called after her, voice apologetic and hurt.

“I must go.”

“Please, don’t! I apologize! I don’t care if I only look at you through a window, if I never touch you again. But if you leave now you’ll take with it my heart ripped out of my chest.”
She took another step back.

She let this go on for too long.

What on earth was she expecting from all of this? What on earth could come from it at all?

Of course he would want more from her.

Of course this would have to end.

Despite the hot tears welling in Yahiko’s eyes, Tsuna turned and rushed down the path and back to her quarters.

————————

Winter brought frost. And snow. And cold.

Hiromoro let his chest freeze.

Hiromoro walked like ice. Cold. Stiff. As if sporting natural shades of black and blue.

Tsuna slept under the surface as if trapped beneath a frozen lake. Shivering and cold.

————————

“It’s important that you keep Hiromoro’s spirits lively.”

The voice washed over Mitsuhide, but his eyes glued themselves firmly to his mother, breathing weakly in her futon, eyes sunken in, skin pale.

“I’ve heard he’s been moping around the estate.”

Mitsuhide finally looked up. His father’s eyes were manic, looking everywhere but his mother, focused so solely on Mitsuhide that he thought his skin might turn red as if from a sunburn.

“You’re there to win his favor. You should be reason enough to keep him uplifted — you’re practically his little brother by now!” His father cackled.

“We’re really different,” Mitsuhide sighed, his hand reaching out for his mother’s.

It was moments like these that he wished so much for her to wake up. To speak to his father in that calming voice that she once had. To look at Mitsuhide, to caress his cheek, to keep him by her side as she did always.

He would have much preferred to spend his days here, by his mother, than another with Hiromoro listening to his boring, confusing poems. Or watching dull plays, or listening to stuffy music in the court.

Before he could truly mourn these things, the back of his father’s hand came down hard against his cheek, and he collapsed onto the floor.

“I don’t care how different you are! If you want status in this family, you need the favor of the god! And the only way to obtain that is through Hiromoro—do you understand me?!”

Mitsuhide simply nodded from where he lay strewn out on the floor.
He wished for other things other than his mother’s healing, too.

He wished to grow up, to grow bigger, to grow stronger. To become a man with a louder voice than his father, a heavier stride than his father, a stronger hand than his father. He would slap him hard again and again—mirroring every place he once left welts and bruises on his own body.

“Respond when you’re spoken to, are you mute?” His father growled. “And get up! Real men learn to take a hit with dignity.”

Mitsuhide lifted him up so that he was sitting again, eyes void of the fire growing in the pit of his stomach.

“Yes, father.”

But more than anything, he wished to leave behind this horrid estate. And whenever he did, he knew he wouldn’t look back once.

“"You’ve not been yourself,” Hisame said.

Hiromoro looked up at her from where he lay in his futon, only to roll over to face the wall away from her. What a gruesome understatement her words were.

Hisame only sighed. “I do not enjoy seeing you like this, you know.”

He only responded by curling further into himself.

“Do you refuse to talk to me?”

Silence.

Hisame shook her head, clicking her tongue. But for a long while, she let silence settle. When she spoke again, her voice was a soothing, rich tone. Comforting and caring.

“I really did think you’d gone mad, you know. I considered for a long time telling someone about what I saw. For a month, my tongue felt as though it might burst whenever I was in the same room with Atsukane. It felt as though I was lying to him, l—it’s a difficult feeling.”

Hiromoro felt tears start to well in his silver eyes, but still he remained silent.

“You’ve been happier. I’d not even realized what that looked like in you. I think, perhaps, because you’ve been buried in something so dark for so long. And I thought, anything that could lift you up out of something most of us down here couldn’t even see—well, perhaps it—he isn’t so monstrous, after all. Like you said.”

The tears broke away, falling down the side of Hiromoro’s cheek. He didn’t even lift a hand to wipe them away. He was so tired of others seeing him cry. He was tired of being weak.

“Fine. You don’t have to speak. I just came by to give you a gift. Open it when you can, alright?” She stood, standing over him, not moving for a moment. “You… seem happier when you’re her.”

Hisame moved away.

Hiromoro listened to the door open and close, but laid there for another moment or so before curiosity seized him.
Sitting up, wiping his eyes, he looked at the package that was left for him. Ornate, beautiful, wooden. Almost as big as one of the tatami panels.

He slid the wooden cover away and marveled at what rested on top.

Powder, lip stain, black pencil for eyebrows and eyes, and another for teeth. Hiromoro smiled weakly down at the bottles before moving them aside. Packing paper folded over the rest of the contents of the package, and Hiromoro gently pulled it away.

There, folded, lay a beautiful, ornate kimono. Fine silk.

The base color was black, but atop played an intricate pattern of New Year pine branches covered in snow. Red berries cascading from the trees, sparrows flying from tree to tree, snow falling in elegant clumps throughout the whole of the fabric.

It was the most beautiful thing they’d ever seen.

A pale hand came forward to caress the fabric, feeling the smooth, light feeling of expensive mastery in the cloth.

But on top of that was a card. Simple, white, with only two words written in Hisame’s neat cursive:

For Tsuna.

Tears fell from their eyes as they quickly repackaged the kimono and shoved it away.

He missed Yahiko so desperately. But it wasn’t until just then he realized how badly he missed Tsuna, too.

———

The calligraphy brush shook in Hiromoro’s normally graceful hand. The shoji doors doing little to keep out the cold. Mitsuhide watched, his own brush poised, trailing less elegant strokes of the older zodiac. Even with a tremor.

There was silence between them again. As there always was, especially as of late.

“It’s cold,” Mitsuhide said. “I know you transform easily. You can rest for the day, if you need.”

Hiromoro dropped the calligraphy pen, ink splotching on the paper as Hiromoro fought off a shiver, clutching the robes more tightly around a shaking body.

Couldn’t he be of a normal birth? Someone who simply shook when the weather was cold? Without feeling the animal crawl beneath the skin at every opportunity?


——

Their walk led them to the main gates, watching idly as the gates broke open now and again for carriages, or merchants with crates of goods and food.

“I asked the chef awhile ago,” Hiromoro began, filling the space between him and the younger boy. “I asked where the fish came from. He said it comes fresh from a fishing town miles down the coast.”
Mitsuhide looked up at him, a forced curiosity in his eyes, “Oh?”

“He said that it’s the only trade that village knows. That the people work and eat and suffer and celebrate together. As one family would. When we purchase fish from them, we feed the village.”

“Sounds like Sohma House,” Mitsuhide said, idly.

“Does it?”

The dog boy looked up at Hiromoro again, head tilted. Hiromoro didn’t even spare him a glance. “I wonder what a town like that might look like. Small and intimate. People with skin stained by sun. The ocean at your doorstep. Friendly people to greet you.”

“It probably smells funny,” Mitsuhide shrugged. “I don’t like fish.”

Hiromoro sighed, but before the aborted conversation could continue the gates opened once more to let in Goichi, trailed by his own servants. Hiromoro looked to Mitsuhide when he clicked his tongue at the sight of the boar approaching them.

“What has you two standing out in the snow like corpses?” Goichi snarled.

“Corpses don’t stand,” Mitsuhide replied. Goichi merely shoved the butt of his dagger onto Mitsuhide’s shoulder, causing him to give an annoyed hiss of pain.

“Goichi,” Hiromoro greeted, body tensing. “The greetings to your nephew become more civilized everyday.”

“He needs to learn to toughen his skin, otherwise he’ll become flimsy and useless like you.”

“Rather he grow to be like his uncle? I would aim for the head next time, then.”

Goichi snarled at Hiromoro, baring his teeth like a dog, but he restrained himself from saying anything more. “If you’re here, Hiromoro, who hangs around Hisame like a trained pup?”

“If you’re asking me where she is, I do not know. But I assure you, while she may tolerate a trained pup, a wild piglet is not wanted in her menagerie.”

Hiromoro couldn’t help but feel pride when Mitsuhide let out a small snort. The feeling was short-lived when Goichi took his hand to Hiromoro’s chest, shoving him backwards into the snow.

“Fancy words don’t defend you in battle,” Goichi said smugly, as Hiromoro did his best to lift himself up. Without another word, Goichi went on his way, chuckling servants trailing behind.

The snow dug into the back and clothes of Hiromoro, who shivered all the more. With no feeling of warmth left in his body, he transformed in the snow.

————————

“Stay inside if you’re going to transform,” Hisame sighed. Hiromoro had instructed Mitsuhide to carry his rodent form to Hisame’s quarters, and he did so without a word.

Now, Hiromoro laid in his rat form behind the ornate changing panel, fresh clothes having already been brought to him. Hisame lounged at her table, hair and robes splayed out ethereally, a woman so completely unaffected by the cold.

Mitsuhide did not join her at the table, instead pressing his back against the wall, staying silent.
“If I want to take a stroll, I should have the freedom to do so,” Hiromoro called back.

The rat form was disgusting. The feeling of being improperly placed in a body that was not his seethed through fur. Hiromoro could feel how nail broke through skin to make claws. Could hear the squeaking rustle of rats. Could feel ears twitch on reflex.

Hiromoro didn’t want the reflexes of a rat. It made him sick.

“You’ve become so stubborn, you know,” Hisame said. “Though, I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised.”

A puff of smoke filled the room, and suddenly Hiromoro was sat naked behind the changing panel, faced with a mirror.

The feeling of being improperly placed did not fade.

A figure stared back in the mirror. One that seemed almost unfamiliar without touches of make-up and twisted around in feminine kimonos. Hiromoro hadn’t even realized how much he had been avoiding his own reflection since he stuffed Tsuna away.

But now, looking in the mirror, he couldn’t see anything but her. Though her limbs were longer, firmer, more masculine—though her chest was flat, her shoulders broad.

Hiromoro—No, that name did not suit. The person who stared back in the mirror did not want to be called by such a name.

Tsuna felt as though she was being unleashed, as though she was looking at herself for the first time. Fresh out of a transformation that felt sick and displaced, Tsuna felt herself claim her human body just as viciously as the rat did when she transformed.

Tsuna hadn’t been painted on—Tsuna had been here all the while. Kimonos or no.

“Goichi was searching for you,” Tsuna said, still marveling somewhat at herself.

“Yes,” Hisame’s tone was grave. “I know why.”

“Will you tell me?”

The body in the mirror covered itself, and Tsuna could see herself come through as she dressed. They were not the clothes she wanted. Not the body she wanted. She pinched the waist of her obi tighter, even if it had to be that of a man’s, and let her hair flow freely.

She could barely find the strength to finish dressing, but realized a long stretch of time had passed since Hisame spoke.

“Hisame?” She called. Finally stepping out from behind the panel to join her at the table.

“I did not want to say while I could not look you in the eye,” Hisame began. “He’s asked for my hand.”

“He wishes to marry you?” Tsuna asked back.

Hisame nodded.

A moment of silence. Only for Tsuna to begin laughing, deep and uncontrollable in her belly.
“Don’t laugh!” Hisame scolded.

“I’m sorry,” Tsuna said between breaths, trying to control herself. “I simply cannot believe he’d act on such a delusion.”

“Delusion?”

“Don’t look at me as if I’m insulting you,” Tsuna shook her head. “You are a picture of grace and divinity. You’re cultured and intelligent. Perhaps the most beautiful woman who has ever lived.”

Hisame looked to glow under the praise, “Perhaps not the most. But certainly second in show.”

Tsuna felt heat rise to her cheeks, but smiled humorously as she continued, “Goichi is nothing but a boar. An animal for a man.”

“Aren’t we all?” Hisame chuckled.

“Goichi takes it to lengths unimaginable. He must find great conversation among pigs.”

Mitsuhide covered another small laugh with a cough, and the two brought their eyes to the boy, suddenly.

“You’re too harsh with him,” Hisame corrected when she looked back at Tsuna.

“You make it sound as if he took his rejection well—something I can barely conceive.”

“Well, I…” Hisame faltered. Tsuna’s eyes turned grave and surprised.

“Hisame, please tell me you sent him away.”

“I’ve yet to answer him,” she was quick to defend. “It’s a lot to consider. You know that marriages between zodiac can be strong and full. We can embrace freely, for one—”

“You could embrace the stone base of a mountain without turning into a horse, that does not make it fit to marry!”

“His family is good, even amongst the Sohmas! I have to consider these things! Women in the zodiac have always been easily discarded! Who is to say I would not be married and sent away to be forgotten until I die living as a cut-out tumor of this family! I have built a life for myself here. I have a certain freedom I enjoy. I have my ladies, my friends, my city, my home. Goichi is simple and easy to control. Most women would jump at the chance to have such autonomy over a marriage.”

“You’re not thinking clearly,” Tsuna rolled her eyes. “He is a violent, angry, petty man. He murdered a man on these grounds!”

“A servant!”

“Do we think of them lesser than animals now?! Is that the type of people we’ve become? That we can dismiss something so wicked if it happens so beneath our rank?!” Tsuna near screeched, feeling words that had been locked away rise to the surface.

“It does not matter how we feel about it,” Hisame tried, exasperated. “He served his punishment! Atsukane has allowed him to return.”

“Atsukane would not have sent him away at all if I had not demanded it!” Tsuna cried. Hisame’s eyes sharpened.
“What do you mean?”

Tsuna could hear Mitsuhide shuffle in the corner but discarded it, choosing to set her focus on her friend.

“It means, no one should commit a crime so heinous without consequence. Men who believe they can do whatever they like are dangerous. I demanded Atsukane send him away—I wanted him gone for twenty years. But Atsukane only had him leave for one.”

“I never knew that,” Hisame said. “I knew you two did not get along, but I never knew you took such issue—”

“I do. As should you. That’s the fear you would be marrying into.” Tsuna fists were clenched so tight, she could feel her nails trying to pierce the skin.

“He would never… He would never do that to me,” Hisame sighed.

Tsuna scoffed, “You have doubt clear in your voice.”

“Then what would you suggest?! I’ve already outstayed my welcome within this family as an unmarried woman. I know my life here will be quick to crumble if I do not find myself an anchor!”

“I am your anchor! I am your friend. I can speak to Atsukane—make sure no harm comes to you. That you are left alone inside the estate. Free to live your life until you happen upon a man worthy of what you are.”

Hisame sighed, “No such man exists.”

Tsuna huffed a laugh. “Will you trust me?”

Hisame bowed her head with a smile. “I suppose, if I must.”

Tsuna took Hisame’s hand in her own and brought to her lips for an affection peck. The two smiling at each other. Lost in conversation, unthinking of the dog boy who sat quietly by the wall.

By the time the celebration for the new year approached, Hiromoro felt as though she’d reunited with Tsuna—but her heart still longed for Yahiko. Others were quick to notice around the estate, commenting on the rat’s glum, snappish demeanor.

Being so fraught with feelings for the lowly cat had brought new troubles to Tsuna, as well. Sickness was quick to come, even more so in the cold, frosty air. By the time snow completely covered the gardens, fevered illness had come and gone in Tsuna’s body like a bird to its nest.

Bedridden, Tsuna could only think more of the cat. Of Yahiko. But deep in her body she knew to reveal herself would mean to be hated by a man she so willingly deceived as result of her selfish desires.

The thought of being rejected, being cast away by the cat, only sent pulses of thick, heady nausea through her.

Tsuna stared out the open shoji doors, far and away, as if she might be able to see through the trees, through the hedges, through the piled snow, to the house on a hill and a kind man’s smile.

Someone wept—she wasn’t sure who. Hiromoro, perhaps—having been fought over like a prize
of war. Perhaps the rat, throwing a tantrum like a child, wanting a stronger, better, more obedient vessel. Whoever it was that leaked tears through this body, the comfort seemed to come from Tsuna—holding a confused child like a mother might.

And she was holding her together more durably than she’d ever experienced in her life.

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“Are you well enough to be walking around?” Atsukane asked, concern clear and unsubtle for his friend. Tsuna smiled, nodding as they walked the grounds, observing the new years preparations.

“Don’t worry about me. I will always be well enough to honor our yearly tradition.”

Each year, Atsukane and herself would walk the grounds the day before the celebrations. It started as children, when the two would pester the maids and chefs, but it was something they’d never been able to outgrow.

Mitsuhide followed, as well, having no other place to be, and with his father insisting that he was just as eager to join their ritual. Though he seemed impassive as always, Tsuna found it was always best to ignore the boy and let him trail behind as he pleased.

“I have been worried, you know,” Atsukane finally said. “You’ve been so ill lately… I set to sail in two months time.”

“We’ll write. It will only be for a year.”

“That’s not what I mean,” Atsukane sighed. “Being separated from the god can cause problems for zodiacs. I already anticipate being weakened be this trip. But I’ve prepared myself. I have done my best to make my body healthy and strong.”

Tsuna chuckled and Atsukane gave a gruff of offense. “Once winter passes, I’ll be fine. And you’ll have returned by the next New Year.”

“I wish you would take me seriously.”

“I’m not sure what it is you want from me,” Tsuna said, flicks of humor still in her voice.

“Come with me.”

The two stopped their stroll abruptly. Tsuna’s eyes wide and staring back at Atsukane, fearfully. Mitsuhide cut between them, more eager than Tsuna had ever seen.

“Could I come?” The boy asked.

Atsukane forced his gaze to Mitsuhide, “Well… If your father agrees, and if you’re under the watch of Hiromoro, I don’t see why not.”

Mitsuhide smiled, the first time Tsuna had ever seen. And he ran ahead, his small dog trailing behind him, barking happily as Mitsuhide laughed like a child.

“Kane, I—”

“I’ve seen changes in you, Hiromoro.” Tsuna ducked her head at the comment. “You’ve been more curious about the world. Like me! Whatever darkness overcame you in these past years, you look as though you’ve broken through. Join me! See the world with me! I want my brother by my side, I want to know he’s safe and cheerful.”
“I don’t… I’ve never been further than the local shrine! I’ve never done more than wade my toes on
the coast—I’ve never imagined—”

“Forget your fears! Does it not excite you?”

Tsuna blinked.

It did.

It excited her more than she could say. Yahiko had shown her a side of the world that she longed to
embrace more and more. All from behind bars. Tsuna had taken the hand of her old, mangled,
tortured soul, and brought it forward.

And she was hungry for the world.

Holland? How thrilling. How beyond dreams. To leave this estate where so much pain had laid
bare before her.

To be far and away from Goichi—a murderer—and the maids, the servants, the cruelty of this small,
stifling place. To not have to walk past where the boar had shed the blood of another so easily, and
have to pretend as though it was nothing but a patch of grass or snow or dirt or leaves.

Of course, she was ready to go.

“I don’t know,” Tsuna’s voice quivered.

How was she supposed to answer such a thing? Though she longed for the faux-freedom Atsukane
had crafted for himself, how was she supposed to leave behind her still beating heart in that cage?
Though she had denied herself any meeting with Yahiko, the idea of so definitely being away from
him left an ache in her chest.

She was still running from that man. She was still hiding herself away. Because perhaps she still had
hope that he could love her still, even knowing what she was—who she was.

Though she was far from ready to release that hope and turn it into decision—when either option
meant her ruin, for sure.

“I don’t know, Kane,” she replied, almost manically. Her whirring thoughts surely playing out on
her face. “You can’t ask me to make a decision like that all of the sudden!”

She turned away from him, only briefly catching the eyes of the young boy who was staring back at
the two.

Atsukane put a hand on her shoulder, drawing her attention back.

“Please. Just consider the option. I want you on that ship with me. We are brothers who should not
be separated.”

“My mother would have mourned having a child like you had she lived,” Tsuna teased, voice still
heavy with indecision. Atsukane laughed.

“You will think about it, right?”

“I promise nothing more,” Tsuna said. “Can we please just continue our walk?”

Atsukane continued forward without another word, but a smile on his face. Tsuna could feel herself
grow ill again.

By the final day of the New Year’s celebrations, Tsuna had still not responded to Atsukane, nor had she visited Yahiko in the cage. It felt so wrong to be partaking in the celebrations, so distant and apart from Yahiko—as if he were someone so easily forgotten.

Wasn’t she just as bad as the rest in that case? Wasn’t she no different than a zodiac who thought themselves above the cat?

With this heavy heart, she forced her way through the 4 days of drinking, eating, dancing, and music.

No rooster was born among them, but Mitsuhide welcomed the year of the dog with a solitary dance. Tsuna would always clutch Atsukane’s hand at the dances each year, as his spirit mourned for the missing animals. Of the 14 who could be cursed, only 8 were alive—many not having been born into the generation and one, the rabbit, having died only a few days after its birth nearly three years ago.

By the final day of the banquet, the seven gathered on their own. Atsukane, the god. Tsuna, the rat. Isao, the dragon. Hisame, the horse. Naruse, the monkey. Mitsuhide, the dog. Goichi, the boar.

Yahiko, the cat, locked away to be forgotten for another year.

They would celebrate together, only weeks before Atsukane would depart abroad. Regardless, the night was lively.

The maids dressed in more formal attire for the event, coming forward to refill wine and food as the night went on. It was an event that older maids had the privilege of serving, and the faces of the women were older, mature, sharp, and wise.

Lady Shino led the formation of maids, looking as neat and strict as always. A woman that Tsuna could never picture a year younger—as if she was born to the world fully grown. Towards the end of the night, however, Tsuna realized something strange.

“Where is Yura?” Tsuna asked to Lady Shino over the guttural laughs of Goichi when the maid went to refill Atsukane’s wine.

Yura was one of the few elder maids that always consistently waited on the inner circle. But tonight she was nowhere to be found.

“She passed,” Lady Shino say simply.

“What? When?” Tsuna’s heart sank.

“This morning, Master Hiromoro,” she said, voice even and unaffected.

“What a shame,” Atsukane said, forcing his voice to become solemn though laughter was still flushed on his face. “She was a good maid.”

“She was the cat’s mother,” Naruse said. “I’m surprised she lived as long as she did.”

“That’s vile,” Hisame quipped, rolling her eyes.

“If anything it’s a compliment! How durable must her ladyship have been to survive the head of a...
monster,” Naruse laughed, which had Goichi joining in, as well. Both red with alcohol.

“I would venture to say your head would have been an even larger challenge,” Hisame gave back easily. Goichi laughed even harder, Atsukane joining now, too, while Isao just shook his head.

Tsuná’s face remained solemn, “Should someone tell—Someone tell the cat of his mother?”

“Oh. I suppose,” Atsukane chuckled into his cup. “Shino, send one of the girls over tomorrow.”

“The ugliest one!” Goichi roared, and Naruse and Atsukane laughed again.

“Yes, Master Atsukane,” Lady Shino retreated back to her post. Tsuna and Hisame locked eyes over the table.

“Don’t you find your jokes a little cruel?” Hisame finally spoke.

“Only fools show sympathy for a monster,” Naruse said, easily.

“It’s true. It’s no man up there. I’ve seen it in its true form.”

Tsuná’s eyes widened, and the rest of the zodiacs leaned in to listen.

“It didn’t try to kill you?” Mitsuhide asked, eyes wide and childish.

“It was restrained,” Atsukane replied, leaning in to tell the story. “But I can assure you, all the stories of the past are true. There is nothing in that cage but a demon of death. Regardless of some beads.”

“What did it look like? Did it have big teeth?” Mitsuhide pressed. “Eyes spilling blood? Stench of burning skin?”

“How did we find ourselves upon such a lively topic,” Naruse laughed.

“This is hardly how I wished to celebrate the new year,” Isao agreed.

“The boy is curious! Let him be!” Goichi boomed, giving Mitsuhide a harsh slap on his small back. “Little boys should hear stories about monsters. It helps them in war!”

“Should he practice to prepare for war, as well? Like his uncle?”

“Are you attempting to say something, Naruse? Surely a respected officer such as yourself wouldn’t cross a samurai’s son.”

“I wouldn’t dream of such a thing!” Naruse laughed again.

Conversation continued on, and Tsuna couldn’t help but feel stifled and hot in her robes. The wine felt sour on her tongue, and pressure built behind her eyes. She could not be in this room for a moment longer. When the conversation became drunken and rowdy again, Tsuna excused herself quietly to get some air on the balcony, away from the noise and light.

She stared out. From the central house of the main estate, Atsukane could only see gardens, but could hear the accompanying celebrations of other Sohmases in their own homes behind the wall.

From the cage they heard that festival all the way at the shrine—what was Yahiko hearing tonight? Alone and cold in his dark room? Was he thinking of her?
“Hiro?”

Tsuna turned at the voice more than the name, faced with Atsukane. The god gave him a worrying glance, and it was only then that Tsuna realized she was crying.

“What’s happened? Are you alright?” He asked, growing closer.

Tsuna ducked her head, shaking it, wiping the tears away, “Don’t concern yourself with me.”

“What’s made you upset?” He pressed, ignoring her.

“I…” Tsuna began. Quietly, she sighed, Atsukane’s gaze intense on her swollen, silver eyes. “Do you really see the cat as nothing more than a monster? I… I’ve never met him myself, but Yura once spoke fondly of him to me. She was a kind woman. To think of her child as a monster, it’s hard to imagine…”

“Hiro—”

“What if we’ve done something horribly wrong? A grave sin against this world? What if we’ve locked away a man with no reason as to why?”

“You’re talking insane. Stop it.” Atsukane commanded. Tsuna felt her mouth click shut. “You’re beginning to sound like the priest from the story. Foolish and naive. I’ve seen the cat. I know what he is. He’s the reincarnated evil that comes with this curse, he’s nothing but a deformation upon this family.”

“How could you know that?”

“Because I know! I’m your god, Hiro! You don’t question me like this! What has gotten into you? Crying over some cat! I’ll forgive much, Hiro, and I don’t taunt and tease you like the others do, but you are truly nothing but a weak man if you find pity in your heart for that creature.”

Tsuna looked at him, the words of her god hitting harsh and grating against her body. She felt as though she might be ill again. Her own love for Yahiko fighting against the beating of god’s commands.

“Why do you speak so harshly to me?” Tsuna breathed, willing herself to keep her sick in.

“I don’t mean to,” Atsukane sighed. “But I’m growing irritated by your… your… sickly demeanor! You are the rat, Hiro. You could be anything you like! You could go anywhere, have anything, have anyone! But you sit in this estate and rot away. Why do you think I long for you to come with me so badly?”

“Because you’re a persistent, foolish man,” Tsuna bit out. “You don’t know what my weakness is!”

“Don’t speak out of term to me!”

“Why should I let you attack my character?”

“Because you do not answer me! So do so! Now! I command you to!”

“NO!”

The two blinked at each other. Atsukane’s heart breaking in his eyes, mirrored only by Tsuna’s gaze.

“No?” Atsukane whispered.
Tsuna felt a cold chill through her at the word. But she stood her ground.

“I will not go with you. I do not want to.”

“But, Hiro—”

“You asked for my answer, and I’ve given it to you.”

Atsukane’s features contorted into a glare.

“Why do I waste my time on you?” He snarled, before retreating back to the banquet.

The words felt like a dagger. Tsuna felt her heart beat frantically as if trying to pump blood to a corpse, trying desperately to animate it.

She didn’t want to be here, she needed to leave. Without a second thought, she retreated from the main estate, heading to her own quarters. There she shouted for the maids to leave her be, shooing away any servant and making sure they were far and away from her.

She reached for the gifted kimono that she had kept hidden away and dressed herself, quick and messy, hair left down, a quick powdering of make-up to make her face pale, along with black to outline the eyes, and red on the lips. It was hurried, and she feared she looked monstrous under the light. But she needed so badly to see him.

She needed so badly to feel his kindness.

——

Mitsuhide hid himself away from the opening door, so Atsukane wouldn’t spot him when he stormed back to the banquet.

The dog boy watched as the god returned to the party, the voices of the other zodiacs rising over the crowd. He peered out the doors, just in time to watch Hiromoro run away. Mitsuhide felt his hands clench, hot pulses of anger churning in his stomach.

He should have known better than to rely on someone so weak, so careless, so selfish.

Just days ago Hiromoro was clear and curt when he spoke against Goichi, giving such a display of friendship for Hisame.

But if Hiromoro knew of Goichi’s true nature, why would he deny Mitsuhide the only opportunity to escape him? To his escape his father? To escape this estate that he seemed to loathe just the same as Mitsuhide—perhaps the only thing they shared in common.

Hiromoro refusing to travel to Holland meant the end of Mitsuhide’s chances, as well. Even if he begged the god, he knew he had no power over him still. He knew that he hadn’t charmed Hiromoro enough to be brought into that circle—no matter how much his father wished for that outcome.

But Mitsuhide couldn’t care less about all that. Ever since his mother had fallen near-dead, the only thing he desired was to find a way out of this world, and Hiromoro had taken that away! Because he was a coward!

Mitsuhide sat himself next to Goichi back at the banquet. Hisame and Atsukane talked in hushed tones at the end of the table, and Mitsuhide snorted when he watched Goichi’s gaze fall on the horse.
“What? Have something to say?” Goichi asked, voice slurred with alcohol.

“She’s not even that pretty,” Mitsuhide said, crossing his arms. “And she’s much smarter than you. You’ll make a terrible match.”

“That’s my future wife you speak of?” Goichi snarled, grabbing Mitsuhide by the collar and shaking him about.

“I don’t think she is,” Mitsuhide let a devilish smile play on his young lips. “Not after what Hiromoro told her.”

The sounds of the party could certainly still be heard from here. But it was faint. As if it were miles and lands and seas away.

Tsuna shook as she came down the path through the hedges, heading towards a familiar window, but finding no one there. Of course not. Why should Yahiko still be waiting for her all these months later.

She swallowed, circling the house to a part she’d never allowed herself to see. Shoji doors stood tall, looking as though they were sealed shut—as they must have been. Yahiko must have been mistaken, there was no way that the doors were left unlocked.

The slide of wood on wood startled Tsuna when she opened the door, and tentatively she walked inside, kicking her sandals off gracelessly.

Her legs were shaking as she walked down the entryway, seeing now in real time what she’d always spotted through bamboo bars. Though her body still trembled, she felt the edge of her nausea finally settle inside the walls of the cage. It was a strange feeling—oddly oppressive. As if some force was weighing against her organs, but she couldn’t find it completely unwelcome.

Lamp light did its best to fill the house, and Tsuna followed it to the main living area. Yahiko was there. His back turned to her, writing furiously in the pages of a journal. His orange hair looking even softer in the dim, yellow light.

“Yahiko?” She tried, quiet to match the air of the house.

He turned immediately, standing quickly when he saw her. “Lady Tsuna!”

He approached her, but quickly stopped himself. They stood feet away, staring at each other.

“You shouldn’t be in here,” Yahiko said, fearfully.

“You invited me,” she said, voice hopeful. “Unless you want me to go.”

“No!” Response immediate. “No, I… I never thought I would see you again. I’ve wanted nothing more than to apologize for upsetting you that day. I did not mean what I said.”

She took a step forward. “You didn’t?”

Yahiko swallowed, “I shouldn’t.”

Tsuna hummed, closing her eyes as if in pain. Her hand trembled as she brought it up, an invitation to meet his, that he readily accepted. He intertwined his fingers with her own, but made no move to step forward.
“I’ve come to say goodbye,” Tsuna said, unable to keep tears from falling onto her cheeks. “I’m going to leave this place.”

“What?” Yahiko asked, eyes wide, chest sucking in a breath. “You’re leaving?”

Tsuna nodded.

“I can’t live in this world anymore. It only holds pain for me. It took me so long to realize that I have no reason to be trapped here, within this estate. I feared the outside world so deeply, but I—if not for you I never would have known that I could risk such a life away from this wretched place.”

Her tears were consistent now, falling evenly. Still her guilt grew hot in her throat at speaking of freedom to a caged man. Of crying so selfishly in front of the one she deceived.

“I’m glad.”

His voice broke through, and she looked up at him tearfully.

“This is no place for a lady. You deserve a full life. You deserve a world that’s free and happy.”

He smiled at her, warm and kind, as if she hadn’t hurt him so gravely, as if she hadn’t been so cruel and distant to him.

Her tears came out in sobs, thick and suffocating, and she collapsed to her knees, though her hand stayed bound to his. He approached her, arms beginning to open.

“Don’t!” She cried. “Don’t embrace me!”

He didn’t, instead he kneeled before her, tentatively taking his free hand to lift her face to his. Another sob escaped her as she looked at him.

“I’ve lied to you,” her voice shook. “I’ve fallen so deeply in love with you, and still I’ve done nothing but deceive you. I’m so wretched.”

His hand clutched hers tighter, and she could see tears of his own beginning to form.

“You’ve fallen in love with me?”

She nodded, chin still held in his fingers.

She had never seen him smile so wide.

“Lady Tsuna, anyone would be a fool not to return those feelings.”

She shook her head, “Then be a fool! You… You will not transform when you embrace me.”

Yahiko stared at her, confused.

“Because you are the rat?”

Tsuna’s eyes widened as she stared up at him, “You knew?”

He smiled back at her, “Your hair is like pure, flowing silver. Your eyes are just the same.”

“You—You knew!”

“I did not know it was a secret,” Yahiko admitted.
“But…” Tsuna breathed shakily. “Surely you must know that the rat is always born as a man.”

Yahiko stared at her again. The intensity in his gaze caused warmth to grow in her belly, bringing her blood to flutter.

Slowly, Yahiko brought their tangled hands to his mouth. He detached from hers, carefully bringing the palm of it to his mouth, staring at her all the while.

“Is this the hand of a man?” He asked, voice suddenly low and rich. Tsuna swallowed.

“No,” she breathed.

Yahiko pressed a kiss to the palm, light and fleeting, but Tsuna felt a jolt from her arm to her chest. Yahiko pushed the sleeve of her kimono up to the elbow, his mouth lingering over the joint of her elbow.

“Is this the arm of a man?”

Tsuna shook her head, “No.”

He kissed again, this time more firmly, but he didn’t linger. His touch made her hot, forgetting that winter could ever even be a season. Her chest came up in shallow breaths as his feathered touch traveled up to her clothed shoulder.

“And this shoulder?”

“No.” Her response quicker, her head tilting to the side to expose her neck.

“This neck?”

“It’s not,” she near moaned when she felt his tongue join the quiet touch of his lips.

His hand found her cheek, and he directed her head back upright to look him in his gentle, sunset gaze. They were close, she knew by how their breaths mingled, by how she could feel the heat of his body graze against her. He kept his eyes on her, so sure, so beautifully open.

“And your lips, Lady Tsuna?” He whispered.

She answered him with a kiss. Her arms wrapped around him without a second thought, and they embraced as their lips moved together in a longing, uncontrollable dance. His tongue worked against hers, and she pulled him closer. His arms wrapping around her waist as if holding something precious and fragile.

A noise left her lips, echoed into his own mouth, and she smiled as she broke away, raining kisses on his eyes and cheeks.

“My body is also that of a woman’s,” she panted. “Kiss me there, too.”

——

How could she have possibly denied herself this man?

Her fingers combed lazily through his hair, long, orange, soft—despite it not having been washed in some time. It didn’t matter, she still loved the feel of it. Just as she loved the feel of Yahiko’s fingers trailing up and down her back.
They laid bare on the floor of the cage, letting the moment roll between loving gazes and languid kisses in the aftermath of their night together. The moon was still high, and Tsuna could still hear the cheers and cries of the New Year’s celebration.

Half laid on Yahiko’s chest, fingers combing through, Tsuna’s expression suddenly turned solemn.

“I’m sorry. I have horrible news.”

Yahiko looked up at her, questioning.

“Your mother has died.”

She kept her hands in his hair, watching him carefully as he took in the words. His expression sank, an unknown world playing behind his eyes that Tsuna so desperately wanted to be a part of.

“Thank you for telling me,” Yahiko finally said, voice dark and saddened.

“Will you miss her?”

He considered this. “Of course. I only wish I had been able to see her once more.”

“What the maids did was horrid,” she said, their voices still low and intimate. “No one should be denied the love of a mother like that.”

He kissed the inside of her wrist.

“I’ve had more love from a mother than many other cats. I should be grateful.”

“How do you do that?”

“Do what?”

“Stay so kind. The world is so cruel to you. They’ve locked you away, forgotten about you. How can you still have so much compassion in your heart?”

He smiled at her, “Cruelty is a necessity of this world. It’s a constant. So much so that it’s grown stale, don’t you think? But kindness shines so much brighter, it rebels so much greater than anger.”

Tsuna scoffed, “There are those out there who are not so deserving of such a kindness.”

He chuckled, wrapping his arms around her waist and rolling them over, causing her to gasp in surprise. He looked down at her, as she stared back up, breathlessly.

“And what about you? What makes Lady Tsuna so cynical to this world?”

Her stare didn’t turn playful like his, instead she stared away from him. Feeling hot tears come up to her eyes.

“Lady Tsuna?” He asked, worry taking his voice as he wiped a tear away.

“The cruelty I’ve faced in my life is nowhere near as great as yours, I should not cry before you.”

“I ask you, if I lay dying from the blade of a sword, and the same blade has taken your leg, do you not weep for that limb?”

She looked up at him, unsure, before finally conceding, feeling words she’d never spoken heavy on
her tongue as they drawled out of her like honey.

“I fell in love with a man. A servant. In the estate. I was younger, I was not so accepted by the other zodiac apart from Atsukane. But this man… he was… in the moment, it felt as if he was all I could ever need. But. But he. He was cruel. He was jealous and possessive.

“I could not tell the others I had fallen for a servant. I was ashamed, and I did not want to feed into their teasing of me. So I insisted on our affair being kept hidden. But he grew so restless. He was so angry with me. He wanted me so badly, he told me stories of the outside world, of how cruel and how shallow the people were.

“He told me that life was not worth living beyond the estate, where nothing but sickness and death and evil would surely pounce on someone so weak as myself. He terrified me. He wanted every part of me, wanted to consume me whole. When I threatened to leave him, he said he would expose me. He said he would take his life, and I—”

Tears fell hot from Tsuna, and she felt Yahiko’s warm hand on against her cheek, his lips pressing against her forehead. Her cries calmed before they could bloom to sobs. She wiped the streaks away, her fingers coming back with make up that she was sure was ruined and ghastly now, but she continued on.

“One of the maids discovered our relationship. Lady Shino didn’t approve, but dismissing a servant, especially one born from one of the servant families would mean exposing our relationship. Instead, the maids framed him. They whispered poison against Goichi, and convinced him that he had stolen the sword his father gifted him from the war. He grew so angry, he was so uncontrollable he—”

Tsuna could see the scene clearly, even a little over a year later. The picture of it clear behind her eyes whenever they closed. Goichi, sword raised high in the garden, Tsuna’s lover on his knees before him, begging and pleading, the blood that spilled over the snow.

“He was a horrible, cruel man—But I loved him,” she sobbed. “I didn’t want him to die.”

Yahiko embraced Tsuna, holding her close as she cried into his neck.

“No one knew?” He asked, his own voice strained with tears, it seemed. Tsuna shook her head.

“You’ve never been allowed to mourn?” Yahiko asked, gentle tears from his own eyes landing in her hair.

“This place has nothing but evil here,” Tsuna sniffed, pulling away to look at him. “Despite everything, be grateful that you live apart from it all.”

He pressed his forehead to hers, the last of her sniffles working out of her body.

“Then when you leave, don’t look back,” Yahiko said simply. “Be free of this place. Please.”

Tsuna looked to him, almost confused, not knowing what it meant to be apart from him, yet his words were stained as a farewell.

“Come with me.”

Yahiko’s face grew panicked and surprised, “What?”

“Run away with me. Let’s leave. Together.”
Tsuna dressed herself quickly, tying her robes clumsily. In the later hour, and with the celebrations away from her quarters and filling people with liquor, she prayed that she would not be spotted—especially with her make-up so awry.

Yahiko saw her to the door, watched her leave down the pathway.

They needed supplies.

Tsuna was to gather what she could from the estate, including the dye she and Hisame used for their teeth to cover the color of Yahiko’s orange hair.

Money, blankets, perhaps some food. It didn’t matter. They needed to leave while the estate was still distracted with their celebrations.

From there they could go wherever the trains would take them. To, perhaps, that fishing village along the coast. Somewhere far, far away where “Sohma” had no hold on them.

She rushed down the path on wooden sandals, snow making the roads slippery and perilous, and Tsuna near slipped more than once in her rush.

And the further she traveled from the cage, the more her stomach and heart grew heavy, as if burning, melted lead was being poured down her throat. She felt sick, disoriented. Atsukane had spoken against the cat so forcefully only hours earlier, and in that time Tsuna had not only laid with him, confessed her love to him, but now made plans to leave with him.

The disobedience jostled the rat inside her angrily. Vicious, venomous claws worked against her as she tried to regain her focus. She simply needed to make it back to the cage. From there, the stable touch of Yahiko’s hand would pull her away from this sickness. She knew it. She knew it.

“HIROMORO!”

Tsuna froze, the name ripping through her like a sharp icicle. She didn’t turn her head. Goichi’s voice clear and booming.

“Hiromoro is that you?! His voice was slurred, and he could barely keep himself upright from the alcohol sloshing in his system. Still he approached her from behind, grabbing her arm and spinning her around angrily.

“Is that you, you bastard?! You! You look at me!”

Tsuna resisted, doing her best to keep her face hidden. From the looks of it, it wouldn’t matter regardless of whether it was Hiromoro or not. Goichi shook her violently as he spoke.

“You sent me a—away! You’re the re—reason! The reason I was banished from this estate!” Words hiccuped and tumbled over as his fingers dug deeper into her skin. “You—You called me a rock! A little pig! A murderer!”

“You ARE a murderer!” Tsuna finally shrieked back.

Goichi released one of her shoulders to reach for his sheath, poising his dagger up at her.

“You want me to prove that?!”

Tsuna took her sandaled shoe and crunched hard on Goichi’s instep. He yowled, dropping his hand
reflexively, causing the dagger to slide against Tsuna’s shoulder, ripping her kimono, and causing her to yelp in pain.

With all the focus she could muster, she brought her knee up hard between his legs, and he dropped, almost taking her down with him, but she snaked her way free. He cursed, loud and jumbled, but still sick with drunken pain. Tsuna wrestled the dagger away from him.

Without a second thought, she hit him square on the head with the butt of it, finally doing enough to have him fall back, unconscious. Whether from her blow or from alcohol, she didn’t care to find out.

Her shoulder was burning now, and she clutched it tightly, her other hand still holding the dagger. She couldn’t escape the estate like this. Her kimono was ripped, blood was soaking through, her make-up was smeared from tears and sex. She looked a mess. As badly as she wanted to leave this estate looking like a free woman, she discarded the clothes, quickly, mournfully tearing a piece of the ruining kimono to wrap around her shoulder, tying it tightly.

She scrubbed away the last of her make-up, and slipped into her male robes, tying her hair back to keep it out of her face.

The rest of the kimono was still lying on the floor, and Tsuna quickly grabbed them, bunched them into a ball of fabric, before stepping outside and throwing it beneath the engawa where it would surely be forgotten. From there, she raided her own room.

She grabbed the black ink and opened a small, decorative box that held her purse of coins—the only thing she had time to scavenge. But when she opened the box, it gave her a brief pause.

The charm Atsukane had gifted her sat unused.

The god’s words still stung, and Tsuna could feel herself becoming dizzy and ill, but she couldn’t help herself from grabbing the charm along with the small sack of coins.

She ran back to the cage.

Her shoulder burned all the more now. It felt as if her arm might fall off, even though the cut itself was superficial and narrow. She tripped, hard, scraping her hands on the way to the cage, lifting herself only in time to vomit into the hedges.

She stood, shaking and determined—she would not be so easily defeated by a rodent.

“Yahiko!” She burst into the cage, near-collapsing into his arms. His wide, horrified eyes taking in the sight of her.

“Are you bleeding!?” He cried.

“Your hair,” she rasped. “Your hair!” The world felt so dizzy. Everything in the world was spinning out of her control. “Take us outside!”

He did as she said.

“Turn around,” she said, when they stood in front of the wooden bath. With Goichi’s dagger, she brought it up to Yahiko’s ponytail, sawing it off as quickly as possible. His hair was uneven and mismatching chunks swept in different direction. She tossed the hair into the hedges before handing Yahiko the bottle of dye.
“What do I do?” He asked, voice panicked at Tsuna’s frantic, unhinged actions and words. She felt as though she was barely being held together, but she needed to leave, she needed out of here. She couldn’t care what the rat inside her body was plaguing her with. It was all she could do.

“Pour it on your hair. Scrub it through as much as you can.”

He kneeled in the snow and did what was told, a black, thick sludge forming from the dye and the grime in his hair. He combed it hurriedly through his hair, and Tsuna watched as orange turned to black, along with the outline of his neck and hairline.

“We have to leave,” she said when he’d finished. Her vision going cloudy and faint. She’d lost blood and lost the contents of her stomach, and was being attacked from the inside out. She walked back into the cage to retrieve the last of her supplies when her legs gave out below her. Yahiko caught her just in time.

“We can’t leave like this! You’re sick! You’re still injured!”

“We can’t stay, we can’t,” Tsuna sobbed, delirium clashing violently with vertigo.

“Tsuna, you can’t go anywhere like this! Not until you’re better! Please, my love!”

“Then, go! Go!”

“I won’t leave without you!” He clutched her hand tightly, kissing it in harsh frantic bursts, tears welling in his eyes. “Tsuna, I’m so frightened.”

“Please, please,” she sobbed. “The maids will see your hair, they’ll know what we’re planning. You have to leave!”

“I will not!”

“Go!” She screeched. “You have so much to see, Yahiko! So much you need to see! The beaches, think of the beaches and festivals and people and cities! The world deserves to see you, Yahiko! Just as you deserve to see it, please! Please!”

“Tsuna—!”

“I will meet you at the docks once I’m well, but please, please, please, my love. We need to meet outside these walls. They’ll take you away from me if you don’t leave now!”

She snatched her hand away, coughing into her arm as she fell to the floor. Yahiko laid her down gently, but couldn’t find it in himself to move.

“Leave!” Tsuna cried between coughs. “Or I’ll never speak to you again!”

He stepped away, finally running on shaking feet out of the cage.

Tsuna laid there, coughs violent, body shaking, arm burning, head pounding and spinning. She rolled herself over, dagger still in hand.

“Leave me be!” She yelled out, yelled to her spirit. Her arm lifted, convinced she could carve the spirit out of herself. Convinced if she slit herself open, the rat would finally crawl out of her skin.

The blade pierced her flesh.

As if from a dream, she awoke when it had glided halfway down her body.
With a strength she didn’t know she possessed, she wrestled the dagger out of the hands of a second man—of a second rodent, pushed her arm away, and threw the knife out past the doors, where it would be buried in the overnight snowfall.

It was the last thing she did before she collapsed.
Atsukane watched quietly as tears dripped from Tsuna’s eyes, his own falling in tandem.

Her cries were silent, however, as she stared at the charm in her hand. The one she had pressed into Yahiko’s hands just before they’d parted.

“She was the kindest man in this estate,” she said, pulling Atsukane’s gaze to her. Her voice broke. “He shouldn’t have been the one to die.”

“Hiro—”

“Don’t call me that,” she commanded, retraining a sob. He let a moment pass.

“Tsuna.”

She shook her head, wrapping her arms around herself in a loveless embrace as she cried into her robes.

“Will he even have a funeral? Will you even give him the proper rites?! He was human! He wasn’t a monster! He was human!” A watery, angry glare pierced through Atsukane. “I loved him even more than I love you.”

SMACK.

Atsukane sucked in a breath, eye reflexively narrowing into a glare. Hand still outstretched from the slap he’d laid hard across his friend’s cheek.

She looked back at him, hardened gaze meeting Atsukane’s faltering one.

“Do you still find me a weak man? Nothing but a waste of your time?”

Atsukane stood, backing away, shame piling behind his hand, deep in his gut. He didn’t know how to take in this story, he didn’t know how to look at his friend in the eye. Hiromoro he knew. He knew everything about him.

But Tsuna—she was nothing but a stranger to him.

“I can’t talk to you now,” Atsukane said, turning to leave. “I don’t know who you are.”

“Kane,” Tsuna called after him. He looked over his shoulder, just as he was about to leave. He looked back to vulnerable eyes that he wanted so badly to recognize.

“Please do not reject me.”

They stood for a moment, keeping each other’s gazes. He didn’t know what to do, what to say, what to think. Overwhelmed too horribly by this tale. The god in him wanted to lash out, wanted to inflict punishment for letting the cat touch the rat so easily.

But Atsukane didn’t know what he wanted, knew only that his heart was tugged harshly at the sight
of her.

“Rest.” He said simply.

“Will you be back?”

He left without a reply.

He didn’t know.

Atsukane awoke the following morning, tears staining his cheeks so deeply, it was as if they’d always been there.

It was only then that he realized how deep of a mistake he’d committed.

Why hadn’t he felt it the day before? How far away his friend suddenly felt? The distance that oceans filled between countries?

How had he not known to protect his own?

Found again by another maid in the morning, was the body of the rat.

“He hanged himself,” Isao said, gravely.

No, she didn’t, was the first thought to enter Atsukane’s mind. But with the murderer gone until the next generation, there was no one to charge with the crime.

Tsuna’s laid there, white cloth covering her face. Atsukane felt cycles and relief and shame churn through him in endless cycles.

Shame for not being there sooner, if not to stop it then at least to have made the discovery himself.

Relief for not having to see an image of something that would surely destroy him.

Atsukane read the note left behind until they were the only words he knew.

Alone, I depart
Yearning only for your love
I will not return

Mitsuhide sat alone on the engawa, legs swinging back and forth, a solemn look overtaking his face. Snow crusted the ground, but his pup slept soundly below his feet, regardless. Still in his formal kimono from the funeral, he looked out onto gardens.

It was becoming too difficult to be around the family. He didn’t find himself wanting to overhear the conversations of adults today.

The door slid open, but Mitsuhide barely paid it any mind until Atsukane was sitting beside him. Mitsuhide quickly righted his posture, stopping his legs from swinging, and doing his best to look proper and grown-up.
Mitsuhide nodded. Since Hiromoro’s passing, he’d been nervous around the god. His stomach twisted into knots every time they passed in the estate. He felt the hot flush of shame that children often felt, but was rare enough to him not to recognize in full.

“Do you think it was my fault?” Atsukane asked suddenly, mimicking the words Mitsuhide had been thinking since the New Year’s banquet.

“No,” he said, truthfully. “He did it.”

Atsukane hummed. “I’m not sure about that.”

Mitsuhide looked up at the god, finding something strange in what he saw there. Mitsuhide was young, and so to him, the world looked old. Anyone taller, broader, older took the title of adult. But Atsukane had always had an air of innocence, always had a spark of childish deviancy that made him strangely attainable to Mitsuhide.

Now, however, Atsukane looked nothing more than one of those distant grown-ups.

“I told him he was a weak man. I never corrected myself. I’m god of the zodiacs, am I not? Did what I say to—” He gave in a shaky breath. “Did my words become reality?”

“Maybe he was just weak. Like you said.”

“Show respect,” Atsukane said, firmly. “You’re young, but speak like that and you’ll grow cruel.”

“I already am cruel,” Mitsuhide pouted, crossing his arms. Atsukane didn’t correct him.

Instead, he asked, “Why did you tell Goichi about what you heard?”

Mitsuhide drew his knees up to his chest, hiding his face in them. Feeling his body quiver from being discovered. “I was angry. I wanted to sail with you. If Hiromoro didn’t go, I wouldn’t have been able to, either.”

“So you sought revenge?”

Mitsuhide clutched his legs, “I didn’t mean for Goichi to try to kill him.”

Mitsuhide’s eyes were clenched shut, a guilt too overwhelming for a child bursting through his skin. When, suddenly, he felt Atsukane’s hand on his hair, ruffling it gently.

“Grow into a man who only does what he means,” Atsukane said. “If that makes you cruel, I’ll be sad to see it. But I’ll hope for someone in this family to carry on the kindness my father would have liked to see in me.”

Mitsuhide brushed the fingers off his hair, feeling heat rise to his cheeks. “You are kind.”

“No, I’m not,” Atsukane sighed. “But I’ll spend the rest of my life doing what I can to make up for that absence.”

Mitsuhide twiddled his thumbs at that, “So then it’s true?”

Atsukane looked to him.
“You’re setting the cat free?”

Atsukane gave a weighted chuckle, “Everyone deserves to see the world before the end of their life. It may not seem like much, but perhaps a few years of freedom before returning to the cage will do the future cats some good.”

“Isn’t that dangerous?”

“Yes. But I’m not sure for who.”

Mitsuhide sat in silence beside Atsukane. The turbulent feelings of the past week starting to settle oddly in him. He’d been racked with a horrid feeling since the final day of the New Year. He didn’t want to be someone complacent with death. He didn’t want to ally with what would soon take his mother away from him.

What he wanted was to be like Atsukane, even if he felt awkward and clumsy when he made a move that was anything more than a fly on the wall might make.

“Hisame is scared you’re going to send her away,” Mitsuhide said. Atsukane looked at him again. “She wants to stay in the estate. She doesn’t want to marry. …Hiromoro said he would protect her before he died.”

“Is that so?”

Mitsuhide nodded.

Atsukane gave him a small smile.

“What other information might you have?”

Chapter End Notes

**TW WARNING!!: This chapter contains suicide, mentions of murder, and a big old corpse-heavy scene! This chapter also includes a character who is trans* - but because her identity is a secret from most of the characters, she is misgendered for the first portion of the fic. In the flashback, she takes over the POV and her pronouns change as she goes through the discovery/transition (sort of) process. For those of you who would like ample warning for that, here is a spoiler name guide!**

Atsukane - God
Hiromoro (Dead Name) / Tsuna - Rat
Yahiko - Cat
Isao - Dragon
Hisame - Horse
Naruse - Monkey
Mitsuhide - Dog
Goichi - Boar
Tatsu - Screaming Maid
Lady Shino - Head Sohma Maid
Yura - Elder Maid, Mother of the cat
I usually don’t go too nuts in the A/N’s here with my intent, but I just want to be very clear that this chapter comes very much from a place of love — Tsuna was someone I wanted to write as well as I could and!! She gave me a lot of trouble for it!!!

I am fascinated by how gender is explored in Fruits Basket, and what sparked the idea for this chapter was the hypothetical of what might happen if someone is meant to be born female, but the curse is something that overpowers and changes so much in your body that it even fucks with your gender/biology.

From there, it was more important to me to write a narrative where Tsuna’s conflict didn’t come from being trans*. Her conflict comes from her relationship with Yahiko, and the tension with Atsukane and Goichi, and what that does to her physically (just like with Yuki at New Year’s). But I did my best to have her transition be something positive that helps her discover her own strength against the rat. I hope I was able to illustrate this by the end, when Goichi (a man who continuously calls her weak and feeble) is someone left defenseless by Atsukane’s interrogation with little to no resistance. Meanwhile, Tsuna’s sense of self has cultivated so much that she is able to hold her ground and show strength all the more valuable — even if it’s something like a bad omen to the curse itself.

I have had this story in my head for a very very long time. This was originally supposed to be posted chronologically, but it took basically an extra two years of TLC to these characters and this chapter to really start feeling right. I was lucky enough to be able to consult with some of my friends who were trans*, and they were able to give me some wonderful advice.

That being said I want to make it very clear that I am beyond ready to hear your critiques. I swear this is the only time I will go so deep into analyzing my own chapters! I am just very nervous and hope very much that you all were able to enjoy!!

LAST BUT NOT LEAST.

THIS CHAPTER HAD A LOT OF POEMS!! Any poems “written” by the characters themselves were done so by me. But any of poems that were quoted by the characters were real poems by actual ancient, Japanese poets! (Which is why they’re very clearly much better than mine LMAO). I’m going to list those poems/authors/and sources here (shout out to my local library):

From the book, The Four Seasons - Japanese Haiku Written by Basho, Buson, Issa, Shiki, and Many Others:

So lonely… lovely…
The exquisite pure-white fan
Of the girl I lost (Buson)

The old dog lies intent
Listening… does he overhear
The burrowing moles? (Issa)
By way of pretext
I said ‘I will go
And look at
The condition of the bamboo fence’;
But it was really to see you! (Yakamochi)

If in the Capital
In this deserted house
I am to sleep alone
Better far to suffer
The hardships of travel! (Otomo no Tabito)

It is other people who have separated
You and me.
Come, my Lord!
Do not dream of listening
To the between-words of people! (The Lady of Sakanoye)
Hello again you beautiful and lovely readers!

Thank you to everyone who has been reading and commenting on this fic even in my stupid long absence. Believe me when I say that everything has been so busy lately, this was the absolute soonest I could possibly upload.

Unfortunately, there is no intermission between the two winter seasons this time (yet). The idea I had kept falling apart, and before I knew it I had already written the next chapter of the main story. I thought it'd be silly to delay posting this for the intermission, so up it goes! Hopefully I can finally get the idea down and post it sometime in the near future for all of you who do enjoy the little side stories!

Some WARNINGS for this chapter and the next: There will be some discussion around the topic of suicide. While it's not as present in this chapter, it might play a bigger role this season - the discussion of it only. Not in any dramatic or narrative practice.

I think that's all - I hope most of you are still with me as this long-ass journey continues. Thank you, and enjoy!

When Yuki opens his eyes he’s six years old and he’s all alone.

It’s spring.

The bed is clinical and firm, with sheets white and thick. It’s the small room where Hatori takes any zodiac patients, and Yuki thinks he must be really sick if he’s waking up here. His body is heavy and his eyes are dry and raw from the tears that shook out of him. It was the kind of crying that sucks the moisture from every inch of skin, wrings out the oxygen in your blood, and vacuum the breath out of your lungs.

He remembers spilling it all onto Hatori’s knee, begging not to take his friends away from him. Pleading that he would be good, he would be so good, if only they could keep just one memory of him. Just one.

He cries until his body collapses, and Hatori stays silent.

He’s tucked into a bed that isn’t his and by hands that aren’t his mother’s. She’s been called, but she can’t pick him up until tomorrow.

There’s no one in the room and Yuki learns what it means to be forgotten.
When Yuki opens his eyes he’s seven years old and he’s thinking of running away from home.

It’s summer.

His body is shutting down and Yuki doesn’t really have enough of a reason to keep his eyes open. His chest feels hot and uncomfortable, as if someone has caked his ribs with sand and dirt. His forehead is feverish and he can’t stop sweating under the heat that’s seeping into the room. The white sheets absorb the moisture from his clammy hands, from his soaking, sick body. He’s in the same bed where he said goodbye to his friends.

Akito visits him and tells him he would be better off dead. No, tells him he would be better off never having existed. No, that it doesn’t really matter if he exists because who’s noticing him now anyway? All Yuki can smell when Akito is near is paint now.

He thinks he might throw up.

Yuki stares out the window and every time a maid comes in they smile as if they’re thinking about something else. He asks if they can call his dad. They tell him they will and then they leave.

There’s no one in the room and Yuki learns what dying feels like.

When Yuki opens his eyes he’s fourteen years old and a letter cutter has sliced his hand open.

It’s autumn.

He’s thankful for this fragile, anemic body of his for the first time in his life. He’s thankful that he’s been hiding his food in the houseplant (the only decoration that room holds) and is especially thankful that he’s been feeding it all to the birds that sometimes swoop down just outside the window. It means that when the sharp metal accidentally slices his hand open, he passes out instantly. And when he’s passed out, Akito can’t talk to him. He’s in the same bed where he decided he would run away from home. He’s in the bed the maids laid his panting body down when he came back.

He looks down at the bandage that wraps around his hand and wrist and wants to see what’s underneath. He wants to see the proof that beyond his skin that’s always so cold, there’s warmth underneath. There’s color underneath. There’s life underneath.

He wonders how much blood he would have to lose to never see Akito again.

Yuki slowly unwraps the bandages and tries to remember what day it is. It’s been awhile since he remembered. The days used to be anchored by his mother coming to pick him up on Mondays. It’s not a very reliable system.

There’s no one in the room and Yuki learns that he can cry from relief, too.
When Yuki opens his eyes he’s seventeen years old.

It’s winter.

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The first thing Yuki could see was white. It was a color far too familiar to Yuki by now. The ceiling panels were longtime familiar companions of his. So, when Yuki opened his eyes his first thoughts were of familiarity. It was as if he was finally waking up in his own bed.

He had a headache.

His mouth felt dry, too. His arms were heavy and weighted, and it took Yuki a moment to orient himself. He was in the clinic, he knew that much. But why? Did he fall asleep here? Was he too tired to walk home after being at Haru’s?

He turned his head, grogginess still encompassing him, and spotted the IV attached to his arm.

Well, shit. He was hoping the habit of ending up in here was long broken. He must have gotten sick, he must have…

Yuki jolted upright, immediately regretting the action when his head pounded in protest, a groan of shocked pain escaped him, and he brought one arm to his head, only to feel a bandage intertwined with his hair.

“Yuki!”

“Ahh!”

Yuki jolted again at the sudden voice, but before he could gather himself a large figure was smothering him, collapsing him in a hug. He could smell the scent of faded cologne too close to perfume, and could see tendrils of long white hair dancing in his vision – as white as the sheets of the bed and the tiles of the ceiling.

“Ayame?!" He could feel his brother hug him tighter, and idly Yuki wondered how long he had been in the room.

He realized that it never would have occurred to him that someone else might be in here, too.

“Oh, Yuki! Yuki! I was so worried! How are you feeling? Are you weak? Do you need food or water?! HATORI!”

Just like that his brother’s presence was gone, running away from a very disoriented Yuki towards the door. Ayame stopped in his tracks just before he opened it, and flung himself around with a distraught stare, “Don’t fret, brother! I’ll be right back! I promise!”

Yuki watched him leave. He blinked.

His head still hurt, and there were vague dustings of pain all over his body. His ankle and leg, in particular, throbbed dully and Yuki let out an adjusting hiss.
God, that’s right.

Machi.

The night came back to him in bits and pieces, and he sighed at the memory. She must have been worried sick. He wondered where his cellphone was. He needed to call her whenever he could. She probably hadn’t slept the whole night before – especially with Yuki causing such a ruckus like that. A flame of embarrassment consumed him, so he placed the matter aside for later.

Later, he could deal with this.

For now…

For now, he needed a moment just to breathe. Just to think. He brought his IV laced arm up to the forefront of his vision. He moved each finger and rolled his wrist, as if learning how to use them for the first time.

He rolled his head, cracking the kinks in his neck. He took a long, deep inhale and consumed every drop of air.

His body felt tired, and the idea of walking around and stretching his limbs felt extremely appealing at the moment. As if he had woken up from a long, much needed nap.

That’s how he felt. Oddly refreshed.

The door snapped open, and in rushed Hatori with Ayame at his heels. The two approached him like stampeding bulls, and Yuki gave them a strange glance.

“Yuki, how are you feeling?” Hatori immediately put a hand on his forehead. “Your fever’s down.”

“I feel fine…”

Hatori gave him a look that Yuki recognized. It was enough to keep him quiet as Hatori undid the strings on the back of Yuki’s neck to roll down his hospital gown. Hatori placed the stethoscope on his chest and Yuki held back a shiver at the cool sensation.

“Breathe.”

“I’m okay, really—”

“Breathe, Yuki.”

He did as he was told. Hatori placed the stethoscope on his back, working rapidly – as if Yuki might float away if he wasted even a second.

“Another breath.”

Yuki inhaled, looking up at his brother. Ayame looked beside himself – almost completely frightened – with his hair lacking in its usual shine and pulled back into a messy ponytail. No lavish coats or accessories ornamented him, and he stood before Yuki in nothing more than slacks and a wrinkled white button-up.

His attention was brought to the lingering warmth in his hand, and a clamminess that wasn’t present in the other.

Hatori brought Yuki’s gown up once more and tied it firmly around his neck.
“How are you feeling? I need you to answer honestly. Does your head hurt? Or your stomach? Do you feel pain anywhere?”

“I don’t know, my ankle hurts a little… and my head, too. I’m really fine. I’m sorry for worrying you last night, but I think whatever it was just… passed.” Hatori and Ayame exchanged a look and Yuki felt himself tense. It was in another moment that Yuki felt himself being embraced once more by his brother. It was tight, and Yuki almost wanted to make a comment about how he couldn’t breathe, but he could feel his brother’s hands shaking.

“What? What’s going on? What’s wrong?” Yuki asked, seeking Hatori’s gaze.

“Yuki, you’ve been unconscious for nearly four days.”

“Four days!?” Yuki scrambled to make sense of it in his brain. “You’re kidding! That can’t… I feel fine!” Yuki said, as if now he were trying to convince himself.

His blood stopped. On instinct, he shoved Ayame away. “What day is it?”

“The third,” Hatori answered.

Yuki paled. “The banquet! Akito! He’s—He’ll—!”

“Don’t worry,” Hatori said. “He doesn’t know.”

Yuki placed a hand on his forehead, the headache beginning to build, “How is that even possible?”

“I told Hari to tell Akito that I was sick,” Ayame said. “I’ve been quarantined from the family. And you, my dearest little brother, have been so worried about my wellbeing that you haven’t been able to tear yourself away from my side.”

Yuki peered up at Ayame, his breath slowly beginning to calm. “That worked?”

“Akito has no interest in visiting a sick snake,” Ayame smiled.

“All he asks is that you visit him once Ayame regains his health,” Hatori said.

Yuki took a moment of silence. He closed his eyes, hating how he always seemed to cause trouble for the people around him.

“Thank you. Thank you, both. I’m sorry to have put you through this. I don’t know what got into me.”

Yuki felt Ayame wrap his fingers around his own. The warmth was back. All he could offer back was a weak, apologetic smile. “Thank you.”

“We’re just glad you’re alright,” Hatori said, the stress finally beginning to seep out of his voice. “But I need you to tell us what happened that night. And be honest, Yuki. I hope you realize now that hiding your symptoms isn’t something you can get away with anymore.”

Yuki gave a sheepish nod. Ayame squeezed his hand.

“I…” Yuki started, his concentration falling back to Machi’s apartment. “That night…”

The little piece of paper. Kyo’s name scribbled across the page. The fresh bruises from their fight.

His confession.
Yuki bit his lip, his brow furrowed in concentration. He squeezed Ayame’s hand and tried again.

*I love him.*

“I…” Yuki opened his mouth as a test, and waited.

A moment passed. Then two. Then three.

He clenched his eyes shut and tried again. Bracing himself.

He felt his body go on the defensive. They tensed when he told his muscles to tense. They relaxed when Yuki commanded them to, as well.

A dull wave of nausea rolled over him, but it felt stale. He remembered a similar feeling on other occasions when he would wake up here.

“Yuki?”

“Huh?” Yuki peered up at Hatori.

“Leave him alone, Hari. Allow my brother a moment of peace, if you could!”

Hatori held his gaze with Yuki, and Yuki stared back. Words on the tip of his tongue, but lodged in his throat.

Hatori sighed, but didn’t break eye contact with Yuki. “If he’s not well enough to answer my questions, perhaps he’s not well enough to have visitors.”

Ayame clicked his tongue, “You’re so strict, Hari!”

“I have visitors?” Yuki asked, looking up at Ayame.

“Of course! There are a lot of worried people waiting for you to wake up from your beauty rest,” Ayame said. He sauntered towards the door, once again. “I’ll go and fetch them!”

“Wait!” Yuki said, another shock of fear going through him. “Who else knows…. About this? Did you tell people?”

Hatori placed a comforting hand on his shoulder. “Don’t worry. The only people who know will be in this room.”

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The three looked exhausted, and Yuki felt that embarrassment bubble up again. All he could do was offer a small wave.

Kakeru collapsed over Yuki’s lap with an exaggerated groan.

“Your family’s got a whole hospital in its house, but they don’t have a more comfortable waiting area?!”
Haru placed a hand on Yuki’s shoulder. Machi sat in the chair already pulled up next to Yuki’s bed. Ayame and Hatori stood behind the crowd. Suddenly, Yuki felt surrounded.

“How long have you guys been here?” Yuki asked.

“Forever!” Kakeru yelped.

“Since yesterday,” Machi offered. “We wanted to come sooner but we weren’t allowed to.”

“Hatori said I wasn’t allowed to wait here, either,” Haru said.

“You all should have been spending New Years with your own families, not in a waiting room,” Hatori scolded—sounding as if he were pressing repeat on the statement. Yuki looked at how the three pouted.

“Kakeru, you shouldn’t do that. Yuki’s leg is still hurt,” Hatori added.

Kakeru groaned, and Yuki pinched the back of his neck. That caused Kakeru to jump up with a yelp.

“Didn’t you hear him, I’m fragile and in great pain,” Yuki said, an amused lilt to his voice. Kakeru gave him a somewhat bemused smile, but there was surprise behind his expression.

“And here I thought you hated being treated like a princess,” Kakeru said, carefully.

“I hate being treated like a futon more,” Yuki said. A smile spread across his face, but the humor fell flat in the room. Yuki sighed, looking over to Machi who was staring intently at the bedsheets.

“You know,” Yuki started. “It’s not like I died.”

His eyes were still on Machi but she wasn’t looking up, only digging her fingers into the edges of the sheets. As if trying to wrinkle them between her hands.

“So…” Kakeru started. “You’re okay?”

“I’m okay.”

“Really?” Haru added.

“I’m telling the truth,” Yuki said, exasperated. Though somewhere, in the back of his mind, he knew he had made it hard for them to trust him. “I just have a headache,” Yuki said. He brought his fingers up to feel the bandage. “To be honest, I don’t even remember hitting my head.”

“Ah,” Hatori said. “That was Ayame’s fault.”

The group of teenagers all turned their heads towards Ayame’s forlorn expression.

“His highness?! What did you do to your brother?!” Kakeru exclaimed.

“It was certainly not done on purpose! In my frenzy to break through sweet Machi’s bathroom door, it swung open and hit Yuki right in the back of the head!”

“It did?!” Yuki reached his hand up to the back of his head, and his headache pulsed immediately. Yuki winced. “I guess that explains that.”

“It doesn’t seem as though you have a concussion, but the sprain on your ankle has gotten worse.
You’ll need crutches for the next few days.”

Yuki groaned.

“That’s what happens when you don’t listen to your doctor,” Hatori said.

“Ooo, Yuki’s in trouble,” Kakeru teased. Yuki stuck his tongue out at him.

“Alright, alright. I said five minutes and I meant it. I think Yuki should get some rest now,” Hatori said.

“It’s okay, really,” Yuki said. “It’s nice to see everybody.”

A stiff silence filled the room, but Haru took the opportunity to squeeze Yuki’s arm reassuringly.

“We’ll be back.”

Yuki nodded.

Hatori began to gather them up, Ayame included, when Yuki felt a hand on his own. He looked up to see Machi, eyes as heavy as the bags under them.

“Feel better.”

“Machi…”

“We can talk later. Just get some rest, please.”

Yuki put a hand over hers, feeling guilt tug at him. “Okay.”

With that, everyone was shuffled out of the room. Yuki looked around, the white beginning to surround him again.

He brought his hand up to his eyeline again and clenched his fingers in and out of a fist.

He didn’t feel like sleeping at all.

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It didn’t take a detective to realize how somber the mood turned the moment they all stepped outside the hospital room and back into the familiar waiting area. Haru watched as Kakeru let out a yawn, rubbing his eyes to clear the fog of just being woken up. Machi was quick to take the seat she occupied the past 48 hours, as if finding it difficult to hold herself up.

Ayame and Hatori were speaking to each other in hushed tones and, for himself, Haru couldn’t shake the feeling that something still didn’t feel quite right.

The jarring juxtaposition of Yuki’s misplaced cheerfulness with Machi’s quiet tears as she tried to explain to himself and Kakeru what had happened that night was disturbing. And it felt as though no one could quite put their finger on why.

Haru stood in the middle of the room, accepting the friendly pat on his shoulder from Kakeru as he slumped down next to Machi. His arm went around his sister, in a tired and protective side hug.
Instead, Haru walked up to Ayame and Hatori, seamlessly slipping himself into earshot of their conversation.

“…But is he well enough?”

“I’m not sure. I can’t tell with him these days,” Hatori said.

“Why does he need to see Akito at all? Can’t you tell him I’m dying? Or have dysentery or something?”

“You know how Akito is, he’s impatient. He’s angry enough that Yuki missed the ceremony.”

“All the more reason! I don’t want my brother thrown to the proverbial wolves after a four-day coma, Hari!” Ayame fumed.

“I understand you’re upset, Aya—”

“Of course I’m upset!” He snapped back. Haru watched silently, marveling at the seriousness Ayame took on. “I don’t understand how this happened! Weren’t you giving him check-ups regularly?! And Shigure, he must have been giving you updates on his health! Has my brother been abandoned by this family?! Is no one taking care of him?”

Mm.

Maybe it was time for Haru to step out of this conversation. For a lot of peoples’ sake. He made the quick decision to walk back towards the waiting room chairs when he felt slender fingers dig into his shoulder.

“Don’t think you’re getting away, Haru! I know how much time you spend with Yuki! You are a part of this.”

Haru sighed, turning back around to face the two of them.

“Now, how did this happen,” Ayame said, crossing his arms.

Haru rubbed at the back of his neck, “I don’t like seeing him like this either, you know.”

Ayame’s gaze narrowed.

“He hasn’t been eating well lately. Or sleeping well. It doesn’t surprise me that Shigure doesn’t know that. Yuki’s… private.”

“And yet, you knew,” Ayame said.

“I was trying to get him to eat right,” Haru said. “I told my mom I needed to start eating twice as much for martial arts. I gave Yuki the extra bento every day.”

Ayame softened, “Haru, you are a sweet boy. But that is not your responsibility. If Yuki isn’t doing well you need to tell someone.”

“Who?” Haru asked. Ayame’s eyes flickered away, a heaviness behind them. “Yuki… chooses who he trusts. If it wasn’t me, it would be no one.”

“We all care about Yuki, Ayame. This isn’t easy on anyone,” Hatori said.

“I simply don’t understand how all of this could be happening under one roof and no one knew!”
Haru stared away from Ayame, the back of his neck starting to collect sweat even as his face stayed neutral.

Those fingers were back, digging into his arm. Haru felt himself squint under the pressurized gaze of Ayame’s surprisingly perceptive nature.

“Anything else, you would like to share, Hatsuharu?”

Mm. This was really not good.

“I wouldn’t blame Shigure,” Haru said. “I don’t think he knows as much as you think.”

“Who’s Shigure?” The unfamiliar voice jumped into the conversation of men, and the three looked towards the new intruder.

Ayame was still fixing his gaze on Haru. He looked towards Kakeru instead.

“He’s… our cousin. Yuki lives with him.”

“Oh, that guy,” Kakeru said. “What are you blaming him for?”

“Family issues,” Haru said, trying to will Kakeru away.

“Why he didn’t inform us of Yuki’s worsening illness,” Ayame said at the same time.

A moment of silence passed. “He is Yuki’s guardian after all.”

Haru was boring holes into the side of Kakeru’s face who was pointedly ignoring him.

“Well,” Kakeru started. “It’s not like Yuki’s been spending much time at home lately, anyway.”

Haru wanted to wince. Ayame’s fingers dug deeper into his arm. Hatori and Ayame shared another look before looking back between the two of them.

“And what, pray tell, is that supposed to mean?”

Kyo marveled at the amount of material on his desk. It was soaked in text books, half-hearted notes in his notebooks, and homework assignments with hula hoops of red coming up not nearly as often as he would like. According to the study guide he managed to unearth, this was the entirety of what the entrance exam would cover. And Kyo was fucked.

Of course he knew somewhere in the back of his mind that other students studied months, years, for this, apparently, life-defining test. But Kyo never even began to process what it would mean to do it for himself. He knew he said he would try for Kazuma, at least put forth even the barest effort, but starting now—barely two months away—might as well mean he start cramming the night before. And it was not as if he were paying particular attention to his studies since (if Kyo was being generous) the spring of his second year.

Maybe these arguments had all been for nothing. Kyo would fail the test, not get into any schools, and Kazuma would see what Kyo meant this whole time.
Kyo batted one of the books off the table and kicked himself away from the desk in frustration. He was never one to procrastinate, but he didn’t even know where to start. And the idea of spending the last day of his winter vacation holed up in his room to study was already starting to make his collar itch.

He yanked open his closet door and decided to pull on his new running shoes — a New Years gift from Kazuma. They were red and practical and didn’t make the arches of his feet sting when he ran for more than a few miles like his old ones did.

It made him slow his movement, admiring the shoes for a moment.

All things considered, if this had to be his last New Years, he couldn’t say he would regret it.

On New Years Day, the two took a particularly long hike to a string on the outskirts of the city. Kazuma clutched Kyo’s arm most of the way there, weighing on Kyo as if he were an aging father with a bad back. Kyo ignored commenting on his master’s sturdy legs that kept him so still, Kyo was convinced not even a hurricane could shake him.

When the two reached the top of the shrine they both threw in their coins and rang the bell. Before they could clap their hands and close their eyes, Kazuma turned to him and said:

“You know what I’m wishing for.”

He did.

Kyo clapped his hands and stared at the bell.

For some reason the only thing that came to mind in that moment was Yuki.

They walked the whole way back and watched the sunrise peak through the jagged skyline of Tokyo. Kyo slept the entirety of the next day.

The rest of the vacation had a ring of mundanity to it. They sat around the kotatsu and ate soba noodles and watched daytime television programs before Kyo returned back to Shigure’s house a couple days later. And now here he was. With Shigure back from the main house and Tohru back from her friend’s. And still Kyo’s ears twitched whenever he heard the sound of what could be the front door opening.

He sighed, finally finishing tying tight knots on his shoes. Kyo stared at his desk in defeat. These idiotic trains of thought were the last thing he had time for.

Kyo’s ears perked.

The sound of tires on gravel came through his window. On instinct he stood to open the balcony door, curiously peering down below to the entrance of the house.

Hatori’s car pulled up onto the road, looking more than dusty and a little scratched. Was this guy drunk?

“The path isn’t made for cars, asshole!” Kyo yelled down.

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“He’s right, you know,” Haru said to Ayame in the driver’s seat. Ayame forced the hand break into a tight crunch.

“Shush, Haru.”

Shush, he did. As he had for the whole ride here. As soon as Ayame pointed a finger at him and demanded he get in Hatori’s car, he was sure to keep as quiet as possible.

And now that they were at Shigure’s house—which Haru had morosely suspected—he had no choice but to step out of the car and stare up at Kyo from the balcony. A scratch to the back of his neck the only apology he could muster to Kyo’s confused eyes.

Ayame slammed the door to the car shut and stormed towards the house, Haru hot on his heels behind him.

And it was two paces behind that Haru watched Ayame slam the front door open with a violent clatter. Ayame’s feet storming onto the hardwood without taking off his shoes.

“SHIGURE!”

Tohru’s head peaked out from the dining room, as Kyo came down the steps with a scowl already etched onto his face.

“Haru! Ayame! I didn’t know you were coming,” Tohru greeted with a nervous delight.

“What the hell are you two doing here?! Go home! Yuki’s not even here!”

Ayame whipped a glare over to Kyo. Haru almost winced.

“I know that,” Ayame hissed. Tohru and Kyo exchanged a look. “Shigure!”

“Ayame, come on,” Haru tried.

Before he could say anything else, Shigure emerged from his office down the hall, his glasses on and a bright smile ready to greet the guests.

“Aya! I wasn’t expecting you! I heard you were sick—”

THWACK.

Shigure fell to the floor in one swift, heavy motion. The aftermath of the devastating punch Ayame inflicted right across his cheekbone. Haru watched as Shigure’s body fell like a brick, colliding against the floor violently, and staying limp once it did.

A pressure clenched the room, and Haru somehow managed to lift his head to see Kyo’s wide, angry eyes, and Tohru’s hand going to cover her mouth.

“Shigure!” Tohru gasped, rushing to his side to try to help him up.

“Ayame, what the hell are you doing?!” Kyo shouted.

Ayame ignored them, staring down at his fallen friend. Shigure stared at the floor.

“Do you have any sense of responsibility?!! Do you?! Do you even comprehend that I trusted you with my baby brother?!” Ayame gritted his teeth. “He is seventeen years old! He is a child. Do you know how many times that boy has been abandoned?!”
Ayame lunged towards Shigure again, as if to kick him but Haru held him back. Tohru gave a surprised yelp and instinctively spread her arms to block any harm from coming Shigure’s way.

“I REQUESTED THAT HE LIVE HERE SO HE COULD BE SAFE! BUT YOU CAN’T EVEN DO SO SIMPLE A TASK AS THAT!”

The house went silent. Shigure clutched at his cheek, only moving to spit out a glob of blood and saliva on the floor.

Haru kept his hold on Ayame, even as he went still. And Haru was glad he was pressed against Ayame’s back, unable to see the stare he pinned onto Shigure. Instead, Haru stole a glance at Kyo, whose face had drained of color. It looked like his throat wasn’t expanding enough to allow him to breathe.

What a mess this all was.

“Let me go, Haru,” Ayame demanded, in just as stern, if not calmer, voice. Haru did as he was told. He brushed himself off and headed towards the stairs, briskly walking past the scene, only to pause on the first step.

“Never have I felt so betrayed by someone I trusted.” Ayame spat. Shigure said nothing. “Tohru!”

Tohru snapped to attention at Ayame’s harsh call, “Y-Yes?!”

“Come with me to Yuki’s room. You, me, and Haru are going to pack his things.”

Tohru shuffled her look between Kyo and Haru, but before she could say anything Ayame was already marching up the stairs. She followed as if being pulled along by a chain.

Haru, Kyo, and Shigure were left alone in silence.

“Kyo—”

“Get up.” Kyo growled at Shigure, cutting Haru off.

Shigure looked up at Kyo, as if he wasn’t worth the trouble of answering.

He stood.

Slowly.

Carefully placing his glasses back on that had fallen a few feet in front of him. His head was bowed. And as if each bone had been broken, Shigure lifted himself up and turned to walk back from where he came.

As soon as Shigure’s door snapped closed, Kyo brushed past Haru towards the front door, slamming it behind him. Haru could hear the sound of running feet on gravel getting further and further.

Haru sighed, and carried himself up the stairs to Yuki’s room.

—
Yuki ran his finger over the bandages wrapped around his ankle. The trail of his touch left behind a small path of dull, swollen pain, concentrated to even the pad of his skin. He sighed, doing it again and again as if fascinated with the sensation.

It was strange – he remembered it hurting so much more (apparently) days ago.

He remembered lifting his leg up, with the clear feeling that if he slammed it down against the floor, he would break the bone there. He remembered being told that he could crumple what was beneath the skin. If he tried hard enough, perhaps his foot would bend sideways and rip off altogether.

He was so delusional, so buried in hot throbs of pain, so frantic and sick, he sheepishly admitted to himself he believed it.

What else was that spirit in him telling him that was a desperate lie to allow Yuki to let go of himself?

Yuki looked over his shoulder cautiously, he fingered the coat wrapped around his shoulders for his cigarette pack – relieved to find it undiscovered where it was.

He took the accompanying matches inside the packet, lit his cigarette, and inhaled deeply.

His body was settling back into being human. Perhaps it really was days.

It was a strange feeling, being the rat.

In a sense, he felt at his most powerful as a small, shaking rodent. Something about his bones felt stronger, his lungs pumped air so effortlessly, his mind felt clear, and his blood clean and energetic. He would claw into the ground, and sometimes he could hear the voices of other rats for miles. Their squeaking voices becoming a nonsensical language that Yuki could only barely begin to interpret when he was back in his human form – as if waking from a conversation in a dream.

But even as cleansing of a feeling as it was, the relief never belonged to him. The menacing spirit inside him would almost force Yuki to feel that same assurance. It would bribe him with health, with healing, with companionship if he would allow it to just relax in the body it longed for.

His body moved on its own, on reflex, on instinct, and Yuki would bring himself along for the ride. As if his spirit was lingering one step behind each skittish paw. He felt divorced from his body, from humanism, from his free-thinking mind—even though he knew it was still in arm’s reach.

And then, it would be over. There was a sting when the puff of smoke would surround him and he would find himself back in his human body. As if his bones didn’t fit inside his flesh. As if his body was too smooth to protect itself. As if everything was just the tiniest too big, and that was enough to make his skeleton yearn for the reassurance of his smaller, calmer body. If not, the bones of a rat would swim inside his bodily fluids until they snapped under the weight of simply being.

Depending on how long he was in his rat form, that feeling could last from a few minutes, to a few hours. But today, he couldn’t seem to shake it. He needed the reminder that his body was his own.

So he inhaled the smoke again, this time holding it in so his lungs could recognize the unwelcome and soothing sensation. He coughed as he exhaled, proving to himself that his people-sized lungs wouldn’t rip. He was pleased when the spirit inside him kept quiet, and his coughs died off after only one or two.

Still lingering in his thoughts, however, he was too late to notice when the door slid open and closed behind him.
“You cannot be serious,” Hatori snapped, voice raised. Yuki jumped, stubbing out his cigarette on the balcony and throwing it off the edge. “Yuki, what on earth are you doing?!”

“Um,” Yuki offered, meek and small.

“Where did you get that from?! Hand over the rest of them. Right now,” Hatori demanded, getting closer to Yuki than he could ever remember. “Hand them over now, or I’ll have no choice to go through your things. And I’ll tell your brother.”

That did it. Yuki avoided Hatori’s eyes as he passed over the crumpled pack, his matches still inside. Hatori thumbed it open, seeing how only a few remained.

“It’s not what it looks like?” Yuki lied, Hatori shot him a glare. “I thought you were going to see Akito.”

“My mistake—apparently, you can’t be left alone. Yuki, do you have any idea how bad this is for you? Do you know what you’re doing to yourself? All these years of asthma attacks and illness have taught you nothing? I never thought you would be so stupid with your own body.”

“I’m not stupid,” Yuki defended. “You do it.”

“I’m an adult,” Hatori nearly shouted. He stopped himself from letting his voice get too loud. Crushing the packet into his coat pocket before crossing his arms. “Does Shigure know about this?”

Yuki took a long pause, eyes still unable to meet the doctor’s, “No.” Hatori gave a long sigh. Yuki could feel his disappointment radiating off of him and soaking into Yuki. “I’m… sorry.”

There was a pause, before Hatori said, “Look at me, Yuki.”

He did, but his heart was still sinking under the gaze – an unfortunately too human feeling that grounded him right back into his body.

“You have a lot of people who care about you. You need to start taking better care of yourself. Do you understand?”

Yuki nodded.

“If you continue to do this, you’re going to have more experiences like the one a few nights ago. You’re lucky you transformed when you did.”

“No,” Yuki said on reflex. He looked at Hatori, “That wasn’t it. I stopped it.”

Hatori looked back at him, anger still not clearing his expression completely, “What?”

“It wasn’t luck. And I didn’t turn into a rat because I was smoking. I stopped myself from transforming,” Yuki said. Silence followed for a moment before he said, “It hurt.”

“I think you’re still recovering, that sort of thing isn’t possible.”

“Maybe if I had been hugged. But I promise, that’s what happened,” Yuki said. “Maybe that’s why I was asleep for so long.”

Yuki laughed, though he wasn’t sure why. Perhaps it was just because he felt like it.

Hatori let the air settle, his shoulders finally beginning to leak of their tension, “You’ve been strangely upbeat since you woke up.”
“Have I? I guess you wouldn’t be used to seeing me that way,” Yuki said. It was true – most times he and Hatori would share the same space, Yuki would resist the doctor’s prescription, the constant reminder that his body wasn’t strong enough. They saw each other as little as possible. They both were sure of that since that day years ago when Hatori took the memories of Yuki’s only friends.

“You don’t believe me, do you?” Yuki asked, when too long of a silence had passed between them.

“I’m not sure what I believe anymore,” Hatori said, honestly.

Yuki would have to agree with that. His fingers itched to have a cigarette between them. He pushed the sensation down.

“Akito is sick, by the way. He’s very depressed you haven’t been to see him yet.”

Yuki curled his knees up to his chest, “Just give me another day.”

“Alright,” Hatori said. And then added, “After your visit with Akito, you’re going to start living with your brother.”

“What?!” Yuki’s head whipped towards Hatori.

“Ayame is collecting your things from Shigure’s house now.”

“You’re joking! You can’t… But—!”

“No buts. We both decided you need to be in a house with a proper guardian. I think you’ve proven that you can’t be trusted on your own.”

“I’m not on my own,” Yuki argued. “I’m with Shigure.”

Yuki really couldn’t blame the look Hatori gave him. Yuki sank down into where he was sitting with a groan. Yuki pinched his nose, thinking of Ayame getting his things—without him even being there. God, what was he going to tell Tohru.

“How humiliating.”

“I hope you learned a lesson from all this.”

“Yeah, call Haru next time.”

“Haru isn’t your doctor, Yuki,” Hatori scolded. “You need to stop treating him as such.”

Yuki felt a pang of guilt settle in his stomach. “I know he’s not.”

“Good. Then it’s time things went back to how they were. With the adults being adults, and the kids being kids.”

“I’m not a kid, Hatori.”

“Then why do you act like one?”
Haru watched the scenery pass by in the car window, going at a much more reasonable pace this time. At bumps in the road, Haru could hear Yuki’s things jostle in the back. He closed his eyes in a spike of annoyance. He’d have to warn Yuki about this. Tohru kept looking at Haru expectantly, hoping he’d say what had happened.

And Kyo… Well, he didn’t even want to think about that.

“He’s not going to stop being your friend, you know,” Ayame said. “And it’s not as if he won’t ever trust you again.”

The ox shifted his eyes over to Ayame, but didn’t say a word. Ayame smirked, the first Haru had scene in nearly a week.

“I think we both know what it’s like to try our best to have Yuki accept us into our lives.”

“He needs me,” Haru said quickly. Calmly. “I’ve known him for a long time.”

“And I haven’t.”

“That wasn’t what I meant—”

“Believe me, Hatsuharu. I’m fully aware. You must think it was awfully hypocritical of me to do what I did to Shigure. Berating a man for not doing the job of an elder brother.”

Haru watched as Ayame’s knuckled tightened around the steering wheel.

“I just thought he would be safe there. Or, safer, I should say from Akito’s cruel words. From that… horrible world he’s built up behind this gates.”

Haru peaked up at the statement.

“You thought…?”

Ayame gave a pained sigh, as if he had been exposed.

“I’ll admit, Hatsuharu, I wasn’t always the most attentive brother in the world. And when Yuki asked for my help as a boy, I… I simply…”

Ayame cleared his throat. “However, after what happened to Yuki in his third year of middle school I started paying attention. I started hearing those words Akito would use against him. I would see how little mother and father would do anything for that poor boy. I saw how he… drifted away.”

Ayame turned the steering wheel to Sohma house. Ayame stopped in the entrance of the gate. The cold winter air running against the shield of the car. Ayame looked as if he were unable to go forward, and the two sat there for awhile.

“For someone to be so… hopeless that they would do that to themselves—”

“What happened back then was an accident,” Haru said, saying the words as much to himself as to Ayame.

“Even still. If… If he… If Yuki hadn’t recovered… he would… he would have left this world with no one.”

Haru dug his fingers into his knees and peered up at Ayame, small, unsuspecting tears falling down the sleep deprived man’s face. Haru had never seen Ayame cry. He’d be surprised if anyone had.
But in that moment, Haru thought he looked remarkably like his brother.

“I asked Shigure if Yuki could live with him. If only to get him away from this… wretched place.”

Haru looked forward, taking in the still-closed gate of Sohma house. He couldn’t help but smile slightly. Despite the memory of a very pale Yuki laying alone in a hospital bed. The haunting idea that he might never be enough to save someone.

Look at that. You had someone else after all.

“Yuki’s better from that time, Ayame. He recovered a lot. In that house,” Ayame looked at Haru, giving him a weak nod. “And I wasn’t thinking you were a hypocrite.”

“I can see why my brother is so fond of you,” Ayame smiled. He rolled down the driver’s seat window to punch in the code to open the gate. Haru watched as they opened.

“Sensei, huh?” Haru mumbled to himself.

“What was that?”

—

“Can Yuki come and live here for awhile?”

“Sure, if you call me Sensei.”

Yuki’s chair was empty the next day at school.

What the fuck, was Kyo’s immediate thought.

He wasn’t the only one who noticed. People were gathering in the classroom around him, eyes peering around, heads looking back and forth for their beloved former class president. But it wasn’t until everyone was seated for homeroom that the chatter really started.

“Where’s Yuki?” One of the girls in the front clamored gracelessly with a hand thrown up in the air.

“Out sick, I think,” Mayu said, turning her attention to writing the weekly schedule on the chalkboard.

“You think?” The girl shot back, and that caused the roars of whispers to rise in volume like an unshakeable static.

Kyo stared through the white noise with a head full of sand, looking back at where Yuki should be. And instead, only seeing an empty desk.

It was lunch when Kyo started feeling really antsy.
He wanted to talk to Tohru, she was the one in the fucking room after Ayame’s little episode. But since that day, Tohru had been hard to talk to. She avoided talking about the matter. She avoided saying anything to Kyo. All she really did was try and get Shigure to open his office door to eat something.

And, really, he felt bad about trying to drag Tohru into this. God knew that between the two of them, they were worrying Tohru into an early grave. He hadn’t been so tone-deaf not to realize this. It was time to stop involving Tohru in this and deal with it. Yeah, that’s what Kyo wanted to do. He wanted to… deal with it.

He was going to talk to Yuki.

Kyo wanted to talk to Yuki.

But now Yuki wasn’t even fucking here.

So instead of what happened, Kyo approached Tohru and said a soft, “You okay?”

Tohru looked up at him, bite her lip nervously, and giving an unconvincing nod.

“Are you?” She asked back, just as quietly.

Kyo rubbed the back of his head.

“I’m gonna go to the roof,” he said. “Don’t worry about it.”

He didn’t go to the roof. Kyo’s feet couldn’t bring him to solitude if he tried. Haru, Ayame’s apparent and reluctant accomplice, had to know what the hell was going on. Maybe even Momiji.

Kyo stopped in his tracks.

What the fuck was he thinking?

He couldn’t ask them. How many people in this family needed to know his dirty laundry at this point? God, just the thought of saying Yuki’s name around those guys was giving him a slimy feeling in his stomach. It didn’t matter how fucking confusing these past few days had been, he needed to get his damn head straight.

He turned around, to head to the roof for real this time. Yuki wouldn’t be gone forever.

Kyo walked down the hall, content with his self-control when an all too familiar shock of black hair came into his vision.

“Hey, Manabe! Wait up! Tell us about your vacation!”

“Woah, woah, not all of you at once, there’s plenty of thorny details to go around.”

“You’re such a show-off. I bet you spent the whole time playing video games.”

“Don’t you know what kind of video games? They make a whole selection now for wanting men in need.”

A gaggle of girls sighed, making disgusted noises while the boys that surrounded the target just laughed. Kyo watched carefully from a distance, watching at how seamlessly the idiot interacted with the crowd around him.
Kyo knew this guy. Yuki’s friend. The guy that was glued to him 24 fuckin’ 7 if Kyo’s eyesight didn’t fail him. The guy who hung off Yuki, who tackled him in the hall, who had a voice like an air horn.

Another bought of laughter came from the group, but Kyo honed his eyes in on the guy, Manabe—apparently. What did Yuki say his first name was?

Well, he didn’t really care.

But he looked tired, something that wasn’t being reflected in his all-too-energetic speech. There were bags under his eyes, and he kept yawning into his elbow as the people around him spoke.

The thought of saying something to him, though, clawed at him. This guy didn’t know him, and that was the most comforting trait anyone could have right now. He could ask him and not have it matter, right? People asked about the well-being of their family members all the time, if Kyo knew even a little bit about basic social etiquette.

The guy began traveling away with the pack of classmates, and Kyo stepped forward on instinct.

“Hey,” Kyo thought, “Annoying guy.”

Manabe turned around at the name immediately, eyeing Kyo up and down before giving him a smirk.

“You did respond to it,” one of the classmates said, before they all divulged into laughter again. The guy kept his bemused eyes on Kyo, smiling at him as if Kyo had fallen into a trap. Kyo stood his ground.

“Let’s talk,” Kyo said, pushing past the crowd towards the roof.

“Apparently, I’m being summoned,” he said, following Kyo even with the strange request. The group of people laughed and waved him off. Kyo didn’t even pretend to notice.

It wasn’t until halfway up the steps that he said, “The name’s Kakeru, by the way.”

Kyo shot him a look over his shoulder.

“You know, former vice-president. Reputable ladies’ man. Yuki’s best friend for forever?”

“I think annoying guy works fine.”

“What’s with the cold air, I feel like I’m about to get interrogated.”

Kyo looked over his shoulder to roll his eyes when he pushed the roof door open. The cold was biting, and Kyo could see out of the corner of his eye Kakeru giving an exaggerated shiver. He turned back around with crossed arms.

“Yuki’s not here today,” Kyo said. And, as if to clarify, “At school.”

“Your observational skills deserve a medal,” Kakeru said with a smile, giving him a fake round of applause. Kyo could feel a headache forming.

“Well where is he?”
“Am I supposed to know?”

Kyo’s nose scrunched, a wash of irritation splashing over him like a bucket of water in the cold air. Fine, he didn’t know. Case closed. “Alright, jeez, if you don’t know then nevermind.”

“Wait, wait, you’re going to give up that easy?”

Kyo turned around, mid-step, a hopeful edge bleeding into his voice. “You do know?”

“I don’t know,” Kakeru said, looking genuinely pensive. “Do I?”

“You know what, I don’t have time for this! Stop yanking me around or just leave!”

Kakeru gave a laugh, causing Kyo’s eye to twitch, “Yuki was right, you’re too much fun to tease.”

This was a mistake. This was a mistake and Kyo was an idiot. A big dumb stupid idiot who couldn’t keep his equally dumb stupid curiosity to himself. “Just forget it!”

Kyo felt a hand on his arm as he turned to walk away, but he reacted in a heartbeat, flinching away and jumping back.

“Woah, didn’t mean to scare you. I just wanted to let you know you found the right guy. I basically know everything about Yuki at all times, you know. We’re practically brothers at this point.”

Kyo felt a headache coming on, but the guy did have a point. “I can see that,” Kyo sharply mumbled, Ayame’s blaringly loud aura coming to mind. “So if you know then why don’t you just answer the damn question. You don’t gotta be so difficult about it.”

“What’s the fun in that?” Kakeru said with a bright smile. It was official. Kyo had a headache.

“Besides,” Kakeru continued. “You’re putting me in a precarious situation, you know. You’re making me choose between my sister and my best friend.”

“Like hell, I’m not making you choose a damn thing. I just asked a ques—”

“Do you know who my sister is?”

“Dammit, I don’t even know who you are.”

Kakeru dropped his hands, as if now the cold didn’t affect him one bit and sauntered over to the chain link fence that surrounded the rooftop. Kyo followed, feeling his blood begin to boil.

“My sister is the one trying to clean up after you, and by the looks of it she’s doing a pretty good job,” Kakeru said. Kyo felt his body turn rigid, his heart beating up into his throat.

Machi. He remembered her. How could he forget her?

He looked at Kakeru through eyes dawning in realization—how the hell was he supposed to know that? The two were opposites in every sense of the word, from appearance to personality.

“So now when you put me in this position, as commander’s co-captain in charge, you’d think I’d have to report back something like this.”

In a flash, Kyo grabbed Kakeru’s collar, spun him around and pushed him against the chain-link fence so roughly the clatter rippled down the metal. “Don’t you open your mouth!”
“Why? What’ll happen if I do? What happens if I tell Yuki about this little scene here? Should I be the bad guy for letting him know how much a certain someone is worrying about him? Or should I keep my mouth shut and let someone who’s actually good for him take care of him.”

“You should keep your mouth shut ’cause you don’t know what the hell you’re talking about!”

Danger signs flashed in Kyo’s head. He was completely ensnared in this idiot’s fucking web, and he couldn’t break out of it. His hands were bound by their threat of violence.

“I know more than you think, and enough to know that my sister’s doing something good for him.”

Kyo felt his chest tighten, “So don’t say a damn thing!”

“And so the predicament continues,” Kakeru sang. “Because most times Yuki isn’t interested in what’s good for him. Is he?”

What was that supposed to mean? What was that supposed to mean?

He didn’t need this. He didn’t need to hear these things. He didn’t need it thrown in his face how bad he was for Yuki. How bad the fucking cat was for the fucking rat. How he could destroy lives just by existing.

Would he always be like this to another person?

Kyo’s eyes widened in shock and fear. He didn’t know what else to do. Memories of being in that classroom as a boy, of watching Yuki walk down the hallway with that girl were all coming back to him. Without thinking he brought his fist up to strike this annoying guy right across the fucking mouth.

He swung his arm forward but it didn’t move, a hand wrapped around his wrist. He looked behind him, eyes still frantic and wild.

Haru.

One hand in his pocket, one hand on Kyo’s wrist.

“Yuki collapsed the day before New Years and was unconscious until a couple of days ago. Akito doesn’t know that Hatori took care of him at the main house. He’s fine now, but he’s staying with Ayame until he recovers completely.”

“He collapsed?”

“Yeah,” Haru’s eyes flicked to Kakeru for a moment before being pinned back to Kyo. “No one’s quite sure why.”

He collapsed?

Kyo snarled and wrenched his hand away from Haru, dropping Kakeru’s collar. Without looking at either of them, he stormed away. He could feel their eyes on him, he knew they were watching him as he opened the roof door and slammed it behind him.

He couldn’t care less.

A mindset that was serving him damn well up until now.
“Sorry,” Haru finally said after a long moment.

“Hm?”

“If I complicated things with your sister,” Haru said, earnestly. “I heard some of your conversation...” Kakeru gave a contemplative hum before shrugging.

“Nah, don’t worry about it. I was just messing with him a bit,” Kakeru said. “Though I almost paid for it with my life!”

“He’s not the kind you want to mess around with that often.”

“Maybe but,” Kakeru dug his hands into his pockets and smiled. “I guess I just wanted to get back at him a little bit.”

Haru couldn’t help but give a snort.

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“You hurt me quite badly, Yuki. I wish you would have at least come to visit me once. What happened to turn you into such a disobedient boy?”

“I’m sorry, Akito.”

“How many times do you plan on apologizing to me?” Akito asked. Gently. Softly. “I’d much prefer it if you became a mindful person, instead.”

Yuki stayed silent, head still bowed down. Akito released a sympathetic sigh.

“Don’t worry, I understand. Every child must go through a rebellious stage, I suppose. Though, I wish you would navigate yours with a bit more tact.”

Arms wrapped around him, a gentle hug that Yuki couldn’t return.

“I’ve talked with your mother. She told me how you’ve been studying very hard in order to succeed me. This makes me very happy. I’m making arrangements for your own house, you know. I want to show you that coming back to me has its rewards. Soon, we’ll get to spend each day with one another again.”

Yuki swallowed.

“Doesn’t that sound nice, Yuki?”

“Doesn’t that sound nice?”

“Yuki?”

“Hm?” Yuki looked up from his knees in the backseat of the car, up to Ayame who stared back at him from the passenger seat. Hatori’s hands firmly gripped around the wheel.

“Are you alright?”
Yuki stared back at his brother, and considered the question. His heart had settled. He wasn’t shaking. He didn’t even feel like coughing.

“Yes,” he said, truthfully. “Just tired.”

Ayame’s house was not at all what Yuki expected.

For starters, when Hatori pulled up to Ayame’s shop, Yuki didn’t exit the car right away. It was only when Ayame gave an amused tap on the backseat window did he open the door.

“Are you going in to get something?” Yuki asked.

“Ayame lives here,” Hatori supplied, opening the trunk to grab the rest of Yuki’s things. The rat looked to the little shop and then back to Ayame who was beaming with a proud smile—visibly excited to bring Yuki into this new world.

He allowed Ayame to help him out of the car, and only made a slightly disgruntled expression when Hatori handed him his crutches.

The shop was closed, and the three breezed through the aisles of fabric, straight for the backroom where Yuki and Ayame had first chatted two years earlier when Yuki first came to the shop. Now, however, it was dark. It was early evening in winter, and dark shadows were being casted by the nude mannequins, the bunched and spilling fabric, the sketches of clothes, the tall overhanging pillars of fabric. In fact, it looked nowhere near as neat and tidy as any of his previous visits.

“Excuse the mess, brother,” Ayame said, sheepishly, as if reading his mind. “This was all very last minute, and we’re in the middle of our busy season. Poor Mine and I haven’t had the time to tidy up lately.”

Ayame led them to a staircase, covered modestly by two opaque, deep red curtains. When he pulled them back, light from the upstairs spilled on them. Hatori led the way, while Ayame gave a supporting arm for Yuki to balance as he hopped up each step. Once at the top, Hatori slid open a shoji door, and the source of light revealed itself.

In the two years Yuki had reconnected with his brother, he had been to his shop a handful of times. Most occasions because Ayame would summon him, but other times Yuki would willingly wander in out of a morbid curiosity. Never in all those times had he known Ayame lived just one story above.

Ayame was such a… flashy personality, Yuki somehow envisioned his home to be something mimicking of Sohma house. Elegant, pristine, pretentious—beautiful in an untouchable sort of way. Perhaps with gaudy room ornaments, and expensive china and sweets. Maybe tapestries draped over the walls. Lush, matching pillow sets on leather couches.

Just the thought of such a place made Yuki tense, and he was always secretly grateful that their rendezvous would occur within the modest, if eccentric, little shop. He should have known.

But the room Yuki entered was… cozy. It was warm. The open door led immediately to a small living room with a kotatsu that flooded a regal red comforter with a worn gold trim. In the middle of
the table, a small bowl of fruit—oranges and bananas. The walls were mostly bare, except for framed 
sketches, strange modern art, and pictures—mostly of Mine and Ayame together. In the corner of the 
room there was a bookshelf, stacked with books and magazines and sketchbooks.

It was clean, but it was messy. It was small, but it wasn’t suffocating. Yuki looked around in awe.

“I know it’s not the grandest of homes,” Ayame said, almost shyly, as he took off Yuki’s shoes for 
him. “But I should hope it would suit your needs, little brother.”

“Yes—of course,” Yuki reassured. Hatori placed the bags on the floor next to the kotatsu, in reach of 
the entryway so as not to have to take off his shoes.

“If you won’t be needing anything else, I should be going.”

“Oh, Hari! Stay for awhile! I can make you some tea, if you’d like,” Ayame said.

Hatori smiled, “Thank you, Ayame, but I’ve been away long enough from Sohma house as is. Akito 
might start to wonder where I am.”

“Do you need me to walk you out?” Ayame insisted.

“No, that will be quite alright,” Hatori said, then turned to Yuki. “Listen to your brother, and use 
your crutches. If you listen to orders this time, you should be rid of them in the next few days. I’ll be 
coming by to check on you.”

Yuki nodded.

“And Yuki,” Hatori said.

“Yes?”

“No more causing trouble.”

Yuki looked down at the floor, but still gave a little nod. Ayame clicked his tongue.

“Hari, don’t be such a bully after all he’s been through!”

“I’ll be going now, Ayame.”

“Bye, bye!”

The door slid shut behind Hatori and Yuki could hear the creaking of the steps as he made his way 
downstairs. Awkwardly, Yuki shifted on his crutches, feeling them dig into his underarms 
uncomfortably. He hated these stupid things, but wouldn’t dare shed them now. Not after everything.

It was after a silent moment Ayame said, “Would you like a tour?”

The kitchen was small, at least half as small as the kitchen in Shigure’s house, but with enough room 
for a wooden kitchen table. The oven was stacked beneath the stove. It wasn’t electric, either, and 
Ayame pointed out the red kitchen lighter by the stove they used to light it. The cupboards were 
stacked with a quantity of plates too big and too much for the tiny space, but Yuki couldn’t help but 
smile at the fullness of it all.

The china was not fancy, but it was colorful, and nearly none of it matched. A small L-shaped 
counter and a fridge finished it off.
The hallway led to three different rooms. One, a bathroom. A decent size, with a tub. Yuki suddenly felt a longing itch to soak himself in hot water.

When they approached the next room, Ayame knocked.

“You can come out now,” Ayame sang. The door slid open, and Mine sat there with her glasses on, but her hair up in a bun and matching pajama shirt and pants.

“Yuki! It’s so nice to see you again!”


“Your brother is so cute and formal!” She said to Ayame. “We are so excited to have you live here! I’m sorry your room is a bit of a mess right now, but don’t you worry we’re working on cleaning it up for you!”

“Oh, that’s… quite alright. Thank you…” Yuki peaked up at Ayame who was smiling down at him, before directing his attention back to Mine. “Thank you for taking me in, I suppose.”

“Of course, you’re family! Oh, but you must be exhausted. I’ll run the bath for you and make you some tea, alright?”

Before Yuki could protest, Mine was out of the room and in the kitchen. A warmth spreading into his chest at the comfortable atmosphere. Yuki peered inside the room. Two matching futons were laying side by side, with more mannequins and a chair and worktable holding a sewing machine was among a clutter of folded fabrics, pins, and thread.

Yuki felt a hand on his back and flinched before realizing it was Ayame directing him down the hall. Yuki led the way slowly on his crutches.

“Ms. Kuramae lives with you?” Yuki asked. Ayame gave a pleased, affirming hum.

“She does, but let’s keep that our little secret.”

“Does Hatori know?” Yuki asked, curious and a bit concerned. “I didn’t see her shoes in the entryway.”

“My brother is Sherlock Holmes!” Ayame exclaimed, sounding genuinely impressed. “You are correct, Mine’s shoes weren’t there. We tend to hide them in the bedroom when we know Hari or someone from the family is visiting, a rare occurrence, regardless. It was a little trick I picked up from Shigure when we were young. He liked to hide in my room late at night, and needless to say mother did not take very well to that dog of a man at all.”

Yuki felt himself bristle with deja-vu, but kept himself from scrunching his face. “Why go through so much trouble? Aren’t you close with Hatori?”

Ayame shook his head, “Let’s just say, Hari is most comfortable when he doesn’t have to lie to Akito.”

“Does she know…” Yuki’s voice lowered. “You know…”

“Here we are! Your room!” Ayame beamed, opening the third door. Yuki gave an amused huff at the evasion of an answer, but let it slide as he entered.

The room was covered wall to wall in sketches and designs and hand-written notes. Pushed against
the walls were more mannequin dress forms with pins sticking out of them. Some with clothes, some without. And in the middle, a futon laid out neatly.

“You have to forgive the mess, as Mine said. We usually use this space as our workroom away from the shop. But we’ve cleared out most of the clutter, enough for you to sleep and put your things at least. The closet is empty, too.”

“Wow,” Yuki said, looking around.

“What? Do you not like it? Is it too small? Too cluttered?”

“No, no,” he said, back turned from his brother and smiling at a half-done garment on one of the forms. “It’s nice. It’s just not what I expected.”

“Funny, that’s what most people say,” Ayame laughed loudly, and even Yuki gave a small chuckle.

“I’m sorry… for worrying you. For causing all this trouble. I didn’t mean…” Yuki clutched his crutches tighter. “I’m sorry.”

Yuki stared intently at the floor, but his vision was suddenly flooded with black socks and slacks. And then, his brother was hugging him.

“I worry you don’t know how to let people worry for you,” Ayame sighed. “Let me be that person, dearest Yuki. Every child deserves to be fretted over.”

Yuki flushed, “I’m not your child, you know.”

“As if that matters in this moment!”

“Alright, alright, get off,” Yuki said with a small smile. “I think I just want to go to bed.”

“Of course,” Ayame said. He lingered in the room, close to his brother, as if wanting to say more, but he stopped himself. Yuki more than appreciated it. It was with another squeeze of Yuki’s arm, that Ayame finally left the room, closing the door softly behind him.

Yuki listened to the way his feet padded outside the door. Listened to muffled conversation from the kitchen between Ayame and Mine. Other noises filtered in, as well. On his crutches, Yuki made his way over to the window in his new bedroom.

City noises.

People’s voices echoing on the street. The passing of a car. Honks and backfires. The clatters of dishes and glasses from a bar across the way. Life pulsed through the street, unlike in Sohma house. Unlike even in Shigure’s house.

In a way, it felt like a thick blanket has been placed over his shoulders after shivering in the winter wind for so long. His eyes drooped, he yawned.

Without bathing or changing, Yuki curled under the futon and slept soundly for the first time in a long while.

Chapter End Notes
In an interview with Natsuki Takaya she said the only thing that surprised her about her own story is no one ever punched Shigure.

This one's for you, Takaya.
Chapter Summary

It takes a village for Yuki to realize he's an idiot.

Chapter Notes

Goddamn, the scenes in this chapter have been written and rewritten to hell. I have a whole document of deleted scenes that may be just as long as this chapter, and trust me this one is long. That being said, I'm finally happy enough to post this (please just take this from my cold dead hands)!

And I certainly hope it makes up for the wait -- I know I say this every time but thank you again to anyone who is still loyal to this fic. You make my heart grow three sizes more each time you comment and kudo and bookmark.

WARNINGS for this chapter: Like I said previously, this season has some heavy topics discussed -- and suicide is a biggie for this chapter. Please be cautious of that to any viewers who could be upset by this.

Merry Christmas, ya filthy animals.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“‘You’re a real brat, you know.’”

Kagura’s arms were crossed over her chest, leaning against the wall where morning light spilled in. Rin curled her legs even closer to her chest, cheek resting on knees and looking away from the boar woman.

“What am I supposed to do? Turn her away? Again?” Kagura pressed.

“I don’t care what you do. Just make her leave,” Rin grumbled with a scowl.

Kagura rolled her eyes.

“If this is how you treat people every time you have a fight with them—” Kagura started, but cut herself off with an angry huff. Rin could tell Kagura was running out of effort to give her. “Fine. I’ll tell her to leave. I should be going too, anyway.”

Rin watched Kagura snatch her purse from the chair by her bed a little too aggressively. “My mom is coming this afternoon to check on you, so at least try and be nice to her.”

“You’re not my babysitter, you know,” Rin bit back, turning her head to look out the window. She wished Kagura hadn’t opened it all the way.

“I wouldn’t want to be,” Kagura said, heading for the door. A little too harshly, she opened it up -
sounds from the hospital immediately flooded into the room. Footsteps, nurses, intercoms, trolleys. All too strong of a reminder of where Rin was. Of how much these white walls echoed the same recycled noises.

Kagura looked over her shoulder at Rin. For the first time that morning, the two made eye contact.

“You’re lucky you have people like Haru and Tohru. They never learned how to give up on someone,” Kagura walked away but not before Rin caught the tail end of her sentence: “Unlucky for them.”

The door shut. The rest of the hospital was muffled once again.

Rin unfolded herself to lay back onto the clinical sheets of her room. She glared at her ceiling. She didn’t need Kagura to tell her that.

——

Tohru didn’t even realize her knees began to bounce until Kagura came back to the waiting room with a strained smile. Immediately, she stood to meet her. A hopeful churn in her stomach quickly turning sour with Kagura’s distantly annoyed gaze.

“I’m sorry, Tohru. She’s… she’s just not feeling very well,” Kagura lied. Tohru could tell, it wasn’t as if Kagura was doing much to hide it.

Tohru sighed, nodding. “It’s okay, Kagura. I didn’t expect her to want to see me, anyway,” She said, trying to smile.

Kagura gave a huff, “Well she should want to! She’s driving me crazier and crazier everyday!”

Tohru offered a hollow giggle.

“I’m sorry that you had to come so early. Now you’re going to be late for school.”

“Oh, that’s okay! I think mom can forgive me for being a little late to class this morning,” Tohru said. “I just thought… I thought I might try again. But I guess she really doesn’t want to see me.”

Tohru tried to ward off the hurting tone in her voice, but if the way Kagura was looking at her was any indication, it wasn’t working. She reached over to straighten a strand of Tohru’s hair and tuck it behind her ear.

“She’ll get over it. I promise.” Kagura said. “And if she doesn’t, I’ll beat her up.”

In a way, the two reminded her of how a certain cat and rat used to bicker. The flash of nostalgia was enough to make her giggle. “She’s lucky to have you.”

Kagura gave her a quizzical look before taking the scarf from Tohru’s grasp and wrapping it around her neck in a cozy knot.

“Go to school, okay?”

Tohru nodded, waving over her shoulder as she walked away.
Rin really was cutting her out. Tohru knew this, and felt like an idiot for still wanting to try. Perhaps it was something in the New Year’s air that seemed different. Or maybe she was hoping that she could… at least help someone.

For the thousandth time that week Tohru saw Ayame punching Shigure, and Haru and Ayame walking out the door with Yuki’s things that she packed. Kyo’s back the most she could see as he jogged and sprinted away from the problems that circled around that house — around this family. Perhaps, if Tohru had half a brain, she would do the same.

But she was so darn stubborn. It was something Tohru was beginning to admit about herself. Rin started her on a path that she couldn’t turn away from. This idea — this beautiful idea — that these wonderful people might be free to live their lives. Might be relieved of the damage and stress that this family had piled onto their shoulders.

That they might be able to live their lives among friends and without worry.

This awful curse ruined lives. Tore down everything in its path and isolated people away from her. Maybe she didn’t want to see people separated from each other for such foolish reasons.

Maybe she was just selfish.

Maybe she just wanted her friends — could she be so audacious to say her family — back.

Her school broke into view, a gust of wind swirling and licking at the exposed part of Tohru’s knees and thighs.

Could she be so selfish to admit to herself that without Rin she was lost in how to fight this terrible, terrible curse.

She was fighting a war completely blind and completely alone.

Winter never seemed longer than in that moment.

———

Something buzzed.

It was muffled against the floor, but it happened again. Yuki began to stir against his cell phone alarm. Pulling himself from sleep was surprisingly easy. The senses flowed back into his limbs and he could confirm one by one that they felt properly rested. He smiled to himself fin his sleep, opening his eyes to the sound of the next door proprietors loudly greeting each other over the sound of delivery trucks.

Yuki aimlessly pawed for his cellphone, flipping it open as he struggled to keep his eyelids up.

2 notifications.

MACHI: [7:23] Can we talk after school today?

Yuki frowned at the message. He knew they needed to talk, and with everything that happened he still couldn’t find the words for what he was going to say to her.
His eyes trailed down to the second message.

_MACHI: [13:16] I guess you’re not in school today. Feel better._

Yuki looked at the message confused. Wasn’t it morning? He cleared the screen of messages and looked at the big bright digital numbers on his phone.

“AYAME!”

Dressing himself was so much harder on those stupid crutches. He hopped in place trying to slide on his uniform pants one leg at a time. All too quickly he was knocked off balance, managing to catch the edge of the closet for support. With an annoyed grunt, he slipped on his shirt, tie flung over his shoulder.

Slamming his door open, he hobbled as fast as he could out of his new bedroom door. Teeth still unbrushed and hair completely in disarray.

“Ayame!”

“In here, little brother!” Ayame called from the kitchen. The click-clack of his crutches forcefully followed Yuki’s angry, lop-sided steps. Ayame was sure to greet him with a bright smile, nonetheless.

“Good morning - or should I say, good afternoon!” Ayame laughed.

“Why didn’t you wake me up?! I’ve already missed half the school day!”

“You cannot be serious. There is no way I’d let my baby brother go to school in his condition!”

“I don’t have a condition, I have a sprained ankle!”

“And I don’t have a car. What do you suggest? Running there?”

“Maybe! If I had woken up in time!”

“Oh please, Yuki, we have much more important things to discuss. You can miss a few silly classes if it means fully recovering from such a diabolical health scare.” Ayame shuddered, exaggeratedly. “I don’t even want to think of these past few days!”

“I told you - I’m fine! Can you please just help me get to—are those my things?!” Yuki cried out in frustration, noticing the college pamphlets laid out onto the futon.

“Good morning, Yuki!” _Mine_ suddenly called. “Would you like some tea?”

“No! I mean—! No thank you!” Yuki gave an annoyed cry behind his teeth. “Ayame!”

“Are these the colleges you’re applying to?” Ayame asked, not doing much to hide the disdain in his voice. The snake held up one pamphlet in particular. “This one looks absolutely atrocious.”

“Give me that!” Yuki said, managing to kneel down and snatch the pamphlets off the table and into one crumpled pile in his arms. Their perfect seams coming undone as his crutches fell behind him.

Yuki gave a forlorn sigh as Ayame and Mine exchanged a look with each other. Quickly, she retreated back into the kitchen as Ayame turned to face his brother with a small smile.

“Is it so terrible that I didn’t want to wake you? You deserved some proper rest,” Ayame said, much
more gently.

“It is so terrible to go through my things,” Yuki snapped.

“They might as well have fallen out of your bag,” Ayame said with a dismissive wave. “Besides, it’s hardly any secret. Mother’s been boasting of your future prospects to anyone who will listen.”

Yuki let the pamphlets unfurl from his arms and looked down at them.

It figured.

He hadn’t heard his mother’s voice in nearly six months. And yet, to any stranger who crossed her path, she was nothing if not the idyllic and proud mother of a faux prodigy. Yuki had been so caught up in his own internal battles with this feral spirit inside him that he forgot about a far more destructive monster — his own mother.

“If you have a problem with the places I’m applying for, you can take it up with mother.”

“Well, you see, dearest, I have. And she’s simply not having any of it.”

“You have? What does that mean?” Yuki asked, voice spiked with anxiety.

Ayame crossed his arms and raised an eyebrow at his brother. “If only you would answer my calls now and again. I’ve been trying to talk to you about your future for quite some time now.”

Yuki let the pamphlets uncurl themselves onto the table. He watched as the worn edges bled into the hardwood - their creases over-exerted from Yuki’s fruitless attempts to find something — anything — that he might consider fulfilling about each program.

Four months and still no luck.

“What is it you’re going to do once you reach university?”

“I’m going to study business and accounting,” Yuki said, as if it were obvious. “That’s what mother said would be necessary to become head of the family.”

Ayame rolled his eyes and held up his hand, flapping his fingers open and shut to mimic a mouth.

“Yes, yes, you know mother isn’t here. You can be honest with me.”

Yuki gave him a confused look, “What do you mean?”

“I mean what are you really going to do when you get to university. That can’t be what you’ve decided.”

“It’s not. It’s what mother decided.” The aggressive edge to Yuki’s words was beginning to come back.

“And you’ve accepted this? Is that really want you want to do? Study business and accounting? Your two wildest passions in life,” Ayame mocked.

Yuki snarled, “Does it matter?”

“Of course it matters!” Ayame said. “University is when you define yourself! It’s where you go to discover who you are! To live your passions freely! To become a true man! You’re going to give that up because mother says so?”
“I can’t give up something I never had in the first place!” Yuki said.

“You’re so overdramatic, Yuki,” Ayame said, almost tearfully.

“You’re calling me overdramatic?!”

“Give me one good reason why you can’t dane to think for yourself in what is possibly the most important decision of your life?”

“For one, mother is the one paying for my education!”

“Oh, nonsense. I’ll pay for that.”

Yuki blinked.

Silence sliced between them as Yuki’s mouth dropped open, not knowing how to even say thank you when Mine placed a cup of tea in front of him, sitting to join them at the table.

“Lunch should be ready soon,” Mine said to Ayame with a smile.

“Thank you, dear, it smells delicious already! Yuki, would you like some?”

“You can’t just say things like that,” Yuki answered, gravely.

“What? Offer you lunch?”

“No! Offer me… Offer me—that! This isn’t a joke, Ayame,” Yuki looked away from his brother, a disgusted look running across his features. His brother liked to exaggerate but sometimes it was too much.

“Who said this was a joke?” Ayame’s surprisingly serious tone brought Yuki’s eyes back to his brother’s. “Honestly, Yuki, if that’s all you were worried about I wonder why you didn’t come to me sooner.”

“I don’t think you know what you’re saying,” Yuki said, shaking his head. “Do you understand how much a university education costs?”

“Of course,” Ayame said, with another dismissive wave that riled Yuki even further.


“Room and board, too, of course. You’ll have to focus on your studies so you won’t have time for a job.”

“You’re insane!”

“I’m your brother!” Ayame said, firmly. “And more importantly I’m your older brother. And it’s my gleeful duty to take care of you.”

That had Yuki’s tongue pressing to the roof of his mouth. Mine looked between them, a smile hidden behind her teacup as she peacefully listened to the exchange.

Was this actually happening?

“I’d live here. And I’d pay rent, of course.”
“Nonsense. If you were to stay here with us you would be rent free, but now is not the time to limit yourself! Go! Travel! Explore! What makes you think you need to stay in this city? Do you enjoy living in Tokyo?”

For the second time in all too short a period Yuki was brought to pause.

“I’ve never thought about it.”

Ayame clicked his tongue.

“Yuki, I don’t believe you know how dear you are to me. And I’m ashamed to say how few times I’ve been able to express this to you. Let me take care of you for a little while longer. I believe, if allowed, that you will grow into someone beautiful.”

Yuki scratched his head.

If Yuki were honest with himself, he hadn’t felt this hopeful since he initially made the bet with Shigure. As fruitless as it should have seemed back then — it still gave him a glimmer of hope that perhaps, even if it seemed impossible, he could truly escape Sohma house once and for all.

But that bet was made nearly three years ago. That hope was always eclipsed by a thwarted love. Those promises always too many steps ahead of him. And he navigated towards his freedom out of spite. Spite for his mother. Spite for the Sohmas.

And now, so suddenly, being told that his path to freedom was nothing more than an open door…

Yuki felt completely numb.

A plate of food was set before him, and he looked down at it, confused. Not sure what he was supposed to do with what he was being provided.

“Yuki? Yuki, have I said something wrong?”

“What?” Yuki said, before shaking his head. “No. No, no. No.”

Yuki cleared his throat. He didn’t know what else to say.

Yuki peered up at his brother through his disheveled bangs. “Do you mean it?”

“Of course I mean it!”

Mine and Ayame exchanged another look, some kind of smile that was so warm. It reminded him of Ms. Honda. The only other person who ever left him speechless with their kindness.

Yuki was beginning to feel like a fool.

There was so much good in this world that he refused to let himself see.

He took a small bite out of the food. His appetite wasn’t back, but his stomach didn’t fight against each bite, either. For that, he was grateful. Especially since it tasted so good.

Halfway through the meal, he finally stopped to look up. Ayame looked at him as if he had been waiting all this time for him to say something. Mine continued to smile.

“Thank you. Thank you… I don’t know what to say. Thank you.”
Ayame beamed at him.

“You're welcome.”

Mine grabbed his hand on the table and squeezed.

“So, Yuki,” she asked. “What do you want to go to school for?”

The pleasant buzz in Yuki’s stomach immediately turned to lead, and his expression fell with it.

“I have no idea.”

Ayame laughed.

“Then perhaps, that’s what we should do today instead of getting you to school.”

“What?” Yuki asked.

“Figuring out what you want to be when you grow up.”

———

YUKI: [20:06] I'll be at school tomorrow, let's talk then.

YUKI: [20:08] I'm feeling much better.

———

Tohru doesn’t get a chance to open the door. It seemingly opens on its own, inspiring an undignified squeak, until Tohru sees Shigure wrapped in a coat, ready to brush by her. He does just that.

“Shigure!”

“I’m going out, Tohru,” Shigure said, already walking down the path. Tohru fell in step with him automatically.

“I brought ingredients for dinner. I know it’s just the two of us, but I thought I’d make something you liked tonight—”

“Very considerate, but I’ll be out until late,” Shigure said, smile on his face but eyes straight ahead. “You’ll have to find someone else to coddle for the evening.”

The words, themselves, were harsh, but his tone was the same as it always was. The same as when he would tell her to go to bed when she had a fever. The same as when he would encourage her through her studies. The same as when he complimented her cooking.

Tohru shook their previous conversation out of her head as her smaller legs tried to keep up with his pace.
“If you’re not home tonight then I’ll make it tomorrow!”

Shigure hummed, “who’s to say I’ll be home tomorrow, either?”

Tohru stopped and watched Shigure walk down the path.

“Then the next night!”

“Bye, Tohru,” Shigure lifted a hand but didn’t look behind him.

She watched him until he was very small, and then turned to walk inside the empty house.

———

Akito laughed, “I think it suits you.”

Shigure turned his head away, facing his black eye away from Akito. The god could only laugh harder. It wasn’t everyday he got to see Shigure pout.

“Aren’t you going to tell me how you got it?”

“You’re the head of this family, shouldn’t you already know?”

Akito frowned, lifting himself up from the mess of sheets on the futon. His robe hanging off of his shoulder, his milky legs exposed through the tied fabric. He rubbed his legs together in a way that caught Shigure’s eyes. Akito knew, because he did it on purpose.

Something about Shigure being knocked off his balance was so enticing.

“Did you come here to act like a child?”

Shigure didn’t respond.

“Whatever it was, I’m sure you deserved it. After all, you’re such a cruel man.”

“I didn’t realize cruelty was so appealing to you,” Shigure said, smirking over his shoulder. Akito glared, pulling his robe up to cover his shoulder. Shigure sighed at the action. “You’re too easy to read.”

Akito flared, hating that distant tone of voice. Akito was on his knees now, shuffling closer to Shigure who was turned away from him. Akito’s arms wrapped around Shigure’s shoulders, and his hand slipped into Shigure’s robe.

This was the only time Akito truly felt like a woman. Like those disgusting, despicable creatures. In the brief moments where he waited for Shigure to drop his smug and all-mighty act and submit. In the moments where he would eye Kureno, and wait for him to approach him without question. The moment of decision that hinged on the other party that was always left dangling in front of him. That desperate, needy musk that was so disgusting.

It’s why his encounters with Shigure were so rare. Because their prideful egos were too strong of a match for each other. Because Shigure never came to Akito anymore to comfort him, to offer
support, to offer goodwill. Not like he used to.

And if he came for sex, he would never be the first one to show it. So Akito would never heed to the desire. Instead, favoring their too-sharp banter, and being the one that would command Shigure to leave.

If it came down to wanting sex, Akito knew he could always turn to the ever-loyal and always obedient Kureno.

But today, Shigure was beautiful. He was so forlorn, so in need of comfort, so in need of Akito.

The god thrived off his down stricken face, the splotchy purple around his eye, the downright sinful aura of a man defeated and submissive. It was the only time Akito would let his ego wane around the man, when he knew he would get his way. When the spirit inside him drew him closer, knew that he could engulf the lesser spirit so easily.

It was the only time he could ignore the wanton and disparaged genitalia between his legs.

“If I’m easy to read,” Akito said into Shigure’s ear, “You must be a coloring book.”

Shigure turned his head away, as if to try and pull his ear out of the range of Akito’s hot breath. Akito only gave a low chuckle.

“As much as you try, there’s very little you can hide from me,” Akito said.

Akito’s hands went down further on his chest, and finally the downward curve of Shigure’s lips tipped upwards.

“I’ve never tried to hide a thing from you,” Shigure said. He turned his head, and with dark eyes gave Akito a smile. “I’m a remarkably simple man, remember?”

“Who are you trying to fool with that act?” Akito said, rolling his eyes. “It’s grown quite old.”

“Tsk, tsk, Akito. You’re so focused on trying to crack my head open, you’re letting other people slip through the cracks.”

Even though Akito knew when Shigure was trying to rile him up - always knew - his hands stopped their mindless caress on Shigure’s chest.

“What are you trying to say?”

“You just don’t know as much as you think, is all. Everyone knows it,” Shigure said, that smirk still playing on his lips. “Omniscience was not passed down to its successors, as much as you wish it was.”

Akito snarled, pinching harshly at Shigure’s nipple under his robe. His face was turned to the side, looking into his own darkened, dilated eyes. A deep exhale through his nose the only indication that he ever felt anything. He was so tight-lipped, even in the throes of passion. It drove Akito mad. He twisted Shigure’s nipple harder.

Shigure made a pained chuckle, “Like I said, you’re too easy to read.”

“What is it that I don’t know about? Aren’t you just delaying your own pathetic reasons for coming here?”

Shigure’s gaze narrowed, “The zodiacs are growing up. Rin’s still missing without a trace,” Shigure
leaned in even closer, causing Akito to restrain a shiver when their lips nearly touched. “Secret romances happening right under your nose.”

Akito smiled, “Are you so idiotic to think of this as a romance?”

Shigure pulled away and smiled.

Akito felt a cold wind in his chest. There was such distance in those eyes. His dark brown irises seemed so detached from his body, as if the distance between one eye from the next would be akin to a desert trek.

It was infuriating. This expression always was. Akito stared him down and reached for Shigure’s member — erect.

He growled.

Akito knew why Shigure was here. But knew nothing beyond that, and that was the terrible truce they would have to come to today, he supposed.

Because whatever it was, it had Shigure running back to Akito. And that was a satisfaction that would never grow old.

He waited for Shigure to be the one to start the bruising kiss. Waited for Shigure to be the one to drag Akito onto his lap. Waited for Shigure to split open his robe and leave him bare. Waited for Shigure to enter him.

Each moment felt like Shigure was being sucked into him, sucked into Akito’s world. It was delicious, and a feeling far more powerful than anything so primal as pleasure.

Regardless, Akito tipped his head back and pretended to be in the throes of it, opened his mouth and moaned the way Shigure wanted to hear, only to expand the snare of his trap. Only to sharpen his claws.

Akito was always alert when Shigure was near. And Akito knew that once they finished, he would need to be the one to tell him to go. Before Shigure left unprompted.

The god looked up at the dog, his thrusts feeling wild and careless. Shigure’s eyes were clenched shut, and his teeth gritted. Akito absently let out an elongated groan, while his fingers traveled up to trace the edges of the bruise on Shigure’s eye.

Akito smiled.

Whatever it was, he definitely deserved it.

———

It was always an oddly unsettling sight whenever the door opened and Shigure was behind it. It was a phenomenon that happened on several occasions in Kureno’s experience.

Each time, Kureno would be greeted in the same way. Shigure would look him directly in the eye and smile. It was an expression akin to that of a hypnotist’s watch. Something like spilled ink from a fountain pen. As if Shigure was only sparing the glance to him because he was in the way. But
otherwise, it was never something he was meant to see.

Shigure had his own path that he followed, and if Kureno ever encountered it in a crossroads, the
dog was somehow sure to let him know that he was not welcome.

But what always struck Kureno as strange, was that even if Shigure’s expression was one that was
consistent and unnerving, he could never tell what the expression on Akito’s face would be.

Sometimes Shigure left, and Akito was smug and haughty. Other times, depressed and inconsolable.
Other times, cruel and electrified. Other times, desperate and aroused.

In other words, Shigure made Kureno’s life a waking nightmare.

So Kureno cautioned himself this time when Shigure brushed his shoulder against his in the hallway,
closing Akito’s door behind him.

Kureno looked over his shoulder to watch Shigure leave, but he never looked back. Carefully, he
took in a deep, calming breath and knocked on the door before entering, wondering what Akito
would be like today.

“Come in,” Akito said through the door.

Kureno followed the order.

Akito was naked, laying on his stomach with nothing more than a a sheet to cover his backside
completely. A hateful twinge grabbed at his heart, even at the knowledge of his own indifference for
Akito’s sexual attention. His mouth felt dry and his body felt hollow.

“You called for me?” Kureno asked, hoping for a response. Akito gave none, continuing to rest his
head on his folded arms, looking content with the small smile on his face.

This was the response Kureno always found the most disconcerting:

A calm indifference.

“We’ve let that slut of a horse out of our sight for too long. Find her. Ask that boar family. They
know more than they’re letting on.”

“Yes, Akito,” Kureno said, turning to leave. He stopped himself. “Anything else?”

Akito looked over his shoulder to give Kureno a cold pair of eyes. “No.”

This absolute motherfucker.

At this point, Kyo didn’t even know why he bothered to worry. He didn’t know why he fucking
bothered to care.

Because there was Yuki Sohma, 

early to school the next day. Sitting at his desk, crutches resting on
his chair, surrounded by students, and 

smiling as if nothing had happened at all.
But that was Yuki’s MO after all.

To act like nothing happened.

Kyo wanted to throw his backpack on the ground. He wanted to rip out his stomach that couldn’t stop sinking and fluttering. He wanted to toss out this over-thinking brain of his that couldn’t stop playing Ayame’s (of all people’s) words over and over and over again.

Because here was Yuki and, obviously, nothing was fucking wrong.

“Yuki! What happened to your ankle?” One of the girls chirped.

“Just a little accident over the vacation. It should be healed up in a few days,” Yuki laughed. *Laughed.* Talking to people like it didn’t bother him.

Interacting with his stupid, annoying, loud-ass fangirls as if it didn’t bother him. Answering questions about himself as if it didn’t bother him.

How was Kyo supposed to take this? How as Kyo supposed to take any of this?

Having to witness Ayame’s weird and unexplained wrath coming down on Shigure (again - of all people!). Having to wonder what might have happened. Having to think about him since that stupid fight. “Collapsed” his ass, he looked *fine!*

Was he supposed to say something? Could he?

“Um, Kyo? Excuse me?”

Kyo jumped at the voice. One of his classmates giving him a weird look and eyeing at how he was blocking the doorway. Kyo mumbled an apology and moved out of her way, shuffling to the wall to continue his contemplation.

He shouldn’t stare. What a stupid thing to do.

Especially when Kyo was beginning to realize that so much of what happened between him and Yuki seemed to matter a lot more to Kyo than it did to him.

What an idiot he was.

Was that Yuki’s fault, too?

On instinct, Kyo brought his eyes to Yuki, as if expecting some kind of confirmation.

But then Yuki’s eyes turned up to Kyo’s, too.

Over a sea of students, flooding Yuki’s desk, trying to make conversation with him, accompanied by some of the male students trying out Yuki’s crutches. There was Yuki - staring right into his eyes.

As if he were trying to say something.

But in the end, all Yuki did was smile. He turned away.

Kyo wanted to clutch his chest to calm the way his heart had started its rapid flutter.

What the fuck was that?
What expression did he make back? Did he glare at Yuki? Did he just stare at him like a beached fish? Fuck, should he say something?

Kyo felt paralyzed by the wall, having to re-ignite every nerve in his body to push himself forward to his desk. One that left him in clear view of Yuki - and would for the rest of the day.

And here Kyo was thinking that nothing could be more distracting than Yuki’s empty desk.

“Yuki! Are you okay?” Kyo’s ears perked up at the familiar voice. He watched as Tohru approached Yuki’s desk, making a complete beeline when she entered the classroom.

“Yes, Ms. Honda. I’m fine, I promise. I’m sorry to have worried you.”

“You worried all of us!” One of the fangirls squawked, never to be outdone by Tohru. He hated the look she threw Kyo’s way.

“What happened to your leg?” Tohru asked, carefully.

“I promise, we’ll talk later,” Yuki said, with a smile.

Tohru smiled back, as if that was enough of an explanation. And just like that, she sat down at her own desk, chatting happily with Uo and Hana.

Tohru. Queen worrywart and constant fuss-maker Tohru.

God, Kyo was thinking way too much about all of this.

“Alright, alright, settle down everyone. Go back to your seats before I start writing you all up,” Mayu said, bursting into the classroom unceremoniously. The girls by Yuki’s desk scattered, going back to their desks.

Kyo took the chance to look at Yuki again, completely free from surrounding bodies. With his eyes brighter and more focused than he’d seen in months, with an aura around him that left Kyo unnerved. And with a brace that strapped over his uniformed leg.

His eyes came back up and once again they collided with Yuki’s.

Kyo felt himself jolt, but didn’t look away. Yuki’s lips turned upwards all too easily - far easier than he had seen in awhile.

And then Yuki was mouthing something.

“Pay attention! Just because you’re studying for the entrance exams doesn’t mean you get to ignore your regular classes!”

Kyo snapped his attention back to Mayu, her stern face leading the class as it always did, and a chorus of “yes, ma’am”s filled the room.

Focusing, right. Studying. Paying attention. Just like he told Shishou.

But maybe today would just be a little bit harder with the back of Yuki’s head, and some silent words jumbling Kyo’s insides.

“You’re staring.”

He had been. But that didn’t mean Yuki was allowed to notice now after all this time.
“Tohru!!” Momiji bounded over to Tohru once the day ended. He wasted know time in dipping low into a regal bow. Kyo grimaced. “Princess Tohru, your knight in shining armor has arrive.”

“If you’re a knight no wonder the feudal system collapsed,” Kyo scoffed, collecting his things.

“—Here to rescue you from disgusting, brute warlords!”

“This brute warlord could probably throw you out the window!”

“A duel!” Momiji said, jumping back and flaying around an imaginary sword. Tohru laughed in delight. Kyo was quick to pull him by the collar so that he was standing up straight.

“Watch your fucking surroundings!”

Momiji stuck out his tongue, “Why? So I can be as stiff and snippy as you?”

“Snippy?!”

“I’m here to walk Tohru home,” Momiji said haughtily, sure to offer his elbow to Tohru who accept with a smile. “You can join us or you can be snippy somewhere else.”

“Don’t just invite yourself over! People live there!”

“I would love for you to come visit, Momiji! I can cook you some dinner.” Tohru said, immediately undermining Kyo.

“I would be an idiot if I didn’t accept the offer,” Momiji said, looking back at Kyo.

“And I would be an idiot if I hung around you,” Kyo said, slinging his backpack over his shoulder and heading for the door.

“Kyo where are you going?” Tohru called after him. “Do you want to have dinner with us?”

He looked over his shoulder, the careful and pleading eyes that Tohru always held. He sighed, “Yeah, I’ll be back home later.”

With that he slammed the door behind him to the classroom, hearing Tohru and Momiji call out after him happily. So distracted that—

“Hey!”

Kyo stopped dead in his tracks inches away from almost bumping into a girl right at the doorway. Kyo’s adrenaline spiked, sidestepping on reflex right into the wall, thudding against it. Quickly losing his balance, he fell on the floor, hard.

Kyo groaned, other classmates in the hallway chuckling at the little show.

“Hey, Kyon! No need to get so excited! She’s not radioactive!”

“Yeah, yeah, keep walkin’,” Kyo called back at the passing peer.
“Are you okay?” Said a familiar voice.

Kyo peered up, locking eyes with possibly the last person he wanted to see.

It was that girl. Machi. Yuki’s girlfriend. Diligently reporting to the outside of his classroom, not even five minutes after classes ended. Her hand was outstretched, and that heinously genuine look was staining her face, just as it had when they first met.

Kyo took the hand anyway, and pulled himself up.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to startle you. You came out of the classroom so quickly.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Kyo grumbled. He dusted himself off, noticing Machi wasn’t moving from her observant post. Kyo rolled his eyes. “You here to see Yuki?”

Machi nodded.

“Then what the hell are you starin’ at me for?” Kyo bit back. Machi took the words, unphased, and kept staring intently.

“I’m trying to understand something,” she said. Her tone as even as always.

“Understand what? Don’t stare at me, it’s creepy.”

She ignored him with a hum, until her eyes pulled away to the side, somewhere far off and distant.

Kyo examined her, rearranging his book bag on his shoulder and staring her down, unbeknownst to her. After a second, he huffed.

“If it helps, I don’t understand you, either,” Kyo brushed passed her and continue walking down the hall.

He felt her eyes on him until he could hear the faint noise of the classroom door opening.

———

There was a small nook on the third years’ floor. A little delve in the corner of the building, somewhat secluded in that the closest classroom was down the hall. The storage closet was in sight, and so was a room too small to force more than a few desks inside.

Clubs were starting, and most students cleared the building for the day, or went off to their respective meeting places. Yuki could hear the faint, laughing voices in the tiny room by the storage closet over the shuffling of Machi’s feet. He tried to distract himself by recalling the memory of which club exactly met in the tiny space.

He would have known a year ago, at the height of his presidency. Now, it was shocking that anything so normal in nature entered his consciousness.

Machi sat next to him on some chair pulled out and pressed against the wall. Likely making this a hangout for when kids ditched classes. Briefly, he wondered if Kyo knew the place. Maybe it was a good substitute when the roof was too cold. He could see out the large windows and even look at how far a drop it was below.
Machi cleared her throat and Yuki looked back at her, eyes now narrowed onto him.

It hadn’t been this awkward with her in awhile. But Yuki didn’t know what to say, and he would let her speak first this time. She deserved as much.

That was the plan at least, but at least ten minutes had gone by now.

“Look,” Yuki started. “I want to apologize. That night must have scared you. The days after must have… I can only imagine what I would think if you ended up in the hospital so suddenly. I’m sorry I worried you. Really.”

Machi looked at him, dazed, and he wanted to squirm underneath her gaze. Eyes that looked as if she were searching for something, as if she hadn’t heard a word.

“Machi?”

“You forgot something at my apartment,” she said, cutting him off. “I was wondering if you were ever going to ask about it.”

She dug into her book bag. Yuki shifted forward.

Out of a mess of papers and stray mismatching pencils, Machi pulled out Yuki’s journal.

A spike of cold crept under Yuki’s clothes. The draft from the window somehow becoming harsher. Her milky hand handed him the forest green book, now with an abused and stretched spine, and puffed up pages pregnant with pencil lead.

A different sight from when Shigure handed it to him months ago.

“I didn’t realize it was gone,” Yuki said, mouth dry. Panic running through him like a shock.

He didn’t like opening it, and he hadn’t ever reread an entry once it was placed down on paper. And even though he was glad it was back, having forgotten most of the words that blended together in the notebook was having him desperately trying to recall every entry.

“I read it,” Machi said. “I read it all.”

Yuki’s eyes widened slightly, watching her carefully.

And that was exactly what he was afraid of. He let himself flip through the pages, trying his best to spot inflammatory words.


Oh no, no wonder she was so mad at him. No wonder she was acting so strange. If she read whatever it was that must’ve surely spilled from the pits of his stomach onto the page… What had he written? He couldn’t remember, and panic was muddling up his memory even more. Snapping the book shut, Yuki shot her a desperate look.

“Whatever it is you read in here, I can explain. I… I’m so sorry. I know some of what was in here must have seemed strange or bizarre, but it’s not… It’s not what you think.”

“What do I think?” Machi asked.

Yuki felt his chest freeze, “If I wrote anything that upset you… whatever it is, I’m so sorry. But please, promise you won’t share with anyone what’s in here.”
“Why would I do something like that?”

“I know, but I need to ask.” Yuki could feel his voice pinching higher, his heart racing. “What you read wasn’t real, I promise.”

Machi narrowed her eyes at him, and Yuki startled slightly, his eyes looking around desperately as if anyone could be listening in on their conversation. Machi was playing it too cool. She was too calm. Too grounded. But when she exhaled a sigh it sounded disappointed, sad.

“I’m not mad at the things you wrote,” Machi said. Yuki didn’t let himself relax as he watched her cautiously.

So when she started to cry, Yuki was quick to respond.

“Hey, hey,” Yuki said, trying to be comforting. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to upset you.” God, Yuki was having heart palpitations. “Please, please don’t cry.”

“I’m sorry,” Machi said quietly. “But you’re so mean to yourself.”

Yuki paused, blinking at her.

“You write all those… all those beautiful things. You write so honestly about how you feel and then you go and say that it’s not even real. Are you that scared of yourself?”

Yuki opened his mouth to respond, stunned by the words.

Obviously, thankfully, there was something of a miscommunication between them. Yuki finally let the thick sheen of fear wash out of him, leaving him jarred but relieved. She didn’t seem to know or realize the implications of how honest his entries were. Though it wasn’t as if he could take it back now without explaining himself.

But then again, when Yuki tried to rethink of what he wrote with a clearer head, less shaken with the terror of his secret being discovered, he still couldn’t remember a word. This book… it was an escape. A place to put his feelings and deal with them, well, never preferably.

He realized, with a growing realization, that maybe what she was saying was partially (completely) true.

“I’m not… scared of myself,” Yuki tested, trying to see if the words were a lie by his own reaction. “I just don’t like to read my entries over. It’s. Personal.”

“Then why did you leave it behind?” Machi asked. “It wasn’t with your things. It wasn’t in your backpack when Mr. Sohma and your brother took everything.”

“I guess I just forgot,” Yuki said, dismissively.

“Don’t forget! It’s important!” Machi said, voice finally raising at him. Yuki blinked at her again, aware that his face was contorting into hurt.

“Why does it matter?” Yuki asked. “It’s just a silly journal.”

Machi wiped at her eyes with the heel of her hands, “I thought it was a suicide note.”

Yuki’s heart stopped. “A what?!”

“Who wouldn’t think that?” Yuki deliberately looked at her as if to say I wouldn’t but Machi just
shook her head. “If you left it behind that would mean you didn’t mean to write anything else.”

Machi choked on the last words, beginning to cry harder, and never more in his entire life did Yuki wish this wretched curse could be expelled form his body. He wanted to hug her so badly, it ached. It took everything he had not to do so, not to reveal himself. Not to undo everything he worked for that night.

And never did he have such faith that she would have hugged back regardless.

He took her hands in his.

“Listen to me, please. Machi, please. I didn’t do what you’re thinking. I promise. I was writing, I left it on the table, and then I got sick.”

“I don’t believe you,” she said between hiccups. Even when Machi sobbed it was quiet. It broke Yuki’s heart.

But he knew he was in a hard place to argue.

**Why would she think that?** A question he was only allowed to entertain for a few moments.

Before a flashing light of his worst, most self-destructive moments presented themselves to him. His poor appetite. His melancholy. His low energy. His self-defeating attitude. How he wouldn’t go home. How he would bottle everything, how he let that lid open with Tohru only to shove it all back in and tightly seal it once more.

And what was worse, the worst parts of those feelings were recorded in pen ink word for word in one little notebook that Machi read cover to cover.

Yuki wanted to slap himself, and he hung his head at his own realization.

He pulled out his handkerchief and handed it to Machi, letting her dry her face.

“You have every reason not to believe me, and that’s my fault. I’ve not… been trustworthy with myself lately,” he looked at the journal in his lap. “I can see that. But you need to forget everything you read. Please. I. I’m begging you.

“Machi, listen to me. There’s something about me that very few people know about. And… I’ll share some of it with you, because I don’t want you thinking this is something I did to myself.”

Machi looked up at him, cheeks puffy and eyes red, but listening intently.

“In my family… there’s…” Yuki paused. “A disease. I’m not the only one in my family to have it. It causes the strange hair color, eye color, creates a… an… aversion to being touched. In most cases it can be,” Yuki rolled his eyes, “Benign.

“That is, if you know how to live with it. But if not…” Yuki shrugged.

“If not, things like New Years happen?” Machi supplied.

Yuki nodded. A beat of silence followed.

“I hate living with this disease. I’ve had to live with it all my life. I want it out of my body. I don’t want to just ‘live with it.’ And so, sometimes, I’ll do silly things to rebel against it. I know it’s stupid to try and purge myself of this thing singlehandedly, but… maybe I’m just stubborn.”
Machi looked down at Yuki’s handkerchief, slipping the edges between her fingers. He felt bad that there wasn’t a tear in it somewhere. He took her hands in his, the handkerchief sandwiched between, and directed her eyes towards his.

“I do it so I can live my life without restrictions. Not because I want to stop living. I promise.”

Machi sniffed, nodding her head.

“Please accept my apology. I never wanted to put you through that.”


“You believe me?”

She nodded again. “But I’ve been quiet for too long, Yuki. Please start taking care of yourself. Please.”

“I will. I promise,” Yuki said, clutching her hands tighter. “The past week has given me a lot to think about.”

Machi retracted her hands and used the handkerchief once more to wipe her face. She handed the cloth square back to Yuki who smiled at her.

“I’m sorry I thought that about you,” Machi said.

“I would have, too.”

“And I’m sorry I read your journal.”

Yuki nodded, looking back down at the offending object.

“You’re a beautiful writer,” Machi said.

Yuki gave an amused huff, “You think?”

“I’m serious. You lose yourself in the words. It was mesmerizing,” Machi said, a sad lilt in her voice.

“Is that bad?” Yuki’s tone turning to comfort.

Machi shook her head, but didn’t say anything for a moment. Words on the tip of her tongue that Yuki could almost see.

“What is it?” Yuki prompted.

“When you write about love,” she looked up at him. “You’re not writing about me, are you?”

Yuki couldn’t respond.

“I didn’t think so,” Machi said.

She smiled, taking his hand in hers, just like he had so many times before, but this time she brought it to her lips and gave it a quick, innocent peck. Her cheeks lit red at the action, and Yuki felt himself smile.

“Thank you, president.”

“Don’t call me that,” Yuki implored. “I… don’t want you out of my life. Is that okay?”
Another moment of silence.

“Of course,” Machi smiled. “Yuki.”

“I didn’t think I’d ever see the day.”

Kyo bristled at the soft-spoken voice, turning his head to stare up at Mayu. She smiled, holding a few books in her hand. They were worn and creased like all the books in the library. Especially in this section, where the books were particularly dusty and the desks were particularly empty.

Shit, he thought he’d be safe here.

“What the hell are you doing here,” Kyo said, instantly being shushed by a librarian’s voice somewhere over mountains of books.

“I work here, you know. You’d probably realize that if you paid attention in class.”

Mayu looked over the textbooks and sloppily-written notes in front of Kyo, her lips up-turning into an impressed-smile.

“Or maybe I should give you more credit.” Mayu’s face contorted. “Then again, maybe not. English was never your best subject, huh?”

Defensively, Kyo started to pack up his things, “I was just leaving.”

Mayu laughed, softly so as not to disturb the library’s quiet shell, and sat across from the bristled cat, “No need to go on my account.”

He ignored her, zipping up his backpack.

“There’s no need to be ashamed of studying, you know. You can care about your future and not have it be the punchline to a joke.”

“Whatever,” Kyo said. “I’m not looking for advice.”

Mayu sighed, “You and your cousin are working to give me chronic migraines.”

Kyo stopped, his eyes narrowing as he stared at his teacher from across the table. Did everyone know that that name got him riled up? It felt like every time someone said Yuki’s name it was because they wanted to get under Kyo’s skin.

“Isn’t Yuki the perfect student?” He spat. Mayu gave him a strange look, eyes rounded by amusement, and suddenly Kyo felt like an idiot. Somehow, Yuki always made him sound like a child.

“The day I meet the perfect student is the day I quit teaching,” Mayu said, easily.

Kyo stared down at the backpack strap in his hands before slinging it over his shoulder, hesitant to step away.
“I can go if that would make you more comfortable,” Mayu said, scanning him. “Can’t study at home?”

Kyo shook his head, “Can’t concentrate there.”

Mayu stood, meeting him at eye-level and patting him on the shoulder, “Life won’t always feel this unclear. Promise.”

She walked away, and Kyo turned to watch her leave.

“You don’t know shit about me,” Kyo called after her, not unkindly.

“Yeah, yeah, you and the rest of my students,” she said, giving a dismissive wave as she walked away, ignoring when the librarian shushed her.

Kyo smirked, walking out, too.

Kyo couldn’t say he particularly liked being in school. The color of the walls felt clinical, and he hated the sound when a student would drag their feet and create a squeaking noise between the bottom of their slipper and the floor.

But the windows were big, he liked that. Even if the big windows caused the classrooms to be drafty and chilly in the winter.

It was late in the afternoon, and the halls were cleared of people. It was okay like this. Kyo looked out the window below and watched some of the track and field students running in their bundled up sweats. He could hear the whistle of a coach, and the yelling of a student captain.

He turned his head away, passing by a girl in the hall running to get somewhere — probably a club still loitering behind in the late hour.

Briefly, Kyo wondered what it might have been like to be in a club. He liked sports, for the most part. Kunimitsu would sometimes listen to baseball on the radio in the dojo, and it didn’t sound bad. Or maybe soccer. Kyo liked to run, and he was good on his feet.

What would it have been like to stay behind in this quiet school every day with a group of people who cared about something? What would it be like to care about something so much, you’d want to keep doing it in college? Maybe for life?

Maybe even have friends who would follow you that far, too.

Well, he did go to the dojo a lot. Though he practiced alone. And he would always want Tohru in his life, even if he would never see her again once his time in the outside world was up.

What would it be like to just be normal?

Kyo’s thoughts followed him to the shoe lockers, aimlessly wandering into the area when his heart stopped.

A pair of crutches rested on the side of one of the rows of cubbies. And in one of the aisles, Kyo could see a shock of gray hair.

Kyo ran a rough hand through his hair — fuck if he needed a slap in the face to remind him that he definitely was not normal at fucking all. Yuki made sure to accentuate that every goddamn time he was in the room.
But, whatever, it was fine. Kyo’s locker was next to Yuki’s, but he could just wait. Kyo could hide behind the corner, and wait for the tell-tale sign of crutches clacking on the ground and in the distance.

He didn’t need to see, hear, or talk to Yuki at all. Or ever.

“Shit.”

Kyo heard the word on a breath and his ears perked. The sound of something clanging against the metal doors followed, and Kyo could hear Yuki let out a grunt of frustration.

Kyo silently clenched his hands in frustration, spinning on his heels, as if it would stop him from being the idiot he was about to be.

But as much as Kyo hated to be a cliche, he couldn’t help himself.

_Curiosity really will get me killed._

Kyo carefully stepped around the corner to look down the narrow aisle of lockers. There was Yuki, his back turned towards Kyo, one hand on the lockers to steady himself, his bandage-wrapped foot hovering above the ground, and an un-tied shoe in his other hand. Yuki was bending down, trying to keep his balance as he maneuvered the shoe onto his foot. But when he did, he wobbled and came close to falling over. Yuki cursed again, and Kyo didn’t even realize that a small smile had bent his lips.

“Never knew rats had such shit balance,” Kyo said, before he could stop it. Yuki stopped, his shoulders tensing and his head snapping up, but he waited to turn around. Almost as if he were gathering himself.

Slowly, he looked over his shoulder. Their eyes met.

Something began blazing in Kyo’s belly. Whatever the sensation was, it was sharp and came up through to his throat. He gulped it back as Yuki turned to face him fully, hopping on one-leg almost comically to do so.

“I suppose we can’t all be as graceful as cats,” Yuki said back, softly.

The two stood there, facing each other for a moment. Kyo’s chest swelled, painstakingly aware of each second that passed where instead of saying something he just stared at Yuki.

The last time they stood eye to eye they were being pulled off each other, having to be held back so as not to unleash the wild and completely uncontrollable adrenaline that ignited them.

Now, Yuki stood before him, one bad leg wrapped with bandages and covered by a sock. And Kyo… he didn’t really know what he looked like at the moment. Did he look tired? His eyes felt heavy. What did his hair look like?

Finally, Yuki let out a small cough, “Do you need something?”

Kyo tried to process the question as quickly as he could, but it scrambled in the space between his ear and brain. His eyes darted to Yuki’s pale hand resting over his locker… _his_ locker. Kyo looked down at his slippers. He needed to change, that’s right.

“Shoes,” Kyo said, gruffly, and pointing to his locker. “You’re blocking my locker.”
“Oh,” Yuki said. He shuffled himself backwards on awkward little hops. “Sorry.”

Kyo walked to his locker, but Yuki was so close now. Hovering his leg still, breathing in even incriminates as Kyo took the shoes out of his locker, quickly kicking off the school slippers and placing them inside.

Kyo was aware when he crouched down to tie his sneakers, his fingers tangling with the laces as he tried to do the job quickly.

“What are you doing here so late?” Yuki asked. Kyo tighten one knot painfully tight.

“Just,” he said, starting to work on the next one. “Had stuff to do.”

“At school?” Yuki asked, almost amused.

“Yeah, what’s it to you? Are you trying to say something?” Kyo shot back, but was ashamedly aware of how little bite his voice had.

“No,” Yuki said, just as gently. “It’s just something strange to see.”

Kyo finished tying his laces, and looked up at Yuki. His silver eyes staring down at him directly, a kind of delight sparkling behind them.

Kyo looked away, “That’s not the only thing.” Kyo looked towards Yuki’s ankle and reached out to flick it with his forefinger.

Yuki hissed half out of pain, half out of shock, “Hey!”

“What happened to it?” Kyo asked, standing up. Their eyes locked again like magnets, and Kyo watched, mesmerized, by every movement Yuki’s body would make under Kyo’s sun-burning gaze.

“Something stupid,” Yuki said with a smirk. “Don’t worry about it.”

“I wasn’t.”

“Good.”

“Good.”

“Then I guess I’ll see you tomorrow at school.”

“Yup.”

“Now that you have your shoes, of course”

“I’m leavin’.”

“Good.”

“Good.”

Kyo grunted and pushed past Yuki, fully intent on leaving and never looking back and never thinking about Yuki again and never dissecting each word Yuki tossed at him.

Problem was, that’s what he told himself everyday since last summer.

Yuki grunted again, this time quieter, and Kyo turned around. With a roll of his eyes he stomped
back towards Yuki.

“T’m gonna help you.”

“What?”

“Give me your shoe.”

Yuki reflexively reached his arm away, “No!”

Kyo reached for it, too, stretching his body over Yuki’s to grab it, “Don’t be such a stubborn bastard! Give me the shoe!”

“No! Go home, I’ll be fine!” Yuki said, reaching it over his head, but Kyo jumped, laughing victoriously when he was able to snatch it out of Yuki’s hand.

“Give that back! Woah, hey—!” Yuki reached for it, pushing himself off the lockers to give him more momentum, but it only caused him to dive forward off balance.

“Watch out!” Kyo grabbed the mass that was Yuki, grabbing the upper part of his arms before he could tumble to the ground. They stopped. Yuki looked up at Kyo, and Kyo realized they hadn’t been this close without violence… not in months. He barely registered his grip tightening as he stared down at Yuki as the silence between them began to expand like hot air.

And then, Yuki’s face turned red.

“I’m fine, let go,” Yuki said, pushing away gently to lean back against the lockers. Kyo loosened his grip, allowing him to slip away, and realizing once he did that his own face was warm, as well.

“Shut up and let me help,” Kyo said quietly. “Otherwise you’re gonna be here all night.”

Yuki just nodded, accompanied with an annoyed huff.

Kyo kneeled back down, untying the knot on Yuki’s shoe and expanding it open to fit easily around his foot without being too snug.

Carefully, he wrapped his fingers around the bandages binding Yuki’s ankle and angled his foot so it could meet the inside of the shoe.

Kyo’s heart was racing with every second, and it was all he could do not to look up at Yuki.

“This is embarrassing,” Yuki said on a groan.

*You’re telling me.*

“You want to walk home without a shoe?” Kyo said instead.

“At this point, yes,” Yuki chuckled.

Carefully, Kyo tied the laces, leaving them loose for Yuki. He removed his fingers and stood back up, still just as close.

Yuki rolled his eyes, even as a smile graced his lips, “Aren’t you just prince charming.”

“Are you calling yourself a princess?” Kyo said, smug even as Yuki clicked his tongue.
“Maybe one day I’ll find a way to return the favor. I could expedite the process by breaking your foot,” Yuki said.

“You think you can take me? Now?”

“What? Are you challenging me?” Yuki asked, his own smile breaking.

“Tch. What kind of fight would that be? When I beat you it’s gotta be fair and square.”

“I don’t know if I’m as helpless as you think. The crutches might make a good weapon,” Yuki said.

They looked at each other again, but this time before Kyo’s chest could expand under the pressure of Yuki’s eyes, Yuki placed a hand on Kyo’s shoulder, using him as balance to hop towards his crutches.

“Hang on, I got it.” Kyo placed his hand over the one on his shoulder, and gently brushed it aside.

Yuki’s hand was cold, and it was such a familiar sensation of having it in his own, that it almost felt like a ghost limb was being pulled on violently.

Free from Yuki’s grip, he walked towards where the crutches rested, grabbed them both and brought them back to Yuki, who buttoned up the last button of his coat.

“Thank you,” Yuki said, simply.

“Are you… gonna be okay? Getting home? Or… wherever?”

“Yeah,” Yuki said. “Hatori’s picking me up. He should be here.”

“Okay,” Kyo said.

“Okay,” Yuki said.

“Then, I’ll go.”

“See you tomorrow,” Yuki said, smiling.

Kyo nodded, forcing himself to turn and walk away, even at the sound of Yuki’s much slower crutches following behind.

The more he walked, the more his face heated, until it was so hot the only way Kyo knew to relieve the steam under his cheeks was to run — all the way back to the dojo.

———

Dinner was among company that night. Tohru could almost feel her lungs contracting from the relief of not having to spend another night on her own. She and Momiji had collaborated on a wonderful dinner. Kyo arrived home just after they set the table.

The three of them ate together, an unlikely amalgamation. But Kyo didn’t say much, just ate his food in silence, while Momiji rattled on and on to Tohru. The noise was so welcome.
Shigure didn't come out once.

Tohru waved off Momiji when he left, Kyo long having retreated to his room. She and the bunny chatted for another hour or so, until he packed up his things and left with an enthusiastic wave.

And then, it was quiet in the house again.

Kyo was either asleep, or using his cat-like footsteps to not make a singular noise. And nothing at all came from the vortex that was the aura around Shigure’s office. At first Tohru thought he must be out. Again.

But when she walked down the hall, perhaps too closely to the office door, she could hear the faint sounds of pages turning and keyboard clacks. All becoming suspiciously quiet when she lingered around the door for a little too long.

Tohru’s eyes narrowed in resolve.

Her feet pattered into the kitchen, pulling out the leftovers of the meal and heating them up, along with a pot of tea. When it was finished, she placed the food on a tray, taking extra pains to make it look presentable.

With the meal in hand, she returned to the office door, knocking once. Then twice. Three times.

“Yes, Tohru?”

Tohru wasted no time opening the door. The light from the office spilled into the hallway.

“I already ate,” Shigure said, not looking up from his work. His glasses were on, and his eyes were covered. His hair scraggly, but otherwise he looked as he always did. He spoke as he always did. His tone, his voice, his posture, his stature.

Perhaps, that’s what was most terrifying.

Kyo and Yuki made a ritualistic habit out of worrying her, but at least Tohru knew when something was wrong.

Yuki would sulk, lose his appetite, speak in quiet tones, and stare out into nothing.

Kyo would yell more, stomp more, fight more. He would run for longer in the mornings, taking longer showers, and only eat late at night.

They were troubled, but thank goodness they were obvious.

Shigure provided no such courtesy. The only thing indicating that anything changed in their relationship was the gut feeling that Shigure had tossed her out. She was no longer welcome in his space.

And it made her wonder what was so different when she was.

“I didn’t see you eat,” Tohru said, trying to sound accommodating. “You shouldn’t skip meals when you work.”

“Then leave it,” Shigure said, looking up only to flash her the briefest smile. “Thank you.”

She stepped forward, walking around the desk to place the tray of food next to him. She straightened herself, looking down on where he worked. Her eye catching on the blotchy bruise hidden behind
his spectacles.

“Did you need something?” Shigure asked, looking up at her. Taking off his glasses with that same vacant smile — as if parading his injured eye in front of her.

“Does it hurt?” She asked, quietly. “I could get you ice.”

“That’s okay,” Shigure said. “Don’t worry about it.”

Tohru turned to leave, mentally berating herself again and again at her complete and utter failure. Maybe she really was out of her league.

“I do worry,” she said, without thinking. The utterance making her realize she needed to turn around. When she did, Shigure was looking up at her. Expression unchanged. “I worry about you a lot. I wish you would tell me what I could do.”

“For today,” Shigure said in the warm, comforting tone that was familiar to Tohru. Accompanied by that smile, parental and calm. “You can leave.”

He turned back to his work after that, ignoring that Tohru lingered by the door for nearly a minute before she gathered the courage to leave.

Perhaps she really was seeing what she wanted to see.

———

He’d just finished buttoning up his pajama shirt when the phone rang, his eyes heavy with the day.

Earlier, when he finally came home from school, Ayame was waiting with a bright grin, and nearly a dozen pamphlets for different universities. Yuki looked over them while Ayame babbled and Hatori rolled his ankle around precariously.

This college had this program, but this university had these clubs, but if he went to this one, etc. Yuki briefly considered teasing Ayame that they were trying to find a school for Yuki, not for him — but he decided against it. Even he could tell how hard his brother was working for him, and to poke fun at that seemed to be in poor taste.

And it wasn’t as if Yuki gave him any specifics about his future.

It was when Hatori finally pulled away, giving Yuki’s ankle a clean bill of health that Ayame admitted that he had booked Yuki an interview. It was overwhelming, and Yuki wanted to snap at him under the strange, and unexpected pressure of having to deal with this all too soon. But Ayame plopped the brochure onto his lap for Yuki to look over and proceeded to tell Hatori exactly what the university entailed.

It was a big school. Public. With a campus by the beach. To accommodate the large student population they provided solid programs in almost every starter field. And offered more than a few exchange programs. Many abroad, but even more across the country. Yuki pondered what life might be like in the countryside. In a fishing town. In a city not so cold as Tokyo.

What would it be like to go to a different country. England? His English grades were decent. China?
Maybe Brazil? Now his mind was just wandering.

Hm.

That had never happened before. (At least not productively).

So Yuki didn’t fight when Ayame roped Hatori into driving him to the main campus of the university. He didn’t fight when Ayame said they would need to practice his interview skills. He didn’t fight when Ayame asked if it was alright.

Maybe his brother knew more about him than he gave him credit for.

But regardless, the day exhausted him to his core. And when his phone continued to ring Yuki knew there was no way he was going to bed just yet.

Yuki winced at the contact name flashing on the screen. He butted the top of the phone against his forehead for a second, letting it vibrate the edge of his hairline, before picking it up with a cautionary “Hello?”

“I heard you had a conversation with my sister,” Kakeru’s voice came through.

“I probably should have expected this call,” Yuki said. Kakeru was too good of a brother. “I hope she thoroughly complained about me to you.”

“You know Machi. Salt of the earth.” Yuki could hear rustling on the other end of the phone. “She didn’t tell me much.”

“You know Machi.”

“But you made her cry,” Kakeru said, pointedly.

Yuki tilted his head back with another wince. Like the comment physically pained him, as if he needed to keep back the startled aching shout. “It will be the last time. I promise.”

“She said something along those lines, too,” Kakeru sighed. Yuki felt a spike lodged in his chest. “You’re mad.”

“She was good for you,” Kakeru bemoaned, sounding decidedly frustrated.

Yuki smiled anyway, “I’m not going to play trial and error with my own feelings at her expense. I care about her too much.”

“Yeah, yeah, fancy talk. I don’t think that excuses you from an obligatory big-brother ass-kicking tomorrow.”

“I won’t argue,” Yuki tried to extend a small laugh to his friend. “Do your worst.”

He thought he could hear Kakeru smile on the other end, “You better not let your freaky reflexes get in the way.”

“I promise.”

The air between them fell quiet but charged. He could feel Kakeru wanting to say something more, but stopping. Possibly the first time in the history of the world that Kakeru left something unsaid. It should go in the history books. Yuki wanted to laugh at the thought, because, in a way, it sounded
like something Kakeru would say to him.

But Yuki had his own words still sticky against his teeth. An aftertaste of his conversation with Machi. He wondered if they want to say the same thing.

“You know,” Yuki started, hoping to sound conversational and not grave. “Machi asked me if I tried to kill myself.”

“Huh,” Kakeru said. “Did you?”

“No, of course not,” Yuki sighed. “Not you, too.”

“What do you mean ‘not me, too’? What was I supposed to think happened?”

“What I told you happened!” Yuki knew he was getting unjustifiably defensive, but he’d never heard Kakeru be short with him. “I already talked to Machi about this, you know.”

“Yeah, but not me!” Kakeru gave a frustrated cry away from the phone, and Yuki felt his heart sink again. “Did you lie to her? Did you lie to my sister and then break up with her?”

“No! Of course not! I would never do that to Machi!”

“Cause you gotta know what it looks like to us, Yun. To me. Looks like you went into my sister’s bathroom, locked the door, and then didn’t wake up for four days.” Kakeru snapped, “And then broke up with her!”

“We were never together!”

“You’re such an asshole!”

“I know!” Yuki emphasized, slumping over the statement. “And I’m working on that!”

Kakeru gave an aggressive exhale over the phone, and Yuki could hear more rustling. “Do you remember me telling you that 17 was a little young to be so heartbroken it ruins your life? Is he that fucking amazing?”

Yuki blinked and thought without hesitation, yes.

He put a hand over his heart, *I’ll kill him before he kills me, though.* A fond smile tracing his lips that made his eyes feel even heavier.

“I didn’t try to kill myself, Kakeru. And I especially didn’t try to kill myself over Kyo,” Yuki said. He could hear Kakeru bristle, wanting to reply, but Yuki cut him off. “But… I also haven’t been… acting in a way that would be considered healthy.”

“You think?”

“That’s why New Years happened. Not because I was being intentional. But because I was… being an idiot.”

Yuki could hear Kakeru tapping his finger against his phone, “I’m sorry what did you say?”

“I said,” Yuki winced. “I was an idiot.”

“Was?”
“I am an idiot.”

“And?”

“And… an asshole?”

“All together.”

“I am an idiot and asshole and I deserve whatever ritualistic beating you have sentenced me to.” Yuki didn’t dare laugh yet. “Please trust me.”

He could hear Kakeru begin to crack, and when he sighed Yuki felt relief wash through him like a violent wave, “Jeez, you’re so high maintenance. That’s the last sibling I throw you in a vulnerable state.”

“To be fair, I did say I wasn’t ready,” Yuki laughed.

“Are you still not over him?” Kakeru said, suddenly. “Honestly.”

Despite everything, Yuki smiled, “You’re a good brother. Machi should be happy to have you.”

Kakeru gave a puh sound over the line.

“If it’s any consolation, I wish I was in love with her,” Yuki said. “But I’m not. It was that simple. It had nothing to do with him. I promise.”

“You know, even when you’re kind of being a scumbag you’re still a nice guy. Do you know how infuriating that is?”

“I humbly thank you for staying with me all this time,” Yuki said. “Are… we okay?”

Kakeru gave an elongated and over-dramatic exhale, which was a good sign, at least. “I guess so, especially since i can feel the puppy eyes you’re giving me from over the phone.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, my expressions are nothing but cold and masculine.”

“I’m going to beat that cold and masculine face in tomorrow, you already said I could. But maybe the day after we can go out for some pizza. I guess.”

“Oh, actually I won’t be at school on Friday,” Yuki said, sheepish. “I have an interview with a university. I wanted to let you know so you wouldn’t… worry.”

“Hm,” Kakeru said, the melody of his voice now as fluid as it usually was. “Thanks for letting me know. Good luck.”

“Thanks,” Yuki said. “Will you also let Machi know?”

“Tell her yourself, asshole!”

The line went dead on Kakeru’s cackle. Yuki smiled at the contact on his phone, and with a soft snap let out a long, tense breath through whistle shaped lips.

Yuki flopped down onto the futon, smelling like the inside of the linen closet. Before, it would have taken ages for him to fall asleep. Yuki would toss and turn on his bed, staring out his window. Feeling himself groggily change from position to position until the sun rose.
Now, just that one scent was enough to convince him to droop his eyes shut until morning.

———

Kakeru kept his promise. The next day, while he was talking to Haru, Kakeru charged up to Yuki and kicked him hard in the ass in the middle of the hallway.

He ran away cackling, and Yuki dropped to his knees and gritted his teeth to stop himself from chasing after him.

“You probably deserved that,” was all Haru could say.

———

On Friday, Kyo was late for school.

It wasn’t his fault. He was studying until 4 in the morning, trying to shove concepts into his head that just wouldn’t stick, and panicking all the while. Every time he looks towards his futon, it was as if he was admitting defeat.

*Just one sentence.* He said to himself. *This is the least you can do, shit brain.*

His eyes drooped, and his back ached from slouching over the notes. When he finally pulled away, he was left with his own sloppy handwriting and words he couldn’t even understand, even though he *wrote* them.

It was then that Kyo collapsed onto his futon, falling asleep as soon as his head hit the pillow — not even changing into his pajamas.

And so, he overslept. He decided it might be alright, his morning jog was replaced with his frantic dash to the school.

He slammed open the door when he arrived, everyone turning their heads from the lesson to Kyo panting in the door frame.

“You’re late,” Mayu said.

*No shit.* But he took his seat without a word. Some giggles floated through the classroom before they were back to staring to the front of the classroom.

Kyo took out his notebook, cringing at the poorly done notes from the night before, and slipped to a blank page. He took a breath before engaging with the lesson, bringing his head up to scan the room.

Where was Yuki? Was he late, too?

Kyo did his best to dismiss the thought. He brought his head up to the board, eyes glazing over the lesson as the teacher talked. Damn, he was still so tired.
Kyo’s eyes slipped back to Yuki’s empty desk. Then to Tohru, who was still paying attention diligently. Absently, he wondered why she didn’t wake him this morning, but she didn’t seem any different from usual. And she didn’t seem to be worried about the empty desk that was much closer to her.

Fine, then it was probably fine.

Mayu spoke. Kyo wrote. Time went on. Slowly. That’s how days were now.

Between each step of the monotony, his eyes still fell back to Yuki’s desk.

*Get a grip, Kyo,* he thought.

Then Kyo remembered that the last time Yuki missed school he came back with a fucked up ankle. He collapsed and was forcibly removed from Shigure’s care.

*But, whatever,* Kyo thought when the chime rang at the end of the day and the school was bathed golden. *It’s probably fine.*

———

Kyo realized that if most people were in his situation, they would probably make what would be referred to as a “bucket list.”

There was a strange liberation in knowing the exact date your life was going to end, it allowed for a certain kind of freedom. A freedom from responsibility, a freedom from accountability, a freedom from the unknown. If anyone else in the world were given the exact date they would meet their end, they would do something about it.

Travel, maybe. Fall in love. Have sex. Hunting down that one jerk from elementary school and really giving him the punch he deserved. Maybe something involving crime. If you’ve already been labeled as reprehensible, what’s one more thing for society to look down on you? Rob a store. Vandalize. Publicly urinate. Kill someone.

Kyo never really dwelled on the psychology of it. Nor did he have such a list to refer to on his few days off.

Where would he travel to? Japan was Japan. Other than the mountains, where he’d already been, nowhere else appealed to him.

Fall in love? Hah. Don’t get him started.

Have sex?

Well, he’d just glaze over that one.

He already gave people all the punches they deserved in real time. And Kyo was never so angry as to become any kind of terror on society. What was the point? Hurting people to hurt people? It went against every ounce of Shishou’s education.

What Kyo did have, however, was a list of things he vowed *never* to do. It wasn’t formal, and it wasn’t like he wrote the damn thing down. But Kyo had his fucking pride, and when he decided he
wasn’t going to do something, that was it. It was decided. It was like a little game he played with himself, a goal post that said “congratulations on standing your ground for life.”

It was an eclectic list that included things like:

Never to willingly eat leeks. Never would he consume a cup of coffee. Never would he talk to his father again. Never would he talk to classmates about the size of classmates’ boobs. Never would he dye his hair.

And never would he become friends with Yuki Sohma.

Never would he talk to Yuki Sohma in any way that didn’t include fists or shouting.

Never would he show Yuki Sohma mercy, on whatever day he asked for it.

There was a big Yuki-themed chunk of the list. One that Kyo would never admit had been obliterated in the past year.

But seeing as he was already on a roll of breaking promises to himself;

Never, ever, ever would he visit the workplace of one insufferable, audaciously gaudy, and horrendously loud Ayame Sohma.

Kyo’s eye twitched at the sign outside the door.

It was something about the roses. The way they intertwined with the loopy, feminine cursive of AYAME on the standing sign. Too loud and too bold, all of which were things that described Ayame too well.

Kyo breathed a harsh puff into his cupped hands and rubbed them together, knuckles red from the brisk walk over. He walked towards the store, but two women walking out and chatting in high-pitched laughing tones changed his trajectory and before he knew it he was across the street again.

Kyo yanked at his hair, stomping his foot petulantly on the ground.

*Man up, Kyo. Man up! How bad could it possibly be, anyway?*

Kyo heard the bell above the door ring, trailing behind another customer — collar high up on his face and looking around frantically as if hoping no one would recognize him. Through the door Kyo could see a hint of blooming ruffles bursting behind a nurse’s outfit.

Kyo’s hand twitched by his side.

Maybe he would just go home instead. Yuki was probably fine. If something happened, Tohru would tell him. Or Haru. Hell, Momiji wasn’t exactly tight-lipped, he could probably eavesdrop whatever the situation was.

But when Kyo moved to turn around, he found he couldn’t. His feet were firmly planted on the cement sidewalk, sucked into the aura of the side street of stacked vendors. Kyo didn’t know where Ayame lived—where Yuki lived—and apparently this was the only way he was going to find out.

Because he didn’t know what he would do if he was left in the dark any longer.

What did it mean he collapsed? What did it mean he was checked into Hatori’s little zodiac hospital? Was he sick? Was he hurt?
Who hurt him?

His stomach clenched, though the spirit inside him filled his chest with a tangible feeling of victory.

Goddamn, if they could rub their dicks together, Kyo could fucking just check to see if he was alive, right?!

“Kyonkichi?”

Kyo yelped, jumping a foot into the air at the voice. He turned around harshly, fists up and poised to fight to find Ayame in a long royal blue coat lined with puffy white fur. His head was tilted and his hip jutted slightly to the side.

*When his mouth is closed he looks like Yuki.*

“Kyonkichi, what on earth are you doing here? Heard rumors of my shop did you? In all its glory?” Ayame tailed the sentence with a booming laugh. Kyo didn’t put his arms down.

“I haven’t heard shit about your shop, stay the hell away!”

“That would be a far simpler task if you didn’t come to my shop,” Ayame’s eyes narrowed as his smile turned devious. He draped an arm around Kyo who bristled, leading him towards the shop. “Could it be you’ve come to divulge in your perfect fantasy? You know, I think I have just the thing! In your size, too!”

The warm air in the shop hit his now burning red face. Kyo dropped to a squat, popping up again only when he was out of Ayame’s embrace.

“I’m not here for a damn dress!”

“Kyonkichi, please, your tone. We have customers.” Ayame clicked his tongue. “The shyer customers are always the more difficult.”

“I’m not a customer, dammit!”

“Then what are you?” Ayame asked, arms crossing. “If that dog-man sent you—”

“I’m here for Yuki!” Kyo threw his hands up. Ayame arched his eyebrow. “I mean! Not—I’m not—”

“I’m afraid you’ll have to leave, I do not allow blood to be shed near my precious garments.” Ayame flicked his hand at the wrist, signaling Kyo towards the door.

“I don’t wanna fight him! Just listen!” Kyo snapped, but when Ayame didn’t have a response, when Ayame leaned forward to do just that, Kyo froze. *Listen to what, dumbass?* “He’s. Sick. Or something. I just. I’m just here, okay? Let me just. Talk to him. Give me your damn address so I can leave this hellhole.”

“So you came to check on my brother?” Ayame didn’t sound as if he believed a word of it. Hell, Kyo couldn’t really blame him.

“Mind your own damn business, okay? How do I find him?”

A long pause, and Ayame’s mouth curled into a devious smile. “Oh, Mine!”
Another memory was coming back to Yuki.

Unlike the others, it wasn’t one of his hazy middle school years, or a memory of Akito, or the main house.

He was five. The four of them drove to the beach. Yuki remembered sitting in the backseat, staring at the back of his father’s head. His father was laughing, looking over his shoulder every once in awhile — attempting to prompt his son to speak.

His mother. Smiling as she spoke. Her lips thin over her teeth, and her eyes maintaining that hard and frightening edge. But still, she smiled.

Ayame beside him. Nodding his head along enthusiastically. He spoke loud and laughed louder.

Yuki was a quiet child, even before Akito gave him a reason. But the soft feeling in his chest was stuck to the memory like dryer lint.

They spent the whole day at the beach. Yuki chased the edge of the waves, scared of the water touching him but wanting to dive in so badly. His mother and father stayed under their beach umbrella, calling them back now and then for snacks.

His brother talking about half-nude women twice his age that he would swear to marry. The sunset pouring onto the ocean and reflecting oranges and pinks.

It was the perfect day. Yuki’s little heart swelled graciously, a moment where a child’s love grows. For his mother. For his father. For his brother. For nature. For life. Things were bigger than his tiny feet, his handprints in the sand washed away so easily. But its grand endlessness was comforting.

His father lifted him to his shoulder, and Yuki didn’t take his eyes of the horizon as they went back to the car.

And then, from the inside, as the car zoomed alongside the metal railing of the road, Yuki watched the ocean slip away as his mother and brother slept soundly in their seats. His conversation with his father low and hushed, as if a secret.

Yuki blinked as he stared out the window, those same golden hues sinking into the passing buildings as he sat in silence by Hatori.

A small smile traced his lips, as he thought of every word that could capture this moment. Every sentence that could twirl around the sunset like its melting rays.

Maybe he would write about it tonight.

“How did it go?” Hatori finally asked, now that they were in the city — fifteen minutes away from Ayame’s shop.

“It went well,” Yuki hummed. “She was nice.”

The whir of the engine beneath them sang, and they jostled slightly as the car dipped into a pothole.

“She asked me what program I planned to take,” Yuki said.
“What did you tell her?” Hatori asked, voice as calm and even as the steady moving car.

Yuki turned his head towards Hatori, still resting his cheek on his fist. “I said I wanted to be a novelist.”

Hatori’s lips thinned and Yuki puffed a laugh through his nose. “Oh?”

“You probably think I’m joking,” Yuki said.

“You spent a lot of time in that house,” Hatori said, carefully. “I wouldn’t be surprised if you picked up a certain kind of humor.”

Yuki gave a contemplating hum, “Maybe.”

Tail lights shined red in front of them as they slowed to a stop, the color outlining Hatori’s unwavering expression. Yuki wondered about the last time Hatori was mentioned in his journal.

He turned his head to look back out onto the crowded cityscape. Always looking from the inside out.

“I want to take everything I think and feel and write it down,” Yuki said, softly. “But I think it’ll take years. Maybe the length of a career.”

“A bold statement for someone who hasn’t even turned eighteen,” Hatori said.

Yuki smiled, “I was born centuries old, whether I liked it or not.”

“I better not hear that line from you the next time I catch you with a cigarette,” Hatori said. Yuki hid his swallowed laughter behind his fist.

They were silent the rest of the way to Ayame’s. When Hatori pulls up into the side street the sun is already hiding behind the stretched out buildings of Tokyo. Pinks and oranges muddled with murky midnight tones.

“Thanks for the ride,” Yuki said, bent down to speak through the car window.

Hatori nodded and rolled it up, but did the courtesy of giving him a small wave. Yuki waits until he’s turned the corner until he goes inside.

The bell rang over the shop, and the fluorescent white light of it stung against Yuki’s eyes, already adjusted to the natural light of the fading sun. Nevertheless, he waved to one of the employees he’d come to know and headed towards the back staircase.

“Oh, Yuki!” Mine called.


“He stepped out to get some dinner! He said he wanted to get your favorite,” Mine beamed. “Did it go amazingly?”

“It certainly could have gone worse,” Yuki said, sheepishly. “I’m going to go to my room for awhile, if you don’t mind.”

“Of course,” Mine nodded. “Oh, but before you do, your cute cousin is waiting upstairs for you! He said he wanted to check on you.”

“Haru’s here?” Yuki felt himself perk up.

Yuki opened his mouth but nothing came out.

“Don’t worry, I’ve been making him tea while he waits! He’s been well taken care of!” Mine gave him a little salute, and Yuki let a weak laugh escape him.

“Exactly how long has he been waiting for me?”

________

Kyo scrunched his face at the cup of tea, the dignity of the deep, bold green muddled with sugar and milk. He sat at the kitchen table, leg bouncing as he observed the small space for about the 80th time.

_Five more minutes, and then I’m leaving._ A well rehearsed lie that he spouted every five minutes on the dot.

Footsteps were trudging up the stairs and Kyo tensed, taking the cup and desperately trying to chug it before the offending figure turned the corner. He wasn’t gonna make the mistake of not finishing his tea this time.

It was mid-gulp when Yuki walked through the door.

Kyo choked, his throat coughing up the thick liquid that left a bad taste on his tongue.

Not that he could taste anything right now.

Yuki was staring at him with those molten steel eyes, an expression he shielded from himself for the past few months. And now those eyes were watching him calm his hiccuping coughs. Goddammit. So much for acting cool.

Yuki crossed his arms, but didn’t move from the kitchen’s entrance.

“What are you doing?”

“Trying to,” his throat caught a small cough, “finish this damn tea before that crazy maid chick comes back up here.” Kyo let a cough rip his throat, only half aware of Yuki’s eyes turning amused in his peripheral. “She’s been drowning me in the stuff for the past—”

Kyo stopped himself. Turning away to cough into his elbow, even though his throat was cleared.

“For the past two hours?”

Kyo’s face burned, a roar waiting on the tip of his tongue if Yuki said another word. But he didn’t, and the two were forced into that deadly whirlpool of eye contact. Flutters were scratching at the inside of his stomach and _fuck, fuck, fuck_ he shouldn’t have come here at all.

With a small laugh, too small for Kyo to reasonably react, Yuki pushed himself off the entryway and approach Kyo. The kitchen was small, and in two strides Yuki was already too close.

Yuki’s hand rested against the table top, and without warning he plucked the tea cup from Kyo’s grasp and gave it a sip, not breaking eye contact with Kyo. He watched as Yuki’s lips lightly
wrapped around the rim. And then he watched his eyebrows scrunch at the taste, a smile still formed on those lips.

“I thought so,” Yuki said.

Without a word, Yuki took the half empty cup to the sink and poured it out. Yuki opened the cupboard above him, and reached for two mismatching cups — both red, one chipped. Kyo watched Yuki take the tea from the container on the counter and carefully portion it into a small teapot. The water from the sink ran as Yuki filled a small saucepan with water, placing it on the stove and combining the gas with the lighter nearby.

The sound of water wanting to boil began to fill the room, humming in harmony with the kitchen’s fluorescent lighting from above.

It was strange, watching Yuki’s back as he did something so menial and domestic. Yuki was cleaning the used tea cup, scrubbing out the sugar residue that must have surely been left behind, and placing it on a drying rack by the sink.

Had he ever seen Yuki do something so… normal?

Other than helping Tohru wash the dishes, the picture seemed strange. Intimate. The quiet air like they were swapping warmth in this small room, tucked away from the winter air. As if reading Kyo’s mind, Yuki divested himself of his winter coat that had been unbuttoned when he first entered, but now was resting against the back of the chair opposite to Kyo.

Yuki didn’t sit down. He leaned himself against the sink. Waiting for the water to boil. Waiting for the tea he was making for Kyo.

Kyo gulped, “you better not burn it.”

“If there was a way I could burn your tea, I would,” Yuki said. “But I don’t think I want to give you the satisfaction.”

Kyo wanted to laugh but it seemed too dangerous, and so instead he was left with staring at Yuki - as Yuki stared straight back.

For the first time in months Kyo was allowed to simply watch Yuki, to observe him. Yuki’s hands were hanging onto his elbows, his forearms exposed through his rolled up button up. His collarbone peaking through the top two undone buttons. His stance careful, but not dangerous. Not poised in anger.

Not like at the dojo. This was completely different.

Kyo forced himself to look back up at Yuki square in the face. *I’m checking you for injuries*, he wanted to lie. *The last time we were together, I didn’t get a good enough look at you*, he wanted to blurt, truthfully.

Which was worse to admit?

“Ms. Kurame said you came to check on me;” Yuki said. “Is that true? Or did you want a rematch?”

*Shit.*

Kyo gulped, “So what if I did?”
“Want a rematch?”

“Want to check on you.” Kyo’s eyes didn’t waver, even as his cheeks flushed. Yuki opened his mouth, but all that came out were the sounds of bubbling water. Two sets of eyes flicked to the stove.

Yuki turned away from Kyo, turning off the gas, and using a towel on the handle of the saucepan to carefully pour the water into the teapot over the tea leaves.

He didn’t turn around, even as the click of the teapot lid sounded.

“I’m sorry for worrying you,” Yuki said, softly. “I’ve been doing that to a lot of people I care about, lately. I never thought you’d be one of them.”

Kyo’s ears burned.

Yuki placed the teapot and the two cups on the kitchen table, finally taking his seat next to Kyo.

Yuki poured the tea. Kyo watched his hands, only with the slightest tremble did Yuki fill up the cup and give it back.

The color was too light, not yet steeped. Kyo sipped at it, anyway.

“I was at a university. Doing an interview,” Yuki said.

“I know. That crazy lady told me,” Kyo said.

“Ms. Kurame isn’t so bad.” Kyo pff’ed in response and Yuki chuckled. “So if you knew I was okay, why did you stay?”

Kyo took another sip of his tea, too hot and too weak.

“For two hours,” Yuki tacked on, as if he hadn’t already slipped that shit in earlier. Kyo resisted the urge to choke again.

“I wanted to see for myself, so what,” Kyo shot back. “Last time you missed school you came back with your ankle all fucked up.”

Yuki smiled. Kyo looked away.

“After apparent-fucking-ly collapsing.” Yuki’s smile dropped, Kyo let the tiniest smirk crawl back.

“Haru tells you too much,” Yuki said, rolling his eyes.

“Did you collapse?”

“Do you care?”

Kyo was beginning to realize something. Beginning to understand why he was so afraid of being near Yuki since that night in the woods. Since Yuki’s confession so honest and sincere and covered in vomit.

This proximity, these quiet tones, these greedy glances were terrifying. Because they couldn’t stop. With every second it was becoming harder to stay farther away. Harder to raise his voice. Harder to look elsewhere than those piercing metal eyes.
Something inside him flared, clawing at his insides and telling him to leave — threatening that if he didn’t it would stretch until it was fitted in his arms and charged into a punch, into a blow. Threatening that if Kyo didn’t leave right now it was crawl up his throat, sink deep below his tonsils and spew sharp words like acid.

“So what if I do?” Kyo said, instead, and something hit Kyo in the gut so hard it rang up into his head and started a migraine like a fire. Kyo pushed it aside, and pressed, “Did you collapse?”

Yuki tapped a finger on the table, “I did.”

“What?”

The tapping sped up, until Kyo could see Yuki squaring himself. “I made the rat spirit so angry it tried to kill me.”

“How the hell did you do that?!” Kyo exclaimed, the weight of the word kill falling heavy in the air, even as Yuki laughed. It was a genuine expression that made Kyo’s heart stutter.

“Jealous that I have a new rival?”

“Who the hell could be jealous of that thing?!” Kyo’s eyes were still wide, but Yuki held up a hand as if to calm him.

“It’s okay, it’s weak. It didn’t do much harm.”

“You collapsed!”

“It tried to kill me, and that was the worst it could do,” Yuki said, with a smile. “I win.”

Kyo clicked his tongue, “You’re smug about everything, aren’t you? Now I’m kind of rooting for that bastard rat to take you down.”

Yuki laughed, and despite his best efforts the edge of Kyo’s mouth cracked upwards.

“It came at a price, if that makes you feel better,” Yuki huffed. “My friends think I tried to kill myself.”

“That’s dumb,” Kyo said, easily. “Why the hell do they think that?”

“That was mostly my fault,” Yuki sighed.

“How the hell—” Kyo caught the words on his tongue. “It’s not like you’ve tried that shit before.”

Yuki stayed silent, scratching the back of his neck. Kyo’s eyes narrowed.

“Have you?”

“You’re asking me a lot of questions, Kyo,” Yuki said.

“And you’re not answerin’ them,” Kyo said, the bite desperately being pulled back into his words.

Yuki hummed behind his smile, taking another sip of tea. “How about this, for every question you ask me, I get to ask you a question.”

“What the hell do you want to ask me?”
“What do you want to ask me?” Yuki shot back immediately, that smile that was reserved for Kyo. It was meant to provoke him, and it was playing on his lips (and Kyo had to stop fucking staring at his lips).

Kyo tossed his whole body back, leaning against the chair, not even realizing how far forward he had slouched, as if his body was being inched closer and closer to Yuki every second he didn’t actively stop it.

“God, you’re infuriating,” Kyo huffed. “Alright, have you tried to kill yourself?” Kyo asked, bluntly. Almost spiteful in his point-blank approach.

Silence filled between them, and when Yuki wouldn’t look up at him Kyo felt something furl dangerously in his chest.

“Why the hell would you ever do something like that?!”

“That’s two questions,” he said.

“Does it look like I give a shit?” Kyo snapped back. Yuki looked back up at him.

“Technically, that’s three,” Yuki said, but Kyo didn’t respond — staring him down until Yuki gave another long sigh. “I don’t remember it very well. I don’t remember most of middle school. It’s something I’ve… kept locked away.”

Kyo’s eyes furrowed in confusion as he listened to Yuki’s rather distant words. As if he were talking about someone else entirely.

“I… stole a letter opener,” Yuki looked as if he was trying to remember the details, clicking his tongue as if forgetting someone’s birthday. “Haru found me in time. That’s all I really remember.”

“That doesn’t make sense,” Kyo said, his voice raspy from how clogged his throat felt all of the sudden. “Your life is perfect.”

Yuki laughed at that, “If that’s what perfect was, I’m glad I don’t remember.”

Kyo couldn’t stop staring at Yuki, perfect Yuki, prodigy Yuki, rat spirit Yuki. It fogged his brain with strange thoughts with a burning inside his chest, as if someone was taking a steal rod that ran through his stomach and heart and was bending it towards Yuki with incredible strength.

Whatever look Kyo was giving Yuki, he must have read it as him pressing further, but Kyo didn’t think he wanted to hear even another second.

“When I wasn’t with Akito, I was at school. And the kids at school didn’t like me,” Yuki started. “The pale boy with the weird hair that wouldn’t talk to anyone. Half way through the first week they decided I was a ghost. If anyone talked to the ghost of class 1-B they would be haunted for the rest of their lives.”

Yuki held up his hands like claws, baring his teeth for the briefest of moments. He laughed. *Laughed.* Like this shit was supposed to be funny. “It’s sort of silly when you think about it now.”

“No. It’s fucking not,” Kyo snarled. “Kids are shit.”

“My turn,” Yuki said quickly.

“Huh?”
“The other day… when you helped me with my shoe,” Yuki clarified, seemingly taking humor from Kyo shifting in his seat. “Why were you at school so late?”

Kyo was fucking leaned back in again, when did that fucking happen? Yuki was speaking too softly. He couldn’t hear each low vibration of his words from so far away. He gripped the edge of the table so hard his knuckles started turning white.

“I was in the library. Shishou wants me studyin’ for the entrance exams.”

“You’re studying for the entrance exams?” Yuki asked immediately, a bit too eager, a bit too hopeful. Kyo’s chest swelled so full it was going to burst.

“Now look who’s asking two questions!”

“At least I didn’t deflect mine!”

“That’s your fucking problem!”

“Are you going to university?” Yuki asked, leaning in further and Kyo didn’t even waiver, breath coming out in staccato.

“I don’t fuckin’ know,” Kyo said, brushing the hair away from his face. “Look, it’s just to get Shishou to leave me alone. Once he realizes it’s hopeless he’ll give up. He’ll give up.”

“He would never,” Yuki smiled.

That finally made Kyo look away. The two sipped at their drinks, the quiet between them allowing the sounds of the business below to carry upstairs. A whole world away. Kyo bit the inside of his cheek hard. Planted to his chair.

It was the perfect opportunity.

Get up and leave. Get up and leave.

He had the information he wanted, he had more information than he would ever want, hanging heavy in his throat, in his fingertips, making it hard to bring the tea to his lips.

Get the fuck up and leave.

“One more question,” Kyo said before he could stop himself. But his stomach vomited the words that churned in his stomach since winter began.

“Okay,” Yuki said, softly.


Yuki tensed at the name, but Kyo was keeping his eyes on his tea again.

“Is she your girlfriend?”

Something dropped in the air, and Kyo’s ears were ringing from how flushed his cheeks were getting. He willed himself to cool down, willed his stomach to fucking relax.

But then Yuki leaned in closer, his pinky finger wrapping around Kyo’s — fuck — a steady, deadly jolt of electricity spiked through that one finger, the static forcing Kyo’s head to turn to Yuki’s.
Shit, he was so close.

"Would you be upset if I said she was?" Yuki said, his face clear of remorse, eyes brimmed with teasing, with an unshed smile.

"Like hell if I’m answering that," Kyo rasped.

Yuki tugged on Kyo’s pinky with his own, the motion somehow pulling Kyo forward.

"That’s the problem when we play these kinds of games, Kyo. You always cheat," Yuki chuckled and the breath of it landed on Kyo’s lips.

"Answer the question," Kyo said, eyes narrowing as he stared right back.

"Like hell."

And then Kyo felt Yuki’s smile on his own lips. Their mouths connected. A shiver ripped through Kyo and he had no control over it — he kissed back.

His eyes slipped closed, his world enveloped by Yuki, by Yuki’s lips, by Yuki kissing him like someone welcoming their lover back from war. His pinky was still intertwined with Yuki’s, but Yuki pressed his other hand into Kyo’s hair. As if he just wanted to feel it, as if he missed each strand that ran through his milky fingers. Because not once did he use his grip to force Kyo forward.

Kyo did that all on his own.

Kyo opened his mouth, a soft groan escaping him as Yuki immediately responded, pressing his tongue inside Kyo’s mouth, exploring, sighing, drinking in each drop Kyo left behind. Yuki’s hand twisted, so that their linked pinkies became linked hands, gripping tight. Yuki was reliving every kiss they’d ever had and doing it right. Taking his time, wanting every part of his mouth tasted.

*I’ve missed you,* was what each second, each touch, each kiss said. And Kyo let himself drown in it.

He clutched Yuki’s arm with his free hand, angling his mouth to press against Yuki’s tongue, letting Yuki suck on his bottom lip. Letting Yuki devour him alive. His eyes clenched shut and so much burning and overflowing and bursting inside him he didn’t know how to contain it.

Yuki’s desire for him felt so rich, so deep, he couldn’t force his lips to rush. He sucked in every single moment, made Yuki kiss him harder, for longer, blocking his breath and making his heart pound. Every second a lost breath and skipped heartbeat.

It was overwhelming. It was so fucking confusing. His face was burning hotter hotter, his hands gripping tighter tighter, he couldn’t hold on.

*I’m going to transform.*

Kyo’s eyes snapped open and pushed Yuki away, gulping in air alongside Yuki who was eyeing him worriedly. Kyo looked back at those lips, kiss swollen, parted, fitted perfectly for his own. He wanted to lean in, God he wanted to lean in—

“I can’t, I can’t, I can’t,” Kyo said, frantically, shaking his head as he faced the floor. Fingers digging into the shoulders and collar of Yuki’s shirt, keeping him at bay. “I can’t.”

Yuki may have beaten his spirit, but Kyo was far and away from doing the same.

And now it was happening again. That fucking nameless kid was running away from him all over
again and it hurt just like it did when he was thirteen.

Yuki was staring at him on the path home, burning with hurt and his fist inches away from giving Kyo a fat lip.

Kyo’s breaths were coming faster now, but not from the kiss and why, why, why did Yuki fucking do this to him? How was he supposed to go throughout his life without being kissed like that again?

How was he supposed to live his life behind bamboo bars without seeing Yuki’s face again?

One second longer and he would have been ruined.

He felt a hand in his hair, stroking lightly. Comfortingly, he realized. He chanced a look up.

“It’s okay,” Yuki whispered. “It’s okay.”

Kyo dropped his head again, shoulders heavy with the weight, and he let Yuki stroke his hair, combing the strands in peace even as Yuki couldn’t seem to calm himself down.

“It’s okay,” Yuki said again.

Kyo clenched his eyes closed.

No, it’s fucking not.

_______________________

Light spilled out onto the dark street from the shop. Yuki held the door open for Kyo who walked through outside wordlessly. His hands deep in his pockets. Breaths immediately visible in the bitter winter night.

The two loitered for a moment in the cold, looking around each other, but nothing more.

Yuki cleared his throat, “Thank you for checking on me.”

Kyo nodded, “Talk to Tohru. You’re worrying the shit out of her.”

“I will. I promise.”

Kyo rocked on the balls of his feet, pinning Yuki with those deep red eyes. Unfair. He wasn’t letting him recover from that kiss at all.

“I’m gonna go,” Kyo mumbled.


Yuki felt Kyo’s eyes on him as he raced back into the shop, grabbing a pen and a stray business card from the counter before rushing back out before Kyo could run away.

In the dim light, Yuki pressed the pen against the card using only his hand as a proper surface for the ink to properly grip. His eyes flashed up when he was done, holding it out to Kyo who —amazingly
— still had not run away.

“It’s my number,” he said, prompting Kyo to take it. “If you need anything. You can call me. You can always call me.”

Kyo inspected the card before shoving it into his pocket with a nod and a slight flush. Yuki smiled back.

“Kyonkichi!” The two froze. “Every time I see you now you’re loitering outside my shop! I should call the police!” Ayame’s laughter boomed through the street, shattering whatever quiet air was built between he and Kyo.

“Shut the hell up! I’m leaving, jeez!” Kyo said, stomping away.

“Bye, bye!” Ayame waved. Yuki watched Kyo’s back as if in a trance until Ayame wrapped an arm around him and led him inside.

“What on earth are you doing standing in the cold! It’s a wonder I haven’t transformed yet, you know our bloodline is so susceptible to this weather! Honestly, are you trying to freeze to death!”

Yuki allowed himself to be pushed into the shop, turning his head to catch a final glimpse at Kyo. Maybe he was crazy, but he was sure he saw Kyo looking back, too.

———

Tohru came downstairs when she heard the clanging on the floor below. In her pajamas, and sleep weaved between her eyes, she carefully went to check the commotion.

Maybe Kyo was finally home, but he rarely made this much noise unless he was angry at something in his way. But it was late, and Kyo didn’t liked to disturb when the alternative was going by unnoticed.

“Kyo?” She called out, warily. “Yuki?” The house was dark, and a chill wafted up the stairs. Tohru held her arms and rubbed rapidly up and down to warm herself, going to turn on the light.

At first, she panicked. Because there was Shigure, sprawled out across the floor, door hanging open, nearly unconscious. Clearly having fallen from being unable to lift his feet over the step from the foyer.

Tohru rushed to his side.

Had he fallen? Was he injured? Was he sick? Oh God, oh—

Tohru nearly gagged at the reeking scent of alcohol and cigarettes when she finally came close enough.

Holding her nose she looked down at her guardian, shoulders slumping at the sight.

She didn’t know what to do with this.

Tohru tried to think back to the times mom had gotten drunk, passing out on the living room floor,
and leaving Thru to place a blanket over her.

No, that wasn’t the same. She only drank during celebrations. When she overflowing with pride and accomplishment—most often for her daughter. She would drink and holler and pump her fist in the air alongside her and Uo and Hana (who were only allowed sodas).

When she passed out she would be smiling. She would wake up and laugh, despite her headache.

It was just another way she loved her daughter.

This was not that.

For one, Shigure was not smiling at all.

Tohru stepped over him carefully and went to close the door. She knelt by his feet to undo the laces of his winter boots, sliding them off with a yank and placing them neatly in the entrance.


With a deep breath, holding in as much as she could so as not to inhale through her nose, Tohru tried to pull Shigure by the arm and found it useless. She tried both arms and still nothing. She tried to drag him by his clothes, and he barely moved an inch. He was heavy and bulky and not about to wake up anytime soon.

So, she did the only thing she could think of.

Wrapping her arms around Shigure, she waited for the puff of smoke. Then hoisted a heavy—but manageable—mutt into the nearby bedroom.

Chapter End Notes

EDIT: Look, this is real damn silly but listen. LISTEN. I am aware this fandom is breathing its last cobwebs of air. But if you're like me and just can't,, let go,,, maybe let's be friends about it. I've decided to be hip with the times and start up a Furuba discord! Of course all, like, 9 of you are invited.

LINK: https://discord.gg/c7CSesEU
Chapter Notes

Can you believe it? Can you actually believe it? Because I sure as hell can't. I cannot BELIEVE it has been so long. All I can really say is thank you so much to anyone who has been waiting patiently for this update, and especially thank you to people who still continue to comment and leave love for this story. 2018 really fought me every step of the way with some Advanced Tumult, and boy oh boy did this chapter seem to want to do the same.

I also need to give a HUGE shout-out to my lovely new beta Crystal who absolutely CRUSHED IT and helped me get over such a enormous block. She edited this like a little speed demon AND I AM SO GRATEFUL. Also thank you to soul who gave me some good Kagura help when I needed it.

Last couple things about the chapter -- I know I've mentioned this before but even though this is TOTALLY manga based, I just love the 01 anime ending so much that I just accept it as canon now. (Oh my god, who is psyched for the reboot, though? I still can't believe this is actually happening?)

And finally, just know that I am 100% determined to finish this fic. I think about it constantly, even in the stupid long gaps in updating. What can I say?

YOU CAN’T KILL ME.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

It was early on a Saturday morning when Kagura finished putting on the finishing touches of her makeup. She clicked her tongue when bits of mascara flecked onto her eyelid. She wasted no time in meticulously trying to wipe it away without disturbing her eyeshadow.

“Kagura! Get down here!”

“Just a second, mom!” she yelled again for the third time in the past seven minutes. A lady could hardly feel like an adult with all this breathing happening down her ne—

“KAGURA!”

“I GOT IT!” she huffed, making sure she was happy with what she saw in the mirror before leaving the bathroom in no rush.

She was barely down the steps of her home when her mother snapped, “You can’t take five minutes to help your mother?”

Kagura’s mother was in one of her weekend dresses, the usual uniform for when she went to visit Kagura’s grandmother, her mother-in-law—a tradition maintained despite her parents’ separation. Tied tightly around her waist was an apron, and her forehead was just slightly shiny from the warmth of the kitchen. She pulled another tray from the oven and tried to grab one of the hot pastries, only for her fingers to flinch away.
“It’s not my fault you forgot to make the pastries for Grandma!”

“I don’t want to hear any of your excuses—”

“My?”

“Or mine! Just help me pack them up!”

“They’re too hot to pack. They’ll get soggy.”

“All the better for your grandmother’s teeth,” her mother said without pause.

Kagura giggled, but helped her mother carefully pack the pastries into the plastic containers regardless. About halfway through, they heard a knock at the door.

Kagura’s mother groaned.

“Dad?” Kagura immediately guessed.

“He’s meeting us there. Whoever it is, get rid of them.” She shooed her away, and Kagura sucked some of the sweet residue off her finger as she rushed to the door. There was another knock.

“Coming!”

The door slid open and Kagura’s face immediately drained of color. She swallowed, staring up at the figure in front of her and making sure not to move herself from the door, lest he think he was invited inside.

“Good morning, Kureno,” Kagura offered.

“Good morning. I’m sorry to drop by unannounced,” he said in that deceptively soft tone of his.

A shiver encased Kagura’s skin, the sensation of nausea forming just from the taste of any food at all. She felt a twinge of annoyance at having to deal with her body’s reaction to the man in the first place.

“It’s… fine. What can I help you with?”

“Do you mind if I come in?”

Kagura squared herself in the entrance, making a show of his exile to her front step. “The house is a bit of a mess… we’re actually on our way out right now.”

“I won’t be long—”

“Are you here alone?” Kagura asked, clenching the door frame.

Kureno’s eyes softened. She didn’t trust the expression, no matter how vulnerable it ever appeared. “Akito’s not with me, no.”

“Then what do you want?”

Kureno paused, looking at her as if he were exasperated that he had to ask. “It’s about Isuzu.”

Kagura crossed her arms, expression hardening. “What about her?”

“I was wondering if you might have any idea where she is,” Kureno said. “She’s still missing.”
“I know that. She lived with us. We were kind of the first ones to notice,” Kagura snapped. “I already told you four months ago that I didn’t know where she was. Why are you coming back now?”

“It’s not good that we don’t know where one of the zodiac is,” Kureno said. “Who knows what might have happened to her? Especially with how prone she is to transformations.”

“I think we’re fine. Nothing on the news about women changing into horses on the street. There probably would’ve been a scandal.”

Kureno never responded well to sarcasm or confrontational tones, but even still, his forlorn expression only made Kagura all the more upset. “I’m not trying to be a bad person here, Kagura. I know you know where she is. Akito is starting to get upset. He might call you soon to ask you these questions himself. Do you want that?”

Kagura glared. “Are you threatening me?”

Kureno faltered. “No, I’m trying to protect you.”

“And I’m trying to protect someone, too. From the same person you think I need protection from.”

Kureno looked away from her steadfast stare, opening his mouth hopelessly until he found the words. “I don’t like doing this, but you know I’m speaking directly for Akito when I ask where she is.”

Kagura tensed, swallowing back her words.

“Akito is asking where she is. Akito is asking you where she is.”

Kagura looked away. “I told you, I don’t… I don’t—”

“Kureno?” Kagura’s mother walked up behind Kagura, putting a hand on her shoulder and handing Kagura her jacket. “What brings you here?”

“Hello, Auntie,” he greeted with a small bow. “I was just coming by to see if you had any news on Isuzu.” Kagura slipped on her coat and flipped her hair out from the collar, stealing a mutual glance at Kureno as she did so. “I heard her family is beginning to ask about her.”

“Is that right?” Kagura’s mother asked, resuming her comforting hold on her daughter’s shoulder. “How strange, because I just saw her mother two days ago, and she seemed spectacularly unconcerned with her daughter’s well-being.”

Kureno turned his gaze downward.

“I’m glad to hear she’s had a change of heart,” Kagura’s mother offered with a practiced smile. “Let them know to get in touch with us and we’ll help them in whatever way we can.”

A moment passed before Kureno replied, “Of course.”

“Now, if you’ll excuse us, we are in a bit of a rush. Not to shoo you off the front porch, but Kagura and I will be late if we don’t leave now.”

“I understand,” Kureno said, nodding and taking a step backward. Then, addressing Kagura, he said, “I’ll be in touch,” before turning and walking away.

“Say hello to your mother for me,” Kagura’s mom called after the man as he left through the front porch.
yard. And then, when he was far enough out of earshot: “He used to be such a nice boy. What a
shame.”

“Mom… thank you…” Kagura sighed, shoulders deflating from their crossed position.

Kagura felt an arm wrap around her, her head being pulled backwards into a gentle embrace. “Let’s
leave the lying to Mama for a while, hm?”

Kagura nodded.

They released their embrace and walked to the car together, the rowdy tone of the morning sobering
between them.

“I think it’ll be best if you visit the hospital today,” Kagura’s mother said as she drove the car toward
the exit gates of Sohma estate. “I’ll drop you off after Grandma’s.”

“Rin won’t like that,” Kagura said with a sigh.

“She’ll understand. What she needs is someone she trusts to be with her for the next little while.
Keep an eye on her, okay?”

Kagura nodded again.

In all honesty, her mother didn’t even have to ask.

————————

“SHIGURE!”

Jolted suddenly by the sound of banging on the front door, Tohru snapped up from her position
against the wall, immediately regretting the sudden movement when a sharp ache in her neck jolted
through the rest of her body. Her eyes were slow to catch up with the rest of her, opening against the
light that was spilling into the room. She stretched her legs with a wince, and her back felt stiff
against the wall. Groggily, she processed her environment.

That’s right, she sighed. This was Shigure’s room. He had changed back into human form during the
night, and he seemed to be sleeping soundly now—even though he looked as still as a rock. He was
covered from head to toe in blankets she had found, and he didn’t seem to be shivering like he had
been when he had first transformed.

The banging on the door resounded through the house again, but Shigure didn’t budge. Tohru
jumped up—her body still a little maligned—and dropped the blanket she had used to cover herself
in the night, scurrying to the door as quietly as possible.

“Shigure! I know you’re in there! You can’t ignore me forever!” The wailing voice came through the
door, much less threatening when it was broken up by the sound of tears. Tohru unlocked the door
and was quick enough to get out of the way when the momentum from Mitsuru’s knock sent her
flying fist-first inside the house.

“Mitsuru, what a pleasant surprise,” Tohru greeted, her smile wavering with concern as she looked at
the exhausted mess that was Shigure’s editor. Not that she looked much better herself, surely.
Mitsuru spared her an angry, panicked look before storming into the house. Tohru followed behind.

“SHIGURE!”

“He’s not feeling well today!” Tohru said as Mitsuru barged into Shigure’s office. She looked around the empty room only for a moment before turning on her heel and marching towards Shigure’s bedroom. Tohru was quick to throw herself in front of the doorway, extending her arms to keep her out.

“I’m sorry, Mitsuru! He’s sick! I don’t think he should be disturbed!”

“Out of the way, Tohru! I’ve gotten through smaller, sweeter-looking barriers than you!”

“Please, please,” Tohru begged, eyes still tired from the lack of rest. “Let me make you some tea, okay? I don’t want anyone to disturb him right now.”

Mitsuru flinched when Tohru gently took her arm to lead her into the kitchen, but followed anyway with a teary scowl.

A few minutes later, Tohru placed a cup of tea in front of Mitsuru with a worried smile. Mitsuru slumped down until her head was pressed against the table.

“He wants me dead. I know it. He wants to see me die,” Mitsuru groaned.

“I’m sure he’ll have what he needs soon…” Tohru tried to reassure her.

“Don’t try and comfort me, Tohru. I’ve already accepted my fate. This is the cost of working with Shigure Sohma.”

Tohru tried to laugh, but Mitsuru looked absolutely exhausted.

“How long have you worked with Shigure?” Tohru asked. Mitsuru sipped her tea as she let out a noncommittal hum.

“Almost six years now, I think,” Mitsuru said. “Though it feels like six hundred.”

“You two seem to have become very close in that time,” Tohru said softly. Mitsuru scoffed immediately. “There must be something that you like about working with Shigure, right?”

Mitsuru put her tea on the table, tears fading from her eyes as she gave the table a big sigh.

“Do you know how highly regarded Shigure’s work is?”

Tohru shook her head.

“He’s the top catch in our publishing firm. His last book won a national award. He’s a literary genius.”

“Wow, that must be—”

“And he knows it,” Mitsuru gave Tohru a sharp look. Already, the younger girl was starting to regret asking the question at all. “He burned through countless editors before he got me. So many of them wouldn’t even bother trying to handle him. Then, they give him to me. A fresh-faced, freshly hired temp.” She let out a sardonic laugh.

“That’s… a lot of trust to put in a new employee… You must be very good at your job.”
“They gave him to me as a joke,” Mitsuru bit out. “They thought I wouldn’t last one meeting with him. They thought he would eat me alive. Which he did. He still does.”

Tohru watched Mitsuru down the rest of her tea as if it were a shot of liquor.

“He made my career,” she said. “And he knows he can end it, too. He enjoys playing with me too much.”

A loud thwack startled the two women as a thick manila envelope landed on the table. Mitsuru looked up behind her with a start and Tohru caught Shigure’s eyes. There were dark circles under them, his hair was still a rumpled mess, and his robe wasn’t even properly tied.

Shigure turned his attention to Mitsuru.

“You give me too much credit, Mii,” he announced with a smile.

“I didn’t say anything untrue and you know it,” Mitsuru pouted, clutching the manuscript tightly. “Is this all of it?”

“Who knows? You’ll just have to go home and see,” Shigure countered, still using that falsely cheerful tone. “Tohru, this woman failed to mention how atrocious of an editor she is and how lucky it is for her to be assigned to someone who needs so little editing done in the first place.”

“Don’t start with me today—you’re two weeks late already!”

“Yes, yes.” Shigure waved his hand dismissively. “It’s all there, don’t worry. I don’t feel like playing with you today.”

Mitsuru humphed as she stuck the envelope into her briefcase. “He’s a cruel man, Tohru. Be careful with him.”

Tohru walked her to the door and watched her angrily put her shoes back on.

“Thank you for the tea,” Mitsuru called over her shoulder as she stormed out of the house. Tohru watched the door shut with a click. She heard Shigure yawn loudly from behind her.

“You shouldn’t say things like that,” Tohru said. “She works hard.”

“She works hard for me so she doesn’t have to work hard for other authors,” Shigure asserted, still smiling. “It’s a give-and-take. She continues her wildly mediocre work, and I don’t get my manuscripts ripped apart.”

“Maybe she doesn’t have time to rip them apart because you give them to her so late.” Tohru turned around to face him.

“We don’t talk for days and the first thing you do is scold me.” Shigure clicked his tongue and shook his head. Tohru dropped her eyes.

“You’re the one…” Tohru swallowed the rest of the sentence. “Are you feeling better?”

“I’m not sick. Just hungover. No need to worry.” He shrugged. “I don’t know how I made it to my room last night, though I have an idea that you do. Unless there’s another explanation as to why I woke up with no clothes on this morning.”

“You passed out in the entrance. I couldn’t carry you in your human form… I’m sorry, I didn’t mean —”
“It’s fine.” Shigure held up a hand. “I’m tired of your apologies.”

Shigure turned to walk back to his room, but Tohru was quick to grab his wrist.

“I know that you’ve been treating me this way on purpose,” she said. “I know you’re acting this way for a reason.”

“Cruelty,” Shigure said over his shoulder. “Isn’t that what Mii said?”

“If you’re trying to make me believe you’re that cold of a person, you’re going to have to try harder,” Tohru said, eyes narrowing. “I don’t believe you. I don’t believe in that side of you.”

“What’s not to believe? It’s not the tooth fairy.” Shigure was still smiling, but there was an edge to his voice. He gently pulled his wrist away.

“And neither is the side of you that’s kind,” Tohru said. “If I’m wrong, then tell me now! Be cruel to me! I’m telling you, you can!”

Shigure turned to face her, eyes narrowed in thought as he looked down at her. He stayed silent.

“Wouldn’t it be easier to apologize to Ayame than to try and prove him right?” Tohru asked softly.

Shigure didn’t break her gaze until he turned to walk away. He closed the door to his bedroom quietly, without another word.

Tohru stood alone in the hallway.

The following week, Yuki attended school every day. The commute from Ayame’s place to school ended up being an even easier trek than the one from Shigure’s house. Monday, however, he showed up late—making the mistake of sleeping in too long and missing his chance to board the rush hour bus. It took him forty-five minutes in the biting cold to walk to school that day.

When he entered the classroom, everyone looked his way. He gave an apologetic bow to his teacher and ignored the amused and curious gazes of his classmates. Ms. Shiraki continued homeroom, making a comment that he didn’t have the crutches as an excuse anymore—which earned a giggle from most of the class.

When Yuki sat down in his seat, he turned his head instinctively to Kyo, who was very deliberately looking straight ahead. He narrowed his eyes, as if to intensify his gaze, and Kyo must have felt it because his jaw clenched and his eyes didn’t move. Yuki sighed and looked back up towards the front, only to see Tohru staring right at him.

Before he had a chance to feel embarrassed, she gave a little wave that Yuki graciously returned.

The rest of the day continued shockingly normal. Yuki sat in class, he took notes, he ate lunch with Haru, and he chatted with Ms. Honda in between periods. It felt like a normal day.

Perhaps a bit too normal.

Yuki wasn’t expecting anything crazy, but was it so unrealistic to expect at least some kind of
change in his interactions with Kyo? He hadn’t said one word to Yuki all day, and made quite the point in not looking his way at all.

He wasn’t thinking he and Kyo would start being friendly again or anything, but this cold shoulder seemed a little extreme. Kyo had kissed him back after all…

And he also stopped it, Yuki reminded himself. Just give him time.

Yuki wrapped his scarf around his neck as he prepared to leave at the end of the day. That was right—he was trying to be a more mature person. Someone who gave space and comfort to the people he cared about. Kyo didn’t seem mad at him, and he wasn’t acting malicious, either.

He just needs time, Yuki reinforced to himself, ignoring the heavy weight of nervous excitement anchored in his stomach now. It was hard not to look at Kyo expectantly every time he walked near his desk, or every time he looked Yuki’s way. Halfway through the week, Yuki wondered how much like a lost puppy he must have looked, and that embarrassing thought alone was enough to spur his mind to wander elsewhere.

Surprisingly, it turned out to be quite simple to get wrapped up in other thoughts.

Yuki took the time to enjoy the refreshing new pathway home in the afternoons. Ayame’s shop was nestled in an alleyway that housed an array of independent shops and restaurants. There was a mom-and-pop bakery that smelled especially pleasant. There was also a small tea shop across from an antique store, and Yuki walked between the two owners conversing boisterously to each other from their separate ends of the street.

After that Monday, Yuki was sure to wake up earlier than usual in order to catch the bus with a much more manageable capacity of people. On Thursday, one of the nearby train lines malfunctioned, and the bus overflowed even in the early hour.

Yuki walked again, this time leisurely, and was sure to grab himself a fresh custard bun from the bakery on the way.

At school, it was easier to pay attention. He kept his head up, took up his detailed note-taking once more, and used the free periods to focus on his weaker subjects (English in particular—it was hard to wrap his mouth around the pronunciation, and even harder to keep up with the strange rules in grammar).

But who knew? Maybe one day, he would like to travel to America. Maybe one day, he would want to go somewhere else.

It felt strange to wonder such things at all.

It wasn’t until Friday evening on the way back from school that Yuki really registered the change in routine. He stepped off the bus at his stop, nearly three blocks away from Ayame’s store. As he walked, there was a small flower shop selling seeds in front of the store in preparation for the upcoming spring. Almost without thinking, Yuki beelined to see the selection, wondering what it might be like to grow flowers in his garden this year. Thinking that perhaps Ms. Honda might have a preference.

On a reflex simpler than breathing, he turned to ask her that very question, only to stop when he realized it wouldn’t get heard.

Something cold passed through his body.
With everything that had happened, with all the mess of working through his body, working through his spirit and emotions… With all the spite and pride charged inside him like an electric spark, there was something very beautiful in his life that Yuki let fade.

This new routine was nice, living with Ayame was nice, and being able to keep some space from Shigure’s house was nice. But how long had it been since he walked to school with Tohru and Kyo? Yuki hadn’t even realized what an essential part of his day that became.

Yuki let his fingers graze over the seeds, staring blankly for a long moment. That’s why when a hand clapped down on his shoulder, Yuki didn’t even realize that his brother was anywhere near him. He looked up with a jump.

“Is it the habit of every teenager to loiter outside the local shops?” Ayame asked, voice full of humor.

Yuki rolled his shoulder to shake Ayame’s hand off and shook his head. “I just got distracted.”

“Don’t get too distracted out in this cold, brother. The consequences could be dire.” Ayame laughed heartily and entered the shop, and without thinking, Yuki followed him inside.

“Aya!” said an older, plump woman in an apron. Her expression was bright and cheery, and her thin brown hair curled and bobbed at her shoulders.

“Greetings, Eiko.” Ayame strolled into the shop and up to the counter. “Do you have my usual for me?”

“Of course, darling.” Her eyes were drawn to Yuki. “And who’s this? It’s a little Aya!”

“My dear, please allow me to introduce my little brother, Yuki. He’s just moved in with us. Yuki, this is Otsuka Eiko. You won’t find more beautiful flowers for miles.”

“Pleased to meet you,” Yuki said with a bow.

“Oh, Mine must be so happy to have someone to spoil! You know, this young boy looks very close to becoming a man. You might have to have some children of your own if you want to fill up that house of yours for good.”

Ayame laughed loudly in response, but Yuki could see his shoulders tense slightly.

It didn’t take long after that for Ms. Otsuka to come back with a beautiful bouquet of white lilies. Yuki bowed again to the owner before the two brothers left the shop to head home side by side.

Ayame’s shop closed early on Friday through Sunday. And so, every Friday, Ayame came back home by dinnertime with a bouquet of flowers and a kiss for Mine’s hand.

Yuki watched from the doorway of the kitchen. Ayame was on one knee in front of the sink, lips pressed to Mine’s gloved hand as she giggled and accepted the offered flowers. Yuki never grew tired of the smile that would brighten her face each time at the gesture.

“Lilies,” she would say every time. “My favorite!”

“Your favorite is my favorite,” he always responded back. He stood straight as a board and kissed her on the cheek, leaning in from afar and allowing the intimate air between them to act as the embrace he could not give.
Usually what would happen afterwards is that Ayame would roll up his sleeves and help in the kitchen. He would chop, and she would stir. She would take care of the tea, and he would take care of the rice. She would serve, and he would start the cleaning.

But as he went to do just that, he turned to see Yuki standing in the entryway of the kitchen, as if forgetting he had come home with him at all.

Ayame smiled wider—he was never a man to turn his nose up to a change in routine.

“Yuki, could you be a dear and get me the vase on the table to replace the flowers?” Mine asked.

Yuki nodded.

“He’s such a sweet boy,” Mine said brightly.

“What else would you expect from my brother?” Ayame said, smiling right back at her.

“Are you happy?” she asked quietly, placing a hand on his shoulder.

“More than I can say.”

Yuki came back then, holding the vase curiously.

“Thank you, Yuki! Why don’t you handle the flowers with that green thumb of yours, and Ayame—if you wouldn’t mind getting started on dinner. I need to call my sister.”

“Off to tell her what a wonderful man you have in your life,” Ayame called after her.

“Yup! And a cute, new one, too.” Mine winked at Yuki, who smiled. Diligently, Yuki went to the sink and dumped out the old water, carefully extracting the flowers and wrapping them in paper towels before throwing them away.

Ayame squeezed his hands into the sink to wash them, disrupting Yuki’s task of washing out the vase. Ayame was surprised when Yuki waited patiently for him to finish without comment. Maybe he really was growing on Yuki.

“How often do you get flowers for Ms. Kuramae?” Yuki asked softly.

“Once a week,” Ayame hummed. “I make it my personal duty to make sure that she’s surrounded by fresh, beautiful flowers every day.”

Yuki nodded, eyes still concentrating on their task. He put the vase on the counter, grabbed the kitchen scissors from the drawer, and very carefully began to trim the stems of the flowers, seemingly admiring them as he did. Ayame couldn’t help but halt his own task to observe him.

“Thinking of getting flowers for a certain someone?” Ayame asked. Yuki’s ears turned pink and he couldn’t help but laugh. “Perhaps that girl whose bathroom you almost died in?”

“I didn’t almost die,” Yuki said, shooting Ayame a glare. “And… our relationship isn’t like that. We’re just friends.”

“She didn’t reciprocate your feelings? What a silly girl!”

“No,” Yuki refuted quickly. “I didn’t.”

It took a moment to reel in the defensive brotherly rage, but when he did, he gave Yuki a strange
look. “I see… well, sweet Tohru then?”

“No,” Yuki sighed, with a roll of his eyes. “Stop guessing. It’s not your business.”

“I recall you asking my advice on one occasion,” Ayame pouted.

“Your version of advice was talking for hours about your love life,” Yuki said, not bothering to look up at his brother.

“What can I say? I have a deep well of experience.” Ayame smiled at his brother but let him be. He was practically welling up with words unsaid. It was nearly seven minutes later that Yuki spoke again.

“I wish I knew how to show my affection for someone… positively,” Yuki murmured, so quietly that Ayame thought he might be talking to himself.

By now the neatly arranged lilies were back on the table, and Yuki was standing next to Ayame, helping him chop the vegetables for the stew.

“What if I never learn how to be good for another person?” Yuki asked, this time more forthrightly. Ayame felt his heart break. Carefully, he placed his hand over Yuki’s clumsy grip on the knife, causing Yuki to finally meet his gaze. He looked ashamed, lost in deep thought, and somewhat exhausted. Ayame recognized the expression immediately.

“Lilies are not that grand of a gesture, you know,” he said. “They make Mine happy. That’s their purpose. And I want her happy every day. Is that what you want for this mystery person of yours?”

Yuki turned pink again, and Ayame laughed, reveling in how much like a teenager his brother looked in that moment.

“Don’t make fun of me,” Yuki grunted, shrugging his way out of Ayame’s grip.

“I don’t mean to, but I think you’re making this needlessly complicated. To make someone happy is simply to observe them, and to realize what it is that makes their day just the tiniest bit brighter.”

Yuki stared at the ground, his expression as if trying to solve a math problem in his head. “How do I observe someone that way?”

Ayame smiled. “If you love someone, you’ve already been observing them for a while now.”

““It always surprises me how good you are with the kids.”

Kagura looked up at Kunimitsu as she was packing up her bag and preparing to leave the dojo. Twice a week, Kagura would come to help the younger kids in their karate classes—sometimes more if her university was on a break. The kids tended to flock to her bubbly personality, as well as the funny way she would scold their form.

“I’m trying very hard not to be insulted by that, Kuni,” Kagura playfully humphed. “I’m a wonderful teacher.”

“I’m not arguing with that. I don’t know how you do it. Kids seem to get more hyper every year,” he said, laughing. He joined Kagura as she started to head outside. Both of them lingered by the entryway, not wanting to expose the warmth inside to the cold air.
“You just don’t have the patience of a woman,” Kagura said proudly.

“Sensei tells me the same thing,” Kunimitsu sighed, and Kagura laughed. Even with the conversation at a breaking point, Kagura lingered awkwardly. Then, after a moment, she said, “Haru told me Kyo’s been here a lot more lately.”

“Yeah, almost every day.”

Kagura pouted, knowing it wasn’t a coincidence that she still hadn’t managed to bump into him, even with her weekly classes. She grumbled, “That must make Sensei happy.”

“He’s a pretty simple guy with a pretty simple son.” Kunimitsu laughed. “He definitely seems happier.”

Kagura finally opened the door to leave, “I’m glad to hear it. Kuni, can you tell Sensei I said bye?”

“No, I should—” Kagura sighed, spirit deflating when she saw a figure looming on the pathway. Kunimitsu immediately sensed the tension in her shoulders and looked forward.

Kureno stood before the dojo, looking like some sort of vampire waiting to be invited inside. Kagura crossed her arms and turned up her nose, walking quickly to try and brush past him.

“Kagura,” Kureno called after her. “Kagura!” he tried again when she didn’t answer. “Kagura, I just need a second.”

Kureno grabbed her arm to keep her from walking away at her rapid pace. Kagura immediately pivoted, shaking him off her arm in a sudden, violent motion. “Don’t touch me!” He dropped her arm immediately.

“I’m just trying to talk to you.”

“You’re acting like a stalker! I told you to leave me alone!”

“Is everything okay?” Kunimitsu called, watching the scene from the doorway of the dojo.

“It’s fine, Kuni,” Kagura snapped. Then to Kureno, “I’ve had ex-boyfriends less annoying and persistent than you.”

“You know I can’t just drop this. You’re lucky you were able to get away with all of this for as long as you did. Just tell me where Isuzu is before Akito calls you in himself.”

“I didn’t get away with anything! Akito just didn’t care about her enough to look!”

“That’s not true,” Kureno argued. “You know that’s not true.”

“You’re delusional,” Kagura spat. “And I’m leaving.”

“This isn’t over just because you walk away from me.”

There was something about Kureno that always infuriated Kagura. That victim-stricken tone to his voice that always sounded exhausted and pleading. As if he couldn’t come about and just threaten her like she knew he truly meant. As if he was constantly being forced to do what he didn’t want to do, and that she was the inconvenience for not being more reasonable.
It was a feeling she despised.

“Why does this matter all of the sudden? It’s been months! Why are you harassing me now?”

“It’s not good for any zodiac member to be isolated. Isuzu already doesn’t have the strongest health. You of all people should understand that.”

“You’re right, I should be the one to understand. It’s just such a shame that I don’t know where she is,” Kagura snapped, turning to walk away.

“You know you can’t lie to me forever,” Kureno called after her. And there it was. That tone in his voice that sounded harangued by the curse, yet still so willing to use it against her. Maybe this is why he felt so distant—even more so than the rest of the zodiac.

Kagura turned sharply on her heel, walking back up to him.

“No. But I don’t have to lie to do this.” Kagura landed a punch right in his stomach, and Kureno doubled over at the sensation. Without a second thought, she turned to leave again, satisfied that Kureno wasn’t following her now.

“If you’re going to tell on me to Akito anyway, I might as well get something out of it!” she called behind her before she disappeared down the pathway.

——

Kureno groaned, putting both hands on his stomach and sucking in a breath. With an unstable exhale, he let himself teeter back so that he was sitting on the ground.

“Are you okay?” asked the man to whom Kagura had been talking. Kureno raised a hand to wave him off, still too winded to speak.

“She packs a mean punch, doesn’t she?” said another voice—this one more familiar. “I should know. I taught her.”

Kureno looked up to see Kazuma’s sympathetic smile.

“Do you want to come inside for a moment?”

——

The strangest thing about being at Shigure’s house again was that Yuki’s first instinct was to open the door and let himself inside. He even put his hand on the door and almost gave it a firm tug (the door had been improperly snagged since the time Kagura had joggled it strangely in his second year of high school). But Yuki stopped himself, lifted his fist, and knocked instead.

It felt weird to wait outside a house that was still hard not to consider his own. He regarded Shigure’s house as more of a home than the one he grew up in. He had moved in at the same time as Shigure. Knew all the strange kinks and flaws in the hallways, on the stairs, in the living room, in the kitchen.

And now, he was waiting for someone to let him in. Another moment passed and Yuki knocked again, the sound causing his nerves to jumble all the way up to his throat.

“Coming!” he heard Tohru’s voice from the other side and the sound of her padding down the hallway, taking a moment to slip into her outdoor shoes.

He swallowed, clutching his backpack strap tightly, and felt a brisk winter wind chill him even more
than he already was.

The door opened and—

“Yuki?” Tohru said, eyes wide.

“Hello, Ms. Honda.” Yuki let the hand hanging by his side clench into a nervous fist. “I hope I’m not intruding on anything—”

“Not at all!” Tohru cried, reflexively reaching for his arm and holding it tightly. “I’m happy to see you!”

Yuki gave a somewhat relieved smile. “I was just… I wanted to stop by and… We haven’t seen much of each other lately…”

“I miss you!” Tohru said suddenly, her eyes more honest than they were allowed to be in school. Yuki felt his throat clog just looking at her glassy, sincere expression.

“I miss you, too,” Yuki said softly. His hand going from his backpack strap to Tohru’s hand over his arm. He held it carefully, and smiled.

“You’re lettin’ in all the cold air, Tohru!” Kyo stomped into the entryway, stopping at the ledge when he saw Yuki. The two caught each other’s eyes for a moment, Yuki tensing again at the thought that Kyo might reject him in a whole different way. Instead, Kyo clicked his tongue, “Oh, it’s this guy.”

As Tohru ushered him inside, Yuki was still having trouble looking away from Kyo’s somewhat shy expression.

“Come in! Come in! I’m so glad you stopped by! Do you want something to eat or drink?”

“Jeez, Tohru, relax. Don’t forget, the guy scares easy,” Kyo said. Yuki tried to ignore the way his cheeks heated just slightly at that.

“Am I scaring you!?” Tohru asked immediately.

“No! No! I’m not… I’m not going anywhere,” Yuki said to Tohru. She beamed a smile at him. “Except Ayame did say I had to be on the bus home by ten tonight.”

Kyo snorted, but Tohru nodded. “That’s fine! I’ll get started on dinner now!”

“It’s okay—” Yuki tried to say, but Tohru was already putting on her slippers and heading towards the kitchen.

“Don’t worry, Yuki! I’ll be sure it’s something you like!” And with that, Tohru was in the other room, leaving Yuki and Kyo still lingering in the entryway.

“That’s not what I was worried about, exactly,” Yuki muttered with a smile, even if Tohru couldn’t hear. He slipped off his shoes and stepped up to the same level as Kyo. “Hi.”

Kyo nodded. “Hey.” It was still difficult to meet Yuki’s eyes. “Tohru’s happy you’re here.”

Yuki smiled. “Just Tohru?”

“If you keep acting all smug, it’ll definitely be just Tohru!” Kyo spat, crossing his arms. Yuki held his hands up defensively with a laugh.
“I promise, I’m not here to rile you up,” Yuki said. “If you want me to go, I will.”

Kyo stared at him for a long moment, before giving an annoyed grunt and walking into the living room. Yuki took it as a sign to follow.

The last time Yuki had been to Shigure’s house was a few days before the new year—more than three weeks ago now—but it had felt like being reunited with an old friend. Yuki could barely remember the last time he had sat around their large, clunky table, and felt truly at peace there.

Kyo sat at the table, too, tapping his fingers in front of half a cup of tea. An amused smile played on Yuki’s lips. “Shouldn’t you be studying?”

Kyo shushed him quickly, looking around as if to make sure they were still alone. “I don’t do that here.”

“Where do you do it then?”

Kyo shrugged. “My room, mostly. Sometimes at Shishou’s.”

“Is he helping you?”

“He tries,” Kyo said with a snort. “From what I know, he was about as good as Tohru in school.”

Yuki smiled, his hands in his lap and his posture stiff with the notion that he was still only a guest here.

“Tohru’s not that bad,” Yuki chastised lightly. “Not as bad as you.”

“Hey! I got good enough grades!”

“Got, back when you actually came to school,” Yuki pointed out.

“I come to fucking school,” Kyo snarled. “More than you lately!”

“That’s not fair—those were…” Yuki winced, “…medical issues.”

“They were dumbass issues, as far as I’m concerned.” Kyo rolled his eyes. “Any more rodent assassination attempts?”

Yuki let out a sharp laugh at the image. “Don’t be ridiculous.”

“Did you come to school the next day with a note from your doctor saying, ‘Sorry, this rat pulled a sneak attack on me’?”

Yuki covered his mouth to stop himself from snickering. “It’s not funny. I was unconscious for four days.”

“You look fine. Hell, I could use a four-day nap,” Kyo said, drinking more of his tea. Yuki shook his head, still smiling.

“You’re horrible,” Yuki said.

“You deserve it,” Kyo shot back. Yuki couldn’t argue with that one.

“Maybe I do, but maybe I’m also immature enough to fight back anyway,” Yuki said with a smile.
“Hell, you definitely are,” Kyo affirmed.

“Don’t test me. I have plenty of information on you, too.”

“Don’t,” Kyo said, leaning forward and hunching over the table.

“Don’t what?” Yuki asked innocently.

“Don’t say anything,” Kyo hissed.

“Don’t say anything about what?” Yuki pressed.

“About the entrance exams,” Kyo said through his teeth.

“What about them?”

“Don’t tell Tohru!”

“Don’t tell Tohru what?”

“Don’t tell Tohru I’m studying for the fucking entrance exams!”

Yuki’s face stretched into an arrogant grin when Kyo’s loud volume caused a clattering of pots and pans in the kitchen. Kyo went pale, but his eyes were still flashing angrily at Yuki as Tohru tentatively entered the room, her eyes hopeful and welling with tears.

“Kyo… are you really… are you studying for the entrance exams?”

Kyo pounded his fist on the table, letting out a frustrated noise. “Do you see what you did?”

“I didn’t tell her anything,” Yuki said smoothly.

“Kyo,” Tohru said sharply, demanding his attention. Yuki smiled at the exchange.

“I… I mean… It’s just somethin’… Shishou’s just being a big pain in the ass!”

“But you are?”

“Don’t get too damn excited,” Kyo huffed. “Just cause I’m taking a test doesn’t mean anything changes.”

“I’m so happy for you!” Tohru cried, almost hurling forward to hug him, but stopping herself right at the last second. “I—! Do you need help studying?! I’m going to get my books! Or—! No, you need dinner! To focus! But I’ll get my notes! I don’t take good notes, but they might help! I got high marks in social studies—I’ll just give you those! Or—no! There’s food on the stove! I’ll—!”

“Do you see what you did?!” Kyo barked at Yuki, pointing to a malfunctioning Tohru.

Yuki stood and placed a gentle hand on Tohru’s shoulder. “It’s alright. I have all my notes here that I can share. After dinner, maybe show us what you have, too?”

Tohru nodded aggressively, tears still in her eyes and a smile on her face that wouldn’t go away.

“Kyo!” she called, suddenly swiveling like a soldier to face him. Kyo jumped at the attention. “I’m going to make the best dinner ever for you!” And back into the kitchen she went.

Kyo pursed his lips tightly together. “That was fuckin’ low.”
“Now you can study in peace here, and what’s more, I can help you,” Yuki said, rummaging through his backpack.

“Yuki, I’m serious,” Kyo said, anger stirring into his words. “I don’t need her or anybody else getting their hopes up about this. This is hard enough as it is without you coming here and fucking things up!”

Yuki looked up to meet Kyo’s gaze, eyes hardening. “I’m not fucking things up. Trust me, I know what that looks like.” Kyo still wasn’t recognizing the humor in Yuki’s voice, so he softened his expression. “You’re going to do this, and you’re going to succeed. Shi-han and Tohru have faith in you. And so do I.”

“That’s not the point! The point is—!”

“The point is that if you’re going to do this, you’re going to need help,” Yuki said softly. “Tohru helps you. I know she does.”

Kyo gave an annoyed sigh and rolled his eyes, finally releasing the tension in his body into resignation.

“I could help you, too,” Yuki said softly. “But only if you want me to.”

Kyo looked up at Yuki, with an incredulous expression. “I don’t want anyone’s help,” he grumbled.

Yuki smiled at him. “I know, but I figured I might offer, anyway,” he said. He pulled out his notebooks from his backpack, and placed them on the table, unopened, for Kyo to take if he so chose.

Hesitantly, he flipped the pages open to glance at them, sighing as his eyes wandered over the material. “You handwriting is shit. I can’t read anything.”

Yuki pushed down the embarrassment at the comment with a roll of his eyes. Kyo looked at the notes a little longer, and let out a defeated sigh.

“I’m too far behind,” he said, closing up one of the notebooks with finality.

“Then you’ll just have to pay extra attention when I explain it to you,” Yuki said.

Kyo gave him a disbelieving look, “You really want to help me study?”

Yuki nodded. “I do.”

Kureno’s stomach was still feeling sore as he sat at Kazuma’s kitchen table. He tried to rub at it discreetly as the other man prepared something in the kitchen, but Kureno knew that the dull ache of it wouldn’t be going away any time soon.

With a dull rub over his shirt, Kureno took the time to look around the space. It was always remarkable to him how things here hadn’t changed since he was a child. There was a brief summer during which his parents signed him up for karate, but he never found himself to be as dedicated as some of his other zodiac cousins.

Instead, Kureno saw Kazuma more often now during meetings with Akito. Or as one of the Sohma’s property managers, needing to check in with Kazuma when the building needed repairs and the like.
Kazuma soon reemerged with an ice pack wrapped in a towel, and handed it to Kureno.

“Thank you,” he said, wincing a little as he placed it on his stomach.

“Had you stuck with my classes, you might have known how to block that punch,” Kazuma quipped lightly.

Kureno gave a humored smile. “I think it’s clear that I’m not quite the martial arts type.” He groaned. “Do all your students look this pathetic after a sucker punch?”

“All I’ll say is that it might be a good idea to try getting away from the office a little more often.”

“Ah, the negatives of being a workaholic from a desk. At least your work keeps you healthy.”

“You seem to be working out of the office today,” Kazuma said, a quiet seriousness in his tone. Kureno looked at him, and the polite pleasantness seemed to drop from his expression. “You seem like a good man, Kureno. I admire your work ethic and your gentle nature. But even good men can have questionable lapses in judgment.”

Kureno opened his mouth to respond, but nothing came out.

“I would prefer if you would not come back here for a while. Especially not to bother a dear student of mine.”

A heavy sigh built up in Kureno’s lungs, but before he could respond, Kunimitsu poked his head into the room.

“Sensei? I’m sorry to interrupt, but you have a phone call.”

Kazuma excused himself and left the room, sure to give Kureno a pat on the shoulder as he left. He hadn’t even realized how much his posture straightened with Kazuma in the room—Kazuma was a man whose demeanor so effortlessly demanded respect and reverence. Kureno was starting to realize why so many of the zodiacs sought refuge here.

For a moment, he wondered if he would’ve turned out the same way, had his curse not broken all those years ago.

It was a strange thing, trying to remember that feeling. It was the same as trying to recreate a childhood memory. The motions were there, but the feelings felt so far and removed. Somehow, this bond turned so many to rebel against Akito—especially recently. A sort of resentment building like a caking rust on the hearts of the zodiacs. Perhaps that’s why it was so easy to work for Akito.

The bond was gone. But so was the need to rebel.

Kureno stood up to stretch, reaching his arms up and wincing at the sting in his stomach when he did. Kazuma’s phone call was taking a while, and Kureno was growing restless here. Idly, he walked around the room, observing the pictures hanging in the dining area.

Pushed against the wall was a low-to-the-ground bookcase that also served as a shelf for other knick-knacks. However, it was far from cluttered, which didn’t surprise Kureno, as he had always known Kazuma to be a frugal and minimalist-type of person.

At the end of the table was a small plate with mail and unimportant paperwork stacked on top. Kureno, at first, didn’t pay it much mind, continuing his stroll around the perimeter, when something struck him.
He walked back, staring at an envelope sticking out of a small manila folder. The emblem on the corner was familiar.

Subtly, Kureno looked over his shoulder before carefully sliding the envelope out from its place. The top had already been neatly slit open with a letter opener, and trying to make as little noise as possible, Kureno removed the letter and unfolded just the first half to peek at what was written.

Dear Mr. Sohma,

Thank you for your interest in our university. We are sending this letter to confirm your time-slot for our upcoming entrance exam.

Kureno hurriedly placed the letter back into its envelope when he heard footsteps coming down the hall.

When Kazuma entered the room, Kureno had just finished putting on his coat.

“You’re leaving?”

“I think I’ve overstayed my welcome,” he said, politely. “Thank you for the ice.”

“Oh, of course,” Kazuma said. “Let me walk you out.”

____________________________

On Monday, Kyo walked up to his desk to find a paper bag on the seat with a note taping the handles together. He snapped it off to bring it closer to his face to read.

These should help. -Y

Kyo looked back at Yuki’s desk to see him sitting there, head down on his work, erasing something in the corner of his notebook. He tried to stare him down, but Yuki refused to look up.

Fine. Kyo huffed and opened up the bag to peer inside.

There were a few notebooks inside. All labeled with a different subject. Plus, an extra remedial English book with hand-written notes inside that looked as if they were written for Kyo. He flipped to the front of the English book and saw another note.

Even you should be able to get this.

At first, Kyo thought the notebooks were the same as the ones Yuki showed him the other day. But flipping through them, he realized that wasn’t the case. The handwriting was neat, painstakingly so, and each set of notes followed a clear train of thought. Some notes were underlined or circled, obviously intended to draw Kyo’s attention.

The detail of them was striking.

Kyo stared down at the books, feeling his chest start to ache. No way was he gonna look back this time. Whatever face he was making would be too damn embarrassing.

He didn’t know it, but Yuki kept his gaze down at his desk for the same reason.

____________________________

For the rest of January, Yuki made the trek to Shigure’s house three times a week to help Kyo study.
The three of them would sit around the living room table, just like they used to. On the days Ayame insisted Yuki come home for dinner, Yuki would stay an hour later in the library with Kyo instead. Oftentimes, Tohru would join them. It was a routine they settled into anew, the only anomaly being when Yuki would pack his things, wave a hand, and head down the path, always at 9:30 PM.

Tohru would watch him leave until he was completely out of sight. Kyo would always go straight to his room afterward.

On the final day of the month, the three of them unintentionally spent their time apart. Kyo helped teach an extra class at the dojo when Kunimitsu was out with a fever. Tohru thought she might visit the hospital again, even if it was just to chat with Kagura in the waiting room. Mine taught Yuki how to chop an onion for their dinner that night.

January 31st was cloudy. No moon or sun appeared until the new month presented itself. The entrance exams would be in the third week of February.

“He’s following you?”

“Yes, but don’t worry about it, I’m taking care of it.”

“Taking care of it how?” “I’m working on it,” Kagura supplied. “He’ll drop it eventually.”

“Eventually,” Rin said in complete and total disbelief. “But not now.”

Kagura shrugged.

“So let me get this straight,” Rin said, her tone sharp. “Kureno is following you, looking for me… and you decided to come here?”

“To warn you,” Kagura pointed out, feeling her eyes narrowing.

“Are you an idiot?”

“It’s Kureno, not a CIA agent. He’s not going to find you,” Kagura said.

“He definitely won’t if you would just stop coming here,” Rin shot back.

“He hasn’t found you yet, has he?”

“What do you mean? How long has this been going on?”

Kagura shrugged, not meeting Rin’s eyes. “A little more than two weeks.”

“Are you serious? What the hell is wrong with you?”

“What do you want me to do? Stop coming?”

“Yes!”

“Tough.”

“You’re such a child,” Rin snarled. “Because of you, we’re both going to get caught.”

“You’re right. Sorry for worrying about you. Sorry for visiting you. Sorry for lying to everyone in
the family for you, including Akito. And Haru!” Kagura bit back, spitefully. Rin scoffed at Kagura’s tone. “You know what makes me so mad about you? Is that no matter what I do to try and help you, I’m always still the bad guy!”

“If you didn’t remind me every two seconds all the good things you do for me, it’d be easier to take you seriously.”

“Oh, you’re right. I just assumed you needed a reminder since you haven’t once said ‘thank you’ to me.”

“Is this why you came here? To yell and stomp your feet?”

“I told you it was to warn you,” Kagura said through her teeth. She rubbed her temples, trying to calm herself down. “God, what even is the point of this anymore? What are you doing here?”

“Excuse me?”

Kagura thrust her arms down to her side, and she squared herself in front of Rin. “Maybe Kureno is right. Maybe you isolating yourself from the zodiac has made you worse.”

“How can you say that?”

“Just give it up, Rin. Swallow your pride and come home. Stop wasting your money on hospital bills, and stop ignoring the people who care about you. Come home.”

Rin stared at her in disbelief. “I can’t believe you.”

“What do you want me to say? You’re trapped in this hospital room, and you’re not any closer to finding a break in the curse. I’m just trying to help.”

“Maybe if you would do things for the sake of others and not just to stroke your own ego, I would believe that.”

Kagura blinked at Rin in shock, her mouth opening around speechless words. Rin looked away from Kagura, face still scrunched and angry. The room was silent in contrast to both of the ladies’ booming tones.

“Is that what you think of me? You think I do this to make myself feel better?”

Rin stared out the window, unresponsive.

“You’re my sister,” Kagura insisted, her tone still angry. “I care about you. Care about you enough to keep my mouth shut about a lot of the things you’ve been doing.”

“I’d love to see you keep your mouth shut one of these days, because you seem pretty talkative to me!”

“You hear me when I talk? I wasn’t aware that you could hear anything over the sound of your own voice!”

“You know what, Kagura? Why don’t you just go back to Mommy and Daddy and your perfect little home if you hate dealing with me this much.”

Kagura gave a frustrated outcry. “Why do you say things like that all the time? Why are you so mad at me? What have I done to you?!”
Rin looked away again, but this time Kagura approached her bed, storming straight ahead—true to the boar inside her.

“I am sorry for what happened to you. I am sorry for what your parents did to you. It’s awful and it’s cruel. But you have to stop taking it out on me! I have been here with you the whole time!”

“Bullshit!” Rin sneered. “You want to know why I’m mad? Because you get to sit up on your high fucking horse every time you come and visit me, and tell me what an idiot I am for trying to do anything against this curse! And then you get to go home to your perfect life and feel like you’ve done your good deed for the day! All you are is complacent.”

“I am not complacent, I just don’t kill myself over this like you do!”

“Then you’re fine with being cursed? How about Kyo being locked up?” Rin questioned, crossing her arms. “You don’t really care what happens to him? In that case, why did you make me listen to you talk about him nonstop?”

“Don’t be so mean,” Kagura said, genuine hurt breaking into her voice. “You know that’s not true.”

“You could’ve fooled me,” Rin spat.

“I know this may be hard for you to believe, but I have a life outside the Sohmas. I have friends, I go to university, and in a couple years, I’ll get my own job, too! You could do all of this too if you weren’t so stubborn! So don’t try to guilt me because I’m not ruining my own life!”

“You don’t have a life. You will never have a life that is actually yours while you’re cursed. You’re an idiot if you don’t realize that.”

“Alright, fine. What do you want me to do? You want me to help? Tohru wanted to help, but she’s not allowed to see you anymore. Do you want me to support you? Believe in you? Like Haru? Wait a second—he’s not allowed here, either!”

“Shut up,” Rin snarled back.

“I don’t get you! If no one is allowed to live with the curse, and no one is allowed to help you break it, then who’s left, Rin?!”

The two women stared at each other, eyes fiery and wide.

Rin shook her head, glare still cemented onto her face. “Get out.”

Kagura stood there for a long moment, her eyes welling slightly and an exasperated, bitter laugh on her lips. “Didn’t see that coming.”

Kagura snatched her purse off the chair and stormed out of the room. She was sure to slam the door when she left.

Both refused to acknowledge the swelling red rims outlining their eyes as they separated.

—

Today was a good day. Tohru noted that to herself as she sat across from Yuki at his desk, making casual conversation. She generally felt pretty guilty talking at all to any of her friends in the class during study periods, feeling like she was nothing but a distraction, but Yuki didn’t seem to mind at all.
It seemed like a lazy day, at the very least. The sky was overcast, there was a definite chill in the air, and most of the other students were spending their time chatting amongst themselves. When Tohru noted this aloud, Yuki laughed.

“I think at this point most of us have accepted our fates. There’s only a couple weeks until the entrance exams—you either know the material or you don’t,” Yuki said.

“I’d be so nervous,” Tohru said. “I’m a terrible test-taker.”

“I think what you’re doing is even more commendable. I don’t think a lot of people would have the courage to go straight into the workforce.”

“The place where I work now is actually considering me for a promotion! Once school ends I might become the new shift manager. If all works out, at least.”

“They’d be foolish not to take you,” Yuki said. Tohru smiled, but before the conversation could continue, the lunch bell rang. The two looked up, somewhat startled.

“The period went by so fast,” Yuki noted.

“Yuki, would you like to have lunch—”

“Not invited,” Uo quickly interjected. She and Hana approached and flanked both sides of Tohru, looking about as intimidating as usual.

“Yes, we’re having a girl’s lunch,” Hana added. “Begone.”

“This is my desk…” Yuki tried futilely.

“Isn’t that unfortunate for you,” Hana said.

“Wait, Yuki doesn’t have to go, does he?” Tohru asked, looking up at her two friends. She’d always known them to be jokesters, especially when it came to Yuki and Kyo, but they seemed particularly stern today.

“It’s okay, Ms. Honda,” Yuki said amiably. “I’ve been meaning to catch up with Haru, anyway.”

“Okay…”

“Would it be permitted for me to have lunch with Ms. Honda tomorrow?” Yuki asked humorously as he stood and gathered her things.

“The committee will take it into consideration,” Hana replied.

“Beat it, Sohma,” Uo added.

Yuki left with a slight wave, heading out the door and throwing a smile over his shoulder as he did. Tohru smiled and waved back, but when he was gone, she couldn’t help but pout slightly to her two friends.

“I don’t think we needed to shoo him away.”

Uo patted Tohru’s shoulder with her hand and sighed, “Let’s go eat, Tohru.”
The three girls sat quietly, eating their lunches on one of the benches outside. It was chilly, and each were wrapped in their winter clothes and scarves. Tohru sneezed when a particularly strong gust of wind hit them, and Hana draped her arm around Tohru’s shoulders in response.

“It’s cold,” Hana said, looking at Uo. “I suggest we say what we need to say.”

Tohru looked up at her friends, food half-eaten and eyebrows up in her forehead. She sat between her two friends, and although she felt the warmth that emanated from them, her chest felt particularly cold at the serious edge in both of their expressions.

“Uo? Hana? Is something wrong?”

“Yes,” Uo said.

“No,” Hana said, at the same time.

“No, there is not,” Hana said, firmly, looking at Uo. “We simply have a proposition for you.”

Tohru looked to Hana.

“After school is finished, we would love for you to move in with us,” Hana proposed.

“Us…?”

“Obviously I don’t want to keep living with my old man,” Uo started. “I’m gonna start looking for another place, and I was wondering if you wanted in on it. Hana already said yes.”

Hana nodded. Tohru’s eyes lit up.

“Oh, that’s wonderful! That would be—” Tohru cut herself off at the underlying meaning. “That would mean…”

“That would mean you move out of that house for good. I don’t know what kind of deal you have with the Sohmas, but you have to get out of there eventually, right?”

“Right…” Tohru said, somewhat distracted.

“I don’t know whether or not they said you could stay there for longer, but I think you have to start thinking about where you’re gonna go.”

“Especially since that family seems to be putting too much unnecessary stress on you as it is,” Hana said. “I would prefer you move out before graduation.”

“They’re not putting me under stress,” Tohru tried, but it sounded weak, even to her.

“Listen, I don’t know what’s going on over there, but whatever it is, you don’t need to be a part of it,” Uo declared. “You have your own life you need to live, Tohru. Think about yourself for once!”

“I am!” Tohru insisted. “I enjoy living there!”

Hana and Uo’s faces softened.

“Really?” Uo asked.

“I do… It’s been… everyone has been going through their own difficult times, I don’t… I don’t want to just leave.”
“We’re not asking you to pack up overnight,” Uo said, placing a gentle hand on Tohru’s cheek, much like Tohru’s mom used to do. Hana’s arm was still protectively draped around Tohru’s shoulders.

“However, you’ve done enough for them, with little in return,” Hana said. “Your waves have been troubling for too long a time now.”

“But…” Tohru started again, but nothing came out. She let her head droop.

“Of course, nothing will be pursued until after we finish these horrid exams,” Hana said, pressing the back of her gloved hand to her forehead as if she were feeling faint. Tohru gave her a faint smile.

“Just think about it,” Uo said. “You can live with either one of us until we find a place, too. Will you promise us you’ll at least think about it?”

Tohru stayed quiet for a moment before responding. “I love the idea of living with you two. It sounds amazing. And I know I can’t stay at Shigure’s forever.”

Uo moved her hand to gently rub Tohru’s back. “We’ll talk about it again once exams pass,” Uo said. “Okay?”

Tohru nodded, and the three continued eating their lunch, mostly in silence. Uo and Hana didn’t retract their gentle touches until the cold became too unbearable, and all three shuffled back inside the school.

When Tohru sat back at her desk, she felt herself deflate. Her good mood from this morning was long gone, which only added to her feelings of guilt.

She in no way wanted to seem rude or ungrateful to her dearest friends. And the idea of living with them sounded like a dream; it sounded like a relief.

But leaving Shigure’s house as it was now, with no resolution, no explanations, no communication… Tohru realized she was slowly being cut off, but now she also understood that with every ounce of her energy, she was fighting to stay. Stay in their lives, their memories, their good nature.

She wasn’t a fool. She knew the circumstances were different now than when Yuki and Kyo had tracked her down in first year and brought her back to the house. They were growing together then. Their lives were twisted around each other like one big vine.

In just the past couple weeks, Tohru finally felt comfortable speaking with them as if things were normal again. All three of them routinely sat around that big dining room table again, relaxed and content in each other’s company. But Tohru knew that the three of them were growing apart. The tense, empty atmosphere in the house was its new norm, as opposed to the warm, welcoming nature it once had.

Tohru wondered how long this all might last. Especially with only a handful of weeks left in their third year of school.

Tohru’s pencil stopped, lecture filtering out of her ears, eyes trained on the blank paper below her.

*If I leave, they’ll forget me.*

Tohru forced the thought out of her head immediately as soon as she felt pressure build behind her eyes.
She couldn’t let herself think that. Not with Yuki coming over again tomorrow night. Not with the promise of rebuilding and reunion so close.

Tohru would stay in Shigure’s house until the end of the school year, no matter what.

Beyond that were thoughts for another time.

Somehow, the sunniest days always felt like the coldest. Yuki enjoyed the sunshine as he headed down the path to Shigure’s house, but his nose was nipped with cold and was starting to run. His ears felt sore, too, and he sped up to a brisk walking pace.

Finally, the trees cleared to reveal the house up ahead, and Yuki shoved his hands in his pockets and began a light jog to promised warmth. He approached the door and took his hands out of his pockets to breathe warm air into them, rubbing them together quickly. He poised himself to knock when his ear caught a small sound from further down the side of house.

Yuki let his curiosity follow him to the outside of Shigure’s office, the door cracked just slightly to allow a familiar radio station to play.

Soft, easy-going music sang through the crack in the shoji doors, and Yuki hopped up onto the balcony without a second thought. He removed his shoes over the edge, wincing at how the cold licked his feet.

He knocked twice, sliding Shigure’s door open without hearing a response. A breath of warm air engulfed Yuki when he entered the room, but it was at war with the chill at his back.

Shigure looked up from his work, looking neither surprised nor amused to see Yuki there.

“Did you know your door was cracked? You’ll catch a cold,” Yuki said, walking into the office and closing the door behind him.

“I did, but I would have closed it if I’d known I’d be getting an intruder,” Shigure said flatly, eyes shifting back down to his open journal and newspaper.

“Am I an intruder now?” Yuki asked, offering a small smile.

Shigure did not return the expression. “Hard to say. You’re here so much now, it’s as if you live here,” he commented.

Yuki chuckled, but it fell flat in the room. Silence fell on them, broken only by the sound of Shigure flipping a newspaper page once in a while, or the sound of pen scratching against paper.

“Um…” Yuki tried after a long moment. “I haven’t seen much of you.”

Shigure gave a hum that didn’t indicate anything other than he had heard the statement.

When Shigure continued to ignore him, Yuki rolled his eyes, receiving the message loud and clear. Quietly, he picked himself up and walked to the door, opening it and lingering in the doorway for just a moment longer.

“I’m sorry I moved out,” Yuki said. “I do like it here a lot.”

With that, Yuki closed the door behind him. Shigure worked for a moment longer before tossing his glasses onto his desk with a sigh. He leaned back and looked up at the ceiling.
“I thought if it had *if* in the sentence, you have to put *could* or *would* or something,” Kyo snapped.

“That’s for conditional clauses. There are just normal clauses,” Yuki pointed out. “If the baby *could* have a temperature, I’ll take it to the doctor doesn’t make sense.”

“Why not? Isn’t that saying if the thing is sick, you’ll do something? If it’s already sick, why are they standin’ around writing a fucking grammar problem about it?”

“I don’t think they interviewed people in real time outside of hospitals asking for them to recite perfect grammar as a prerequisite of getting treatment,” Yuki retorted.

“You know what I mean!” Kyo said, throwing his pencil on the table before pointing to the problem below it. “Well, what about that one? That makes sense, right?”

“No! It does not make sense to say *If the weather is fine, we could walk tomorrow*—let me see that,” Yuki said, snatching the paper to re-read the problem.

“See!” Kyo said triumphantly.

“Alright, it makes sense, but it’s not what they asked for. The entrance exam is just as much about following directions. Maybe a game of ‘Red Light, Green Light’ would serve you better than anything else,” Yuki said, feeling exasperation beginning to seep into his tone.

“Hey, don’t start with me just because I’m better at English than this stupid worksheet.” Kyo snatched the sheet back, violently erasing the answers.

“Kyo, you’re working so hard. I wish there was something I could do to help,” Tohru said, tearfully holding up her most recent English test with a big ‘64’ written in red letters at the top.

“Don’t worry about it, Tohru,” Kyo said. “Just be glad you don’t have to take this damn thing.”

“My social studies notes aren’t too bad. Maybe I can find you those…” Tohru said desperately.

“It’s fine,” Kyo said, stealing a glance at Yuki. “I’ll manage.”

“Yuki, you really are a great teacher. You helped me so much every semester with exams,” she said cheerfully. “I won’t worry! You’re in good hands, Kyo.”

Yuki and Kyo exchanged another look with each other before Tohru stood up.

“Where are you going?” Kyo asked, his tone verging on panicked.

“I’m going to the grocery store. I may not be able to help you study, but I can at least make sure you don’t do it on an empty stomach! Do you want anything, Yuki?”

“Anything you cook is perfect, Ms. Honda.”

“Don’t leave! The… the leftovers from yesterday are fine!” Kyo argued, eyes watching her as she left.

“We don’t have enough if Yuki is staying for dinner,” Tohru called from the entrance as she grabbed her coat.

“He’s a freeloader, he can fend for himself!”
“I’ll be back soon!”

With that, the two listened as the door slid closed at the front. Kyo let out a big sigh, and Yuki chuckled in return.

“Are you that nervous around me?”

“No,” Kyo shot back. “She just doesn’t need to be doing useless things.”


“Hey, no, don’t do that.” Kyo pointed at him. “Not allowed.”

“Do what?” Yuki asked, innocently.

“That thing you do. That flirty thing,” Kyo said. “I’m trying to work here!”

“Oh, okay,” Yuki said, but he was still smiling. “I have no intention of distracting you.”

Kyo gave a mirthless laugh at that, still focusing on his work. He erased his answers and diligently filled them in again, one by one. How much was left after this? It was three weeks until the entrance exams. How much would he have to do every day for this to stick? This was just English. When were they going to cover math, science…

“You’re taking this really seriously, aren’t you?” Yuki said, instantly interrupting Kyo’s train of thought.

“Huh? Of course I am. What’re you trying to say?”


“It’s stupid,” Kyo muttered. “And besides, I’m just doing this for Shishou. There’s no way Akito’s even gonna let me do this. It’s all damn pointless.”

“You say that, but if you look at that worksheet any harder, it’ll combust,” Yuki said. “Is it so bad to want these sorts of things for yourself?”

“Alright, now you sound like Shishou,” Kyo said, looking up at Yuki in full now. “Get off my back. I’m tired of people pushin’ this on me.”

“How can you put this much effort into something and claim someone else is responsible for it?” Yuki questioned, sitting up straighter. “In any other situation, if someone implied that another person was responsible for any of your actions, you would snap at them.”

“Listen, I appreciate what you’re doing for me, but you don’t have to pretend like this is gonna go anywhere.”

“I’m not pretending. If Shi-han says he knows how to get you out of that cage, I believe him.”

“Well, don’t! This is hard enough as it is without people adding on any of their dumb expectations! What are you gonna do when I get locked up anyway?!?”

“I’m not going to let that happen!” Yuki slammed his hand down hard against the table, startling Kyo into silence. With the way Yuki was staring at his own hand, it seemed he was surprised at himself. Kyo swallowed down whatever was bubbling up in his throat.
“You can’t do anything,” Kyo said after a long moment, his voice frighteningly sober. “You of all people know that damn well.”

Yuki stared at him straight on, and it was too much for Kyo already. He knew that look. It hurt to even think about it when he shut his eyes. That focused, hardened gaze that was reserved completely for Kyo. Set on him with no falter and no hesitance.

“You can’t fool me, Kyo,” Yuki said, but his voice was so quiet. He must have moved closer to say it. “I know you want this.”

Yuki put his hand over Kyo’s, and Kyo looked at him with wide eyes.

Yuki rolled his eyes and shook his head. “I mean a future. I mean a life.”

Kyo felt petrified. He was almost certainly giving Yuki the look of trapped prey, trying to retreat to the farthest part of its cell. Yuki clutched his hand tighter, as if sensing he might run away.

“I want to help,” Yuki said, breathing against Kyo’s skin. He was close now. Really close. And Kyo watched it happen. Watched Yuki draw him in, watched Yuki lick his lips nervously as he kept his eyes on Kyo’s.

“I thought you weren’t gonna distract me,” Kyo said, but it came out as if chunks of his voice were missing. It was quiet, as if he were scraping his words across gravel.

“Can I ask you something?” Yuki’s lips were only inches away now. “Why did you let me kiss you that night?”

Kyo visibly tensed up, and the heavy weight in the room exposed itself. They hadn’t said a word about it since it happened, and Kyo knew Yuki had been waiting to bring it up.

Kyo’s throat went dry, unable to answer him. So Yuki tried again.

“Is the flirting really not allowed?”

Kyo swallowed. Yuki’s lips were right there. If he was being honest, the effect of their last kiss still hadn’t worn off. This wasn’t right. This was too overwhelming. Errant images were flashing in front of him to trick him and seduce him. These entrance exams… Yuki… If he let go, if he leaned in, what kind of idiot would that make him?

How much harder would it be when he was locked up?

Failing the entrance exams, or passing and getting locked up anyway—those were outcomes Kyo expected, and Kyo told Shishou to expect himself time after time.

But Yuki… This fucking persistent rat never changed the way he looked at Kyo.

If he leaned in, he might as well rip out his own heart, and squeeze it until it popped. That’s how useless the heartbreak would be.

Kyo pinched his eyes shut, blocking out Yuki’s expression. He leaned forward to press his forehead against Yuki’s, his lips out of reach.

He needed to collect himself. He needed… He wanted… Yuki was so warm. Just for a second. Even if it wasn’t in the way they could have it.

“It’s not allowed,” Kyo reaffirmed, before forcing out the words: “Don’t kiss me ever again.”
Kyo dragged his hand back out from under Yuki’s and finally pulled himself away, looking down at his worksheets again but not really seeing them. He waited. Waited for Yuki to storm out. Waited for him to yell, and curse, and punch him. Like that autumn night, when Yuki threw his fist hard and fast at Kyo with that crazed look in his eye.

God, he hoped he would. That would make all of this so much easier. He braced himself for as much when Yuki opened his mouth to say—

“‘I forgot my wallet!’ Tohru cried suddenly from the other room.

The two of them leapt apart, as if having to rip the air they were breathing away from the other. Back to where their original spots at adjacent corners, looking down at their materials as Tohru padded through the living room, into the kitchen, and back out with her purse.

“Silly me! I’m off!” she called, not sparing them another glance.

“Be safe,” Yuki called after her.

The door shut again, and the two were left there alone once more.

Yuki cleared his throat. “Once you’re done with that, let’s do the rest of the worksheets in the chapter. Then maybe we can move on to science.”

Kyo looked up at him; the words were dead on his tongue, so instead he just nodded.

A few moments later, the silence was broken by Yuki’s smooth, quiet voice. “I won’t try and kiss you again.”

Kyo pulled his head up to look at Yuki dead in the eye. “I’m sorry for ever making you think that was all I needed from you,” Yuki added.

Kyo felt an overwhelming urge to yell at him in that moment. He didn’t know what, just as long as they were words, and as long as they were at Yuki. He opened his mouth to see what would come out, but nothing did.

“Let’s keep studying, okay?” Yuki prompted, and Kyo brought his head down to his worksheet.

His skin prickled, an unnatural irritation flaring under his skin. Even though this is what he asked for. Even though he was sure this is what he wanted.

So why did it feel like he was being given up on instead?

And why did that hurt so badly?

———————————

“Your stupid medication isn’t working,” Akito said, his hand reaching up to cover his eyes and block out the light of the room. Sprawled out over his futon, he reached out with his other arm, beckoning Hatori to give him another shot.

“Be patient. It’ll start to work in about 30 minutes,” Hatori said calmly.

“I don’t want to wait 30 minutes! I called you here so that I could get rid of this stupid headache now!”

“Stay in bed. The rest of your body needs to recover, as well,” Hatori said.
“Where else would I go, hm? My brain feels like it’s pulsing blood and my idiot doctor can only give me faulty medicine! If you’re this terrible at your job, you should be out there serving at some terrible run-down clinic on the outside. Not acting all high and mighty in here.”

“I promise it will work. Just give it some time.”

Akito groaned at the response, retracting his hand.

“Do you want me to stay for awhile longer?” Hatori asked.

“Fuck you,” Akito bemoaned into a pillow.

“Alright, then I’ll be leaving.” Hatori stood, only for his pant leg to be caught between Akito’s fingers. With a sigh, he sat back down.

“Stay with me until the pain goes away. That way I can know for sure you’ve done your job properly,” Akito mumbled quietly. Hatori didn’t say anything; instead, he just watched as Akito stood and hobbled towards a crystal jug of water that he kept in the room.

“Kureno!” Akito cried out. No answer. Akito stomped his foot on the ground. “KURENO!”

The door slid open, and a young, panicked-looking maid was sure to bow deeply before entering.

“Master Kureno is dealing with something at the moment,” she said in a skittish tone. Hatori wondered who she must have crossed to be on call for a sick Akito. “C-Can I help you with anything, Master Akito?”

“Yes. You can get Kureno from whatever he’s doing. Right now. And while you’re at it, fix the heat in this room. I can feel my skin start to boil.”

“I will! The temperature I can fix, right away, of course. B-But… Master Akito, Master Kureno is… I don’t think…”

“Are you simple? Have your ears fallen off? Did I ask you for excuses? Get. Kureno. Now. Or I will demand your presence back here, I will take the scissors in my boudoir, and I will cut your uniform to shreds for you to walk around in!”

The maid bowed low to the ground immediately before leaving in a frightened hurry. Akito downed the water and let out a frustrated howl.

“There was no need to treat her like that,” Hatori admonished.

“Don’t start with me Hatori! I’m not in the mood!”

Akito went to pour himself another glass when three loud, arguing voices could be heard approaching the door. The noise began to grate on Akito’s ears, and he took another drink before slamming it back down.

“What the hell is going on?!” Akito turned around and yelled into the room at nobody in particular. As if on cue, the door slammed open to reveal Kazuma, an angry expression on his face, along with Kureno, who pulled back futilely on Kazuma’s traditional robe. The skittish maid was not far behind.

“Akito!” Kazuma called in a booming voice.

“Akito isn’t seeing anyone today!” Kureno called back, trying to take hold of Kazuma’s wrist only for the other man to snatch it away.
“Who are you barge into my room like this! Who do you think you are?!”

“I have been trying to meet with you for a week! I want to know what the meaning of this is!” Kazuma held up a formal letter with Akito’s signature.

As if Akito were suddenly healed of his ailment, his posture straightened and his expression cleared. “Can’t you read? Don’t you teach that in your idiot school for monsters? It’s an eviction notice!”

“You can’t evict me from my own dojo,” Kazuma cried, his voice authoritative and firm. “I’m not falling for your scare tactics!”

“Scare tactics? There have been no scare tactics here! I warned you what would happen if you signed that monster up for those exams, and you went and disobeyed me anyway! You threatened me.”

“This is a petty move from a petty man,” Kazuma said through his teeth. “The dojo isn’t even in your name.”

“It’s on Sohma property. It belonged to the Sohma family generations before you signed your insignificant name onto it! You bought that dojo with zodiac money from your grandfather’s passing—don’t think I don’t know. Every inch of that dojo belongs to me.”

“So what? You won’t evict us if I let Kyo get locked up without a fight?!”

“Is that surprising? That’s what I told you two months ago. Whatever started you on this delusional path is your own doing.”

“Akito!” Kazuma stepped forward, only to have Kureno block his path, grabbing both of Kazuma’s arms to force him back.

“You have to leave,” Kureno insisted.

“You have to leave,” Kureno insisted.

“Do not make me use my teachings on you, Kureno,” Kazuma warned. “Let me go.”

“I can’t. I don’t know what you’ll do,” he replied.

Hatori watched in silence from the side, keeping a careful eye on Kazuma.

“I can tell you what I’ll do,” Kazuma spat, looking Akito right in the eye, as if Kureno wasn’t even an obstruction. “I’ll leave the dojo. I’ll give it to you. All of it. I’ll teach my classes out of an apartment if I have to. Because there is nothing you could offer me that I would trade for my son’s freedom!”

Akito rolled his eyes, shaking his head back and forth at each word of Kazuma’s speech.

“He’s smart and kind and deserving boy. I will never see him locked up in the name of your sick fairy tale.”

“My sick fairy tale? Is that what you think the curse is? Some sort of tea party for lost animals?” Akito gave a sharp laugh, taking deliberate strides towards Kazuma. “You don’t understand anything about this life, do you?”

“As much as you understand about human decency,” Kazuma shot back.

Instead of revealing the rage flickering inside himself, Akito smiled. Suddenly, he grabbed Kazuma by the neck and dug his long nails into the skin there. Kazuma barely winced.
“Alright, fine. I have a new deal for you then,” Akito sang, his voice dark and wicked. Kureno and Hatori shared a glance for a brief moment before looking between the two. “Kyo can take his entrance exams. And you can keep your precious dojo.”

Kazuma steeled himself for what came next.

“Only, however, if the monstrosity is man enough to ask me himself.”

With his other hand, Akito reached for the letter trapped tightly in Kazuma’s fist. Without breaking eye contact, he ripped it in half.

“See? Aren’t I a generous god?” Akito maintained his smile, but every sound was like a snarl.

“You’re underestimating him,” Kazuma said in an even tone.

“That’s what you get for underestimating me.” The last word was punctuated by Akito’s nails slicing out of Kazuma’s skin. Red marks were left behind, one beginning to blossom the tiniest bit of blood.

“Fine. Kyo will. He’ll tell you exactly how his future will proceed.”

Akito smiled. “I’m very much looking forward to it.”

The dinner was delicious as always,” Yuki said. His back was to Tohru, and she watched him put on his shoes with a sense of hollow pleasantries following him around like a ghost. It had been like that for the rest of the night, Tohru noted.

“I’ve been thinking that I want to learn how to cook, too,” he continued. “Ms. Kuramae has been giving me pointers, but maybe once these entrance exams are over, you could give me some lessons. If you wouldn’t mind, I mean. I would appreciate it.”

Tohru didn’t respond, shuffling in place with a downtrodden yet nervous energy as she watched Yuki gear up to leave. It still felt so strange having to send him off at the end of the day. And… there was just something that Tohru couldn’t get off her mind.

As if sensing her trouble, Yuki finally turned to face her. “Ms. Honda? Are you okay?”

Tohru finally turned her eye up to look at him, anxiety detectable in each word as she forced out a meek, “Are you coming back?”

Yuki gave her a confused look, “I thought so. I can usually come Thursdays. But if I shouldn’t—”

“No!” Tohru interrupted. “I want you to come back. I just…”

Yuki stared up at her from where he stood in the foyer. Still in her socks, she played with the ends of her braid.

“I didn’t forget my wallet,” Tohru said, softly. “I’m sorry.”

“What?” Yuki asked. His polite smile remained, but Tohru could see his shoulders stiffen.

“I heard you two talking,” Tohru said, and she swallowed. “I didn’t mean… Well I did… I…”

Tohru took in calming breath, trying to avoid the way Yuki was staring at her with such wide and paralyzed eyes.
“What Kyo said… I just thought—I wasn’t sure if you would go away again.”

A long, pregnant silence filled the space between them. Yuki looked pale—looked as if he didn’t know what to say. The cold air was seeping into the entryway, and they both gave a small shiver.

“I never really apologized to you, did I?” Yuki finally said. Their eyes met then, and Yuki looked as if he were peeking over a high, impenetrable wall. His expression was open and vulnerable. To Tohru, it felt as though Yuki was finally in the same room, finally in the same time, finally in the same life—all from one sheepish yet honest look.

Tohru felt her lips tug into a small smile as she shook her head. “You haven’t.”

Yuki smiled back. “I’m so sorry for how I acted, Ms. Honda. I’m sorry for not saying anything, and for pushing you away.” He took another deep breath. “I care for you very much, but I haven’t acted like it at all.”

Tohru let out a small shaky breath and nodded.

“I wish I could tell you… everything. I want to. But…” Yuki deflated, his eyes turning somber. “I don’t think I should be the one to say anything. I think… he needs you more.”

Eyes welled up in Tohru’s eyes at Yuki’s soft-spoken words.

“Are you upset? At… us?” Yuki asked, unable to look Tohru in the eye.

“Of course not,” Tohru said quickly.

Yuki smiled. “Good. Please don’t think differently of him, Ms. Honda. All I can say is that it’s one-sided.”

Tohru swallowed a lump in her throat, stepping down from the wooded floor onto cold stone so that she was level with him. She couldn’t embrace him, though her arms so badly wished to wrap around him, to comfort in the way that had always helped her in the past. The way her mother would embrace people as if lightly tugging them out of their darkest thoughts, giving them solace and rest in her arms—as if bringing them to a different world altogether.

Tohru wanted to give that to Yuki so badly, and it ached in every bone that she couldn’t. So instead she reached for his hands and squeezed them tight, cold fingers meeting cold fingers, and she smiled up at him.

“It means a lot that you’re here. To both of us. I can tell,” she said, her eyes bright.

Yuki squeezed back, forcing a smile onto his face. “Thank you for saying that.”

They stood like that for a moment, Yuki resting his forehead briefly on Tohru’s before he pulled away.

“I’ll be here tomorrow. I promise.”

Tohru closed the door behind Yuki’s retreating form and sighed. The downstairs was cold again, and empty. Deciding quickly, she shuffled upstairs and knocked on Kyo’s door. When there was no answer, she went to her own room and pulled on her warmest pull-over before heading to the balcony and climbing the ladder to the roof.

Sure enough, Kyo was there. Sitting in the biting chill as if it had no effect on him. It was dark out,
but the moon illuminated enough to see, along with the downstairs balcony light throwing the faintest, warmest light upwards—enough to guide Tohru’s path as she walked towards Kyo and sat down next to him.

She tucked her knees under her chin in a brief attempt to keep them warm, and enjoyed the moment next to her friend. Even though the peace was disrupted by the turmoil rolling off Kyo in anxious waves, it had been a long time since they had enjoyed each other’s company on the roof.

“He’ll be back,” Tohru said in a cautiously cheerful tone. “He said he would.”

“What do I care?” Kyo’s response sounded plain and automatic.

“You don’t?” Tohru asked, prodding. “It’s okay if you do.”

Kyo leapt up, immediately taking a large step over Tohru and heading back towards the ladder to head back down.

“Where are you going?” Tohru asked. In a panic, she reflexively shot her hand out to grab at his pant leg. Kyo’s balance faltered for a moment, but his swift reflexes caught him, and he turned around with burning eyes.

“What the hell, Tohru?! You tryin’ to knock me off the roof?!”

“No, I’m trying to talk to you!” Tohru pleaded.

“I don’t want to talk! I don’t want to hear whatever bullshit he told you! I’m sick of thinking about this all the fucking time!”

“He didn’t tell me anything!” Tohru said, standing—ready to follow him if he fled. “He said if I wanted to know anything, I should talk to you.”

“What a real fuckin’ peach he is, then,” Kyo snarled. “Well, I got nothing to say.”

“I don’t believe you!”

“That’s not my problem,” Kyo shouted as he resumed walking towards the ladder.

“I saw him go into your room!” Tohru shouted back, desperately. Kyo stopped at the edge of the roof, keeping his back to Tohru. It always seemed to be that way now. Their backs to her, and her shouting after them.

No, this time it was different. She had stayed quiet for so long, she’d forgotten what it meant to use her voice—to fight to keep someone in her life.

“A few months ago, I saw him… And today… I lied about going to the supermarket. I listened to you two talking.” The idea of whatever expression Kyo was making that she couldn’t see had her crystallized in anxious terror, but she kept speaking anyway. “When I told Yuki, he said… he said it was one-sided. And that I shouldn’t think of you any differently.”

Tohru could see his shoulders’ exaggerated movements with the inhale and exhale of each breath.

“I want you to know that I would never think of you differently. Never!” Tohru asserted. “You’re my be—best friend. I want to support y—you. I want to help. I don’t want to leave and be forgotten by everybody.” Tohru’s tears were falling down her cheeks now, and she couldn’t stop them.

Kyo finally turned around to look at her, his facial features looking panicked and far less angry than
she expected. And so much more broken.

“I would never fucking forget you,” Kyo said. “Don’t ever say something that stupid ever again.”

“Then why won’t you talk to me? I promise to listen,” Tohru choked out. “I just want to help.”

With very hesitant steps, Kyo walked slowly back towards her, his expression like a frightened animal, but still laced with concern and hurt for his crying friend. Finally, unsure how to approach her, he laid a tired forehead on her shoulder.

“I don’t know how to talk about any of this.”

Kyo’s voice cracked ever so slightly, and it was enough to spur Tohru to wrap her arms around him. A puff of smoke erupted, and a cat with chilled, orange fur was instantly pressed against her.

——

Tohru sat with her back against Kyo’s door, cracked open halfway. She could hear his paws roaming around the room until they settled on the other side of the door. Though Kyo’s lights were turned off, the light from the hallway felt like they were in a completely different world from the darkened realm outside on the roof, and Tohru was pleased to be somewhere warmer.

She could feel the slight weight of a cat press against the other side of the shoji door, and finally, after a long moment, Kyo sighed.

After a long enough silence passed, Tohru spoke. “If there’s something between you and Yuki—”

“I can’t talk about Yuki.”

“But—”

“Look, I could deal with him being a son of a bitch. I could deal with him throwing a fucking tantrum and acting like a piece of shit. It makes it easier to want to beat the hell out of him. Which I still want to do,” Kyo growled. “I can’t deal with whatever Yuki is right now. The things he says…and does. It freaks me out. It’s like he’s trying to make himself impossible to hate.”

“Is… that so bad?”

“Yes,” Kyo said immediately.

There was a sudden ethereal pop, and a puff of smoke spilled from the opening in the door. Tohru kept her back against it in the hallway as she heard Kyo rummage around his room and get dressed. Finally, he sat with his back against Tohru, the wall still keeping them separated.

“I don’t need to be more confused than I already fucking am.”

“Do you… do want him to stop coming? To stop helping you study?”

A long moment of silence fell between them. Tohru could hear nothing but the buzz from the hallway light, and a sigh from the other side of the door. Now that Kyo was in his human form, Tohru could feel the way the shoji doors became pregnant with his resting head. How it laid there, defeated.

“No. I don’t want that.”

Tohru smiled softly to herself.
“Maybe you don’t need to understand everything right away. Maybe with time—”

“What time? That’s the thing,” Kyo protested. “Everyone keeps filling my head, trying to tell me this isn’t going to happen. But it is. I’m getting locked up in two months. I don’t have fucking time. And I’m not like Yuki who can have a…a-a fucking fist fight with his zodiac and beat it down, or whatever.”

Tohru’s eyebrows scrunched at that.

“This… thing in me… isn’t going away. Ever.”

Tohru turned herself around to face the door, sitting on her knees. Listening carefully, even as her heart broke.

“There’s no point in me taking this stupid test. It’s…” Kyo cleared his throat. “It’s better if I’m put away.”

“You can’t say that!” Tohru called back, suddenly sliding the door all the way open, which caused Kyo to fall on his back on the floor with a yelp.

“Fuck, Tohru, warn a guy!”

“You can’t think something like that!”

“Why not?!” Kyo yelled back, anger seeping into his voice as he stared up at her from the ground. “Do you remember what happened when I transformed last time?”

“Yes, but—”

“I shredded your shoulder. I beat the shit out of Yuki. I was going to kill you both!”

“No, you weren’t,” Tohru said sternly. Kyo opened his mouth, but Tohru cut him off. “That’s the silliest thing you’ve ever said.”

“You don’t know what it’s like to have this thing inside you!” Kyo said, finally sitting up to face Tohru. They were still in separate rooms—Tohru in the hallway, Kyo in his own room. But now the door was wide open, and the light from the hallway illuminated Kyo. “If people wanna ask me what the fuck is going they have to realize that—that I am scared shitless of what’s inside me. Don’t say I’m not gonna hurt you. Don’t say I’m not gonna hurt someone else. ‘Cause I can’t know that, because that’s a whole part of my body that I can’t control!”

“But you did control it!” Tohru countered, not faltering. “Don’t you remember? You fought back. And you didn’t kill us, because I know you would never let that happen. Not with us, not with anyone.”

“What if that doesn’t happen next time? What if I don’t change back?”

“So your only other option is locking yourself away?! You won’t even try and fight for yourself?! You can’t do that!”

“Why not?!?”

“Because too many people love you!” Tohru shot back with narrowed, angry eyes.

Kyo blinked, taken aback by Tohru’s sudden, determined anger, and by how her hands curled into fists. Tohru watched as Kyo cycled through a storm of emotions, finally rubbing his hands
over his face in resignation.

“Alright, I get it. Stop making that face,” Kyo said. “I don’t know what to do with you when you’re mad.”

“I am mad,” Tohru reaffirmed.

Kyo sighed. “I’m sorry, okay?” he relented.

Tohru’s face softened ever so slightly and she felt a sigh seep out of her. “A lot of people are working really hard to make sure things change for the better. Don’t you think it’s better to join them than to decide that you’re not worth anything at all? After everything Kazuma’s done? And Yuki? And me?”

Tohru thought back to the Mondays she would go back to Rin’s hospital room, staying for hours and pouring over books, listening to Rin fight and scratch and claw from a weakened form on a hospital bed.

How every day she would go with the goal of breaking the curse, of shattering that cage.

Of having her family reunited without such a horrible, dark cloud casting over each shared interaction.

“It hurts to see you give up,” Tohru said, meeting Kyo’s eyes and speaking evenly. “I’ll be even madder if you do.”

Kyo matched her gaze until finally, he hung his head low.

“Tohru… I get it. But I don’t know where I would even start.”

Tohru reached forward to place a hand on his shoulder. “Taking the entrance exams is a start.”

“But—”

“It’s just a start. You can take things piece by piece from there.”

Kyo sighed, but finally rolled his eyes and mumbled, “Whatever, I guess.”

Tohru smiled. Kyo let out a teasing huff. “You know, you said you would listen, but instead you just got pissed at me.”

“Maybe it was your turn for someone to be mad at you,” Tohru said, still smiling as she punched a fist into her opposite hand. “Next time I’ll challenge you to a fist fight.”

Kyo snorted and crossed his arms. “You’re goddamn ridiculous, Tohru. But if it’s gonna save me a beating, I’ll take the damn test. I already told Shishou I would anyway.”

“Good.” Tohru beamed. “Yuki will be really happy, too.”

Kyo averted his gaze, and as the conversation settled down, Tohru found that her thoughts snagged on something Kyo had said.

“Kyo… can I ask you a question?”

“Hm?”
“What did you mean by Yuki having a… ‘fist fight’ with his zodiac?”

Kyo spread himself out into a more relaxed position on the floor. “I mean, you know how he collapsed on New Year’s?”

“He collapsed?!”

Kyo pinched the bridge of his nose. “God, that guy is the worst. Apparently, I gotta tell you everything.”

“What happened?!’”

“Apparently he pissed off his zodiac, and it tried to kill him.”

“What?!”

“I don’t know, that’s what he said. The only reason I believed him was ‘cause he was so smug about it when he told me. Only Yuki would act that high and mighty to some ghost rat.”

“Does that mean he fought back?”

“He’s still alive, isn’t he?” Kyo pushed himself up, clearly done talking about the subject, and made his way downstairs. His steps seemed lighter, and his shoulders didn’t slump as much under the heavy weight of his burden as they had these past few months. But Tohru barely noticed, falling into a distracted state. “I’ll make you some tea in exchange for gettin’ you angry. Deal?”

Tohru stared after him, eyebrows furrowed in deep thought. Not until Kyo called her name a second time did she snap herself out of it and head downstairs.

Tohru wasn’t able to shake off her distracted state for the rest of the night and on through the next morning. Words from her teachers passed right through her, and even the light morning conversation with Uo and Hana was half-hearted on her part.

Her eyes kept falling on Yuki throughout the day, which he must have noticed because he kept sending her confused smiles whenever their eyes met.

It was between classes that she gained some resolve, asking Uo if she could borrow her cell phone and quickly dialing a familiar number in the hallway. It rang three times before a hostile and wary “Hello?” came through on the other line.

“Kagura? It’s Tohru.”

The other girl’s tone lightened immediately. “Oh. Hi, Tohru! Sorry, I didn’t recognize your number. Don’t you have school today?”

“Can you get me on Rin’s list today? Please?”

“Tohru… I think you’re really sweet to want to check in on her, but I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“Please. I really need to talk to her about something. It’s important.”

Kagura sighed. “This is probably the last time, okay?”
Tohru took in a deep breath. “Okay.”

Yuki looked up when a shadow fell over his desk. A smile broke out on his face when Tohru stared down at him, even though she had been acting rather strangely all morning.

“Everything alright, Ms. Honda?”

“I told Kyo you couldn’t come over today,” Tohru said suddenly. Yuki felt his brows crease, but Tohru continued before he could say anything else. “Can you come somewhere with me today?”

“I… guess?” Yuki replied, his head tilted in confusion.

“Good. Meet me by the gate after the last class, okay?”

And with that she went back to her desk to join her friends, moments before their next class began. He glanced forward to see Kyo looking back him, but when he gave him a questioning look, Kyo only offered a shrug.

They walked in silence together, side-by-side. The train ride had been silent, as well—other than Yuki expressing concern that it might be too crowded for him to board, and Tohru assuring him that she knew the line well enough for it to be manageable. And it was, even if Tohru stood protectively in front of him at their stop, making sure they were able to exit without incident as other commuters rushed into the train car impatiently.

They were in a neighborhood Yuki didn’t recognize. The buildings were tall and corporate, and the street was wider than the residential roads that lead to Shigure and Ayame’s house.

Men in plain, black business suits talked on their cell phones as they walked through the streets, and women in modest pencil skirts and taut hairdos did the same.

They had been walking for ten minutes when Yuki finally turned to Tohru to break the silence.

“Can I ask where we’re going?” And it somewhat amazed Yuki that his trust for Tohru ran so deep that he only thought to ask this question now—almost an hour into their journey.

Tohru spared him a glance, a mixed look of nerves and determination on her face.

“I talked to Kyo last night,” Tohru started.

“Oh?” Yuki asked, a lump of nerves in his throat.

“He told me he doesn't want you to stop tutoring him,” she said with a smile directed his way. Yuki felt something warm bloom in his chest before returning his focus to the matter at hand.

“That doesn’t really answer my question.”

“Did you tell Kyo that your spirit tried to kill you?”

Yuki blinked. “Why would he—”

“Did you?”
“Yes… It’s kind of a complicated story.”

“He said you collapsed on New Years’ Eve,” Tohru continued.

“I’m fine now. I promise,” Yuki quickly assured. “It’s really nothing to worry about.”

Tohru’s steps finally slowed, and the two stood at the gateway of a large hospital. At first, Yuki was sure that Tohru was stopping to tell him something. But when she faced the building with a look of resolve on her face, Yuki realized that this was their destination.

“I promise I don’t need to go to the hospital,” Yuki said, confused.

Tohru finally turned to face him. “Rin’s in there.”

Yuki’s eyes widened. “What?”

Tohru nodded. “She’s been in this hospital for the past few months. I used to visit her every week until… until she told me not to come anymore.”

“Ms. Honda… you really aren’t making much sense. You’ve known where Rin is all this time? Why didn’t you tell anyone? Me? Or Haru?”

“I promised I wouldn’t tell anyone,” Tohru said. “She doesn’t know I’m bringing you here. But I think it’s really important that you talk to her.”

“Why?”

Tohru swallowed. “Rin and I used to meet every month to try and figure out how to break the curse.”

Yuki blinked at his friend, not yet fully processing the information.

“When we reached a dead end, Rin started getting frustrated. I think she didn’t want me spending any more time on it. So she told me to stop coming.”

“So why did you bring me?” Yuki asked, feeling his nerves build with every second. “You’re still not making much sense.”

“Don’t you think it’s incredible that you were able to fight your zodiac spirit? Kyo did something similar when he transformed, too… Maybe… Maybe it could lead to breaking the curse. Maybe the solution is a lot closer than any of us thought.”

Yuki felt his body swell with confusion, with apprehension, with hope, with anxiety—all at once. His eyes darted around as if scanning the area for anyone who could be listening in on their conversation—as if he was planning out an escape route. And immediately, he recognized an inhuman reflex within him that simmered with anger and disbelief.

A reflex that was so much quieter now than it used to be. Yuki realized that, but he supposed he had never really thought much more than that.

He blinked. Trying to process everything Tohru was saying outside without letting the rat’s thoughts muddle his own.

“Why Rin?” Yuki asked. “Why bring me to her?”

“Because she’s the only one who’s been trying.”
Yuki knew deep in his gut that that must be true. He thought of how even Haru flinched from the curse, even if his heart was still broken and maimed from Rin’s absence.

A sense of duty filled him at the thought of his close friend.

“Will you come in with me?” Tohru asked him.

Yuki glanced at her before letting out an anxious sigh. “I guess we’re already here.”

It was somewhat amazing to Yuki how Tohru navigated through the hospital with such ease. She was familiar with the corridors and hallways, and even got a familiar smile from the receptionist.

Tohru explained to him that despite her call with Kagura that morning, her name would most likely not have been restored on the list of approved visitors, and that they might have to wait for Kagura to arrive. Or Yuki might have to go in alone, seeing as he was at least a relative.

So they both shared a surprised look when the receptionist told them to go on ahead.

“Really? I can go in?” Tohru asked, somewhat slack-jawed.

“Ms. Tohru Honda, right? You were added to the list a couple of days ago.”

“A couple days ago?” Tohru parroted, confused. “I thought…”

Yuki felt himself smile and rested a hang on her shoulder. “I don’t think it’s possible for anyone to keep someone like you away for long.”

Tohru returned the smile. “Thank you!” she chirped to the receptionist. She lead Yuki down the hallway, a lively bounce in her step now.

Which abruptly stopped when they were right outside her hospital room.

“She’s going to be so mad when she sees I brought you,” Tohru said, her face turning a little pale. “I’ll be kicked out for sure.”

“Are you sure you want me to go in? We don’t have to do this, Ms. Honda.”

“No,” Tohru said, resolutely. “She should hear what happened to you.”

Yuki shifted on his feet a bit as Tohru knocked on the door without another beat of hesitation. A soft “Come in” could be heard through the door. Tohru looked to Yuki, took a deep and confident breath, and opened the door to let them both in.

Rin was standing by the window, and Yuki immediately noticed how pale and thin she looked. Her hair was still long, and it didn’t look like she had made much of an effort to keep it out of her face. In all honesty, she looked like something out of a ghost story.

When she turned around, her eyes instantly locked with Yuki’s in a harsh, icy stare, and Yuki immediately felt the urge to flee. He had forgotten how nervous she made him, how intense her demeanor was.
It had been a while, but seeing her again reminded Yuki of just how formidable of a force she was. Her eyes, her posture, and her movements all held a power that made Yuki feel small and nervous. And even while she was visibly weakened by an illness, Yuki could feel the intensity of her aura as though it swirled relentlessly around her.

“What is he doing here?” Rin snapped.

“I brought him here,” Tohru said, stepping in front of Yuki as if to protect him. “I think he can help!”

“What was the one thing I asked you to do when Kagura started bringing you here, huh?! I said not to tell anybody!”

“I know, but—!”

“And you don’t just bring anybody, you bring Akito’s little darling child?!”

“He’s not—”

“Rin. Calm down,” Yuki said, stepping forward and trying to hide his irritation. “I’m not going to tell Akito you’re here. I won’t even tell Haru.”

Rin’s eyes stayed narrowed and suspicious, but her shoulders seemed to relax slightly.

“I knew I shouldn’t have put you back on my list,” Rin hissed at Tohru.

“He has something to tell you,” Tohru said adamantly. “Please listen to him.”

“I don’t want to hear a word out of this guy!” Rin said, pointing a long finger right at Yuki. “Do you know where he stands in this curse? As God’s right-hand lackey? The one who is most obedient? Most manipulative?”

Yuki flinched at the description, but narrowed his eyes at her.

“All the more reason you need to hear me out,” he asserted. He looked over at Tohru and could tell that she was starting to falter; her guilty eyes avoided looking at Rin as if Tohru were a scolded dog.

“I don’t need to do anything. And I especially don’t need to hear what a rat has to say,” Rin snarled.

Yuki clenched his fists. “If you want to break this curse, you have to stop seeing me, or anyone else, as an animal.”

Rin’s eyes narrowed, arms crossing across her chest before she finally sat down at the edge of her bed. “You have five minutes to prove me wrong, then.”

Yuki gave a quick sigh of relief before exchanging a glance with Tohru. He approached Rin carefully—as most people did with Rin—and sat at the chair pulled up next to her bed. He looked at her for a moment. Pale skin on white sheets against a blasting sun from large windows that devoured the wall. His back was to the door, but he could hear Tohru resting against the wall there, stepping back to let Yuki speak.

To let Yuki speak about something that could potentially… break the curse.

It didn’t seem real. This whole ongoing battle with his zodiac spirit felt so personal, and so futile at times. The idea of it turning out to be something so much bigger than he could imagine…

Yuki steeled himself.
“I’ve been having strange interactions with my zodiac spirit,” Yuki began. He kept himself firm and calm under Rin’s scrutinizing gaze. “At first, it was small. Coughing fits every once in a while. Feeling tired. Not having an appetite. Things that felt… normal. I just thought being sick was normal for me.”

Yuki met Rin’s eyes. She shifted at that last sentence, probably hearing something hitting close to home, Yuki thought, if her history with hospitals was anything to go by.

“The curse makes you sick. So what? I know that already.” Rin spread her arms out, indicating the room around her that served as example enough.

“I did things to irritate it, which made it worse. And I got really sick. I felt like my whole body was being controlled by some other force, as if it was trying to bully me into acting the way it wanted. And then…” Yuki sighed. Rin was listening now, he could tell, and he could feel Tohru’s eyes boring into the back of his skull.

“I made the spirit angry. Really angry. So it tried to kill me. I could tell that’s what it wanted to do. And when it realized it couldn’t, it wanted me to transform. It made me so sick so that I wouldn’t have an option, and it tried to make me weaker and weaker.”

“How?” Rin asked, eyes still narrowed.

“I don’t know. It triggered my asthma. Made me sick to my stomach, gave me a headache, I think it tried to mess with my mind, too. It kept telling me that things were wrong with my body that, looking back, couldn’t have been true. My ankle was sprained at the time, and the spirit inside me told me that the whole bone had shattered. It made me think that my foot could fall off.”

“That doesn’t make sense,” Rin argued. “You transform when you’re weak. It wouldn’t have had to do all that. I’ve seen your brother transform if he forgets to bring a jacket with him in the spring.”

“That’s the other thing. I stopped myself from transforming.”

He could hear Tohru shifting behind him, and he could see Rin’s eyes widen.

“I was at a good friend’s house when this happened, and I didn’t want her to find out. So I kept myself from transforming until I knew I was safe. And even though it hurt… very badly…” Yuki exhaled. “I did it… I was unconscious for four days after, but I did it. And since then, I feel like I have more control. I feel like I’ve won some kind of claim over my body.”

Rin looked as if she was still processing the story, doubtfully contemplating each word as if unable to believe any of it. “You stopped yourself from transforming?”

“Somehow,” Yuki said with a sheepish smile.

“If that’s true…” Rin said, her harsh edges faltering for just a moment before they reemerged in an instant. “There’s no way. That’s not possible. If there was a way to talk with our spirits like that, someone else would’ve noticed. I would’ve noticed.”

“It’s not something I chose,” Yuki defended, feeling uncomfortable already at having to explain himself. “Like I said, I made it angry. Maybe I forced its hand.”

“You made it angry?” Rin mocked. “And how did you do that?”

Yuki tensed. “I don’t think I should—”
“If you want me to stop thinking of you like a rat, then stop acting like one,” Rin said through her teeth.

Yuki shifted in his seat and sighed, his shoulders feeling stiff and his throat feeling dry.

“I’ll tell you. Under one condition.”

“What?” Rin asked flatly.

“You reach out to Haru,” Yuki said. Rin immediately bristled, but Yuki spoke before she had a chance to snap back. “He hasn’t stopped thinking about you once since you went missing. He only wants to help. And… and based what I have to tell you, I can promise you that breaking the curse singlehandedly will be an impossible task.”

Rin’s affronted expression was as harsh and sharp as the tip of a blade, but Yuki kept his gaze firm on her—almost threatening—until finally, Rin opened her mouth to speak.

“Only if what you have to say isn’t something completely idiotic.”

Yuki gave her a slight nod, before closing his eyes to collect himself. His head was buzzing and his nerves were acting up again.

So much so that he didn’t hear the small click coming from behind him.

“I fell in love with Kyo,” Yuki said.

“Yuki—” he could hear Tohru say from behind him, but he kept his eyes firmly on Rin.

“We were… involved with each other. Briefly. And it became one-sided. But I refused to stop. I refused to stop loving the cat.”

Rin’s eyes were wide, and Yuki felt a sickly guilt at even saying the words aloud, divulging a secret that Kyo clearly wanted to forget. But Yuki owed another deep and endless debt to Haru. One he was determined to repay.

If it didn’t leave this room, it was fine.

A thought that died as soon as Rin’s eyes locked on something behind Yuki. As soon as Yuki heard the sound of a door clicking closed.

When had it opened at all?

“You’re in love with Kyo?” said a voice that wasn’t Rin’s or Tohru’s. And when Yuki turned around, he was faced with the tearful, confused, and angry eyes of Kagura.

Yuki immediately stood, feeling every nerve in his body clench against veins of ice.

“Kagura—”

“You were involved? What does that mean?” Kagura asked, her eyes narrowing.

“Nothing! It’s not—!” Yuki stuttered, panic spilling into his voice.

“Kagura, please don’t tell anybody,” Tohru stepped in, eyes wide and pleading.

“You knew about this?!” Kagura shot an accusing glance at Tohru.
“Calm down,” Rin called from the bed. “You don’t have any right getting upset over a guy you never had.”

Kagura’s face crumpled with unfiltered anger, and without another word, she turned on her heel, threw the door open, and ran out of the room.

“Kagura!” Tohru called after her, immediately following her out the door.

Yuki felt frozen in place, panicked eyes landing on Rin. “Was that necessary?!”

“I wasn’t wrong,” Rin snarled. “You need to go get her. She gets stupid and irrational when she’s like that.”

Yuki spared one more tense glance at Rin before flying out the door, running down the hallway as carefully as possible to avoid bumping into anyone. He flew past the receptionist desk and out the front door. There, he caught up with Tohru, who was bent over with her hands resting on her knees, furiously trying to catch her breath.

“Which way did she go?!” Yuki cried.

Tohru shook her head, out of breath, mirroring his panicked look with one of her own.

Yuki rushed past the gate, looking one way and then the other. Even with the streets fairly empty, there was no sign of Kagura. And Yuki knew all too well how futile it was to try and outrun a boar.

“What do we do?” Tohru asked, breath still ragged as she stood next to Yuki.

He didn’t know.

Yuki stared out into the street, a crushing feeling settling into his stomach.

Chapter End Notes

In all of Kureno's scenes he was wearing this, but I just didn't mention it because it wasn't relevant to the story:

https://images.halloweencostumes.com/products/8009/1-1/adult-parrot-costume.jpg

(JOIN OUR YUKIKYO DISCORD: https://discord.gg/fqKWtB6)
Chapter Notes

No, your eyes do not deceive you. Yes, I really did update in a somewhat reasonable time frame. No, I can't believe it either.

OKAY A FEW THINGS BEFORE WE KICK THIS OFF.

First, I need to dedicate this chapter in its entirety to the lovely Crystal—who not only killed with with her edits again, but also just celebrated her birthday!! Though I have something else planned for you (that will probably take forever, who are we kidding), let me give a shout out to your birth and you being on this earth!

Second, I had a lot of conflicting sources for how the structure of entrance exams work in Japan. So it kind of ended up being a combination of the research I did/the SAT/what I remember from watching Azumanga Daioh when I was, like, fourteen. Forgive me.

Third, oh my GOD? This fic was featured on fucking SyFy????


I absolutely lost my shit when I saw this, so thank you to Kristina for featuring me and whatever other weird ass force of the universe allowed this to happen.

God, can you believe that the reboot comes out in less than 24 hours? I know, my timing is horrendous--my recommendation would be to ignore this and just eat up the premiere instead. But thank you again so much to everyone reading this. You fill up my heart with love.

Well, anyway... so many people to apologize to for this chapter... so little time to run....

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“You’ve all worked very hard to get to this point, and to say I’m proud of you would be an understatement. These next couple weeks won’t be easy. You’ll be stressed, you’ll be tired… honestly, you’ll probably feel like you want to die.”

“Isn’t this supposed to be a pep talk?”

“Yeah, Mayu—we’re not feeling too inspired right now!”

“My point is...” Mayu said with a smile, “that these feelings will pass. When you look back on these next couple of weeks, you won’t remember how tired you were, and you won’t remember how scared and anxious you were. All you’ll remember is whether or not you did your best. And from there, you’ll take your next step as young adults.

The next time we see each other will be for your graduation rehearsals. The exams will be over before you know it. So take the time you need to think about the future you want. Fight for that when you walk into your exam room. Understand me?”
A half-hearted “Yeah” filled the room, which made Mayu roll her eyes. She slapped her hand down on the podium.

“No way am I letting you leave this classroom with that kind of half-assed attitude. Again!”

“Yes, sensei!”

The giggles of the class were broken up by the sound of echoing chimes that signaled the end of the school day. The students took a moment to look around at each other. At the classroom. At the scuff marks left from their desks. At the bulletin board tacked with club announcements and forgotten student council campaign posters.

The chime rang again, but this time, it had nothing but silence to bully through.

Mayu smiled at her students.

“Class reps, why don’t you take us through it one more time,” Mayu said.

Yuki locked eyes with his fellow class representative—a girl with straight brown hair and glasses firmly perched on her face. She smiled at him, and he did his best to mirror the expression.

“Rise!” Yuki and the girl said in unison.

The sounds of chairs scuffing backwards filled the room.

“Bow!”

The students bent at the waist in front of their teacher, and when they rose again, Mayu’s arms were crossed. A firm, confident smile graced her lips.

“Dismissed,” she said.

The entrance exam was in one week.

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Yuki pressed the phone to his ear. He bit at the hangnail on his thumb nervously as the other line rang. Tohru stood in front of him, an equally concerned look on her face as they stood in the school hallway. They kept themselves against the far window, but it didn’t stop other students from giving them a wave as they walked down the hallway.

“Tohru! Wish me luck!” one of the girls from their class said as she rushed by, and Tohru gave back a strained yet cheerful wave.

“Hello, you’ve reached the Sohma household. Please—”

Yuki pressed ‘end’ on the call before immediately redialing.

“Maybe they’re not home,” Tohru tried.

“Someone has to answer the phone eventually,” Yuki insisted.
Ring… Ring… Rin—Click.

“Hello?”

Yuki’s shoulders slumped in relief, and Tohru mirrored the gesture before leaning in closer, trying to hear.

“Auntie? It’s Yuki. I was wondering—”

“Oh, Yuki! It’s so nice to hear from you! How are you? How’s exam season going?”

Yuki gave a stiff chuckle. “It’s been stressful, but I’m not too concerned.”

“Well, why would you be with a brain like yours?” Kagura’s mother chirped cheerfully on the other line. Rustling noises came through the phone. “You know your mother has been going on and on about the universities you’re applying for. It’s so exciting—your Auntie is wishing you luck!”

“Thank you…” Yuki said, keeping a sigh at bay. “But… I was wondering if Kagura is around? I really need to speak with her, and I think… well, her phone must have died.”

“I don’t know what I’m going to do with that girl,” Kagura’s mother groused. “She’s been staying out so late, she’s barely been around to give her own mother a hello.”

“Oh, really?”

“If I manage to catch her, I’ll be sure to let her know you called.”

“Thank you, Auntie. Please, if she could call me back as soon as possible. It’s really important.”

“Oh my, you sound so serious, Yuki. Everything alright?”

Yuki and Tohru locked eyes.

“Of course,” Yuki said, his tone defeated. “Thanks again, Auntie.”

“Bye, Yuki! And good luck!”

The line went dead, and Yuki snapped his phone shut a little too aggressively and pressed the phone against his forehead, which crinkled in aggravation.

“This is not good.”

“What did she say?”

“That Kagura hasn’t even been around the house.” Yuki sighed. “I can’t believe I was so stupid.”

“It’ll be okay, I’m sure! She just needs… she just needs to figure herself out. She wouldn’t do anything bad.”

Yuki shook his head, Tohru’s attempt to comfort him rolling off his tense, guarded shoulders. “I should text Rin again.”

“I asked Momiji to let me know if he sees her, too,” Tohru said, then quickly added, “I didn’t say why, though.”

Yuki nodded, a heavy exhale escaping him as he typed out a quick text on his phone and snapped it
shut again.

“There’s nothing we can do for now, okay?” Tohru assured him. “She’ll call back.”

Yuki gave her a relenting look before stuffing his phone back in his pocket. His body felt so tense, even moving his limbs felt like prying apart wood and nails.

“If she gets to Kyo before I can find her—” Yuki cut himself off, the mere thought making him sick. “I don’t want him worrying about anything other than the exam.”

“Kyo doesn’t have a phone,” Tohru offered. “And if she comes to the house, she’d see me there, too.”

“You’re right.” He sighed. “You’re right.”

Tohru gave him a soft smile, just barely containing her own concern. Yuki finally met her gaze, but was only able to exchange it with a tired grimace.

“What the hell are you two up to?”

Yuki’s spine immediately straightened at the rough voice. He turned, only to find Kyo with his head tilted and arms crossed.

“Nothing!” Yuki and Tohru both reflexively shouted in unison. Kyo arched an eyebrow.

“You look like you’re scheming something. I don’t know if I like it,” Kyo said. When Tohru and Yuki exchanged a glance, Kyo just rolled his eyes. “Are we going or what?”

Tohru was the first to let her expression melt, tension foaming off of her like cream soda as she followed Kyo and motioned for Yuki to follow.

“Ready to study?” Tohru chirped, as the three walked down the hall.

“Beats hanging around this place,” Kyo said. “Too many people keep trying to hug me.”

“It is the last day of school,” Yuki said, finally releasing his own tension. “Surprisingly, I do think people are going to miss you.”

Kyo let out an undignified snort, hands shoved deep in his pockets. “And how the hell are you still walking around on two feet? You’d think some girls would’ve tackled you down already.”

“Please don’t even joke about that.” Yuki paled, the idea of it not mixing well with his already nervous stomach.

“We should still stop by the classroom and say a proper goodbye!” Tohru said, her eyes bright. “I can’t believe the next time we see everyone will be at graduation.”

“Fine by me,” Kyo grumbled, but the two followed Tohru into the classroom anyway.

It had thinned out considerably. Most students lingered outside on the grounds, despite the chilly weather that February persistently brought. But still, a few stragglers remained, clumped into groups while chatting loudly, and laughing even louder.

A couple of girls in the corner had tears in their eyes as they were swarmed by friends, wrapping their arms around them. Yuki and Kyo stiffened, subconsciously hiding themselves behind Tohru—a habit developed back in their first year that none of them had ever even noticed.
“If it isn’t Tohru and the idiot twins,” Uo called from the other side of the room. Hana stood next to her, along with a couple of male classmates that leaned against the classroom windows.

“Aw, seein’ you three together is kinda nostalgic,” one of the boys piped up.

“Yeah, life isn’t gonna be the same without seeing the weirdo trio,” the other said with a laugh.

“A title so rudely taken,” Hana said with a dramatic sigh.

“You want to be called that?” Kyo asked, an aggressive edge in his voice. Uo cackled in response along with the other two boys. Out of the corner of his eye, Yuki could see Tohru beam a bit brighter.

“Listen, a bunch of us are meeting up to celebrate. You guys coming?”

“Is Kyota going? Because I demand a rematch,” Uo said, pounding her fist on the desk.

“He better. Not like he has anything to study for, that son of a bitch!” one of the boys countered, his voice spiked with irritation despite his smile.

“Shouldn’t we be celebrating after the exams are over?” Yuki questioned.

“I think we were planning on studying again tonight…” Tohru added.

“There’s still a whole week to study! At this point, you know what you know, right?” Yuki eyed Kyo at the comment, noting how his jawline hardened.

“Yeah, you three, live a little!” Uo said, elbowing Kyo in the stomach. “Even if it sure is a blast seeing carrot-boy here be all serious.”

Kyo rubbed his stomach where Uo had landed her elbow a bit too harshly. “I’m always serious!”

Yuki couldn’t help but let a grin stretch over his face, faint as it was. Though their classmates laughed, it was true. Kyo was always serious. Yuki had become very well-acquainted with the furrow in Kyo’s brow over these past few weeks. At how his eyes would lock into a focus so fierce, it was like chipping at a block of thickened ice whenever he was forced to react to something outside of his studies.

A realization came over Yuki just as it had in front of the flower shop nearby his new home—that there was a whole other part of his life that he had been neglecting. A world not controlled, not even touched by the Sohmas or the zodiac.

His life here at school.

His classmates, his teachers, his friends, his notebook now pregnant with pen ink. For the first time in a while, Yuki’s mind wandered to the student council, and to his memories that lived in each and every classroom in this school.

Maybe today should be about that world instead, he thought.

“We should go,” Yuki suggested. Tohru and Kyo both looked to him, while the boys whooped in place. “He’s right. Y—we’ve studied hard. We should spend time with the class.”

Tohru’s eyes immediately lit up, a smile gliding easily on her face as she whipped her head over to look at Kyo. Yuki had to hide a laugh when the force of Tohru’s expression forced Kyo to take a
half-step backward.

“I don’t give a shit, sure,” Kyo said, his hands up as if to defend himself against Tohru’s optimism.

“We’ll go!” Tohru said brightly. Uo and Hana both smiled good-naturedly at them.

“Awesome! Meet us at the station in an hour, then,” one of the boys chirped before another classmate stole the group’s attention away. “We’ll see you guys there!”

And with that, the five friends were left alone as they circled together. Arisa leaned back in her desk chair, while Hana loomed beside her. Meanwhile, Tohru stood straight and strong in front of Yuki and Kyo.

Really, it felt like any other day.

——

From the school, the station was a twenty-minute walk away. After making conversation with a few more classmates, the five of them wrapped themselves in their jackets, sweaters, and scarves, and took the chilly path down together.

Although the brisk winds still enveloped them, the sun burned off the clouds, leaving a bright, clear, blue sky—almost like an omen for the upcoming spring weather that would soon warm the Tokyo concrete.

They stopped at a café on the way, Hana announcing that she wanted something sweet to eat while Uo complained that her fingers were getting cold. It was too crowded inside, so Yuki and Kyo opted to wait for the girls outside.

They stood across the street in easy silence. Yuki’s head naturally tilted towards the sun, loving the feeling of warmth biting through the cool air, while Kyo tapped his foot against the sidewalk rail with light, mindless kicks.

“I shouldn’t do this,” Kyo finally spoke up, drawing Yuki’s attention. “I gotta study.”

“Don’t you think you deserve a break?”

“Yeah, after all this shit is over with,” Kyo grumbled.

With a smile, Yuki brought his foot up, blocking Kyo from his nervous tapping against the metal railing. He gently settled Kyo’s leg back down with his own.

Kyo’s shoulders slumped, but he brought his annoyed expression up to meet Yuki’s eyes.

“Consider this a different kind of studying,” Yuki said. “Like Ms. Shiraki said. Time to study for what comes after.”

Kyo rolled his eyes. “What? Living life slammed like a sardine in a karaoke box?”

Yuki chuckled. “If that’s what you want, I wouldn’t judge.”

“I don’t know what the hell I want,” Kyo said, running a hand through his hair and deciding to sit heavily on the railing instead.

After a moment, Yuki sat next to him, being sure to leave a sliver of space between them.
“I do,” Yuki said. “I know what you want.”

“Please, enlighten me, asshole,” Kyo snarled, arms crossed.

“You want to pass the test,” Yuki said. “No one gets this nervous over something they don’t care about.”

“I’m not nervous!”

“I hate to think that this is what you look like calm,” Yuki quipped.

“Jeez, I don’t want to hear this from someone who’s probably never freaked out over a test before,” Kyo huffed.

Yuki blinked for a second, before staring down at the sidewalk for a second. Then, all too lightly, he said, “I guess I haven’t.”

Kyo snorted. “Goddamn, you’re the worst.”

“Just because I don’t freak out over tests, doesn’t mean I handle other issues gracefully.” Yuki winced. “Maybe we call it even?”

Kyo shook his head, but a lightness was coming back to him. “Maybe if you didn’t sign us up for the idiot party, I’d look past it.”

“They’re our friends,” Yuki reasoned.

“I don’t have friends,” Kyo snapped back, but humor tainted the undertones of his voice.

Yuki couldn’t help but laugh. “You sound like you did when you busted through the ceiling of Shigure’s house.” Kyo groaned at the memory as Yuki let another laugh slip from his lips.

The two looked at each other, the easy air between them feeling foreign after all these years. Maybe it was easier now that Yuki’s expression could remain open and honest. Maybe the most difficult thing when this whole situation started between them was beating his expressions into a neutral submission.

Having to confine every word, every glance, every movement deep inside his body as it chaffed against every vein inside him—made him tense and reckless. It made him irritable, snappish and mean.

But now Yuki could look at Kyo and let his eyes bend under the affection that was finally free of the twists and stains of a heart covered in claw marks. To know Yuki could care about Kyo, and that Kyo would let him, was a relief Yuki never realized he wanted to feel. He really did owe Machi more than he could even fathom for such a lesson.

Kyo stared back, as if trying to assess Yuki—something he seemed to do a lot now. As if trying to see if what he saw in Yuki’s face was sincere. Not that Yuki would blame him.

But he was more than ready to be interrogated. More than ready to stay honest as he looked back at the man he loved.

Yuki felt more than a little of his pride swell when he didn’t even so much as feel a tickle in his throat at the thought.

“Kyo, can I ask you a question?”
Kyo shrugged easily, and Yuki felt something warm in his chest at how his words no longer sent Kyo teetering on the sharp edge of mistrust and discomfort.

“Do you think we could still be friends after all of this is over?”

Kyo’s eyes narrowed at the question, though not out of anger. His shoulders expanded in a contemplative breath before he finally looked away.

“I don’t know,” Kyo said. Yuki felt something sink in his stomach, but his expression stayed soft. “I mean—” Kyo cut himself off with a rough sigh.

“It’s okay,” Yuki said. “You don’t have to—”

“Tohru said to take things piece by piece,” Kyo continued. “If I think too much about anything after this week—” Another rough and irritated grumble.

Yuki couldn’t help but give an affectionate smile. “That’s probably good advice.”

“Surprise, surprise—Tohru always knows what the fuck to say.” Kyo rolled his eyes.

“I’ll never understand how she does it.”

“I’m not sayin’ no, by the way,” Kyo admitted.

For the first time in a long time, when Yuki looked up, Kyo was the one who was already staring. Yuki met his expression like a wall, caught off-guard by Kyo’s unwavering, bright red eyes.

That dreaded honesty was back on Yuki’s face, smeared like sunblock over a child, and he brightened a bit too much when he gave a teasing, “Oh?”

It was worth it to see Kyo’s neck turn red as he turned his face away. “I’m not saying yes, either! Don’t look at me like that!”

Yuki laughed. “I’m just happy to hear I’m still in the running.”

They bickered back and forth on the sidewalk railing until the girls came back out to join them, hot drinks in their hands, faces flushed from the cold air after being warmed by the humidity of a crowded café.

From there, easy conversation flowed among them as they completed their journey to the station.

By the time they arrived, most of 3-D was already loitering around the outside of the building. They called out, arms waving high, voices decibels higher than the low-calibrated tones of the adults who passed by them with wary glances. It seemed as though this was how the group was greeting all of their classmates. The pack grew larger and larger until everyone was there.

High school was strange that way, Yuki thought. So much happened in those three years that it clouded his mind. It veered his focus almost every day—kept his thinking off the looming threats of his past and future. Something he was sure Kyo felt, too.

But there were brief moments, brief instances of clarity, that allowed Yuki to lift his head—to look around at the world outside his mental chain-link fences. And there were people who saw him, knew parts of him he hadn’t even realized he’d exposed—parts of him he didn’t even know were a part of him.

As seemed to be habit, the three of them expanded outwards like a breath. Yuki spent his time
around his seat-neighbors from 2nd year, along with his fellow class representative. One of the boys laughed when they teased Yuki, recalling how hard it was for Yuki to wake up during those mornings on their class trip. They talked about how Yuki would stop by their clubs, and how they remembered the time that Yuki joined in a game of soccer when settling a faux-feud between the basketball and baseball clubs.

Tohru was swarmed by the few girls in the class who hadn’t ever falsely built her up to be a villain whose motivation was to steal the school’s most eligible bachelors. One admitted that she was always jealous of how neatly Tohru could make her braids. One of the boys in the cooking club told Tohru he still remembered when she came to visit their club (back when Momiji was a member for a brief period) and she gave him the tip to cover his potted rice dish with a plastic bag to help keep the moisture inside. He admitted that he still did so, even a year later.

Kyo found himself pushed around by the louder, cockier, humorous students of the pack. The boys stretching their arms over his shoulder and talking loudly in his ear. Girls with short bobs and messy bangs joined in on the jokes, remembering once when Kyota tried to startle Kyo awake when Kyo drifted off during a free period, and how Kyo’s quick reflexes got Kyota punched in the stomach before Kyo even fully processed he was conscious. They talked about the morning they ran into Kyo early before school, a few blocks away from the campus, and dragged him with them to have an early before-school breakfast at a new café nearby. And how they’d found out about Kyo’s dislike of western breakfast, apart from hard-boiled eggs.

Without even realizing it, the three of them had plenty of memories of their classmates to share in return just as easily.

They all packed into a room for karaoke, much to Kyo’s chagrin, and swapped songs, laughter, and loud conversation until day turned into night, and bright cheerful greetings turned into lamented, obnoxious partings as students left one-by-one.

“Why don’t I remember this?” Yuki asked through his laughter. He sat across from Tohru, Uo, and Hana, with two other girls standing at the head of the table. Another male classmate of theirs sat beside him.

“That was the whole reason Eiko had to cut her hair short!”

“Because a deer ate your ponytail?” Yuki asked, somewhat awed.

“Yes! It was so traumatic,” Eiko cried out, causing the whole table to laugh again. “It was the second day of the school trip! I swear, you were right there!”

“I definitely would have noticed that,” Yuki cried humorously.

“You know, I’m starting to think Yuki isn’t as observant of a guy as we first thought,” one of the male classmates chimed in. “Do you even notice when girls change their hair?”

“Quick, Yuki! What style was my hair in first year?” the girl next to Eiko challenged.

“Uh…” Yuki panicked. “You had… bangs?”

The group cackled together. “How are we just now realizing how clueless the prince is?!” one of the boys spouted, fist pounding against the table in laughter.

“Did you even notice a chunk of my hair was gone on the trip?”

“Yeah, Hana had to give her an emergency haircut because the ends were all frayed and gross,” Uo
“I thought you looked really cute with short hair,” Tohru said cheerfully.

“Ugh, Tohru, what am I going to do without you?” Eiko bemoaned. “Boys won’t compliment me nearly half as much as you do! Oh—Kyo!” she called out, eyeing Kyo as he walked back from the soda bar with his own drink.

“Do you remember that deer you saved me from on the school trip?”

“The one that tried to eat your head?” Kyo asked. “Yeah. I had to pry its jaw open, the dumb animal.”

“My hero!”

“I definitely would have remembered that,” Yuki said, laughter still audible in his voice.

“It was the goddamn funniest thing I’ve ever seen in my life,” Uo added. “Imagine carrot-top yelling at a deer to open its mouth while it munched on Eiko’s hair as she flailed around.”

“Stop teasing me! It was horrible!”

Even Kyo laughed with the rest of the group at that, and just like that, he was brought into the conversation.

Like an intake of breath, they compressed together again.

Tohru, Yuki, and Kyo waved goodbye to their remaining classmates towards the end of the night, receiving a chorus of “Bye!” and “Good luck!”

Even though city noises drenched the outside air, the staggering difference in noise level from the hyperactive party room to the bustling yet restrained street had the three of them walking together in silence. After a block, Tohru reached her hands forward and interlocked her fingers with Yuki and Kyo’s.

They walked like that until Yuki’s bus stop.

They accompanied him there without even thinking, despite it being a ten-minute walk out of the way from Shigure’s house.

——

On the bus on the way home, Yuki received a text.

*Rin [21:47]: still haven’t heard from her. sorry*

Yuki did his best not to let the text shatter the fluttery feeling that had been building within him all evening.

——

“You know, you could study here sometimes,” Ayame pouted. Yuki chuckled as he slipped on his shoes, backpack slung over his shoulder.

“It seems silly to make them both come all the way out here,” Yuki said simply. “Besides, I don’t mind the commute.”
“Yes, but I don’t like you spending so much time at dog-man’s house. I brought you to live here for a reason.”

Yuki turned to look at him, giving his older brother a reassuring smile. “You can’t be mad at him forever. Isn’t he your friend?”

“I refuse to acknowledge him as such,” Ayame said with a dramatic huff, to which Yuki rolled his eyes.

“He’s hardly ever around, if that makes you feel any better,” Yuki said.

“No,” Ayame contended. “But if you insist on spending the entirety of your free week there, then I suppose I can’t stop you. But you will be back for dinner.”

“Yes, Ayame,” Yuki relented. “Can I go?”

“See you soon.”

“I’m off.” And with that, the door shut behind Yuki.

“Teenagers,” Ayame griped as he strode into the kitchen.

“It’s good that he’s so close with his friends,” Mine offered. “High school will be over soon—he should make as many memories as he can before then.”

“I just wish they could make memories here,” Ayame said. “We have a lovely home.”

Mine giggled. “The loveliest!”

They were interrupted by the landline ringing throughout the house.

“Maybe that’s work to distract you, Mr. Grumpy,” Mine teased. “Go on and get it.”

Ayame sighed, but sauntered into the living room, picking up the phone and giving a flowery “Hello? Boutique Ayame.”

“When were you going to tell me that Yuki moved in with you?” a voice boomed on the other end, carrying a cold, resonating tone that made Ayame imagine the phone freezing into a heavy block of ice. Ayame just clicked his tongue, sitting down heavily at the table nearby.

“I don’t see why that should bother you, Mother,” he said, his own tone already bored and irritated with the conversation.

“It wouldn’t, if you weren’t so determined to be an awful influence on him.”

“I am nothing of the sort,” Ayame returned, smiling to himself and holding up his hand to absentmindedly examine his fingernails. “If anything, I believe I’ve only helped young Yuki’s journey into adulthood.”

“Exactly what I was afraid of. Give him the phone.”

“He’s not here. He went out.” Ayame smirked. “I suppose the conversation will have to end here. And what a shame! I do love catching up with you.”

“Spare me,” she snarled back. “Don’t think I don’t know what you’ve done.”
“That being?”

“I called to follow up with the universities he’s applying to. They say Yuki hasn’t signed the paperwork to have his test scores sent to them.”

“Curious. Perhaps you weren’t calling the correct universities.”

Ayame could only feel triumph when he heard his mother’s long, angry sigh over the phone static.

“Is this how you plan to get closer to Yuki? By ruining his future?”

“I’ve not ruined a single thing. I’ve simply allowed our dear Yuki the ability to explore what it is that he wants to do with his life. Is that so horrible?”

“Yuki has no clue what he wants. And regardless, it doesn’t matter. What he needs is to keep himself available to take over as head of this family.”

“Sounds dreadful,” Ayame said.

“And what sounds better? Becoming a failure like his brother? Funneling all his money into some horrible, god-forsaken business like the one you bought on a whim?”

“Ah, ah, ah… you get so snappy, mother. Frankly, considering your complete lack of parenting of any kind toward Yuki in the last several years, I don’t believe you really have any say in this matter anymore.”

“Don’t be so naive,” she shot back. “If you’re going to keep my son hostage, then tell him that I’ve taken the necessary steps to make sure his test scores go to the proper universities.”

“Even so, it won’t stop him from choosing the university he actually wishes to attend.”

“Yuki isn’t so dense as to make the same mistakes you did. Make sure he calls me. I have no desire to visit that deviant shop you run, but I will if necessary. Are we clear?”

“As crystal,” Ayame said, his smile evaporating.

“Good.”

The line went dead.

Ayame set the phone down on the table with a deep sigh.

“Who was it?” Mine asked, though the way that she stood cautiously in the doorway told Ayame that she already knew.

“No one, dear,” Ayame replied. “She’s no one.”

Yuki decided to apply to three universities, including the one for which he’d had his interview a few weeks prior. They were large, public, national universities that buzzed with life and possibility.

All three fell under the umbrella of the National Center Test, meaning Yuki would only be required to take one test this exam season and hope for the best (he wasn’t worried—something that had Kyo calling him a bastard every time the subject was brought up).
Yuki’s test would be the next day, while Kyo’s would be a couple days afterwards.

Kyo, deciding to follow the path that Kazuma helped him lay out, opted to look into smaller, Buddhist universities with more intimate settings. The notion of calmer surroundings and a strong central philosophy appealed to him.

He would be applying to two such universities, and would be taking two separate tests. It was less intimidating than the NCT, but his scores would not be allowed to be sent to any other university if he didn’t do well. Whereas Yuki (the bastard) could always decide to send his scores last minute to other universities if he somehow managed to fail (which he wouldn’t—again, bastard).

“Do you feel ready, Yuki?” Tohru asked, bringing out a plate of dried squid for the table. Yuki immediately took a couple pieces, while Kyo kept his eyes trained down on his notes.

“I’ve done all I can,” Yuki replied easily. “All that’s left is to take the test.”

“Be sure to get a good night’s rest tonight,” Tohru said. “And you need to eat a good breakfast, too!”

“Ayame and Mine said the same thing.” Yuki smiled. “Apparently, breakfast tomorrow is going to be a feast.”

“I think it’s wonderful how well they take care of you,” Tohru said.

“Ayame is just excessive,” Yuki muttered, a faint red staining his cheeks. He popped another squid piece in his mouth, “Kyo, if you stare at that book any harder, it’ll catch fire.”

“Maybe if you were helping me study instead of just chatting away,” Kyo snapped back.

“Oh, I’m sorry, Kyo!” Tohru cried. “I’ll keep quiet.”

“I was waiting for you to ask me to help,” Yuki said with a smirk before reaching over to one of the notebooks he’d made for Kyo and flipping to the appropriate section. Yuki leaned in closer toward Kyo, tapping his pencil on a section of formula before snatching the textbook away. “It’s all laid out there. Maybe I can find some better practice questions for you.”

Kyo rubbed at his temple. “Fuck, I forgot about this part.”

“Don’t panic,” Yuki said calmly. “You still have a couple days to clean up the edges.”

“You’ve studied really hard, Kyo! You’ll do amazingly, I know it!”

“It’s true, you should be proud of how much you’ve done.”

“I don’t need a cheer squad, thanks,” Kyo said flatly, finally shoving some of the snack into his own mouth.

Yuki finally let out an “Aha” before laying the textbook back down. “Try these problems. They should give you a better sense of what’s on the test.”

Kyo grumbled a “thanks” before scratching pencil against notebook paper.

Yuki rested his head on his hands. “Where’s Shigure?”

Kyo shrugged, still focusing, and Tohru’s smile turned into a more subdued expression. “He’s out, I think.”
“He’s surprisingly good at math,” Yuki commented passively.

“Really?”

“Back in first year, he would sometimes help me with my homework,” Yuki said. “That was before either of you moved in.”

Kyo snorted. “I can’t picture that at all.”

“That sounds so sweet,” Tohru said. “Maybe when he comes back, we can convince him to help Kyo!”

“Over my dead body.” Kyo pointed the eraser side of his pencil towards Tohru accusingly.

A knock on the door interrupted the conversation. The three looked at each other for a moment, assessing if anyone else had been invited over. With all three of them looking equally clueless, Tohru finally stood up.

“I’ll get it,” she chirped.

“Probably just Shigure forgetting his keys,” Kyo said, still writing in his notebook. In the background, they could hear the rustle of the door sliding open, along with the sound of Tohru’s cheerful greeting.

“Kazuma! What a surprise!”

Kyo’s ears perked up, his head lifting off his studies to see Shishou being led into the living room by Tohru.

“Shi-han, what a surprise,” Yuki said brightly. Kazuma gave him a puzzled smile.

“Yes, it is,” he said, not unpleasantly, before looking to Kyo. Kyo couldn’t stop his cheeks from heating up at Shishou’s questioning glance.

“What are you doing here?” Kyo asked him, curiosity piqued.

“I was hoping to have a word with you,” Kazuma said. “It’s important.”

“Uh, okay,” Kyo said. Kazuma waited for Kyo to stand and leave the others behind to have a private conversation. Instead, Kyo motioned for him to join the trio at the table.

Pleasantly surprised, Kazuma took a seat across from Kyo and Yuki, with Tohru sitting at the other edge. “Seems like everyone is studying hard. That’s good to see.”

“Kyo’s been working hard all month,” Tohru said proudly, almost like a bragging mother, to which Kyo could only roll his eyes.

“You two seem to be helping with that, as well.” Shishou locked eyes with Yuki, who cluelessly gave a small smile back. “When’s your test, Yuki?”

“Tomorrow,” he replied.

“I wish you luck,” Kazuma said.

A silence fell over the four, with Kyo eyeing his Shishou warily. The older man looked pale and bags were visible under his eyes, as if he hadn’t been sleeping well. But his robes were always done
neat and proper, matching his perfect posture. A nervous energy came over Kyo.

“Should we… give you two a minute?” Tohru asked carefully. However, the idea of being left alone right now only shot another cold wave of nerves through Kyo.

“It’s fine,” Kyo insisted with a wave. “What’s going on, Shishou?”

Kazuma took another moment before responding. “I spoke with Akito.”

The three immediately tensed, and Kyo could feel Yuki and Tohru’s eyes burning into the side of his head.

“He’s agreed to let you take the test and attend university under one condition,” Kazuma stated, sighing before continuing. “You have to ask him… yourself.”

“What?” Tohru breathed, a gasp that was lighter than the heavy air of the room floating out of her mouth. “That’s… that’s incredible! Isn’t that good news?”

“No fuckin’ way,” Kyo said immediately. “I’m not doing that.”

“It’s the only way he’ll accept this,” Shishou said. Out of the corner of his eye, Kyo could see Yuki bringing a solemn hand up to his eyes.

“Of course it is,” Yuki said gravely.

Kyo shook his head. “This is so fucking stupid.”

“I know it’s scary, but…” Tohru tried, bringing the attention of the men towards her, “All you have to do is ask. It should be fine, right?”

“Even if I do, he’ll do something. He’ll think of something—he’ll figure out a way to fuck this up and twist it around,” Kyo said, standing abruptly.

“Kyo, he can’t twist this away from you,” Kazuma assured him, also standing. “You can’t let him.”

“You have no fucking idea what it’s like to be in a room with that guy,” Kyo said, pointing an accusing finger.

“It’s one conversation. And that’s it,” came Kazuma’s leveled response. “You can do this. I’ll take you there myself. I’ll wait outside the doors for you. You just need to turn your desires into words, Kyo. Strengthen them as you would any other skill, and don’t falter when you see him.”

“He’s right,” Yuki piped up. His face was still grave, and Kyo almost couldn’t stand to see how pale he’d become. Echoes and shards of past conversations over the past year suddenly crashed over Kyo in waves. It made him so angry that Yuki was the one person he couldn’t accuse of not understanding the terror of Kazuma’s suggestion.

“He’s right, Kyo,” Yuki repeated, this time looking up to meet his eyes. “One conversation with Akito in exchange for your life.”

“He’s a liar,” Kyo said.

“I know,” Yuki responded.

“It’s not gonna be that damn easy!”
“I know.”

“He’s gonna fuck with my head!”

“I know!” Now, it was Yuki’s turn to stand. “But you have to try. Right?”

Kyo looked around the room. Looked at Kazuma, looked at Tohru, looked at Yuki. The impressions of hope and expectation were palpable in each of their expressions. Kyo felt his heart begin to race—felt his head begin to split with the swift pain of a migraine.

“Goddammit. Goddammit,” Kyo shouted, kicking at the table just enough to send it skidding back towards Kazuma. Tohru let out a surprised yelp. The dried squid spilled all over the hardwood floor.

“Kyo—” Kazuma began.

“This is such a fucking trap, and all of you are too far up your own asses to even see that!” Kyo shouted.

“So what if it is a trap?!” Yuki countered, raising the volume of his voice. “Those are the conditions! If you don’t go, you play right into what he wants!”

“That’s real rich coming from you of all people! Out of everyone, you should fucking know that this is such a goddamn set-up!”

“What other choice do you have?!” Yuki shot back.

God, now Kyo’s headache felt like it was tearing his brain in two. How did he not see this coming? How did he not know that something like this would happen? What was this delusion that he’d subscribed himself to over the past month?

Kyo glared at the ground, focusing hard on the tatami floor. “I need you all to leave.”

“What?” Yuki asked, his voice taking on a heartbroken tone that Kyo was all too familiar with now.

“Kyo, this needs to be settled,” Kazuma said sternly.

“I’m tired of this.” He was aware of how terrifyingly low and defeated he sounded. He didn’t care. “Just leave me alone.”

Kyo stormed away and up the stairs, ignoring them as the three called back after him.

In the back of his mind, he knew he still hadn’t committed that formula to memory.

——

“What do we do?” Yuki asked, looking to Tohru and Kazuma.

“I think we just have to let him be for a little while,” Kazuma replied, sighing. “Kyo doesn’t respond well to being pushed.”

He didn’t need to tell Yuki twice.

“I’ll keep an eye on him,” Tohru offered. “He’ll come down when he’s feeling better.”

“Thank you, Tohru,” Kazuma said. “Yuki, I think it might be best if we leave for now. Don’t you think?”
“But—” Yuki looked up towards the ceiling, feeling an acute pain at not being able to follow after him. God, he wanted to so badly. Wanted to do what he always wished someone would do for him when he was locked in that empty room, waiting for Akito to arrive.

How he wanted someone to rip open the doors, pull him by his wrist, and lead him far and away from the Sohma house. Farther and farther with each step, and never looking back.

He would imagine it so vividly. Would imagine the wind whipping into his messy hair, imagine his legs—static for so long and constantly feeling like lead—stretching and blooming and burning over the world he wished to be a part of.

And how shamefully he would imagine Kyo being the one to grab his hand in the first place.

Yuki knew he couldn’t be that person for Kyo.

So instead, he sighed. “I’ll walk you down the path, Shi-han.”

In a daze, Yuki collected his books, slid on his shoes, and waved goodbye to Tohru. As he walked away from the house, he couldn’t help looking over his shoulder towards the window of Kyo’s room.

It wasn’t long before gravel and dirt crunched under two pairs of shoes as they trekked down the path.

“I didn’t expect to see you here at Shigure’s house,” Kazuma said quietly beside him.

Yuki looked towards him, that same expression from earlier that revealed nothing. Kazuma stared at him as if he were some sort of puzzle.

“I’ve been helping Kyo study,” Yuki said simply.

“I see,” Kazuma said, smiling softly. “Isn’t that nice.”

Yuki woke up with a definite sense of unease.

For one, it was early. He hated being up this early. But it was also somewhat inevitable with his brother taking on the role of a non-stop alarm clock for the day of his test.

For another, he hadn’t heard from Kyo the rest of the night. Later that evening, Yuki had called the house, immediately asking how Kyo was doing when Tohru answered the phone, only to inform him that he still hadn’t come out of his room—not even for dinner.

With a heart as heavy as lead, Yuki reluctantly went to bed, but his brain refused to let him rest. It worked incessantly—it wanted to keep thinking about Kyo, to keep worrying about Kyo, to keep thinking of solutions or ideas or anything that could help Kyo.

But when he opened his phone, he was greeted with a text:

Machi [5:00]: good luck on your test today
Machi [5:01]: :)

Today was the day of the National Center Test. As much as it felt like singlehandedly tearing stone from the side of a mountain, Yuki did what he could to focus on the task at hand.
As promised, Mine and Ayame had prepared a feast for him when he emerged from his room, groggy and unfocused. Mine fusses over him immediately, sitting him down and laying out all the delicious breakfast options they’d prepared. Miso soup with grilled mackerel and rice, with omelets and fruits on the side.

With the first taste, he could feel some of the fog around his brain start to clear away. And so, he ate. Hungrier than he’d thought, devouring the foods in front of him more heartily than he’d done in a while. Ayame smiled gleefully, being sure to tell him exactly what it was that he had prepared as Yuki indulged.

At around 6:00 AM, Hatori knocked on the door, ready to drive Yuki to the testing center. Ayame slipped on his shoes, as well, following them all the way out to the car. Yuki didn’t say anything when Ayame got into the car, as well. The three of them drove off, and Yuki thanked them both through the window when they dropped him off at just a few minutes past 7:00.

“Do you need us to pick you up?” Hatori asked. “It’ll be dark by the time you’re finished.” Yuki took in the weather around him—another sunny day with a temperature just warm enough to keep the deep winter chill at bay.

“I’ll be okay.”

“Good luck, Yuki! You will do fantastically!” Ayame proclaimed, practically crawling over Hatori’s lap to see him off.

“Don’t be nervous, Yuki. You’ll do fine.”

“Fine? He’ll do better than fine!”

With that, Yuki backed away from the car with another wave and headed towards the testing center. It took some shuffling, some getting lost, and a lot of waiting in line, but finally Yuki sat in a large lecture hall with just a pencil and eraser. Electric, nervous energy rolled off the other adolescents, a mixed bag of different students. In the room ahead of Yuki’s was a familiar face—a girl wearing his school uniform, and he waved to her when she turned to assess the massive amount of students beginning to pile in.

With still a few minutes left before the test was set to begin, Yuki took his phone from his pocket and sent a text under the long, arched table.

Yuki [7:43]: Are you here?
Kakeru [7:44]: room 320
Kakeru [7:44]: u?
Yuki [7:44]: 226
Kakeru [7:45]: what a shame now I can’t cheat off you (▱﹏▱)
Yuki [7:46]: You wouldn’t need to.
Kakeru [7:47]: Awww! Was that a compliment?? Prez I'm touched
Kakeru [7:47]: good luck btw!
Yuki [7:48]: You too.

Yuki took a deep breath and replaced his phone back in his pocket.

After ten minutes, a testing official came in, immediately extinguishing the hushed buzz of voices.

“We will be handing out the tests now. Each section is three hours, and you will have ten minutes between each section. If you need to use the restroom at any point during the test, you will be
escorted by one our officials. Eyes on your own papers, and good luck.”

The tests were passed down the aisles, and once the sounds of papers being handled died down, the official announced the beginning of the test.

Yuki ripped open the perforated sides and flipped the booklet open.

He cleared his head, took a deep breath, and read the first question.

When he realized he knew the answer, the test progressed slowly, but smoothly, for the rest of the day.

By the time Yuki answered the last question, the sun had long since set, and the moon beamed brightly in a cloudless sky.


That was the trance Kyo succumbed to outside the house. He executed the movements again and again, over and over, until his muscles burned from the constant, wary use of them.

Tohru wasn’t home. He knew this because he had waited for her to leave the house before peeking out of his room. She had already knocked on his door twice today, but eventually left to fulfill her promise of meeting Uo and Hana after their tests were finished.

Fuck, even just the thought of the test at this point made him feel winded, so he focused his frustration onto his form, straightened his leg, dropped his shoulders, and kept his fists firm and tight.

Eventually, it would get easier to breathe.

Kyo was so securely locked inside his own head that he didn’t even notice when Shigure came walking down the path. Even if he did notice, Shigure was nothing more than a ghost that haunted the house lately. An entity that was felt, but no longer heard or seen.

So it surprised Kyo to see Shigure standing there, somewhat amused, loitering around Kyo’s attempts to fight back against his stress in the biting February air—made all the sharper by the sweat seeping from his exposed skin.

“What do you want?” Kyo finally said, throwing another punch at the air.

“Nothing.” Shigure shrugged. “I caught myself thinking that this sure feels nostalgic.”

Kyo threw him another wary glance, but kept on with his exercises. After a while, he realized Shigure still lingered, watching as if he’d been brought into the same trance as Kyo.

“Can I help you?” Kyo bit, sending a particularly rough kick into the wind.

Shigure stayed silent for a moment, before speaking in his usual, aired-out and humorous tone, “Something happened.”


“Akito won’t let me take the test unless I ask him myself.”
“I see,” Shigure said. “What a pickle, indeed.”

Kyo heard the sound of Shigure’s boots sliding against the gravel, and then the sound of the shoji door rattling open.

“What have you told him?” Kyo finally forced out. He looked up, his glare meeting a perfectly neutral gaze.

“What have I told who? Akito?” Shigure asked, falsely innocent.

“I’m not goin’ there if this is some kind of trap,” Kyo snarled.

“It most certainly is a trap,” Shigure said, his cheerful tone hiding the cruel teeth beneath the words. “But it’s not one of my design.”

“How am I supposed to believe that?” Kyo asked, anger only barely kept at bay on the edge of anxious, red eyes.

Shigure, for the first time Kyo could even remember, let his smile drop. “I said I wouldn’t say anything, didn’t I? There’s no reason for me to go spreading your secrets.”

Kyo kept watching him, still breathing heavily to replenish the oxygen from his workout.

“Assholes lie all the time,” Kyo finally landed on.

“Never once have I told a lie.” Shigure’s smile was back. “And I don’t intend to start now, even if I’ve bored of your high school melodrama.”

“Yeah, that, or Ayame beat the shit out of you and you can’t stop acting like a kicked dog.”

Kyo spotted how Shigure’s hand tightened on the shoji door, but his expression remained the same. Unfazed, untouchable, unreadable, with a smile as easy as slicing butter with a hot knife.

“What do you want from me, Kyo? Reassurance? Encouragement? Do you want to start a fight?”

Kyo faltered, feeling the words die on his tongue.

Shigure clicked his tongue. “I’m happy to give you any of those things, but until you figure that out, let’s not waste each other’s time.”

Shigure stepped into the house, and Kyo shook his head before using the back of his hand to wipe the sweat from his forehead. With one messy punch, and a frustrated growl, he ran into the house before Shigure could clear the foyer.

“You really didn’t tell him anything?”

“I didn’t,” Shigure said.

“Why not?” Kyo glared.

Shigure responded as easily as ever, “Maybe I’m curious to see what happens next.”

“I thought you said you were bored of all this bullshit,” Kyo shot back.

Shigure shrugged before heading towards his bedroom. Before he closed the door behind him, he called out a “Good luck, Kyo,” over his shoulder.
Kyo waited until he knew for sure that Tohru had gone to sleep before he picked up the phone and dialed Kazuma’s number. He couldn’t give Tohru one more thing to worry about. He couldn’t give Tohru one more thing he might fail at.

It was late, but he knew that Kazuma was still up. On the fourth ring, Kazuma answered, an eager and fraught, “Hello?” coming through the line.

“What time am I supposed to see him?” Kyo asked.

A line of static passed between the phone.

“Tomorrow at one.”

Kyo let out a mirthless, angry huff of a laugh.

“Fine. I’ll meet you at the main house.”

Kyo hung up before Kazuma could respond, trying to stabilize his breath and clutching the phone desperately as he did so.

After a few moments, he dropped his hand by his side, feeling exhausted and ready to collapse into bed.

As he passed by Shigure’s room to head up the stairs, he could hear the faintest shuffling from behind the door.

———

Yuki [10:24]: Any word?
Rin [10:36]: not yet
Rin [10:36]: stop freaking out
Rin [11:13]: tohrus coming by today. come with her.
Rin [11:15]: we can figure this shit out
Yuki [11:21]: Can I bring Haru?
Rin [12:02]: no
Yuki [12:04]: We had a deal.
Rin [12:08]: not yet
Rin [12:10]: please
Yuki [12:15]: I’ll see you this afternoon.

———

Kazuma met Kyo outside the main gates. He wore his school uniform under his thick jacket. He still didn’t don his tie, but his shirt button was done almost all the way up, which made Kyo feel stiff and confined—even more than he already had before getting dressed. Kazuma smiled when he saw him, immediately pulling him into a soft, all-encompassing embrace.

Kyo hugged back, but if he was honest, it only made trying to breathe evenly that much more difficult.

“Are you ready?” Kazuma asked, pulling away.
Kyo nodded, waiting until Kazuma turned away to take his shaky breaths. His Shishou led the way to Akito’s house within the inner circle of the estate.

Kyo hated it here.

He hadn’t lived within the walls since he was a child, and even then, his family’s house was flung off to a far side of the estate. He didn’t remember much about his first home, and whether that was by choice or just how time just happened to erode his memory, he wasn’t sure.

What he did remember, he didn’t like.

Being so far on the outer circle of the estate, their home was placed right by the eastern walls. Unless you laid down on your back flush against the windowed patio door, the sky wasn’t visible from the kitchen or living room windows. Kyo knew, because he would do just that some days—all for the sliver of blue it would expose.

His mother had tried to keep him indoors at all times. They rarely left the house, and on the rare occasions they did, it was in quick, hurried intervals. Kyo had spent a lot of time in the backyard, bouncing his ball against the looming border wall. It was the only companion in his life that would throw it back, and, at the time, was the only thing in the world that seemed taller than his father.

After his mother died and he moved in with Kazuma, Kyo almost never went back to the main house—the only exceptions being the handful of family events that he was required to attend.

He would walk down the pristine stone pathways to banquet halls and hear so many whispers, it was as if people forgot how to use their voices properly.

Kyo would show them.

Kyo would show them how to yell.

That boy was still inside him somewhere—he was sure of it. The one who would scream, and kick, and shout, and break whatever his hands could touch. Where was that protector now? Where was that anger now?

Every word felt stuck in Kyo’s throat, and all he could think of was how ashamed his six-year-old self would be of him.

Then again, six-year-old him didn’t want the things he wanted now. Him back then didn’t know he could be allowed to want something so much it could hurt.

Kyo then had already given up, and was prepared to take the rest of the world with him.

Kyo now felt as though he was clinging—clawing—onto the edge of that same world he’d rejected as a boy, fingernails sinking so hard into the dirt his fingers bled.

Kazuma walked slowly and steadily, the afternoon air brushing past them on an infuriatingly sunny day. They removed their shoes as they stepped onto the wooden outside barrier of the home, and shuffled their feet as maids passed by them in quick, practiced paces.

When Akito’s door was visible, Kazuma turned to Kyo, his face serious and mournful all at once.

“I know you are capable of this,” he said. “Think of this as endurance training. Stay strong. Outlast him. And when we’re home, you can sleep.”
Kyo swallowed, nodding his head.

“T’ll be waiting right here.”

It took a moment to realize that Kazuma wasn’t going to walk any further—that Kyo was expected to take those last few steps on his own. It jarred him more than he would have liked. Regardless, Kyo stepped forward on shaky legs to approach the door.

With a hand that felt all too clammy, he knocked on the wood.

The door was flung open almost immediately, but no one within met his eyeline. His attention was drawn to the maid sitting in seiza by the door, pushing it open in sections until she motioned for Kyo to enter.

When he did, she took his coat before leaving the same way without a word.

Akito’s room was dark.

The curtains were drawn, casting heavy shadows and weeding out the sunlight, except for the tiny slivers that leaked through the fabric. The room was also relatively bare, holding nothing other than the futon Akito was lounged across, as well as the few decorative ceramics that were pushed against the wall on expensive looking dressers.

Akito’s robes were in disarray. Fabric spilling over fabric spilling over skin. Kyo couldn’t help but immediately think of his Shishou—even when frazzled, he’d never seen his robes improperly tied. If the neatness of Kazuma’s image was a comfort, then even just the slightest glance of Akito could cause unease.

At first, Kyo thought Akito might not have seen him. The darkened room served to hide Akito’s eyes, and Kyo was more startled than he wished to be when he realized Akito was staring up at him through spindly fingers pressed against his head—as if Akito were consoling a headache.

“Ugh, I forgot about this,” Akito muttered, sitting up. “Seeing something like you is only going to make me feel even more sick.”

Kyo was sure that Akito would change his mind in that moment—that he would be thrown out without a second thought. He’d witnessed the whims of Akito before and was already prepared for that scenario.

But Akito stood, slowly and languidly, approaching Kyo in a way that would rob him of his title as both cat and monster.

He stopped inches before Kyo, who willed his face into something stern and unmoving. Akito stared back, looking irritated and put-out from his afternoon of stretching out in the dark.

“Well, go ahead. State your case.”

Kyo looked at him, a clumsy “What?” escaping him. Akito rolled his eyes.

“You’re here to ask me if you can go to university, right? Well, go on. Ask.” A sickly smile spread over Akito’s lips, and Kyo felt his insides burn with the instinct to run far and away.

“I. I…” Kyo was stuck on the word, his gruff voice dragging against his tongue. Why couldn’t he just say it?
Once he did, he could leave, right? That was the damn deal. Kazuma was outside waiting for him to peel the words out of his mouth, off his teeth, and plop them triumphantly in Akito’s sick, chalk-white hands. And then he could leave.

“Having trouble there?” Akito tilted his head in amusement. “This is why I thought it would be best for us to speak face-to-face.”

Kyo turned to glare at Akito, who walked past Kyo to pour himself a cup of tea from a pot sitting on an iron warmer. They were so far inside the estate, no city sounds penetrated Akito’s quarters, despite their location in the heart of the busy city. Instead, the air inside was so still and silent, Kyo could hear the tea splashing against porcelain for every drop.

“I know you don’t think very nice things about me,” Akito said, still serving his own tea. “But I’ve always thought that we had something of an understanding between us.”

Akito sauntered back toward him, cup of hot liquid in hand. Gently, he used the back of his free hand to caress Kyo’s cheek, managing to look both smug and offended—as if he were touching built-up dust and dirt on attic furniture.

“As much as we both hate it, we’re connected. We understand each other.” Akito’s hand floated to Kyo’s chest and pressed against his rapidly beating heart. Kyo felt himself falter, but Akito seemed to anticipate his need to step backward—because before Kyo could even blink, Akito’s nails sunk into Kyo’s skin through his shirt. The sudden movement jostled the overfilled tea cup. A drop of hot water spilled over the lip and landed with a plop next to Kyo’s big toe.

“Kazuma has been pushing you into this whole university delusion, hasn’t he? Talking about your future. Your classes. What job you might get.” Akito chuckled, sounding genuinely amused. His mocking tone felt like it was cutting through Kyo’s skin—even sharper than his nails. “And you let yourself believe it, because you don’t want to let foster-daddy down.”

“No,” Kyo said, weakly. “Not true.”

“Not true,” Akito mocked. “Of course not. Then tell me! What are the big plans? Kazuma seems so excited, it’s sickening.”

Akito finally unclenched his fingers, stepping back to assess Kyo and waiting patiently for his answer.

_Piece by piece_, he heard Tohru echo in his head. _Piece by piece._

“I’m going to take the entrance exam,” Kyo stated firmly.

“And then?”

_Piece by piece._

“And then I’ll go to university,” Kyo forced out, as if on repeat.

“Enthralling. And what will you study?”

Kyo opened his mouth, but couldn’t find the next piece.

“That’s alright,” Akito said with a smile. “You’re young. You’ll figure it out. That’s what Kazuma must have said, hm? But that’s not true, is it? Because you already _have_ figured it out.”
“What’s that supposed to mean?” Kyo asked, his throat raw.

“It means that people who aren’t cursed will never really understand what I’ve done for you all. And even if you resent me for it, like a petulant child, you know it’s where you belong.”

Something resonated in Kyo; something dark and devastatingly familiar about the words. To his horror, he realized that a charred and mutated comfort was seeping into him.

Because they were the same words that had been playing in his head this whole time.

“Have you ever seen the cage, Kyo?”

He shook his head.

“It’s nice. Almost as nice as this,” Akito said, arms lifting to signify the room around them. Akito took a sip of his tea. “Nicer, I’d argue. It’s isolated here on the grounds. Less noise. Less troublesome people coming in. I don’t keep you in a pit. I don’t keep you in a dungeon. There aren’t even locks on the doors.”

Kyo swallowed.

“Why do you think that is?”

“Because… Because—” Akito was messing with him. Messing with his head. Akito was a liar. Akito wanted to throw him off.

“Because I don’t imprison you,” Akito interrupted. “I accommodate you.”

Kyo’s stomach sunk to his toes, making his feet feel flushed and wobbly. He struggled not to stagger where he stood.

“You,” Akito lifted his arm to point a boney finger at Kyo, “are dangerous. And you know this.” Akito’s tone turned pitying somehow, as if he was trying to comfort a child. “And it’s not just you. It’s all the zodiacs. Everyone in this bond needs a place where they can be safe. Where people can be safe from them. From you. That’s just how the zodiac works.”

_I made the rat spirit so angry it tried to kill me._

_I win._

Kyo blinked at the invading words. Yuki’s smug yet affectionate smile sliced through the weeds that had been flourishing and spreading in his head.

“I’m not dangerous,” Kyo bit out. Akito’s expression dropped.

Without another moment of hesitation, Akito stepped forward.

His hand reached for Kyo’s beads.

Kyo jerked back immediately, clutching at them like a lifeline.

“DON’T!”

The motion knocked more tea out of Akito’s glass. This time, it fell on the top of Kyo’s foot, sinking through his worn sock. Kyo winced, heart still racing and breathing still shallow from when Akito’s fingers brushed against his red and white beads.
Akito smirked. “What’s the matter? I thought you weren’t dangerous. Don’t you think that charm of yours is a little too fragile to protect you through another four years? It didn’t even last two years of high school.”

The cackling that erupted from Akito resounded in Kyo’s head, and he realized his arm was still tensed up and away, his fingers clutching onto the beads so tightly it made the pads of his fingers sore.

“You can try and go on living in that world, if you like. Needing a flimsy string of bones and blood for the rest of your life. But there’s not much out there left to see. It’s not as if you’ll be accepted into society. It’s not as if you’ll find love.”

_I fell in love with you the moment I met you!

Yuki was back in his head, and it was as unwelcome as it was distracting. He didn’t like to think about that moment in the woods. He didn’t like to think about Yuki’s vomit staining the roots of the tree he leaned against. He didn’t like to think about Yuki’s angry, desperate eyes as he screamed and yelled his broken feelings at Kyo’s face.

But somehow, here, those words played on loop again and again. They made the potency of Akito’s words slide down his skin, where they would normally stick and suck like a leech.

“Don’t tell me you think otherwise,” Akito said with a snort. And only then did Kyo realize how long he’d been lost in his own train of thought.

“Who cares if anyone loves me or not,” Kyo let out, as if his chest was releasing a gust of wind. “I ain’t here about that. I’m just here to ask about university.”

Akito’s face turned sour. “I find it rather presumptuous of you to be asking for so much when you haven’t even completed our original agreement.”

Kyo’s tongue was stalled, his throat backed up with sludge.

“Defeat Yuki and you can be free from the cage. Am I supposed to just give you a pass?”

Kyo clenched his fists. “Yes.”

Akito tossed his head to the side, thoroughly unimpressed by Kyo’s sudden curtness. “You’ve really lost your place living in Shigure’s house. How sad for you.”

Kyo straightened his back and squared his shoulders, trying to stand strong.

“Here’s what I’ll do, since you think I haven’t noticed that this request also means accepting your defeat against Yuki,” Akito said, crossing his arms. “You can ask me to take the entrance exam. If you pass…” Akito paused to give a condescending smirk to Kyo. “_If_. You can go to university. But our little bet is off the table. Once those four years are over, you come back here.”

Kyo’s eyes widened, sweat forming on his forehead and what felt like a barrage of pins sticking into his stomach.

“Isn’t that generous of me?”

This wasn’t right. This wasn’t what Kazuma wanted. And, with Akito’s words swarming his head, he wasn’t sure if this is what he wanted, either. That fight, that win, that _victory_ against Yuki was the only thing piecing together any semblance of hope he might have had for the past three years.
Something that had also shattered months ago.

He realized this in those moments he stood over Yuki’s shaking, sickly, angry body, ready to throw his confession back in his face and destroy Yuki, as well as every vulnerable piece of him he’d laid out for Kyo that day.

But he hadn’t.

This had been fruitless for so long, and he knew that.

Perhaps this really was the best he was going to get.

Ever.

Kyo looked up to see Akito’s impatient face staring back at him.

“Well? Go on. Ask.”

The hiss through Akito’s teeth hit like a thin, poisoned blade between his ribs. He could feel those words running through his blood, forming into an unrelenting need to scrape the words out of his mouth in an action as violent as skin scraping against gravel.

“How I take the entrance exam? Can I go to university?” Kyo’s mouth felt parched, and he hated the unwittingly childish tone his questions took on. Something inside him felt rotten and hollow.

Akito grinned. “Say please.”

Kyo swallowed, speaking before thinking, “Please.”

Akito laughed into his sleeve, downing the rest of the tea in one last gulp. “Who could say no to such a polite request?”

Kyo felt his legs shake where he stood. The urge to leave was overwhelming, but he felt frozen where he was.

“Leave.”

And with just that simple command, Kyo felt movement return to his legs. He trotted towards the shoji doors, the sunlight trapped behind them providing him with the only solace to be had in this loathsome room. But before he could open the doors for himself, Akito’s voice rang out once more.

“I want you to remember just this, Kyo.”

Hand still touching the doors, Kyo warily turned around to face Akito, who smiled back at him.

“No locks.”

Kyo stared back at Akito for a long moment, watching his slender yet formidable form saunter back toward the futon, until Akito called out a casual, “Open the doors.”

The maid from earlier did as she was told, and finally, the sunlight shone through.

——

When Kyo stepped outside, it was as if stepping into an entirely different world. He felt sick to his stomach, and his skin felt hot and clammy, as if even the seasons were doctored in Akito’s dark and
When the maid handed him back his coat, just the idea of putting it on made him feel uncomfortably hot, and the mere weight of something on his skin felt like it might trigger him to vomit.

He focused on his feet for a moment, walking forward on shaky legs, oblivious to the person coming towards him. When his chest collided with another’s—the body of someone soft and feminine—it startled him so badly, Kyo was certain he was going to throw up.

But instead of the shock of transforming, he found himself still intact in his human form. And when he looked up, his wide, anxious eyes met with Kagura’s.

“Kyo?”

Kyo was sure he would be sick if opened his mouth, so instead he just nodded and walked past her.

“Are you okay?” she asked, a worried strain in her voice.

“I’m fine, okay?” he snarled out.

She followed him down the hallway until they reached Kazuma’s perch, his patient and concerned eyes like open arms.

“Kyo!”

“Just leave me alone, Kagura.” Kyo closed his eyes as he clutched onto Kazuma’s sleeve. “Get me the fuck out of here.”

“Miss Kagura?” the maid that had opened Akito’s door called. Kyo looked back at Kagura, who seemed hesitant to step away from Kyo’s side. Nevertheless, she backed away until finally turning around to walk into Akito’s quarters.

Kyo turned back to face Kazuma, who was still keeping him under his watchful eye, Kyo hadn’t even noticed that Kazuma had put his hand over Kyo’s where it grasped Kazuma’s sleeve.

“Let’s go,” Kazuma said.

Kyo didn’t give Kagura a second thought as he followed Kazuma all the way out of Sohma house.

Yuki arrived at the hospital twenty minutes earlier than Tohru, but he didn’t go inside. Instead, he lingered around the front gate, exerting a nervous energy he was finally allowed to indulge in now that the test had passed. Also, the idea of facing Rin alone somehow seemed far more daunting than necessary; he honestly wasn’t sure how Tohru was able to do it so often.

When he finally spotted Tohru, she waved at him from down the street. Her jacket encircled her flowing cotton dress, paired with thick tights that helped protect her legs from the cold that persisted, despite the deceptive way the sun was shining more often these days.

He waved back, holding a smile until she hopped up beside him, her scarf wrapped tightly around her neck. His smile faded when he saw her eyes, mirroring the worry in his own.
“How is he?” Yuki asked, the words forcing themselves out instead of a proper greeting.

Tohru didn’t seem to mind. “I don’t know… I haven’t seen him much the past couple of days. He hasn’t really come out of his room.”

“Do you know if he decided to see Akito or not?” Yuki asked, voice grave. Tohru shook her head.

“He doesn’t really want to talk,” Tohru said. The two shuffled toward the hospital entrance together in silence before she continued, “Do you think he will?”

“He doesn’t have any other choice,” Yuki replied with a sigh.

“Is that… really true?” Tohru asked. Yuki gave her a questioning look. “I mean, couldn’t he still take the exam and… choose not to see Akito?”

Yuki stared at her, his mind blanking at the absurdity of the question. But after a momentum he realized that, realistically, Tohru’s words weren’t unreasonable at all.

The doors of the hospital opened for them, a wall of warm air hitting their chilled bodies pleasantly.

“I hate to say it, but…” Yuki sighed. “It doesn’t work like that.”

“Because it’s Akito?” Tohru inquired, and Yuki was left wondering how much Rin had actually told her.

“Yes,” Yuki said simply.

Tohru took in the information thoughtfully for a moment before nodding. “Then he’ll definitely do it. I believe in him!”

“I do, too.” Yuki smiled, but his expression was quick to turn dark. “But I can’t help worrying about him. I can’t even describe what I would give to never have to be alone with Akito again.”

“He’ll be okay,” Tohru consoled. Yuki shook his head, but made sure to slide a detached smile onto his face as they approached the reception desk.

“We’re here to see Sohma Isuzu,” Yuki said.

The receptionist looked through some files at her desk before giving a polite, “One moment, please,” and walking off. Yuki gave her a dismissive nod before turning back to Tohru.

“This is all turning into such a mess,” Yuki said, his tone defeated. Tohru offered a sympathetic look. “Between this and Kagura…”

“Rin said she would help! Those two are like sisters—if anyone would know where she is, it’s her.”

“I suppose you’re right,” Yuki relented.

“We’ll find her, Yuki. Everything will be fine.”

Yuki smiled at Tohru just as the receptionist returned to the desk.

“Excuse me? Are you a relative of Sohma Isuzu?”

“I’m her cousin, Sohma Yuki, and this is our friend, Honda Tohru. She should be on the approved visitors list. Is there a problem?”
“Well… we already contacted her family a little while ago, but Ms. Sohma is missing.”

Yuki and Tohru traded anxious glances before turning back towards the receptionist.

“What?”

“What do you mean ‘missing’?!” Yuki demanded.

The receptionist looked uneasy. “There’s no record of her checking out, but when a nurse went to check on her, she was gone.”

Yuki felt a sharp chill shoot through his body. “How is that possible?”

“She’s gone?!” Tohru’s voice was just as frightened as his, but the receptionist stayed calm and composed.

“I’m sorry, I don’t know what to tell you.”

“She’s been practically living here for months! How can she just disappear?”

“Is she even well enough to be out walking around on her own?” Tohru questioned.

“I promise, we’ve had our staff search the entire hospital.”

“Something must have happened to her!” Tohru cried, her voice melting into panic.

“She’s right. I have texts on my phone confirming that we were going to meet!” Yuki confirmed. “Shouldn’t we call the police?”

The nurse looked between them, apologizing for not being able to offer them a better explanation. “We called her mother, but she told us not to be concerned. Apparently, she’s done this before. We can’t call the police if the family doesn’t authorize it.”

Yuki and Tohru looked to each other again, their eyes wide and unsure.

“Can I help you in any other way?” the receptionist asked carefully.

The two stood there, unable to answer.

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Kyo stared up at his ceiling, his back resting against his old futon from middle school. It smelled like the linen closet of Kazuma’s house—oaky from the cabinet, and floral from the cheap cabinet fresheners Kazuma had a habit of buying.

It took a long time for Kyo to calm down after his meeting with Akito. He had spent the entirety of the walk back to Kazuma’s house in a nauseous daze. He had stood in the entryway of the familiar house as Kazuma hurried upstairs to pull out his old futon and set up his old room. Kyo had waited, his head spinning with every word of the god—enough to make him dizzy.

He slept for quite a while, just as Kazuma predicted he would, but his dreams were unsettling—manifestations of the sick, anxious feeling his chest. When he finally woke, his skin was coated in a cold sweat, and his limbs felt achy and worn out.
His mind wasn’t granted the clarity that usually came from his body shutting down—from using sleep to burn off the excess emotion that his body couldn’t contain. Instead, he felt more shaken up than ever. More lost than he ever could have imagined.

The last time he felt this way was when he had been curled up in his monstrous form after running headfirst into the woods with no clear idea of where to go. He had sat slumped over in the rain, knowing somehow that it would never end. Somehow, this is what it would always come back to. A loneliness so complete, he felt it in every movement. Skin smelling like death. Mud and soil so flooded with the downpour, he thought nothing could grow there again.

_You are dangerous._

He wanted to think of Tohru. His dearest friend in the world. Chasing him down. Her words strong and clear with the parting of rain.

_I’m not imprisoning you. I’m accommodating you._

He wanted to think of Shishou. Waiting in beams of sunlight, a confident and triumphant gaze bestowed onto his son.

_You will never find love._

He wanted to think of Yuki.

Yet somehow, the only words that rattled in his brain, again and again, were those of Akito.

His darkest thoughts were building, forming like a sludge, trapping him in his room. He couldn’t breathe. He hadn’t been able to breathe all day.

_Kazuma doesn’t understand. Kazuma doesn’t understand._

Words that had been slowly poisoning his thoughts, tearing him piece by piece for months, were now bubbling to the surface of his mind, and he didn’t want to think about this. He didn’t want his own mind to turn against the one ally he’d always had.

But until those thoughts settled down—until they were sweat out of his system—all he could do was lay still in his bed and hope he wouldn’t make any noises loud enough to disturb Kazuma downstairs, who was probably hyper-aware of every creak and crack of the floorboards. He couldn’t face Shishou with his head screwed on backwards like this, especially with the outline of his textbooks still hanging in his backpack serving as a constant reminder of the looming exams. He still didn’t know that fucking formula, along with so much other material. He could study right now. He could just crack the books open and learn it.

A migraine hit Kyo fast and hard, sharp and piercing, like a bullet from long range. It felt like shards of metal exploding, spreading bit by bit through his brain matter until his entire head was obliterated.

Kyo fought off the agonizing pain and misery until the walls were making him stir crazy, and his backpack in the corner of the room sending jolts of anxiety through his bones.

He needed to get out of this room, even if just for a little bit.

Like countless times in his youth, Kyo quietly slid his window open, taking special care to move it slowly and carefully through the halfway point, where the glass would squeak especially loud against the pane.
He needed to run. He needed to burn these feelings off. And then, he would come back. And he
would go to bed, and wake up, and go to the testing center like a good son. Like he had been given
permission to do.

A future in exchange for a future.

Just the thought of telling Kazuma the terms of this contract field that anxious strain in his legs.

Kyo slipped on an extra pair of sneakers from his closet and tied them so tight, he could feel his
blood buzz from lack of circulation. But it didn’t matter.

He hoisted himself out of the window and hit the dirt below. Without a second thought, his legs took
off. Immediately, he felt the burn in his calves, the shortness of breath in his chest, the night-bitten
chill in the air that made his ears and nose flare red.

Kyo ran as fast he could, hoping Akito’s words would roll off him and be left behind, unable to
catch up.

You are unlovable.

You cannot be loved.

Don’t you want to spare yourself from this?

Don’t you want to rest?

Don’t you want to be safe?

With every step, it was as if Akito was growing louder. As if his words were devouring him more
and more. As if he were irritating a wound, scratching it open wider and wider.

Kyo screamed as he ran faster down the empty path.

Trying to hide himself from what he knew, what he fucking knew from the moment he’d stepped out
of Akito’s room and into the broken world outside the Sohma gates—a world he’d been barely
clinging onto since he was fucking born into this grotesque and hellish form of his that always
lingered underneath his own flesh and bone.

What he knew was that Akito may have spoken the words, but Kyo had already been thinking all of
it all along.

What the fuck was he supposed to do in university? What the fuck was he supposed to do with this
mangled, monstrous body of his? What the fuck was he supposed to expect from four more meager
years of dragging himself along? Why bother trying to exist in a world that he’d spent so much time
and energy hating?

Kyo clutched at his head in a desperate attempt to force his thoughts down the correct path. Ones that
didn’t make him so torn up inside. Ones that didn’t make the cage seem so appealing, safe,
comfortable—so necessary.

He stopped at a street corner, where the dirt trail around Shishou’s surrounding property ended and
the rest of the world began. He put his hands on his knees and sucked air into his chest, his head
buzzing with both a headache and the need to inhale oxygen. His back and shoulders heaved
violently, and out of the corner of his eye, he could tell some late-night stragglers walking home were
giving him strange glances.
Now that he was here, he didn’t know where to go. He didn’t know which direction to take. He would have to go back eventually, but the idea of turning back now made bile crust up at the roof of his stomach.

The walk signal turned green, but Kyo didn’t move. Instead, he stood up straight and tilted his head back, trying to get the last remnants of air into his system to soothe his burning lungs.

With his body calmed only slightly, the edges of the city were starting to catch his eye.

Across the street was a convenience store, still open, next to two office spaces that appeared dark and closed for the night. At the end of the corner across the street was a phone booth. Kyo stared at it for a moment, breath sputtering out of him before he reached into his back pocket for his wallet.

*You are unlovable.*

The walk sign turned red, then green again. And this time, Kyo crossed the street.

A business card was clutched tightly between his shaking finger tips.

——

When Yuki finally dragged himself home, it was already late at night. There was light coming from Ayame’s shop, despite the fact that it had long since closed for the day. Yuki hardly noticed—could hardly care about the numerous missed calls and texts from his brother. His eyes were so tired, so heavy with the day, that he could barely even process Ayame’s angry expression that flickered with panic.

After the hospital, he and Tohru had gone to the police station. The two tried to convince them to open a report, but aside from the fact that Rin had only been missing for a few hours, her mother’s apathetic dismissal was the first thing the officers saw when pulling up her file.

In the end, they were told to leave—told to come back another day, maybe when they were certain Rin was missing for sure.

They didn’t understand.

So Yuki headed for the main house next, insisting that Tohru head home and wait by the phone. He didn’t want to subject her to the stifling world inside those walls, and the last thing he wanted was to run into Akito by some chance with Tohru by his side.

He had knocked on Kagura’s door for nearly ten minutes. No one answered. He tried to pry open the doors, the windows—anything in an attempt to get inside.

Nothing.

Yuki attempted Momiji’s place next, trying to look and sound as casual as he could, but was told by his cousin that he hadn’t seen Kagura since the week before.

“What about Rin?” Yuki asked, desperation edging into his voice.

“She’s been missing for forever. Didn’t you know that?” Momiji asked, his amusement fading into concern. But Yuki cut the conversation off before Momiji could ask him anything else.
Haru was next. His cousin wasn’t home, but his parents were, and gave a similar response: they had not seen Kagura in quite some time.

Ritsu parroted the sentiment. So did Hiro and Kisa.

At the end of the night, with the sun already having sunk below the horizon, Yuki swallowed what little he could of his anxiety and knocked on Rin’s parents’ home.

When the door slid open, he was met with a coldly indifferent stare. And with conversation equally as flippant. In the end, asking Rin’s parents about their missing daughter was a conversation that lasted less than two minutes.

And with that, there was nowhere else to go.

He had called Tohru on the way home, but she merely confirmed what Yuki already knew. No one had called.

This whole thing was sitting horribly in Yuki’s stomach, bending him out of shape, clogging his throat with a hopeless fear. He had walked with slow, defeated steps back home, and now he was here, facing Ayame as he glared with worried tears at his brother.

Before Yuki could brace himself, his brother blew up at him.

“Where on earth were you?!”

Yuki couldn’t open his mouth fast enough to answer.

“I understand that you’re a teenager, and that you were afforded a certain irresponsible level of freedom at that dog-man’s house, but that is not how it is here!”

“I… I’m—”

“Would it have been so difficult to answer your phone? All I needed was to know that you were safe!”

Safe.

The last thing Yuki felt was safe.

When he finally looked into his brother’s eyes, Ayame must have recognized that very sentiment in the creases and bags on Yuki’s eyes, because his expression softened immediately.

“Yuki? What’s the matter? Has something happened?”

Yuki shuffled in place, his neck hot and his chest aching from being short of breath. “I think… I think something bad happened. I think it’s my fault.”

“What do you mean?” Ayame’s voice sounded warm now, and a large, chilly palm met with Yuki’s cheek in a gesture of comfort. “Can you tell me about it?”

Could he?

What else was he supposed to do at this point? What else could he accomplish?

Especially if all he could do, despite his most strained and desperate efforts, was destroy.
“I don’t know,” Yuki said, his breath catching. “I’m—”

Yuki’s phone rang.

The sound of the melodic ringtone filled the space between him and his brother, and with an apologetic glance, Yuki took the phone out from his back pocket and looked at the caller ID. His breath caught when he saw an unlisted number, and his eyes were immediately wide with a fraught hope when he pressed the call button and placed the phone against his ear.

“Hello?”

“Yuki.”

His stomach dropped. Kyo’s voice on the other end sounded grave and defeated. Yuki spared a look up at his brother, who was watching him carefully. He stepped out of his brother’s orbit to walk closer towards the entrance, away from Ayame. He was more than grateful when Ayame stayed put.

“Kyo?” Yuki said, his voice low. “What’s going on? Where are you calling from?”

There was silence on the other end of the line. The only sounds coming through were those of Kyo’s rough breathing, as well as the crackling static of the phone.

“You said to call,” Kyo finally said. Yuki couldn’t decipher his tone. Something about it was far off and disconnected.

“I did,” Yuki said. “Is everything all right?”

“No,” came the response, much quicker this time.

“What’s wrong?” Yuki asked, his heart pounding. “Is this about the test?”

“It’s not about the fucking test,” Kyo snapped. And there it was. Kyo’s emotions revealed themselves in the cracks and grooves of his words—a mannerism that Yuki had been observing for years.

Kyo was angry.

Yuki felt like every cell in his body turned cold.

“You still have that garden?” Kyo asked.

“It shouldn’t have moved,” Yuki responded, close to swallowing his own tongue.

“Meet me there.”

And with that, the line went dead. Yuki stared at his still open phone, taking a moment to contemplate the late-night call. The sound of Kyo’s strained voice. The whole horrendous chain of events that had haunted him all day.

*He knows,* was all Yuki could think.

“Yuki?” Ayame called from behind him, his voice soft and concerned. “What’s going on?”

Yuki wanted to turn around. Somehow, he wanted to confess all of his troubles and fears, to unleash the entirety of his world onto his brother. Wanted to surrender—to avoid dealing with the consequences he was surely going to sow. He wanted to sleep.
But he couldn’t.

He was trying to be better than that. He was trying to take responsibility for the things he’d done. He couldn’t sleep. Not with Kyo standing alone, in the cold, at his own garden, needing Yuki there. To yell at him? To punch him? To reject their relationship—whatever it was now—all over again?

It didn’t matter.

Yuki would give him whatever he needed in exchange for complicating Kyo’s life in all the ways Yuki had never wanted.

“Yuki?” Ayame called again, but when Yuki heard his brother take a step forward, his legs snapped like a rubber band.

Without a second thought, he wrenched the door of the shop open and broke into a sprint down the quiet, sleeping street.

It was only after three blocks that he stopped hearing the echoes of his brother calling after him.

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Winter had killed the plants.

Kyo stared down at them, his hands clenched in tight fists as he stared down at the plot of land that was formerly Yuki’s garden. It was overgrown now, with wild grass licking at the edges. Weeds sprouted between rotten and dead bulbs of vegetables and fruits. The now-dominant, dreary brown color struck Kyo as a distinct difference from when he had last been here.

When Yuki had brought him here months ago, rich greens, sharp reds, and deep purples sprouted from the ground—an autumn harvest that must have been ravaged in the collateral damage of their last conversation here.

It bothered him that Yuki hadn’t taken care of it. It bothered him that he had some sort of hand in the wilting corpses on this patch of land.

What was he doing here? His heart somehow felt gnarled and twisted underneath his tight chest; he could feel it throbbing between each of his ribs. It was late and his body was demanding sleep under the nervous hum of his blood.

But leaving seemed futile now, just as it had in Ayame’s kitchen almost a month ago.

Kyo brought his hands up to cover his face, rubbing them over his chilled cheeks, reaching up into his hair and grabbing at the roots. His head was a mess. His body ached with relentless emotional strain. He couldn’t breathe. Fuck, he couldn’t breathe.

“Kyo?”

Kyo whipped himself around, his eyes meeting Yuki’s like cars in a collision. Yuki was breathing hard, sweat glistening on his forehead beneath his somewhat damp bangs. His shoulders were tensed, but also slumped slightly from exertion, and his face was pale.

It wasn’t fair that Yuki looked exactly how Kyo felt in that moment.

It wasn’t fair that everything about him had to be so distracting. It wasn’t fair that of all the fucking
things that might have emboldened him to challenge Akito’s words, it was Yuki’s absurd, horrifying confession.

It wasn’t fair that he hadn’t been able to stop thinking about Yuki for almost a year now.

It wasn’t fair that it felt like Yuki was the only person in the world who could calm the storm raging within him.

“Kyo?” Yuki repeated. He took a tentative step forward, but seemed to be holding himself back from coming any closer. “What’s going on?”

Quick as a shot, Kyo stormed towards Yuki and placed his hands desperately on his upper arms over his coat, holding onto him like it was the only thing keeping him upright. He could feel Yuki tense violently under him.

“Are you still—?”

“I’m sorry!”

They both spoke at once. They stared at each other for a brief moment, both sets of eyes wide and frightened.

“Sorry for what?”

“Am I still what?”

Yuki’s eyebrows creased, but he made no move to shake Kyo’s hands off his arms. His expression shifted from trapped to concerned. Kyo felt his heart hammer in his chest, striking the inside of his rib cage so forcefully, he was sure his entire body was shaking with each beat.

“Kyo, you’re scaring me,” Yuki said, voice stern. “Am I still what?”

Kyo swallowed, mildly aware of how his face was contorted into a glare.

“Are you still in love with me?”

A blanket of fear washed over Kyo as soon as the words left his mouth. He’d never realized how badly he wanted the words to still be true.

He never realized how maimed he’d been by the thought that those words had been a lie. He remembered Yuki walking down the hall with that girl. Shigure’s taunts about his little fucking bet with Yuki rang in his ears. Yuki’s angry scowl and angrier words confronted him again and again and this couldn’t true.

But if it wasn’t, why couldn’t Kyo bring himself to lift his fist to him? Why did Akito’s bet seem so impossible now? What had he even traded in exchange for a few more measly years here.

Yuki blinked, his chest rising in a heave that Kyo knew was no longer from Yuki’s run here. He looked almost hurt by the question, confused. But when he spoke, it was clear and simple.

“Of course I am.”

Kyo pressed his forehead against Yuki’s, wincing as if he were fatally wounded, trying to force out the plague of anguish and self-doubt that Akito had planted in him.

He shouldn’t do this.
He shouldn’t have called Yuki at all.

Kyo felt a chasm in his chest swell with empty, broken winds. His forehead still pressed against Yuki’s, lips close and breathing harshly. The warmth from Yuki’s form so close, but still being kept at bay by Kyo’s arms locking him in place.

*Don’t give up on me.*

*Please.*

Yuki’s arms reached out, squeezing comfortably at Kyo’s waist, and it was enough.

Kyo’s lips collided against Yuki’s, catching Yuki by surprise as he unwittingly let out a sound of bewilderment straight into Kyo’s mouth.

Kyo’s eyes were pinched tightly shut. His hands grasped savagely onto Yuki’s arms. And for the first few moments, Yuki didn’t respond. He stood there, pressed against Kyo, his mouth pliant but unmoving, breathing heavy and body tense.

In his frenzy, Kyo could smell the copper scent of sweat on Yuki. He didn’t know what he would do if Yuki pulled away right then.

Because Akito’s words were bouncing around in his brain on loop—his threateningly easy response, his complete and total understanding of Kyo—and Kyo couldn’t listen to it anymore.

He needed to hear the only voice that seemed to rival Akito’s.

He needed to feel loved.

At the thought that Yuki might not respond at all, he started to pull away, that anxious and tangled lump in his chest ready to fuel his feet to run. But just as Kyo felt hot flashes of guilt and regret creeping up his neck, Yuki pulled at Kyo’s waist and brought him close again.

Kyo’s lips were on Yuki’s again, but this time, Yuki was moving in tandem with him.

The kiss was frantic. Kyo was asking for peace, for comfort, for intensity, for distraction, for a pained love—all in one. His mouth opened and closed on Yuki’s as if he were drinking from an oasis in a desert.

Yuki was matching his strides. His breaths were coming out in frantic bursts through his nose. He opened his mouth, taking in Kyo’s tongue, sucking it into himself, provoking a spark of possessiveness that flared down Kyo’s spine. When Yuki released a small groan, feeling overwhelmed and rushed, Kyo finally slid his arms around Yuki’s back.

Yuki followed suit, wrapping his arms around Kyo’s waist, until the two were pressed flushed together. Their chests were zipped together tightly, their arms tensed, trying to pull each other closer. Yuki let out a small cry when Kyo bit down on his lip.

Fuck, he’d missed this—something he hadn’t allowed himself to realize until just now, as the relief of feeling Yuki’s body on his own was echoing through every joint in his body.

He missed Yuki touching him, he missed the warmth of Yuki’s mouth, he missed the desperate encounters, that feeling of being desired.

*You will never be loved.*
Kyo tensed against the words, suddenly pushing Yuki backwards until his back collided roughly with a tree. Yuki let a pained grunt escape him, but immediately fell back into being consumed by Kyo’s kiss. His hands trailed upwards from Kyo’s waist to dig in his hair as he pressed his mouth against his harder.

Kyo got it now. Every single kiss they had shared made sense now.

The way Yuki would push and prod and ask for so much more than Kyo thought he had to give. How every overwhelming, charged, and intense touch of lip and touch of skin expressed his need for Kyo completely.

And now, Kyo needed the same.

Needed Yuki to need him back.

Kyo’s hands traced up to Yuki’s neck, tilting his mouth into a drastic angle and pressing his tongue in and out of Yuki’s mouth in hot thrusts, the aggressive nature of it making Yuki’s hands tremble and clench in his hair.

It was enough to press his thigh between Yuki’s legs, shifting so that the pressure he was putting on Yuki’s groin was inescapable as he trapped Yuki tightly against the tree. Finally, Yuki broke the kiss, popping his head back against the rough bark and taking in harsh gasps of air.

“Kyo… Kyo,” Yuki half-breathed, half-moaned. Kyo’s lips immediately connected with Yuki’s neck, causing Yuki to hiss. “What are you doing?”

Kyo didn’t want to answer, so he sucked a patch of Yuki’s skin below his ear between his teeth and bit down. He felt Yuki’s legs tighten around his own leg in response.

“I don’t know what’s going on,” Yuki gasped, his eyes still snapped shut and his hands sinking from Kyo’s hair to his back. “I thought you were mad at me.”

“I should be,” Kyo hissed against Yuki’s neck, pressing his lips up and under Yuki’s jaw, causing Yuki to tilt his head back.

He should be. He should be so angry at Yuki for making him need this. He should be infuriated for the way Yuki bulldozed into his life. He should be fucking mad that Yuki fell in love with him at all.

Why wasn’t he?

“I’m sorry,” Yuki breathed.

“This ain’t your fault,” Kyo said, pained yet sincere as his hands sought the skin of Yuki’s stomach under his shirt. As Kyo kept biting and sucking at Yuki’s neck, he was becoming addicted to the way Yuki would arch into his touch.

But Yuki stilled. Kyo could feel the tension from Yuki radiating through his body. He could feel Yuki bending his neck down to look at Kyo, and he finally met Yuki’s gaze. His face flushed, his breathing labored, his hair mussed—some of it even caught on the bark of the tree.

“It is my fault,” Yuki said adamantly.

Kyo finally leaned back, breathless himself, with their legs still intertwined. “What the hell are you talking about?”
Yuki looked at him with eyebrows creased, his eyes conveying both surprise and concern. “Kagura,” he breathed out.

Kyo felt a seed of panic plant in his stomach.

“What? What the fuck are you talking about? What about Kagura?”

Kyo watched as Yuki’s face immediately paled, his mouth opening and closing a few times until he finally spoke. “She… She found… She knows about us. She found out. And then—and then she went missing.”

Kyo’s arms immediately dropped from Yuki’s frame as he swiftly backed away. Yuki slumped, no longer held up by Kyo’s iron grip.

“What do you mean she found out??”

“I’m sorry, I’ve been trying to look for her—”

“She’s not fucking missing!” Kyo cut him off, his voice louder and far more strained than he intended. The image of Kagura stepping into Akito’s room was playing on loop in his head. “I saw her today! She went in to see Akito after I did!”

Yuki’s face immediately melted into dread. “You saw Akito today?”

“He just gave me permission to take the fucking entrance exam! But if Kagura fucking knows—!”

“She wouldn’t. She wouldn’t do that. Not to you.”

“Why the fuck else was she there?! I’m guessing she didn’t take it well!”

“Kyo, that doesn’t mean anything. We can’t panic about this.”

“I can’t believe this,” Kyo said. “There’s no way… there’s no way he’ll let me—”

Yuki came towards him, cupping Kyo’s cheeks within his hands, gently tilting Kyo’s head towards Yuki’s frightened eyes.

“Kyo,” Yuki said, sharp and determined. “I will fix this.”

Kyo felt the glare return to his face as fast as a reflex. He shoved Yuki backwards.

“You’ve fucking done enough.”

Yuki looked as though he’d been struck across the face, but the panicked edge in his voice remained. “I promise this was an accident. I would never… I would never want to hurt you like this.”

Kyo looked Yuki dead on. “Then maybe you should stay the hell out of my life.”

The words shot a hot pulse of regret through Kyo, but he couldn’t bring himself to care. Yuki looked as though he was paralyzed, not knowing how to respond, not knowing what words to offer Kyo.

“Kyo—”

“I’m done with this!” Kyo snapped, his voice rising. “I’m done with you yanking me around! I’m done with fucking thinking about you! I’m done with how you keep fucking me up!”
Kyo stared straight into Yuki’s eyes. He looked angry, though not with Kyo. He looked lost and confused. His eyes were rimmed in red, and his mouth trembled as he searched for the right words to say.

“You…” Yuki tried, having to reign back the strain in his voice. “You may be done with me. But I will never—I will never be done with you. I said I would fix this. And I will.”

Kyo felt his chest inflate with a rage he hadn’t felt in a long time. The fire of it consumed every part of him, as if his bones and blood were made of dry branches and gasoline.

“If you don’t stay the fuck away from me, I will kill you.”

Yuki’s eyes widened at the words that clawed their way out of Kyo’s mouth. Words that had been resting like a sleeping beast in his belly. Words he hadn’t used since he’d begun trying so hard to shut out that side of his mind, body, and spirit.

Yuki looked like he was searching for his words, trying to bring them back from where they shattered in the back of his throat.

It didn’t matter what Yuki had to say.

Because, for once, Kyo listened to his goddamn instinct and ran away—leaving Yuki alone in the barren garden. Yuki didn’t call after him. Yuki didn’t chase after him, either.

Something snarled in him, vicious and mutilated, that wondered if Yuki thought he was telling the truth.

Kyo’s feet slammed on the pavement all the way back to Kazuma’s house, and by the time he entered the home, his legs were burning from the exertion.

In four hours, he would have to wake up for the entrance exam.

__________________________________________________________________________

Tap.

Haru blinked awake.

The remaining winds of winter coaxed the tree branches into tapping against his window, and it was finally becoming loud enough for him to groggily open his eyes.

He ran a hand ran through his hair, still a bit damp from his shower earlier in the night. The distinct sensation of insomnia was settling in his bones, despite his soundless sleep just a few moments before.

The night, winter air was as calm and as cool as a corpse. And for a moment, it felt unnatural to move at all at such a late, still hour.

Tap.

There was the sound again; although this time, when Haru turned towards his window, he wasn’t so sure it was the tree anymore. Curiosity and restlessness taking over his limbs, he climbed out of bed —still in just his sweats. When he opened the window, the sudden chill caused gooseflesh to break out over his bare skin, but he ignored it in favor of stretching himself out to look at the ground below.

A brief rustle in the branches had Haru more than curious enough to make a decision.
He reached towards the branch of the nearby tree, his bare feet gripping the bark and climbing down one by one into the lower hanging branches, until Haru could climb down to safety.

He hit the cold dirt below with a soft grunt before looking around in the yard beside his house. He approached what he believed to be where the rustling came from, wiping his dirt covered hands on the back of his sweats.

“Hello?” he called. And then, because he was almost certain now where the sound came from, “Yuki?”

It wasn’t Yuki.

Eyes that could pierce even the darkest of nights bore into Haru’s chest. In the shadows of the shrubbery and trees were long, dark locks of hair, and skin paler than the moonlight that reflected off her.

“Rin?”

She didn’t respond. Instead, she tilted forward, and Haru leaped forward to catch her as she immediately passed out and landed in Haru’s arms.

She was shivering, and Haru couldn’t quite figure out what else to do other than hold her close, his heart racing against the slow beats of her own.

Kyo woke to a knock on the door, and Kazuma’s voice floating through the shoji doors.

“Kyo? It’s time to wake up—we’re going to be late.”

Kyo sighed, immediately collapsing back into the futon. “Yeah, gimme a sec.”

He rested there for a moment, not used to being this groggy in the morning, before realizing he was still in his clothes from the day before. When he’d come home, he’d simply collapsed onto his futon, proceeding to toss and turn with an anxious stomach the whole night.

He didn’t want to get out of bed. Doing so felt like peeling part of his skin off, but he diligently changed into his school uniform, feeling gross when the fabric touched the dried sweat on his skin. A glance at the clock told him he definitely didn’t have time for a shower.

He came downstairs to find a few simple, homemade rice balls, and a cup of tea waiting for him, along with Shishou in the kitchen rinsing something out in the sink.

“I don’t want to rush you, but you should probably eat quickly. We’ll need to get going soon.”

Kyo silently took his seat, taking small, languid bites of the food. His foggy brain took a moment to realize that Kazuma was looking at him, now at the other end of the room.

“Nervous?” he asked, an affectionate smile on his lips.

Kyo just nodded.

The two walked to the testing center together. Walking this early in the morning meant seeing less people on the streets than usual, and they eventually found themselves in front of the testing center. Kyo looked around at the students snaking inside—at the other uniforms that became a blur as the vast amount of people amassed.
Kyo felt his muscles tense up. His brain still wasn’t even truly awake, and he had completely forgotten about his need to stay alert in the face of a crowd like this.

Kazuma clapped a hand on his shoulder.

“You’ve done your best up until now. You’ll do a fantastic job.”

Kyo craned his neck back to look up at Kazuma, a heavy gloom darkening his eyes—as heavy as the bags below them.

“What if I don’t?” he asked.

Kazuma smiled down at him. “You will. Go on. I’ll be back when you’re finished.”

Kyo felt Kazuma push at his back ever so gently, but it felt as though he was being pushed off the top of a building. The adrenaline of falling coursed through him as he maneuvered through the crowd, as he stood in line to find out his testing details, as he sat in the crowded testing hall, surrounded by murmurs and students and pencil scratches and text tones.

Kyo just needed silence. Just for a moment. Just one fucking second.

The testing official walked into the room, and for better or worse, Kyo was granted his wish as the man in front began taking stacks of paper out of a locked briefcase.

“Good morning,” the official said. “We will begin passing out the test. Lunch will be at 12:00 PM for thirty minutes. Other than that, you will have two five-minute breaks before and after lunch. If you have any other questions, please raise your hand and I will come to your seat. Otherwise, we ask you to remain silent out of respect for your fellow peers.” He quickly looked around to see if anyone might have any questions. When no one raised a hand, he said, “Good luck.”

The tests were passed out in rows. Kyo was sitting at an individual desk in a valley of ducked heads.

When the test finally made its way to his desk, Kyo felt a hot flush of panic well up in his chest just at the sight of it.

He was exhausted, he hadn’t studied the night before, and he’d had no time to learn that fucking equation from two days ago.

“All right, students. Begin.”

With that, the multitude of students flipped their tests over and opened their little booklets. Kyo did the same, the echo of his paper lagging behind the rest of the test-takers.

With his heart beating in his throat, and his brain still beaten and bruised from the day and night before, Kyo looked down and read the first question.

He blinked.

He read it again. And again.

*I don’t know the answer.*

He felt his throat constrict. Briefly, he flipped through the rest of the test, not realizing that the girl beside him was giving him a side-glance at the aggressive turn of paper.

None of it.
He didn’t recognize any of it.
He didn’t know this.
He wasn’t ready.
He couldn’t do this.
He couldn’t do this.

I can’t fucking do this.

Kyo stood, his chair scraping against the floor, drawing all eyes to him. He felt like he was drowning.

He looked around, at the curious glances, at hands with pencils poised to answer questions they all fucking studied for. That they all fucking knew. And that Kyo didn’t.

“Excuse me? Take your seat please.”

Kyo looked up at the testing official, the man’s stern eyes mixing horribly in his gut with everything else that had been there, rooted there, since he agreed to take this stupid fucking test.

The eyes of the entire classroom were still fixed on him. So he did the only thing he could do to get their prying looks off and away from him.

He left.

On legs still sore from the night before, he ran from the testing center. Out of the classroom, out of the building, out of the outside gates.

Kyo ran.

And he ran for a while before he realized he didn’t know anywhere he could go.

Chapter End Notes

YELL ABOUT FRUITS BASKET AND YUKIKYO WITH ME ON TUMBLR:

http://mistergrass.tumblr.com/

And join our YukiKyo discord while you're at it!:

https://discord.gg/fqKWtB6
Intermission - Spring, Summer, Autumn, and Winter 2001

Chapter Notes

OKAY REAL QUICK - PLEASE READ:
You might have noticed that this fic went from 23 chapters to 25! That is because the other chapter is the missing intermission between the two winter seasons that SHOULD have been posted, like, 2 years ago. So if you're an intermission fan, be sure not to miss it! I do recommend reading it before this intermission (if you like those chapters) but really, in the end, what does it matter?

IF YOU ARE NOT AN INTERMISSION FAN! This is probably the ONLY one I'd recommend giving a read! Again, all these chapters you don't really need to know what's going on — but it might certainly contextualize some stuff in this fic! And if it's just not your bag, I'm happy to say that updates will (hopefully) be a bit more steady now that I've worked all the intermission gunk out of my brain. So stay tuned! Pursuit is getting finished in 2019 if it kills me!!!

QUICK WARNINGS FOR THIS CHAPTER: There is a fair bit of alluding/discussion/thoughts to a particular incident (that has been mentioned previously in this fic) that can be read as attempted suicide/self-harm/cutting. Again, there is no actual practice of it in the chapter — simply the discussion of it!

I would be a fool if I didn't at least partially give a shout out to some of my fave Shigure stans--Tsun, Bee, Shark, this one if for you.

ALSO IF YOU LIKED SHIGURE GETTIN PUNCHED IN THE FACE FROM A FEW CHAPTERS AGO, CHECK OUT WHAT HANNAH DREW ME:
https://lilbeehive.tumblr.com/post/185717976177

Despite the fact that Pursuit flops around with POVs, it has been a very conscious decision not to have Shigure's POV featured until now.

Enjoy the first and last look into this garbage man's brain!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The side table slipped from the man’s gloved fingers and landed with a hard **CLUNK** on the hardwood floor.

Without a moment of hesitation, the man’s superior barked a loud, “Watch it!”

Shigure flicked open his lighter, taking in a deep breath of his cigarette as he watched the men in uniform coveralls crawl around the room like worker ants.

“No harm done,” Shigure reassured from his perch by the door. “Nothing in here is all that precious.”

“Sorry, sir,” the mover said, regardless. He picked up his end of the table, and he and the other man hefted the piece of furniture out the door. Shigure took another deep inhale of his cigarette as the men
worked around his house—his former house, he supposed.

Most of the smaller affects had already been packed in boxes in the weeks preparing for the move, and now with the hired hands moving out the bulk of furniture, it really began to feel empty. Even if there were more people in his home now than there might have ever been before. Between the hired movers and the Sohma maids cleaning each room bit by bit as it was emptied.

A fruitless gesture. This house wouldn’t do anything but gather dust until the dog returned. Whether that would be him, or another generation, Shigure still hadn’t decided. But he amused himself with the thought of idle grime gathering uselessly on the soon to be clean, pristine floors.

He stepped outside, positioning himself away from the stream of movement of men and furniture and cleaners, and enjoyed his cigarette in peace. Watching the bustling, but making no move to be apart of it. So when Hatori stepped down the pathway towards Shigure’s house, almost colliding with a man carrying a large lamp, Shigure was the one to see him first of the two.

“Morning,” Shigure chirped, smile bright when Hatori approached him. “Come to help?”

“I don’t see why I should, since you don’t even seem to be doing so,” Hatori said, evenly.

“I’m delegating,” he gave a wave of his hand. Shigure took cigarettes from the back pocket of his jeans and offered the pack to Hatori, who declined with a cold stare. He shrugged, stubbing out his own that had been burnt to the filter, and lighting up another for himself.

“I stopped by to make sure you’re still coming tonight,” Hatori said, arms crossing.

“Did Akito send you to check?” Shigure asked with a smile. When Hatori answered with a disapproving tilt of his head, Shigure laughed, “Of course I’ll be there. It’s my going away party, after all.”

“Who knows? You’ve been acting rather unpredictably, lately.”

“Have I?” Shigure hummed. “I don’t think that’s true.”

Hatori sighed as Shigure sat himself down on the outer barrier of the house, hands resting behind him to keep him propped up. After a moment, Hatori resignedly sat beside him.

“I don’t think you understand the level of responsibility you’re taking on here,” Hatori finally said.

Shigure laughed, “Neither do I.”

“Shigure, I’m serious. It’s one thing to move out on your own. It’s another to have Yuki move in with you, too.”

“His parents don’t seem to mind. Is it really such a problem?” Shigure asked lightly, with no real care for what the answer was.

Hatori sighed, “He’s very fragile, you know.”

In truth, that didn’t surprise Shigure all too much. He didn’t know much about Yuki, and had barely interacted with him even through the process of coordinating the move to the new house. But from what he could gather he seemed like a quiet, tragic sort of kid.

If the way he clutched Shigure’s sleeve was anything to go by, at least. If the prominent scar on Yuki’s wrist was also added to the conversation.
But even besides that, before Yuki’s little incident caused a flare to surge through the main house, Shigure thought fragile was a perfect way to describe the boy. Yuki’s eyes constantly heavy, his palms always sweating, his movements either lethargic and weighted or anxious and fidgety. The worst kind of person, in Shigure’s book. Timidity was a trait with which Shigure never felt even a passing need to empathize.

“I’ll be sure not to drop him,” Shigure joked back.

“I’m serious. You need to be careful with him. His body has been weak ever since he was little, asthma attacks are common for him. What are you going to do if he has one in that house in the middle of nowhere?”

“Why, call his doctor, of course!” Shigure gave back. Hatori shook his head.

“And be careful what you say around him, too. I know you love to instigate people, but Akito is a very sensitive subject for him. Suppress the urge to get a rise out of people this time around, understand me?”

“Yes, yes,” Shigure waved a hand dismissively.

Hatori sighed, finally taking out his own cigarette and lighting it up. The two sat in silence for a moment, watching the movers continue to work. “This is a terrible idea. You should have refused him.”

“Ah, so sorry,” Shigure nearly sang. “If you’re coming to me it must mean that he wouldn’t listen to you, either.”

“He has his heart set on moving into that house for whatever reason.”

“Teenagers are headstrong, Hari. Let them live their lives freely.”

“Have you ever spoken more than three words to him? Ever?”

Shigure shrugged, taking another deep inhale of his cigarette, “I’m sure I’ll talk to him tonight.”

Hatori didn’t say anything to that, and the two smoked in silence. But Shigure could feel the tension on Hatori’s shoulders, knew when Hatori was shuffling words in his head so they would come out eloquent and clear on his tongue. Shigure’s mind wandered to the third musketeer of their pack. He thought of how Ayame was quick to speak his mind, and did so with a freedom that Shigure savored.

“You have no idea what this is doing to his health,” Hatori finally decided on. And Shigure knew the little rat boy was no longer the subject of their conversation, if he even was in the first place.

“He has you and Kureno at his beck and call. I don’t understand why I would be any use to him.”

“Must you be such a child about this?”

Shigure slowly exhaled the smoke out of his lungs, a hard look settling onto his face.

“Yes.”

Not one word was exchanged between Shigure and Yuki at the party.
It wasn’t intentional—in all honesty, Shigure had planned to strike up even the most mundane of conversations with the skittish, sickly looking boy. Though, admittedly, some of the fun had been taken from the idea when Akito retired barely an hour into the gathering—a soured look on the young god’s face. But if only for the dual purpose of teasing Hatori and putting Ayame at ease, Shigure still planned on at least saying a brief greeting.

Instead what happened was this:

Right around the time Shigure thought idly to himself that perhaps he’d attempt small talk with his younger cousin, Kyo showed up.

Kyo was not here to see Shigure off.

His stomping feet took him directly to Yuki, whose soft-boiled egg of an expression immediately gained a sharpness that had Shigure tilting his head in tepid curiosity.

Kyo attacked Yuki, looking wild and unrestrained as if he were a feral animal. Yuki fought back looking much the same.

Yuki sent Kyo skidding through a now-broken table, smashing expensive china and spilling delicacies down Kyo’s rage-soaked body.

“Honestly,” Ayame huffed beside him, with a delicate roll of his shoulders.

“Fragile, hm?” Shigure mocked to Hatori, watching as Yuki excused himself out of the room with a troubled expression burnt on his face. Haru followed after him. Kyo leapt up, storming out the way he came, cursing at Momiji who laughed a few words at him.

“You know what I mean,” Hatori simply said, as the conversation and party continued on around them without taking time to linger on the common occurrence.

Yuki didn’t return to the party. Shigure wouldn’t have noticed if he did.

———

The first week was the only time Shigure had the house to himself. The furniture was wrapped in plastic, boxes littered the floor, and only two rooms in the house had functioning lightbulbs (the kitchen and the office).

He busied himself with unpacking and convincing himself that the still, quiet, forest air would be conducive for writing. Shigure spent the first hour looking for the box with his radio inside—immediately searching to fill the house with tinny, static talk shows and music while he sorted his things with no real urgency.

After a week, towards the end of March, Yuki arrived.

The house was still a wreck, but at least the furniture wasn’t wrapped in plastic anymore. But books, keepsakes, and kitchenware piled high on any available flat surface.

Hatori and Yuki let themselves in, both toeing off their shoes as Shigure emerged from his office with a couple books in hand.

“Welcome,” Shigure said in that synthetic amicable tone he reserved for the outside world. “Did you find the house alright?”
“This place is a disaster,” Hatori answered in lieu of a greeting.

“I’m growing into it,” Shigure quipped back.

“Where’s my room?” Yuki asked. There were two suitcases, one being rolled in by Hatori, and the other a duffel bag slung over Yuki’s shoulder. Shigure wondered if that was all he had.

“Upstairs and to the left,” Shigure said. “I’ll show you—”

“It’s okay,” Yuki cut him off with his feeble voice. And with that he shuffled upstairs without a word. Shigure stared after him until Yuki cleared the hallway and disappeared up the stairs.

“Charming kid,” Shigure laughed.

“Don’t start with him,” Hatori sighed. “I have an hour before I have to head back. I’ll help you unpack.”

“How agreeable of you.”

By the time Hatori had to leave, they’d accomplished putting away most of the kitchen. Shigure continued to work in his office by himself, occasionally hearing the sounds of wood shifting and settling from the ceiling, along with muffled, sock-covered steps.

Shigure wondered if this is what being haunted felt like.

“Should I call an exorcist?” Shigure mused aloud. There wasn’t any response other than the chuckle he gave himself.

Shigure learned one thing very quickly: Teenagers were troublesome.

Not that this was any surprise, considering how Shigure’s teenage years turned out. But the little spirit upstairs was troublesome in a whole other way he’d never anticipated.

For one, Yuki never left his room.

It wasn’t that Shigure was necessarily looking forward to the company of the diluted personality of a child, but he certainly expected that when he invited someone to live with him that the house wouldn’t feel quite as empty as it did at all times.

A vast contrast to the world Shigure lived in up until now.

Sohma House was a monster of a construction. The inner mansion had mazes of engawas that connected room to house to room to house and so on. Shigure spent much of his time there, both during adolescence and his young adult life. The pattering of footsteps was a constant, soothing noise. Easy conversation that passed between maids and servants and Sohma family members boomed through thin, paper walls.

Outside the inner mansion, but still deep in the estate, were the zodiac homes. The paths often filled with children, often brought forth familiar faces. Shigure spent his school years living not even a five minute walk away from Ayame and Hatori. He knew each zodiac parent, he knew each of their Sohma relatives. He would stop on his way home from school and speak with his neighbors in front of their homes. There Shigure would get to know Kagura’s father. There Shigure would chat idly with Hatori’s uncle, once he moved in when Hatori’s parents passed away. There Shigure would sit
with Ayame on the porch of his home, talking loudly for hours about empty, pointless things.

There was something that Shigure quite liked about the yards and roads and pathways within the Sohma walls. Walking down them felt powerful. The world beneath his feet seemed to shift and move for him. Cars and children and people knew his face, knew his status, knew his name. A place crafted to live openly and freely.

This house was deathly silent.

It took twenty minutes just to reach a main road.

A blessing, really. A writer could not put pen to paper without some silence in the world. And the seclusion boasted power of a different kind, Shigure thought. One that controlled the comings and goings of his guests (of which there were none), and sat him as the sole leader of the household (of an empty, haunted building).

Shigure would lay awake, small bedside lamp illuminating a book, and he would hear timid steps in the hallway that only grew stronger once they passed his room. Shigure thought about joining Yuki on a number of occasions, perhaps just to startle him like a bratty child would to a mother. But each time, he decided against it.

What was really baffling to Shigure was despite Yuki’s apparent fear of Shigure, Yuki had no problem leaving evidence of himself all over the house. There were crumbs on the floor in front of the fridge. Plates were left unwashed in the kitchen sink. Used napkins laid on the kitchen table. Shigure gave a small grumble when he had to throw away a package of opened cold cuts sitting on the kitchen counter from the night before.

The trash can overflowed in the kitchen from the efforts of two people (as invisible as one of them was), and Yuki apparently had no qualms about placing his garbage on the floor nearby when it wouldn’t fit inside. Shigure tied the bag and set it against the far kitchen wall, out of the way.

The closest the garbage collectors came was at the end of the pathway leading up to the house. Never was Shigure in the mood for that walk.

Later, he thought. Not without a hint of resentment.

Shigure didn’t see Yuki until another week passed. It was early in the morning, and Shigure was up, having worked through the night. He poured himself a coffee in the littered kitchen when Yuki walked in. His eyes were wide, as if he were surprised Shigure was there at all.

“Going somewhere?” Shigure asked.

Yuki gave him a strange look, looking down at himself as if to point out the obvious, “School?”

The navy uniform was apparent now, and Shigure’s tired eyes waved off Yuki’s scrutiny.

“First day of high school, right?”

Yuki nodded.

“Have fun,” Shigure said, walking past him without another glance.

Shigure settled in his office, pinching the wooden doors open just a crack to let in the fresh, spring air. He watched as Yuki walked down the path alone.
A part of him couldn’t help wondering what caused a person to be wound so tightly.

Shigure wasn’t *avoiding* the house. It wasn’t in Shigure’s nature to avoid things. His path was as decisive and filled with momentum as water being pushed down a river. He freely splashed against boulders, crashed down steep drops, and elegantly diverted his path when the river came upon unexpected bends. Water didn’t avoid obstacles because water didn’t *have* obstacles.

Except, perhaps, the threatening dry air in a brutal, lifeless desert.

Not that Shigure was comparing Yuki to such a thing, mind you. He would never.

And not that Shigure would avoid any area because of a *teenager* of all things.

Even if Yuki at this point was more of a poltergeist than a school boy. He charged the air with tense, petrified energy. He made Shigure conscious of his heavy strides. Perhaps that was the problem; in Sohma House, Shigure never had to be aware of anything at all. Here, it was as if even the slightest movement was rippling through the entirety of the house.

A natural effect when someone was frightened of you, Shigure concluded.

Not that Shigure ever thought of himself as someone to fear.

Again, this is why he couldn’t stand the timorous.

Shigure spent the next few weeks visiting Hatori at the main house. He bothered him between appointments, and walked around the Sohma grounds to retain the peace the estate so easily offered. He gossiped with his favorite of the maids, and invited himself over for tea with Kagura’s parents.

It was after a few days that Hatori made the comment:

“Not able to maintain your own household?”

Shigure didn’t go back to the main house for a little while after that.

Instead, he called the few friends he had at the publishing company. For a full week, Shigure went out drinking every night, indulging in the conversation of other authors. Drinking alcohol until all he could do upon coming home was collapse in his unmade bed and wake up with a hangover only more beer and liquor could cure.

One morning Shigure ran into Yuki just before the house. Yuki was in his uniform, walking the lonely harrowing path towards school, while Shigure was returning from a night of drinking, still a bit distorted by alcohol.

Yuki eyed him unpleasantly, and Shigure could feel irritation billow under his skin—quite a bold expression for someone so frightened.

“Have a good trip,” Shigure said instead, grin contrived on his face.

“I’m off,” said Yuki back, with a stability in his voice that Shigure was sure must have been forced.

Ayame visited at the end of April.
Shigure lifted his head from his pillow as if it were a brick. His brain was still clogged with the lingering pulse of liquor, and mouth dry as sand. The knocks continued insistently until Shigure pulled himself up and carried himself to the front door.

“Gure!” Ayame beamed, all too loudly, when the front entrance slid open. Though he didn’t mind, the house could use some noise.

Just the sound of Ayame’s unfiltered presence felt like a flush of toxins both in the empty, drafty rooms, and through Shigure’s own hangover.

“Aya,” he beamed right back, stepping aside to allow his first official visitor.

“You must think I’m absolutely horrid for not coming sooner,” Ayame tsked. “I ask such a favor of you and I can’t even find the time to grant you a housewarming present, but fear not! I’ve arrived with gifts and sweets!”

“No trouble at all, Aya,” Shigure said leading him into the living room. “It’s taken me longer than I want to admit getting the place settled.”

Shigure discreetly shut the kitchen doors tight, keeping the bags of waste out of view as he sat with Ayame around the living room table.

“What a wonderful space! So Japanese,” Ayame laughed. “It’s almost as if you should be wearing a yukata.”

“What an inspiring idea. It does seem very writer-ly.” Shigure put a finger on his chin as if considering.

“Novelist cosplay,” Ayame said, with a nod and a hum. “A rare one, but a good one! I’ll have to send you one from my shop.”

Shigure laughed, “Don’t do that, then I’ll actually wear it.”

“Well now I must,” Ayame boomed. He moved to grab the items from the bag he’d brought. A set of elegant sweets and bottle of sake laid out on the table.

“It’s still morning, you know,” Shigure mused, picking up the bottle to inspect it. The brand was far too expensive, and Shigure had to stop himself from ruining the mood with a huff.

“For you. For later,” Ayame smiled.

Shigure felt a sigh heavy on his lungs, but repressed the sound in favor of maintaining his easy grin, “You could come by later tonight, you know.”

“Oh no,” Ayame said immediately. “I shouldn’t. I… Well, I’m sure Yuki has no interest in seeing me just yet.”

That billowing irritation was back in Shigure’s blood, and he leaned closer to Aya with a strained grin.

“Teenagers hardly ever know what interest them,” Shigure comforted.

“Something we both know all too well,” Ayame said a little too easily. Shigure laughed.

“I don’t think Yuki realizes what a good brother he has,” Shigure said, leaning back to open the box of sweets. He offered one to Ayame who politely declined. “I wouldn’t blame you if you wanted to
Shigure expected Ayame’s tone to turn playful and cheerful, but instead his expression dampened in a way that had Shigure feeling uneasy.

After high school, Ayame gained a seriousness to his features. There was a hardened edge to his eyes that tried so desperately to appear kind instead of callous and passive. Ayame was so expressive, so bright and alive, and when he thought, it spoke loudly on his well-proportioned face.

Shigure found he liked to watch the process. Shigure found that Ayame’s quest for gentility to be quite inspiring. He loved watching Ayame craft himself like clay, command his own thoughts and words as if he were a god molding the earth. He found he had a softness for Ayame’s now careful steps, because even careful Ayame still walked with a stride so bold and confident that it could not be matched.

So when Ayame’s features were pulled downwards, Shigure found himself pulled with them, listening closer to make up for the space left behind from Ayame’s deliberately quieted words.

“I know I’ve asked so much of you, Gure. Don’t lie,” Ayame started. “I don’t think I could be any more grateful to you for allowing Yuki to live here. The thought of what might have happened if he stayed in that dreadful house…”

Shigure watched Ayame’s teeth clench.

“He’s safe now.” Probably. Shigure allowed himself to comfort Ayame, regardless. Even if he hadn’t seen much of Yuki at all since he moved in.

“I know he is,” Ayame smiled warmly. “My trust in your runs deeper than anyone. I cannot begin to tell you how relieved I am each morning when I wake up knowing my brother is away from that terrible place.”

Something uneasy built in Shigure’s gut again, but he brushed it away. Was Ayame the only man in the world who trusted him in such a way? It was odd thinking that that must be the case. He found he didn’t mind in the slightest.

“Even more than Hatori? I’m touched.”

“Don’t you dare say a word to him, you know how sensitive he can be!” Ayame laughed.

“My lips are sealed,” Shigure said, smiling. “You know I can’t say no to you, anyway.”

Ayame’s expression faltered slightly at that, the somber expression returning like a dip in a roller coaster.

“I know, Gure. And for that reason I hate to ask more of you, really I do,” Ayame lamented, earnestly. Shigure eyed him questioningly, waiting for him to continue. “Yuki… He’s such a quiet boy. And I’m afraid he’ll be awfully lonely until he learns to properly use his voice again. Would you keep him company in the meantime? Just as you used to do for me when we were boys?”

“Hopefully not exactly like when we were boys,” Shigure laughed, but it was subdued, matching the tone of his dear friend.

Ayame let a smile slide onto his features, “Don’t you lay a finger on my baby brother, you lecherous man.”
Shigure chuckled, holding his hands up defensively.

“Please don’t leave him alone, Gure,” Ayame said, suddenly. His eyes pleading. “It frightens me so.”

Again, the topic of Yuki’s scar was brought forth in a way that no one could seem to put into words. But it read so clearly on Ayame’s face, just as it had on Hatori’s.

Just months ago, a blade sliced through Yuki’s wrist.

A blade that Yuki controlled.

“He’s so weak,” he remembered Akito saying, fists clenched, eyes weighted by anger.

Who was Shigure to argue at the time?

Ayame looked at him so pleadingly—not even realizing what he had entered just by being kind. There was a war being fought, quiet and brutal. The fighting factions both sling the blood on their hands towards the other hoping it would stain. And Yuki was a weapon so beautifully designed to help Shigure win.

But now, with Ayame staking his claim over his brother—as unsure and humble as it was—the battlefield unwittingly shifted.

A fight between good and evil over Shigure’s decidedly complacent soul.

“Don’t you worry, Aya,” Shigure said, contrastingly cheery. “He’s in good hands with me. I’m such a fun person, after all.”

It was enough to clear the fog off Ayame and send a smile right back. Cheerfulness filled Ayame again like water overflowing from a glass, and Shigure found he enjoyed watching Ayame’s effortless transformations.

Why couldn’t everyone’s emotions come so easily?

It was three days later that Shigure received a package in the mail—large and bulky, but not too heavy. Inside, a deep blue yukata. Shigure laughed loudly when he held it up from the mess of tissue paper inside the box.

Ayame’s note read:

*It’s always important to look the part!*

The task was simple: Pretend to care.

Shigure could do that. He was quite a master at it. He had won awards for books with characters he wrote that cared so much.

He could play the part of the wise, older cousin. Of the friendly landlord.

This was all easier said than done, however. And Shigure lamented the loss of freedom that going out drinking gave him. Despite the fact that other authors could only offer such dry, dull conversation. Pretentious flaunting of their styles and ideas were always quick to come up, and Shigure had tired of being a head above the rest.
Still, he hadn’t realized that agreeing to let Yuki stay here would equate to being a live-in nanny.

It was close to May and still the two had barely spoken.

Perhaps if he looked the part, all this would come easier.

In a navy blue yukata, Shigure knocked on the door of Yuki’s room one night.

“Yuki?” He called.

After a moment, the door slid open a crack, Yuki peering from behind the door, only to give Shigure a once over.

“What are you wearing?” He asked, distaste obvious, as he opened the door a little wider.

“Don’t you think it makes me look like a real writer?” Shigure asked, with a smile.

“Not particularly,” Yuki said. “You look like Grandpa Bunji.”

Shigure couldn’t help but laugh at the image. Grandpa Bunji was a servant turned resident of the Sohma House. He worked for years for the family, becoming quite beloved amongst the Sohmas. Later in his life, when he retired, he settled in a modest house on the grounds, spending his days sitting in the gardens in his yukata. He was notorious for chatting the ear off of anyone who dared pass by.

“Be that as it may,” Shigure started. “Why don’t you come down for a moment. I’ll prepare something to eat.”

“You’re going to cook?” Yuki asked, skeptically. And Shigure wondered why he ever thought this kid was afraid of him.

“Have you eaten dinner?”

“Yes.”

“What did you have?” Shigure asked.

“Instant miso,” Yuki said. “And there’s still some microwave rice.”

Shigure’s brow furrowed. “Is that what you usually have for dinner?”

“You don’t stock your kitchen very well,” Yuki said, coolly.

“You could have said something, you know,” Shigure responded. “You live here, too.”

Yuki’s eyes drifted to the floor and he shrugged.

“Not used to asking for things are you?” Shigure deduced easily, and Yuki gave him a wary glare. “Well, being around Akito for so long will do that.”

Shigure watched him carefully, for that fragility that Hatori warned him about. For how he might look at the floor with a cold sweat on his brow. For that timidity to come back in full force.

Instead, Yuki crossed his arms, holding his elbows in front of his stomach.

“If you know that, then why not buy more food?”
Shigure blinked.

An easy smile spread over his face.

“Don’t worry,” Shigure said, tone light. He gestured towards the stairs, watching as Yuki relented and emerged from his room. “I have a feeling I’ll be turning over a new leaf any day now.”

He knew how to make curry, at least.

Shigure dropped the little block of instant stock in the pot and let it sit while Yuki sat quietly at the table. The tension that Yuki brought into the room was far more pronounced now with Yuki only a few feet away. Shigure repressed a sigh when he looked over his shoulder, eyeing Yuki apprehensively.

His back was straight and stiff as a board, his eyes focused on the far edge of the table. He looked tense, as if he was waiting to be scolded. And his clothes hung off his frame that made him look all the meeker. Shigure let his eyes trail down to Yuki’s left wrist, resting on the table. From this angle it was hard to see, but the flash of a scar that went from palm to wrist was still clear as day.

Just as it was the day Shigure asked if he wanted to move in with him.

With the pot covered and the rice in the cooker, Shigure went to the cabinet to pull out the sake that Ayame bought, bringing it to the table and setting it down with a tiny glass. The small thunk of the bottle and ceramic against the wood table was the only sound apart from the rustling flames of the stove, and it was enough to have Yuki’s eyes on him—the rat’s expression clearly disapproving.

Now that the two were sitting here, Shigure had run out of words to say to him. The silence of the house seemed intensified, and already he was beginning to regret knocking on the boy’s door. The curry bubbled in the dirty kitchen, sounding something like a swamp.

Yuki looked as though he wanted to be here about as much as Shigure did. There was no turning back now though, he supposed.

Shigure poured himself a glass of sake and sipped at it. It was smooth going down, as all needlessly expensive alcohol was, and Shigure smiled at the delicate flavor. He would still need to find a way to scold Ayame for the extravagance of the gift.

He looked to Yuki when he felt eyes on him and was met with a rather brusque expression from the boy. It was strange how differently he looked from Ayame, despite all their physical similarities. He didn’t think he’d ever seen an expression so idly cross on his friend—probably never would—but Yuki wore it as if there was no other expression in the world to make.

“Would you like some?” Shigure asked, lifting an amused eyebrow.

“No, thank you,” Yuki said, not looking away.

“I’ve met your mother—I’m sure she’s taught you staring isn’t polite,” Shigure chuckled.

“I’m not living with my mother anymore for a reason,” Yuki responded.

“Ah, what a freedom you’ve managed to claim,” Shigure teased. Yuki’s eyes narrowed.

“Meaning?”
“Well, you haven’t done much since you’ve moved in other than barricade yourself in your room and glare at me.”

To his credit, Yuki did look a little taken aback by that, and his young features did passively land on an apologetic look for a moment. Finally, Yuki looked away—most likely when he realized he couldn’t maintain the expression.

“Sorry,” Yuki said, eyeing him only slightly now. “I didn’t mean to be rude.”

“It’s just surprising,” Shigure laughed, taking another sip of his sake. “Since I was sure you were scared of me.”

“I was,” Yuki said honestly, before turning back away. “Until I realized you were a drunk.”

Shigure choked slightly on the alcohol down his throat, causing it to burn all the more. He composed himself just barely, bringing a fist to tap at his chest.

He sat straight, a vexed smile stretching over him, “Excuse me?”

Yuki gave him another look, irritable and condescending before his eyes landed on the sake bottle. And now that Shigure thought about it, the bottle itself was rather large — meant to share at a party, or meant to stock a crowded bar. Shigure was hardly about to drink all of it in one sitting, though.

“Has anyone ever told you that you’re a little uptight?” Shigure asked, still somehow maintaining his rapidly hollowing smile.

Yuki whipped his darkened eyes back to Shigure, “You can’t say something like that to a total stranger.”

“Are we strangers?” Shigure laughed.

“Yes,” Yuki hissed.

Shigure considered this for a moment. It was true that Shigure knew next to nothing about Yuki, and had only considered him when he became points of fixation for the people in his life—always Akito’s playmate, suddenly Hatori’s anchored guilt, even more suddenly Ayame’s fix-it project in his cold, dispassionate family.

“I don’t think we are,” Shigure said. “Aren’t we family? Aren’t we bonded?”

Shigure chuckled when Yuki seemed to pout at the last word—his face utterly teenager.

“What you need is to learn to take more control over your freedom—such as I’ve been doing.” Shigure stood to fetch something from the kitchen, and returned with another sake glass in tow. He poured it to the brim and passed it to Yuki.

Yuki eyed it unimpressively, “Your freedom?”

“Did you think I got this house by asking nicely?”

Yuki blinked, expression finally clearing through a haze of defensive irritability. When he softened, he really did look like a child. Perhaps that was why Yuki didn’t seem to allow himself to relax his features all that often.

The rat boy stared cautiously down at the sake glass, picking it up as anyone would their first time bringing alcohol to their lips — as if the cup was improperly weighted, or as if it was something to be
treated carefully.

He sipped at the lip and swallowed it down as if it were a bite of steak too big. Yuki brought it back to look at it, as if surprised it hadn’t told him it tasted so decent. Shigure smiled at the scene, shaking his head.

“Don’t expect all sake to taste that good,” Shigure said, drawing Yuki’s curious eyes up to him. “It’s a gift from your brother—his taste is infamous, I’m sure.”

Yuki’s expression crinkled a bit at the mention of his brother, but Shigure was surprised when he didn’t seem to have any more of a reaction.

“Can I… finish this?”

“I poured your glass, didn’t I?”

The sake did not compliment the curry.

Yuki sipped at his glass throughout dinner, taking bites of sauce over rice in big clumps. They didn’t speak about much else, but Shigure couldn’t help but feel as though he’d achieved even the slightest victory.

——————

The following day, Shigure heard Yuki return from school. But instead of footsteps passing by his room and trotting up the stairs, Shigure was surprised when he heard a knock on his office door.

“Come in,” Shigure prompted. Yuki slid the door open, taking a look around the office before focusing his gaze away from the dog.

“I was wondering,” Yuki started.

“Yes?”

“The land out back,” he stopped himself. “Were you planning on using it for anything?”

“Out back?” Shigure wondered. Quite honestly, he hadn’t considered the land out there at all. And the idea of making any sort of alterations to the current plot seemed almost absurd—perhaps it was the first time Shigure realized how temporary he considered the home to be. “I didn’t have any particular plans for it.”

“I see,” Yuki said, shifting his weight.

Shigure wondered how someone could be so sharp-tongued, yet so meek at the same time.

“I won’t let you use it if you don’t ask me properly,” Shigure goaded, with a smile. Yuki’s expression scrunched almost comically.

“I thought you said this house was both of ours,” Yuki said, rather petulantly.

“I thought you said you had a hard time asking for things,” Shigure crossed his arms, smug expression looking up at Yuki expectantly. Finally, the boy met his gaze with an uncomfortable huff.

“You said that, not me,” Yuki mumbled, but continued anyway. “Could I use it? Just what’s down the hill out back.”
“What for?”

“A garden,” Yuki said. “For vegetables.”

Shigure gave the boy a funny look, “That’s a pretty odd request from a fifteen year old.”

“You told me to take advantage of my freedom, right? Well. This is how I want to do it.”

Shigure hummed, eyeing the boy approvingly.

“Go ahead,” Shigure said, looking back to his work. “Sounds fun.”

“Really?”

He looked back up to see Yuki’s wide, hopeful eyes—as if this was the first time anyone had ever allowed him anything. Though that couldn’t have been true—not for the rat family, surely. Not for the little mouse who sat so close to god.

A god that had cast Shigure away.

“Of course.” His tone was more reassuring than need be, but what a victory to be something contrary to Akito and have Yuki drawn in all the more.

“Thank you,” came Yuki’s honest, quiet reply. The door to Shigure’s office slid shut.

He smiled when he went back to his papers.

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Shigure grew tired of curry rather quickly—and so did Yuki, who was finding it much easier to express his opinion after their first meal together. Take-out was quick to become the routine, and Shigure didn’t think he encountered one delivery boy who didn’t comment on the distance or seclusion of the house.

The apparition decided he would continue to eat his meals with Shigure — how fortunate of him to be deemed worthy, Shigure mockingly thought to himself. But the tension of the house seemed to ease meal by meal. Yuki didn’t ask for anymore sake, but Shigure didn’t find the need to drink with his meals all that often, anyway.

After a couple weeks of none-stop take-out passed, Shigure noticed that Yuki’s clothes didn’t seem to be hanging off him quite as much. He didn’t think too much of it, other than to playfully curse the teenage metabolism as he wondered if he was gaining weight, himself.

“I need exercise,” Shigure said one morning, after hours of hunching his back over his desk over research. “Let’s go out tonight, shall we?”

Yuki shrugged, biting at an apple in the kitchen, as he slung his backpack over his shoulder. “That’s fine.”

“Have a safe trip,” Shigure called as Yuki headed towards the door.

He paused for a moment, door open.

“I’m off.”

Shigure chuckled to himself and went back to his office to work.
One afternoon, the door slammed.

Shigure was almost startled by the sound, immediately getting up from his desk to check where the source had come from.

“Yuki?” Shigure called out.

Yuki looked frantic, and completely put-off by Shigure’s sudden appearance in the hallway stopping the pathway to his room. His eyes were angry and focused in every way, and he looked out of breath as if he ran the whole way home.

“What’s going on? Are you alright?” Shigure asked.

“I’m fine. I just. I need to go to my room,” Yuki insisted. Shigure reflexively blocked the hallway even more.

“You know, usually when something troubles you, the best thing you can do is talk about it.”

“I don’t want to talk about anything,” Yuki said sincerely, trying to take another step forward.

Ayame’s plea to Shigure played in his ear, and if there was ever a time not to leave Yuki alone, he supposed it was this one.

Shigure put a hand on Yuki’s shoulder, giving him as sincere a smile as he could muster.

“Sit down,” he said, authoritatively. “Let’s talk. Otherwise I’ll just have to assume you’re sick with that horribly pale color in your face and I’ll call Har—”

“Don’t,” Yuki near shouted. Desperate as the wild look in his eyes. Shigure tilted his head towards the kitchen. Yuki swallowed and padded silently towards the table, Shigure following the whole time.

“Now, why don’t you tell me what’s wrong,” Shigure said after a long moment, when Yuki’s breathing seemed to finally settle.

Yuki eyed him nervously before staring back at the table.

“I pushed a girl today,” Yuki near-whispered. Shigure arched an eyebrow.

“I’m sure you know better than to go using your martial arts against women.”

“It wasn’t on purpose,” Yuki insisted. “She tried to hug me. She almost did.”

Shigure blinked, “What? Were you confessed to?”

“Yes, I—”

Yuki was cut off by the sound of Shigure’s laugh drifting through the living room, completely combating the tense air that Yuki trailed in behind him. Yuki’s eyes narrowed into a glare.

“What are you—Why are you laughing?!?”

Shigure waved a hand, “No, no, I’m not laughing at you. I’m just thinking back to when I was in high school how many times this used to happen.”
Yuki’s eyes widened, “Really?”

“Well, perhaps not exactly. Hari, Aya, and I went to an all boy’s school, you see. But the students tended to be quite close with the all girl’s school in the same district. Girls would call us out all the time to confess. Waiting by the gate with their little love letters,” Shigure chuckled again. “I almost forgot what it was like being that young.”

Shigure ignored the confused glare Yuki shot him and pressed on with his story.

“Once, one of the girls from the nearby school came by to confess to Aya. She must have been captain of her drama club, who knows. She gave the most Shakespearean love confession to Aya I’ve ever heard come out of a teenager’s mouth. You know Aya, loves his dramatic antics. He told the girl he would accept if only it weren’t for the fact that his family had arranged him to marry someone else. Someone abroad, I think he said. ‘Come, let us embrace now before what little time we have left is yanked away!’” Shigure mimicked, tilting his voice lower and melodic to match Ayame’s.

Yuki’s eyes widened, “That seems so—What would have happened if she actually hugged him?”

“That was the best part,” Shigure laughed. “She did.”

“What?!”

“She jumped right into his arms, and poof.”

Yuki looked at Shigure in complete disbelief. “That—That’s insane! I—! Wouldn’t I have heard about this? What happened?!”

“What happened? Hari erased her memory. It wasn’t so big a deal,” Shigure shrugged. “He wasn’t too happy about it, of course. I think we created a little too much practice for him when we were younger.”

Shigure grabbed the packet of cigarettes from his sleeve, bringing one up to his lips to light it as Yuki continued to gawk at him.

“That’s not what it’s like now,” Yuki said, voice low and accusing. “I don’t have that option. I go to a coed school. People could have seen.”

“So they see,” Shigure dismissed. “Nothing the family hasn’t dealt with before.”

“I know.”

Shigure took a deep inhale of his cigarette, eyeing Yuki as he nearly shook with anger and fear.

“I’m not going to tell anybody,” Shigure said. “If that’s what you’re worried about.”

Yuki gave a shaky exhale.

“Would it have been so bad?” Shigure asked.

“Yes,” Yuki answered honestly. “If I—if that happened… Akito would have sent me back to that all boy’s school. I would have to move back in with the main house. I know it.”

“Hmm, good point.”

“I almost lost everything again… over something so careless,” Yuki said around clenched teeth. His
frame was so tense, so riddled with tangled up nerves, Shigure almost felt his neck crick just at the sight of him.

“Here,” Shigure said, jokingly handing his cigarette across the table to Yuki. “You seem like you need something to calm down.”

Yuki eyed it warily. “I don’t want that.”

“Ah, that’s right, your asthma,” Shigure chuckled at his own forgetfulness—though Yuki must have read it as something else.

“I barely have asthma anymore,” Yuki glared. “I’ll try it.”

Shigure handed it back over with an amused smile. Yuki held it like Shigure would have expected, as if he didn’t know how. He pinched it between his forefinger and thumb, holding it upright to observe it, nose scrunching slightly at the smell as the smoke rose.

Using his other hand to hold it, Yuki adjusted it so that the cigarette was held between his pointer and middle finger. Tentatively, as if his face was resisting how close he would come to the cigarette, Yuki brought it to his lips and sucked in a small breath. The tip of the cigarette burnt a mild orange in response.

Yuki exhaled without a sound. Shigure chuckled.

“What?” Yuki asked, genuinely curious this time.

“You’re not doing it quite right, but I think that’s probably for the best,” Shigure said, reaching over, signaling for Yuki to give it back. Yuki didn’t, flinching back defensively.

“What’s the ‘right’ way?”

Shigure shook his head, “You know Hari just might kill me.” Yuki kept his glare adamant. Shigure gave an amused sigh of defeat. “You don’t just keep the smoke in your mouth. You breathe it in like you would air.”

Yuki eyed the cigarette again, hand stuttering to bring it back to his mouth. Yuki breathed in more deeply this time. Shigure could tell Yuki was letting the smoke in by how his chest expanded.

He exhaled, coughing a little as the last bits of smoke paraded past Yuki’s lips.

“Quick learner,” Shigure said. This time Yuki handed over the cigarette willingly.

“It tastes weird.”

“Everyone thinks that at first.” Shigure took a much more practiced inhale of the cigarette now that it was back, blowing out the smoke as easily as exhaling on a morning in January. “Did it help? Calm you down, I mean.”

Yuki put a hand over the breast of his shirt, “My chest just feels fuzzy.”

Shigure snorted. Yuki gave him another glare.

“Don’t worry so much,” Shigure said, this time allowing the reassurance to seep into his voice. “You chose that school for a reason, right? You have to learn to not be afraid of the things you decide.”

Yuki bowed his head thoughtfully, taking in the words.
“I know,” Yuki said, though the frantic nature of his words had certainly settled. “And... I know I’ll have to go back eventually. I know this situation is only... temporary. But I want as much time away from that world as possible. Even if it’s silly, I want to try my best under my own means. I don’t want that to be cut short... Especially now, I just started...”

Shigure smiled, “You should start looking at the glass half full. A girl confessed, that means you’re popular, right?”

“I guess,” Yuki mumbled. “Maybe not after that...”

“Adds the the mystery, I’m sure you’ll find.”

“I don’t want to be mysterious, I want to be normal.”

Shigure crushed the last of the cigarette in the ash tray. “You’ll have to learn to become both, then. After all, duality is something we Sohmas are fairly skilled with.”

Yuki shifted where he sat, peaking his head up to finally look at Shigure for the first time without suspicion or apprehension. “You really won’t tell anyone?”

“Who would I tell?” Shigure asked on a laugh. “I’m enjoying my time away just as much as you are, after all.”

The phone rang a few afternoons later, and Shigure stretched out his back as he padded into the hallway to answer the phone.

“Hello?”

“Sensei, how’s Yuki?”

“What? Not even a ‘hello’ from you, Haru?”

“Hello, Sensei,” Haru amended, falling silent for only a brief moment. “How’s Yuki?”

Shigure chuckled, “He seems to be as fine as any other teenage boy his age.”

“I see,” Haru said, considering this. “That’s good. If Sensei doesn’t notice anything, that’s probably fine.”

Shigure had a feeling he was talking more to himself than Shigure. Still, it was odd this perception that the other zodiacs had gleaned from him. By no means was he as observant and omniscient as they all seemed to claim him to be.

“I’m glad you’re so trusting of my word.”

“Should I not be?”

“I didn’t say that,” Shigure laughed. Haru ignored the comment.

“Can I talk to him?”

“He’s still at school. Why don’t you call later tonight?”

Haru hummed pensively, almost troubled over the line.
“I can leave a message with him, if you want.”

There was silence for a long moment. And then, “Can you tell him something for me?”

Yuki’s glass landed a bit too abruptly on the table.

“Kyo’s missing?”

“Apparently for about a month now,” Shigure said.

A sudden sound came from the kitchen in the small restaurant, tugging Shigure’s attention immediately at the clatter of pots and pans.

“Everything alright back there?” Shigure called back.

A loud grunt preceded Mr. Negishi walking through the thin fabric curtains from the kitchen and into the main dining area—a thin, tanned, older man with a loud mouth to match. “We dropped your food, Gure. You’re gonna have to eat it off the floor!”

“The service in this place is horrible!” Shigure jokingly bemoaned.

“Then get yourself a wife, how about?” Mr. Negishi boomed. “Just another couple minutes, boys.” Shigure chuckled at the man’s retreating back.

Shigure and Yuki were pushed into a booth in the small, over-heated restaurant. Humidity fogging the windows of the small, family owned restaurant that was becoming a staple in their routine. Shigure liked it here, liked the owner who laughed loudly and teased the two for their bachelor lifestyle.

When Shigure turned back to Yuki, however, he was still looking at him seriously—despite the lighthearted atmosphere of the stuffy restaurant.

“A month?” Yuki asked, and for a moment Shigure didn’t register what they were talking about until his mind caught back up with the conversation.

“That’s what I heard.”

“How has he been missing for a month and no one’s noticed?” Yuki asked back, voice fearing into a passionate edge that Shigure hadn’t seen from Yuki yet.

Ah, wait.

The going away party suddenly came to Shigure’s mind, of the hardened expression Yuki donned if only for a moment. Of the violence that stretched from Yuki’s limbs.

“You didn’t notice, either,” Shigure laughed.

“I d—” Yuki stopped himself, a fired-up glare charged behind his eyes—one that he must have reserved for Kyo, because Yuki looked as if he couldn’t even see Shigure.

A waitress, Mr. Negishi’s far more subdued young daughter, dropped the food off between them, only nodding when Shigure gave a brief “thank you.”

Shigure picked up his chopsticks, but Yuki didn’t even make a motion towards the food.
“I don’t live at the main house anymore. That should be their responsibility.”

Shigure laughed, slurping in a bite of his food, “You seem to have an awful lot of faith in how much the main house cares about a cat.”

“They don’t have to care, they just have to know where he is,” Yuki snapped back, defensive.

“You know, the way you’re talking it’s as if you blame me for his disappearance,” Shigure said. “I’m not at the main house, either.”

“I know,” Yuki finally conceded. He went back to the food in front of him, though something in Yuki was sluggish now—as if something was weighing him further and further down.

Silence fell over them, but Shigure hardly noticed — he felt as though he was watching something dangerous unfold, something chemically forbidden, all in the small frame of a fifteen year old boy.

In a strange way, Shigure hadn’t known anyone else to hold back so much of a force and anger behind each limb and pore and motion other than Akito. But even Shigure knew that sort of comparison would immediately shipwreck whatever tentative acquaintance the two were forming.

And why would he do that? It was just getting interesting.

“Eat, Yuki,” Shigure softly commanded, taking another bite, and Yuki finally, hesitantly, broke his chopsticks apart.

He took one bite before his chopsticks were back to pushing the food around in the bowl. Shigure was about to chastise him again when Yuki spoke.

“I thought he didn’t know I’d moved,” Yuki said, more to his noodles than anything else.

“Don’t fret, Yuki. Kyo will always come back to you,” Shigure laughed, half-joking.

But also, perhaps, because that felt like the right thing to say.

Yuki scoffed, face pushed back to neutral, “I’m not fretting.”


Yuki took another bite out of his food, learning bit by bit to meet Shigure’s prodding teases with impassivity—though Yuki was hardly as good at it as he thought.

“I don’t hate him,” Yuki said, however, instead of a denial—even if his tone was as casual as ever. Shigure raised an eyebrow at him. “I don’t know enough about him to hate him.”

“Kyo seems to hate you just fine with the information he has.”

“And that’s why he’s an idiot,” Yuki snarled. “It’s not as if he’s ever given me a chance.”

Shigure hummed at this. The sound of the restaurant filling the space between them once again.

“I see,” Shigure finally said. A smirk crawling up onto his lips.

Yuki met his gaze with a glare, before turning back to his food.

They ate in silence for the rest of the meal.
It was late when they arrived back at the house. The night air was pleasant, and when Shigure gave a small dismissive goodnight, he retired to his office—leaving the door open so he could open up the outside patio doors, allowing the breeze to come through.

It was only when Shigure stood from grabbing his ash tray that he realized Yuki was lingering in his office doorway.

He repressed the urge to sigh. It felt like he was spending all his time with the little rat, lately. He was playing the part more than suitably for Ayame’s sake. Greeting him, making sure his work was done during the day to babysit in the afternoons, coddling him to eat his food like a nagging mother. And now, Yuki was invading his office—encroaching on a space that was Shigure’s and Shigure’s alone.

Still, he kept his expression gentle.

“Yes?” Little ghost?

“Could I try another cigarette?” Yuki asked.

What a strange time for Shigure to realize how poor he was at saying no to people.

Yuki and Shigure sat next to each other on the patio, ash tray between them, staring out into the night sky. The only light coming from behind them in the office, making it seem as though the house was the only pulse of life for miles.

Shigure eyed Yuki — how he puffed at his cigarette in much less frequent intervals that Shigure, how it still seemed uncomfortable in his fingers. How he coughed here and there against the smoke. He smiled as he took a drag of his own.

“What if he really has run away?” Shigure wondered aloud instead. “What would happen… to the family?”

Shigure looked at him again, how he deposited his cigarette in the ash tray a little too carefully, how he brought his knees up to his chest, how his pointer and middle finger didn’t quite close with the rest of his fist, as if outcasted for being dirty.

“He will,” Shigure said. “Any cat that’s tried to run away before hasn’t succeeded.”

“Others have tried?”

Shigure nodded, sucking the last of his second cigarette down. “That was a long time ago.”

“How do you know all these stories?” Yuki asked quietly. Shigure gave inquiring hum in response.
Yuki looked out in the inky black night for a long time, eyes focused so intently on something that wasn’t there—something so far away. It almost had Shigure wanting to look out in the nothing, wanting to squint until he saw what Yuki did.

“At the banquets,” Yuki started, softly. “You tell all those stories about old zodiacs. You tell them like fairy tales, but they’re real, aren’t they?”

It was true, Shigure had become the family storyteller during New Year’s. It had become something of an unofficial tradition that the younger ones of the bunch would huddle around him to listen to him tell whatever Sohma ghost story he fancied at the time.

Last banquet, he’d told the story of the murdered seahorse from generations ago—fresh bandage still wrapped around Hatori’s eye.

Akito had stormed out.

Never once did Yuki approach him over the years, though. He stayed, loyal and frozen by Akito’s side. Watching everything with glazed over, faraway eyes. So much so that Shigure was surprised to hear that Yuki would listen to such a menial tradition—usually Shigure was more than attuned to people’s curiosities.

“What makes you say that?”

“Even you couldn’t make those up.”

“I’m a writer, you know,” Shigure huffed. “I’m not sure I like that implication.”

Yuki didn’t respond but eyed him curiously, ignoring Shigure’s indignant reply. Teenagers really were rude. Even skittish little poltergeists that haunted his front porch. Shigure felt a tug of annoyance.

“I’ve done my research. Our family history is fairly well-documented. You would just need to learn where to look.”

“Would you tell me one?” Yuki asked suddenly. “One day. It doesn’t have to be right now.”

Shigure lifted a curious brow, “You could always read one of my books, you know. There’s some on my shelf right here. I won’t even charge you.”

“I don’t think I could stomach that,” Yuki said, flatly. “It’s easier to tell if you’re lying when you talk.”

“I never lie,” Shigure said, simply. “It’s strange to me how you can act simultaneously like a wide-eyed kid and a petulant teenager in the same conversation.”

Shigure hadn’t meant to say that out loud, but the strange back and forth of Yuki’s attitude towards him was hard to track. Did he hate him? Admire him? Fear him? Resent him? Is this how Yuki viewed the world in general? Was Shigure as big a presence in Yuki’s life as the looming atmosphere of this house, or was he simply a small clearing in a vast expanse of woods?

It was irritating not knowing.

“Maybe Akito has rubbed off on you more than you realize,” he said, poking the one area that he knew was a constant itch under Yuki’s skin.
Yuki stood, fists clenched.

“Why do you say things like that? You don’t even know me!”

_Hypocrite_, was Shigure’s first thought—until he realized that’s exactly how he designed the world to see him. But that didn’t matter. Ayame asked him to try, he was _trying_. And what a waste of effort it was turning out to be if this _kid_ couldn’t even bother to see that.

“Do you want me to know you? You don’t seem to want to be too friendly with me.”

“I just—” Yuki gave a frustrated glare. “I don’t understand!”

“Understand what?”

“Why you let me stay here at all!”

Shigure crossed his arms. A battle from this constant war flaring up, and Shigure aligned himself before he could think twice.

“To get back at Akito.”

Yuki blinked, “What?”

“I’m using you. To make Akito mad.” Shigure smiled, all too cheerfully. “That’s why I let you stay here.”

There was a long silence. Of course there was. Shigure basked in it. Despite what Yuki said he knew Yuki. He knew all about Yuki. He knew him from Adam. And how could he not? The one common factor in his three only consistent and true relationships. Akito’s playmate, Hatori’s guilt soaked hands, Ayame’s looming conscience.

He knew them, so he knew Yuki. He knew his scared eyes, his anxious demeanor, his terrified posture. He knew Yuki was scared of the world, when he could have just as easily embraced it, just as easily found ways to conquer it—just as easily been _him_. Instead of scared senseless of a house of all places.

The comment ought to break Yuki—a disservice to Ayame that Shigure mourned only briefly. It was not as if he would know. It was not as if Yuki would tell him. It was not as if the war would end here.

He could continue to pretend to care after tonight.

These thoughts vacuumed back into Shigure’s skull when Yuki spoke.

“My mother said something similar to me.”

Shigure looked up at him, face pushed into apathy. Yuki didn’t seem to mind, he wasn’t even looking towards him.

“It was strange. She would take me to these places—to see all these people. A lot of times different Sohmas. She was so different then. She would bring me forward and say things like ‘look at my son, I’m so proud of him. You should hear of all the things he’s done in school. He and Akito are so close, they’ve become such good friends. It’s because Yuki is such a gentle boy to be around.’ Things you would want to hear your mother say. But then we would be alone, and it was as if she wasn’t there at all. Like something left her body. She wouldn’t even smile.
“I’ve never been good with people. But I know I liked going out with her then. She was warm. And I would think, this can’t be fake. She must see something in me. I must be a good son. But when I asked her—” Yuki swallowed. “She told me I was a tool for her to use. That she was using me. Just like you.”

Shigure listened carefully to each word, even as Yuki stared away.

“Which side of her am I supposed to believe? Which part of her is the lie? I don’t think she hates me. I’m not sure if she loves me but… I couldn’t live in a place like that anymore. Where I didn’t know.”

Silence swelled for a moment.

“I thought you left to get away from Akito,” Shigure’s tone was oddly careful.

“That too,” Yuki said. “Well, maybe it’s—”

The words died on Yuki’s tongue, and for once Shigure felt the curiosity spike in him. He prompted, “It’s?”

“It’s… to know…” Yuki sighed. “I don’t think I can be… mad. At Akito. Not yet. I’m still—”

“Afraid?” Shigure supplied when Yuki’s words stalled. Yuki just nodded.

“It’s nice to know someone else is. Mad, I mean.”

Mind horribly blank, Shigure stared at him.

“So thank you.”

“Thank you?” Shigure asked, still in that mocking, scathing tone. Always always with a smile.

“Thank you for being honest with me. No one ever has before,” Yuki said before gently sitting himself back down besides Shigure. “Almost no one.”

Not quite knowing what to do, Shigure took out another cigarette to light it up in his mouth. Unsettled in the strange peace that suddenly fell between the two—a peace Shigure did not create. Unsettled by the fact that Shigure had committed himself to not being a liar—to being someone whose sole reason for housing a lost child was for something so scathingly cheap.

“I’m sorry,” Yuki said, as if he was the one who needed to apologize. “I don’t want to be like Akito.”

Shigure exhaled the smoke, “You’re not. Other than you’re just as easy to bother.”

Yuki smiled at his legs at that.

“Next time I’ll tell you the story of the priest and the cat,” Shigure said, smiling around his cigarette, as well.

“You really do like to bother me,” Yuki mumbled.

“Is that story so bad?” Shigure asked. “I guess it could be pretty embarrassing for you. The rat getting tricked out of his bones by the cat.”

“It is.”
“I thought you said you liked my fairy tales.”

“Not that one,” Yuki stated, firmly.

“You and Kyo both,” Shigure laughed. And this time he didn’t mean it as a jab or insult, it wasn’t so calculated. But the silence that he was met with made him realize perhaps he said the wrong thing again.

However, when he looked over to Yuki, a strange expression flitted onto his face.

“He’ll be back. He has business to finish with you, after all.”

“He would be an even bigger idiot than I thought if he comes back,” Yuki said, quietly.

“You should tell him as much when he does,” Shigure teased. Yuki gave a weak glare before bringing his knees back up, and Yuki rested his cheek there, looking away from the dog.

“If he doesn’t come back—” Yuki buried the thought, starting again after another moment. “The last time I saw him we fought,” He gave a heavy sigh. “I guess we fight every time we see each other.”

“I remember,” Shigure said. “I was there.”

Yuki turned toward Shigure, and said quite earnestly, “Were you? I don’t remember.”

Shigure couldn’t help but let out a laugh.

————————

Teenagers were troublesome.

So Shigure stopped talking to Yuki like a teenager.

It became a common occurrence for Yuki to join Shigure late at night in his study or out in the living room. Summer had them leaving the walls of the house open, and there in the middle of nowhere, sitting in a wallless home in the middle of the woods, did Shigure and Yuki talk.

Yuki was more of a conversationalist than Shigure ever would have imagined, was far more open than he would have imagined, so much less fragile. Shigure found himself wondering who Hatori could have possibly been talking about all those weeks ago.

It almost felt as though he was right back to gossiping within the main house. Speaking with friends and family in their shared homes, drinking sake, smoking, and laughing in the safe little nest of the estate.

They spoke about the Sohmas, about those inside. Shigure gave long detailed histories of the petty dramas within the family—Yuki putting faces and names he only saw from a distance to stories and personalities Shigure would give.

They spoke about Yuki’s family. Yuki would talk about his mother, about his father, about his grandparents in cold, hushed tones. Though Ayame never seemed to come up, Yuki never shied away from Shigure’s stories involving his brother.

They spoke about Akito. Somehow. Even with Yuki’s heavy eyes, and stilted, cut-off speech when anything involving the god passed his lips. But Yuki listened so intently, so readily, to the few anecdotes Shigure would give about Akito when they were younger. It looked as if Yuki was trying to dispel a mythical creature within his own brain, and stories of Akito’s scraped knees, of lazy
summer antics, of soft, careful kindness were the weapon Shigure allowed Yuki to brandish.

It turned into a routine. Just as dinner did. Just as Yuki trailing dirt and grime from working in his garden into the house each afternoon. Just as Yuki saying “I’m home” when he arrived, and Shigure replying with a friendly “welcome back.”

They had both grown into the house, and there an odd peace floating to its surface.

But peace, Shigure found, was easily disrupted.

Summer was ending when Shigure looked up to the ceiling, crouched in front of the linen closet to fetch an extra futon for a strange, friendly girl, when Kyo smashed through the roof.

———

“He wasn’t missing,” Hatori said from his office chair. “We knew Kazuma was with him.”

“And Kazuma told you where they were going, did he?”

Hatori sighed, “It was supposed to be for a couple of weeks. When it turned into a month—then four, people started to panic.”

“People? You mean Akito?”

“I don’t, actually,” Hatori turned in his chair to face Shigure. “He was quite confident that Kyo would return.”

“Is that so?” Shigure lounged out on the couch. “And yet it was all kept so hush-hush.”

“For obvious reasons, Akito didn’t want to advertise the matter. I don’t know how you found out, since you don’t even live here anymore.”

“Haru told me,” Shigure said, with a bright smile. Hatori just humphed at that.

“In that sense, Hatsuharu is like you. Information has always been attracted to that boy.”

Shigure smiled, “He called to tell Yuki about it. I still can’t figure why.”

“I’m guessing for a reason that would be smartly classified as none of your business,” Hatori lifted himself up from his office chair to sit down across from Shigure. Grabbing a cigarette from his breast pocket and lighting it up. “Speaking of, how is Yuki?”

Shigure averted his eyes from the small flame of the cigarette, putting out his own though plenty was still left.

“You ask as if I’m doing something terrible to him in that house.”

“I just don’t want to see him getting worse.”

“Worse? You mean his asthma? Or his wrist?” Shigure mused, tapping his own with a smile.

“I wish you wouldn’t be so callous when you talked about things like that,” Hatori’s eyes narrowed. “You would think living under the same roof with him would garner some sympathy from you.”

“It has, it has,” Shigure laughed. “I’m just surprised by how different he is from what you described.”
Hatori raised a curious, unimpressed brow. “Oh?”

Shigure hummed, “You might have to find out for yourself. He’s a bit of a puzzle, that one. I don’t think me explaining it would do any justice.”

The man considered him, eyes narrowed suspiciously, yet tinted only slightly with amusement.

“That’s high praise coming from you.”

Shigure felt a pang of defensiveness at that, “Is it?”

“I’m glad to see you two are getting along. I was worried.”

“I don’t think I like it when act so pleasant, Hari. It takes all the fun out of everything,” he laughed.

“You can joke all you want, but I’m glad to hear the arrangement is working out. Maybe I will check on him sometime soon.”

Shigure gave a nervous laugh at that, “You might be seeing him sooner rather than later. But I’m sorry to say it won’t give you any brownie points.”

“What happened?” Hatori asked, voice immediately flattening.

“As much as I enjoy our visits, I’ve come to the main house with a bit of a tall order for Akito today.”

“That being?”

Shigure smiled, “God willing, a couple new housemates.”

Hatori looked more than exhausted as Shigure explained the situation to him, told him of the optimistic young girl who knew too much, and of an angry cat still sulking on Shigure’s living room floor.

At the end, Hatori shook his head, “You’ve gone insane.”

Shigure smirked.

“You did say that the house was awfully big for just me.”

———

Somehow, Shigure’s home was being turned into a bed and breakfast. Not that Shigure could really mind. But it was funny to think back on how empty the house once was. It almost seemed like a different place entirely.

The routine with Yuki was getting too normal, anyway. Kyo sent a jolt through the house that reminded Shigure what he was doing here in the first place. He was reminded exactly what this war waged with Akito had started, and where it just might end.

Shigure thought back to his conversation with Yuki weeks ago, how strange of a thought it might have been to think of the cat and the rat as friends. No, perhaps that wasn’t it. Shigure had journals stacked upon journals, notes he’d transcribed as a young man, memories of old accounts he had read and reread over and over again that seemed to say the same thing: The cat and the rat had been friends for centuries.
How strange, Shigure amended, that *Yuki and Kyo* might be friends. And better yet, what a wonderful piece of knowledge to stash away in his armory. To aim against Akito when the time came.

“Actually, starting next week Kyo will be attending the same school as you two.”

Well, he hadn’t expected Yuki to be *that* angry.

“Lighten up, Yuki,” Shigure said that night as the two talked out on the balcony of Shigure’s office. “Why not take it as an opportunity to try and be friends.”

“I still can’t believe you,” Yuki snarled, choosing to stand as he smoked, refusing to sit next to Shigure though he was the one who still joined him that night, regardless. “What’s the point in messing with my life like this?”

“I’m not messing with anything,” Shigure said. “Kyo had to go to school somewhere, what would you suggest?”

“*Anywhere* else.”

“Just a few weeks ago you were waxing sympathetic for him,” he challenged. “Would it be the worst thing in the world to try and befriend him?”

“He doesn’t want to be my friend,” Yuki snapped.

Shigure huffed a laugh. But when he looked up at Yuki, the angry tint of his words didn’t seem to match his expression. His eyes were something else. Desperate. Scared.

*Heartbroken.*

“What about you?” Shigure asked carefully.

“I don’t want to have to look at him everyday,” Yuki said behind his teeth. And then, much more weakly, so absent of hatred, “I don’t want to be his friend.”

Shigure felt something click. The missing link from that conversation with Yuki all that time ago.

“I hope you’re happy with yourself,” Yuki said before Shigure could get out another word. He smashed his cigarette in the ash tray before turning on his heel and heading up the stairs for bed.

Shigure watched him go.

No, that couldn’t be right. Even Shigure wouldn’t have stumbled across something that ridiculous.

______________

It was still on Shigure’s mind when an unfamiliar slump of body against wood crashed outside Shigure’s office. When he opened the door, there was Kyo, laying against the engawa like a tired cat.

Shigure laughed at the sight.

What was it that brought even the ornery cat to his door? Shigure couldn’t help but notice that he didn’t mind. He looked at Kyo like he once looked at Yuki, like a troubled teenager—only this time Shigure was sure there was nothing deeper than that.
Perhaps, that’s what made giving advice to Kyo all the easier.

“Talking to people takes work, it takes training like anything else.” Shigure could hear floor boards creaking on the other side of the office door. “So keep training, Kyo. Otherwise you won’t know what to do when someone tells you they love you.”

“Yeah, right. Like that’ll ever happen.”

“What will you say, then? When that happens? When you find someone who loves you?”

“I don’t know. Ask if they’re crazy, I guess.”

“Ah, I see,” Shigure laughed. The door opened at that, and Shigure looked up at Yuki with a smirk.

“I’m home,” Yuki said, ignoring Shigure’s expression and throwing a glance to Kyo still sprawled out on the wood.

“Welcome back,” Shigure said automatically. “I’m thinking of walking Miss Honda back from work.”

“There are quite a few dangers on the path,” Shigure mused.

Abruptly, Kyo stood, looking Yuki right in the eye. “Don’t bother. I’ll do it.”

Kyo stomped away, and Shigure could hear Yuki as he gave a little sigh.

Shigure pulled a cigarette out and put it between his lips.

“Then, I guess I’ll start on homework,” Yuki said, making to leave.

“Yuki.”

He stopped, turning to look at Shigure.

“How strange of you to think of braving that long path home so late at night on your own.” Shigure brought the lighter between his smiling teeth and lit his cigarette, eyeing Yuki’s wary and confused expression over the flame. He exhaled, letting the smoke rise between them. “Are you crazy?”

Yuki’s eyes widened, and for the first time in months Shigure recognized fear in Yuki.

Without a second thought, the door to Shigure’s office was slammed, and angry stomps could be heard all the way up the stairs.

Shigure brought the cigarette back to his lips, taking another inhale—not realizing how stunned his own expression was.

Honestly. He hadn’t expected to be right.

———

Yuki didn’t come downstairs that night. Or the night after.

Yuki didn’t come downstairs for awhile after that, really.

———

It was autumn when they brought Tohru back home.
Shigure watched as they walked down the path, hand in hand in hand. Something so achingly soft and innocent that Shigure almost felt as though he shouldn’t be allowed to see it at all. But their hands didn’t disconnect when they saw him in the entryway, if anything eyes fell on him in greeting.

As if he were involved in this moment, as if he weren’t just a filthy man playing house in the woods.

How did Shigure keep ending up with these strange roles? How did Shigure feel as though his hand was being held with the merry band wandering back home?

Shigure did his best to enjoy the dinner that night, and to his discomfort found that it was all too easy. Tohru, this strange little girl, heading the conversation as if she were master of the household, as if she had usurped this world that Shigure had built. And now, it was as if Shigure was simply participating.

It was strange knowing he didn’t resent this. And if he were honest, to spite Akito so perfectly would mean to create a world so opposite of him—an impossible task for Shigure, whose heart beat in time to the god’s.

Yuki intruded on him that night, of all nights. His first one on one encounter with Shigure since Kyo’s first day of school. Another similarity between the current rat and cat, Shigure noted:

The ability to hold a grudge.

“Long time no see,” Shigure said, when Yuki pinched the office door open and stood there for a moment. “Come in, sit down. No need to loom.”

Yuki sighed but did as he was told, sitting down across from Shigure at his desk.

“How can I help you this evening?” Shigure instinctively pulled out a cigarette for himself. Perhaps just seeing Yuki now made him want to smoke. “Want one?”

Yuki shook his head.

Yuki hesitated for a moment before speaking, eyes falling down to his hands, timidity spiking—as if the two had never met before. Shigure felt that sharp tug of irritation fuel the smirk spread over his teeth.

“I know that you’re planning something with Akito. Or against Akito. I’m not really sure what the difference is right now in regards to you, but still.” Yuki looked up to stare him in the eye. “Thank you for letting us bring Ms. Honda back. I’m… glad she can stay.”

Shigure took a long, quiet inhale of his cigarette as he stared back at the boy. “Of course.”

A tense silence lingered between the two until Yuki nodded, making to get up.

Shigure spoke before he could.

“I think we’re all getting used to having her around. I have to say, it was quite a sight seeing the three of you coming down that path, holding hands.”

Yuki looked away, a little flustered.

“I think what’s most remarkable is the effect she’s had on Kyo. I can’t believe how much calmer he’s become.”

“Hardly,” Yuki huffed, but his voice was quiet.
“With a superpower like that, stored in our own little Tohru, it makes me wonder—maybe how lovely a couple they might make.”

Yuki looked to him again, and once more—though he has proven wrong so many times before—Shigure thought he knew what to expect.

He figured Yuki might get angry, might storm out again, might get flustered and throw back his words with venomous denial.

Instead, Yuki stood. His eyes met Shigure’s far too easily, and his expression was only one thing: Hurt.

“You’re a cruel man,” Yuki said, simply.

He turned and walked away.

For some reason, Shigure couldn’t accept that.

———

All things considered, he shouldn’t be that surprised. History repeating itself was nothing new. But Shigure supposed it was one thing to read it in a journal, as a far off distant fairy tale, and another to witness it unfold in real time.

Yuki hadn’t talked to him in days since his mindless comment, and Shigure told himself that it didn’t matter. That was the limbo they maintained, Yuki must have known that by now. Shigure’s affection towards Yuki was Schrodinger in nature—like it was for near everyone—and it amused Shigure to watch people grow wary, to try and fail to read each word that carelessly slipped from his own tongue. It amused him to see people try and make sense of him, when he felt as though he couldn’t be more plainly apparent in anything he did or said.

Regardless, Shigure found himself digging through boxes of books, notes, and other research material he had gathered over the years.

Buried in the back of his closet, along with other lingering unpacked boxes, were transcriptions he hadn’t read in years—having absorbed the words so many times, it hardly made sense to do something so redundant as look them over once more.

His room was messy from the search, but he sat against the wall of his room and flipped through the pages without a care.

He didn’t fall asleep until the sun peaked up over the horizon, back stiff from sitting in one position for so long. The last words he read jostled his stomach, and he drifted towards unconsciousness with an unease sinking into his gut.

——

“Do not be fooled, my brothers. This place is kind. So let it make you kind, too.”
After Tohru won over Hatori at the main house, Momiji joined the mix. The little rabbit was all too eager to catch them up on the goings-on of the different zodiacs - and was sure to mention how many of them were eager to meet Tohru, too. What a funny thing that his house might begin to attract zodiacs. Funny that of all the girls that could have come crashing into their lives, that it might be the one to gather them.

The group of them sat around the table in Shigure’s living room - bringing forth premonitions of banquets to come with the buoyant conversation Momiji and Tohru always inspired.

Shigure found himself participating again—liking the noise, the liveliness, the warmth of other people. Just like his own private estate. Just like when he was a boy, he mused.

Momiji and Tohru laughed, Kyo yelled his interjections, and Yuki…

Yuki looked at the scene fondly, watched them speak with the same contented disconnection that Shigure found in himself. But the affectionate smile had a landing point—found its center in Kyo, though it was disguised as overviewing the scene in its entirety.

Yuki met Shigure’s eyes at one point, but Shigure couldn’t find it in himself to smirk—to throw back a smug expression at Yuki. Yuki looked at him challengingly, as if all he expected of Shigure was to lord this new horrifically private information over his head. Shigure couldn’t bring himself to respond to the easy bait.

The sun had long set by the time Momiji headed back home, and not long after did it have Kyo, Tohru, and Yuki heading up the stairs to bed. Tohru and Kyo chatted as they walked, and Yuki trailed behind.

Shigure felt a brief memory of watching the backs of Ayame and Hatori when he was young. Always connected, yet always apart.

“Yuki,” Shigure called. All three turned to look, as if sharing the same neck. Shigure just motioned with a finger for Yuki to join him in his office. He did, leaving the other two to head up to bed without him, only Tohru seemingly curious of Shigure’s summoning.

Yuki entered, closing the door behind him but didn’t sit down.

“What?” He asked, flatly.

Shigure sat down behind his desk, wishing it wasn’t quite so cold so he could open the back doors and sit out on the balcony. He’d grown quite fond of the secluded view his house offered.

“Would you believe me if I said I wanted to see how you were doing?” Shigure asked a bit too cheerfully.

“No,” Yuki replied. “If that’s all—”

“Well it’s true,” Shigure offered, smile not fading, but tone calmed into something serious.

“I’m here to help you make Akito mad. Not for you to start playing caring uncle.”
Help as if Yuki was his ally of sorts. Shigure smiled at the thought, despite the spiky tone Yuki had regained from when he first moved in.

“Who says I can’t do both?” Shigure gestured for Yuki to sit down.

Yuki did so, warily. Shigure offered him a cigarette but Yuki resolutely shook his head, though he looked like he regretted the decision for the briefest of moments.

“Do you want to talk about it?”

“No.”

“Yes you do.”

Yuki glared at him. “Not to you, I don’t.”

“Oh? Did you have someone else in mind?”

Yuki’s eyes trailed away, looking like a child caught by their parents. “Can’t you just leave me alone?”

“This coming from the little mouse that always scurries into my office in the late hours of the night.”

“If it bothers you so much—”

“I didn’t say that,” Shigure cut him off. “I’m just saying I think I’ve proven myself to be a good listener in these past few months, don’t you think?”

Yuki’s mouth stayed closed, but his eyes flared with indecision, shame, and the remnants of a fading resilience.

“I’ve been in love before, you know,” Shigure said. “Even I remember what it feels like.”

Yuki brought a surprised expression up to Shigure—a look so pure it immediately dashed away the white noise that had gathered like calcium behind Yuki’s eyes. For a moment, Shigure wondered why. Until he remembered that of all the times they talked, they never seemed to talk about him.

“I don’t believe you,” Yuki said, voice still stained with surprise. Shigure took the comment for what it was. Prodding—not challenging.

“I was,” Shigure said with a laugh. “But it’s difficult—feeling those things and being cursed, isn’t it? Wanting to be with someone and being torn in another direction, almost against your will. Well, not that I would do anything against my will.”

“You seem pretty sure about that,” Yuki said—marveled. As if he were jealous.

“I am,” Shigure shrugged. “It’s what makes being cursed all the easier. Makes it almost fun, really.”

Yuki didn’t respond to his overly-cheerful tone. Instead, he sunk back into his thoughts, eyeing the dog curiously. “Did you ever confess?”

Shigure smiled. “No. I didn’t have to. I knew.”

Yuki nodded as if he understood.

“These feelings will fade, you know,” Shigure said. “They’ll become manageable. You’ll get to a
point where you won’t even think about it, really.”

Yuki’s posture turned smaller, turning in on himself. As if Yuki was trying to protect himself from the words. Shigure gave him a strange look.

“That’s for the best, really,” Shigure offered, as if it was obvious.

“You should have told them,” Yuki said, immediately. “Then you would at least know.”

“I did know,” Shigure offered back, not knowing how he ended up on the defensive here. “Just like you know.”

Yuki’s eyes fired up, meeting Shigure with an intense, *burning* gaze, “Things are changing!”

“That doesn’t matter,” Shigure tried to counter Yuki’s raised voice with his own, calmer tone. “You still need to be careful.”

Yuki’s expression scrunched in distaste, “Of what?”

“Those feelings of yours,” Shigure gestured towards Yuki. “I know little Tohru has made this place a haven for you all, but the main house is still on your shoulder.”

“I know that!” Yuki called back. His fist clenched, his eyes horribly anguished. And finally, finally his head bowed under the weight of it. “I know that.”

Shigure watched Yuki gather the broken pieces of himself back into his body, like he had been for months.

“Yuki—”

“Why did I—” Yuki began, so softly, so carefully. “Why did I have to love him?”

Hatori was right.

Information was attracted to him.

And even though Shigure knew, the weight of every word was felt by the dog.

“I must sound so pathetic,” Yuki finally slurred out.

“You do. But I wouldn’t worry. It’s all a part of the human experience,” Shigure said with a sympathetic smile.

Yuki gave a mirthless laugh at that.

“These feelings will go away,” Shigure comforted on instinct.

“No,” Yuki said. “They won’t. They haven’t.”

Shigure couldn’t help but feel threatened when Yuki brought his pointed glare up to Shigure.

“Maybe they might have if you hadn’t thought it was funny to bring him here!”

“Consider it a favor,” Shigure laughed, nervously.

“And now I’m stuck feeling like this,” Yuki pouted, but his voice turned brittle. “Things are changing. Right?”
Shigure thought of shooting back a teasing reply, of really riling up the young boy in his moment of tired, heartbroken need. Instead, “They are.”

Yuki’s expression softened all the more.

Suddenly, he realized he had a choice—another impasse to cross with Yuki at the center of it all. Shigure was winning against Akito, was thwarting this war almost effortlessly. The rat, the cat, the dog, and a kind stranger all living under one roof. All living separately, away from the god. Proving that it was what they preferred.

But was that enough? These victories were short term. What happened after his three little misfits graduated? Yuki would go back to the main house, Kyo would get locked up, and Tohru would return back to a world that deserved her. The world would retain its order once more—leaving the loss all the more humiliating the closer, and kinder this world became.

The temptation to use his role as Yuki’s confidant simmered. What would come of encouraging this? What would come of inflating that hope Yuki clearly clutched onto desperately. Shigure wasn’t blind, he knew what a clear failure looked like. Kyo hated Yuki, looked at him with nothing but contempt. To encourage Yuki to pursue these feelings would be like telling a man to walk into the belly of a whale.

Shigure couldn’t help but think back to the journals—the stories forgotten by history, the secret documents of what cat and rat truly meant in the past. And how tragically those stories ended. How Yuki was setting himself up to relive a heartbreak so heavy that it had lasted generations, in so many different forms. And how that heartbreak had started to tally the dead in its wake. Could Shigure aid that path? Knowing all he did?

Especially knowing the deep, wretched satisfaction of creating such a defiant world under Akito. If the cat and rat were to fall for each other, what a victory that would be. That wouldn’t be just a battle. That would be the whole war.

Shigure balanced himself on the edge, as Yuki gathered his words.

“I can… I just need time to…”

Shigure snorted. “Time to what?”

“Don’t make fun of me.”

“I just find your optimism alarmingly naive—in an entertaining sort of way.”

“I’m not insane. I don’t think he’d ever—”

“What if he did?” Shigure mused, the thought still thrilling to his vengeance-addled core. “My oh my, wouldn’t that be a sight to see.”

“Why do you act like you know everything?” Yuki shot back. “Why do you have to be so… so—!”

Shigure took another drag of his cigarette, “Cruel?”

Yuki glared at him again, but this time his eyes followed the half-smoked nub in Shigure’s fingers.

“I want a cigarette.”

Shigure smirked, but did nothing more than open the packet and hand it towards Yuki for him to take.
one. He did, catching the matches Shigure tossed him to light it up. He breathed in, petulantly. As Yuki often did when he smoked. It was the reason Yuki smoked. Just to prove he could. Just to prove he was different from what was expected of him. Just to prove he could follow through on his words, not seem so weak, not be controlled by his feeble body, or by the words of others that caressed his fragile, trembling, frightened form.

Really, it was all too fun.

So maybe, Shigure didn’t have to make a decision right in the moment.

“How about this? Why don’t we make a little bet, if you’re so sure.”

“A bet?” Yuki exhaled skeptically, the smoke trailing behind the words.

“You get Kyo to return your feelings and I’ll pay for your college.”

Yuki’s eyes widened, “What?”

“Good deal, isn’t it? You get the love of your young life and a free ticket to whatever you want to study outside the main house.”

“No… No way, you can’t be serious.”

“Dead serious,” Shigure said.

Yuki’s eyes narrowed, “You’re teasing me. You’re only offering because you know it won’t happen.”

“You might be right there,” Shigure said. “Frankly, I think it’s a terrible idea. If you had any sense at all you’d drop these feelings and go running the other direction.”

“And if I lose—”

“—Which you will—”

“If I lose,” Yuki restated over Shigure, irritated. “What then? What do you get out of this?”

Shigure hummed. Strangely enough, he hadn’t thought about that. If Yuki lost what would that mean? What would that look like? Shigure didn’t want the consequences of that, surely. And despite the history stacked up against the zodiac’s past, Shigure knew that the achingly tragic love story wasn’t so prominent here.

Yuki was just a teenager with a misdirected crush. He didn’t know what love was. Not really. Perhaps things shouldn’t be taken so seriously.

“Nothing,” Shigure finally settled on.

“Nothing?” Yuki raised an eyebrow.

“Nope,” Shigure crushed the cigarette in his ash tray. “You shouldn’t be punished for making the right decision to let sleeping cats lie.”

Yuki glared at that.

“No, Yuki. If you lose, just keep going forward. Just keep living.”
At the time, neither of them knew it—but the words would become so important to the dog. Yuki would forget the exact wording of the bet after a month.

Shigure would feel the words cling to his chest in a winter two years later. The memory of the conversation as dark as a black eye.

———

As autumn crested into winter, things fell back to normal.

Shigure would wake after the kids had already left, he would write, the sun would fall, the four of them would have dinner, he and Yuki would talk.

Yuki didn’t bring up Kyo again, and neither did Shigure. The bet was simmering in the background, but never brought to the forefront of the conversation.

In all honesty, Shigure thought Yuki might have forgotten. It’s not as if anything changed between the two in the weeks after. Yuki and Kyo still fought, still bickered, still broke his house like it was a hobby. And what’s more, Yuki would often times be the one to rile Kyo up in the first place.

Unless that was Yuki’s idea of flirting.

In which case Shigure thought they should maybe have a whole other conversation about charm and charisma. After all, Shigure never really did have a problem attracting either sexes.

The end of autumn was colder than usual, and Shigure refused to be holed up in an office with an upcoming deadline without the proper tools. Two space heaters attacked the office from every side, making his face prickle with heat, contentedly.

“How can you stand to be in here?” Yuki fanned himself as he sat across from Shigure, school book in hand for his literature class. “I’m going to open the doors, it feels like the place is about to burn down.”

“Don’t you dare,” Shigure said quickly. “The cold will shrivel up my fingers and I won’t be able to write for days, years.”

“Your poor editor,” Yuki sighed, but settled for rolling up the sleeves of his button-up.

“How did your math test go?” Shigure asked, brushing off the comment.

“Well, I think,” Yuki hummed back. “The equations you helped me with were there. So thank you.”

“Glad I could help,” Shigure smiled. “I used to help Hari, too, you know.”

Yuki snorted, “You can’t expect me to believe you.”

“I did!” Shigure cried back indignantly.

“Next time Hatori comes to the house, I’m going to ask him.”

“So maybe it was only one problem, it doesn’t change the fact that he came to me.”

Yuki rolled his eyes with a smile, propping his left arm on the desk so he could rest his cheek on it, looking down at the book he was reading for class.

Shigure realized he hadn’t laid eyes on Yuki’s scar in months now.
It was faded now. Extremely so. The evidence of marred skin almost fading completely. But Shigure knew where to look, saw the slight bump of skin, saw how it was just a touch lighter—if that was possible on Yuki’s already porcelain flesh.

It bothered him now to look at it, to know where it was. Which was strange, because months ago when the scar was prominent and apparent Shigure in no way felt his stomach churn as it did now.

“What?” Yuki asked, when he realized Shigure was staring at him.

He never asked before. Perhaps because he knew from the moment Yuki began talking to him how honest Yuki was willing to be.

Perhaps because, just a few months ago, it didn’t concern him.

Not that that had changed, really.

“Your scar,” Shigure said, looking back down at his research, making the question sound casual. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Yuki look down at his wrist. “How did you get it?”

For the first time, Shigure couldn’t predict how Yuki would respond. Yuki still held an air of simmering anger, simmering sadness, simmering hope that were all so close to boiling over. And Shigure could simply look at the pots in front of him and guess which one might overflow.

Even when he guessed wrong, Shigure learned how to predict Yuki all the better the next time around.

But now, he had no idea what he had asked.

And in that year, Yuki surprised him one more time.

“I don’t remember,” he said. Honestly. As if it weren’t even a concern.

He said it as Shigure might.

The dog looked up at Yuki, eyes pinched in a curious disbelief. Yuki only shrugged under the scrutiny.


Shigure removed his glasses to stare at Yuki more intently. Yuki’s tone didn’t even dip into something darker.

“There’s a lot I don’t quite remember,” Yuki hummed. “But it’s nothing to be concerned about.”

Yuki spoke like the words were practiced—as if he’d said this before. As if he felt the need to comfort Shigure. In that moment, Shigure couldn’t tell how honest Yuki was being at all. How much of this tale had he hidden away from others? And what happened to make him speak it back so unscathed?

And even if he was telling the truth, Shigure thought that might be worse.

Had Yuki been caught in a lump of self pity, had Yuki inflicted the wound on himself, had Yuki decided that the only solution was to stop living, Shigure could admit to himself that he wouldn’t be able to sympathize.

To be so sure so young—to be so defeated when so much of the world was still in reach to take.
How silly would that be? Especially a Sohma. Especially a zodiac. Why escape this world? Why turn your back when there was so much still left to take advantage? The hopelessness of it all seemed silly. Optimism and pessimism in both their purest forms were tired, hapless doctrines that Shigure would not entertain.

“You don’t remember?” Shigure asked. “I’m not sure I believe you. Not after the panic you sent the main house into.”

“If you knew what happened why did you ask me?” Yuki asked, curiously. His voice long having softened to Shigure in the past months—but it made the conversation all the more cryptic.

“I wanted to know what happened from you,” Shigure simply stated. He turned to his tried and true tactic of instigation when he needed to ground himself in a conversation: “You were the one who tried to kill himself.”

The comment did nothing more than cause Yuki to look at his wrist again.

“Maybe I did,” Yuki said, tone still conversational. “But I don’t think so. I wish I could say for sure.”

Maybe Yuki really couldn’t remember.

To move on a bodily instinct so strong, stronger than your own will, to succumb to thoughts in a mind that you couldn’t control.

That Shigure could understand.

“Yuki,” Shigure said, gravely. Yuki looked up at him curiously, still unaffected by the heavy atmosphere that had plagued his world. How Akito had become so angry. How Hatori had become near speechless, mending Yuki’s wrist with the same hands that wiped Kana’s memories hardly a month before. How Ayame had cried. He had never seen Ayame cry.

Yuki just blinked back at Shigure, face innocent and clueless.

“People say you need to remember your past to move forward. They’re wrong. All you need to do is be better than who you were. If you have that in mind, there will always be a goal to reach.”

Yuki considered the words carefully, absorbing them silently. Still not dampening in his posture. Still so unaffected by his own mortality.

Still so comfortable with Shigure.

“Okay,” Yuki finally said. “Thank you.”

It sounded like an obligation to say as much. Shigure could only shake his head.

“I don’t think the main house knew how much trouble you are.”

Yuki smiled back, “That’s probably a good thing, coming from you.”

“Perhaps that’s just what this house is,” he waved a hand. “A bunch of troublemakers.”

“That’s probably karma,” Yuki pointed out. “I know stories about you, too.”

“Good. I’m hoping to become my own Sohma fairy tale.”

“Now I definitely don’t want to read your books.”
This time when Shigure laughed, Yuki laughed with him. Even if it was only for a moment.

Winter grabbed Tokyo by the neck. December was met with a cold snap, harsher than anyone had seen in years. The shoji doors did their best to keep the cold out, shutting against harsh breezes.

The kotatsu was warm, and it was no surprise that the whole household had become somewhat drawn to it. Tohru would cook, too. Pots and pans adding a steaming heat to the kitchen that would fog the windows—hot and cold colliding over the sheen, glassy barriers and made the rooms feel almost humid. As if summer was being captured in this small little pocket of his house.

A feeling that was echoing in his chest, expanding as if they’d been locked in place by a centuries long freezer burn.

“People have been catching a cold at school because of the weather,” Tohru said, as she placed the thick bowls of stew in front of everyone that night—accompanied by rice and some pickled veggies on the side. “I want to make sure everyone stays warm!”

“How thoughtful,” Shigure smiled. “Kyo that means you. Don’t let her efforts go to waste because you refuse to wear a jacket.”

“I don’t get sick!” Kyo shot back.

“That’s right, idiots don’t catch colds,” Yuki added on.

“Hey!” Kyo shouted back, but didn’t launch himself to his feet.

“He has a point, Kyo,” Shigure laughed.

“How ‘bout this, we stand outside all night no jackets and see who gets sick first.”

“Please don’t do that,” Tohru called after, worryingly.

“If you’re expecting me to get sick first, isn’t that just proving you’re an idiot?”

“That’s just a dumb saying! I don’t believe in that crap,” Kyo shot back.

“That and it’s not as if we need more evidence for something we already know.”

Shigure watched the scene like he’d watch a little boy pull on the pigtails of a girl he liked. He couldn’t help but smirk, watching as Tohru fussed over the two, all four cozy under the warm blanket.

“Joking aside, everyone sleeps with an extra blanket today. If anyone gets sick, Hatori will have to make a house call, you know.”

The two clammed up at that, and Shigure laughed.

“Tohru, you too,” he said, fondly. She nodded with a big smile.

Before anyone could say anything else, the phone rang. Shigure padded over to the hallway, listening to the sounds of conversation resume between the three. His legs broke into goose bumps from the sudden exposure from warm to cold, and he shivered slightly from the change.

Even the handle of the phone was cold to the touch, and Shigure resisted another full-body shiver as
he pressed it against his ear.

“Hello?”

“Sorry to call so late,” Hatori said on the other line.

“Hari! Speak of the devil, we were just talking about you.”

“I don’t like the sound of that,” Hatori said. Shigure just laughed. “I’m not interrupting am I?”

“We just sat down to dinner.”

“I see. Then I won’t be long. Ayame just called to say he’s coming by tonight. He wanted me to call to see if you wanted to join us, since it’s been so long since he’s seen you.”

“In this cold?” Shigure questioned.

“They’re having issues with the heating again over at the shop.”

Shigure gave a small sigh. “I wish he would let me call a repairman.”

“You know how stubborn he can be.”

Shigure hummed in agreement, “I can tell by the way he’s still afraid to call my house. He really shouldn’t be, you know.”

“I’m just here to pass the message along.” Hatori paused. Shigure could hear the flick of a lighter in the background. “It has been awhile since you’ve terrorized the main house.”

“Is this your way of telling me you miss me?”

“Hardly,” Hatori drawled. “But come by if you like.”

Shigure smiled, hearing a sudden burst of laughter from Tohru at Kyo’s raising tone—followed by something hushed and determined in Yuki’s own voice. It was warm under the kotatsu—in the kitchen. Eating dinner and making conversation. With his unexpected houseguests. With his little family of spirits.

He didn’t feel the need to venture into the cold tonight.

“How about next week, Hari? I think I’ll stay home tonight.”

“I’ll ask Ayame,” Hatori replied. “I’m sure he’ll agree.”

Shigure smiled into the phone, “Stay warm, Hari.”

“You too.”

The phone hung up with a click. Shigure wasted no time coming back to the kitchen, making a show of seeping back under the warm covers away from the cold.

“Dramatic baby,” Kyo scoffed at him.

“The manners I have to put up with from you,” Shigure mused.

“Who was it?” Yuki asked, eyes genuine and curious. An expression Shigure was getting used to as time floated past. Tohru mirrored the gaze, and Shigure felt something tug in a direction completely
unfamiliar.

“Hari just called to say hello,” Shigure smiled.

“I hope he’s doing well in this cold!” Tohru beamed back. Shigure reassured he was, and again, so easily, conversation flowed around him.

Shigure was used to be torn in two different directions—battling with this war of good and evil. Of with Akito and against Akito. Of whether to be kind or to be cold. Everyday the battle would change, just like the outcome.

But tonight was different. Or, perhaps, not just tonight. He was starting to feel himself being led in a direction all the new. Towards a house that was gaining a life of its own.

*Pretend to care,* he mused.

On nights like tonight, he realized it was becoming all the more difficult.

Yet, not in the way he expected at all.

Chapter End Notes

“Writing would be so much easier if I knew how to fucking read.” —Shigure, probably, but also me, definitely.
Isn't this technically three chapters in a month? In a month? I feel invincible.

HEY Y'ALL IT'S FINALLY SPRING. Thanks to everyone who is still hanging on for this last, final stretch! I said I was gonna get this thing done before 2019, and by some miracle that's still looking to be on track.

First off, thank you so much to Crystal for putting back on the editing hat, and just totally crushing it ONCE AGAIN with her edits. My love for you swells more and more everyday.

ALSO, PLEASE ALLOW ME TO SHARE SOME ART WITH YOU ALL:

Tsuki Went Off and did so many incredible illustrations for my Winter 1826 intermission chapter (I recommend clicking after you read the chapter, there might be some spoilers!):

X x X x X x X

And then Kiri went and did me this beautiful piece of Kazuo and Daiki from the priest and the cat chapters.

In general I've gotten a few friends telling me to stop encouraging readers to skip the intermissions, which I suppose I should heed especially since you're gonna start seeing them more referenced in these last few chapters. So, uh, if you wanna, maybe give them a shot if you haven't already that'd be cool :")

But for now, back to the main story!! Hope you all enjoy!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“We’re sorry. The person you are calling is outside the cellular service area. Please leave your name and number after the tone.”

Beep.

“Hi Kagura. It’s me. Again.” Tohru clutched the phone to her ear, speaking in low tones so as not to disturb anyone else in the household. But her voice still wavered as she spoke. “I don’t know if you’re getting my messages. I hope so. I really hope you’re safe wherever you are. I don’t know if you’re with Rin or… or with Kyo. If you are… I just wanted you to know that I… I miss you all very much. And—”

Tohru’s voice broke slightly, but she inhaled deeply through her nose to compose herself.

“I know I’ve said this on all my other messages… but we can figure this all out! I know we can! We can help you! Even if it’s dangerous!”

The soft sound of footsteps on wood sounded down the hall, and Tohru tensed, forcing her voice to
go even lower. “I know you probably think I’m really naive… but I’ll keep looking until I know you all are safe… Okay? So—”

“Tohru?” came the sleepy voice from the other room.

“Wait for us!” Tohru rushed out into the phone before hanging up quickly, just as Arisa walked into the room, stretching her arms far above her head with a yawn.

“Tohru? What are you doing up this early?”

“I thought I would make breakfast!” Tohru cried, scurrying through the kitchen of the small apartment. “As a thank you!”

Arisa placed a hand on her shoulder and gave her a stern look. “You’ve done enough chores, alright? Just relax.”

Tohru eyed the phone for a brief moment, only to look back at her dear friend. “I don’t mind, really. It’s the least I could do after imposing—”

“I brought you here,” Arisa huffed. “Just go get ready if you need to do something. You better not take this attitude when the three of us get our place, got it?”

The blonde gave her a bright, cheeky smile that Tohru could only match with a weak version of her own. Regardless, she nodded and trotted off to Arisa’s bedroom, where a stack of her clothes, books, and other items were still packed in the corner.

She rifled through the bags of clothes until she pulled out her school uniform and laid it on the bed to change.

————————

The tie around Yuki’s neck was already starting to suffocate him.

It felt like it had been ages since he last donned his school uniform, and it was almost as if the brief time that had passed was long enough to undo the broken-in feeling of the clothes.

Or maybe it was just Yuki. His whole body felt compressed and starchy since he’d woken up that morning, after all.

Students convened in dense clumps throughout the gymnasium, causing an echoing roar of carefree voices to bounce between the hardwood floor and the vaulted ceiling. Chatter and laughter and shouted greetings were blending together into one rattling vibration that assaulted Yuki’s ears as he tried to navigate through the crowd, his shoulders tensing up painfully.

Were it under any other circumstances, Yuki would have repeated his actions from the high school entrance ceremony a few years ago—waiting from afar and watching the crowd congeal into spartan-straight lines that Yuki could maneuver through with much more ease. But today, the day of their graduation rehearsals, that wasn’t the case.

Wading into the center of the storm of people, Yuki finally caught a glimpse of blonde and black—but when he tried his best to look at the surrounding crowd, Yuki realized Tohru wasn’t amongst them as per usual.

Regardless, he approached the two girls, whose eyes turned sharp and guarded as soon as they saw him approach.
“What do you want, Prince?” Arisa asked, crossing her arms.

“I was looking for Ms. Honda,” Yuki tried. “Do you know where she is?”

“Yes,” Saki replied.

Yuki tried to repress a sigh when she didn’t elaborate. “I need to speak to her. It doesn’t have to be for long.”

“Doesn’t have to be long for you to bring Tohru right back into your bullshit.” Arisa’s words were sharp and cold, and Yuki could feel them sting like frostbite. “How about you just let her be, huh?”

“I think that would be wise,” Saki added.

“Please,” he started. “If she doesn’t want to see me, that’s fine—but at least give me the number for where she’s staying with you. I just need—”

“Yuki?” The soft voice prompted all three of them to look at Tohru. Her hands were clasped together in front of her, her expression heavy without even the smallest attempt of softening into a smile. She did her best to keep her gaze steady, and when Yuki met her eyes, he could feel guilt sink from his stomach to his knees like a rock.

“Ms. Honda,” he said, almost as if to assure himself it was actually her.

“Good morning,” she greeted.

Yuki frowned. “Good morning.”

“Come on, Tohru. We gotta line up soon,” Arisa urged, but Tohru kept her eyes on Yuki expectantly.

Yuki could only do his best to offer a comforting expression, though he wasn’t positive it won the battle over his shame. “Shi-han is coming back today. I thought you should know.”

Tohru’s jaw tightened as if something was lodged in her throat, but she only nodded. “Okay.”

“I’ll let you know when he gets here. I promise.”

Tohru just nodded again, eyes bending as if under a heavy weight.

He felt a sudden shove at his shoulder, pushing him away. When he looked up, Arisa and Saki had taken their familiar posts of standing guard in front of Tohru.

“What did I say? Doesn’t take long at all with your bullshit,” Arisa nearly snarled, her tone almost as venomous as Saki’s accompanying glare. “You talked, now go.”

“Wait,” Tohru said suddenly from behind them. “Uo… Please, if it’s okay, I need him to have your number.”

Arisa’s eyes narrowed at Tohru, whose steadfast and pleading expression didn’t budge. Finally, Arisa clicked her tongue, holding her hand out towards Yuki.

“Phone.”

Yuki obeyed, immediately digging his cellphone out of his pockets and dropping it into Arisa’s palm. When she’d finished entering her contact information, she tossed the phone over to Yuki, who barely
caught it against his chest.

“You may leave now,” Saki declared.

Yuki did as he was told with only one last glance towards Tohru.

It was almost overwhelming how drastic his relief was when he spotted Kakeru observing him with a curious look on the other side of the room. He walked over to his friend as if on instinct, feeling his muscles relax in front of someone who had always allowed him to look his worst.

“Jesus, what’s the deal with you and Honda?” Kakeru asked, his voice as bright and prominent as ever.

“It’s nothing.” Yuki gave an exhausted, mirthless smile. “I just have a habit of making a mess of things.”

“I’ll say,” Kakeru snorted. “C’mon, lighten up. It’s time to stare wistfully back at your youth, not wallow in it. Speaking of…” His voice softened only slightly, “any sign of carrot top?”

Yuki’s expression must have turned even darker, because Kakeru dropped his usual, bright attitude and replaced it with a hearty sigh. “Should’ve figured he was the source of the wallowing.”

“I don’t want to talk about him,” Yuki shot.

“Everybody, time to line up! Come on!”

Kakeru and Yuki both looked towards the stage. The students around them began to untangle and detach from their groups of friends into rigid, compact lines. Before Yuki could join, Kakeru placed a hand on his shoulder.

“I’m catching breakfast with the old lady, Maki, and Machi after rehearsals. Why not tag along?”

Yuki offered as much of a smile as he could. “As much as I would love to, I’m meeting with my mother after this.”

“Oh, yikes,” Kakeru lamented. “Good luck, I guess. You can come crash at my place if you have to later.”

Yuki nodded gratefully, but as they separated and walked to their respective positions, he couldn’t help but feel the bitter tug of familiarity at the offer. It settled poorly in his stomach, and immediately he wondered if he was becoming just as helpless, transparent, and immature as he had acted months prior.

“In line, everybody! Just because you haven’t been in school doesn’t mean you can just forget how to listen to your teachers!”

Yuki shook his head, trying to clear the thoughts out of his brain as he finally stood in his designated spot. All around him, students lined up in an orderly fashion and straightened their posture bit by bit, as if the gymnasium was being worked over with a rolling pin, until they all stood army straight.

Yuki kept his own head up. He didn’t have time to wallow. He didn’t have time to worry those in the only remaining relationships he still had. He didn’t have time to be exhausted.

Mayu clapped her hands together, gaining the attention of the students and burning off the last of the buzzing murmur of restless teenagers. The other homeroom teachers gathered beside her, whispering
amongst themselves and snickering before turning their attention to the student body.

A fragile silence fell, still disrupted by coughs and giggles and chairs scraping against wood as teachers sat to observe.

For the graduation rehearsal, the students were lined up by their surnames in vertical rows. Now that everyone stood in their rightful positions, legs straight and knees locked, Yuki was faced with nothing but an empty space in front of him.

Kyo’s space.

The way the uniformed bodies crowded around his absence seemed almost violent, almost indecent. As if more room should be set aside for what was gone.

The rehearsal began. The teachers barked out instructions to make their voices fill the echoing room. An announcement was made reminding students that they needed to arrive an hour earlier than their guests—in just a week from then.

Finally, the students made their way one-by-one to the stage to shake hands with the teachers acting as stand-ins for the school board. Laughter gripped too easily to the crowd as students took their moments on stage to pose or dance or make faces. When Kakeru’s name was called he brought his hand out for a shake, only to slip it into his hair, leaving the teacher hanging.

“Mayu, throw Manabe’s into the trash. I’m keeping this kid for another year,” the teacher, presumably Kakeru’s homeroom teacher, quipped into the microphone.

Yuki hadn’t even realized his friend was on stage at all.

Down the line they went.

“Sohma Kyo,” Mayu called out. And when she saw Yuki standing there instead, she gave him a pointed look.

“He’s skipping!” One of their classmates called out.

Mayu just sighed.

“Sohma Yuki.”

He approached the stage, shaking hands down the line until he was in front of Mayu.

“Don’t let him do anything stupid,” she said before letting go of Yuki’s hand.

As if he could control that at all.

It was March.

Kyo had been missing for a month.

____________________

The restaurant was in one of the wealthier districts of Tokyo. It took nearly an hour and a half to travel from Kaibara High School to where he would meet his mother, and if anxiety wasn’t already so familiarly embedded into his bloodstream, Yuki’s stomach would have twisted at the realization that he was running late.
He would be scolded for sure. His mother was the most precisely punctual person he had ever known.

Sweat gathered at his hairline as he jogged down the too-long blocks bloated with boutiques, restaurants, and European brands housed by black marble buildings. A vast contrast to the area Yuki lived in with Ayame, where the wooden and plaster shops were packed so tightly, they resembled books on a cheap, overflowing shelf.

Finally, Yuki arrived at the restaurant with the familiar-sounding name. A man in a suit and white gloves greeted him and opened the door for him, but Yuki lingered for a moment to catch his breath and use his handkerchief to dab at the sweat on his forehead. When he deemed himself composed enough to face his mother, he nodded at the greeter and felt the warm wash of air from inside the restaurant as he entered.

“May I help you?” asked the uniformed hostess in overtly formal speech.

“I’m meeting someone—she should be here already. Sohma?”

The woman nodded before leading Yuki through the restaurant, “Right this way, sir.”

Yuki trailed behind.

The ceiling was high, but intricately designed carpeted floors constrained the voices of the patrons, reducing them to a dull hum. The elegant yet mindless tinkling of a piano mixed into the air in a hushed whisper, and Yuki felt as if his steps on the carpet were disturbing the aristocratic atmosphere. Yuki felt out of place even in his school uniform, and part of him wondered if his mother chose this place on purpose to spite him—to mock the polyester fabric he covered himself with when he chose Kaibara.

Or perhaps not. Perhaps his mother was nothing more than a subconscious master of making Yuki feel out of place.

From where he followed the hostess, his mother came into view.

Yuki saw her before she saw him. That was obvious enough, judging by the amiable smile stretched over her lips as she carried a friendly conversation with another woman standing next to where his mother was sitting.

The skin around her eyes folded into fine wrinkles as she laughed. Yuki felt as though he was looking at something forbidden to him.

This was the “other” woman. The woman that Yuki naively wished might be his mother when he was younger. The shadow of warmth and affection that Yuki’s mother orchestrated so beautifully, only for Yuki to find his arms empty when he tried to embrace the clever trick of light.

Even after all this time away from her, she still made him so nervous. It was enough to still his feet when he saw her.

“Your table, sir,” the hostess said with an extended arm, paying no mind to the slight distance that had formed between them. “Your server will be with you shortly.”

Yuki forced himself out of his delay. How many times would he need to come to this realization again and again?

He could handle her. He knew that. Even if he needed to repeat that sentiment to himself again and
“Thank you,” he said, now aware that the hostess had directed the attention of both women onto him. He offered a polite bow. “Hello, mother.”

“Yuki!” his mother said brightly, as if she were excited to see him. “You remember Hiroko, don’t you? She’s another Sohma.”

“Pleased to see you again,” Yuki said with another bow to the woman he could not recall in the slightest.

“I can’t believe how big you’ve gotten,” she chuckled. “It felt like only yesterday that you were clutching onto your mother’s knee.”

Yuki’s mother laughed at that, as if the memory was fond to her in some way. Yuki forced a tight smile as he sat down in his chair.

“I won’t disturb your meal anymore. I just wanted to offer my congratulations on being accepted to all those fine universities. Your mother can barely contain her pride.”

“Thank you.” Yuki gave another slight bow from where he sat.

His mother laughed again, easy as ever, and smiled up at the other woman. “Be sure to visit soon. It’s been too long.”

“Oh course,” Hiroko said with a final wave goodbye. The smile on his mother’s face remained as she brought her water glass to her lips, but by the time she set it down again, her face was hardened and stern—as if the water had melted away the residual foam of her expertly crafted affability.

“I believe you owe me a ‘thank you,’” she said, the words like bricks on her passive, authoritative tongue.

“What for?” Yuki asked.

“I was able to have your test scores sent to the proper universities. You’ve been accepted to all of them. Choose whichever of those three you’d like.”

“Ayame warned me you did that.” Yuki sighed.

“He’s really taken up the mantel as your personal secretary,” she delicately snarled. “Answer the phone when your mother calls.”

“I haven’t been home much lately.”

“That’s another thing—I want you moved out of that man’s house as soon as possible. I’ve already made the arrangements for your return to the main house. I want you settled in after graduation. I think even you can appreciate how important that is, now more than ever.”

“Is that it? Did you just want to meet with me to tell me that you’ve already made all my decisions for me?”

“If I didn’t, who would?” She took another sip of her water, patting her lipsticked mouth with her napkin, looking elegant and immovable in her tailored designer dress. “You’ve had your fun, Yuki. Don’t push it further than that.”

Yuki’s eyes narrowed down at the tablecloth. “I’m not doing any of that. I only agreed to this lunch
so that I could tell you that once and for all.”

“What I’m saying is non-negotiable. I let you do what you wanted in high school, a mistake on my part. Now, however, it’s time you start acting your age.”

Why, even now, did her words resonate as if they were law? Since moving into Shigure’s house, Yuki had seen his mother a scarce handful of times. He had grown separate from her, away from her—he had learned not to need her. So why did his thoughts feel so jumbled, even now? Even after everything? Even after the strength lent to him by his brother?

“I don’t want to argue,” Yuki started, his eyes closing in an attempt to contain his frustration.

“There’s nothing to argue about in the first place,” she said, her eyes narrowing like a snake’s. “Don’t you think you’re acting like a selfish child? You should have a sense of obligation to this family—isn’t that what’s at the root of the zodiac? Why is it that I’m the one sitting here trying to convince you to show some compassion for your own family?”

Compassion?

Yuki looked up at his mother, brow furrowed and mouth turned down into a deep frown. “You don’t get to tell me that I don’t care about what’s happening.”

She rolled her eyes, her unyielding posture making her all the more commanding, even as she gave a disbelieving shake of her head.

“Two zodiacs are missing. Three if you count that cat. And what have you done as the future head of this family? Pitched childish fits because I won’t allow you to throw your life away on some whim your brother has inflicted on you.”


Yuki clenched his fists at the thought of them. A slew of overwhelming and demoralizing emotions hit him like a wave—a familiar sensation that Yuki had endured countless times over the past month.

Who was she to make accusations like this? When Yuki had been pouring all his time and energy into looking for them for weeks now?

Yuki stood, suddenly. The bang of the arm of the chair meeting the table echoed like a gunshot throughout the restaurant.

“I’m going home.”

“Sit down. Don’t make a scene,” his mother hissed. Her eyes swiveled around the restaurant to assess whose attention they’d caught.

“I said what I needed to say.” He needed to leave now, before she beat him down even more. Before he was too tired and exhausted to do anything but agree. “I’m choosing my university. I’m choosing where I live. I’m choosing my future.”

“I said sit down,” she threatened again. “I’m not going to have a conversation with you if all you do is default to the same dramatics as your brother.”

“My brother…” Yuki started, but still didn’t sit. “I think comparing me to my brother is the kindest thing you could have said to me, and you don’t even realize that.”
Her eyes narrowed even harsher at that, “He’s an idiotic man.”

“He’s a good person. And he’s already offered to pay for my college, which is why I don’t have anything else to say.”

Yuki would have turned to leave, but the rigidity of his mother’s face broke into a condescending, barbed smile. “Ayame is?”

He didn’t know why, but the simple question was enough to jumpstart Yuki’s nervous system—his face contorting into something vicious. Before he had a chance to speak, however, his cell phone vibrated in his pocket.

His mother scoffed at his manners when he looked at the caller ID, but his eyes were already wide and his heart pounded mercilessly as he answered.

“Hello? Hatori?”

“You told me to call when Kazuma arrived.”

“He’s there?”

“One of the maids just informed me. Are you coming to the main house?”

“Is K—” Yuki eyed his mother, still staring daggers into the side of his face. He turned away from her, voice hushed. “Is anyone with him?”

He could hear rustling from the other line, along with a labored exhale from Hatori, “I don’t know. The maid didn’t say anything else. I’m going to meet him with Akito now.”

“Please tell him I’ll meet him at the dojo. Ms. Honda will, too,” he hoped.

There was another delay before Hatori gave a soft, “Alright.”

Yuki snapped the phone closed and turned back to his mother.

“I’m leaving. I have things I need to settle before graduation. And that includes finding my friends.”

“Yuki. I’m not going to tell you again. Sit down.”

Yuki threw her one last hardened look before he turned on his heel to leave. She wouldn’t call after him. Not in a restaurant with every word so amplified. She wouldn’t run after him. Not with people she knew sitting only tables away.

She wouldn’t look away from him, Yuki knew. So his final task was to not look back at her as he exited the restaurant altogether.

The tea set fell on the floor with a CRASH.

“GET OUT!” Akito screamed, mindlessly stepping on one of the broken shards. Blood was already starting to leak from the cut skin of that foot.

“Akito!”

“Akito, please!”
Hatori and Kureno held back the raging head of the family. Akito struggled, lithe limbs flailing violently to free her upper half to be free just long enough to lean down and grab a jagged, sharp piece of porcelain. Akito brandished it in her hand like a knife, but she could feel Hatori and Kureno’s grip keeping her from lunging forward.


“Go on, Kazuma,” Hatori added, voice loud and unsettled as he clutched Akito tightly by the waist.

“Akito, your foot!” Kureno cried, grabbing at her shoulder, hoping to calm her down.

Kazuma took the cue, bowing at the waist before he left.

“What good are you? WHAT GOOD ARE YOU?” Akito called after Kazuma, voice scratchy and violent.

“Akito, you have to calm down,” Hatori insisted.

“I WILL NOT BE TOLD TO CALM DOWN! DON’T YOU SPEAK ANOTHER WORD TO ME, HATORI!”

“Akito, please, we need to tend to your foot,” Kureno offered, yet still Akito’s limbs flailed, resisting the hold they had on her.

“DON’T TOUCH ME!” Came another shriek. “I DON’T WANT TO SEE ANY OF YOU AGAIN FOR AS LONG AS I LIVE UNTIL YOU FIND THEM!”

“Akito!”

“THEY HAVE TO BE WITH THAT BITCH! WITH THAT LYING WHORE OF A PIG!”

“Akito, you’ll hurt yourself!”

The two did their best to calm the angered god down, but really it was for naught. Hatori kept his weary hold on her until she finally tired herself out, fury still simmering. Kureno placed a hand over hers where the jagged piece of glass was clutched so tightly, another cut formed on her palm.

She dropped it, but slapped Kureno across the face with a bloody palm as soon as she did.

“Find them. Start at that pig’s house. Burn her house down if that’s what it takes to make her squeal —”

“Akito!” Hatori scolded.

“SHUT UP,” Akito screamed. She turned back to Kureno. “Bring them back here or don’t you ever come near me again.”

Haru looked in the fridge, examining it for a long time before his eyes landed on the leftovers from the night before. He pulled it out, along with the accompanying rice and a few apples, before heading towards the pantry to have a look at what was there.

He closed the door quickly when he heard the distinct sound of his mother’s hasty steps down the stairs. Haru rose in time for his mother to enter the kitchen. She wore sharp, expensive clothes, with
perhaps just a little too much jewelry and a little too much perfume. She looked at the thin, gold wristwatch giving a ladylike huff of frustration as she stormed around as if on a silk-sewn warpath.

“Oh, I’m so late,” she said, kissing the side of his head.

“I thought you already left,” Haru said.

“I had to do my hair,” she replied, simply. She scooted Haru out of the way to grab an infused water from the fridge.

“It takes longer every day.” Haru’s tone was flat, but curious. His mother pinched his arm playfully.

“You sound like your father,” she huffed. “Oh, this woman, though. If you don’t look your best—! You remember that cute little friend you had in elementary school? What was his name? Tou something. Remember?”

“Not really…”

“Yes you do! The one who cried on stage during your school play. In elementary school!”

“Mom, your memory is pretty amazing. What was his name again?”

“Anyway, it’s his mother. And she’s a sweet woman, honestly. She is. But this new diet she’s on— goodness. If I have to hear about it one more time… Don’t get me wrong—she looks incredible, but Mama always had the best hair. We have to make sure to show it off when she gets to look so thin. And knows it!”

“Women sound so complicated,” Haru hummed. “It’s like a whole other world.”

“I’m not taking lip from my little boy on strange women or strange worlds,” she said with a sigh, pinching his nose affectionately.

“Hmm… That makes me sound like I have a complex,” he said, wrinkling his nose when she pulled her hand away.

“I’m sure you have many. Luckily for me, you’re still such a good boy.”

“Pure white,” he added flatly, in mock-agreement. She didn’t respond, already turning to leave.

“I won’t be back until late, Hatsu,” she said, walking towards the entrance on the balls of her feet, as if already anticipating the heels she’d be wearing.

“Okay, mom,” he said, still not moving to continue his task.

Good thing, because she stopped suddenly, as if she forgot something, and turned to Haru.

“Oh, sweetie, one more thing. I know your mama can be a little air-headed, but I’m not as dumb as you think. If any more food goes missing, you’re footing the bill.”

Haru blinked at his mom, now very aware of the large plastic container of food that sat before him.

“I’m going through puberty,” he tried.

His mother’s eyes turned annoyed, but certainly did not take on hard edge. “I’m not going to ask any questions. For both of our sakes. But as your mother I think it’s my job to at least warn you that your second puberty could get you into a lot of trouble.”
Haru stayed quiet, averting his eyes away from his mother.

She sighed. “I’m off.”

“See you,” Haru called after her. When he heard the door click shut, he resumed his search of the pantry, finding a couple bags of chips. He stacked them on top of the plastic container of leftovers along with the fruit, grabbing some chopsticks before heading up the stairs.

Quietly, he opened and closed his door to his room behind him. He set the food down on his desk.

“I think my mom might suspect something,” Haru said, plainly.

Rin looked up at him from his bed, where she was reading one of his magazines.

Sitting on the floor against the bed, Kagura looked up from her phone.

This was definitely turning into a dilemma.

—————————

Hatori hadn’t even realized he dozed off when he heard the sound of knocking against his front door. He shook his head with a groggy sigh as he righted himself in his office chair, brushing the hair out of his face.

He glanced a look at his watch when the knocking started up again. It was still early in the evening. He needed rest, but he knew that was far and away with the main house still arrested by turmoil. He had only just gotten Akito to calm down, but even in the moments of quiet within his own home and clinic, he knew it was only a matter of time before he was pulled away again.

Evident enough by the insistent guest at his front door.

He lifted himself with more effort than should have been necessary to answer the door. The knocking was irritatingly persistent, but not so urgent that it resurrected Hatori’s simmering dread.

That being said, it wasn’t exactly a pleasant sight when he opened the door to find Shigure.

It may have taken more than a little willpower not to slam the door shut.

“Hari,” Shigure greeted. Smile as usual.

“I have nothing to say to you,” Hatori said immediately.

Shigure’s smile only softened. “Do you need to speak to me to let me inside?”

Hatori only eyed him warily.

“I promise, I didn’t come here to irritate Akito. Or you.”

It had been months since he last talked to Shigure—since New Year’s, really. With everything that happened with Yuki, and with Ayame’s inflamed anger at the dog, Hatori found the distance growing between them to be somewhat inevitable.

Of course, Hatori couldn’t help the prickling irritation when no effort came from Shigure towards any of them to make amends. No calls to either him or Ayame. No surprise visits. Nothing but silence after a well-deserved scolding. How old was Shigure again?
Hatori narrowed his eyes, feeling the bitterness of his thoughts sink in. But he walked away from the entrance, leaving the door open.

Shigure’s soft “pardon the intrusion” followed after him as Hatori made his way back to the sitting room.

Hatori sat heavily on his couch, immediately feeling the exhaustion of the past month engulf him like the powerful tides of the ocean. He wanted to sleep, but it seemed every time he closed his eyes, Akito was summoning him again.

He withdrew a cigarette from his breast pocket and placed it between his lips, lighting it as Shigure sat across from him.

“You look rather worse for wear,” Shigure lightly teased. Hatori only rolled his eyes, taking a deep inhale of tobacco.

“And don’t you seem well-rested,” Hatori commented.

“Do I? Perhaps it’s just the natural youthfulness of my face.” Shigure laughed.

Hatori did nothing to acknowledge the comment. He raised his tired, serious eyes to Shigure, only to find Shigure had his eyes trained on Hatori’s cigarette. He exhaled a puff of smoke, and raised an eyebrow when Shigure’s eyes followed it for a brief moment, only to return his gaze to Hatori.

“What? Did you forget yours?” Hatori asked, but made no movement to offer him one. He was in no mood to offer Shigure anything.

Shigure just chuckled. “I’m trying to quit.”

“Oh?” Hatori took another puff, watching Shigure through the smoke. “You and Yuki both.”

“Yuki? He smokes? Isn’t that so terrible for him?” Shigure placed a hand on his chest, taking in a dramatic gasp.

“I can see why it would be so shocking.” He glared. “Considering he said you had no idea.”

“Ah, I used to hate such good kids like him,” Shigure said.

Hatori eyed Shigure carefully, watched as his mockingly shocked features melted into a sigh—a small smile still hanging back on his lips, however. A look utterly fond, yet one that was also somehow exasperated and patronizing at the same time.

Hatori merely shook his head. “If the way you treated Yuki was your way of showing affection, then I’ve reached a total loss with you. All the better that Tohru moved out, too.”

Shigure only looked away at that. “If the way you treated Yuki was your way of showing affection, then I’ve reached a total loss with you. All the better that Tohru moved out, too.”

“Shigure only looked away at that. “Would you have preferred it if I hated him? Or was apathetic toward him?”

“Aren’t you?”

“No,” Shigure said simply. “No, I’m not. But I’m not here to explain myself. Especially since I’ve come to realize that I don’t regret how I acted.”

Hatori shot a forceful glare at Shigure. He stubbed out the last of his cigarette in his ashtray, a disappointed sigh escaping off his mouth. “Then I take it you’re not here to apologize.”
Shigure gave a small, yet sincere smile. “No, I don’t think I am.”

Hatori stared at him with disgust, disbelief—with anger. He stood, antsy from a mind addled with sleep deprivation and the infuriating blasé nature of his friend. Wrenching the door open to allow the chilly spring breeze in, he lit another cigarette. A hurried inhale and exhale was all it took before he turned back around to face Shigure.

“I’ve been trying to figure out when you became this person. I’ve known you my whole life, and I’ve also known you to say and do some truly thoughtless things. But is this what you’ve truly decided to become? Someone who is trying so hard to be this heartless?”

Shigure had his arms crossed, not looking up at Hatori, but he didn’t seem anything more than merely annoyed by the outburst.

Hatori felt his anger billow. “Answer the question.”

“I’m not exactly sure how,” Shigure responded, simply. “If that’s how you think of me, isn’t the fault on you for letting him live with me in the first place?”

“Perhaps it was,” Hatori shot back.

Silence passed between the two. The only sound coming from the strong winds that rustled the tree branches—still too early in the season to bloom fully.

“Do you not feel any guilt over what happened?” Hatori asked, finally.

“I never said that.” This time, Shigure looked Hatori right in the eye. He only gave a small laugh at Hatori’s wary expression. “What happened, happened. By now, what good is an apology? Whether I feel guilt or not isn’t relevant in that regard.”

“So it’s best not to bother at all, hm?” Hatori said, with a crossing his arms as he looked down at Shigure.

“Words are empty things. You of all people should know that, spending as much time with Akito as you do. But you listen to them anyway, Hari. I think it’s both a good point and a bad point of yours, at times.”

Hatori took another drag. He could feel a pressure headache starting to form just by being near this man. “Why are you here, Shigure?”

Only then, Shigure’s face turned serious. “I want to start speaking to Aya again.”

Hatori finally sat down again, this time in his desk chair, releasing a sardonic breath of a laugh.

“Even I don’t think I can help with that,” Hatori said. “Especially when you don’t even plan to apologize to him.”

“I will. If he needs to hear it.”

“And to me? To Yuki?” Hatori eyed him.

Shigure smiled. “Would you believe me if I did?”

Hatori studied him through his overgrown bangs. “Only if Yuki believed you.”

“Ah, you see,” Shigure said as he stood up from the chair with a stretch, “that’s where things get a
bit complicated, don’t you think? Seeing as I doubt Yuki expects something like that from me.”

“He’s a forgiving kid. That hardly means you should take advantage,” Hatori said.

Shigure hummed at that. “You should spend more time with him. You’ll realize Yuki isn’t so simple.”

Hatori only offered him a deep frown.

“I should go,” Shigure said. “I’ll be back soon. Tell Aya to expect a call from me, if you will.”

“Don’t you dare see Akito,” Hatori warned.

“Even I’m aware that I am the last thing needed in this trying time of crisis,” Shigure said with a wave. “I’ll see myself out.”

Hatori watched him leave the living room, listening as the front door opened and closed behind Shigure. He stood with a heavy sigh to stub out the nub of his second cigarette.

At this point, all he wanted was rest.

——

Kureno stopped in his tracks just before Hatori’s house when Shigure opened the door. He was sure his eyes looked burdened with heavy bags beneath them. He was sure his clothes appeared rumpled and unwashed. Kureno’s first instinct was to step back, as if Shigure might not notice the discrepancies in his appearance if he were a few more scant inches away.

Something twisted in Kureno’s gut when Shigure only responded to Kureno’s step back with a knowing smirk.

“The doctor is in, but that doesn’t mean you should bother him.”

“Akito is calling for him.”

“Ah, then who am I to stand in the way of god?” Shigure slid away from the door with a bow, arm extended out as if presenting Hatori's front door as a prize on a gameshow.

Kureno stepped forward warily, opening the door as he eyed Shigure, who didn’t seem to have any intention of moving.

“He’s… very upset.” Kureno remarked.

“So don’t make it worse?” Shigure finished for him. He laughed when Kureno’s face twisted unpleasantly. “Don’t worry, I don’t have any business with Akito. Lucky you.”

It was then that Shigure finally left, walking down the path away from Hatori's house.

Kureno watched him carefully, only heading inside when he saw Shigure head down the direction opposite of the main mansion.

——

When Yuki called, Tohru agreed to meet at the dojo as soon as she was passed the phone.

So it wasn’t much of a shock when he approached the dojo and saw her sitting there on the porch,
her legs dangling as she stared down at her knees, but it made Yuki’s heart stutter nervously all the same. It was still so unfitting to see Tohru wear such an expression. As if optimism was a stranger to her. It broke Yuki’s heart.

Quietly, he sat down next to her. The wood creaked under his weight.

Supposedly, it was spring now. But it was still chilly, and the trees still looked barren and bald from winter. Tohru wore a light scarf around her neck, and Yuki was wrapped in his winter jacket, still. The air was clear, though. Bright blue skies with bursting cotton clouds danced only briefly in view of the sun now and again. Even so, warmer weather seemed more like a broken promise than a reality.

Yuki turned to Tohru, his eyes apologetic as always when he looked at her now.

“Is Shi-han here yet?”

“I’m not sure,” Tohru said, quietly. “I… I didn’t want to knock.”

Yuki more than understood the feeling.

Kazuma had departed three weeks ago to search the mountains for Kyo. He would visit the former dojo they stayed in during their four-month long absence. He would visit the surrounding temples. He would walk down every footpath they could have conceivably passed on their journey. Yuki saw a fire of determination burning behind Kazuma’s eyes at the promise that he would find his son.

In the meantime, Yuki and Tohru searched on their own—for Kyo, but also for Kagura and Rin. Yuki got in contact with some of their classmates to try and casually ask if they’d seen Kyo. He visited every possible nearby dojo on the off-chance he sought refuge from one still in the city. He scoured the woods by Shigure’s house, wondering if he might have taken up Tohru’s example from when they first met her at the beginning of high school.

Tohru joined him most times, also asking Kisa for the schools’ information for both Rin and Kagura. The two visited the campuses, talked to the students there, trying to find anyone who had befriended the two girls well enough in their respective schools to hide them away. They tried to coax Haru into the search, but he had become cold and distant since the disappearance of his ex. Yuki didn’t want to press it.

Day after day, it only became more and more hopeless—more and more discouraging. Until one day, Yuki called Shigure’s house to the rare instance of the dog picking up the phone instead of Tohru.

“Her friends came to get her,” Shigure had said. “I got quite the earful.”

Not that Yuki could blame them. Spending your days on fruitless searches, only to go back to a home that only echoed with the people who were once there. Echoed with Kyo’s absence.

Yuki felt his chest clutch so tightly, it felt like his sternum might burst out through the skin.

“Ms. Honda…” Yuki started, but for a moment, a breathless sound was all he could offer when he realized he shouldn’t apologize yet again. “How are you doing?”

She looked up at him, finally, and offered a sad smile. “I—Well.” Yuki could see her eyes water and her throat start to bob, constricting her voice. “I just wish I knew if he was safe.”

Yuki swallowed, cold dread ringing through him like a gong. He pushed it away. If he thought about that, he would fall apart. “I’m sure he is, Ms. Honda.”
She nodded, and though she kept her wooden smile, even he knew it was becoming harder to believe.

The sound of the door sliding open from behind them caused them to turn. Kunimitsu stared down at the both of them from inside, cocking his head.

“How long have you two been sitting outside? You’ll catch a cold in this weather,” he said amiably.

“We’re waiting for Shi-han,” Yuki replied, standing. “Sorry for intruding.”

At that, Kunimitsu’s face softened with sympathy at the two. “Sensei should be back soon. He called me from the main house.”

“Did he say anything?” Tohru asked hopefully.

Kunimitsu just offered an apologetic smile. “No, sorry. Ah, but he’s never been one to talk much on the phone. Who knows what that means?”

“Right,” Yuki said, trying to give Tohru a comforting expression, only to see she’d looked away again.

“Better yet, you can ask him yourself now,” Kunimitsu said, his eye catching on something down the path. He waved a hand high in the air and suddenly called out, “Sensei!”

Startled, Yuki and Tohru looked up, their hopeful eyes darting down the path and focusing on the approaching figure. He was far down the dirt lane, but it was clearly Kazuma. His stature, his posture, his presence was so undeniable, even from a distance. Something Kyo had unwittingly inherited, Yuki noted.

Which is why it was all the more jarring when that presence was absent again.

Kazuma walked down the path alone, and finally when he was close enough, his darkened expression was as clear as the brisk, blue spring sky.

——

The three of them sat around the table in the dojo, Kunimitsu setting a cup of tea down in front of each of them.

None of them had said a word since they entered the house. But now, with all of them sitting at the table, tea steaming before them, there was nothing left to do but speak.

“I didn’t find him,” Kazuma finally said. “There’s still a possibility he could be somewhere in the area, but I made sure to let the dojo masters and local priests know to contact me if he’s spotted.”

Yuki’s throat felt like it might close up when he spoke. “No one would be able to miss him, that’s for sure…”

“Is… Is there anywhere else… anywhere in the mountains that he—that he maybe…?” Tohru asked, the broken words somehow finding their way out of her mouth.

Kazuma sighed. “I don’t know of anywhere else he could have gone, in that regard. But that doesn’t mean I’ll stop looking.”

Silence fell on them again, the air morose and oppressive—just as a humid, heavy fog might feel.
Tohru’s hand slapped on the table. “We need to call the police!”

“The Sohmas refuse to report any of them missing,” Kazuma said.

“But… aren’t you Kyo’s guardian? Wouldn’t you be able to?” she implored.

“I tried.” Kazuma shook his head. “The police have done next to nothing.”

“A few Sohmas are high-ranking officials in the police department,” Yuki confirmed, bitterly. “I remember meeting them with my mother when I was a boy. They could be doing it on purpose…”

“You guys are starting to sound like a crime family or something,” Kunimitsu piped up from the corner of the room.

“It’s not that,” Yuki strained. “The Sohmas are just…”

“Powerful,” Kazuma finished.

“Then they should be able to find them!” Tohru cried out, desperation creeping into her tone.

Yuki felt his face tighten as he struggled to maintain his composure. Tohru was right. This didn’t make sense. The Sohmas were so foreboding, so controlling, holding so tightly onto the necks of its family members, it was a wonder their heads didn’t all pop off.

“Kunimitsu,” Kazuma said suddenly. “Would you mind excusing us for a minute?”

Kunimitsu gave him an apprehensive glance before nodding, finally. “I’ll check to make sure everything is in order for the classes tomorrow, sensei.”

“Thank you.”

It wasn’t until the three heard Kunimitsu’s bare steps fade down the hallway that Kazuma spoke again.

“I was told they’re handling it quietly,” Kazuma said, his own voice just as disbelieving as they all felt. “That’s how they handle most zodiac matters.”

Yuki stared hard down at the table, willing away the furious flames that licked and burned inside of him.

 Couldn’t they even be regarded as human before being known as a zodiac?

Tohru sniffled. Yuki suddenly turned his gaze to her. He watched her silently try to wipe her tears away with the back of her hand as they fell, looking upset at herself for crying at all.

“He’ll miss graduation,” came her wobbling voice.

Kazuma’s expression quickly shifted from determination to sorrow. Yuki felt like he couldn’t breathe—as if all his concentration needed to be focused on making sure his breath didn’t go too shallow.

He had never seen such an expression on Tohru or Kazuma. He couldn’t handle witnessing the helplessness of so many people in his world who always stood so tall and sure—who had always epitomized his ideals of optimism and inner strength. It was then, and only then, that Yuki found himself grateful for having learned to keep his emotions so hidden and locked away—if only not to add to this atmosphere of this smothering despondency.
If only, at least, to return the strength Tohru had lent him time and time again.

“Well’ll find him,” Yuki said firmly. A hollow confidence kept his spine straight. “I know we will. I know we can.”

Kazuma gave him a fond smile. “You’re right, Yuki. I think we will.”

But no clarity came with the statement, and Tohru continued to cry quietly at the table.

They had exhausted their options.

The real question that was weighing on everyone was one no one had an answer to:

What now?

Ayame was already waiting at the entrance when Yuki walked in.

The amount of energy emanating Ayame as he stood still, hands tucked behind his back and eyes shining at Yuki, made him look like a child trying to keep a secret.

Yuki simply focused on taking off his shoes, his shoulders still slumped. “I’m home,” was all he said.

“Yuki! You dawdle too much! I’ve been waiting expectantly for you to return!” Ayame exclaimed. He was already far too loud for Yuki’s exhausted, defeated spirit.

“Oh?” Yuki brushed past him inside the house. He wanted to go to bed.

“A certain university has sent their response,” Ayame declared.

Yuki stopped. When he turned around, Ayame’s hands were filled with a large white envelope that must have been hidden behind his back, the return address sticker emblazoned with school’s emblem. Yuki’s eyes widened, reaching forward to grab it immediately. Ayame led him into the living room with a hand on his back as Yuki stared down at the envelope. Mine stood there, too, her eyes dancing with excitement as she watched the brothers.

“It’s a big envelope,” Yuki said, almost in a daze.

“It is!” Ayame confirmed heartily.

“I said the same thing!” Mine chimed in. “Didn’t I, Aya? I said it was big!”

“You did!”

Yuki looked up at them, smile ghosting onto his lips. Of the three universities Yuki had applied for, two had already sent letters to inform him of his acceptance. However, the only university that he had yet to hear from was the one where he had interviewed. The one he had stayed up late into the night researching with Ayame. The one Hatori had driven him down the coastline to visit.

He was smart. Yuki knew that. The test had gone well. It must have. Two other universities had already accepted him, along with the other three to which his mother had sent his scores to without his permission.

But Yuki still wanted this. Butterflies still tickled at his stomach at the idea of being accepted into the place where he had first truly envisioned a future of his own. Frayed nerves were bound to follow,
The crinkle of the envelope under his fingertips caused Yuki’s heart to leap, and he gave one more expectant glance up at Ayame and Mine before carefully working it open. He took a deep breath before carefully sliding the first page of many out of the packet, handling it delicately as he read over the words on the page.

Ayame and Mine looked beside themselves, to the extent that it appeared to be physically paining Ayame to stay quiet and let Yuki read.

Despite everything, Yuki couldn’t help but smile. A small, flush of pride colored his cheeks as he looked back up at them.

“I got in.”

Mine clapped her hands and let out an exclamatory cry, while Ayame immediately crushed his brother in a hug, letting out his own cheer. Yuki indulged him for a moment, letting his mind wander back to that beachside campus. He got in. He got in! To a place where he would be free to choose the next part of his life.

*Free.*

When Ayame pulled away and looked down at him, Yuki’s happy expression had already crumpled.

“Yuki, what’s the matter? Aren’t you over the moon?”

“Is this not the school you want to go to?” Mine questioned, her smiling face shifting into concern.

“No… No, it’s not that.” Yuki sighed. “I’m. I’m happy. I’m so happy—”

“Then we should celebrate! We’ll go out to eat! Or perhaps we’ll go on a trip! Mine, let’s close the shop tomorrow, and the three of us can properly enjoy such wonderful—”

Mine put a hand on Ayame’s shoulder, halting his rushed, overly joyous outburst. He looked to her, observing her concerned smile aimed at Yuki.

“But?” Mine asked, as if Ayame hadn’t said a word at all.

Yuki couldn’t help but give a strained smile. Both at Mine’s gentle attention, and at Ayame’s confused expression.

“It doesn’t feel right… to be happy. Not when so much is still going on with… with the family.” Yuki sighed, sitting heavily down at the table, and the other two followed suit.

“Do you mean…” Mine began when Yuki didn’t continue after a moment, “with your cousins still missing?”

Yuki nodded.

Ayame sighed. “Oh, Yuki. You’re such a gentle boy. You’ve got that same sensitive nature Hari has.”

He placed his hand atop Yuki’s on the table and offered him a smile. Yuki only looked away, his brows returning to that furrowed look they’d held since he’d seen Kazuma walk down the path earlier that day.
“It’s not right,” Yuki defended. “Kyo was—! He was supposed to—he should be getting responses from universities, too. But he’s… They’re all just gone. How am I supposed to just move on from that? That’s not fair.”

Ayame gave him a troubled smile. “You and Kyonkichi really have become startlingly close, haven’t you?”

“Something like that,” Yuki mumbled, taking back his hand and looking over his acceptance letter. “Do we have to be close for me to hope he’s alright?”

“I suppose not,” Ayame hummed. “Yuki, as horrid as this may sound, there is not much that can be done about those three. I know you must be worried… and I know that we all have a… particular bond with them.”

Yuki eyed Mine for a moment before looking back at Ayame.

“But will you stepping forward into the next part of your life truly deter their well-being?”

“No, but…”

“This is something you have worked hard to accomplish. You should be proud of yourself, Yuki. You’ve grown into a fine young man with a beautiful heart. But allow yourself a moment to appreciate all you’ve done for yourself.”

Yuki bowed his head and squeezed his eyes shut, covering his face as if to deflect his brother’s comforting words in a way that felt almost violent.

“I haven’t done anything for myself.” Yuki’s voice simmered low, an anger forming at no one in particular.

Or… no. That wasn’t true.

What was forming was an anger at himself.

Because he hadn’t done a thing for himself. It felt as though he had been dragging his spent, useless body from one crutch to another. What would he have done without Ayame? Without Kakeru? Without Machi? Without Tohru? Without Haru? Without Hatori? Without Shigure? Without Kyo? Who would he be on his own?

What had he done for himself that wasn’t rotting his body with tobacco and maintaining poor eating habits and even worse sleeping habits? What had he done for himself other than whimper and whine and wallow throughout this past year of school? What had he done other than create chaos in the lives of those he loved?

Someone like Kyo… Kyo was someone who truly worked for himself. Who spent tireless, countless hours and energy and effort into bettering himself and moving forward. Something Yuki had no idea how to do in the single-handed manner that Kyo tackled everything. And Yuki… Yuki had only ruined that.

Was he supposed to destroy the entirety of Kyo’s world and then simply move on?

He wanted to move out of Sohma house to be better. He wanted to learn how to be his own person. He wanted to grow into someone worthy. But instead, what had he done other than isolate himself within his own destructive mind and stay just as silent and still as that trapped little boy in Akito’s room?
And what had he done to the people who pulled him out of that world? To the people who yanked on his arms until his limbs nearly came out of their sockets, just so he could stand on his own two feet?

What did he give back to them?

Kyo ran away because of Yuki. Kyo... the person he had claimed to love since he was a child.

That was the kind of love he gave in return.

“Maybe I’m really... maybe I’m just hopeless.”

Yuki jumped when he heard fists pound on the table, his wide, startled eyes immediately landing on his brother’s angry expression.

“Enough, Yuki!” Ayame cried out. “How can you sit here, a glistening achievement resting in your own two hands, and still say such terrible things about yourself?!”

“Ayame—”

“You worked hard! You did your best! You accomplished a goal you set for yourself to achieve! Do those sound like the actions of a hopeless person to you?!”

“None of that would have happened if it wasn’t for you!” Yuki snapped back. “I—I didn’t do this on my own! If it hadn’t been for you or—or Ms. Honda or... so many other people in my life that I don’t deserve!”

Ayame let out a harsh, dismissive noise, “What on earth does that mean?! Explain yourself!”

“It means that everyone has done everything for me! And all I am in return is—is!”

*Dead weight.*

Yuki heard a crinkle of paper only to see that his curled up fists had marred his acceptance letter.

He glared down at it.

Out of everyone, what gave him the right to be happy?

Yuki heard Ayame sigh again, angry but restrained. He didn’t want to look at his brother. But two pale, slender hands came into view when they coaxed the acceptance letter away from him. Ayame placed it flat on the table and carefully smoothed it out.

Yuki chanced a look up. Mine was staying quiet, listening carefully, but knowing enough not to say a word as she stared at Yuki with sympathetic eyes. Ayame, meanwhile, looked mournfully down at the crumpled letter.

“Tell me, Yuki,” Ayame began. “Do you think we’re all supposed to go through life alone?”

Yuki blinked. “I don’t, but...”

“What do you think a life with people dear to us in it looks like?”

Yuki’s eyes furrowed in heavy confusion under the question, and Ayame simply sighed again.

“People in our lives are not dormant things. They’re an expression of your own soul, wouldn’t you
agree? They show us how to step forward when we’re lost. No matter how long that may take.”

Ayame finally looked back up at Yuki, his hard, merciless stare pinned on his little brother.

“But those steps that you take are yours, and you mustn’t forget that! Don’t discredit the love that others have given you. Nor should you mistake that love for weakness! Frankly, it’s disrespectful.”

Ayame crossed his arms, and Yuki felt himself flush. His shame was so intense, it felt as though it were coiling around his neck, choking him. Yuki nodded, but averted his eyes.

Despite his brother’s words, he was still tired of saying the wrong things again and again.

“I blame Mother for this,” Ayame huffed. “She puts you in such a foul mood.”

Yuki gave a weak smile. “Our meeting didn’t last too long.”

“Oh?” Ayame questioned. “Were you able to properly tell her everything?”

Yuki nodded. “I told her I was choosing my own future.”

Yuki felt a sudden ruffle of his hair. He turned to see Ayame smiling softly at him.

“I’m so very proud of you,” Ayame said warmly.

Yuki felt his chest swell at that. “I’m… sorry,” he said. “And… thank you. For everything. Both of you.”

“Let’s cook your favorite dish tonight, Yuki!” Mine cried out, happily. She stood, about to head to the kitchen, when, “Oh, goodness. I forgot we’re out of sugar.”

“Why don’t you and Yuki get started on preparations, and I’ll go to the store, my dear.”

“Roger that!” Mine replied, and with that she bounded into the kitchen. Ayame lifted himself up as well, heading to the entrance to put on his coat and shoes. Yuki followed him and leaned with his shoulder against the wall as he watched his brother, uncertainty still plaguing his thoughts and embarrassment still fresh and stinging.

“Ayame…” Yuki finally spoke.

“Hm?” Ayame tapped his toe on the entryway to adjust his shoe.

“Are you sure you’re still okay to pay for my college?”

“Of course. Why would you even need to ask?” Ayame flipped his hair out of his coat and turned to face Yuki.

“I, well…” Yuki’s fingers fiddled with his sleeve. “When I told Mother you would pay for everything, she… laughed, kind of.”

Ayame’s eyes only softened, and he gently placed his hand atop Yuki’s head. “Certain people in this world will use any tactic available to them to keep your spirit locked away. Pay her no mind.”

Yuki watched the door close behind Ayame, but he didn’t move from the entryway.

That was true, wasn’t it?
Yuki hadn’t realized how wide his eyes had become at the words.

All this time, they had been looking everywhere for Kyo. Because, supposedly, Kyo was hiding from a person who would do just that.

Dinner floated by pleasantly, and Yuki did his best to eat as much as he could of the delicious celebration dinner. His stomach was still tied up in knots by the time they all went to bed, however.

Yuki couldn’t sleep. His body was too restless, and his mind revved like an engine trying frantically to surge forward.

Only when the sun finally rose the next day was Yuki able to feel the shallow relief of releasing the energy and agitation his body had hummed with all night.

He paced as he brushed his teeth, feeling nausea rising with the same plaguing thoughts he had fallen asleep to.

With the train of thought “locked away” had triggered.

The cage.

He hadn’t even thought to check—perhaps he simply couldn’t allow himself to take that line of thought seriously. If he did, his stomach knotted into a horrible tangle of dread, his tongue felt like a weight dropping down to his ribs, and his arms and legs felt shaky and fragile.

That place. That cage. Was there any logical explanation as to why Kyo would be there?

Had Akito found him somehow? Had he thrown him in there early? Had he not even allowed Kyo the last of his high school days? With no goodbyes? No announcement? Nothing? Had Kagura actually told Akito the nature of his and Kyo’s relationship?

Was Kyo paying for that now?

Yuki had to stop himself. He had to give himself the unpleasant reminder that if Kyo was being punished for that… Yuki definitely would have received his own punishment from Akito, as well. But there had been nothing—Akito hadn’t even called Yuki to the main house this past month. That didn’t seem right, if that’s truly what happened.

Then what was the other option? It almost felt worse.

Had Kyo chosen the cage to hide? Had he isolated himself of his own accord? Had what Yuki done to him… had it truly robbed Kyo so completely of any hope for his future, that he sought refuge in his own prison?

These thoughts circled Yuki like a vulcher throughout the day. He had taken to helping Ayame in his store since the break began, and on most days, it was a welcome distraction from the failed search parties he and Tohru would form in the mornings and evenings.

But today, Yuki felt like he was in a haze. Everything felt blurry and distant, until only one thought occupied his mind.

Even though it sickened Yuki to his core, he knew it wasn’t something that he could just brush off. If anything—if at the very least… if he checked the cage himself, he would clear his mind of the
weight of these paranoid musings.

It was late afternoon by the time he was finally able to slip out of Ayame’s shop and make his way towards the main house. His heart stooping lower and lower with every step until it felt as though he was crushing his organs into the concrete.

What if Kyo really was there?

Yuki had been so focused on trying to find him, he hadn’t considered how much Kyo definitely wouldn’t want to see him. Especially after their last encounter.

He stared at the hole in the estate wall, running his hand over the plaster that created a ring around broken, chalky stone edges. Yuki ducked down to step inside, moving the leaves of the bushes out of the way with his hand as he did.

Well, Yuki thought as he pressed his back against a large tree when he heard the sound of maids walking past, it doesn’t matter if Kyo wants to see me or not.

There were other people Kyo mattered to—other people that deserved him in their lives. Other people who wouldn’t chase Kyo away, or hurt and damage and strain things the way Yuki had such a knack for lately.

Yuki maneuvered his way through the main estate, staying in the gardens and taking cover in the greenery as he advanced. He even took a longer route to avoid having to pass by the maids’ quarters at all.

But finally, Yuki came across a familiar pathway. It was beaten down with time, and unless someone truly looked for the bit of dirt that branched away from the main road, it would be easy to miss altogether. Trees and bushes surrounded the area, forming a tunnel of sorts, and Yuki swallowed before forcing himself to walk down the path.

The first portion was uphill, and Yuki felt the exertion of climbing up when his breath was already hard to come by. He could feel sweat forming on his brow, on his neck, and dripping down his back, despite the cooler weather.

The path broke, just as Yuki remembered it did, to reveal the faraway house on the hill. The shrubbery that surrounded it blocked any view beyond this little world. Yuki was again struck by how normal it looked.

Aside from the bamboo bars that obstructed the windows.

Yuki approached them, clutching the bars as he had done once before and finding them just as sturdy. The shades were locked shut on the window, so he couldn’t see the inside. But, curiously, he pressed his ear to the window, bamboo pressing into his cheeks as he did. He wasn’t sure if he was hoping to hear silence or not.

For a moment, there was nothing, not even the sound of Yuki’s breath that he held deep in his chest.

It was only when Yuki was about to pull away that a sound emerged.

The unmistakable creak of tatami.

Yuki’s heart stopped.

With a mouth as dry as summer pavement along with frightened, hopeful eyes, Yuki pushed himself
off the wall and rounded the corner, seeking the front entrance.

Someone was in there. Kyo was in there. *Kyo was in there.*

Would it be locked? Would he be able to simply walk in as he did last time? Would Kyo have eaten? How long had he been in there? How long had he been locked away? In another horrible, suffocating, Sohma *room*?

Yuki hopped onto the engawa, the door now only feet away. It didn’t matter if it was locked. He would break it down if he had to.

He would—

Before Yuki had a chance to grab at the door, his arm still outstretched, it slid open.

Yuki blinked.

His surprise mirrored on the face of the boy in front of him.

The boy who was definitely *not* Kyo.

“*Haru*?!”

“Shh.” Haru put a finger to his lips harshly.

“Shh?!” Yuki hissed. Haru closed the door behind him and grabbed Yuki’s arm to pull him away from the entrance. “What are you doing here?!” Yuki whispered harshly, wrenching his arm out of Haru’s grip as they nestled themselves closer to the foliage barrier.

“What are you doing here?” Haru asked, genuine curiosity in his voice.

“I’m—!” Yuki gave an exasperated gesture to the whole of the area. “I’m looking for Kyo!”

“Ah,” Haru said, as if honestly just realizing the connection. “Sorry, he’s not here.”

Yuki felt a wave of relief and disappointment in equal parts. Still, his confusion forced the matter at hand to the forefront. “Then what are you doing here if you’re not looking for Kyo?”

“Well—”

The sound of the door sliding open again caught both their attention, and Haru swiftly shoved Yuki down by the crown of his head into the bushes to hide him. Yuki made a small, indignant noise, but kept himself crouched down as he watched Haru walk back towards the entrance.

“Haru?” A feminine voice called out. One that was unmistakable.

*Kagura*?

From where Yuki was hiding, he couldn’t quite hear past the murmuring of voices, or see much more than a sliver of Haru’s shoulder. He watched in disbelief, straining to hear the conversation, until finally Haru nodded and headed back to where Yuki had been shoved away.

When Haru stood over him, Yuki shot a glare up at him. He stood slowly and brushed the dirt off himself.

“Do you want to tell me what’s going on?” Yuki asked, voice still low.
Haru hummed, resting his weight on one foot as he crossed his arms, contemplating. “I guess there’s no hiding from you now, is there?”

“That was Kagura, wasn’t it?” Yuki accused.

“Yeah,” Haru conceded. “Rin’s in there, too.”

“What?!”

Haru cut him off by pressing his finger to his lips again. “No one knows. I’m hiding them here. They’re… fine for the most part.”

Yuki looked towards the cage, feeling burdened just by the sight of it.

“Why would you…” Yuki trailed off, still trying to make sense of all of this. “Have you known where they were this whole time?”

“Ah, basically.” Haru scratched the back of his neck. “I tried hiding them at my place for a while, but my mom kind of caught on. Here, at least no one comes by.”

“I’ve been worried sick! Ms. Honda been worried sick! You could have at least told us!” Yuki admonished.

“Sorry, they both have been pretty insistent on keeping it hush-hush. Kagura especially. Very especially.”

Yuki ran a hand through his hair. “I have to tell Ms. Honda. You know that.”

Haru sighed. “I suppose that’s the reward you get for your detective work.”

“It’s not detective work, it’s just…” It was just…

As his mind worked to process the absurdity of the situation, the weight of another realization came upon him.

This was yet another failed attempt.

Once and for all, Yuki had run out of places Kyo could be.

“I thought he would be here…” Yuki murmured. Haru gave him a sympathetic look—one he was receiving a lot these days, it seemed.

Haru put a hand on his shoulder and gave it a comforting squeeze. “At least you got two out of three, right?”

Yuki rolled his eyes and slapped his hand away. “Not funny or comforting. And this is dangerous. What happens if you get caught? You’re hiding them right under Akito’s nose!”

Haru sighed. “We’ll figure it out. For now, worry about what you need to.”

Yuki looked away, his eyes crinkled with an every increasing frustration. “Worrying doesn’t do anything, apparently.”

“Maybe not.” Haru shrugged. “That doesn’t mean it’s something you can control, right?”

Of course not.
Any emotion he’d felt for Kyo, he hadn’t been able to control since he first met him years ago.

Why would this be any different?

——

The question came up again: what now?

What now? *What now?*

Yuki ducked out of the hole in the main estate and pressed his back against the outside barrier. His hand pressed to his forehead, his eyes shutting tightly in contemplation.

Was this it? Was he just supposed to give up now?! Where was there left to look?

If he went home… would this be over? Would he have done nothing for Kyo?

He couldn’t accept that—he refused to. He had to be somewhere. He couldn’t have just disappeared, even if that’s how it was beginning to seem, more and more.

Yuki’s legs flung him forward as he walked away from the main estate. He wasn’t going home. There had to be something that they all missed, or somewhere they hadn’t checked yet, or some person they hadn’t talk to, or *something*.

Where had he gone? Kazuma had said that he brought Kyo to the testing center himself, that he had watched him walk inside. And then? Where did he go? What did he do? How was surviving? Did he have money? Food? Water? Shelter? Was he truly roaming around in the mountains aimlessly, drinking from streams and camping on beds of long, straw-like grass?

Yuki felt himself walk at the speed of his thoughts, the frantic mutterings of his brain all crashing together into one jumble of anxiety that clouded his vision. He hadn’t realized how strongly he’d depended on Kazuma to have answers. He hadn’t realized how deep down he’d buried these nervous, trigger-taut thoughts that were now ready to burst like a heart pumping too fast to handle its own blood.

Before he knew it, he found himself on the path home.

Well, former home.

He supposed that no matter how long he lived with Ayame, Shigure’s house was never going to truly relinquish that title in his mind.

This was the path to their home. The home that belonged to all of them.

Like he had many times before, he listened to the gravel and dirt that crunched under his feet as he walked the familiar pathway. It was dusk, and the tops of the trees were illuminated with a dusting of orange and purple.

Yuki forced himself to walk through regretful memory after regretful memory of Kyo that his surrounding were reawakening—memories that, in his mind, were burned into the nature. Memories of where Yuki had grabbed Kyo’s wrist and pulled him off the path to press him against bark and leaves and him.

Of where he had walked beside Kyo day after day to school and back, and leaned glances onto Kyo out the side of his eyes, disguising affection and fondness with petty, cruel remarks.
Of where Kyo had told him he didn’t love him. Where Yuki had yelled and screamed at Kyo like a child in response.

Yuki wrenched open the front door of the empty house, stepping inside without a moment of hesitation. Quickly, he slipped off his shoes and stepped up onto the entryway.

He looked down the hallway towards the living room and kitchen and sighed.

Had the house always seemed this… big? The lights were off, leaving everything shadowed other than the scattered sunlight still yet to be bullied away. It was oddly clean, but Tohru had only moved out a little over a week ago. It would take more time for the bones of this place to expel her essence completely, and that included the clean floors she liked to keep.

Yuki headed up the stairs and past his old bedroom to stand before the door to Kyo’s room. He opened it without a second thought.

Kyo’s room.

It looked as if no one had lived here at all.

Yuki narrowed his eyes and stormed inside.

He flung open the closet door, rifling through the few hanging clothes Kyo had. He opened up the drawers to find them mostly empty, unfolding and throwing out each article of clothing that was left behind. Nothing.

He rummaged through Kyo’s desk. Old notebooks and papers were stacked in uneven but neat piles, and Yuki flipped through them, letting each one fall to the ground as he deemed them useless. One by one he open each drawer. Nothing. Nothing. Nothing.

The bookshelves. Kyo read these books. He’d told him so himself. He had granted Yuki that knowledge when he confided about how he coped with having no future at all—and now he was throwing it away all on his own?!


“Dammit!” Yuki violently swept his arms across one of the shelves and knocked each book to the ground. His chest heaved as he stood in the middle of the room, chaos at his feet and in his head, and he let out a strained, angry, desperate sound from behind his teeth as he dug his hands into his hair.

“…Yuki?”

He swung around, faced with Shigure’s questioning eyes from Kyo’s doorway.

Yuki’s chest still heaved, and it didn’t matter. It didn’t matter—Shigure had seen him at his worst, every worst he had ever had since leaving the main estate. Yuki’s eyes stung, and he felt absolutely no need to beat them into a neutral, careless expression for the sake of sparing himself Shigure’s teasing, mocking, all-knowing words.

“I don’t know where else to look,” Yuki admitted, loud and unrestrained. “I don’t know where he is, Shigure. I don’t… what do I do? I don’t know what to do. I can’t lose him. Not like this. Not because of me! I can’t be the reason he’s gone! I need to fix—I need to fix this! I need him back!”

Yuki felt his eyes sting, but he held his tears back by sheer force, though the pressure in his throat
and behind his nose made it so difficult to breathe. He buried his face in his hands, shoulders still shaking with the need to catch his breath, but he couldn’t collect himself.

“I need him back,” Yuki said again, this time softer.

He stood shattered at Shigure’s feet.

It was a long moment, but he finally heard the long, burdened exhale from Shigure.

“Come on, Yuki. Come out of his room,” Shigure coaxed. Yuki dropped his hands to his side and nodded, completely defeated.

He followed Shigure as he turned to head back downstairs. The lights of the house were still off, but when Shigure opened his office door, and flicked the ceiling light on, it was just the same as it had always been. Yuki couldn’t help but feel the slightest comfort at that.

Yuki watched as Shigure opened the balcony doors, sliding them open in a familiar ritual Yuki hadn’t taken part in since autumn.

Shigure turned to look at Yuki when the chilly spring breeze assaulted the office, and tilted his head for Yuki to follow.

He did, sitting at his usual spot on the balcony and folding his legs into himself as Shigure rummaged around his office for something, until finally, he sat down next to him.

When Yuki turned to face him, Shigure was offering him a cigarette. Out it stood from the pack he was holding, and Yuki felt himself hesitate as he glance up at Shigure, unsure.

“I don’t think I should,” Yuki said.

“Last one,” Shigure pressed. “Don’t worry, I don’t want to get you into any more trouble with Hari.”

Yuki reached out, still a bit uncertain, but slid the cigarette out and placed it between his lips. Shigure lifted one from the pack for himself and pulled a lighter from his sleeve.

“I shouldn’t be doing this, either,” Shigure said, smoke escaping around the cigarette in his lips as he handed the lighter to Yuki. “I’m quitting.”

“You’re not doing a very good job.” Yuki lit the cigarette for himself and took a hesitant drag.

He felt the tension in his chest artificially ease. The taste was just as gritty and sharp as he remembered.

Silence ensued for a long while, with Yuki taking fewer drags that Shigure as their cigarettes burned a thin layer of orange at the tip.

“I didn’t realize you were home,” Yuki finally said. “I’m sorry for making a mess.”

Shigure tapped the ash of his cigarette over the balcony in the absence of an ashtray. Yuki did the same.

“I wasn’t,” Shigure said. “I arrived home to quite the racket. It was all quite nostalgic.”

“I’m sorry,” Yuki said again, throat tightening once more.

“I don’t really know what to do when people apologize to me.” Shigure gave another long exhale.
“Not that I’m angry to begin with.”

Yuki sucked down a long drag, coughing when he breathed out, letting the sensation rip through his lungs as if he had never smoked a cigarette in his life.

Yuki spat loud and rough coughs into his elbow, his eyes watering from the lack of air as he did. Shigure plucked the cigarette out of Yuki’s fingers when he finally settled and crushed both their cigarettes into the side of the balcony before tossing them away. “That’s enough for now.”

“Is this you trying to comfort me?” Yuki asked, voice still strained and scratchy, and he let just a couple more coughs past his lips until he settled down.

“It is,” Shigure confirmed. “It always seemed to work before.”

Yuki hugged his knees to his chest, looking out at the familiar view. It still felt as though he needed to stay quiet. It still felt as though he shouldn’t raise his voice loud enough to be heard by their housemates sleeping in the rooms above. It still felt like any other night in Shigure’s house. The warmth of the people he loved so dearly surrounding him, even from behind closed doors. Where Yuki knew they would be. For a while, that alone was enough.

But just remembering the reality—the emptiness of the house—was enough to have him sink into the wooden slats of the balcony, melting until he, too, was nothing but compressed splinters.

“Isn’t it a good thing if he ran away?” Shigure asked.

“Not this time,” Yuki choked out. “He didn’t have to. We would have figured it out.”

Shigure hummed. “You seem pretty sure.”

“I’m not. But that doesn’t mean I wouldn’t have tried my best, anyway.”

Shigure rested back on his hands with a labored groan, looking up at a sky starting to season itself with stars as the last of daylight was beginning to wander away. “Kids always think that’s enough.”

“Don’t patronize me.” Yuki shot a glare at Shigure.

“I’m not saying it’s a bad thing.” Shigure smirked. “It’s probably why you exhaust us adults as much as you do. It’s been awhile since ‘trying our best’ did much of anything.”

“Then what do you think I should do?!” Yuki snapped, that feeling of uselessness sinking in all the more.

“I don’t know,” Shigure offered, his smile still ever-present. “Other than try and keep from blaming yourself. When you do see him again, he’ll probably need to be scolded, not deal with your self-pity.”

Yuki’s hands clenched into fists. “You don’t know… you don’t know what I said… what I did… before Kyo ran away, I—”

“It doesn’t matter,” Shigure said flippantly, waving it off so easily. The weight of his heaviest thoughts that crushed Yuki’s shoulders into a powder this past month, flicked away by one motion of Shigure’s wrist. “Like you said, he didn’t have to. Don’t you think it’d be rather idiotic if he hadn’t realized that?”

“Not particularly…” Yuki sighed. He lifted his head, thinking back to his conversation with Ayame
the day prior. “I’m still learning the same thing.”

Shigure didn’t respond.

The two sat there for a while longer, watching night engulf their surroundings with its total, inky darkness. It wasn’t until Yuki’s legs began to prickle asleep from sitting on the hard wood that Yuki stood.

“I’m going home,” Yuki said. A strange phrase to say while he was inside Shigure’s house.

Shigure stood, too. “I’ll walk you out.”

Yuki turned on the hallway lights before sitting down to put on his shoes. “What have you been eating?”

“Take-out,” Shigure replied. Yuki gave a soft snort, despite his unshakeable melancholy, righting himself when his shoes were on.

“I’m sorry for everything, Shigure,” Yuki said. “You should know… you should know it wasn’t my choice to move out. I like it here.”

Shigure crossed his arms with a smirk. “I know.”

Yuki nodded. “Okay, well—”

“Could you do me a favor?” Shigure asked, suddenly, before Yuki could turn to leave. Yuki responded with a small, complacent shrug.

The dog padded down the hallway, and Yuki leaned to watch him go, not wanting to step into the house with his shoes on. It was only moments later that Shigure returned, handing Yuki a slip of paper.

“There’s a book that I want you to get your brother for me,” Shigure said. “Aya’s shop isn’t too far from the book district, right?”

“I guess,” Yuki said, opening up the piece of paper to see a messily scribbled address.

“If you could ask him to give me a call when you get it to him, I would appreciate it.”

Yuki looked up at him, giving him a small nod. “Okay.”

“Bring Tohru along, too. I think she’d like the place,” he smiled.

Yuki only gave him a tight smile in return before nodding.

As Yuki walked down the pathway alone, he couldn’t shake the familiar feeling of being watched.

The next day, Tohru was waiting for him at the station entrance.

Yuki approached her carefully where she sat on a bench, clearly spacing out. She looked completely lost in thought as she stared up blankly at a tree with a small bird’s nest that housed chattering occupants.

“Ms. Honda?”
“Yuki.” She blinked, embarrassed, as she snapped out of her reverie. “Sorry… I got here early. I was getting distracted.”

“It’s okay.” He smiled. “Thank you for meeting me at all. I know it’s probably hard… for you to see me.”

“No! That’s—That’s not it!” Tohru said, suddenly standing up and giving him a pleading look. “Uo and Hana are just trying to protect me, they don’t mean what they say. I promise.”

Yuki nodded, trying to offer her a reassuring smile. “I’m just glad you’re here. Maybe… maybe afterwards, we can get lunch. There are a few things I should probably tell you.”

“I’d like that,” Tohru replied. The two walked silently away from the station and into the unfamiliar district.

The area was charming. Block after block boasted bookstore after bookstore after cafe after bookstore. People sat outside despite the chill, drinking coffee and flipping through tiny novels with colorful book covers. Small stands with old, used, overflowing books seemed to take on the excess of what the stores couldn’t hold.

Had Yuki’s mind not been so occupied, he might have appreciated the area more. This is what he told the woman at the college he wanted to do, right? What if one day, it was one of his own books being sold in established, trendy bookstores? Being read by attentive patrons with frothy teas and coffees?

He didn’t dwell on the idea, though when he looked to Tohru, he was pleased to find her nowadays-solemn expression replaced by one of faint curiosity and wonder. Maybe it had been a good idea to bring her here, if only for the distraction.

“I’ve never been here before,” Tohru explained when she caught Yuki giving her a smile. “It’s nice.”

“It is,” Yuki agreed. “Maybe one day, we can come back here.”

Tohru smiled sadly, but nodded at him. Yuki looked down at the address again when they reached the end of the block. It was the middle of the weekday, so it wasn’t as crowded as it could be. Yet Yuki still felt himself relax slightly when he saw that the crosswalk wasn’t too congested.

“I think, according to this, it should be one of the shops down this road,” Yuki said, leading Tohru across the street.

Tohru looked around as they walked. “There don’t seem to be a lot of shops here…”

“You’re right,” Yuki said, curiously looking over his shoulder towards the main street. The street they walked along carried only tucked-away residences. Small houses pressed together side by side as like marshmallows in a package.

Yuki noted the numbers of the houses one by one, his brows creasing more and more when they finally stood in front of the address written on the piece of paper.

“Is this it?” Tohru asked. “It doesn’t look like a shop.”

Not in the slightest. The little home was just as charming as the district, with a small sliver of lawn in front, and potted plants hanging from the covered porch. It couldn’t have been more than one story at the most, and in place of the usual wall-type barriers in most residential areas, it featured the same the waist-high iron fence of its neighbors.
Yuki observed it for a moment longer, “It’s definitely the address that Shigure…” He trailed off, something striking him.

When Yuki looked to Tohru, he found she was already staring back at him, both their expressions inflated by an uncertain anticipation.

“For now, we should…” Yuki started, opening up the iron gate to let them both in. “We should just knock on the door.”

The two approached the house, nerves singing in unison when Yuki lifted a knuckle to knock on the forest green door. Movement sounded from inside and Yuki and Tohru stole another glance from each other before it opened.

“Hello—Oh!” Perhaps the woman was hard to recognize at first because she didn’t look to be so suicidal, as they had only come to know her. “Yuki, Tohru—Shigure said you would be coming by today.”

“Mitsuru?” Tohru breathed. “You live here?”

Shigure’s editor crossed her arms, indignantly. “Did he tell you I lived under some bridge or in some shack somewhere? He’s done that before! He once told an entire sales team that I lived out of my car just to make fun of me!”

Yuki looked at her, confusion still knit into his brows. “I—No. Well… we thought we were here to pick something up.”

Mitsuru nodded in understanding. “Come in, you don’t have to wait in the cold. He’s just inside.”

Tohru and Yuki faltered for a moment before they could find it in themselves to follow.

He?

The two scrambled into the house—a quaint, modest, and well-kept home with bookshelves overflowing with novels. A few of the books sat next to identical copies. Some, Yuki recognized, as being Shigure’s.

Yuki couldn’t give that a second thought as Mitsuru led them to her kitchen—a small, square, western-style table serving as the only dining area.

And it was at that table that a boy sat, his back facing the three of them, with an unmistakable shock of bright orange hair.

Yuki and Tohru stopped in their tracks.

“Kyo?” Yuki asked, voice far from maintaining composure.

Kyo turned, his amber eyes blazing with shock when he registered the two standing before him. An undeniable expression of fear flared up in Kyo as he stood, his defenses up instantly.

“What the hell are you guys doing here?!”

Chapter End Notes
Don't worry, we get a whole lot more of Kyo's perspective in the following chapter (lol).

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Yuki lunged towards Kyo without a second thought.

“What are we doing here?! What’s wrong with you?!” Yuki grabbed at the collar of Kyo’s t-shirt, shaking Kyo where he stood. “Are your fingers broken? Have you suffered some traumatic head injury?! Is there any excuse you can give for not even giving us a goddamn call?!”

“Get the fuck off me!” Kyo grabbed at Yuki’s wrists and forcefully pulled him off, causing Yuki’s grip to slip away so Kyo could shove him backwards. “You think I’ve been hanging out here for fun? YOU DON’T THINK I THOUGHT ABOUT THAT?”

And just like that, the first punch thrown was from Yuki. Kyo held his forearm up, just barely able to block it from hitting his face, but Yuki swung a kick at his side that had Kyo stumbling violently into the kitchen table, which screeched when it dragged across the hardwood.

“THOUGHT ABOUT WHAT? YOU CLEARLY DON’T HAVE THE CAPACITY FOR ANY SORT OF COMPLEX THOUGHT IN THE FIRST PLACE!”

“HEY—!”

Yuki charged at Kyo again before he could regain his balance. He grabbed Kyo’s forearm, his fingers digging into the skin so tightly, he felt his bones might crack.

“DO YOU HAVE ANY IDEA WHAT WE’VE BEEN THROUGH, LOOKING FOR YOU? WHAT YOU’VE PUT MS. HONDA AND SHI-HAN THROUGH? WHAT YOU’VE PUT ME THROUGH?!”

Kyo thrashed his arm to free himself of Yuki’s grip, only for Yuki’s nails to drag against his skin as he pulled away. “IT’S NOT THAT SIMPLE—”

“THE HELL IT’S NOT.”

Kyo raised his fists, looking all but ready to throw every cell in his body into a fight, “WOULD YOU JUST LET ME FUCKING TALK, YUKI?!”

“NOW YOU WANT TO TALK?!”
“Stop it! STOP IT! BOTH OF YOU!”

Before either could register what was happening, Tohru had wrapped a tight grip around each of their wrists, dragging them towards the front door of Mitsuru’s house. She only released Yuki’s hand for a moment to open the door, before she was all but flinging the two of them out of the house.

Tohru was small and petite, with no real strength in her upper arms other than the muscles gained from her part-time job and housework, but Yuki and Kyo had never felt themselves stumble harder as they were unceremoniously tossed out of the house in just their socks.

Tohru stood on the other side of the door, face contorted in a deep, troubling glare—an expression so foreign it looked as though it was breaking something on her face. But she held the expression steadfastly as she stared them both down.

“I don’t want to see you two fight! If you have to do something like that, then do it outside! I’m going to thank Mitsuru for everything she’s done for us. So just wait here and—and stop being so awful!”

The door slammed.

Yuki and Kyo looked from the door to each other, eyes mirroring the same surprised expression. The same tint of reddened shame on their cheeks.

Their bodies were tensed, still posed for a fight, but their tenacity had been dampened by Tohru’s own anger.

“Fuck,” Kyo breathed, chest still heaving from the adrenaline. His hand went to his orange locks, pushing them out of his face. Yuki watched him, closing his eyes to try and steady his breathing.

“Are we fighting or what?”

Yuki opened his eyes to Kyo, to see him looking right at him. His body was taut in a posture that Yuki recognized as something that could easily move into a defensive stance. A part of him wanted to punch Kyo—wanted to throw him around and send him flying until he landed on something rough and painful and unforgiving.

Just seeing Kyo again had every frayed nerve in his body lighting like a fuse, and his blood burned as it coursed through him as if his blood was as sweltering as the water from a natural hot spring. Yuki had to shut his eyes again, just in case Kyo was some sort of mirage.

“I don’t want to fight you,” Yuki spat.

“Could’ve fooled me,” Kyo shot right back. “You seemed ready to kick my ass two seconds ago.”

“Well, what do you expect?!” Yuki cried out, voice becoming louder. Two passersby with a dog on a leash glanced towards the house before mumbling to themselves as they walked by. Yuki looked after them for a moment before turning back to Kyo with a sigh.

Kyo was still looking at the ground, and it made Yuki’s heart sink. He just wanted Kyo to look at him again. Not to have to avert his eyes every time they spoke. Every time they were left alone.

Though Yuki knew that was always going to be a long-shot, whether Kyo had run away or not.

“I made a horrible mistake,” Yuki choked out. “I know that. But you were the one who ran away.”

“Maybe things aren’t as easy for me as they are for you,” Kyo said practically through his teeth.
Yuki shook his head with a mirthless laugh. “If that’s the case, you must really enjoy trying to level that playing field, don’t you?” He glared at Kyo. “But you know that’s not true.”

Kyo used the heels of his hands to rub at his eyes, still blocking his vision—still blocking himself from looking at Yuki, from just seeing him. Another moment passed, and Yuki realized Kyo wasn’t going to say anything in response.

“You could have called. You didn’t have to tell us where you were… You could have just—” Yuki stopped himself. His words felt so useless.

“If you’re pissed, I’d rather you just punch me,” Kyo said. Yuki looked to him. Kyo’s head was turned down and to the side, glaring at the dirt beneath their feet. His fists were balled tightly, his brow was furrowed with wrinkles so deep, Yuki wanted to press his thumb into the divots there to smooth the skin.

As if on instinct, Yuki stepped towards him and reached his hand forward as if to cup his cheek, at odds with how contorted Yuki’s own expression was—carved with turmoil, regret, and ire.

Maybe you should stay the hell out of my life.

Yuki stopped short. The heat from his palm colliding with that of Kyo’s cheek but not touching. Finally—finally Kyo looked up at him through heavy, shame-lidded eyes that still looked so angry. But he didn’t step away from Yuki. He didn’t even say a word. And just the feeling of Kyo’s eyes on him, of their gazes meeting—crashing together, was enough to wind Yuki all over again.

He dropped his hand.

“You’re okay,” Yuki breathed, relief compressing his chest, and sucking the air out of his lungs like a vacuum.

“I’m fine,” Kyo mumbled. Finally looking up and away, but not moving, despite how close they had gravitated towards each other.

Yuki clutched at his shirt right above his own frantic heartbeat, as if to try and ease it. He bowed his head, still a hair’s distance away from Kyo’s shoulder, where he longed to press his forehead. But he didn’t. He would stay away. Just as he was asked.

“Thank you for being okay,” Yuki said—words breathy like a whisper.

Kyo said nothing in response, but Yuki felt Kyo’s hand land on his upper arm—gripping hesitantly, then remaining stock-still. The touch felt like an electric shock, and gooseflesh bloomed on Yuki’s skin under Kyo’s palm.

Neither moved for a moment, as if doing so might break something so tragically fragile.

—-

Mitsuru let out a long, annoyed sigh. “I’ll take that to mean Shigure didn’t tell you Kyo was here.”

Tohru shook her head, but kept herself bowed at the waist. Her hair slid from her back to hang by her face as she tried to control the sweep of emotion that had engulfed her.
Mitsuru shook her head, rolling her eyes. “He told me his house was being fumigated, not that I was housing a runaway. Honestly.”

“I’m sorry. I’m so sorry for the trouble,” Tohru said, still bowed.

“It really wasn’t too much trouble.” Mitsuru grabbed at the end of the table and slid it back into place, scooting the chairs back to their proper places. “He’s surprisingly quiet.”

“You’ve done so much for us. Thank you. If there’s any way we can repay you—”

“Tohru, please, no need to thank me so much. Shigure already more than made up for it.”

Tohru looked up from her straightened posture, eyes wide and questioning. “He did?”

“When he dropped him off, he said in exchange for looking after him for a bit, he’d get all his work in on time. He turned in his manuscript early this month. Kyo can live here if it means Shigure meets his deadlines.” Mitsuru huffed with a cross of her arms, but still kept a smile on her lips.

Tohru straightened herself completely, hands still clasping in front of her, biting the inside of her lip nervously for a moment. “That’s… all?”

Mitsuru gave Tohru a confused glance with a tilt of her head. “What is?”

“Last time we spoke… I just thought… It didn’t seem like you would want to do any favors for him.” Tohru explained.

Mitsuru let out a sigh, but still her smile didn’t fade. “I said he made my career, didn’t I?”

Tohru blinked at her, to which Mitsuru just gave a small laugh. Tohru tried to remember a time when Mitsuru looked so composed—she really only came to the house under extreme circumstances, it seemed. But now, she seemed much calmer—so much more adult, in a way.

“Come on, let’s go get his stuff,” she said, leading Tohru down the hallway to another room.

The room was a modest size, and definitely smaller than the one Kyo occupied in Shigure’s house. A futon was rolled neatly into a corner, and some books were stacked in a small pile just beside it.

Though the room didn’t boast much furniture, other than a desk that took up most of the space along with some filing cabinets and a bookshelf, it seemed as though Kyo hadn’t used any of it. His clothes were piled in a duffle bag—some folded, some not, but all contained to one area. When Tohru opened up the modest closet inside to double check for any of Kyo’s things, nothing of his was inside.

By the time Tohru was clutching the zipped-up duffle bag in both her hands and walking to the front door, she found she couldn’t help but give another deep bow to Mitsuru.

“Really… thank you so much. Thank you for keeping him safe.”

“You’re going to make me blush.” Mitsuru waved her off.

“I’m so sorry they fought in your home, too!”

“TOhru, you’re too young to be acting like a frantic mother,” Mitsuru chuckled. “You can thank me by making sure Shigure doesn’t fall back into his old habits!”

Tohru straightened again. “Well I…” She frowned, before giving a firm nod. “I’ll do my best!”
When Tohru opened the door again Yuki and Kyo were standing apart, faced away from each other —Kyo with his hands shoved in his pockets, and Yuki with his hands on his elbows. At least they weren’t fighting, though she was far from appeased.

Shoes now on, she approached Kyo, looking up at him. Her eyes were creased in an unfamiliar glare. He looked down at her, apologetic, maybe—or perhaps just embarrassed. She shoved his duffle bag into his arms. Tohru could feel Yuki watching them both.

“Put your shoes on, please. Yuki, you too,” she said, her voice firm, but still soft. They both nodded, heading back inside to do just that. Tohru watched them from outside as they approached the house.

Mitsuru stood in the entryway, elevated above them with her arms crossed. Yet her expression was oddly gentle, despite the palpable tension between the three. Kyo stole a glance up at her as he wiggled his shoes on.

“Thanks,” he mumbled.

Mitsuru smiled at him. “Good luck. I’m rooting for you, whatever that means.”

Yuki looked over to them, meeting Mitsuru’s eye, before she shifted her gaze over to Tohru in the yard.

“You seem to have good people looking over you,” Mitsuru said.

Kyo shrugged, slinging his duffle bag over his shoulder as he tapped his toe to the ground to adjust his shoes.

“Ready?” Yuki asked. Kyo only gave a gruff nod.

“Oh, wait!” Mitsuru said suddenly, just as they had turned to leave. She returned within a few moments, holding up a book wrapped in brown paper and string. She handed it to Yuki. “Shigure also said something about you picking this up.”

“A book?” Yuki questioned. “He was serious about that?”

“Who knows what’s serious with him?” Mitsuru sighed. “It’s pretty rare, so be sure to take care of it.”

“I will,” Yuki assured her.

With that, Mitsuru gave one last final farewell, being sure to wave to Tohru before closing the door behind them.

The three were left in the yard, locked in a stand-off that had all of them tense and exhausted. Tohru still felt her insides wrought with anger and confusion, and when she looked to Kyo, her eyes stayed narrowed. Kyo looked absolutely lost with what to do with himself.

“Tohru—”

“I am very, very mad at you.” Although she tried to keep her voice firm, her eyes watered all the same.

Kyo’s shoulders slumped, and he opened and closed his mouth trying to find the right words to respond. He found he didn’t have to, in the end, because Yuki placed a gentle hand on Tohru’s shoulder.
“Why don’t we find somewhere to sit down?” Yuki suggested. “This probably isn’t the place to have this conversation.”

Tohru nodded at him, seeing the same exhaustion in herself mirrored in Yuki’s eyes. He and Kyo must have talked while she was still speaking to Mitsuru, because something between them seemed easier—or at the very least, no longer violent.

They moved together, walking as if they were one person as they shuffled out of Mitsuru’s yard. Yuki opened the gate, and they trudged down the road and back into the bustle of the city.

They ended up in a café in the book district. It was a big place—big enough to hide away in a corner booth without fear of being overheard by servers. The weekday and the odd time made it easy for them to find an isolated spot, fortunately.

Their booth pressed against a wall-to-wall window, outside which passersby and tourists walked in and out of view in tempered droves.

Kyo had found it hard to say anything at all since leaving Mitsuru’s house, especially with Tohru’s tongue still tied tight in her mouth—seemingly ready to act like a needle against an over-inflated balloon at any minute.

Yuki ordered for the three of them when a waitress approached—coffee for himself, green tea for Kyo, and cocoa with cinnamon for Tohru. Now the three of them were staring down at their drinks, steam licking the sides of their hands as they idly sipped at them.

Kyo couldn’t say this wasn’t out of the realm of what he had expected when he saw them again. Logically, he knew there would be people worrying about him. He knew they would look for him. He knew they would probably be fucking infuriated with him.

But in his brain, he pushed that away, deciding he would face it when he was ready—when he was better. When he had his shit sorted, and his brain untangled, and some sort of courage to display.

Days passed. Then weeks. As they did, it became all the more important for Kyo to be someone he wasn’t—to be someone strong and capable and worthy of caring about. How stupid. How selfish. How idiotic.

Kyo knew that, but it didn’t make it any easier when Tohru continued to glare down at her untouched drink like she was.

The pressure of a hand weighed down on the vinyl fabric of the booth next to him, and Kyo snuck a glance down to see Yuki’s hand lingering by his thigh. The warmth of it bit into his skin, even through his clothes. An oddly comforting gesture, but still just a little too far away to do anything other than raise nervous pinpricks under his skin where leg almost met hand.

Kyo took another long gulp of his tea, burning his mouth in the process and feeling how it blazed a scalding trail down his throat and into his stomach.

“Why don’t…” Yuki started haltingly, breaking the clamping silence. “Why don’t we just start with what happened.”

Kyo could feel Yuki’s eyes boring into the side of his face, and he snuck a small glance his way before training it back on his drink.
“Can you at least tell us that much?” Yuki urged, his voice shockingly gentle—so much so that it made his heart stutter in time with the waves of anxiety attacking his stomach. All at once, he realized how much easier this would be if Yuki was the one pissed out of his mind, rather than Tohru.

Pointedly ignoring the weight of Yuki’s hand just beside him, Kyo finally felt his tongue fill enough to burst under the weight of two inquiring stares.

“I didn’t know the answers to the test. None of them,” Kyo finally said. “So I left.”

Kyo pushed down the shame of it and rooted himself in his answer.

“You… studied very hard,” Yuki said carefully. “That can’t be true.”

“Yeah, well, it is.”

“You didn’t even try?” Tohru asked, eyes still narrowed and voice stricken by dry tears and exasperation. Kyo kept himself from flinching.

This was why he wasn’t ready to see them yet. This was why he hadn’t said a word. This was why he had buried himself in that house, day after day, falling into a secluded, monotonous routine in a borrowed space. He was working on it—he was trying to figure out what to do next. He wanted to face them when he knew he could give them something.

Not now. Not like this. Not when Kyo was so wrung dry, so entirely and wholly empty. With nothing, nothing, nothing to offer. Waking up day after day and realizing he still wasn’t better, he still hadn’t changed…it was just another day of fruitless labor.

It was as if winter had pruned the thorny vines that snaked around his own heart, but it was too late—they had cut too much. The organ had fallen away in a scramble of useless, uprooted, and dead weeds. And he had tried—had tried to grow it back. He felt as though he had spent the entire past month on his hands and knees, praying for even the barest sapling to grow through a crack in the concrete.

But, really, Kyo had never been too good at growing anything.

And why should Yuki and Tohru have to see that? Why should he have to put himself on display like this? Body like a dying flower bed, chest hollow like a cheap, porcelain vase. How was that fair to him?

“So what if I didn’t try, huh? So what if I ran away? Do either of you think that was an invitation to try and find me? Huh?! Has anyone been listening to me at all these past few months?! Or is everyone just out to do whatever the hell they want?!”

“I’ll keep doing what I want until you want it, too!” Tohru fumed.

“Don’t waste your damn time,” Kyo spat back at her, ignoring the twist in his chest at having to fight against the wrong person.

“So that’s it? To everything? What are you going to do now, then?!”

Kyo’s glare deepened at questions he had been trying not to fucking think about this whole past month.

“Kyo, realize what you’re saying,” Yuki’s calm tone came in, contrasting with Tohru’s heated
words. “Do you want to be locked up?”

“No!” Kyo cried out, trying to avoid Yuki’s anxious eyes.

Trying not to see Tohru’s angry, challenging expression that was backing him further and further in a corner.

Trying not to fucking think.

“Well then what do you want?!” Tohru commanded back.

“It doesn’t matter!”

“It does!”

“I want everyone to just leave me alone!” Kyo ignored how Yuki’s hand seemed to sink harder into the booth.

“Why?!” Tohru cried.

“Because I failed, okay?! Because it’s not fucking worth it!”

Kyo’s hand slapped on the table, gaining the attention of the few patrons in the restaurant, and Kyo could hear murmuring envelope the café. A flush filled Tohru’s cheeks, but she kept her eyes narrowed and stern. Kyo did the same, though in the corner of his eye he could see Yuki shift.

It hurt to admit it. It hurt to let that hot wash of humiliation engulf him.

He had been avoiding having to admit it for just this reason.

Just saying it out loud made every cell in his body want to give up for good.

“I think a manager is coming over.” Yuki slid himself out of the booth, his hand just grazing over Kyo’s thigh, causing him to clench his eyes shut. He didn’t want any fucking comfort—especially not now, when Kyo knew he didn’t have the strength to push it away. Yuki stood, glancing down at how Kyo and Tohru glared into their drinks, and sighed.

“No matter what anyone wants, I don’t think we have any other choice but to figure out the next step. Let’s try and keep our heads together until then. But afterwards, Kyo, I think it would be best if you let Ms. Honda yell at you as much as she needs.”

Yuki walked away, and Kyo looked over in time to see him intercept the manager—bowing to him and speaking easily in an attempt to ease the man’s apprehensive demeanor.

Kyo looked back to Tohru, but this time her hand was covering her face—her bangs brushing against the backs of her fingers, her shoulders slumping to look less conspicuous. But it wasn’t enough to hide the tears that dripped down her cheeks, convening at her chin and plopping onto the table.

“Kyo—”

“You say you don’t need this,” Tohru said, her voice strained through held-back sobs. “But I don’t know what it is you do need. Why won’t you let us help? Why can’t you let yourself be worth it to us?”

This… this was exactly what he had been trying to avoid. Kyo could only hang his head. Tohru’s
quiet sobs continued to fill the space between them until Yuki returned. He gave a pained look at Tohru before sliding in next to Kyo again.

“We can stay, but I promised we would keep it down,” Yuki said. Tohru gave a tight nod, her lips still pressed together and her hand still covering her eyes. Yuki’s hand was back next to Kyo, and Kyo just wished Yuki would hit him already.

“Why Shigure?” Yuki suddenly asked, after another few agonizing moments of sniffling silence. “Why go to him for help?”

Kyo bristled at the thought. “I didn’t. After the test, I stopped by the house to grab some of my stuff. Shigure just… caught me. I told him I’d kick his ass if he didn’t get the hell out of my way. But—” Kyo gave a gruff sigh. “He said he knew somewhere I could go.”

“Did he say why?” Yuki asked.

Kyo shook his head.

“You trusted him?” Yuki pressed. Kyo could see Tohru’s cries finally calm out of the corner of her eye. She lowered her hand, though her eyes were still red and shiny.

“Not like I had a choice. Where the hell else was I gonna go?”

“To us,” Tohru replied softly.

It was then that Kyo felt Yuki’s hand withdraw, pulling all the warmth in the room with it.

“He did, Ms. Honda.”

Kyo felt his chest clench and watched as Tohru eyed the two of them curiously—mournfully. Their last encounter was clear in Kyo’s memory from having replayed it again and again since they’d parted.

It never really occurred to him that Yuki might have been doing same.

Kyo chanced a look at Yuki, but his eyes were trained away. His hand now tensed into a fist on his lap. What little Kyo could see of Yuki’s face was hardened like stone—his pale skin making the bags under his eyes stand out all the more.

Yuki was sitting right next to him. Why, all of the sudden, did he feel whole worlds away?

“So, what now?” Yuki asked at his coffee, making it clear that he wasn’t going to elaborate further despite the prodding expression on Tohru’s tear-stained face.

The question hung between the three of them.

“By any chance…” Tohru tried, glare softening now. “By any chance… were Rin and Kagura hiding with you, too?”

Kyo’s eyebrows creased. “Rin and Kagura?”

“They went missing the same time you did,” Tohru clarified, clearly disappointed by Kyo’s confusion.

“They what?!”
“I know where they are,” Yuki suddenly said.

Tohru’s eyes widened as she pinned Yuki with a hopeful stare. “You do?”

“I found them yesterday. I was going to tell you about it today, Ms. Honda.”

“Where are they? Are they safe?!”

“They’re fine.” Yuki snuck a glance at Kyo, who met it curiously. Yuki turned back to Tohru, “Haru is hiding them.”

“What the hell are they doing? Why are they hiding?” Kyo asked.

“I don’t really know, I—” Yuki cut himself off, taking a deep breath before looking back at Kyo. “They’re hiding in the cage.”

Kyo felt his blood go cold, and he could see Tohru’s eyes widen.

“They’re what?” Kyo demanded.

“In the cage?” Tohru asked shakily.

Yuki nodded.

Kyo felt his voice bend into a snarl, though his eyes didn’t follow suit—they were still wide and startled. “And what the hell were you doing there?”

Yuki, at the very least, had the decency to look somewhat ashamed of himself. “I was looking for you.”

Kyo swallowed, voice low and dangerous. “And you thought I would be—”

“Isn’t that where you keep saying you’ll end up, anyway?” Yuki shot back, though it sounded more like a scold than an accusation. “I can’t say how relieved I was when it wasn’t you in there.”

Something hammered deep in Kyo’s chest. One, single, fearful heartbeat with a force that felt like enough to knock Kyo over. But Kyo kept himself still.

“How is that possible?” Tohru finally asked anxiously. “How—How would they even get into such a place?”

All too suddenly, Akito’s words was spearing through Kyo’s thoughts.

“Akito told me it doesn’t look like a cage,” Kyo said, eyes boring down into the table. “He said it looks like a normal house.”

Tohru’s brow creased at that, but Kyo didn’t miss how Yuki sucked in a tight breath.

“He’s telling the truth,” Yuki confirmed.

Kyo felt something sick sink deep into his stomach.

“A… house?” Tohru asked, almost to herself. Despite the tumult of her confusion, she shook her head. “That’s still dangerous. They shouldn’t be there!”

“I know,” Yuki sighed. “We could—”
“I’m going to go,” Tohru said, immediately digging for change in her purse to pay for her drink. Kyo and Yuki both startled at that.

“What? Go where?” Kyo called after her.

“The cage?” Yuki asked.

“There must be something going on! Something that they need help with! Otherwise they wouldn’t have been hiding for this long, right?”

“Haru said Kagura kept it a secret from us intentionally,” Yuki contended. “What do you expect to do?”

“I… I don’t know! But Rin spent so much time trying to fight the curse and—and I was there, too! I was helping! There must be something I can do.”

“And where are we supposed to go?!” Kyo cried out as Tohru stood. She looked at him, her expression finally relaxing out of their glare into something apologetic.

“Wherever you want,” was Tohru’s pained reply. “I don’t know where that is, but if you hate my help that much…”

“That’s not what I said,” Kyo responded, desperately. Where the hell would he be if even Tohru gave up on him? Isn’t that what he wanted? Isn’t that what he feared the most? Why did he feel so fucking weak? Why was he so sorely missing Yuki’s hand even just resting against his.

“Kyo…”

“We should go. All of us.”

Kyo’s gaze whipped to Yuki’s, a defensive and frightened glare etching on his face like a dagger against the suggestion.

Yuki, however, met his eyes just as sharply.

“You should see it,” Yuki said.

“Yuki,” Tohru started, her voice distressed. “I think… I think that’s a bit cruel—”

“You’re not worth it? You’ve failed? You want to run away? Okay. But know where it is you’re running to before you decide. And if you want to stay there—if you want us to really leave you alone after all that—” Yuki cut himself off, but Kyo didn’t miss the break in his voice that sent a jolt through Kyo’s stomach. “Then Ms. Honda and I will have no choice but to leave you alone.”

“Yuki!” Tohru scolded. But Yuki’s gaze wouldn’t budge from Kyo.

Tohru stared them down, waiting for a response. But Kyo’s mind was completely, utterly blank.

The cage?

He’d never even seen it before.

He had never wanted to.

What did Yuki expect? For Kyo to have the strength to reject that place? What if that wasn’t what happened? What if the cage drew him in all the more? What if it was just as twisted and manipulative
as Akito?

What if he entered and finally decided not to leave?

God, he was such a hypocrite. Not moving forward because of his fate, but too scared of his fate to succumb to it. He was walking a wire-thin line that he hadn’t been able to balance himself on for months. The only difference was that now he had already fallen on the ground, and hard. He just didn’t know which side his back was pressed against.

“We don’t have to,” Yuki said when Kyo didn’t respond for another moment. “I won’t force you into anything. And wherever you go… I’ll go too. Just for now. Until we figure all this out.”

He looked up at Yuki, then to Tohru who was still standing at the head of the table, eyeing him worriedly.

Fuck.

Kyo swallowed whatever it was that was lodged in his throat.

He wasn’t sure if the curiosity was his or the cat’s.

“I’ll go.”

———

Yuki was instantly regretting this.

He had regretted coming to the cage the very first time he’d stumbled upon it. Back then, the weight of the discovery was something he’d tried to lock away—as a courtesy to Kyo, if nothing else. It wasn’t his to see. It wasn’t his to fear. It wasn’t his to explore.

Nerves rolled off Kyo in waves—and each crashing swell of anxiety drained more and more color from Kyo’s skin.

It was an odd contrast to Tohru’s determined and steadfast steps beside him. How she jittered with too many words, and with emotions so powerful they could bulldoze through concrete. Under any other circumstance, Yuki was sure Kyo would be comforted by the resolve.

That hardly seemed the case now.

So Yuki led them, caught somewhere in the middle between the two, and walked the now familiar path to the cat’s cage.

It was far more difficult trying to weave and hide away from residents and maids with the three of them. It was then, really, that Yuki truly realized how right Tohru was in saying that this situation was dangerous. Sneaking around now as they were only made it seem more so.

But finally, the dirt path came into sight — the same tunnel of trees and greenery.

“It’s just up this path,” Yuki said quietly. Tohru looked to him and nodded, going on ahead. Yuki did the same, hearing Kyo’s meek steps following behind him.
Halfway up the path, Yuki felt something clutch his sleeve.

Yuki stopped immediately. He turned his head to see Kyo’s ducked head. Kyo didn’t look up at him, but when he felt Yuki’s eyes on him, he clutched Yuki’s sleeve even tighter.

“We can go back,” Yuki said.

Kyo shook his head.

“I said I’d go,” Kyo mumbled, a thin, match-like flame of anger licking at the edges of his terror. “Just give me a minute.”

Yuki nodded. Kyo’s knuckles were brushing through his arm through his sleeve. It felt like his blood was following the contact, bunching to kiss against the barely-there touch through a barrier of skin. Yuki swallowed, looking up the path at Tohru who was now staring back at them anxiously. Yuki gave her a heavy, reassuring smile.

Gently, Yuki placed his hand over Kyo’s where it still clutched at his sleeve. Kyo was standing close behind him, breathing in deliberately even cycles. Yuki could feel the brush of Kyo’s exhale on the back of his neck.

Yuki placed a gentle hand over Kyo’s, savoring the warmth from the contact.

“Come on,” Yuki said, Kyo’s face still out of his eyesight. “Remember, you can leave whenever you need. The door won’t lock behind you.”

Kyo snatched his hand away as if Yuki was the one who had forced it there before brushing past him and walking up the rest of the pathway.

“I know that,” Kyo simply said.

So they continued the remaining walk to the house on the hill.

Yuki eyed both Kyo and Tohru as they observed the structure, confusion and apprehension pulsing in both their expressions. The sound of the sohzu bounced off the silence taut among the three, like the skin of a drum.

Three pairs of feet crunched against gravel until they rounded the corner to the front door. Yuki and Kyo raised their legs to lift themselves up onto the engawa before Yuki turned to offer his hand to Tohru so she could do the same.

“Should we knock?” Tohru asked in a whisper when the three were left standing in front of the door.

“I suppose.” Yuki lifted his hand to give quiet taps on the door. Nothing. He repeated the sound again.

“Are they still here?” Tohru asked, voice still hushed. Yuki shrugged, repeating the soft knocking.

“Oh, for the love of—” Kyo exasperated, wrenching the door open and causing Tohru to yelp.

“Who’s there?!?” came a voice immediately, tense and rich from the other room. A voice that undoubtedly belonged to Rin.

Kyo stormed in, Yuki and Tohru hot on his heels before clearing the hallway into the main living area of the cat’s cage.
Rin was on her feet, body tensed and braced as if expecting a blow in a fight. Her eyes narrowed like razors, accusing and confused. Kagura stood beside her, arm outstretched in front of Rin as if to protect her, her own fighting stance adopted, though her fearful glare quickly morphed to raw shock when she saw the three.

Meanwhile, Haru sat at the table—head twisted around to assess the group, looking nowhere near as shocked as his female companions. He raised his hand in greeting.


“Haru.” Yuki sighed.

“What the hell are you all doing here?!” Rin shouted, pointing a finger at the three. When the group hesitated for a split second, Rin barked, “Tohru!”

“I’m sorry! I’m sorry!” Tohru sputtered out, bowing at the waist over and over. “We came without warning you first!”

“Don’t apologize!” Kyo shouted back. “We should be askin’ you that! What the fuck is wrong with you, hiding here?!”

“You wouldn’t share your hiding space,” Haru said from the table.

“Kyo!” Kagura interjected. “You’re okay!”

“What makes you think I’m okay right now?”

“How did you find us?!” Rin’s voice bulldozed through. “And why did you come here?!”

“To help!” Tohru squeaked.

“Help?!” Rin snapped.

“We don’t need help!” Kagura added.

“I wouldn’t say that,” Haru said.

“Haru!” Rin cried.

“Rin, please!” Tohru called.

“You should all just leave!” Kagura shouted.

“We’re not going to leave you here like this!”

Yuki gave a loud, single CLAP of his hands. Five pairs of eyes swiveled toward him, seeing the way his eyes clamped shut, his mouth downturned with irritation. “Everyone. Please. Stop yelling.”

Rin huffed, crossing her arms. Tohru and Kagura looked down at their feet somewhat shamefully, while Haru leaned his head on his propped-up hand and sighed. Yuki looked to Kyo, who was still looking pale, his lips shut tightly as he trained his eyes on the table in the middle of the living room.

“Where we are isn’t safe. No matter how secluded it is, if we continue to talk like that, we’ll definitely get caught,” Yuki said to the group.

“Come on,” Haru added, addressing the group. He patted the tabletop with his free hand. “Sit
Reluctantly, all five shuffled around, finally settling in spaces around the table. Tohru and Haru sat on opposite sides, with Kagura and Rin sitting beside each other. Once again, Yuki noted, Kyo was sitting beside him, though his legs were crossed and his head was bowed.

Yuki’s brow furrowed, but he looked away. This place was just as sterile and cold as he remembered it—bare of furniture or design or life. But it was odd, spotting the couple of overstuffed backpacks that must have belonged to Kagura and Rin. A thin trash bag in the corner looked like it was collecting plastic bento boxes and empty chip bags.

Several magazines were splayed across the table, and Yuki could see that some of the pages had been earmarked and worn.

It was unsettling seeing such human elements brought into a place that felt so disconnected from everything else in the world.

That familiar air engulfed Yuki—one he couldn’t quite identify. But whatever this place was, it was causing his body to react. It was making him anxious and unsettled—it felt like it was strumming his veins and vibrating every cell inside him. Yuki suddenly had a memory of feeling as though his hand had been burned when he touched the wall of the cage, and suddenly, he could completely empathize with the tension clearly visible in Kyo. His limbs were drawn inward, like he was folding in on himself. He looked as if he was trying to protect himself from the house—as if each foundational beam was reaching toward him, acting as a living skeleton for the cage.

Perhaps that’s how it felt to Yuki, too. Alive. And maybe the slow, steady heartbeat that murmured beneath their feet as if it might expand the tatami was creating the twists of dread in each of them.

“If we’re going to talk, we have to stay calm,” Haru’s even voice finally said. His eyes flicked to Kagura. “Right?”

Kagura pouted, crossing her arms and defiantly looking away from him.

“Rin…” Yuki decided to start. “You left the hospital without a word. You have no idea how much you worried me and Ms. Honda.”

“Did something happen? Why did you two run away?” Tohru pleaded, hands clenched over her chest as she leaned worriedly towards them.

Rin simply rolled her eyes. “Go on.” She lifted a hand to smack the back of Kagura’s head, who gave an indignant cry. “Tell them what you did.”

Kagura rubbed the back of her head with a glare towards Rin.

Yuki eyed her curiously, watching as she lifted her eyes to meet Kyo’s. Kyo and Kagura stared each other down—Kyo’s expression almost fearful, but his glare kept the edges of his panic concealed. Kagura looked angry, her eyes shining. But she didn’t seem to be angry at Kyo. Not with the way she looked away first. Not with the way she stared down at the hands in her lap with a shake of her head.

“I… I went to Akito,” Kagura mumbled. “I was going to tell him about what you said. About you two…”

Yuki paled, his hands clenching on the table as his heart came to a stop. Kyo looked much the same as the two stared her down.
“Kagura…” Tohru muttered, her voice soft and disappointed.

“It’s not like that! I wasn’t thinking, okay? I—I heard all of that and it was like my head stopped working! I was so… upset and out of it—I don’t know! It’s not right!”

A tense silence fell over all of them. Yuki felt as though oxygen wasn’t being allowed to pass into his system.

“I… I know it’s not conventional,” Tohru started, speaking when Yuki and Kyo’s voice had been drained away. “But—”

“That’s not what I mean!” Kagura quickly cut her off. “I mean between…”

“Between a cat and a rat,” Rin finished impatiently. “I’d be lying if I said I didn’t have the same reaction.”

Yuki blinked at her. He looked to Kyo, who still hadn’t lifted his head again—his eyes now clenched and jaw tensed. Yuki looked to Haru instead.

“Haru?”

Haru rubbed the back of his neck. “It was a gut thing.”

“Isn’t that the curse?” Tohru asked, causing all of them to look her way. “Can’t it… make you think something you don’t believe?”

“Well?” Rin asked to Kagura, who was still woefully glaring at nothing in particular.

“Dammit,” Kyo painfully uttered. “Akito knows. *Fuck*. I shouldn’t have come ba—”

“He doesn’t know!” Kagura asserted forcefully. “I was going to tell him, but I didn’t! I couldn’t! I saw you in the hall, Kyo, and you looked so hurt. I…I couldn’t be the reason you looked that way again. I—I snapped out of it, I promise! Akito doesn’t know anything!”

“Then what’s going on?” Yuki impatiently cut in.

“I asked to meet with Akito… I couldn’t just leave. You *know* that,” Kagura fiercely defended. “Kureno has been following me lately… he’s been trying to find Rin. Akito… Akito thought I was there to come clean, and when he asked I couldn’t—I couldn’t lie. I had to tell him where we were hiding Rin. I… told him everything. I couldn’t stop myself.”

“So you hid her again,” Tohru realized. “That’s why Rin wasn’t at the hospital when we went!”

“I rushed over right after my meeting with Akito and snuck her out. Akito is… he’s really *really* mad at me. I don’t know what he’s going to do, but he’ll definitely make me give up Rin again, and I won’t!”

“You will if he catches you,” Rin said plainly.

“Go easy on her,” Haru said. “Because of that you came running into my arms.”

“I didn’t come running into anything!” Rin snapped back.

“You could have at least told us something,” Yuki said, crossing his arms.

“Or called—or anything!” Tohru added insistently.
“It wasn’t your business,” Rin said, her tone as final and authoritative as ever.

“It is my business!” Tohru shot back immediately. “I may not be a zodiac… I may not be cursed… but this is my business, too! All of you went missing without saying anything! Why would any of you think that I would forget that?!”

Kyo, Kagura, and Rin had the decency to look somewhat ashamed at that—all grumbling as they looked away. But Kyo still hardly said anything audible, still kept his eyes down and away from the rest of the group.

“Good. You all needed a scolding,” Haru said flatly.

“This includes you, Haru,” Yuki snapped. “You could have said something, too.”

Haru was silent for a moment as he chewed over the words. After a moment more, he looked to Tohru and bowed from where he sat at the table. “Sorry.”

“It’s okay, thank you for taking care of them!” Tohru said frantically. Yuki sighed at the scene.

“Hey,” Haru said, turning his head while still bowed to look up at Yuki. “Sorry to you, too.”

Yuki rolled his eyes. “Sit up.” Haru did.

“The fact of the matter is, even if we did tell you anything, it’s not as if you could do something about it,” Rin said. “We’re at a dead-end here.”

“That can’t be true,” Tohru tried.

“Think about it,” Rin said. “There’s no place else for us to go. We can get by hiding, but if we go too far away, we’ll start to get sick. If we go back—who knows what Akito would do to the three of us. Especially him.” Rin gestured towards Kyo. Yuki eyed him, watching his hands clench into tight fists in his lap. Yuki had to stop himself from putting a hand on his knee.

“The only way we can come out of hiding is if the curse breaks,” Rin continued. “And that’s not something that’s going to happen.”

“It could!” Tohru said, undeterred. “What if we tried to break it? All of us. Together!”

The group all looked to Tohru—even Kyo.

“Don’t be stupid,” Rin scoffed.

“Weren’t you trying to do the same thing?” Tohru asked.

“Yes. Until I realized I was being stupid,” Rin hissed.

“What’s the alternative?” Yuki asked suddenly. “Hiding for the rest of your lives? Here, of all places? How is that different than any punishment Akito would inflict on any of us?”

“I don’t think it’s something we can just break,” Kagura said. “We don’t know anything about the curse other than that it’s lasted generations.”

“That’s not true,” Tohru said, lighting up as if realizing something. Rin glared at her, already knowing what she was about to say. “Shigure’s books!”

“They were useless,” Rin insisted.
“Then, Shigure!” Tohru proposed. “We can ask him!”

“What, are we bringing the whole zodiac in here for a reunion now?” Rin argued.

“Ms. Honda’s right,” Yuki said. “We should go to Shigure’s.”

“You all have lost your mind!” Rin cried out, pounding a fist on the table. “Shigure is Akito’s loyal, little pet! If we went there, we’d be found out in a second! Kagura stopped herself at the last second—Shigure wouldn’t even try to fight that urge away!”

“That’s not true,” Yuki said immediately. “Shigure wouldn’t do that to us.”

“Never!” Tohru reaffirmed. Rin opened her mouth to speak, but Yuki was quick to cut her off.

“Consider your situation,” Yuki started. “Whether you want to acknowledge it or not, we’re in real danger staying here. It’s only a matter of time until a maid or some curious kids come by and discover us. We’ll be safe at Shigure’s house, at least.”

“Safe?” Rin asked incredulously.

“Don’t you think you’re putting a bit too much faith in Sensei?” Haru asked.

“Haru’s right. I don’t think Shigure’s a bad person, but he’s more tied into this family than anyone,” Kagura added.

Yuki looked to Tohru, both their gazes resolute and unwavering.

“He’s not gonna tell,” Kyo piped up before Yuki or Tohru could say a thing. “He’s not that much of a bastard.”

Tohru and Yuki gave affirming nods at that.

Rin, Kagura, and Haru all looked at each other apprehensively.

“What other choice do you have?” Yuki asked.

No one seemed to be able to argue with that.

———

It was still mid-afternoon when Yuki, Tohru, and Kyo had made their way to the cage.

Collectively, they decided they wouldn’t be able to escape the Sohma grounds in such a large group until nightfall. So, despite the urgent, jittery jump of their muscles, they waited together for the sun to fall.

The group idled in mostly tense silence, their anxieties both eased and agitated by boredom. Tohru spoke in hushed tones to Kagura and Rin, and Yuki and Haru sat in companionable quiet together.

But Kyo sat on the opposite corner of the room—brows furrowed, eyes serious and concentrated, and spine wound tight and stiff. No one dared say a word to him. But even so, Yuki kept his concerned stare fixed upon him in obvious intervals. No one dared to say anything about that, either.
It was dusk when Haru offered to sneak away to grab them all some dinner. No one had an appetite, but Haru insisted, regardless. When he returned, the slide of the opening door sent a jolt through all of them and the shock of it made their stomachs shrink even more.

And then, it was time to go.

It was incredible how bare this place could look, Yuki thought. With all of them crammed inside the modest space—with Kagura and Rin’s messy duffle bags, with convenience store bentos, and plastic bags being used to store trash—it was becoming difficult not to think of the structure as a simple home. Even with the strange, unknown feeling that pulsed under their skin.

They were packed and ready to leave. They had meticulously picked up everything behind them, making sure there was no stray trace of the runaway zodiacs and their accomplices left behind.

And now, it was empty. Truly empty. Nothing but a bare table, old, worn tatami, and sullen-colored walls.

Tohru, Rin, Kagura, Haru, and Yuki idled by the door, their movements quiet yet thrumming with tension. They were right to wait until nightfall to leave. It was dark and impossible to see more than a few yards ahead. The tightly-weaved wall of shrubs and greenery that served as the cage’s border had lost its color to nightfall, and now was nothing more than misshapen shadows of black and moonlit sheen.

But even so, the nerves of the group tightened in each of their throats, making them all the more aware that their footsteps, breaths, and rustling through and atop the well-kept grounds of the estate were noises that couldn’t easily blend with crickets and the wind-kissed bends of bamboo and pine.

“Ready?” Haru asked the group, voice low and steady as it usually was—a subconscious comfort to each of them.

Tohru gave a nod, as if to answer for them all. Another unwitting comfort.

Still, however, they didn’t miss how they were short a member as they stood ready in the entryway. Collectively, their eyes fell on the one that still lingered behind.

Kyo stood in the middle of the room. His eyes were glazed over as he stared at the wall—stared at it as if there was something there. Stared like someone might observe art in a museum, or maybe how an on-looker would stare at the scene of a deadly collision on the side of the road.

He showed no sign that he knew they were looking at him. Lost as if in a trance, he stood completely still and unmoving.

Completely alone.

Yuki’s heart seized in his chest. Kyo looked numb to the world around him. He looked rooted, as if he might not be able to even lift his foot, which seemed braided into the soft rush rice straw from which the tatami was made.

Yuki turned to the rest of the group, completely unaware of how pleading his eyes had become. “Would the rest of you mind going ahead first?”

The remaining four exchanges glances, but after a moment Tohru spoke. “Be careful, okay?”

Yuki nodded, a strained smile given as a thank you.
Haru gave Yuki a final pat on his shoulder before turning towards the door, the signal for the others to follow. One by one, with last wary glances thrown over their shoulder at either Yuki or Kyo, they left.

The door slid shut, wood softly knocking against wood. For a moment, Yuki could hear the gentle crunching of gravel beneath their careful steps. In only a few moments, however, that faded into nothing.

Yuki turned, walking with rodent-quiet steps through the darkened hallway and back into the tatami room, which was warmed only by old the oil lamp Haru had lit using his lighter once the sun had dipped behind the western wall of the estate.

The orange of the light matched Kyo’s hair—bright, warm, flickering—and it fogged against the back of Kyo’s neck as he remained still even as Yuki moved to stand next to him. At first, he looked to Kyo’s profile. Yuki’s concerned eyes watched him and tried to read the stone-set skin around his sunrise eyes. But, after a moment, Yuki turned to look at the wall, as well. The scattered shadows of the two of them fluttered against the dingy earth-yellow color.

“It feels strange, doesn’t it?” Yuki asked quietly, when the silence was becoming too heavy on his shoulders.

Kyo stepped forward, bringing his right hand up. He hesitated for a moment, but finally pressed his palm flat against the wall, taking in a deep, stuttering inhale.

Yuki remembered when he had first come to this place. How when his fingers idly pressed against the structure of the house, his reflex was to leap away as if he’d been burnt. But Kyo kept his hand directly on the fire, eyes narrowing as if in a challenge at nothing in particular.

So, Yuki did the same. He brought his left hand up and gently placed it on the wall inches away from Kyo’s. A deep, undeniable shiver quavered through his body—starting from the back of his hand and billowing through his body. It felt as though a rope was tying heavy knots around his throat and knees.

Maybe that wasn’t the right way to describe it, though, Yuki thought.

This feeling had always been there, and Yuki had always been complacent to the feeling. He had always been tied—but maybe now, he was acutely aware of that sensation. Now his blood chaffed as it scrambled to escape from the scratchy, painful hold.

Yuki was the first to bring his arm down and he turned to Kyo, “We should go.”

“I wasn’t gonna take this lying down,” Kyo said instead. He turned to look at Yuki’s wide, curious eyes. Yuki felt the strike of their gazes like an electrical shock. “You have to know that.”

“Know what?” Yuki asked, not following.

Kyo’s hand crumpled into a fist against the wall. His body tensed as it always did just before a fight—it was a muscle memory that Yuki recognized after instigating it for so many years. Kyo’s lips peeled back into a dangerous, blood-curdling snarl and Yuki felt another choking shiver unfurling throughout his body.

“I don’t want to be here. I wasn’t gonna rot away in this damn cage! I was gonna earn my freedom on my own terms, or else I’d just kill myself! You got that?!”

Yuki steeled his eyes. “Of course I do.”
Of course he understood that. *Of course* he understood that.

Kyo only grew angrier at the response, bristling like a cat would, turning to face Yuki head on. Yuki wondered if he should prepare himself for a fight. Regardless, he didn’t raise his arms or change his stance. Instead, he stood defenseless and listened.

“I was gonna beat you! And I was gonna fucking win! I was ready to take you down and I wasn’t even gonna feel bad about it! Because who cares what happens to you! Who cares if you get a little scratch on your permanent fucking record! Who cares if you were taken down a peg, huh? Who cares about you, you fucking rat! Maybe then Akito would see that you weren’t some perfect little pet! Maybe you’d see that, too! Maybe this whole family would open its fucking eyes and see you for what you really are!”

Kyo took in deep, ragged breaths. His voice was scratchy from yelling, and it had disturbed the static night like the echo of church bell—vibration rattling in Yuki’s stomach from just being *so close to* where the tongue of the bell beat relentlessly again and again.

Yuki swallowed. “What am I, then?”

Kyo’s wild eyes didn’t budge from Yuki’s own gentle stare, but his breath left his nostrils as if he was deflating.

“I don’t know,” Kyo said, just as harshly as before. “That wasn’t supposed to matter.”

“But it does now,” Yuki half-guessed, half-mused. “Am I supposed to apologize for that?”

“You don’t *get it*,” Kyo spat. “I was the one with the bet. I was supposed to win. Akito told me if I beat you, he’d let me go!”

Yuki’s eyes widened as Kyo finally looked away from him. A harsh sting bloomed in Yuki’s chest—something like anger and pity and hope and defeat and humiliation. It tangled Yuki’s tongue as he opened his mouth to speak, eyes narrowed and distraught—but Kyo beat him to the punch.

“Are you pissed?” He asked, eyes peering up to pin Yuki through errant strands of orange hair.

Yuki’s brow creased. “I—”

“I’d be pissed. I still am, over that shitty bet you made with Shigure.”

Yuki felt his stomach drop, the hostility of his gaze leaking out to make room for shame. “I didn’t… know you knew about that.”

“Have for a while,” Kyo turned back to the wall to glare at it. “I thought—I thought this guy really likes playing around with me, huh? He really has the time of his life messing with my head.”

“Kyo I—” Yuki stopped himself from releasing the words that always seemed to trip over themselves in order to find their way out. Yuki locked them away, almost flushed from the effort. “My feelings for your haven’t changed. I promise I wasn’t trying to use you.”

Kyo’s glare only deepened. He shook his head, a frustrated noise escaping his mouth.

Kyo knew that. He knew that. But it didn’t matter. Kyo had lost again, anyway. Months before today. Months before this moment, in which he was standing in the place he once feared the most with the person he once hated the most.
Ages before the entrance exam, before the studying, before Kazuma’s relentless gentility. Before Yuki’s breath scorched against his lips, his neck, his chest, his legs, his entire body. Before Yuki at all—before this confusing, tormenting, humiliating, exhilarating year.

Before all that, there was a day in the rain. His beads in the grass, his skin peeling away, with a taste and a smell in his mouth like death. A smell that lingered in his nostrils for nearly a month afterwards. A smell that made him vomit in the sink as he stood trying to scrub the dirt and blood from under his grotesquely human fingernails.

The first nail in the coffin had been the realization that he was uncontrollably, undeniably, dangerous.

The second had been when Yuki’s lips had pressed against his.

And the third and final one had been realizing he didn’t want that danger in their lives. In Tohru’s life. In Yuki’s life. Maybe he didn’t even want it in his own.

Yuki loved him and it was painful, because there was no other way to love him in the first place.

How fucking selfish to want it all the same.

“Why did you have to fuck me up so bad?” Kyo nearly choked.

Yuki’s eyes took on that disgustingly apologetic weight, “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to—”

“That’s not what I meant!” Yuki stopped, watching him carefully. Kyo felt his chest fill to bursting with air he couldn’t breathe. “I didn’t mean what I said. I’m not gonna kill you.”

*I don’t want you to stay away.*

Yuki let out a shaky breath, taking a step back, crossing his arms, folding himself away. Kyo felt the expanded distance like a thirty-story drop. “You can’t, apparently,” Yuki chuckled.

Kyo let out a mirthless, breathy laugh. “Apparently. But I wouldn’t know… since I haven’t tried in a while.”

“That’s what makes it worse,” Yuki said, taking another subtle step back. “You have no idea the effect you have on me, and you don’t even try.”

Kyo looked straight at Yuki, but it was his turn to look away, fingers clenching into his arm as if he were holding his own body away from Kyo with every ounce of his strength.

“I was angry when you stopped fighting me,” Yuki confessed, his voice gravelly. “I didn’t know why, but it made me so mad. I didn’t realize it was because I was watching you give up. And I had already fallen in love with someone who was willing to fight for absolutely everything in their life.”

Kyo felt his gut plummet into his calves. “So it was bullshit.”

“I didn’t say that,” Yuki responded immediately.

“Then what, huh?” Kyo stepped forward on instinct, and Yuki didn’t move away. “What if I have given up? What if there’s nothing left? What if I end up back here for the rest of my goddamn life and I don’t even fight it?! What then??”

They were standing close again, each of them striving to tower over the other—both challenging and fragile at the same time. Kyo’s heart was beating at a raging pace, as it always did when they were
alone together. He could almost hear how it thumped against his chest like a battering ram. He hoped Yuki wouldn’t notice, but Yuki was looking at him as if Kyo was the only thing occupying every one of his senses.

Yuki uncurled his arms from his chest and stared back at Kyo.

He looked into Kyo’s eyes carefully, his arm lifting slowly and deliberately so that Kyo could know to move away if he so chose. The back of Yuki’s fingers smoothed down the side of Kyo’s left cheek and lingered there. He let his thumb caress the skin just below Kyo’s eye. Kyo flinched from the contact, but didn’t move away—didn’t look away from Yuki.

His pale fingers trailed lower, sliding against his neck and causing Kyo to involuntarily lean into his touch with a quiet, shattered breath. Down Yuki’s hand went, riding the skin of his arm once he’d passed his sleeve, and finally colliding against a set of red and white juzu beads.

Yuki brought Kyo’s wrist, bracelet and all, to his lips, and watched Kyo carefully as he used his thumb to slide the beads further down his wrist, pressing a kiss against skin usually barricaded by bone and blood.

Goosebumps violently flared up Kyo’s arm, and he thought the whole limb might go numb just from the faintest of touches.

“Kyo,” Yuki breathed against Kyo’s wrist, his eyes now closed. “I can show you exactly how I think of you.”

Yuki’s eyes opened at that, his gaze making a direct collision with Kyo’s. Kyo felt the crash of it, and in that instant, he felt it break each bone in his body, rip him open, and drain his blood, hot and scalding, onto his already burnt and mangled skin.

Yuki’s thumb rubbed where wrist met hand, however, and Kyo was suddenly forced back together again, and all too aware of it.

It was small, it was tense, it was barely a motion at all—but Kyo nodded.

Yuki didn’t move right away—he didn’t move as if controlled by reflex. He took command over his body, willing it to make each and every movement deliberate. Yuki’s free hand moved to Kyo’s nape, his short, blunt nails scratching lightly at the back of Kyo’s neck in comforting motions. His thumb fluttered over Kyo’s erratic pulse.

Then, he leaned forward. Kyo didn’t resist when Yuki gently pulled him forward to meet his lips halfway.

Why wasn’t he used to this yet? Why did every kiss feel as overwhelming as the last? Why did every breath feel like flames licking up his skin?

Yuki fought to keep his movements controlled and measured. He wanted so much to give Kyo the comfort and ease and release and assurance that he was seeking. A comfort Kyo had been seeking the night before the entrance exam, when Kyo had pleaded for the haze of Yuki’s lips and body over his own. And Yuki had ruined it. He took Kyo’s vulnerable kiss and made a mess out of it. Kyo had come to him asking for Yuki to give what Yuki had wanted to express for years, and he’d ruined it.

But now Yuki was drunk on the exhilaration of having a second chance, and he was warring within himself, fighting to keep his kisses slow and sweet, but also unable to ignore how famished his lips and mouth and fingers had become in Kyo’s absence.
Yuki slid his other hand up so both could rest on Kyo’s neck, bringing him forward. Kyo yielded easily, his own tanned hands curling up and under Yuki’s arms to grab at his shoulders, hanging onto Yuki like a lifeline. Kyo’s hands squeezed at the skin under Yuki’s shirt and Yuki gasped, opening his mouth and pulling Kyo even closer.

Yuki’s breath rushed harshly through his nostrils. He lapped inside Kyo’s mouth, letting Kyo’s tongue slide against his. He licked behind Kyo’s teeth, eliciting a shiver that rattled against Yuki’s chest, and the movement sang through him like an echo. One hand slid into Kyo’s hair on the back of his head and used the loose hold to pull their mouths only a sliver away.

They breathed into each other, heavy gasps of breath circling between their open mouths. Yuki pressed Kyo’s forehead against his. God, he wanted to be sweet. He wanted to be slow. He wanted to show Kyo the power he had held over Yuki since the first time they’d met—he wanted to show him everything within him, body and soul, that Kyo had molded with his rough, tan hands. How his heart pounded through his chest as if trying to reach Kyo’s own.

Yuki could feel himself being pulled in with the force of a riptide, slipping under the waves as he pressed his lips suddenly and deeply against Kyo’s mouth—only to pull away again, as if seeking air from the brief moment of reprise the ocean allowed.

But he couldn’t help it. He couldn’t give his kisses without wanting so much more in return. And Kyo seemed so willing to give that to Yuki. Yuki pressed his lips against Kyo’s again, felt how Kyo kissed back without hesitation. He felt Kyo bite at his lip, listened to the way his breaths pushed musically against his throat.

He felt Kyo’s hands digging into his shoulders, tensing them up into him, pulling Yuki even closer, even though there was not even the barest space left between them. He could feel the warm flush of Kyo’s chest through their clothes—could feel it expanding as if trying to swallow Yuki completely.

Yuki was trying to give and give and give, but Kyo was giving all the more, and Yuki was overwhelmed by it all. He was terrified that he would take too much, leaving Kyo empty and broken and tangled like he’d done so many times before. But it was so hard to think and so hard to reign himself in when Kyo’s hand slid down to disappear under the hem of Yuki’s shirt. Kyo’s hand felt like it scalded the skin of his lower back, and Yuki let his breath flutter over Kyo’s open mouth before frantically kissing at his chin, his cheek, his ear—finally landing on his neck, just above his pulse point.

He bit down, and Kyo squeezed him closer. The hand on his lower back surged him forward, and Yuki could feel their hips meet in a flush.

Yuki bit at the skin of Kyo’s neck again, and this time Kyo let out a huff, his head instinctively tilting just the slightest bit away. As an apology, Yuki licked where his teeth had been, using his lips to suck at Kyo’s pulse, only to provoke a bitten-out whine and an even tighter grip from Kyo’s arms.

Their hips rubbed together, but they were still standing, and the angle was awkward and rapidly becoming nothing more than frustrating. Kyo must have shared this sentiment, because his hand slid from under Yuki’s shirt to the side of his hip, trying to leverage their hips together that way. However, their shaking legs and careless balance had them swaying a little too much. Yuki’s socked foot dug into the tatami to steady them. His lips moved from Kyo’s neck up to his ear, biting lightly at the lobe and causing Kyo to hiss.

“Lay down,” Yuki breathed into Kyo’s ear.

“Take off your shirt,” Kyo demanded instead, tugging at Yuki’s hem.
“You take off yours,” Yuki laughed breathlessly into his skin, and Yuki could feel the rumble of humor in Kyo’s chest.

Cold air sliced between them as they moved apart. Kyo’s arms stretched behind his neck to tug off his t-shirt as he sat down on his behind, his legs sprawling out and open. Yuki followed the movement as if bound to it by a trance, hurriedly working at the buttons of his own shirt as he knelt between Kyo’s legs.

Yuki thought his hands might be shaking, because it never took him this long to undo a button. Kyo was staring at him as he did, resting back on his arms—shirtless with a beautifully flushed chest that was kissed by golden lamplight.

Yuki wanted to lick his collarbone—he wanted to bite his pec, and lave his tongue over his dusty, pink nipple. He wanted to do so much without having to disguise it as getting off as quickly as possible. All those moments wrapped in sweaty limbs and grinding hips, and never once had he allowed himself to linger long on Kyo’s body.

Would Kyo have realized the truth sooner if he had?

Yuki’s hands fumbled again, and Kyo reached toward him, fingers overlapping as they undid the last of Yuki’s buttons. He pushed Yuki’s shirt down his shoulders just as Yuki came forward to lock his mouth against Kyo’s. Yuki was between his legs now, and the weight of him brought their hips together in a way that made Kyo’s breath quicken.

Kyo could feel himself being eased onto his back, and he closed his eyes for a moment to collect himself when Yuki’s arms caged his head, his silver hair hanging down and tickling the sides of his face.

When he opened his eyes again, it was all Yuki.

Yuki’s chest was hovering above him. His lips were parted as he stared down at Kyo. His pale skin was washed with a feverish red. And Yuki’s eyes… his eyes were so completely open. So entirely honest. So reverent of the person below him. Of Kyo.

Had anyone ever in their life looked at him the way that Yuki was looking at him now? There was no way.

After years of being hated and tolerated and pitied and feared—after years of having nothing but those emotions brand him as if they were fire-hot iron—was this what it looked like to be loved? This burned even hotter.

Kyo reached up and grabbed at the back of Yuki’s neck, easily pulling him down onto his lips and onto his body.

A soft, pleading noise came from the back of Yuki’s throat as he kissed Kyo passionately, his tongue coaxing the same involuntary whines from Kyo’s mouth, too. Now that they were laying down, Yuki had the leverage to grind his hips onto Kyo’s, almost absently moving his lower body in slow and sensuous waves. The movement and force of it caused Yuki’s hips to tremble every time they parted from Kyo’s, but when they met again, the force of it was dynamic and strong.

Yuki gasped out a moan when Kyo pushed his hips up to meet Yuki’s, and Kyo mimicked the sound. His head tossed to the side now that it wasn’t tethered by Yuki’s lips.

Yuki became heavier on top of him all of a sudden. Their bare chests met flush together, and Kyo
realized that Yuki no longer was propping himself up. Instead, bare skin melded with bare skin, and Kyo felt Yuki’s long fingers trace up from his shoulders to his wrists, urging Kyo’s arms above his head. But instead of pinning Kyo’s wrists against the floor, Yuki interlocked their fingers together. The shift in position had every part of their bodies touching, and now, when Yuki grinded his hips down onto Kyo’s, his entire body followed. Kyo was being pressed down into the tatami, overwhelmed by the weight of it all. His skin felt unable to breathe outside of Yuki’s touch. Kyo forced in a shaky breath.

“Kyo,” Yuki breathed, voice rough and a hair’s width away from losing its control. “Kyo,” he said again in a fruitless attempt to steady himself. He leaned his head down and kissed at Kyo’s lips. “We shouldn’t be doing this.”

Yuki choked on his own breath when he felt Kyo press his thigh between Yuki’s legs in response. Without being able to stop himself, Yuki rocked himself against Kyo’s thigh, riding the sensation as he pressed his lips together, desperately trying to keep himself in check. Yuki looked back to Kyo, and immediately caught the challenge in his own lust-hazed red eyes.

“We need to stop.” Yuki’s words were nothing but a hot breath on Kyo’s ear, and he savored the way Kyo arched into him. His leg pressed more insistently into Yuki, their groins interlocking and their skin unbearably hot through sweltering cloth.

“No.” Kyo breathed. He rolled his body up into Yuki’s—legs, hips, stomach, chest, pressing firmer, harder, into Yuki.Demanding. Desperate. Yuki moaned above him and the sound sank into his stomach, expanding through him like wildfire. Yuki clutched Kyo’s hands even tighter, hanging onto him, and Kyo did the same.

Kyo could feel how hard Yuki was getting through his pants. He could feel his own erection swell with each languid press of skin and sweat. Fuck, fuck, it never took this long before. They never kissed and touched and wound each other up like this for this long before.

Had this been months earlier, Yuki would have grabbed his hips by now and shoved them together in a frantic, punishing rhythm. Because all they had needed back then was to get off. All they could do was to calm that fucking endless rush of angry fucking need that they both shamelessly aroused in each other. Yuki’s cock would slide against his, harsh and unrelenting. And Kyo could stop fucking thinking. Just for a fucking second. Just for one fucking moment, he could clear his damn head and just feel what his body ached for, but that his mind—his life, his curse, his beads, his future—would never let him have again.

And at the end, they would leave without even a look over their shoulders. And that would be fine—that would be perfect. And they wouldn’t look at each other again until that inescapable desire built up once more.

That was what he wanted when he called out to Yuki in his garden. That was what he needed when he crushed his lips against Yuki’s, all but begging him to help clear the haze from his mind again. To empty everything out, to purge Kyo of himself, and to just let him breathe again. Even if they were breaths that were thinned and panting as Yuki took him apart—as Yuki circled his fingers around his cock, maybe sucked at his neck. Fuck, Kyo wanted to ride his fingers. The thought caused Kyo to surge up again—this time more insistently.

Yuki met his hips, forcing them back down with his own as he sucked at Kyo’s earlobe. His hands stayed interlocked with Kyo’s. Kyo let out a frustrated growl from the back of his throat.

Why was Yuki not sweeping him away? Why wasn’t he doing what he always did? What they always did? Why weren’t they throwing limbs at each other thoughtlessly until one of them emerged
the victor? Why did Kyo have to be so fucking aware of how he was being completely taken apart?

Kyo wrenched his hands out of Yuki’s grip, immediately shoving them into Yuki’s back. Rough fingers and merciless nails dug into the skin of Yuki’s shoulder blades, and Kyo used the leverage to grind himself even harder against Yuki—angrily so. Kyo’s hands raced down Yuki’s back to his pants, trying to shove them down even though they were still snug on Yuki’s hips.

Yuki was propping himself up again, and Kyo could feel a shiver as goosebumps swept down his chest and torso from Yuki’s body peeling away from him. Kyo chased Yuki’s lips with his own to combat the shiver of cold, pressing up against him as he bit at Yuki’s pliant, kiss-bruised lips before falling back down to reach out his hands to undo Yuki’s pants.

“We can’t do this here,” Yuki said, but the protest shattered into a moan when Kyo slid his hand into Yuki’s boxers—the heat of Yuki’s member burning into his fingertips. He squeezed insistently, and Yuki dropped his head as he leaned into the sensation. Kyo squeezed his dick, and he felt Yuki tense and stifle another moan in the back of his throat.

“Now you fucking care where we do this,” Kyo spat, voice wrecked and dry and cracking. Yuki felt himself shiver at the accusatory tone. “You corner me at the house, on the path home, at fucking school. And now you care?”

Kyo was pumping him now, insistent and hard. His palm rubbed over the head of Yuki’s member. He slicked the callous skin of his hand with Yuki’s leaking pre-cum and slid up and down on his cock without mercy.

“You’re such a fucking son of a bitch,” Kyo breathed out, and Yuki could barely keep his head together to listen. His hips were moving with Kyo’s hand, his eyes trailing down to look at the way Kyo’s chest would contract and expand with heaves, and how his nipples were pearled and speckled with goosebumps. Kyo spoke again, and Yuki could hardly concentrate on anything but the rough texture of the sound, trying his best to take in the words as his hips continued to work against Kyo’s hand.

“Do you know that? You’re a complete—a complete and total bastard. God, I hate you, I hate you. You fuck me up so much.”

Kyo nearly yelped when Yuki brushed the words aside and leaned down, finally taking Kyo’s nipple between his teeth. He bit and sucked at the skin there, licking Kyo’s flesh with the flat of his tongue and sucking down hard enough to leave a bruise. Yuki gasped out a sudden moan when Kyo squeezed Yuki even harder in reaction.

“Then let’s stop,” Yuki murmured against Kyo’s skin. “Let’s stop right now.”

Yuki was using his teeth to explore Kyo’s chest, feeling his breaths coming faster and faster, and Kyo was writhing beneath him. Yuki felt Kyo’s fingers going into his hair and tugging for purchase at his scalp, and Yuki all but groaned at the sensation.

His head was being forced down by the hand in his hair, and Yuki let out a frustrated sigh of relief when the hand on his member left to clutch at his cheek. Kyo was forcing him to look right into his eyes. Even through the lust-laden haze, Yuki could tell Kyo was searching him, searching every part of him. And Yuki had absolutely no energy or will to conceal what he was sure was the most honest his eyes had ever looked.

He looked at Kyo. He looked at his desire, his want, his concern, his eagerness, his love so unfiltered that it was terrifying. And Yuki felt himself almost start to shake from being pushed to the edge, only
for Kyo to hold him as though he was the only thing keeping Yuki from falling off a cliff-face and plunging into a chasm—his feet on the edge of crumbling rock, his body leaned back and poised to fall, and Kyo straining to hold onto the entirety of Yuki’s weight.

“Not a fucking chance,” Kyo finally said. And then they were kissing again—frantic and rushed like they had so many times before. There was nothing left in Yuki’s body that would allow him to resist Kyo’s decision.

So he didn’t.

His hands went to Kyo’s pants, undoing the button and zipper and breaking away, only to yank them down his hips and off his legs completely. Yuki hurriedly went to lean back down, too much time having passed with his lips not touching Kyo—but he was stopped by Kyo’s insistent hands pulling at Yuki’s pants, too.

Yuki sat up on his knees, rapidly pushing down his pants and biting his lip when his member became exposed to the air. He fumbled as he laid down on top of Kyo to wiggle the fabric off of him completely. But soon enough they were off, and both were completely bare and tangled together.

Yuki shifted so that their bare cocks could meet, and both of them jolted and moaned into each other at the sensation. Kyo’s arms flew up to circle around Yuki, pulling him down as if there was any chance of Yuki being any closer, and Yuki panted into Kyo’s mouth. His lips hovered above Kyo’s, both their mouths hanging open, and Yuki wanted to kiss him, wanted to suck his tongue into his mouth, wanted to feel Kyo’s teeth clench around his lips. But he couldn’t bring his lips to move with their groins rubbing against each other—with pleasure surging through his body and robbing his brain of coherent thought.

All he could do was grind against Kyo again and again, and listen to Kyo moan into his open mouth. His palms dug into the tatami just above Kyo’s head, searching for leverage to grip onto.

“Wait, wait,” Kyo finally panted out. “Shit, no, wait, stop.”

Yuki forced his hips to still, propping himself up to look down at Kyo. His breathing was harsh and quick as if mid-sprint, but he heeded Kyo, concern creasing his eyebrows.

Kyo stared up at Yuki. He was so light-headed he could barely think, but he needed—he needed to not lose his head just yet. Kyo wanted more still; he didn’t want to end this frustrated and hollow. But the words still wouldn’t find their way to Kyo’s tongue. Even in the fog of building pleasure, Kyo still felt himself clench in shame at what his body wanted so badly.

Yuki was staring down at him, all movement stilled, and Kyo had to stop himself from writhing up into nothing as he tried to piece together how to say anything at all.

Déjà vu struck him, and suddenly he was staring into Yuki’s eyes in a cramped stall in the boy’s bathroom at school. Suddenly, Yuki’s fingers were pressed against his mouth to keep him quiet. Suddenly, his mind was searching for an action that would make his desire achingly clear without him having to say a word.

Kyo craned his neck slightly to see where Yuki’s hands were pressed into the tatami beside his head, and before he could doubt his decision, Kyo was grabbing at Yuki’s wrist, almost causing him to topple down from the sudden blow to his balance.

Kyo directed Yuki’s fingers to his mouth, taking in the first three and clenching his eyes closed as he sucked on them, tongue laving around each digit and coating them with spit. Kyo’s lips closed
around the fingers when he suddenly felt Yuki begin to pump them in and out of his mouth—and Kyo pumped his hips into nothing, wanting so much to feel that movement somewhere else.

The thought of it had his arms going numb and his head feeling dizzy and weak. Yuki kissed at the side of his mouth. Both their lips felt how his fingers were entering and exiting Kyo, and Kyo finally let an unabashed moan rock through his chest when Yuki pushed his hips against Kyo’s again—though his hips stayed still and did nothing more than press their lengths together in a teasing pressure.

Kyo closed his eyes and opened his mouth in an insistent groan, releasing Yuki’s fingers from his lips, and he was so fucking grateful when Yuki took the opportunity to immediately retract his fingers. Kyo’s eyes opened to Yuki propped up on one arm above him, and Kyo watched how Yuki took those same fingers into his own mouth and smeared his own saliva quickly atop Kyo’s before hurriedly trailing his fingers down and pressing one finger into Kyo’s hole.

Just the way Kyo felt around his finger was enough to wind Yuki. Just the way Kyo twitched and settled around the pressure had Yuki going insane. As steadily as he could, he slid his finger further into Kyo, crooking it leisurely against his walls. Kyo’s hips shifted on his finger, seeking the pressure of it with his entire body. Yuki had to press his forehead against the side of Kyo’s neck to steady himself.

Yuki wanted Kyo’s thigh pressed between his legs again. He wanted to clench his thighs around Kyo and grind and rub and ride against him until he lost control, and his hips shifted expectantly against nothing at the powerful need of it. But Yuki needed to keep himself together. He already had almost lost himself rocking against Kyo’s hips, and thank god Kyo had stopped him, because his head was getting too cloudy and he felt himself wanting to completely submit to an instinct so raw and unthinking.

But that wasn’t the point of this. This wasn’t another dishonest tryst against the bark of surrounding forest trees. This wasn’t a selfish, harmful cry for Kyo’s attention.

This was about comfort, about trust. About giving. This was about Yuki showing Kyo exactly what he needed to say, exactly what he needed Kyo to understand. So his body protested and suffered as he forced himself to clear his focus and press his finger into Kyo.

Kyo’s mouth was still hanging open. His eyes were dazed and staring far away into nothing. His body was twitching and seeking any place that Yuki touched him hungrily. With red flushed cheeks, with pupils blown wide, with teeth-shaped bruises forming on Kyo’s chest, Yuki didn’t know how he was supposed to keep himself steady.

He looked so earth-shatteringly beautiful. Yuki’s chest swelled with emotions so strong, they left no room for anything else—not even his pounding heartbeat.

Yuki slid in another finger, and Kyo reached up to grab at Yuki’s shoulder at the feeling of it. Kyo was tight around him, and suffocatingly hot. Kyo was clenching around him and Yuki sucked in an urgent breath through his nose, spreading his fingers open in an attempt to work against the tight, overwhelming vice of Kyo’s hole.

Kyo looked like he was unraveling under Yuki, and Yuki was getting drunk off each sound and motion and twitch and gasp and breath and crease of Kyo’s features. Never, never, never did he ever think he would be allowed to do these things, to express these feelings. He wanted Kyo so completely and thoroughly, and ruthlessly loved that Kyo had no choice but to shatter his glass world and build another from the rich earth that Yuki had always known Kyo was made up of.
Yuki drew his fingers slightly out of Kyo just to press in again, and Kyo arched his back and groaned from behind his clenched teeth. And Yuki wanted to say it.

I love you. I love you.

Yuki’s tongue was bloated with the words, and they caused a fresh new wave of heat to rapidly unfurl beneath his skin. Yuki gasped, mouthing at Kyo’s neck as his fingers worked carefully inside Kyo. After a moment, he pressed a third finger inside to stop himself from saying something so careless.

Because those words were dangerous. They were sharp, like the edge of a freshly molded steel blade. The mere utterance could cut one or both of them in half from the inside out, and put a weight on this moment that Yuki couldn’t impose on Kyo again.

If he loved him, he would prove it. And he would prove it by saying nothing at all.

Three fingers were inside Kyo, and Kyo was panting as if the room was running out of air. Yuki’s arm was starting to ache from the angle and from the halted circulation of being pressed between their two bodies. But Yuki continued to stretch and caress and fill Kyo, regardless of the numbing sparks that shot up his limb. Kyo’s legs were spreading for him even more at the sensation, and a hand was back in Yuki’s hair, gripping desperately.

Yuki felt Kyo’s free hand curl against the wrist of the hand that was pumping steadily in and out of Kyo, and for a moment, he wondered if Kyo was signaling him to stop. But then Kyo was pushing Yuki further inside him, and his hips were meeting Yuki’s in time. Yuki savored the feeling of Kyo hanging on to Yuki’s blatant attempts to dismantle him.

It felt powerful, it felt incredible, it felt vulnerable, and it felt so absolute. Yuki had never felt so uninhibited in his entire life, and now that that thread was being tugged on and unraveled by Kyo, he couldn’t stop himself from giving more and more of himself to the boy who had enraptured him since he’d first laid eyes on him.

Yuki spread his fingers wider—as wide as he could—and Kyo tilted his head back as a moan clawed out of his throat. Yuki felt his whole body shudder at the sound. His own cock was hanging heavy and hot between his legs. Yuki looked down between them to see Kyo’s member looking much the same, flushed red and leaking and bouncing slightly against his stomach as Kyo shifted into each thrust of Yuki’s fingers.

Yuki didn’t know how he was hanging on—didn’t know how he was managing to keep himself in one piece as Kyo surrounded him with hot breaths and even hotter skin. And now Kyo was moving faster, more insistently, more desperately. He rolled his head back with clenched teeth, letting out a frustrated growl before forcing his head up to capture Yuki’s lips again, his hips working faster and faster.

Yuki kissed every inch of Kyo’s mouth, sucked his tongue in like water in a desert, groaned into his mouth, and stole the air from Kyo’s halted breaths still in his lungs. His fingers were moving faster and faster and finally, the searching digits probed deeper into Kyo, pressing into him in a way that made Kyo’s entire body clench. It made Kyo moan so deeply, it left aftershocks through them both.

“Kyo,” Yuki breathed against Kyo’s lips on a desperate moan. Kyo echoed it before uselessly trying to move his lips against Yuki’s.

“Please,” Kyo croaked out, sounding almost completely gone. He repeated it, so soft that even Yuki could barely hear the strained cry. “Please.”
“Anything—anything,” Yuki said immediately. And he kissed and licked the inside of Kyo’s mouth to reinforce the statement.

Kyo pulled away on another groan, speaking haltingly through his clenched jaw. “Not just…” He trailed off with a frustrated noise and sharply thrust his hips against Yuki’s fingers.

“Just?” Yuki prompted, his mind losing its foundation at the feel of Kyo grinding up against him so desperately.

“Fuck—your fingers,” Kyo growled. “Not just your fucking fingers.”

Yuki didn’t process the words right away, but when he did, the hand inside Kyo immediately stilled. Kyo clenched around him, as if protesting the sudden stop, and Yuki swallowed heavily.

“Kyo—”

“Don’t. Okay? Don’t—don’t fucking… don’t talk, alright? Don’t fucking make me talk. Just—” Kyo babbled, his panting starting to calm due to the sudden lack of friction inside him. Frustration and embarrassment were clear in each word as he tried to shift his hips against Yuki’s fingers again, looking so completely distraught at the feeling—at what it lacked in comparison to what Kyo was asking for.

Yuki pulled his fingers out of Kyo.

At first, a shameful fear arrested Kyo—Yuki was stopping. Kyo had asked for too much, and he was stopping. Kyo was left strewn against the floor of this fucking cage, desperate again for something so within his reach, yet so wholly unobtainable. He felt a pressure build behind his eyes, and he clenched them closed, feeling desperate and pathetic and pitiful.

“Okay.”

Kyo’s eyes snapped open wide just in time for Yuki to press his lips against Kyo’s again—urging him into a deep, sweet, comforting kiss. As if Yuki could read every part of his body, every part of his mind.

“Okay,” Yuki whispered again into Kyo’s ear when he pulled away from the kiss. Yuki’s hands slid up and down Kyo between them, Yuki’s touch trailing over every part of his skin.

Okay? Okay?

The gravity of the word was sinking into Kyo and making it even harder to breathe.

“Okay, okay,” Yuki chanted against Kyo’s ear in-between licks and sucks at the skin there, and Kyo’s pulse hammered so hard he could feel it through every single vein.

Kyo felt delirious. He felt lost and unstable. He felt fucking hard—he’d never been so hard in his life. His head was an absolute mess. His body was humming and weeping and demanding and for the fucking thousandth time he thought, Why the fuck does Yuki do this to me?

Yuki’s hand trailed to his stomach, causing the skin there to flutter, before tracing down to his pelvis and giving Kyo’s length a few loose, teasing strokes. Kyo near-whined at the contact—realizing only now how neglected his cock had been since Yuki had stopped locking their hips together.

“You should—” Yuki started, sounding both unsure and eager. “Turn—turn over,” Yuki whispered, this time with an air of finality.
The air shifted around them.

Kyo forced himself out of this instinctive, erotic push-and-pull that had been pulsing through them both since their lips met. Kyo looked up at Yuki, his eyes defaulting to their hardened, challenging edge as he stared him down.

Yuki’s hair was disheveled, and the messy, out-of-place strands were being illuminated by the soft, yellow light that barely covered the room. His face was red, and his forehead looked shiny behind bangs that were slightly matted with sweat. His lips and chin shared their own bruising flush. But his eyes… his eyes were almost unbelieving. They were tentative and patient. Not insistent or hurried.

Kyo was under him. Kyo was responding to each of Yuki’s touches. Kyo was asking for Yuki to bury himself inside him. But it was right in this moment that Kyo realized the weight of the power he had over Yuki. He realized Yuki’s expression was a mold that Kyo had already left countless imprints of his fingerprints upon. He realized he could ask for anything in this moment, and Yuki would give it to him.

There was one other time that Kyo had had this realization: when he had stood tall and straight in front of Yuki, who stood hunched over and sick from his confession. Then, the spirit inside Kyo had celebrated. The spirit inside him had felt uncontrollably victorius. The cat had caused Kyo to rejoice beneath his panic because he’d won—he’d won. Yuki was nothing, he was broken, he was defeated, all because of Kyo. And that had tasted so overwhelmingly sweet, it had caused Kyo’s head to hurt.

Kyo’s spirit was uncharacteristically quiet now—leaving Kyo to have this revelation unassisted and unblemished. Leaving Kyo to process the fragility of this moment all on his own. And Kyo realized he couldn’t be more grateful for that.

Because it was in that same moment that he realized Yuki had the same power over him.

Without breaking eye contact, Kyo peeled himself off the tatami, the woven brush having stuck into his back uncomfortably. His legs slid together, and Yuki adjusted himself so that his legs were on either side of Kyo’s. With a deliberately slow pace—so Yuki could know how sure the action was—Kyo turned himself around in the surrounding world of Yuki’s arms.

He laid face down, settling himself. His chest and collarbone were pressing against the floor, and his hips were slightly elevated, keeping his throbbing member from pressing unpleasantly into the hardened floor. His knees were digging into the tatami to keep himself propped up and stable, despite the way his thighs shook involuntarily.

He closed his eyes as his cheek pressed into the flooring, his arms bent beside his face weakly. His body felt simultaneously wired and on the brink of collapse. The new position stirred an overflowing thrill of nerves and arousal within him, and he held his breath in his chest. He couldn’t see Yuki—he couldn’t read him from this position. He couldn’t do anything but trust in Yuki’s grotesquely honest expression and let himself become just as pliable in return—an absolutely, undeniably frightening thing to do.

Yet even so, Kyo didn’t even consider the idea of stopping this momentum.

Yuki lowered himself so that he could kiss the angry, red indents left behind from the tatami on Kyo’s back. He traced over the marks reverently, tenderly running his fingertips and feather-light kisses over the bumps.

The muscles of Kyo’s back flexed under the touch and Yuki felt his breath leave him. There wasn’t one part of Kyo’s body that wasn’t devastating, and Yuki took each simple movement like a shot to
the chest. He sat up on his knees, his palms splayed flat on Kyo’s shoulders, and delicately slid his hands down the curve of Kyo’s body. Yuki watched, bewitched, as porcelain pale crashed with natural tan. He savored the feel of Kyo’s hardened back muscles, the slight taper of his waist, and finally, the firm cheeks of Kyo’s ass.

Yuki squeezed, spreading the cheeks slightly and watching as Kyo’s hole resisted the exposure. It looked small and tight, and apprehension seized Yuki at the thought of what they were about to do. He spit on his first two fingers, and inserted them again, biting his lip hard at the image of his fingers sinking in. Kyo’s hips shifted towards the feeling and Yuki dug his fingernails hard into Kyo’s cheek.

Kyo’s hands were clenching into fists, and his arms were sliding against the floor as he tried to ground himself.

“Don’t make me say it again,” Kyo growled through clenched teeth. Yuki sunk his fingers in deeper, the new angle offering a newfound ease to it. Kyo tensed beneath him.

“It’ll hurt,” Yuki said softly, voice still not free of its quiver. “You have to relax.”

Kyo clenched his eyes closed, looking like he was biting back a rebuttal, and did his best to release Yuki’s fingers from their vice. Yuki rubbed at Kyo’s lower back soothingly until he felt his fingers slide out with unhindered ease.

Yuki wanted to ask, Are you sure? He wanted to ask, Are you okay? He wanted to ask, Is this really something you want to give me? He wanted to ask, Is this really something of mine that you want?

But the words stalled in his throat, as they always seemed to do around Kyo. He both craved and feared the answer in equal parts, and he felt the pressure on his heart causing it to crack into spiderweb-like veins on glass.

He wanted to say, Even if this is the last time I touch you, you will never be alone again. He wanted to say, Trust me… please trust me. I will never let you fade away. Not here. Not anywhere.

Yuki spat a generous amount of saliva into his palm, stroking himself and mixing spit and pre-cum over his length. It felt too good, the idea of being inside Kyo felt too good, and he had to forcefully keep from touching himself just at the thought of it.

And instead of the words plaguing his thoughts like an anchor, instead of letting useless, unanswerable questions fall between them, Yuki said:

“Okay.”

Kyo’s eyes went wide, his mouth fell open at the sudden sensation, and his throat warbled out a pained gasp. It was weird—it was really really fucking weird. It wasn’t like Yuki’s fingers; it wasn’t like the gentle, gradual pressure of being stretched bit by bit. Kyo felt full just from the head of Yuki’s cock barely breeching him. He felt like he couldn’t breathe—as if his breath was being held by someone other than him.

Kyo’s nails scraped at the floor and his ass reflexively clenched tight, causing Yuki to give a guttural yowl of surprise.

It was too fucking much, too too fucking much. He was being split open; he could feel the sensation up to his fucking throat.

“We can stop, we can stop,” Yuki hurriedly panted, those soothing motions back on Kyo’s back
though they were as rushed as Yuki’s heavy breaths.

No, no, don’t… Please don’t, were the desperate pleas that immediately sounded off in Kyo’s mind. Because despite the shock of it—despite the sore stretch and the near painful tension pulling from every limb in his body—there was an itch deep in his core that was finally, finally being scratched. There was something primal and completely run by the burn in his stomach that begged for this to continue.

Kyo tried to rock his hips back, only to release a hiss of discomfort.

“Don’t rush,” Yuki said, voice horribly strained. “Relax, Kyo, please—relax, relax,” he chanted. One hand was on Kyo’s hip, rubbing insistent circles, and the other was snaking around to his half-hard length.

“Shut up,” Kyo cried out, his hips needing friction. He haltingly thrusted into Yuki’s hand.

“Relax,” Yuki pleaded anyway. So Kyo closed his eyes, releasing a mangled moan of equal parts discomfort and overwhelming sensation as he forced himself to loosen around Yuki. Yuki still didn’t move, but just the feeling of his walls allowing the blunt head to rub against them, rather than try and fight the sensation away, was causing a relentless pressure throughout Kyo’s entire body.

God, that’s what he was doing. He was allowing Yuki inside him. Kyo was ripping apart blockade after blockade that had taken him years to build—walls of brick and stone and steal that Yuki had already carelessly bulldozed in this past fucking shit-show of a year. And now Kyo was finishing the job, but digging worn, bleeding fingers into the rubble and tearing away.

Yuki shifted further inside him, and it took every part of Kyo not to clench around him again—not to try and force him out—because Kyo’s body felt like it was on fire. Flames were licking up his skin and it was so fucking much—the heat of it was painful and unforgiving. But Kyo had spent his entire life freezing. It didn’t matter if the flames left burns across every inch of his skin—he never wanted to feel a single shiver from cold ever fucking again.

Kyo found himself realizing that he had been all wrong about Yuki. He’d been all wrong to associate him with cold, with winter, with snow, with ice. He’d been wrong to think of Yuki as anything having to do with even the slightest hint of chill. And why had he thought that?

Because his eyes would turn so distant and hard around Kyo? Not anymore—god, not anymore. The storm-gray of his expressions had long since melted away.

Was it because he seemed so composed? Seemed so unaffected by anything? Seemed so untouchable? Kyo deliberately clenched around Yuki again, despite the intensity of it completely overwhelming the both of them, and they shuddered and shared the same strangled moan. Yuki was nowhere near unaffected by Kyo.

Was it for baseless superficial reasons? Was it because Yuki’s hands got cold so easily? And when he would make the first move—be the first to reach towards Kyo—Yuki’s fingers would feel like ice against Kyo’s overheated skin. Was it because his skin was translucent and porcelain? Clear and beautiful like blankets of fresh fallen snow?

No fucking way.

Kyo squirmed—his forehead digging into the ground, his arms numb from assaulting pinpricks of pleasure—heightened by breathlessness. Yuki slid in further once more, causing Kyo’s thighs to tremble and his knees to painfully dig even harder into the floor.
Yuki was nothing more than the white-hot base of a fucking wildfire. Nothing but chaos at his touch, nothing but heat and billowing flame, and warmth and life.

A heart-rending sound broke loose from Kyo as his walls were spread further, as his body willingly ripped itself in two, as Kyo urged Yuki further. As Kyo brought Yuki as far inside of him as anyone could ever be.

Yuki could only squeeze Kyo’s hips and brace himself.

He was losing himself. Every second was an arduous struggle to keep holding on. He was halfway inside Kyo now, and the intensity of Kyo surrounding him—almost choking him—was becoming unbearable.

Yuki had never felt his body so on edge, so alert, so taut, so completely and utterly overwhelmed. Kyo needed time, he needed patience, he needed to adjust, but Yuki could barely keep a grasp on himself as the unyielding tightness around his hard and aching cock drove him into senselessness.

He forced himself to focus on Kyo—to focus on his reactions, and on the erotic and lewd gasps and moans that came from deep in Kyo’s throat.

Yuki shifted again, and this time, Kyo squirmed uncomfortably, sucking in a sharp breath at the resistance of the movement. Yuki spit in a glob on his hand again, slicking up what was left of his exposed member. God, Yuki was fucking inside of Kyo, and just the sight of himself buried halfway caused another harsh ripple of heat to amplify the tightening pleasure that bloomed in his stomach and balls.

This time, when Yuki shifted forward, the movement was easier, and Kyo let out another trembling groan. The sound was gorgeous, unbelievably so, and Yuki felt himself whine in response. Yuki’s hand was still loose and pumping around Kyo’s cock, which was now almost completely hard again, despite the slow, measured movement of their halted sex.

Yuki realized Kyo was enjoying this. However harsh the sting, Kyo was getting hot off Yuki burying himself deeper and deeper inside of him. The thought thrilled Yuki. It sparked scorching, brutal waves of heat radiating through his entire body.

Yuki took his hand off Kyo’s dick, using it to prop himself up as he leaned down and sloppily kissed at Kyo’s nape and back and shoulders.

Yuki’s hand shifted so that it overlapped with the backs of Kyo’s hands. Fist was woven with fist as Kyo curled his fingers closed around Yuki’s. “Kyo,” Yuki moaned again, breath hot and wet on the back of Kyo’s neck before he felt Yuki suck at the skin there.

“Fuck—” Kyo was cut off by his own silent scream. Yuki’s hips had shifted—he had done something. And now Yuki was fully inside him. Kyo could feel it. He could feel it with every inch of his body. The burn of it was devastating and sickly sweet and intoxicating and uncomfortable and what had been so utterly craved by something buried deep, deep within him.

But now, nothing was deeper inside him than Yuki.

Kyo’s body trembled in the blistering sensation that started in his ass and expanded throughout his whole body. Yuki was laying on top of him, putting pressure on his hand—putting pressure on his chest, on his hips, on his knees. He was going numb from the position and from the pleasure, and not one part of his skin was dormant or passive.

Kyo felt a hand in his hair, fingers too gentle in comparison to how ferociously the rest of their
bodies were bound together. He felt stretched to his limit—he felt as if his body was cinched to Yuki’s from the inside out. Kyo did his best not to clench around Yuki, did his best to keep himself relaxed and open, even if the control over his own body was slowly slipping.

God, it hurt. It hurt, it hurt, it hurt. But Kyo felt a breathless curve of his lips at the feeling as he let it absorb him—because it felt so, so good. Just like anything good in Kyo’s life, it came with a burn, it came with a sting, it came with sweat and work and effort because nothing, nothing that was good in this goddamn world came fucking easy. Good, Kyo thought. Because his body had. always thrived under challenge.

And what could describe Yuki more than a fucking challenge?

Yuki let out an uncontrollable moan when Kyo rocked back onto him, his movements turning deliberate, despite his clumsy shaking. Yuki responded by grinding his hips further forward, despite already being sheathed to the hilt inside Kyo. Kyo’s walls fluttered around him as Kyo released a heated gasp. Yuki did it again, only rolling himself out a few millimeters before rocking himself back in again. Another hiccupping moan came from Kyo, and Yuki just clutched Kyo’s hair tighter.

He kissed the side of his face, his neck, his shoulder, the top of his arm, his ear—anything his mouth could reach. He sucked Kyo’s skin in between his teeth in frantic, open-mouthed kisses again and again, staining Kyo with his tongue, with his desire, with his need.

This couldn’t be just for himself—Yuki wouldn’t be able to stand it. Yuki needed Kyo to know that he would do anything for him in this moment—in any moment—forever, for as long Kyo would let him, for just this night if that’s all he was allowed. Yuki would move and say and kiss and touch and feel however Kyo needed him to. It couldn’t be just him.

Yuki kissed his way back up to suck Kyo’s earlobe into his mouth before panting into his ear. He could feel Kyo squirm at the sensation. “Touch yourself,” Yuki demanded, voice almost completely wrecked. The hand not held down by Yuki’s shivered as it followed the order, disappearing beneath them and pumping at Kyo in uneven, scattered strokes. Yuki shifted so he could kiss the shoulder that commanded the movement.

“Kyo—” Yuki said again, because his tongue craved no other word. He rocked his hips again, pressing his forehead into the nape of Kyo’s head when Kyo’s stuttered moan sent another surge of pleasure through him. “Tell me how you feel,” Yuki said in a rush, voice full of air and lips punctuating the command by dragging over Kyo’s sweat-slicked skin.

“Don’t make me talk—don’t you fucking make me talk right now,” Kyo snarled, voice breaking on lost breaths and the involuntary whines that he kept failing to swallow.

His eyes were shut tight, and every part of his body was sensitive. Anywhere Yuki touched felt like a lit match, or like hot, melted wax creating path down his skin. Yuki was rolling his hips in more of a rhythm now, though he barely pulled himself out as he did—for which Kyo was grateful. He didn’t know if he could handle being broken in half again and again and again.

For now, Yuki was grinding inside of him, letting Kyo really feel the length of him and never allowing him a moment apart from Yuki’s cock, which was making Kyo choke and sputter with gut-punched moans. His knees hurt, his shoulder hurt, his palm and wrist hurt, and he wasn’t sure he could keep himself propped up much longer. But just the thought of peeling himself away from this engulfing bonfire left him with shivers of hypothermia.

Kyo snapped his hips back, squeezing his own length as he did, and feeling Yuki’s moan against his shoulder.
“You—you’re going to kill me,” Yuki gasped against Kyo’s skin. Yuki brought his hips back, pulling out just a little bit more this time, and then languidly slid back in. Yuki felt every nerve in his body respond to the feeling. He was lightheaded and losing himself inside Kyo.

And Kyo was losing himself all the same. He responded to each pull and thrust from Yuki with his own bucking hips. The short, blunt, rocking movements were enough to drive him insane. And he could feel himself wanting to suck Yuki back inside of him during even the briefest moments that Yuki pulled himself away.

But Yuki was being driven almost completely by instinct. The tightness in his stomach was so intense, it was almost painful now. And Yuki sloppily pulled himself out nearly halfway before snapping back inside Kyo.

Kyo cried out, loud and deep and unfiltered. And once the noise was released from his throat, it felt like he couldn’t stop. Not with Yuki’s teeth on his neck, his breath on his ear, his hand tugging at his hair, his hips so hesitant yet demanding. Kyo was digging the balls of his feet into the tatami to try and ground himself, but when Yuki repeated the piston-like snap of his hips, Kyo felt his leg slide out from under him. The floor felt like it was moving beneath him, the whole world felt like it was rotating around him, and nothing felt stable or clear or sure other than Yuki right now.

Yuki quickly caught them both when he felt Kyo start to collapse from underneath him, taking his hand out from Kyo’s hair to stabilize them both on the tatami. The hand that had been intertwined with Kyo’s hand went to wrap around Kyo’s chest, pressing them tightly together.

It was the barest shift in angle, but when Yuki rolled his hips back and thrust back inside him in time with the near-fall, Kyo felt the head of Yuki’s cock press clumsily against his prostate, and Kyo clenched impossibly tight around Yuki.

The feeling of it was so sudden—too sudden. Yuki strangled out a surprised moan—loud and breathless. And before Yuki could understand what was happening, the tightness and heat in his stomach was releasing in overwhelming waves into Kyo. His orgasm was long, sudden, and as brutal as a deadly ambush, and he clutched Kyo to himself as his hips spasmed, his cock unleashing into Kyo’s hole, and his mangled grunts muffled as he bit into Kyo’s shoulder blade.

Kyo could barely comprehend the sensation. It was warm, and he felt it wash through his whole body. Yuki was softening inside of him, and Kyo breathed harsh gasps of relief and frustration. He felt full with Yuki’s climax overflowing inside him, but he was still hard—he was still wired and lost in the chase of his release. He rocked back on Yuki’s softening length when Yuki finally came down enough to release Kyo’s shoulder from his clamped jaw.

“I’m sorry,” Yuki panted. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry.” It was a chant now, and Yuki was kissing down his back with frantic, fluttering lips. He moved to pull his hips out, but before he could, he felt Kyo urgently reach behind him, digging his nails into Yuki’s hip and halting the movement.

“I’m not done,” Kyo snapped, voice wound tight in an unforgiving coil.

Yuki’s eyes widened, but he forced himself to concentrate through the haze of his lingering climax. Mournfully, he unwrapped his arm from around Kyo’s chest, reaching down to grip at Kyo’s length—still heavy and weeping between his legs. Kyo gasped at the sensation, digging his fingers even tighter into Yuki’s hip.

It was so different when Yuki touched him. Even before tonight, Yuki’s smooth, long fingers had long since been imprinted onto his cock. Yuki had stroked him, touched him, and brought him to release again and again in way his own hand just wouldn’t. And it felt so good to have Yuki’s hand
against him again—Kyo hadn’t realized until now just how deeply he’d felt the loss of it.

Because this was new, this was all new. These sensations, the deep, outreaching heat, the slow and careful pace, the whispered words, the vulnerable gasps for breaths—this was new for them both in every sense. But Yuki’s hand pumping Kyo, remembering what made him squirm, what made him writh, what made him sigh and moan and growl—those were all things Yuki would never forget.

Kyo was mindlessly thrusting his hips against Yuki’s softened dick, still feeling plugged up and full. Yuki kissed at the back of Kyo’s head, breathing in the beautiful orange locks, and he stroked him hard and firm. Yuki’s thumb slid over the head Kyo’s member—mesmerized by how much pre-cum had leaked from him.

Kyo came when Yuki slid down his length and squeezed slightly at the base. He spilled out onto the floor below in thick, white ropes. A moan ripped from Kyo—a primal sound so deeply embedded in his blood that it caused his whole body to shudder. He could feel his climax from his fingernails to his throat, to his chest, to his knees, to his ankles. Every part of him collapsed with overwhelming release.

They didn’t move.

For a few years-long seconds, they didn’t move.

The world was coming back to them in small bursts. A night-time wind lapped against a shuttering shoji door. Crickets chirped in rustling bushes. Their attempts to catch their breaths mixed with the groaning of the floor below them—a result of age and wear and tear.

As carefully and as gently as he could, Yuki slid out of Kyo, his hand back to rubbing the small of Kyo’s back as he did. Kyo gave an involuntary shiver at the sensation, feeling grateful for the ability to breathe again, but unable to stop his hole from clenching around nothing.

Yuki shifted him so that he was on his side, and despite the debilitating relaxation of his limbs, Kyo could feel the places where he would be sore and bruised when his body regained consciousness. But for now, Kyo was left to uselessly feel the drip of Yuki’s seed leak out of him.

Yuki’s breaths were in time with Kyo’s as their frantic heartbeats began to calm, and Kyo could feel Yuki’s heartbeat thundering in his chest against his back. Those sweet kisses that Yuki had peppered him with throughout the night were back—apologetic and caring.

“Let me help,” Yuki whispered against his ear. Before Kyo could register what he meant, Yuki’s fingers were back inside of him, and Kyo’s overly-sensitive muscles seized with the sensation—his ass raw and inflamed.

“Shit—what the fuck?” Kyo rasped, because his voice was also worn and sore. He felt Yuki’s fingers crook inside him, pushing the evidence of their night out of his body.

“Sorry,” Yuki whispered again. “Just hang on,” he soothed. Kyo remained clenched and tense as Yuki cleaned him out—Kyo’s leg reflexively kicking forward at nothing at one point—until Yuki finally retracted his fingers completely.

Immediately, Yuki pulled Kyo closer, pressing Kyo’s back to his chest—their bodies expanding with the effort to breathe, as if sharing the same lungs.

Kyo didn’t resist—he didn’t push the embrace away. He allowed Yuki’s hand to intertwine with his again, and allowed Yuki to press one more kiss on the skin behind his ear.
Together, they laid on the tatami, unable to untangle themselves from one another.

_We shouldn’t have done this here_, Kyo thought to himself. _Not fucking here._

But the thought was so passive and so quickly forgotten by the urgent need to shut his eyes and surrender to sleep against the lullaby of Yuki’s heartbeat.

They laid there on the floor of the cage.

And of all the places in the world, it was there that Kyo realized he never wanted to be lonely again.

The outside light wasn’t on, so at first, Tohru thought nobody was home. The house looked deserted and lifeless. A small surge of panic spiked inside her. She had found a way to keep her keys; she had been reluctant to say goodbye to this house with such finality when Uo and Hana had shown up one day and packed her things. Shigure hadn’t asked for it back, and Tohru hadn’t offered it in return.

But her keys were still at Uo’s house. She woke up this morning thinking she might see Yuki for an hour or two—that she might sit in stiff, mourning silence with him as they let small talk fizzle between them. Then, she thought she would meet Uo at the end of her shift and walk home with her.

Things had not gone according to that plan.

Tohru lifted her fist to knock rapidly on the door. Haru, Rin, and Kagura stood behind her, and she could feel the girls shifting apprehensively when no one immediately answered. Tohru removed her glove with her teeth, and this time used the butt of her fist to bang louder—but still at a polite pace—against the door.

Finally, she heard the sound of the inner door opening, and saw light glowing through the frosted paper. Tohru let a relieved smile flood her face.

Shigure slid the door open. The light from inside shined onto the four teenagers still coated in the nighttime air. They had been utterly stiff while sneaking through Sohma estate, their nerves on edge. But now with the warm yellow light spilling from the welcoming home, Tohru could feel herself relax into the safety of it—even if she could tell the three behind her were far from feeling the same.

“Well, this is a surprise,” Shigure said, looking genuinely shocked at the company on his doorstep.

“We need to stay here!” Tohru said immediately. Her tone made it an obvious plea, despite the demand. “Is that okay?”

Shigure blinked at her, but after a moment, he moved aside and gestured for them to enter.
Tohru entered immediately, removing her shoes and sighing happily in the foyer of her home. Haru, Rin, and Kagura followed behind, and Shigure closed the door behind them. Tohru didn’t miss the way Rin eyed Shigure, being sure to glare fervently at him when their gazes met.

“I guess it would be futile to ask you not to cause any trouble,” Shigure said with a laugh, clearly finding their accusatory eyes amusing.

Rin let out a sharp, sardonic laugh. “Please.” Rin lifted her thumb and jutted it towards Tohru. “She is the trouble.”

Haru snorted, finally pulling off his boots.

The group was staring at her now, and Tohru squared her shoulders in response.

“I’ll make some tea and get the bath ready. When Yuki and Kyo are back, we’ll talk about what to do next,” she said.

The four all exchanged glances with each other. At this point, who were they to say otherwise?

Something was buzzing. The noise hammered at the fog of sleep Yuki had succumbed to, and he irritably considered opening his eyes to look towards the desk in the corner of his room where his phone was usually plugged in.

Then again, the buzzing stopped, so maybe he didn’t have to. Yuki tried to fall back into slumber, only to find that he was freezing. His skin tensed with goosebumps. Where were his blankets? His arm felt numb, and his legs felt sore, but his brain wasn’t allowing him to wake up fully.

He reached for his blankets, but in the spot where his blankets were supposed to be, he encountered something much warmer instead.

Yuki’s eyes opened slowly, and just the sight of Kyo’s broad, tanned back—peppered with purple, teeth-shaped bruises—caused Yuki to feel every memory of the night before rush back at once. Anxiety lanced through him at the thought that they were still in the cage, but it quickly quelled when Yuki registered the way the early morning sunlight was falling peacefully into the room.

Carefully, Yuki took a look around. It was strange how ordinary it felt. It was strange how safe it felt. Now that he’d spent hours in here, he’d leaned into the oddness of its aura and found he didn’t mind how it made him feel.

Assessing his body, Yuki realized that despite the chill and the ache of sleeping on the floor of a drafty room, he felt quite healthy. A pleasant surprise. Despite the quieted rage of his zodiac spirit, Yuki had been certain it would have made some sort of sickly commotion in response to Yuki’s very physical declarations to Kyo the night before.

He decided not to question it, instead bringing his eyes back to the bare, sleeping form in front of him.

Yuki brought a finger up to Kyo’s back, tracing the motionless muscles there. He used his thumb to gently pad over the love bites he left, and Yuki felt a lazy wave of arousal work through him just at
the memory of placing them.

Yuki propped himself up so that he could look at him from above.

The morning light was hitting the top of Kyo’s head in the shape of a crown, lighting up his tan features. He looked relaxed—he looked completely gone to sleep. The crease in his brow that had burdened Kyo since they had found him yesterday was finally eased, and now he looked completely at peace.

Yuki brought the back of his hand to stroke Kyo’s cheek.

Kyo was so beautiful.

Yuki couldn’t believe he could be lucky enough to see this again—to be allowed something as intimate and vulnerable as a morning.

He leaned down to press his lips lightly against Kyo’s eyebrow, but then the buzzing was back. Yuki sighed, shifting away from Kyo to sit up and looking around the room.

Their clothes were scattered around them haphazardly. The lamp light had burnt out completely, not that it mattered now that the sun was shining through. And the air smelled dusty and chilled, as if it had frozen over the scent of their sex and bodies completely.

The buzzing stopped and started again. Yuki leaned towards the scattered piles of clothes, trying to locate the noise—not realizing the movement and noise was causing Kyo to stir now, too. Yuki leaned forward, grabbing his pants that rested at their feet and shaking them until his phone came free. It was still buzzing when it plopped onto Yuki’s lap, and he flipped it open just as the buzzing stopped again.

(78) Missed Calls.

Well, that couldn’t be good. Yuki winced when he realized that 75 of those calls were from his brother.

An unnatural knocking brought Yuki’s attention to the body next to him, and Yuki realized that Kyo’s movements were causing some sort of strange shift in the foundation of the old, outdated house. Though he hardly had a moment to register the noise, because Kyo’s eyes were now open and staring right at him.

Yuki felt his heart flutter at the sight of those intense and breathtaking red eyes.

“Hey,” Yuki said, smiling slightly.

“Hey,” Kyo rasped, voice coated in sleep. Yuki watched him bring the heel of his hand up to rub at the crust around his eyes. “What time is it?”

“Early,” Yuki said, snapping his phone shut. “We should get going. They’re probably wondering where we are.”

Kyo just nodded at that.

They were both still completely naked, though Yuki’s pants were pooled in his lap and covering him. Kyo seemed to have noticed the same thing, because suddenly his eyes flitted away, and his face became somewhat flushed.
Regardless, Yuki watched as Kyo clicked his tongue in discomfort as he stretched, and then felt himself flush slightly when Kyo sat up with a grimace.

“Sorry,” Yuki said quietly. Kyo eyed him but didn’t say anything in response as he reached forward to grab his own clothes. Yuki continued to watch Kyo stretch and move, his throat clogged with so much to say but muted in the quiet air of the morning. “How are you?” Yuki asked, as Kyo slid his pants up his legs. Even if he didn’t look at Yuki, he didn’t move from where he sat next to him.

“Fine,” Kyo replied simply. He tossed a brief look Yuki’s way before pulling his t-shirt over his head. “Are you gonna get dressed?”

Yuki let the question hang in the air for a moment. Instead of giving a proper answer, he said, “Should we talk about what happened?”

Kyo let out a long, labored sigh as he finally settled down next to Yuki. His head shook slightly, and he still didn’t look Yuki’s way.

Yuki felt his chest constrict painfully. “Kyo?”

“Could you just give me a minute?” Kyo snapped, though his voice didn’t interfere with the softened volume of the careful, tentative morning air. Yuki felt annoyance and hurt spike through him, regardless. He rolled his eyes, offering his own sigh, and the two sat next to each other for a long moment—not moving, not speaking.

Yuki felt his resolve strengthen under the tense silence, and he turned towards Kyo head-on. Despite his irritation, Yuki’s hand found its way to Kyo’s cheek, gently turning his face to look at him.

“Minute’s up,” Yuki said. And softly, with none of the punishing urgency of the night before, Yuki leaned in to connect their lips together.

Surprisingly, but not unpleasantly, Kyo kissed back immediately.

The kiss was soft and slow—a moving of lips together that was now familiar in a brand new way. Yuki breathed in deep and long through his nose as their mouths continued to chastely waltz together. No tongue, no rush, no lust. Just a question Yuki couldn’t form into words yet, met by Kyo’s equally unsure answer.

They pulled away, and Yuki pressed his forehead against Kyo’s, with his hand still lingering on his cheek. Yuki’s eyes were searching and hopeful, and Kyo’s were skittish and overwhelmed.

“I—”

Yuki cut himself off immediately. His eyes went wide, his breathing sucked back into his lungs to keep silent. Was he hearing things?

A man-made rustle seeped through the walls of the cage, and Yuki’s wide frightened eyes met Kyo’s.

They stayed completely still, wondering if it might pass—a ridiculous thought. The cage was completely isolated. It wasn’t a neighboring home in the Sohma estate that people simply passed by. If there were rustles or footsteps, they had one destination—and it was here.

Yuki rushed to pull his pants on as quickly and quietly as possible as the two held their breath at the sound of approaching steps.
“Maybe it’s Ms. Honda,” Yuki whispered so quietly, the words were barely formed at all. Kyo stayed quiet, but he quickly passed Yuki his shirt, who took it and shoved it over his already messy hair.

Kyo stood as Yuki dressed himself, walking over to the shoji doors that led to the outside balcony, leaning forward for a better listen. Yuki watched him desperately, gathering whatever it was that they had left behind into a pile on Kyo’s duffel bag.

Rustles turned to graveled footsteps turned to voices—one deep and faintly familiar, the other feminine, foreign, and polite.

“That’s not Tohru,” Kyo whispered, voice stricken with panic. Yuki tried to keep his head, tried to think clearly. Could they run? Could they burst through the shoji and simply sprint to their escape? Could they keep themselves hidden in one of the other equally bare rooms here? The footsteps were getting closer.

“What the fuck do we do?” Kyo hissed out.

Yuki stood still and speechless, the same knocking of the foundation from earlier paralyzing him with anxiety under his feet.

The two shared a frightened look.

——

Kureno walked up the pathway with a maid in tow. She was one of the younger of the bunch and held an undeniably nervous energy because of it. A few more years and the older maids would harass the uncertainty out of her—a few more years and the older maids would shape her into another vessel of empty, Sohma interests.

But for now, her gestures were still uncertain, and her words were stiff and overly polite. If anything, this made her trustworthy.

“You’re sure you saw someone here?” Kureno asked again, his voice deceptively firm.

“Well… I… It was late, and really dark. I just thought I saw someone at the head of the path. It could have been another maid.”

Kureno ignored her uncertainties as the cage came into view. Gravel crunched beneath their feet, and Kureno’s legs were moving faster—forcing the girl to keep up in her restrictive work kimono.

Was hiding here utter lunacy or completely brilliant? Was Kureno wise to follow this hunch, or completely at a desperate wit’s end?

A soft noise came from the cage—so faint it could have easily been blamed on any of the rustlings of nature around them. Still, Kureno stopped in his tracks. He put an arm up, indicating the maid to stop walking, as well. The two stood in complete silence, and Kureno strained his ears to try and hear anything at all.

“Did you hear something?” the maid finally whispered after a long moment. Kureno simply let out a sigh.

“I could be mistaken,” he said. But regardless, he hurried towards the cage. Quickly, he slipped out of his shoes and—without hesitation—opened the doors wide open, stepping inside.
The cage was empty and bare as it had been left years ago. Kureno had only been here a handful of times, but the barren nature of it made it hard to tell if anyone had passed through here recently. The only pieces of furniture were a table and an oil lamp, both seemingly undisturbed. Kureno looked around before moving down the hall to the additional rooms.

The doors were closed—odd, since the maids usually left them open to air. Kureno opened them, stepping into the center to find it empty. He did this with the second room, and then the third.

The tatami groaned beneath him as he walked back towards the main living area to rejoin the maid who stood tense and patient in the foyer.

“Did you find anything?” she asked. Kureno just sighed again with a shake of his head.

“No,” he said. “It was a silly thought, anyway. Thank you for taking time away from your duties to alert me to something so strange.”

“Of course,” she said with a bow.

“Let’s go. Nothing good can come of hanging around this place,” Kureno said insistently. He silently thanked whatever deity controlled his fate for allowing the maid to mention the strange figures to him and not to Akito.

The god was paranoid and frantic, and surely this would have turned into an unnecessary waste of effort and energy for nothing at all.

Kureno gave another apologetic tilt of his head to the maid, and the two exited. The maid closed the door behind them.

The air stilled.

Sunlight stretched unabashed into the room.

Generations prior, the shoji walls would slide open, allowing the whole house to drown in the morning sunlight. The open doors faced East, and deliberately so. A kind man with a low voice and tender expression had once said it was so this little house on the hill would be the first to capture the morning light. The Sohma walls casted shadows that stretched like malformed, crooked fingers. But here, the subtle hilltop kept this place separate. Different. Almost free.

Almost. But not quite.

Life pulsed beneath the walls. They had seen too much and known too many to stay dormant. And with the air quiet again, it hummed with an unseen, unheard energy. Those with the ability to perceive it had long since gone extinct. And so it existed in a constant silent conversation with itself, and with the echoes that so many others had left behind.

Those echoes, however, were not all meant to fade away without being heard.

The rocking sound was back. A panel of the floor shifted under nobody. And with a few more hesitant knocks and creaks, it opened up completely.

Orange locks poked out from the opening. Kyo looked around, making absolutely sure that the house was empty. His arms shifted up to move the panel to the side, and he looked back down at Yuki, who lowered his cellphone light when faded sunlight allowed them the ability to look around properly.
Kyo stood on a creaking, wood-rotted, make-shift stairway that led into a damp, cold cellar beneath the floor of the main living area. The panel must have always been left deliberately loose, because it had jostled slightly ajar either the night before or this morning. Kyo had noticed it only in the last possible moment.

But that was hardly what caught their attention now.

The cellar was small and cramped, but pressed against each wall were bookshelves covered completely in dust. The only exception was the northern wall, where a table rested with piles and piles of loose papers and books stacked on top of it. It was a sharp contrast to how clinically clean the cage above was kept.

Each bookshelf was stuffed with wilting, old papers, bound together in books that looked to be of varying ages. Some only decades old, and some surely from centuries prior.

Yuki approached one of the shelves, his finger gliding over a tattered spine before carefully sliding it out. Kyo took one last final look at the room above before coming back down, standing close to Yuki as he opened the book.

It was hand-written. The text was mostly hiragana, peppered by the simplest of Chinese characters. The writing was messy and scrawled, but small—as if trying to make the most of the page. Yuki flipped through with careful fingers before looking towards Kyo, who was still hovering next to him and watching over his shoulder.

“Here,” Yuki said, eyebrows still creased to match Kyo’s morbid interest. He handed the journal to Kyo, suddenly not feeling as though he should be the one to touch anything in here at all.

Kyo took the journal in his hands, flipping through far less gently than Yuki had and skimming page by page.

“What is this?” Kyo asked, though deep down, he already knew.

Kyo flipped to a page. The date read 1721.

“It’s a journal,” Yuki answered, though he knew Kyo already knew.

They were all journals. They were all hand-written records.

They were all the true and honest accounts of the lives of the previous cats.

Kyo did his best to keep from shaking.

The whole room smelt like death.

Chapter End Notes
Uhhhhhhhh,,, THANKS FOR READING. We're like seriously in the home stretch here with only three chapters to go. Thank you all for sticking around for this long, and I sure hope Kyo gettin dicked down was worth the wait aha,,,

As always, big super shout-out to Crystal for being a champion and always puttin that grade-A polish on this big mess of mine.

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